Women experiencing Violence in Couple Relations and their view of the Institutions working with them.

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Original Article

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Abstract:

Objectives: To provide the perspective on perception Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the police of the Slovak Republic and courts as formal actors assisting women experiencing violence.
Methods: Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interview and processed using the method of qualitative thematic analysis based on a phenomenological approach.
Results: They point to women's experiences with aid actors located in the so-called formal environment and to a fundamental need in educational practice on this topic.
Implications for practice: The approach of the Police, the Courts and also the Social and Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family appears to be insufficiently supportive and

helpful. Women's experiences with helping organizations that provide specialized assistance to women are positive.

Introduction

According to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), violence against women means "any act of violence directed against a woman because she is a woman, or has a disproportionate impact on women" (Kelly, Dubois, 2008:9). Violence in couple relationships can be characterized as gender-based violence by men against women that occurs in relationships between close people during a relationship or after separation (Almeida, Durkin, 1999:313).

In Slovakia, according to research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 34% of women will experience physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime, and every tenth woman will experience a physical and/or sexual attack within 12 months.

In Slovakia, 317 persons were accused for the crime of torture of a close person and a trusted person according to § 208 of the Criminal Code against a specific person in 2017, which, compared to 2016, means an increase by almost 30%. The number of accused persons for this crime is continuously increasing; in 2014 there were 175 persons accused for this crime, which is an increase by up to 81% (compared to the 317 accused persons). (Súhrnná správa...,s.35).

The complexity of knowledge about violence has led the World Health Organization to develop a socio-ecological model that includes a number of factors that increase the risk of violence at the individual, relational, community and societal levels. The mentioned model is mainly aimed at trying to explain why some people commit violence. Thus, violence is perceived as an interplay of factors that occur at different levels. The ecological perspective was also used by Donald Dutton (2006, in Ondrušková et al., 2020), who perceives an individual from the viewpoint of various relations, systems, and environments. According to Burajová-Činčurová (2016:14), this model also finds application in the field of assistance to women experiencing violence, when the analysis of factors and the identification of sub-goals of interventions in various areas lead to a common goal in the form of prevention and elimination of violence against women and in families.

Methods used in data collection and processing

We collected research data using a demographic data questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, which were strictly anonymized so that women's safety would not be jeopardized. Ethical rules for data acquisition and processing were formulated in an informed consent specified for participants, organization workers and researchers, personally signed by all parties. The data collection was carried out by professional employees of the organizations (only women), who were trained in the research methodology by a personal meeting with the members of the research team, where the training took place, and they had the opportunity to communicate all interview questions. At the same time, they received methodological instructions for filling out the questionnaire and conducting interviews and had the support of the research team. The questionnaire contained questions focused on basic demographic data: age, size of the place of residence (the current one, the one relevant to the relationship in question), change of the place of residence, stay in safehouse for women, marital status, educational level, employment, number and age of children.

The semi-structured interview consisted of six basic open questions aimed at finding out the experiences and behaviour of women in situations of violence, in a violent relationship and supporting, helping or other actions of actors in the informal and formal environment.

The data obtained in semi-structured interviews were processed by the method of qualitative thematic analysis in the program ATLAS.ti 8 and MS Excel 2013. We applied predominantly the processes of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Willig, 2013), which puts emphasis on the importance of experience for respondents. The qualitative data (transcripts of interviews) were divided into segments ac-

cording to the research objective and research questions: (1) women and their behaviour, (2) individual factors, (3) men and their behaviour, (4) child/children, (5) informal actors, (6) formal actors. First, the data were arranged to segments/categories. Categories represented the most general level of data classification, created on the basis of a pre-determined criteria. Encoding was conducted by researchers divided into smaller groups, confronting their procedures, and creating criteria for designing categories. The resulting tables and procedures were discussed by the whole work group.

Characteristics of the research sample

44 women participated in the research, who were approached through organizations providing specialized services to women who experience violence in couple relationships. The condition for approaching a woman (and inclusion in the research sample) was that the woman had been working with the organization for at least two years. This condition was intended to prevent women from being secondarily victimized or repeatedly traumatized.

Participants were ranged between 22 and 65 years of age. The age range was quite wide. Most participants were aged 36-49, with high school education, followed by women with university education. Almost 60% of them were divorced. Most of the worked full time, two participants were old-age pensioners. Two women (out of 44) were childless.

Research findings – women´s experience with formal actors

Situational strategies with the involvement of the formal environment or actors from the formal environment are typical mainly by filing a report with the police, asking the police for help or seeking medical help. Long-term strategies in which women used the help of the formal environment can be understood mainly as: filing a criminal complaint, filing a divorce application, working with psychologists or seeking legal help or contacting workers in the social and legal protection of children and youth and social guardianship.

