

Parents as agents of Change: Respectful Childbirth

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) SCIENTIFIC REPORT

- Action number: CA18211
- STSM title: Parents as agents of Change: Respectful Childbirth
- STSM start and end date: 2021-01-07 - 2021-01-17
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PURPOSE OF THE STSM:

Over the many years, there has been an always increasing understanding of the connection of the pre and perinatal experience for all involved and the quality of life after birth (1-8). More and more research evidence is now added as to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder associated with labor or other prenatal procedures (9-11). Health professionals in the childbirth field have already started to see the new reality associated with human rights being respected pre/perinatally for both the birthing mother, the baby being born or gestated, fathers and the family as a whole (12-14). Researchers have also started to see the lifelong effects of disrespectful interventions (15-18). for those who have experienced them, the society as a whole and the quality of health, global relationships and peace. Mothers who have suffered turn to professions such as doulas, midwifery or obstetrics, psychology etc in an effort to understand, integrate and heal while supporting others (19, 20).

However, we do not see parents from the conception of their children on to get together and advocate for their best of interest during the most crucial for their health and quality of life phase from pre-conception to after birth and early postnatal years of their children. Is it because they are dis-connected from their power to have the destiny of their QOL and that of their children in their hands? Or is it that the many years of disrespect have disempowered themselves to the stage of being powerless victims? Or is it that it is the beginning of a new era during which parents are realizing their power of being agents of social change and they just need to integrate leadership qualities to secure that their health and that of their children will be guaranteed? Perceived Parental Effectiveness (PPE) is what the writer defines as the term that best describes the parents' understanding of their ability to contribute to specific sustainable health and quality of life-related outcomes under real world conditions, through specific conscious behaviors adopted and implemented to safeguard high parental values and

principles from preconception to after birth and beyond in life. The STSM aimed to explore the theme as well as how parents' organisations are organized, their challenges and their best practices to explore the methods, techniques and instruments they use to build the organization and keep it going on successfully and B. to meet with parents/ members actively involved in parental advocacy to learn about their motivation.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSMS

Day 1: 7 January 2021: Met with Katharina Hartmann, one of the founders of Mother Hood e.V. and in charge of research & international networking for the organization. We discussed the program that would best serve the needs of this work. Katharina oriented me in the ways Mother Hood e.V works and introduced the other board members and their roles, helping me to get a first idea of who does what. We confirmed the schedule of interviews of the people participating. Interview with Katharina Hartmann and Katharina Desery. The discussion was around the establishment of the NGO and the historical/ societal / political/ legal events connected with it, the vision of Mother Hood and its values and principles and how the parents' perspective is different from the midwives' perspective and why it is important for parents to get together and safeguard their rights to respectful childbirth. Discussion was also made about what might stop parents from joining an organization and the challenges these reasons at work may present for such NGOs. Then, the discussion was focused on networking and community building, the need for information dissemination and how it can be implemented, feedback giving challenges and evaluation challenges and how such issues can be tackled. Finally, the discussion was on how to contact politicians and decision makers and bring the parents' voice to their awareness or how to promote solutions on a political level. Katharina Desery is the public relations person in the organization and an absolute asset for it as her personality and expertise is of high standard.

In the evening, the introduction letter as to the aims and goals of this STSM was written and was sent out together with a biographical note of mine to all those who opted to be interviewed. Later, the questionnaire that would become the spine for the interviews with the board members and staff of Mother Hood e.V. was structured so that it can bring the best possible information out of each interview. A Skype link was created and sent to all for participation.

Day 2: Jan 8 The day started with an interview with Anna Lagodka, mother who does parents advocacy for Mother Hood e.V in the bundesland of Brema and at the same time she also studies midwifery.

In the afternoon, there was an interview with Nihan Salgar, the secretary of Mother Hood e.V and the discussion was about the secretarial organization of the NGO, the registration process and different registration types with the different rights offered to member, the physical and virtual meetings of the general assembly and the board meetings, the levels of structure of the work on a national, federal and regional level and how it is accomplished, the communication between members or the communication channels with the general public, the activities and events organised and the services offered to the members and friends who come to the NGO. The discussion was also about the telephone Hot Line they started to better support mothers during Covid-19 in co-operation with ISPPM.

