

The shadows of family life: mistreated girls admitted to the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona in the eighteenth century.

Introduction: Sources, problems and approach

The Casa de Misericordia (House of Mercy) in Barcelona exemplified a kind of institution that became common across western Europe during the early modern age, its mission being, among other things, to contribute to public order and the moralization of social space by taking in the poor and the wretched. As a source of information, the admission files held in the institution's archive can help to shed light on the difficulties and challenges that a great many families of that time faced as they struggled to survive in the absence of regular work. In what follows, these files will provide a window into the problems affecting the most vulnerable households of Barcelona and its surrounding area, households that, as a direct consequence of poverty (albeit a complex concept¹) or insecure work, were also characterized by domestic conflict, marital strife and intergenerational disputes. From a sociological perspective, and as research on this topic has shown,² material struggles have always been linked to problems in domestic relations, insofar as adversity of this kind could change what family members expected of one another, disturbing or interfering with the basic rules of home life or of discipline, which might then be applied at times too harshly, at others not at all, or perhaps with the head of the household simply laying down the law. In this context, one of the advantages of studying the admission files of an institution such as the Casa de Misericordia is that they can provide insight into the different levels of poverty – or of what may be understood as poverty – in the early modern age. The men and women who ended up in these institutions (of all ages, but primarily children and the elderly) constituted the neediest sector of society. They had clearly fallen into or were close to poverty, insofar as their presence at the door of a hospice or shelter demonstrated for all to see their

dependence on these places for survival. However, the inhabitants of this network of shelters were not defined solely by poverty. Indeed, and as we will see when examining the admission files of the Casa de Misericordia, not only were there other reasons for requesting entry but a family's material circumstances might also improve as a result of their finding regular work, and hence an abandoned child could be retrieved and brought back into the fold. The problems of definition that one encounters when addressing this sector of the population in social terms are also present when considering the timeless relationship between poverty, conflict, and violence, as well as the more specific relationship between family life, conflict and violence. Although, regarding the latter, historiographies of the early modern age have long since revealed the intensity of conflict both between and within families, to the extent that these strained relations are seen as far from anomalous,³ one may speak of a growing tension among families suffocated by material and social deprivation, who experience in turn constant emotional ups and downs and a breakdown in family ties as they live under the relentless threat of vulnerability and exclusion. In Spain, the work of James Casey and María José de la Pascua on family conflict has drawn attention to a number of causal factors that, in a broad sense, may be incorporated into the present study; these factors include the persistence of interdependent family models based on a hierarchy of everyday relations in the home, or patriarchal moral discourses that, in some form or another, permeated most family groups.⁴ Aside from studies of the social elites, whose conflicts and violence were closely tied to competition and the hereditary monopoly, other authors, focusing on wider society, have identified several factors capable of generating conflict: the repeated absences of authority within the family as a result of high mortality, which was taken advantage of by children to shun discipline by women;⁵ the pressure on families to conform with what the community considered right; or, as highlighted by Arlette Farge,

the open secrets of private life that revealed the existence within the home of dividing lines, mistrust and rivalries.⁶

In this respect, examination of the files held in the archive of the Casa de Misericordia of Barcelona shows that those who requested help, shelter (or also guardianship), at times, referred to the conflicts and violence they had been experiencing. It is important to consider that other terms were used in accordance with morality or shame. However, discussing "violence" clearly leads us to that world of loneliness, poverty, and lack of opportunities. They rarely turned to the courts for help with these issues, as to do so would be beyond their means. Furthermore, these conflicts (visible or otherwise) were deeply embedded within their lives, their emotions; rather than being something tangible and concrete, their daily struggles took the form of tensions, disillusionment, unspoken abuse. It must therefore have been a relief when, in the presence of someone from outside the family, in this case, the administrators of an institution, they were able to speak of this lived or felt experience that made their lives impossible. They knew, however, that they also had to defend what little remained of their honour, or that of the young girl they wished to be taken into care, in the event that it was she who was the affected party. All this had to be protected, for what was at stake was not only their material survival but also their moral standing, the latter a prerequisite for integration into society (and therefore the possibility of work) in a time of confessionalism.⁷ In short, the files of the Casa de Misericordia raise multiple questions that invite examination from multiple complementary perspectives.

To date, the archive of the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona has not been examined from the combined perspective of family conflict and gender-based violence, and yet the files include both explicit and indirect or insinuated references to the maltreatment of young girls specifically. With the aim of addressing this gap, I have

conducted an in-depth study of the files both quantitatively – in order to determine how many of the girls who entered this institution had experienced violence, and how representative this was of the institutional population as a whole – and qualitatively, that is, the form these experiences took, the identity of the perpetrators and the family circumstances. One suspects, however, that many experiences of violence would have been hidden, not merely out of shame but also because of a fear that to speak of them might lead to the girl being treated differently after entering the institution, with the institutional authorities perhaps seeing fit to make more detailed enquiries. The figures derived from the files, therefore, are unlikely to reflect the scale of the problem. However, much information can also be gained by considering what is omitted or left unstated. The task is to understand the language used, to imagine what is being described, to flesh out the fears or desires by reading between the lines of what is written and to interpret it in light of the moral context of the time, of the shame associated with what for families constituted failure, the abandonment of a child, even if this was only envisaged as being temporary. Note too that deciding whether to keep some things hidden was not only a question for families but also for those who, in their institutional role, heard what the girls had to say. For the backdrop to all these stories is the relationship between the limits of survival, the despair caused by poverty or hardship, and conflict and violence, a spiral from which it was difficult to escape. I have already referred above to the presence of conflict (whether full-blown or silent) within family relations, the dynamics of which are uncontrollable when there is a risk of social exclusion. Indeed, the fertile body of research on the history of poverty in the *Ancien Régime* offers precise accounts of the lives of children living under hardship,⁸ and this issue also appears in more general studies of childhood during that time. The classic work of Philippe Ariès in which he discusses the renewed importance ascribed to childhood, concomitant with a decrease in

