

## THE WORLD

# Mothers battling heroin

By Angela Bianchi  
Special to The Star

NAPLES — They meet daily in the drug infested streets of Naples' impoverished "quartieri Spagnoli" to battle the war that's killing the city's youth — heroin.

"Madre Corragiose," or Madre di Dignita as they are known in Italy, are a group of 100 Neopolitan mothers who united after eight of their children died injecting a dose of what they call "dirty heroin," a mixture of heroin and marble dust.

Without money, an office or state assistance, the mothers stand in solidarity fighting the *cammorra* (Naples' crime family) and local drug dealers.

Singlehandedly they intend to wipe Naples' streets clean of the "white powder."

They meet on the same corner of the same street, dubbed Heroin Street. They confide in each other, revealing unashamedly how their children batter them, steal from them to support their drug addiction problem. There are many sad stories.

Lucia Saputo, 42, has three sons, all drug addicts. One day she went as far as tying her eldest son, Luigi, to his bed to prevent him from injecting himself. When that didn't work she turned him in to the police. She says, "I'd rather see him safe in jail than buried."

### Dead daughter

One mother cries about her poor son who beat than stabbed her when she refused to give him money to pay his drug debt. An elderly woman sits alone crying for her dead daughter who days earlier jumped out of her fourth storey balcony out of desperation.

Many families are going bankrupt just to pay for their children's drugs. The son of a former Italian senator turned to kidnapping in order to get money (after he sold all his possessions) to buy heroin for his girlfriend.

Italians at large paid little attention to this group of harassed mothers until it was learned that 9- and 10-year-old boys were being used by dealers as go-betweens from one drop-off point to another.

Called "muschilli" (dealers in shorts), or courier babies, they're preferred by dealers because they're quick, honest and don't attract police attention. In the event of arrest no charges can be laid against them because they're minors. Why do they do it? For money which amounts to about \$5 a day.

The war on drugs has produced a number of casualties but none so heart-wrenching as Gennaro Peluso, a 10-year old "muschilli" forced to repeatedly inject heroin at gunpoint by dealers as a warning to his mother of what they'll do if the mothers report them to the police.

### Shattered building

So dismal has the situation become that it's impossible to walk the streets of the "quartieri" and not find syringes scattered everywhere, people fixing themselves out in the open. Often you see small children pick up the syringes and play with them. On the wall of a shattered building wrecked by the 1980 earthquake someone has written: "Viva la droga."

Getting heroin in Naples is no problem. Street stands that once sold black market cigarettes make more money passing heroin. Old abandoned churches make great drop-off points.

Statistics show that there is at least one addict in every family in the "quartieri" and that drug use has increased by 50 per cent in the Naples area since the earthquake that left thousands homeless and jobless.

"Mothers against Drugs" are fighting to free their children from "this dark world of drugs, violence and crime." They're willing to risk their lives and stand up to dealers who laugh in their faces.

"They tell us if we don't stop making trouble for them they'll kill our children with bad drugs," says one mother.

These mothers know the dealers by name; often they're neighbors of theirs. They've pointed them out to the police but so far no arrests have been made.

The mothers have pleaded their cause to politicians and marched to Rome to bring it to the attention of Pope John Paul II but all they've received were sympathetic words.

"We're alone in the fight," the mothers say. "The police are lax. They say they're cracking down on drugs but they're looking in the wrong places. Look in the laundry hung to dry outside the window, look inside a little boys briefs and socks under parked cars . . . the dealers are always one step ahead of the police."

"We're desperate. Dealers can walk freely under our noses pushing drugs and nobody does anything. Naples is suffocating."

□ Angela Bianchi is a freelance writer who has just returned from living in Italy.