



“Institutional systems need coordination”: Ernesto Caffo of SOS Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus & Fondazione Child on child-centered solutions, international collaboration, and addressing technology challenges.

Sanne Breimer

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Sanne Breimer: Could you please introduce yourself and describe the problem that you are addressing?

Ernesto Caffo: I am Ernesto Caffo. I am a professor of child psychiatry at [the University of] Modena and Reggio Emilia and a former president of the European Society of Child Psychiatry. I am the president of two foundations: Telefono Azzurro, a foundation that for 50 years has managed all the systems in which we can listen to the needs of the children, either in an emergency or in consultancy. And we manage the [hotline] for missing children, 116 000. I am also a member of ICMEC [International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children], an organization that is connected with missing children and sexual exploitation, for a long time. And I am a member of the Patricia Commission for Child Protection.

I think about how we can manage the victims' request to support children and adolescents. We try to find a network that is able to manage, either in an emergency or not, the need of children to find some support, in the judicial system, in the care system, and in the immediate situation, with middle and long term solutions. Another issue that we've managed for a long time is all the effects of sexual abuse in the digital world. In this case we organized at the Holy See with many international organizations at the Child Dignity in the Digital World conference in Rome.

In general, we think our research can give us knowledge to better manage concrete solutions. I think that research training is crucial. Our board and our staff are very connected with university faculty and PhDs, because we have a topic that we have to face with new solutions. For example, the issue of perpetrators is a serious issue, and in all the communities, either in the lay community or in the church community, the problem is how we can intervene very early to support the victims, and how we can find risk factors in adults or in peers who are perpetrators [against] young children.

We try to find a strategic plan in [each] country. We work a lot with institutions. We work in Italy and at the European level and the international level. Now is the moment to have a global approach, after more local solutions, because we have to think about the differences that we have in different cultures.

For example, one issue that we have in Europe now – in South Europe in particular – is the issue of children that are sexually exploited and that arrive from different parts of the world. Or missing children, or unaccompanied minors, and the support has to be given in different ways. We have to be aware of their culture. We have to think about how we can build new solutions for new problems in different ways.

To make connections between the real world and the digital world is more and more [important]. For example, grooming is one issue that is more and more present in the life of children, and is connected with real sexual abuse. The problem is how we can manage effective solutions.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say makes your approach distinct, and why did you approach it the way you did?

Ernesto Caffo: We [think] that every professional discipline that is involved in [fighting] sexual abuse—psychological, psychiatric, legal, social, or education—[needs] to be open to new models to find solutions. And in particular, now we are aware that the development of children is changing in [recent] years.

For example, there is the impact of pornography in the life of children. And it's difficult to understand why in social networks or in real life children have this very violent sexual behavior against others. The problem is that the cognitive process and emotional process connected with the experience of seeing pornography material very early creates a lot of toxic behavior. I think we have to see every time how we can intervene in a system of care before intervening with a [police] report, for example.

The reporting system of sexual abuse is a big issue. We have to think about how we can be more effective, in particular when we speak about young adolescents. They [do not have] positive [experiences] with the reporting system that the law gives to them. We have less reports

than we expect from them. Is the system that we have to care for children with the traumatic experience of sexual abuse the right solution, or do we have to change the model?

We have to make more research in this area, and we have to know better the consequences of traumatic experience and sexual abuse. We know the cost in mental health, and we have to show the cost of mental health of traumatic experiences to the public and to institutions, to invest more. Victims are not supported; in particular, young victims are not as supported as adults.

The women's movement did wonderful [work] in promoting psychological treatment. But this is not the case for children. We have very few centers with the professional care of children from a psychological point of view. We have very little research and support of research in this area. The grants in this area are very few, and only in the last few years have we received some support from the European Commission in this area. Until now, mental health was not [prioritized] in this area. We had more support from study groups in the legal system, and less in care for the victims.

I think victims should be central in our strategy and have to be supported everywhere. The problem of the victims in the Church is a new topic. Victims were absolutely forgotten. Nobody was listening to them. Silence was the most common aspect in the experience, silence that became the silence of the victim, because nobody listened to them. This is the reason we started eight years ago, and this still the reason we need [a better] system of listening. To be more direct, we need technology to be more effective, to support us, to make it possible for every person to ask for help when they need it. And we have to create a strategic, interdisciplinary network in which we have a common culture.

Sexuality is part of our knowledge in the faculty of medicine, in the legal profession, in sociology, in education, and until now we haven't spoken much about this issue. Particularly in South Europe, this issue is not as developed as in other countries. And in many countries, as in the States, there is more interest in the reporting system than the care system.

Sanne Breimer: Could you share a practical example that illustrates the impact of your work, and what specifically led to that success or impact?

Ernesto Caffo: The system of helplines and hotlines that started in the 80s in many parts of the world, in particular in Europe at the beginning—UK, France, Spain, Italy—is a system in which people have two opportunities to report. The helpline is a confidential solution. Confidentiality is very important to help people to think about their experience.

