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Gender-based violence – viewed from the perpetrator's perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to give a picture of the current situation in Finland in relation to violence against women. I will try to briefly observe the operating environment and especially from the point of view of the perpetrators of domestic violence. The text highlights the developments at different levels regarding the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

I would like to present the perpetrators programmes offered by our organisation and look at them as good practices. These programmes designed for the perpetrators of violence, and they have evolved since 2000 into functional entities that, with their good structures, provide help and support to men who have used violence in their relationships.

I also think about the possibilities of transferability of good practices from Romania and finally I present my thoughts in relation to new changes that can concretely help combat gender-based violence.

1. Relevant country context

Finland is committed to complying with the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. However, violence against women remains a major human rights problem, with major implications for both the individual and society. Gender matters when it comes to violence. Men are the victims of violence most often in public places, while for women the most dangerous place is the home, and the perpetrator of the violence is often their own partner. Gender also determines our way of understanding violence in public discourse, in aid work practices and as a legal issue.

A recent report compiled as part of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention implementation plan reinforces the gendered nature of family violence. The report says that according to a registry study, from 2015 to 2020, 541 men and 6899 women have been victims of domestic violence in shelters. According to the same study, over a five-year period, the additional direct health care costs caused by physical intimate partner violence experienced by women amount to EUR 150 million per year (according to a population survey, 146,000 women are victims of physical intimate partner violence). A recently published study on relationship patterns towards women, on the other hand, showed quite worrying trends from the last few years. In Finland,

women's risk of dying as victims of intimate partner violence is high compared to other Western countries.

A positive development in considering and addressing violence against women and gender-based violence appears to be the establishment of the position of rapporteur on violence against women at the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman as of 1.1.2022. The website of the Ombudsman for Equality describes the role of the rapporteur as follows: *"The rapporteur on violence against women comprehensively monitors violence against women and domestic violence, the functioning of national legislation and the fulfilment of international obligations. The rapporteur also monitors and evaluates measures to combat violence against women and domestic violence. About domestic violence, the duties of the rapporteur also cover, for example, violence against men and boys. The reporter shall be independent."*¹

According to the Council of Europe's recommendation, Finland should have 550 shelter places instead of the current 230. In recent years, shelter services have been developed quite a lot and the number of shelter places has also been increased. In 2005, when shelter services were transferred as state-funded, EUR 8 million in funding was allocated to them and by 2022, the funding had already risen to EUR 24.5 million. In 2015 there were 19 shelters in Finland, at the beginning of the year 2023, there were already 29 shelters.

About specialist support services, it is also worth noting that, in addition to services aimed at victims of violence, the differences in the accessibility of services also apply to services aimed at perpetrators of violence. The resources of specialist support services aimed at ending violence against women and domestic violence, are still inadequate and unevenly distributed regionally. The services are mainly provided by NGOs, who have traditionally developed, organised, and implemented services for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. The third sector started combating violence against women already in the early 80s as part of shelter activities. In the early 90s, work with perpetrators began in NGOs. Over the years, a large amount of expertise and competence has accumulated in third sector operators. However, the understanding that there is a need for solid working processes with both the victim of violence and the perpetrator is still a "silent" topic. However, the services are insufficient, and their long-term financing is uncertain. More funding is needed for preventive work, crisis work and particularly demanding work. Now, for example, there are not enough resources for preventive work. It would be very important to safeguard the services of NGOs in the future. Regarding special support services, a particular challenge is that the funding of services comes from the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA) as a form of target grant that does not allow for sufficiently long individual work processes. Most organisations offer special

¹ Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, 2021.

support services to victims and/or perpetrators in such a way that the clientship allows for only five appointments.

2. Policy debate

The systematic nature of measures to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence has improved in recent years², but the level defined by the Istanbul Convention has still not been reached. Although Sanna Marin's Government highlighted measures aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in its Government Programme, as well as the Istanbul Convention, particularly prominently, the Government did not allocate resources to work aimed at ending violence. Although the Action plan for the Istanbul Convention for 2022–2025 brought improvements to several of the problems identified, the main challenges have remained unchanged.

In addition to the Action plan for the Istanbul Convention for 2022–2025, the work aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is guided by the Government Report on Gender Equality Policy, which sets national gender equality targets until 2030. The report also includes equality objectives for ending gender-based violence.

The prevention of violence plays a key role in achieving the Gender Equality Policy Report's objective. NGO actors have long been actively highlighting the need for a structural law to ensure cooperation between municipalities, wellbeing services counties (WSC) and central government in preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The introduction of new WSC's is an opportunity to get the work on violence prevention in order, but it cannot be done without legislation.