infant mortality and the rise in private life and the individual,⁹ it's been widely discussed. In recent years, the study of the history of childhood has been shedding light on new controversies and uncovering perspectives that diverge significantly from Ariès' theses, including issues such as kidnappings, incest, abuse, and abandonment, as exemplified in the work of Didier Lett.¹⁰ The admission files of the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona may be analysed from the point of view of a family's wish to protect their children, removing them from the tragedy of hunger, of being left alone, of the scheming and abuse to which they might fall victim within their community. But they also reflect the opposite: rejection at home, disaffection, family conflicts.

Various authors have analysed the role played by institutions and hospitals in general with respect to abandoned children. Their intense and extensive work across Europe encompassed civil, municipal, and ecclesiastical initiatives, serving an educational as well as custodial purpose. This provision of care has always been a topic of interest, and in recent years it has been examined from the perspective of new cultural parameters and gender. In Spain, M. José Pérez Álvarez and Marta Lobo have revealed the different facets of poverty and the intense activity of a hospital network that sought to provide various forms of relief despite persistent financial difficulties. The study of this network has helped draw attention to the lives of the most vulnerable families, to their strategies, their disintegration, and their sources of support or solidarity.¹¹ Beyond the Iberian Peninsula, the work of, among others, Mónica Chojnacka¹² or Nicholas Terpstra, has achieved something similar.¹³ Terpstra has recognized that women play an essential role in caring for orphans. In the case of the girls at the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona, their lives were surrounded by women, such as mothers, aunts, sisters, who tried to care for them until it became impossible, as will be seen in a significant number

of cases. The present work sits at this same crossroads and focuses on gender and a particularly delicate stage of women's lives, the childhood years from five to thirteen.

The Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona and the population of girls who received shelter there

When these young girls entered an institution such as the Casa de Misericordia, this was usually (at least initially) seen as a temporary measure until the family's material situation improved or the girl received an offer to enter domestic service as a maid with a different family; or in some cases, until there was an improvement in her disorderly conduct, which were it to persist would merely add to the problems of an already chaotic household. Little is known about the violence and conflicts to which children were exposed,¹⁴ and more needs to be uncovered about their lives¹⁵ so as to capture better the complexity of this multifaceted reality. The road from family to institutional life and back again did not follow a straight line. We know where it begins, much less so where it ends, because even if a girl was later collected by her family, she did not necessarily remain with them; she might go into domestic service or be left with a relative. This instability and insecurity were itself a form of abuse against children. The findings of modernist historiography in this regard are scant but nevertheless essential. Dorothea Nolde recently reported on current research into sexual violence against children¹⁶ and points out that most studies are based on judicial archives, in which the majority of accusations concern kidnapping. As noted by Elizabeth Archibald¹⁷ and Didier Lett,¹⁸ incest was much more difficult to catalogue, because subsequent to medieval ecclesiastical debates any mention of the possibility of sexual relations between a girl and a male relative was avoided, and neither were such relations seriously pursued. It is possible that the shift towards a more nuclear family reduced contact with relatives and left children less exposed to abuse. In

Spain, violence against girls or very young women during this period has been explored by a number of authors: Margarita Torremocha, in an edited collection, addresses the subject of rape, Maria Luisa Candau discusses sexual conflicts during courtship, and Marta Ruiz Sastre focuses on girls forced into marriage and mistreated by parents and relatives when they dared to challenge this destiny.¹⁹ More is known about young women of marriageable age, or even married women who were taken in for the purposes of moral reformation,²⁰ in large part because of the incorporation into this material of Foucauldian ideas about discipline and punishment.²¹ The admission files of the Casa de Misericordia can help to fill in some of these gaps and also highlight the importance of considering gender discrimination and inequality, insofar as the snapshots of life recorded in the files speak only of the maltreatment of little girls, not children in general. It is true, of course, that women accounted for the majority of residents in the Casa, a point noted by Montserrat Carbonell in what is to date the only work to consider the institution in the context of attempts by adults to survive; many residents were migrants or elderly and abandoned women, but there were young women too, who through their time in the Casa increased their chances of finding work, insofar as they received training in traditionally female tasks, were employed as maids or even went on to marry. It is at all events apparent that by the second half of the eighteenth century, poverty was common among women, due to their exclusion from the workings of merchant capitalism. This is evidenced in the files of the Casa, which show that of those admitted in the years 1768, 1771 and 1796, women accounted for 76%, 82% and 64%, respectively.²²

A common thread running throughout almost all the experiences described in the files is that families turned to the institution because they could no longer provide for their daughters or ensure their Christian upbringing; furthermore, these young girls were considered 'to be of no use' (*inútiles, inservibles*, in original language), because unlike

their male siblings they were incapable of contributing to the family income, accompanying their parents to work in the countryside or seeking a living on the streets. Faced with the impossibility of feeding their children, families had to choose which of them would be handed over to an institution that could fulfil the role of a good family. There were several reasons why it was invariably girls who were chosen to leave the family home: they helped out very little when still young, and neither was it good for them to be left alone while their parents were out searching for work or sustenance, as this not only left them exposed to malicious neighbours, visits from strangers and gossip but also increased the likelihood that they would start wandering the streets and get up to no good. Families also feared for the girl left alone while both parents were out working, a girl vulnerable to the scheming of others, or even to kidnapping, and this, coupled with her inability to contribute to family tasks, was what led ultimately to her being sent away. But this final act of abandonment may also have been preceded by other events related to the problem of too many mouths to feed, to the strain of poverty and the constant struggle to survive, to the family falling to live up to the standards of public morality, or to conflicts in the everyday life of the family that led to misunderstandings, outbursts, disobedience and punishment.