Day 3: Jan 9 Interview with Julia Hoyer co-founder and now an active member of Mother Hood. A mother, special education teacher and, as she calls herself, "an activist to make the world a better place". The discussion was about the backstage or preparation work for the statutes and the process how they started from the idea to the establishment of the NGO as a legal entity, the work involved behind creating a larger network of organization to change birth culture and the manifesto they created and signed, the meetings and the philosophy of those network meetings that were made along the way, how they come up with the various documents they have worked on based on the needs they can see and how they nurture each other so that the fire that inspired them is burning. She also mentioned

the online Birth Story Cafes they organize together with Lisa von Reiche (s. below), the services they offered to refugees, the role of the fathers in the NGO and psychological aspects that may appear in childbirth group dynamics. The discussion was both on a strategic level but also on an operational level in an atmosphere that was full of appreciation gentleness and deep understanding.

Day 4: Jan 10 Interview with Charlotte Volpert in the morning and Lisa von Reiche in the afternoon. Charlotte Volpert is the treasurer of the NGO, mathematician with a minor in psychology, a mother and at the same time a university student, a creative person and one who has recently applied for a midwifery course. The discussion was, of course, about funding, costs, numbers, fees and donations, how to budget and how to recruit professionals to deliver reliable services and the desired outcomes. But we also discussed about the motivation of parents who join parents' organization and why others do not, the needs of parents, the traumatization of midwives and obstetricians and the need for empathetic health practitioners, the need for childbirth supervision or observation that the rights are protected and that the experience is humanised, the need for new curricula in all levels of schooling and finally the need to calculate the economic impact for the society when the parent-child bonding is not empowered as a language politicians and decision makers can understand.

Later, the same day, there was an interview with Lisa von Reiche, a collaborator of Mother Hood but also an innovator herself as she is the one that came up with the Birth stories café. The discussion was around what made her move from a more intense way of working in the field to a milder way of bringing the message across and then it was focused on how a birth story café can be organized and offered. We also discussed about the birth cultures project (Erasmus+) and the importance of birth cultures moving exhibition has for the general public awareness.

Day 5: Jan 11 Meeting with Katharina Hartmann to check on what needs to be done, the progress of the process and the initial results. Later, that morning, there was an interview with Daniela Drandic from RODA parents organization in Croatia. The discussion was around strategic and operational aspects of Parents' organisations. More specifically, the discussion was about the volunteer based running or paid staff, or mixed models, project-based funds, crowdfunding and other campaigns they did, the need for subsidies and grants to support the community work offered, educational programs they offer and how they organize them round the year, team-building, research needs, gaps in education and explored best practices.

Later, in the evening, there was an interview with Gerit Sonntag, regional representative for Bonn and Community Leader member. The discussion was focused on how to organize the work on a regional level. The important part of the discussion was how to spot and use the political scene in a region, and create the contacts with the politicians or other important decision makers and inform them about the hot issues or place a request with them suggesting how they can help. We talked about lobbying, participation in round tables, networking and collaborating with other same minded organizations on a mutually agreed cause. Finally, we talked about how an exhibition event can be organized and run in a way that makes good results in the end, about the annual program they make, new ideas and projects and the creative list of actions that can add value to the outcomes of a parents' organization.

Day 6: Jan 12: Interview with Ruth Piecha, the person who is the mind behind the message and how it is communicated to the public. Ruth being one of the well-known professionals in the field of initially film making, then creative production, concept analyst and launching ideas, shared her expertise on how this analysis can happen so that the right message can be sent out and received by the public, on what principles the whole work can be based, the need to change narratives so that an exciting story can be told in a way that the audience can get and follow etc. Discussion was also brought to the need to explore the resources available so that you can make your work easier.

Day 7: Jan 13 Attended the local regular's meeting of "Mother Hood e.V. Bonn and surroundings", one of the organizations many locally working groups of the NGO, in the evening. This helped me get insight on the atmosphere such meetings can take place so that they are not only management meetings but also occasions for strengthening bonds, honoring people and sharing from the heart.

Day 8: Jan 14 Interview with Jennifer Moosheimer, the National coordinator of Mother Hood e.V. The discussion was on how you can organize a multi-level parents' organization, on a National, Federal and regional level and how you can nurture the others in the team so that the organization can thrive. We spoke about prioritization and the steps on system changing processes within humanitarian organizations and, at the same time, how you can be speaking from the heart, one to one. Finally, we spoke about what needs to be changed to promote respectful childbirth.