In the process of analysing the segment: formal environment, categories of formal subjects, actors were created, which were: police, health workers, workers of the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (ÚPSVaR), legal aid providers (lawyers, advocates), judges and non-governmental organizations working with women experiencing violence.

Subcategories were created based on the evaluation of women's experiences with their actions (or inaction) or interventions. As a rule, these are two subgroups of subcategories. Those where the woman expressed a good experience and useful help and support, or interventions shaping the woman's bad experience, rejection or experiencing unprofessionalism. Procedures of formal actors that hindered women in the process of stopping violence, such as failure to act (e.g. trivializing the situation, failure to provide information, discouraging reporting, delays in proceedings) or unprofessional procedures (inappropriate personal approach, mistrust of women). Table 1 illustrates the perception of the approach of formal actors in dealing with violence experienced by women.

On the part of the police, supporting and hindering factors were generally noted, where on the one hand the police knew how to give the woman advice, intervened relatively quickly or helped with the filing of a criminal report. On the other hand, the police often shifted the responsibility for what happened in the partner relationship to the woman, trivialised the situation and behaved unprofessionally.

„They told me they will help with the harassment, yes. But not with the other issue, as he is still my husband. So yes, he can walk in front of my house. They rebuffed me in that one." (ID48:76)

„ I was told by the police that they will do nothing. Okay, so I will have to find another way. (ID 62:147).

The probation officers working in the departments of social legal protection of children and social guardianship of the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family tried to be supportive and cooperative. However, the negative experience of women prevails; they perceive this organization as one that fails or the one that acts predominantly in favour of the man while enforcing the rights of the man-father, but without

Table 1 Selected formal actors and their approach

FORMAL ACTORS	CRITERION	SUBCATEGORIES	
Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (ÚPSVaR), Social protection of children and social guardianship (SPODaSK)	**Evaluation and experience of women with actions of SPO-DaSK**	**Approach of formal actors**	
		Hindering change	**Supporting change**
		Unsatisfactory assistance from expert employees; Lacking personal qualities of professionals in this field; Unprofessional actions of probation officer - inaction; Arbitrary decisions of probation officers; Bribing probation officers; Actions of probation officers to the detriment of a child; Distrust towards the „social office“;	Unexpected, but supportive inspection by probation officers; Good cooperation with probation officers; Probation officers understanding the situations of women; Professional inspection by guardians ad litem;
	Proceedings in favour of man		
		Influencing male and female curators; female curators acting in favour of men;	
POLICE	**Evaluation and experience of women with actions of the police**	**Approach of formal actors**	
		Hindering change	**Supporting change**

		The helplessness, ignorance, and inability of the police to deal with the situation; Frequent interrogations of women; Police did not know what to do, what actions to take; Low powers of the police; Rebuffing women when pressing charges	Assistance and support by the police when leaving the place of residence; Swift police intervention; Police directly stopping the violence; Assistance in filing the complaint; Police intervening against a harassing husband;
COURTS	**Evaluation and experience of women with actions of courts**	**Approach of formal actors**	
		Hindering change	**Supporting change**
		Delayed expert report; Court backlogs, inadequate duration of court proceedings; Doubtful courts, trivialisation of women´s situations; Proceedings conducted in various courts; Repeated returns to district courts; Inefficient legislation; Extremely low law enforceability; Court ruling to the detriment of a child; Distrust of women to the judicial system;	Judge helping in building the child´s respect towards mother; Woman supported by a judge, Issuance of an immediate action by the court;
	Proceedings in favour of man		
		Influencing the judge by a man;	

Source: own processing, 2023

evaluating the risk associated with his behaviour and actions. The participants evaluated the actions of professionals from ÚPSVaR to the detriment of the child, describing their arbitrary decision-making and unprofessional approach resulting from insufficient professional knowledge of social workers.

„They should educate to learn how the children look like, those, who were abused, who saw what happens to their mothers, who saw the cruelty of the father; they should learn how the children put up with it. Because they cannot understand it." (ID 47:195)

„She (the probation officer) was happy, as she found a scapegoat. But she will not manage to blame me for everything. She ruined our lives and health. We will need years to get through it." (ID 47:222)

„The lady at the guardianship office told me: you will get used to it." (ID 48:148)

„ They were linked to the social office, to the man there, he was the one to make proposals, decisions etc. He abused his power over the women, because it was the issue of the women and their children, and the women stick to the children." (ID 60:49)

A look at the involvement of the so-called formal environment to solve violence shows the absence of support for the mentioned actors, whether in the form of condemnation of violence, lack of sanctions or trivialization of the situation of women experiencing violence or their disparagement. According to Ondrušková and Smitková (2020: 118), in the analysis of factors influencing the choice of strategies, the approach of formal actors (especially the police of the Slovak Republic and the Department of Social and Legal Protection of Children and the social guardianship of the ÚPSVaR, but also physicians and courts) appears to be insufficiently supportive and helpful.