The present text therefore aims to speak to the relationship between poverty, domestic problems and violence. How many fathers and mothers, together or alone, married or widowed, and struggling in the face of a lack of work and food, began to feel that raising their children was the main cause of their plight? The fear of leaving a girl alone in the house, vulnerable to an unexpected visit, unaware of going for a walk far away and getting lost, with the risk of being assaulted or even raped, was also the cause of minor domestic dramas and severe punishments. This fear is apparent in the file of Rosa Mañosa, a 14-year-old orphan who lived with her older sister and her husband: “the

declarants fear that a person of ill intentions may defile her".²³ Josepa Roca's father also expressed concern: "she roams this city, and considering his daughter's young age, he fears that malicious individuals may attempt to seduce her, leading her away from the devout path of God".²⁴ Similarly, the widow Teresa Sapera expressed the following when requesting that her 13-year-old daughter be granted admission to the Casa: "Fearing that some scoundrel with little fear of God might, in ill will, abuse my innocent daughter, in light of the fact that I am unable to keep her always in sight".²⁵ The hardships experienced by families who turned to the Casa de Misericordia prevented them from raising their children, and especially their daughters, and it should not be forgotten that girls were subject to a much stricter set of rules:

"...many girls of all ages live as beggars without any protector who might teach them to live as Christians or show them those labours that are necessary to sustain human life, it is a path to utter misfortune and the perdition of body and soul (...) they frequent the taverns eating and drinking dissolutely with men (...) they flee from their parents (...) others, whose parents or families are unable to sustain them, are sent here so that they may get by the best they can (...) so that here they may have instilled within them the Christian doctrine (...) These girls roam the city alone, seeking charity and free to do as they please (...) they are on the road to perdition, and one sees many mothers who allow this and join them in offending his Divine Majesty".²⁶

This fragment is taken from the rule book of the Casa de Misericordia, one informed by the tenets of a Christian life, and it reveals the concern that was felt over the lives of girls and young women. A mother who worked all day as a servant, often far from home, did not have time to teach her young daughter the basic rules for getting by in the world, nor to instil in her a sense of obedience, a love of work or the rudiments of Christian morality, especially as regards the honour and purity of girls. In extreme cases, desperate mothers resorted to begging on the streets and taught their daughters to do the same. All these problems are reflected in declarations made before the Casa de Misericordia. For example, in 1757, Josefa Marquilles, a mother, considered that "it

would be for the best that her children entered the Hospice because they would therefore receive education and be protected against the vicissitudes and weaknesses of human life".²⁷ Parents, together or separately, often complained about girls' lack of discipline, about their disinclination towards work or the hardships to which they would have to become accustomed. While they did not have plans for these girls' futures, which would be the case among higher social classes, it was nevertheless important for parents that their daughters did not add to their existing problems. But the solitary childhood of many of these girls exposed them to numerous dangers, not least when, in an act of defiance, they ran away from home, causing much suffering among the family. These disappearances often mobilized the whole community or parish, and neighbours who joined the search for the missing girl thus became witnesses to the family's problems. More often than not the girl would be found wandering alone, lost in the woods, and in the worst cases showing signs of harm. These episodes of running away from home were often, although not always, the trigger for sending a girl to an institution, whose very purpose was, among other things, to take in young women in need of a certain moral education and to engage them in work. Families trusted in these institutions to rein in their daughters and prepare them better for life.

Mention has already been made of the control of female morality and sexuality as a form of discrimination, and the admission files contain numerous allusions to this issue. The Casa de Misericordia became seen as the ideal place to reform the behaviour of girls who were bringing additional burden to their families.²⁸ But one should also ask whether this might equally have been a strategy employed by families with the aim of securing automatic admission for their daughter, as demand was high and there was not room for everybody. Whatever the case, disobedience and defiance were met with, or preceded by, threats, punishment, ill-treatment, and scorn. Beyond a family's fears for their daughter

and their role as her guardians, their responsibility for her upbringing also gave them *carte blanche* to act in whatever way they saw fit. Indeed, this was an accepted aspect of child rearing according to books of the day setting out the Christian doctrine, and even though the lower and illiterate classes were unlikely to read or even be aware of them, the ideas they contained could be conscientiously spread by attentive parish priests. Hence the need to pay attention to the small and almost imperceptible acts of violence that accompanied other forms of control and punishment, those acts which from time to time are revealed in the notes taken by institutional officials after repeatedly listening to what the children in their care had to say. Gender-based conflicts and problems emerge in moments of tension, strain, and dispute, such as when a family decides to send a child away, and the records taken at those times can help to illuminate the darker corners of family life.

