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ICT use in combating violence against women and programmes for perpetrators: Slovak reality

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1. Basic documents on violence against women and the reality of implementation in the Slovak Republic

As an introduction to my Comment Paper I would like to present the context of Slovak policy and reality of Violence against Women (VaW). The information and opinions given here and below are based on, and for sure also influenced by, my professional experience: being a field expert and also a statutory representative and managing director of a feminist organisation in Slovakia focused on social services for clients, women experiencing violence and their children. The second factor playing a significant role in my evaluation of VaW policies is regional disparities we face in everyday life: Prešov is a town with 90 000 inhabitants, and its approximate distance to the Polish, Hungarian and Ukrainian border is about 100 km, but 450 km to the Slovak capital, Bratislava. As a small organisation with only four full time employees at the time and 200 clients since 2003, we keep trying to follow the Minimum Standards of the Council of Europe to Support Services for Women Surviving Violence even in this small scale. It is not always easy, as we have to cope with occasional contradictions between national legislation and the proposed standards (e.g., the shelter address is recommended not to be public by the European dossier, but according to the Slovak Act on Social Services 448/2009, the address of service registered *must* be public). In this context, we sometimes see our remote location from the centre as an advantage, as our contacts on local and regional level can be used for modification of rules in favour of our clients.

A series of positive changes in policy and legal context have followed after the most complex research into VaW in Slovakia was conducted by the Institute of Labour and Family Research in 2008¹. Based on the research findings and after long and detailed discussions among government, NGOs and research experts, the National Action Plan for Years 2009–2012 for Prevalence and Elimination of Violence against Women (further as NAP) was approved.² The optimistic expectations of service providers that a system of services on all levels shall be established (national, regional, local) and a multidisciplinary approach will be supported have not been fully met. The real implementation of this basic strategic document into practice, including such measures as ICT use or programmes for perpetrators, is still under the process of evaluation and updating. The crucial system changes are expected to be implemented in the National Project supported by the European Social Fund and

¹ Representative Research in Prevalence and Experience with Violence against Women, <http://www.unifem.sk/uploads/doc/VAWSlovakia.pdf>

² <http://www.gender.gov.sk/index.php?id=798>

the Operation Programme of Employment and Social Inclusion. The implementation of the National Project so much desired by all VaW stakeholders was postponed due to other government priorities. In accordance with the NAP, the Regional Action Plans were issued, but have been put into practice only in Bratislava. In the Prešov self-governing region, the RAP was finally prepared thanks to a few eager individuals in the self-government bodies and in the NGOs rather than being an outcome of a nation-wide strategy and systematic approach. The other seven self-governing regions' bodies have involved the issue of gender violence into the strategies of social services or into Community Plans for Social Services, which shows that the authorities still consider gender violence a social services issue rather than an issue of the violation of human rights of the clients and their children. Moreover, even though some planning documents already exist in the regions, their implementation is mostly formal as the criteria for outputs checking are not clear and the objectives and tasks of the strategy are described quite vaguely (e.g. to support the establishment of new facilities for women experiencing violence). This might be one of the reasons why the RAPs are not applied in field work.³

Concerning the strategic documents preparation and acceptance of international norms and agreements, signing of the Istanbul Treaty in May 2011 was one of the most important steps towards a better future in the realm of services for women experiencing violence and their children. The Slovak Republic's act of signing this treaty brings the NGOs' expectations for better legislation conditions for offering the services to clients closer to reality. The real implementation of the most priorities stated in the NAP (specialised advisory centres, education of experts, a national-wide network of specialised services, Safe Women's Houses) are expected to be put into practice not only under the National Project but also under the specialised Programme SK09 Domestic and Gender Violence of Norwegian Financial Mechanism and under the call for proposals of a specialised Programme of EEA Grants and Norway Grants.

NAP has also brought a base for establishing a complex of VaW-related services. At the end of 2012, the Monitoring of Social Services for Women was conducted as research mapping the needs of specialised services. The Institute for Labour and Family Research, using the experience of more than 30 years of practice of „grass root“ organisations running Safe Women's Houses and advisory services, stated that gender neutrality is not only non-effective one but can be even harmful in these special services. The services must be specific in two ways:

- a) they must be specifically oriented on the topic of violence experienced by the women and their children, and
- b) they must understand this type of violence as a gender-specific form of violence based on historically non-equal share of power between men and women.