In this case we have a model of listening, a model of care that is effective, and we have all the data that demonstrates the effectiveness. Particularly last year, because we utilized a cognitive approach, and we can measure the results of the system of care. We know that people who are

able to speak about their experience [are more likely to] ask for support in their community. The system of care gives them some concrete solution, and after some of the victims start to have personal psychotherapy and, some of them, legal protection, there is more and more effect. And at an earlier age. At the beginning we had more older people. Now young people speak about this issue and ask for help.

The reporting system that we have in the other line, the 114, is managed by us as a foundation and is under the control of the presidency of the council of our government. We work directly with different agencies, in particular emergency, police, justice, and the health system.

Institutional systems need coordination and training of the people that work in this field. Training in public administration is sometimes not so easy. We have data about effectiveness, and we know that we can do a lot more, because we still have a lot of people that don't ask for help. We have a gray area of not reporting. In general we have a lack of culture of care in sexual abuse. It's the problem that we have everywhere. In some institutions, including the Church, it's still difficult to speak about this issue.

Sanne Breimer: Could you describe something that you tried but didn't work, but that taught you an important lesson?

Ernesto Caffo: One issue is the work of the judicial system, because we don't care about the victims of the system. In general we have very few well managed cases in this field, [whether it's] intra-familial sexual abuse, institutional sexual abuse, or digital sexual abuse. The perpetrators continue to be perpetrators. We have very few real, serious interventions or rehabilitation of the perpetrators. And the victims don't have real treatment. We tried to create a center for treatment, but still now we have very few very well prepared professional people in this field of treatment of the victims.

And the prevention strategy is declared but is not managed. For example, we don't speak as is necessary in schools about this issue. We don't speak in the community, in the sport systems. This is a lack of recognition about the importance of this situation.

I think the media play an important role. We [did] research about this, and the media in Italy speak very little about sexual abuse, because nobody likes to create problems for some communities, particularly religious communities. Nobody likes to speak about sexual abuse in sport. The media is not courageous in this area. We don't have any campaign as happens in Spain or France or the UK or the States about this issue. And if you have a case, it's only a very single case that is in the media for one day. That is a lack of responsibility in journalism.

It's a taboo in society. Many people in many communities know stories [of abuse], but they do not like to speak about this issue. They remove the topic from the table. We speak about a single case with a single problem, and we aren't able to understand that we have thousands and

thousands of cases every year in my country, as in France, as in Germany, as in Sweden, as in the Netherlands.

Sanne Breimer: What specific strategies do you think will work to change this cultural norm and people's behavior around the issue?

Ernesto Caffo: It is important to present, in the right way, knowledge, data, and proposals that can be accepted. I know that if we create some scandal, we have a reaction and nothing happens. The problem is to open the discussion. That is the reason we organize international meetings many times a year. We share ideas with people to discuss, and this creates the opportunity to open the minds of many people. People prefer to discuss this issue in a very serious [format] and with people that are qualified.

For this reason, we utilize the academy as a place to discuss this issue. We don't like to make campaigns with the public that are sometimes complicated to manage, because we have a lot of reaction to this. We try to be very prudent—sometimes too prudent, I say to my colleagues, because sometimes we try to be outside the discussion. For example, to [focus] too much on digital sexual abuse and not on real sexual abuse that happens everywhere is a way in which we don't face the problem that exists.

The scouts movement, educational groups, sport activities—I think this issue has to be faced in society by all the institutions. We have to speak more and more with the ministers, with the chief of the government, with the parliament. For example now, we invited all the parliamentarians to have a meeting in New Zealand to speak about this issue. The parliamentarians and the people that we know that is necessary to speak out, and they know that for example great movement at the start of the process, they have a very interesting action with meeting to speak with the different institutions about what happened to them, and this I think is crucial.

Sanne Breimer: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward. Who are your main partners? Can you talk a little bit about the strategies you use to cultivate these partnerships?

Ernesto Caffo: As a network, we learn from each other, share materials and ideas and new solutions, for example, the law in California or the new position of the German government, and we try to take the good ideas for our strategy. We have to work internationally and regionally. We work by region to share ideas, to collect data. Data collection and experience collection is crucial. Afterwards, we have to discuss it together. Knowledge and research are crucial for the future. Knowledge can change the situation.

We sometimes have too many players. We have to know very well the system that exists, and this needs analysis. We need not too many organizations. I think it is important to build a network that'll be effective, not to have too many people that raise money and compete with the

others. We have to be aware of the institutions, and we have to communicate in the same way all over the world. We have to campaign together in Italy, in Germany, in Sweden, or in the States, with some differences, but it has to be the same campaign, the same strategy.

Sanne Breimer: What would be a first step to create that? Because there are many different organizations and everybody is fighting for their own funding, right?