It will be helpful at this point to say a little more about the history of the *Casa de Misericordia* in Barcelona and the population to whom it offered shelter. As an institution, the Casa reflected urban social policies of the early modern age, insofar as the provision of shelter and guardianship was underpinned by a programme of moral discipline. It was endorsed by the city government. Built between 1581 and 1584 following proposals put forward by Canon Miguel de Giginta and, subsequently, the humanist theologian Diego Pérez de Valdivia, the Casa de Misericordia sought to respond to the growing numbers of vagrants and beggars of all ages and both sexes who roamed the streets of Barcelona. Its aim was to take them in and apply the Christian doctrine, including preparing them for a working life; in the case of the elderly, the sick and the infirm, only shelter was provided. These goals are reflected in the institutional rules of 1633, 1679-99 and 1712, the most important prior to the changes introduced at the end of the eighteenth century. Between 1679 and 1699, a total of 69 chapters of new regulations

were published, with 26 chapters exclusively focused on addressing issues concerning families and the sheltered daughters.²⁹ A parallel focus was the extreme conditions under which many girls, specifically, were living. The mission here was to take in young girls who lived with mothers of ill repute, as well as those who were alone, either because they had been abandoned or due to the death of a parent, the result being that they spent their days begging in the company of unsavoury characters. These girls had to be rescued from such a nefarious and immoral environment. These were the cases for which protection and guardianship were sought. Although it had initially provided for both men and women, the Casa soon turned its attention primarily to the latter, a further illustration of how poverty affected the two genders differently. The absence of women's identity in the labour market, and the difficulty of surviving outside of marriage, at least for the majority of them, were some of the most significant reasons in a context of limited opportunities that led to poverty. Destitute and vulnerable women thus became the focus of the Casa, and when, in 1684, a new set of institutional rules were drawn up, 26 of the 69 articles referred solely to the young women for whom shelter should be provided. It was at this point that the work of the Casa began to be administered by Third Order Franciscan nuns.³⁰ Only during the final quarter of the eighteenth century did the Casa become more of a lay institution, its name during the period of the Franciscan nuns (i.e., *Casa y Hospital de la Misericordia*) being changed to *Real Casa de Hospicio y Refugio* (Royal House of Hospice and Refuge). Its powers did not change substantially.

The girls arrived at the institution accompanied by the person or persons who requested their admission: their parents, their mother and father alone, or a relative. In cases of absolute abandonment, the local parish priest accompanied them. Baptism certificates were included in the records, although this documentation was not always provided. The preservation of these records is irregular. If a girl arrived with a modest

dowry, it was documented, but the majority could not contribute anything. It's important to remember, as Montserrat Carbonell demonstrated, that within the Casa, the girls represented essential labor for working in the garden and assisting with the preparations for the funerals of the deceased in Barcelona. Their work constituted a significant part of the Casa's income, such as 30% in 1669.³¹ Some of them entered domestic service, as many affluent families visited the institution to find their servants. Simultaneously, the girls received practical training and education in the Catholic catechism. On the other hand, the institution received bequests and pious donations from individuals. Figures for the number of girls who resided in the Casa can be found in the work of Montserrat Carbonell, who notes that according to the census of 1787, there were 237 girls among a total population of 1,341 residents (equivalent to almost 18%). However, the same author also points out that, in 1768, young girls aged 15 or younger accounted for 40% of female residents in the Casa. Furthermore, this percentage rises considerably when analysing the broader period from 1762 to 1805, during which time girls of this age made up 54.6% of the female population in the Casa. From a socioeconomic perspective, the high proportion of girls of this age is a reflection of the fact that admission to the Casa de Misericordia implied an opportunity to receive an education, and hence it was a stepping stone towards obtaining work or entering marriage.³² While acknowledging the importance of material struggles, my aim here is show that the decision to remove young girls from the family home was also the result of the violence to which they were potentially exposed – a multifaceted and barely concealed violence which was perpetrated in a context defined by fear, sex, morality, weakness and need.

Experiences of abuse and violence: The girls of the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona

The short and fragile lives of the girls we will read about below were defined by the hardships of their social status. The scarcity of food at home meant they were frequently malnourished, and they would often spend long periods alone while their parents sought work and sustenance (absences which sometimes became permanent); furthermore, when a parent did find employment, the harsh working conditions could readily lead to ill health, a problem that was also common among fathers returning from war. Above all, the fragility and, at times, severing of relationships within the family unit meant that a profound sense of aloneness hovered constantly over these young girls' lives. Yet it was not simply the death of their parents, or of whoever was charged with putting food on the table, that left these girls exposed and alone. On the contrary, their lives were likely already characterized by instability and solitude, whether due to a breakdown in their parents' marriage, an absent father whose whereabouts were unknown, or to their being sent to work as a maid with another family, from where they might subsequently be sent home again, thus heightening a sense of uprootedness. These experiences severely undermined their personal development and any possibility of their integration into society, until someone recognized the need for them to be sent to the Casa de Misericordia. Uprootedness is a theme that can be seen in the file pertaining to Francisca Sanges, who entered the institution when she was orphaned aged 10. From there she was taken in by a poor childless couple, with whom she lived for two years. However, the couple came to see the girl as being “badly inclined, rebellious and disobedient”, and hence they requested her readmission to the Casa. They presumably concluded that the young Francisca was of little use to them if her behaviour made it unlikely she would soon enter employment, and hence be in a position to look after them in their old age.³³ In

the case of the 13-year-old orphan Catalina Permanyer, the aunt with whom she lived sought her admission to the Casa because “her presence in the home is the cause of many quarrels and disputes with my husband”. Achieving any kind of emotional stability was difficult in such a setting. To what extent was Catalina affected by these arguments prior to her aunt's decision? Did she feel guilty, or did she feign ignorance until the finger was pointed at her by aunt or uncle?³⁴