As it is mentioned in the Monitoring, minimum standards (Sopkova 2005, Fenestra 2006) were worked out by NGOs in Slovakia, but they have never been implemented. However, some organisations are still using them as standards for their work. Our organisation is trying to find a compromise between legislation, financial possibilities and standards for specialised services as we want to keep the service in the best possible way. The organisation WeMothers was ranked second

³ http://genderdatabaza.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/monitoring_socialnych_sluzieb_1.pdf

in the supply of gender sensitive services for VaW clients. But there still is a lot to do: according to the Minimal Standards⁴ there is a need of 695 family places in specialised Safe Women's' Houses in Slovakia. There are 238 places in the residence institutions that follow 75% of minimum standards of the European Commission, meaning that 457 places in specialised residence institutions are lacking. There should be 52 advisory centres based on the population of the country, but there are just 11 centres fulfilling at least 75% of the Minimal Standards.

2. Good practice in ICT utilising in VaW and programmes for perpetrators - Slovak context

According to the above mentioned Monitoring, the programmes for perpetrators are also part of the supporting services stated in the Minimal Standards of the Council of Europe. The close co-operation between entities offering assistance and services for women experiencing violence is a crucial part of the programme philosophy. In 2010 the Institute of Labour and Family Research conducted the research Programmes for work with men – perpetrators in violent relationship with women.⁵ The research paper can be used as an overview of different strategies in these programmes realised around the world. Part of the document which is dealing with the situation in Slovakia stated that in the Slovak context, specific programmes should be implemented by Departments of Advisory and Psychological Services of Offices of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (currently 46 places, DAPS). A 2006 survey on services in the area of domestic violence states that four departments offered such programmes; however, it is not clear from the report whether the programmes were also implemented.⁶

An initiative came from our NGO, WeMothers in Prešov: specialised methodology training for employees of DAPS was offered and the Prešov DAPS office was asked by our organisation to involve the perpetrators to specific programmes, too. The programme had an ambition to become part of a broader intervention framework of the programmes for abused women. Based on this proposal the manual „Methods of Work with Perpetrators Causing Domestic Violence” was published. There is no capacity so far for the National Centre of Labour, Social Affairs and Family to support executing of the whole approx. 200 – 300 hours specific training for work with perpetrators, the manual offers the basic knowledge and partly also the skills and knowledge needed for the work with perpetrators. So far only one training took place as a three days seminar (supervision and e-learning) for approximately 10 psychologists from Presov regional DAPS.

⁴ *Minimal standards of Council of Europe are discussed here and furthermore based on research Monitoring social services for women experienced violence from point of view of European standards provided by B.Holubova, E.Filadelfiova in 2012, Institute of Labour and Family Research, ordered by Department of Gender Equality of Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in accordance with National Action Plan for elimination and prevention of gender violence for years 2009 – 2012, executed in 2012.*

⁵ <http://genderdatabaza.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/programy-pre-pracu-s-muzmi-pachatelmi-nasilia-na-zenach-v-partnerskych-vztahoch/>

⁶ Holubová, B., 2006. Monitoring of Organisations Offering Assistance for Victims of Domestic Violence, Institute of Labour and Family Research; [http://sgdatabaza.unwomen.org/uploads/Slovak%20Republic%20-%20Monitoring%20of%20organizations%20providing%20social%20services%20to%20domestic%20violence%20victims.%202006%20\(Slovak\).pdf](http://sgdatabaza.unwomen.org/uploads/Slovak%20Republic%20-%20Monitoring%20of%20organizations%20providing%20social%20services%20to%20domestic%20violence%20victims.%202006%20(Slovak).pdf)

The basic aim is to support security of woman and her children and any programme for perpetrators must be based on this gender sensitive approach. The proposed programme, which takes from 12 to 52 weeks, is to be held in two modifications:

- a) psycho-educational programme, applying cognitive-behavioural approach from feminist perspective and
- b) advisory services with the previous phase dealing with motivation

The main result is in changing behaviour of men in intimate relationship by improving their social skills of empathy, communication and dealing with aggression. The author of the manual, Hambálek, based his advice partly on the Duluth programme, but also on his long therapeutic experience and knowledge of socio-cultural reality of Slovakia.

Various programmes for perpetrators are offered by other NGOs but also without real application (the Alliance of Women of Slovakia, the Centre Hope and others).

Perpetrator programmes are also part of supporting services in VaW according to the Minimal Standards of the Council of Europe and they are stressed as a tool of improving the safety of women and their children. During the Monitoring 2012 it was clear there are some NGOs dealing with the programmes, but a detailed evaluation would be needed. Only 4 of 8 self-governing regions had some advisory services for perpetrators.

