




The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys
in advancing gender
equality and breaking
gender stereotypes**
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Comments paper – Slovakia



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The role of men and boys in advancing gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes: Slovakia

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Abstract

Despite existing practices in the field of violence prevention in Slovakia, there are still many more opportunities and measures that could be implemented in the country in order to advance gender equality.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the prevalence of domestic violence remains alarmingly high, while public policy debate, especially regarding the Istanbul convention, still remains a sensitive subject.

With no curricula, no government-run perpetrator programmes, nor any other state services aiming at working specifically with men and boys, Slovakia still has a long way to go before it achieves full gender equality.

Reinforcing primary prevention with men and boys as well as working with men who have already used violence could prove particularly efficient. Successful projects implemented in other countries such as Austria and Ireland could become a great inspiration for Slovakia.

1. Relevant country context

1.1 National Action Plan 2014-2019

The framework of the national policy that tackles violence against women in Slovakia was defined in the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women 2014 – 2019.

According to 2014-19 National Action Plan, “despite the continuing implementation of tasks under previous action plans and a definite movement in the matter of violence against women in recent years, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Slovakia still has no coordinated system for providing assistance to women who experience violence (secondary and tertiary prevention) or for primary prevention of violence itself”.

Therefore, this Action plan includes a series of operational objectives, namely the following:

- Prepare and submit to the legislative process an act on domestic violence based on the “Istanbul convention” taking into account a gender perspective and the specifics of violence against women;
- Prepare material and submit it for deliberation in the government on a proposal to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;
- Implementation of the European Protection Order (Directive 2011/99/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on the European Protection Order);
- Establish a Coordination Methodological Centre on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and ensure its sustainability;
- Recommendation to prepare and implement in practice regional action plans (RAP) for the prevention and elimination of violence against women;
- Prepare a legal and technical framework for the establishment and functioning of a network of intervention teams;
- Amend section 27a of Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic no. 171/1993 on the police force, as amended, to extend the current 48-hour period for which a violent person can be banned from a shared residence to a longer, reasonable period;
- Create legislative conditions for the establishment of mandatory programmes for the perpetrators of violence against women and implement such programmes;
- Ensure the promotion and transfer of good practice in efforts to prevent violence against women during SKPRES.

These tasks fall mostly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in cooperation with The Coordinating Methodical Centre (CMC), that was established in April 2015 and it is, as of 2015, responsible for creating, implementing and coordinating a comprehensive national policy for the prevention and elimination of gender-based and domestic violence.

The CMC is responsible for the systematic prevention and intervention of violence and providing professional coordination of activities through methodical guidelines in primary prevention as well as other relevant areas for the elimination of violence against women and children.

1.2 National Action Plan 2022-2027

After three years of discontinuation, a new National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women for the years 2022 - 2027 was elaborated with new modifications and suggestions.

The new Action Plan raises awareness to the most extreme forms of violence against women. It states that, “according to police statistics, 31 women were killed or

murdered in 2020, out of which 12 were murdered at the hands of their current or ex-partner.”

It further indicates that available data from organisations providing support and aid to women experiencing violence shows that the pandemic increased both intimate partner and domestic violence. According to CMC’s research, more than 1250 women reached out to domestic violence services during the first wave of Covid-19 alone (i.e. between 30 March and 14 June 2020), including 362 new clients. That same year, the number of calls to the National helpline for women experiencing domestic violence rose by 49 per cent compared to the previous year.

New legislation aiming at better helping victims has been put in place. A so-called “law on victims” changed the definition of domestic violence, making it inclusive of criminal offences perpetrated with use or threat of violence against a relative, adoptive parent, adoptive child, sibling, husband, ex-husband, partner, ex-partner, parent of a common child or another person that lives or lived in the same household as the perpetrator. The subject of this amendment that is effective as of 1 July 2021 is to create intervention centres for victims of domestic violence, based on the examples of good practice in other countries (especially Austria and the Czech Republic).

Therefore, the current action plan stresses the need to establish a coordinating system aiding and protecting women and children from violence. It also highlights the need to implement a robust system aimed at violence prevention that will include the following activities (among many others):

- publishing a series of methodical manuals aiming to prevent secondary victimisation;
- preparing expert materials for systemic education of high school and university students;
- working on prevention activities targeting prevention and eliminations of violence;
- working on relevant media campaigns to sensitise the general public.

As of 2018, The Coordinating Methodical Centre is operating as part of the National Project “Prevention and Elimination of Gender Discrimination“. As part of its mission with regard to preventing domestic violence with men and boys, the CMC has published, in collaboration with a team of experts specialised in working with perpetrators of violence, a Manual on Working with Perpetrators of Violence against Women in Penitentiary Care, as well as an expert study “Standards and Procedures of Implementing Social and Intervention Programmes for Perpetrators of Violence against Women.”

The above mentioned study outlines the current situation and the country context with regard to programmes for perpetrators of intimate partner violence. The experts collaborating with the NGO *Aliancia žien* who are the authors of this publication have been implementing training for psychologists, therapists and social workers working with perpetrators since 2013. The objective of these trainings aimed at working with men and boys is to prevent domestic violence and protect women victims of violence.