While the difficulties of making ends meet inevitably raised tensions in the family household, it is also important to consider the sense of blame that girls might feel in the context of a fragile and fractured life in which nothing or nobody could be relied on. The blame mentality is itself a form of cruelty or oppression, especially when inculcated in another, as it both oppresses and represses.³⁵ Consequently, ending up in an institution such as the Casa de Misericordia was not a sudden unfortunate episode in their lives but merely the latest chapter in a tale of misfortune. Regardless of whether they had been subjected to some form of violence (as a result of their sex, smallness, lack of strength or presumed uselessness), life in the home where they had been born or ended up was a life ravaged by the desperate struggle for survival, a breeding ground for dislike: “she is unwanted by all”, declared the parish priest of Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona upon requesting admission to the Casa for one of the daughters of Antonia Mayol, whose husband had abandoned her with three young girls to take care of, one of whom she had already sent to live with a relative.³⁶ When a child is the result of an unwanted pregnancy or when a new mouth to feed merely adds to the family burden, the parents may feel contempt towards the child, who may in turn perceive this.

The files of the Casa de Misericordia also bear witness to other forms of violence perpetrated outside the family home: girls directly exposed to abuse by strangers. For example, one often finds entries such as the following:

“with no-one to protect and care for her, she is poor and unable to serve as a maid or even a shepherdess, due to impediment, and thus she must beg from door to door, and so, in light of the danger to her honour that such wanderings entail, I hereby request her admission (...) so that she may be saved from perdition”.³⁷

One sees here how the notion of moral rupture takes precedence over bodily harm. The language of honour and dishonour encapsulates that sense of blame that is attributed solely to women, irrespective of their age. Yet beneath it all lie the minutiae of a hard life – hidden violence, deception, abuse and rape.

The table below summarizes the types of violence experienced by girls admitted to the Casa de Misericordia during two twenty-year periods from the beginning and end of the eighteenth century. Simultaneously, the life stories described throughout the text aim to illustrate this information. For the analysis I sought to identify girls aged between 5 and 15 years of age who were taken to the institution by one or both parents, a relative or by a figure of authority from the parish or neighbourhood, whose declaration, as recorded in the files, makes reference to the girl experiencing one or more forms of violence. The justification for the choice of two twenty-year intervals, spanning from the beginning to the end of the century was to capture possible changes or trends related to their corresponding socioeconomic characteristics, insofar as the first was a time of war and, therefore, economic downturn, while the latter was a period of prosperity and growth in Catalonia and, especially, Barcelona. Although the number of cases is notably higher in the second period, this should be interpreted with caution because the number of records held by the institution also increases over time (they are better preserved and archived), and the growth in population as the century progressed would logically lead to a greater demand for shelter of this kind. It is also likely that towards the end of the century, society would have come to recognize that a key function of the Casa de Misericordia was to provide education, and hence families would have seen a child's admission not as

a punishment or dramatic episode in their lives but rather as an opportunity to receive help with a task they were unable to fulfil. Another possibility is that the increasing number of admissions reflects a heightened degree of social control, driven by the consolidation of the moral regulations imposed since Trento. The truth is, and this might aid in comprehending this development, since the late 18th century, the institution has admitted a noteworthy number of women who are facing marital difficulties or are in the process of separation, and they are sent there while these issues remain unresolved, as evidenced by the case studied by Marie Costa.³⁸ Consequently, the Casa has become more attentive to receiving individuals in conflict situations. Exploring these questions is, however, beyond the scope of the present analysis, and hence I will limit myself to discussing the experiences of violence that are mentioned in the girls' files. Experiences of this kind account for just 4.6% and 9.7% of the reasons expressed for admission to the Casa in the two time periods, respectively, and they might therefore be overlooked given that the vast majority of admission requests refer exclusively to poverty. It is important to note, however, that the figures reflect only those cases in which explicit mention was made of violence, and most family members who took a daughter, niece, sister or grand daughter to the Casa would most likely have kept quiet about any sinister or pitiful events leading up to this. To take an extreme case as an example, a girl who was openly declared to be the victim of rape would be unlikely to be well received; she would be seen in a bad light by the institutional authorities, the suspicion being that the innocence of other residents, whether of the same age or younger, might be tarnished through contact with her. And of course, such a girl would, after puberty, be less likely to be a recipient of one of the marriage dowries that were bequeathed to the Casa de Misericordia for pious causes. Even though the consequences of an honest declaration could not be predicted, any Christian family knew – through the culture of the day and by listening to preachers –

that the loss of a daughter's purity or virginity outside of marriage should not be spoken of as it was a sin and were it to become public knowledge the scandal would merely make matters worse for the whole family. The figures derived from the institution's files are undoubtedly, therefore, an underestimate of the experience of violence in these girls' lives, and hence it is reasonable to assume that many requests for admission to the Casa were also made in an attempt to remove the girl from the setting (whether within or outside the family home) in which she had suffered it. Which is not to say, of course, that young girls' lives were not also blighted by the family's basic struggle to survive and to raise its children.