Ernesto Caffo: I have had some experience in [recent] years of international campaigns. I think if we have an institutional campaign, this can work, because every person can participate and it is not negative for their national or local campaign for fundraising, because all institutional campaigns are awareness campaigns.

It is important to see how we can communicate for the common interest, and to [allow] the possibility to make a similar campaign more connected with the local approach and local fundraising. Because if you invest in a campaign, you have to invest resources, and you expect some resources back. We now have a campaign that we planned with a big company that they have given for free; that is an exception, because in general, we have to pay. We have some groups that invest a lot in market communication. Market communication transforms the quality because you use emotion, and to me, in the area of sexual abuse, using emotion is sometimes not effective. It can be useful for the donors but not the victims.

Sanne Breimer: What is a good way for the media to discuss this topic?

Ernesto Caffo: You have to start with a real story, and you have to explain that it's possible to get results from the community system, that support can be given. Give them the hope that a solution can be achieved in their personal life, in their community. People [need to] understand that they can open the door and speak with somebody about the problem. It's very important that people understand that they do not have to be silent, isolated, and alone, but they have a lot of people to consult.

Sanne Breimer: And there is data that proves that that is working?

Ernesto Caffo: Yes. We did a lot of research in this area with a company collecting data, and they did a wonderful job to compare data about the different organizations. An important consultancy firm worked with us pro bono, and they gave us a lot of information. We decided after what to do, utilizing the data of their campaign. That is a very, very crucial area. Communication is so important.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on the field in the next five years, and what do you see as the key leverage points for action?

Ernesto Caffo: International agencies can play an important role, with the support of NGOs. On the other hand, communication with religious groups can play an important role. We did many activities with Muslim groups, with Interfaith Alliance group, and we invited all these religious groups to work together, because sexual abuse is an issue to connect with ethical values and religious values. We can build a new strategy, enlarge the area of people that can be [reached]. And the international organizations and religious organizations together can make a lot of difference.

I don't think that a small group will [contribute] only locally; they can give big results in international activities, because sexual abuse cases happen everywhere. We have more and more digital aspects in sexual abuse. For this reason, we have to work globally. We are now working for new legislation in the European Commission, and we have to achieve the goal, we have to press the countries to cite the document, and only at this level can we get results, not only locally.

Sanne Breimer: What can the inter-religious alliance do practically to work towards solving the issue? What is an action that they do?

Ernesto Caffo: That process started more or less 10 years ago, and at the beginning was a meeting in which the discussion was more connected to ideas: how to discover the issue, more about prevention and less about intervention. We have some movement for legislation change and this was important. In many countries, sexual abuse was not recognized and it was impossible to intervene. We need a system of care [as robust as] for diabetes or for oncology.

We invited all the big players in Zurich to discuss how we can build strategies in this area. This is the future. I think that now, step-by-step, something happens. We have a conference every year or twice a year. We have resources that can be utilized, but it is not enough if we don't have a coordination of action, because every organization has to consider how to be part of the system, because we don't have any solution in one unique group. Some groups work well or less well; some organizations are growing or are failing. It depends. The problem is to coordinate and to collaborate in taking care of children. This is our goal. Children don't have the opportunity to speak, and we have to listen to them. We have to find all the solutions to listen to them, care for their needs, and protect them.

Sanne Breimer: Tell me about how mobile phone use for children relates to the problem.

Ernesto Caffo: It's a discussion that we've had [in recent] months everywhere in Italy. When we try to find a solution by blocking the phones, which has happened now in Italy with the opening of the new school year, [it's] because the adults are not aware. And if you are not aware that this has changed all of our lives, and children in particular, it's because we took too long to see the situation, and now it'll be difficult to change.

We have to [work] with the companies to develop age verification. We can do age verification. We need a new system that involves children and creates more critical thinking. They have to be more aware about the instrument. You can't solve the problem by saying, "Don't use it."

We have a campaign saying, listen to children and [spend] time using your device with your children. People say, no, the device has to be taken out of the life of children. That is complete nonsense, because we have to be aware beforehand about the risk. Children now are in this digital world alone with a lot of risk. But the companies are investing a lot of money in children. They collect children's data and utilize algorithms [to target] children.

This is a big fight in which the company is stronger than the organization. And the organization takes some money from the company to survive. That is not the right relationship with the company. We have to be independent. We need more resources from independent bodies than from companies.

Sanne Breimer: Is there anything we didn't cover that you feel is important to add?

Ernesto Caffo: We have to think about the future of sexual abuse, and that is very, very complicated because of migration, poverty, digital transformation. We need a more effective strategy. The systems we have now are not enough, because the forms of sexual abuse are more and more complicated to face. [We have to be] aware of the problem. Legislation is not the only solution. We need the culture, we need a lot of action and communication is crucial. We have to speak more about this issue and open the minds of the institutions that have to play an important role.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*