The WSC's started their operations at the turn of the year 2022–2023, but so far, no special funding has been allocated to the work against violence. A coordinating body would also be needed to prevent and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence in all WSC's. The implementation of the Istanbul Convention should be a priority in all WSC's in the future, so it would be important for all those counties to have an action plan against violence against women and domestic violence. At the moment it is not visible that the necessary coordination structures are being created for nearly all WSC's. The key question is how the guidelines of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare for municipalities and WSC's will be implemented in practice. Without a structural law, the implementation seems rather uncertain.

In Finland, criminal policy has been strongly gender-neutral, and the raising of the gender perspective has provoked opposition among national actors. In its country

² E.g. The employing of a full-time General Secretary, made possible by the increased resources of the NAPE Committee, has made it possible for the Committee to develop its work with a more long-term view. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022, p. 40.)

report on Finland, GREVIO drew attention to how some aspects of social policy and legislation seem to reflect the family-dynamic discourse of domestic violence instead of the discourse of gender-based violence. International agreements – the Istanbul Convention – have been the impetus for several legislative changes (most recently the comprehensive reform of the sexual offences legislation and the reform of the legislation on restraining orders), and although these are major advances, there has still been no significant progress in the legislation on gender mainstreaming.

A significant change in the legislative consideration of gender entered into force in the Criminal Code at the beginning of 2023; Gender is now one of the grounds for aggravation laid down in Chapter 6, Section 5 of the Criminal Code, so the offence can thus be punished more severely if the offence is motivated by gender. The aim of the legislative reform was to highlight the reprehensible nature of acts motivated by gender-based hatred, especially directed at women. The aim of the legislative reform has been to improve the effectiveness of addressing online harassment and hate speech.

3. Good practice examples

Unbeatable Line in Espoo (Lyömätön Linja Espoossa ry) started its operations in 1993. Over the years, has been developed the *Unbeatable Path – perpetrator program®*, which has been offered to men who have used or fear using violence in their intimate relationships or families. Since 2005, the existing perpetrator programme for Finnish men has been applied to the needs of immigrant men. In the *gender and culturally sensitive perpetrator programme*, special attention is paid to the clients' ethnic background and the impact this has on the working process.

Our relatively long-term perpetrator programmes (1.5-2 years) were transferred to a separate project in 2020 called the *Safe Tracks project (Turvallisille raiteille - hanke)*. The Ministry of Justice is funding this project, the duration of which is 4 years. The purpose of the project is to create and implement a well-structured perpetrator programme at the national level. The main applicant for the project is the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, and the implementing NGOs are the Unbeatable Line in Espoo and Viola-Violence Free. The hope and goal are that the Safe Tracks project will become established after the project period. The effectiveness and efficiency of the perpetrator programme will be assessed by the Department of Criminology and Legal Policy at the University of Helsinki. We consider it important to have a long-term structure of the perpetrator programme, which makes it possible to eliminate violent behaviour and also to prevent the recidivism of violence. Instilling and establishing this perpetrator programme would provide those who work with the perpetrators of violence with the necessary tools and – we hope – financial resources for their own work.

4. Transferability aspects

It was very interesting to get familiar with the good practices proposed by Romania. On a general level, they are well planned and would serve the work against intimate partner violence well, both from the perspective of the victim and the perpetrator.

However, I would like to focus on another good practice that better reflects the work of our association.

The idea of establishing 10 referral centres for victims of sexual violence and 8 centres for perpetrators around the country sounds very good. You also initially have good financial resources.

We all know that – not only sexual violence – but also domestic violence in general is a “taboo” in public discussion. We have noticed in our services that accurate profiling for sexual violence significantly raises the threshold of the victim and the perpetrator to contact adequate services. Would it be easier for victims and perpetrators to get access to services more quickly if they were offered as e.g. intimate partner violence centres and services? In my opinion, it would be also important to create a network of professionals, whose task would be to develop cooperation models for the service guidance of the victim and the perpetrator. I would like to hear more about this good practice during the seminar and maybe reflect together about possible cooperation.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

In professional work (individual meetings, group activities, etc.) with perpetrators of violence we've noticed that solution-focused methods and a cognitive-behavioural approach can cause change relatively quickly. However, it should be noted that the change is superficial. When we take a closer look at the characteristics of the phenomenon, we understand that intimate partner violence is based on gender-related attitudes, expectations, and stereotypes. During the working process, we observed that a lot of issues related to masculinity are discussed in client meetings. These stereotypes clearly show the influence of the gender role in relation to violent behaviour.

In Finland for example, there is a gender-neutral way of conceptualising violence that also affects measures and services aimed at preventing and combating violence, which for the most part is still implemented in a gender-neutral manner. A gender-neutral way of speaking leads to the absence of something very essential from measures and practices aimed at preventing and combating violence; the wisest approach to addressing violence against women and domestic violence as a gender-based phenomenon. The point here is to accept the fact that we cannot explain a gendered phenomenon by using a gender-neutral way of talking about this.

Understanding the domestic violence as gender-based phenomenon, we could find appropriate discourses and also practices combatting domestic violence.