As can be observed in the table, an examination of the institutional records revealed six different categories of violence, which the archives, naturally, describe with apprehension and use terms like "extreme abandonment and helplessness". The situations found are: physical maltreatment, such as excessive punishments or beatings, at times linked to a parent's alcohol abuse or ill health; malnutrition through lack of food, in most cases due to the father abandoning the family home and his children -abuse of the maintenance obligation-; one or both parents abandoning the children, not simply in the search for work or food but to distance themselves from their problems and responsibilities; the girl is kicked out as punishment or in response to her disobedience, the result being that she goes back and forth between different homes in a spiral of instability (e.g. first to live with relatives, then back to her parents, then to a new household to work as a maid, and so on); psychological maltreatment, in the form of all kinds of verbal abuse; and finally, sexual abuse within the local neighbourhood or further afield after running away from home. It should be noted, however, that these different forms and degrees of violence or abuse were not mutually exclusive and might well be experienced simultaneously:

“I faithfully declare that I have witnessed Bernat Comellas raise his daughter Rosa, who I confess has a wicked, stubborn and disobedient nature, and who is incorrigible for her parents and, at twelve years of age, has lost all fear of them (...) and as she cannot be disciplined with love and kindness I have often seen her harshly punished to an extent that I felt went beyond what was right for a parent to do (...) later they took her to her uncle's house, asking that he punish her (...) The girl, I believe, continued to disobey all that she was ordered to do (...) and her uncle, being a strict man, did what he had to do and returned her to her parents saying that she was insufferable and hence he was leaving her there (...) later they decided to send her into service in another home [from where] she was once again returned home, and wishing to punish her, her father beat her, and thus did she run away from home, her whereabouts unknown for several days while her father searched high and low for her”.³⁹

Even though multiple circumstances may coexist, the records typically emphasize a primary theme. This could be due to a fear of rejection; it was not advisable to bring a girl to the institution burdened with too many problems. These words, of the parish priest of Sant Esteve de Múnter in his declaration before the Casa de Misericordia, show how everyday quarrels between parents and children could culminate in excessive punishments, including with the child being confined: the case of Isabel Campás is illustrative: “Sometimes, for a period of two weeks, and other times for a full month, she is unaware of her daughter's whereabouts (...) her parents, who are poor laborers in the countryside, are unable to secure her in a safe space”.⁴⁰ They frequently moved them to other homes to have company while the parents went to work or looked for employment. And even if the latter was that of a known relative (uncle, cousin, grandparent), the girl was sure to suffer there the punishments that her own parents had not dared to mete out, because these changes within the family network occurred as part of a mutual aid agreement. Although the priest's declaration ends with the girl running away from home, it is likely that in doing so she entered a new cycle of extreme vulnerability as she would have found herself alone in an unknown environment replete with all manner of delinquents and rogues who would be more than willing to trick and abuse her. However,

and as one would expect in an institution supported by the Church, the files of the Casa de Misericordia tend not to gather such heartbreaking testimonies, it being much more common to find the language of moral metaphor: “I wish for her to be taken in by this holy Casa de Misericordia so that she may be freed from the worldly ties that bind her so”, stated Isidro Mariner, from Cornellà, upon taking his 13-year-old daughter to the institution.⁴¹ Another case that illustrates a fragile and unstable existence, being expelled from their home, is explained by Josep Bultá and his wife Isabel. In a file from 1783, this couple appeared at the Casa de Misericordia to collect a 6-year-old girl. This nomadic experience is evident here, which must have been very distressing for such a young girl:

“After they got married, the wife informed her husband, Josep Bultá, that she had a daughter in the House of Mercy from her first marriage to Pedro Pablo Batlle. Soon after her mother picked her up, she had to keep the girl away because the in-laws she was living with didn't want her. She was entrusted to Isabel's sister, the girl's aunt. However, this aunt fell ill and returned the girl to the Casa de misericordia without the mother's knowledge.”⁴²

The line between physical punishment and the most suitable way of inculcating Catholic morality and doctrine in a child was often blurred. Francisca Figueres, from Vilanova de Bellpuig, asked that her daughter be admitted because “in word and deed she is both impetuous and reckless, and she remains oblivious to warnings of the spiritual or bodily consequences”.⁴³ Thus was the health of body and soul intertwined in discourse. And this is one of the reasons why it is difficult to gain full insight into the silent forms of violence that girls experienced prior to being sent to the Casa to instil in them some discipline. At all events, what the files often reveal is not so much occasional acts of violence but rather a history of harm at the hands of different members of the family or the local community. And this accumulated harm was often deep-rooted insofar as it reflected the violence already experienced by the girl's own mother:

“Isabel Termes is a defenceless orphan (...) without the protection of a home as her mother has died; and her father, these five years since, is either missing or dead, for it was then that he left the girl's mother in this town, his whereabouts since unknown, or whether he is alive or dead”.⁴⁴

Economic abuse or neglect of the maintenance obligation by the husband/father, his failure to provide food for the family, whether through absence or mismanagement of resources, resulted in misery, abuse and ultimately abandonment: “(the husband) has wasted the dowry and has left his wife with four daughters and a son”, one reads in the file of Arcángela Magem.⁴⁵ Isabel Termes suffered a form of emotional abandonment, just as her mother had been abandoned in marriage. Petronila Queralt had a similar fate, although in her case the perpetrator of abuse was her older brother. In the father's absence, older males in the family would take up the mantle, and some of them relished the opportunity to act the patriarch with their sisters, who were alone and powerless to defend themselves against these predatory tendencies. When Petronila and her brother were orphaned, they agreed to sell the house their parents had bought and split the proceeds. But as she didn't trust her brother, she quickly deposited the money with a chemist in Barcelona by the name of Joan Sabater:

“not wishing that said amount would go to the supplicant's brother, Josep Queralt, a labourer in this city and who, under false pretext, managed to have her taken in by the Casa Hospital de Nuestra Señora de la Misericordia, and thus it was that on 25 December 1774 the sum of 48 pounds and a few shillings was deposited with the administration of said Hospital, these being the monies that had been deposited with Mr Sabater (...) and as the supplicant later demonstrated the falsity of her brother's allegation she was able to regain her freedom”.⁴⁶