Day 9: Jan 16 Meeting with Katharina to revise, comment, prioritize and finalize what remains to be done.

Day 10: Jan 17 Interview with a father. The focus was to explore how prepared people are before the conception of their child, during pregnancy and how prepared they are for childbirth and childrearing. We explored challenges but also what worked best and what they needed so that they could feel read to enter parenthood having trust in themselves. How parenting has transformed them. We explored the reasons why a parents' organization is significant and the directions this work can take.

Day 11: Jan 18 Interview with Maria Untch (Mother Hood Board member and scientific Officer) and 3 mothers and the discussion was focused on the same themes as described above when mentioning the father. The discussion with Maria Untch was focused on the kind of scientific work she does, the need for data management tools so that in the future possible users can find a reliable, easy to use classification system and be able to spot what needs to be spotted fast. She speaks about her efforts to discover classification systems that work. She also makes clear why it is important for evidence-based scientific information to be gathered and then used in different ways to raise public and members' awareness. The interviews with the mothers were very revealing and helped explore this field better with a bigger sample of parents. The findings are included in part B, below.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

There were two main axons of interest in this STSM:

- A.** To learn from best examples how to establish, run and implement the visions and goals of a Parents' Organization and
- B.** Explore the parents views, needs and challenges which either make them abstain from being active agents of change or motivate them to be active change makers.

A. PARENTS' ORGANIZATIONS

All participants agreed that a Parents' Organization is the result of history and events that happen in the specific community/ country. It is based on the community needs at a specific time/ place. When this context is recognized, then, the initial group who first realizes what is going on and is the first the feels the need for action, gets active. As they do so, they meet and network with others who share the same philosophy of life and they start working towards a common goal. Thus, it is a bottom-up process. It is also a rather slow process in the beginning as the decision that will lead to the establishment of the organization and the way it will be should come from the group and not be the one person's effort. The process can take from months to a couple years and involve multiple meetings and co-operation on small other projects of mutual interest. Once goals, philosophies,

values and principles are agreed on, the organization needs to be run on a professional level, meaning that the organization needs to take into account whatever is now known as best practice and nurtures the many aspects of the different tasks that all together constitute a whole. That is the existing knowledge within the fields of communication, research, networking, event management, resource management, fund raising etc. All these ask for time and energy of good quality. A volunteer usually offers part of his/ her free time, which can be limited as (s)he needs to work elsewhere to cover his/ her needs for sustainability or development or has limited resources/ time/ energy due to the multiple family responsibilities. It can start on a volunteer basis but if it depends on volunteers, it can't go far due to the fact that parents are usually so busy that there is not enough time or energy to devote on volunteer work and be reliable. Of course, volunteer work is still important: All of Mother Hood's local groups are run by volunteers. But for stability reasons and in order to have the core needs of the organization covered paid staff and stable work contracts are necessary. Paid staff can work towards implementing outcomes. Recruiting among volunteers or active members is the way to start. Part time work schemes are the best as you are given the opportunity to invest as you go. A number of 5-7 people part time employees is the good minimum as different skills are needed which are not found in 1 or 2 people who might work full time.

The structure of the organization needs to integrate models that work from other professional fields. The board can do the strategic planning but the organization needs to provide for:

1. Creative communication to work on the messages communication and the means to do that.
2. Registration and administration
3. Research and information
4. Resources management
5. Fundraising, grants, donations and subsidies
6. Public Relations and media management
7. Educational Office
8. Community services
9. Networking
10. Maintenance and update
11. Technical support
12. Design and creative projects
13. Publications
14. Legal matters, etc.

The historical/ cultural and specific context within each country needs to be understood before policies are designed as what works for one country may not work in another or what seems to be an issue in one may not be an issue in another.

There is an urgent need for changing the general public's/cultural attitudes. New words, new visuals, new concepts need to replace the ones associated with stress, pain, trauma and inequalities and injustice. In this direction it is felt by activists interviewed that school books need to be re-written, new curricula are needed in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, as well as the university promoting respectful childbirth. General life-long learning modules are needed to work with taboo breaking, attitudinal change. Grandparents should also be involved.