Interventions and services for women experiencing violence and abuse

Women experiencing violence from their intimate partner must receive immediate and comprehensive help provided by coordinated, multidisciplinary and professional efforts, including medical treatment, and psychological and social intervention. Specialized services should be in line with the goals and needs of the women themselves. A woman's needs are individualized and personalized using her own combination of strategies to reduce or stop the violence - some women want to leave the relationship; others choose to stay in it but want the violence to end. The main goal of all interventions for women and their children is to prevent or reduce their exposure to abuse. Reisenhofer, Taft (2013) defined the primary goals chosen by women that correspond to their needs in different situations as follows: (a) to leave an abusive relationship in an attempt to escape the abuse; or (b) to stay in the relationship when the abuser stops being violent and the woman and her family are safe; (c) or to stay in the relationship, recognizing that the abuse will continue, but minimizing harm and promoting the personal/family well-being. Regardless of the goal a woman chooses, the primary focus is on a comprehensive assessment of her current level of safety, goals, and individual decision-making factors.

The support provided to a woman may affect the protection against any future violence by enabling the woman to use her sources and strategies more efficiently. Goodman et al. (1999) found out that women reporting higher levels of social support, are more willing to cooperate in prosecution of their abusing partners. However, women with lack of social support face greater barriers when leaving the violent person.

Support services for victims of violence constitute a highly specialized sector in the fight against violence against women, which includes organizations providing a range of options that allow women to creating a sense of safety, seeking justice and getting rid of trauma. Social support from formal and informal actors (family and acquaintances) has proven to be a critical resource for women trying to stop violence in their lives. Social networks offer women support on the one hand, but at the same time they serve to establish social norms that can protect them from adverse effects (Beeman, 2001).

Educational practice needs

Despite the positive changes that have taken place in the framework of the approach and

work with women experiencing violence in recent years, there is still considerable room for supporting measures, especially in the field of education, aimed at changing social and cultural gender stereotypical models of the behaviour of men and women and at removing prejudices based on the idea of superiority and inferiority of one of the sexes. There are still gaps in the system of undergraduate and postgraduate education of professions coming into contact with women experiencing violence.

Amendment to Act No. 274/ 2017 Coll. on victims of crimes and on the amendment of certain laws effective from July 1, 2021 in § 32a defines professional training in relation to "institutions providing education for employees of courts, court officials, judges, prosecutors or members of the police or training for the performance of the mentioned professions providing general as well as specialized training related to the rights and needs of victims in order to raise awareness of the rights and needs of victims and to ensure the protection of victims from secondary victimization and repeated victimization".

Other affected professions - social workers, psychiatrists, physicians, paediatricians, nurses, paramedics and other so-called supporting workers also need to rely on the system of undergraduate and postgraduate education. However, the education system of professions dealing with the issue of violence against women and gender equality shows significant reserves, which may be the cause of negative evaluation of women who have experienced violence.

It is justified and necessary to develop and financially ensure the further training of judicial, legal, medical, social, and police personnel in order to prevent the abuse of power that would lead to violence against women and to inform the aforementioned professional personnel about the nature of acts and threats of gender-based violence, to ensure correct treatment of women experiencing violence or with survivors.

The prevention of secondary victimization or other gender-insensitive treatment by the police, health, social or court workers and other professionals requires special attention. According to Mesochoritisová (2014), the training should increase the awareness of professionals about violence and also contribute to the grounding of the attitudes and behaviour of these professionals towards women who have experienced violence. Professionals must be aware of what their professional systems require during the individual phases of the intervention process and, in addition to the procedures in their own system or institution, they must also know the way of work and procedures of other relevant systems. Mesochoritisová (2014, 2015) proposes to create educational modules and training aimed at sensitization in dealing with women for justice, the police, social workers and other professionals coming into direct contact with women at risk or experiencing violence.

Conclusion

The aim of good practice and interventions is not only to achieve the safety of women and their children, but also to strengthen and increase their autonomy so that they can handle all the difficult challenges they face. According to Pružinská et al. (2020) the main goal of anti-domestic violence movement initiatives is the empowerment of survivors. This concept is also a starting point for creating approaches to support and help women with experience of violence in intimate relationships. Quality help and support from formal and informal surroundings (family and acquaintances), along with an empathetic and respectful approach, significantly contribute to reducing traumatization. Efforts to comprehensively solve the problem of violence in intimate relationships require the continuous education of formal actors who come into contact with women experiencing violence, in terms of the latest scientific knowledge and findings from practice.

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