Petronila then found work as a maid and subsequently married, although not before returning to the Casa to retrieve the money she needed for her wedding. Cases such as this became more common. Just as Isabel Termes began to feel the consequences of her father abandoning the family, so too did Teresa Dinarés,

“a girl ten years of age (...) with father and mother alive, yet the father is but a wanderer in this world and fails to care for either daughter or wife, and the girl's mother is unable to work through ill health, for which she often has to attend the hospital, and thus Teresa must raise herself as if she had neither father nor mother, being nothing but a waif”.⁴⁷

A similar fate befell not only Teresa Serra but also her mother, who

“by having an unfortunate husband, who through the vice of gambling and womanizing failed during most of the year to provide food for the supplicant and who would return home in the early hours of the morning, and seeing herself befallen of such a life (...) she took the young girl and sought shelter in the hospice”.⁴⁸

This was the life of an underprivileged girl, a life marked by a lack of security and trust due to abandonment, making such girls vulnerable to additional harm. Maria was an older girl who was

“completely neglected due to her father serving the King in the present war, it being two years since there was news of him, while the mother's whereabouts are also unknown as she has had to flee this land due to her crimes and immoral behaviour”.⁴⁹

Maria was found wandering the streets and fields, defying all manner of misfortune, this being a girl whose life had already been marked by absences, transgressions, and betrayals. And just as Maria had experienced the rupture from her own mother, so too did the daughter of Susana Velarde, who upon marrying for the second time chose to live alone with her new husband and detach herself from the young girl “whose wicked, incorrigible and indomitable nature has left the family dismayed, and thus her presence in the home is unwanted by her stepfather”.⁵⁰ It is worth reflecting here on whether the arrival of another man or woman in the home through a swiftly agreed second marriage was perceived as a intrusion by children from the first marriage, who had to adjust from being the centre of their parents' attention to obeying the orders of a stranger. In this

respect, one finds in the files numerous statements such as “she was terribly mistreated and despised by her father and stepmother” or “she came of her own accord because her stepmother was mistreating her”. To avoid reaching a situation that he would later regret, Juan Ayllón declared that he was “obliged to leave his daughter in the Casa as she did not get on with her stepmother”.⁵¹ More extreme is the testimony of Francesc Escaler, a weaver from Barcelona, who was initially forced to send his 12-year-old daughter to the Casa

“because she was in the hands of a wicked stepmother who day after day not only beat and insulted her but also deprived her of food, and thus was life in the home an unabating tempest; later, seeing she was close to childbirth and in need of assistance, the stepmother urged the supplicant time and again to retrieve the girl from the Casa de Misericordia, promising that she would be treated with the love that befits a mother; but this she has not fulfilled, and hence he requests once more the admission of young Raymunda”.⁵²

The fragility of domestic relationships, caught in a cycle of being torn then mended, brought uncertainty and violence to the lives of the weakest members of the household. In the case of Susana Velarde's daughter it was clear that “her presence in the home is unwanted by her stepfather”. There was also no lack of occasions when admission to the Casa appeared to be for the best. When Joan Guell asked that his 10-year-old niece be offered shelter, he must have had good reason for stating “that she not be handed over to her mother in the event that the latter so requests this”.⁵³ Had the mother mistreated her daughter? Or perhaps the uncle removed the girl so that she would not end up following what he regarded as the mother's bad example. The violence implicit in a forced separation at the behest of a third party is a constant occurrence that is inseparable from the precepts that led to the founding of the institution:

“...will take in young girls, the daughters of poor parents who do not wish to obey them and who are in peril of going astray (...) also the daughters of women tainted by prostitution (...) or of those unable to provide for them”.⁵⁴

Even the Casanova couple explained in 1787 "that because of her (their daughter), the parents are in constant anguish and arguments."⁵⁵ Yet the true object of protection was the higher moral order, which was seen as fundamental to public order and social peace. Many declarations in the files make clear the efforts of families to protect their daughter's honour, turning first to some intermediary and ultimately to the institution. In addition to confirming the moral mission of the Casa -the control of female sexuality- these processes show how sensitive families were to the dangers of sexual violence against women, which was seen as especially repugnant in the case of young virgins. In 1754, a parish priest from Barcelona wrote a letter of recommendation for the daughter of Paula Maderas, of whom he wrote that

“through living apart from the husband and being barely at home during the day is unable to raise her daughters as would befit, and thus are they at risk of going astray, whereby it is advisable for the two little girls to be offered shelter in this Casa before they come to know the evil of this world”.⁵⁶

The deep-rooted culture of blaming women in these matters masked the suffering of victims. A daughter was considered to have "gone astray", or a girl was seen as "a lost soul" in circumstances where she might also have been harassed, pursued, abused or raped. When the files speak of perdition (*descarrío*), it is safe to assume that the experience is one that not even the girl herself would dare speak of, let alone that the details would be recorded in writing. What followed these actions was consequently an oppressive silence and shame, the mutterings of disapproval and rejection within the family, who saw admission to the Casa as an opportunity to make amends for and draw a veil over what had happened. The widow Teresa Arbor wished that her 12-year-old

daughter be taken in by the Casa “to save her [the mother] from embarrassment”.⁵⁷ Only thus could she breathe a sigh of relief, for shame fell not just on the individual but on the family too; likewise, embarrassment was felt not merely for the perceived loss of innocence but also for the breakdown in trust within the community. For it was the community, the neighbourhood that had failed, and it had been shown to be neglectful and under threat through one of its members. In seeking admission to the Casa for 14-year-old Coloma Oliver, the parish priest of Sant Feliu de Sabadell declared that “she is on the road to perdition, all possible means have been employed to rein her in, yet not even the discipline of her father and relatives has succeeded in doing so”.⁵⁸ Whatever form this discipline took, it is easy to imagine that the girl's relatives, alerted by the father to her behaviour, would have been willing to mete out even harsher punishments than had so far been tried. In the case of Francisca Galcerán, a 15-year-old orphan, the priest in attendance at Santa María del Pi church in Barcelona stated that:

“based on the information in my possession regarding the young girl for whom shelter is sought in this Casa de Misericordia, and given that her parents are no longer in this world to protect her and provide the example needed to tame her wilder tendencies, I consider [her aunt's] intentions to be most Christian”.⁵⁹

The file pertaining to 10-year-old Gertrudis states that “she has paid no attention to the reprimands of the priest and even less to the threats of her father”.⁶⁰ Even when parents or relatives did not dare to mention it, it was at times impossible to hide the fact that it was too late to protect the girl, in which case shutting her away in an institution was a way of avoiding further such events. Francesc Molins, a labourer from Sant Andreu de Palomar, accused his daughter Maria Angela of engaging in bold behaviour and seeking out danger by wandering from the home, yet he also admitted that “she has been pursued by certain characters”, and thus he sensed the cunning of men that “can only lead

her to perdition”. What he feared deep down, however, were those acts most likely consummated during the days when her whereabouts were unknown: “the scandal of the town”.⁶¹

Conclusion

Despite their young age, many of the girls who entered the Casa de Misericordia in Barcelona were already familiar with emotional and physical suffering wrought by violence. During their brief lives they had received little of what a child needs: they lacked a safe, complete and supportive family unit; hunger and want were constant threats; they could not trust other people, and nor could they be sure that they wouldn't be sent elsewhere to live; and faced with the lack or rupture of domestic ties they were prone to the lure of relationships with strangers. The overarching theme here is, in my view, a life characterized by inner solitude, uncertainty and mistrust. And intertwined at the heart of this life are the numerous experiences of violence and all this entailed: the contempt of others, stolen or forgotten affections, being sent to live elsewhere, insults and excessive physical punishment, and the dangers, deceit and sexual abuse they experienced outside the home, a home that was already lost to them emotionally. Thus was the violence of a wretched life, a violence to which girls were especially vulnerable due to their sexuality and the belief in their innate weakness – facets of the same social problem that also underpin their physical and emotional solitude. It is safe to assume, therefore, that violence, whether explicit or hidden to some degree, was a reality for many of the girls whose families or other social agents sought to have admitted to institutions such as the Casa de Misericordia. And it is also reasonable to suppose that the frequency of this violence was maintained or even increased as the population of Barcelona grew through migration to the city. For girls such as those we have encountered above, it was their

poverty, which was structural, sex and young age that opened the doors of the Casa de Misericordia, and gradually the desperate voices of the wretched began to be heard. And what this revealed, and it is a theme running throughout the testimonies gathered in the files, is the problem of the patriarchal mindset and society. What should not be forgotten here is how the sense of shame and guilt stifled these voices and inhibited what could be said, the fear being that to speak too openly or crudely would reduce the likelihood of the institution taking in a girl who had been maltreated, abused or raped, a girl who was marginalized both within and beyond the family. Consequently, families opted to hide or play down this reality. Behind expressions such as “saving her from perdition” lay many other things that could not (should not) be spoken of. The disgrace of shame not only silences suffering and unjust treatment but also serves to bolster patriarchal relations. It is what is known as symbolic violence, forced concealment, and it is evident within the files of the Casa de Misericordia. A girl was seen as lovely, happy despite her misery, although she spent too much time on the street (in fact, her only source of recreation or shelter), and because of her "coquetry", which meant she was at risk of going astray (either losing her virginity or casting doubt publicly on her purity), she was punished, confined or sent to the institution. Families, or what was left of them, frequently complained about their daughters' disobedience and rebelliousness for it threatened what little peace there was at home, and they feared it was a prelude to perdition – yet what they feared most was the scandal that would destroy all possibility of her returning to the fold and finding work. Through their silence they tolerated certain violent forms of sexuality that they well knew existed. This was the mentality that girls from humble backgrounds, living at the limits of survival, encountered on a daily basis. The conclusion that can be drawn from having consulted several hundred admission files in the archive of the Casa de Misericordia is that leaving a girl in the care of the institution was ultimately

a substitute for the protective role that families themselves had been unable to fulfil. It was a way of removing her from the perils and difficulties to which she had been exposed, albeit at the price of her freedom or of temporarily breaking up the family. For families, whether complete or broken, taking a girl to such an institution implied public recognition of a problem that threatened the girl's future, not merely the material survival of whatever remained of the household. Protection, concealment, and rejection may appear as contradictory approaches to a problem, but social dynamics often harmonize contrasting interpretations, much like fear can be succeeded by hope, or violence can be followed by forgiveness. This is why the girls from these vulnerable families, shaken by domestic conflict and at risk of marginalization, had the chance to exchange their separation from home for a measure of stability. For the neighborhood and the city, the goal of upholding order was accomplished.

Abstract

Many of the girls admitted to the Casa de Misericordia (House of Mercy) in Barcelona during the early modern age had suffered forms of violence, within their families and in the wider context of their deprived neighbourhoods. Although poverty was the main reason for entry, there were many concomitant factors that led to girls being abandoned. My aim here is to demonstrate that among these factors, the experience of violence was important both quantitatively and qualitatively. The admission files reveal certainly the relationship between poverty, family conflicts and violence against those most vulnerable members of society.

Keywords: family, care, poverty, violence, gender, women.

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