All staff and active members would benefit from being trained in mentoring skills, leadership skills, community excellence, project management, data management, research tools, resources management, and new technologies. Of course, there is a lot of free stuff online or generally around us but not all of it is reliable, high quality, understandable or of proper use to promote the philosophies and values, aims and goals of such an organization. Thus, it is extremely helpful to have appropriate guidance, kind of a roadmap so that you can get to the information you need the best and easiest way.

In my sample, there is an approximation of minimum 42,000 – 50,000 euros annual running costs that have to be secured. The experience says that once paid staff is involved, this money invested pays back.

B. PARENTS VIEWS, NEEDS, CHALLENGES

All parents participating in this STSM, when asked if they felt prepared for parenthood before the conception of their 1st child answered, they were not prepared at all before the conception or the birth of their 1st child. They lacked correct, useful information, let alone guidance or respectful support. Then, they learned from experience –which was usually traumatic and which they accepted as they have been brought up to think of it as normal. Certainly, they were not aware of their childbirth rights. They also felt unprepared for newborn care.

When asked what lies behind the low participation of parents in parents' organizations that promote respectful childbirth, they answered that the great majority of parents do not realize that they can become members of parents' organizations. First of all, they are not informed, then they lack the time or energy to dedicate personal/ family resources on that. When their children grow up a little bit and they can find some time/ energy they feel they do not fit as the time has passed now.

Furthermore, the participants said that parents seem to be trapped in role models of the past, according to which mothers are at home looking after the children, fathers are at work. Some mothers seem to grieve over the lost opportunities connected with their studies, dreams for a career or seeing the world,

From my sample, parents who do participate in parents' organizations are there either because they have had a positive childbirth experience and they wish to share it with others or have had a traumatic childbirth experience and are there to help others not to have the same bad experience. They stay with the organization for anything between 1 to 5 years maximum. Then, they continue with other interests.

Parents in my sample also ask for more peer learning but actually what they seek in these gatherings/ sharings is the reassurance that others also experience or experienced the same agonies and worries as they do. Books, although mentioned as helpful guides, seem not to be the best preferred way to get the information. Actually, they ask for contact, partnership, companionship and emotional support or human presence as being the best emotional support. In their narratives, all mothers ask for continuity of care that allows the presence of a familiar figure at their side whom they trust and know, ask for the fathers to be there for them, they ask health professionals to become sensitive and listen to the mothers and not to the medical instruments readings, be patient and not rush them to give birth. They also ask health professionals to communicate whatever they need to communicate to them with respect and kindness. They also criticize the fact that there is a low number of midwives available. They explain that this does not allow them to have a midwife all the way from pregnancy to post-partum, they criticize hospital policies that monetized childbirth and ask politicians to realize their responsibilities as decision makers and see the impact childbirth has on the society. Unfortunately, for most politicians it appears difficult to find solutions or ways to help so the parents' organization in my sample need to work on solutions and suggest measures when contacting them. Parents also ask for positive living models of mothers/ fathers that can inspire them in a realistic way. They ask for silence, peace and calm atmosphere during the postpartum without visitors or other interventions so that they can bond with their child. The father also brought the need for the father to have paternity leave (at least 7-10 days) so that the father can bond with the newborn.

Moreover, the interviewees spoke about the many losses they experience. Although none of them would ever consider not to ever have children so that they could pursue their personal life goals

(studies, career, other) mothers emphasized that they feel they have to sacrifice a lot raising their children. They spoke of the injustice of the system that makes it difficult to find a job just because they have “a womb” or have to stay out of the scientific/ professional scene for some time period which can bring them to the point of not being updated to the fast changing technological scientific advances which would secure professional or academic advancement. They ask for a societal attitude change which will make no role discrimination as to which jobs are male or females and an attitude change which will pay both men and women equally for the same work done. It is noted that among the support services needed are groups for loss and bereavement and also psychological support to relieve parents from the perceived guilt of not having done things “properly” or other PTSD issues.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

The work findings of this STSM will be integrated in the design and implementation of a toolkit for Parents Organizations who wish to promote respectful childbirth, so that they can be supported with resources which will make the establishment, organization and implementation of their visions and goals easy and successful, promoting at the same time the spirit of community and strong co-operation among parents globally.

A paper with the same title as the title of this STSM is planned to be written and submitted for publication

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