Speaking about the effectiveness of crisis line similar to the Spanish context, the reality in Slovakia is different. The general nation-wide nonstop crisis line specialised on VaW does not exist. Some institutions provide their own crisis lines with different education experience of their personnel. There are two NGOs, one in Eastern Slovakia, Kosice (Fenestra) and one in Bratislava – Women Alliance Slovakia (30 calls per week, 27 on the issue of VaW). The latter runs a nonstop crisis line, declared as provided by the educated staff. According to the information from Monitoring 2012, there are three other NGOs that provide a nonstop crisis line in the Bratislava region to children and families threatened by violence. In other regions, lines are mostly run by NGOs during working time, five days per week. The quality of education of their staff is questionable, as it is not part of the accreditation process for the specialised services.

Some clients seeking assistance are distributed to organisations based on information from the above mentioned regional crisis lines. If there is a client living closer to our Centre, we are contacted (mostly clients calling the 24h line of Alliance of Women in Bratislava are advised to contact us during working hours).

There is one free of charge line operated by the Centre of Labour, Social Services and Family 0800 191 222, for reporting mistreatment of children but also misusing the social system. No client was distributed to our advisory centre through this line. The reasons of non-existence of a 24h line run by specialised and educated NGOs is the lack of financing and training, which should be offered by the National Project implementing the needs stated in the National Action Plan.

Other ICT means mentioned in the Spanish Good Practice paper are in a similar position as the crisis lines. A ministry-run web site www.zastavmenasilie.sk/ can be seen as a positive output of the co-operation of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs

and Family (Department of gender equality and equal opportunities) with non-governmental sector. There is basic information on gender violence, contacts for regional assistance (but not updated permanently as there is the lack of systematic support of services). Many organisations or private persons who are still on the web have stopped their services. Specialised regional web pages do not exist yet.

Telephone services as they are described in the Spanish paper are offered by every specialised organisation in the region without common strategy and a telematic tracking system is not in our legislation at all. The only way how to keep the perpetrator at a distance is the law on expulsion from the dwelling and the restriction of usage of the house, which can be ordered by court.

3. Possible transferability in Slovak context

Looking on what we have and what is needed in Slovakia we can use the presented Good Practices in both discussed topics. The case of the Crisis Line should be improved, as it is usually the platform for the first contact between service providers and women experiencing violence. In the Slovak context, there are two possible ways of implementation: to unify the already existing regional crisis lines or to establish one specialised nonstop line with the educated personnel prepared to offer not only general information, but being also helpful for relatives, neighbours and the general public seeking answers to various legal, policy and other relevant questions concerning all forms of VaW.

The crucial part will be **proper training** of the personnel and **economic sustainability of the system**: a 24h line free of charge is stated in the NAP as one of the goals. The Spanish experience with specialised training for work with all forms of violence and handling the support of victims and their empowerment is also a crucial part of the implementation of this good practice. An interesting question is also publicity of the crisis line, and the way of assuring the visibility of the relevant number in public phonebooks, published and visible in relevant institutions like hospitals, social services bodies, etc. The information provided and updated on the national web will be more specific as soon as there are more specific services available. Hopefully, after putting the NAP to the practice, the regular update based on the network of all regional service suppliers and other relevant bodies will be provided.

Telematic tracking (TT) would be complicated to implement in Slovakia, as most inhabitants live in small rural communities and due to economic and social reasons moving to other community wouldn't be always possible, so a 500 m distance between the perpetrator and a potential victim would be hard to achieve. Moreover, the most dangerous and violent partners tend to be sent to jail instead of leaving them free and trying to protect women and their children by telematic tracking. From our experience, TT could have a good target group in cases of a perpetrator with mental diagnosis under a long term treatment provided on the regular basis by visits only, without hospitalisation. But this would expect a broader discussion with experts from psychiatry and psychology, anticipating sufficient understanding of the nature of VaW.

Perpetrator programmes are not anchored in the juridical system in Slovakia. Current community based programmes assume motivation and voluntary involvement of violent men. According to our experience with the preparation of the

Manual for the work with violent men and training the staff of DAPS in 2010, no latent client was looking for these services. However, a possibility of training focused on violent men was much more attractive than sensibilisation training for the staff being trained. Providing programmes for perpetrators is one of the supporting systems for improving security of women and children, but lack of basic services looks like much more acute problem than PP. Since 01/2013 there's been another, this time national training for professionals working with perpetrators, organised by the Alliance of Women in Slovakia, with the goal of encouraging project activities oriented on psycho-social programmes for persons with violent behaviour.