The CMC has also published a monograph “Primary prevention of gender-based violence in the educational System in Slovakia” that analyses the current state of realized primary prevention of gender-based violence in the various environments (types and levels) of education in Slovakia.

2. Policy debate

The whole policy area of domestic violence has been highly influenced by a movement mobilising against the so called “gender ideology“, which has led to the cease of the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention.

On 29 March 2019, the Slovak parliament asked the government to no longer continue in the process of ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. This stemmed from a resolution submitted to the parliament by the Slovak National Party (SNS), and was approved by 101 MPs.

The importance of gender-based violence prevention programmes and campaigns, as it is emphasised in the Istanbul Convention, has been widely criticized by the conservative community in Slovakia as being part of the so called “gender ideology“, that is sometimes represented as a threat to the “traditional family“.

In the current political climate of strong opposition towards establishing the legal framework for violence against women, the implementation of sustainable specific programmes, services or campaigns therefore proves particularly problematic. This is particularly true with regard to prevention programmes aiming to reduce and eliminate violence, focusing on both victims and perpetrators.

Opponents frequently oppose any forms of sex education, prevention and raising awareness classes surrounding gender equality in schools as these are often viewed as ‘harmful’ for children by the conservative communities.

3. Good practice examples

Among the first organisations working on advancing gender equality and breaking harmful stereotypes was the non-governmental organisation *Esfem*, based in the city of Prešov in eastern Slovakia. As of 2005-2006, the organisation implemented a project titled ‘A model of gender-sensitive education’, specifically targeted at technical high schools with boy-only classes. The activities focused on gender-sensitive fatherhood and good example practices from different countries, showing young boys non-stereotypical gender roles and situations, such as fathers walking infants in pushchairs or preparing food. The project was set up to “create pedagogical procedures aiming to foster boys’ personal development, eliminate aggression and enhance a caring attitude”. The project also resulted in a creation of a specific educational module in this area.

In 2015, *Slniečko*, another women's NGO, has elaborated an educational programme called "Kozmo and his adventures". The project currently works with school and preschool children (both boys and girls) and aims to prevent all forms of violence.

The Coordinating Methodical Centre has also been running primary prevention activities in primary and secondary schools since 2015, focusing on different issues that are linked to domestic, gender-based, and intimate partner violence, including challenging gender stereotypes, sensitising young people to basic women's and human rights, and a national campaign that raised awareness to the problem of sexualised violence.

When it comes to intervening against men that have already used violence, the NGO *Aliancia žien* along with other experts in the country have been offering a limited number of therapeutical services for men who have used violence. The psychologist Robert Vavro was among the first ones to work on programmes for perpetrators; researcher and social worker Slavka Karkoskova has also been active in the field of sexualized violence prevention and child abuse prevention, collaborating with both NGO sector and the CMC, and publishing a number of expert publications, including a manual "Social work with perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse."

The CMC had also organised a specialised expert seminar "Programmes for perpetrators of violence against women and domestic violence – the experience of three European countries", that was held on 14th May 2019 in Bratislava, and that provided an expert panel discussion with professionals from the Czech Republic and Norway who shared the good practices from their respective countries.

This list of good practices and initiatives is not exhaustive.

4. Transferability aspects

Good practice examples from Ireland and Austria could prove very useful for the Slovak context. Counselling for men – not just for those using violence – but also for those who might be going through a crisis or a stressful time, could certainly become helpful in long-term reduction of violence. In the current context of the pandemic, such a service might constitute a very good resource should a national lockdown occur again in the future. A helpline for men – or perhaps even a different form of helpline that would be non-specific, but open to men – could also without a doubt constitute a major force in violence prevention. Data from Slovak helplines for women experiencing violence show that third parties, including men, regularly contact helplines for women, seeking for help for friends and loved ones. Furthermore, psychologists offering therapeutic services for men using violence confirm that they receive requests for help for men¹.

¹ [Blog N: Tréner a psychológ: Prácou s páchatel'mi násilia ochraňujeme obeť \(dennikn.sk\)](#)

Gender-sensitive work with youth has already been carried out in Slovakia to some extent, mostly by non-governmental organisations and the CMC. Funding on a national level would certainly improve violence prevention and make it systematic, as it is the case in other countries.

Slovakia also lacks data on perceived gender norms among male population. Carrying out research similar to the study “Gender norms in Ireland”, could prove particularly relevant, and could serve as a roadmap for state and non-state actors to elaborate and improve their existing programmes in the field of working with men and boys.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

In Slovakia, strengthening good practices in working with men and boys would be useful both in terms of violence prevention, as well as in terms of intervention (working with men having used domestic violence). Good practices from foreign countries could constitute a major inspiration for Slovakia. With no specific state programme targeting men and boys at the moment, it would be recommendable to consider implementing good practice examples from other countries on a national level. These should include systematic prevention of harmful gender stereotypes with teenagers and youth, both in boy-only and mixed groups. Offering programmes for men using violence could also use particularly helpful in reducing some of the already existing forms of violence.

Ensuring regular and uninterrupted funding for carrying out these activities should be key. Building synergies and cooperating with organisations on a national and international level could also be a good source of inspiration for Slovak organisations. Last but not least, carrying out more research in the field of perceived gender norms could help ensure that current programmes for men and boys are relevant and up-to-date, and could help with preventing violence against women in the long run.