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Preventing domestic violence with Men and Boys: Challenges and Opportunities

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Preventing domestic violence with men and boys: the Slovak perspective

Sára Činčurová

Institute for Labour and Family Research

Abstract:

Despite several good practices and initiatives that have been implemented in Slovakia with regard to violence prevention with men and boys, there are still opportunities for growth and progress. Fostering a coordinated system for violence prevention and intervention based on effective tools and strategies at both local and national level, and reinforcing primary prevention with men and boys could prove particularly efficient. Implementing effective tools and strategies that work well in foreign countries could be very useful for the Slovak system; fostering a deeper understanding of violence and emphasising the importance of violence prevention and early intervention could also help tackle the issue of domestic violence.

1. Relevant country context

The framework of the national policy that tackles violence against women in Slovakia is currently defined in the National strategy for gender equality and the National plan for gender equality for years 2014 – 2019, as well as the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women 2014 – 2019. According to the 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.”¹

The National Action Plan defines and outlines multiple tasks to tackle this issue, including the establishment of a Coordinating and Methodical Centre for Gender-Based and Domestic Violence (CMC), the implementation of Regional Action Plans (RAPs) for the prevention and elimination of violence against women, and the creation of legislative conditions for the establishment of mandatory programmes for the perpetrators of violence against women.

One of the Operational objectives outlined in the National Action Plan is to “**Prevent the occurrence of violence and any situation that contributes to the occurrence**

¹ National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women 2014–2019. Retrieved from: https://www.gender.gov.sk/en/files/2012/06/NAP_VaW_2014-2019_EN.pdf

or tolerance of violence". The specific tasks defined for this objective include, but are not limited, to:

- Incorporating the problem of violence against women and domestic violence into teaching materials for subjects in primary and secondary schools relating to human rights;
- Updating and extending study materials on the problem of gender equality, non-stereotypical gender roles, mutual respect, nonviolent conflict resolution in interpersonal relations, gender-based violence against women and the right to integrity of the person in course plans of relevant subjects in departments of criminology, police science and investigation;
- Carrying out preventative activities for the prevention and elimination of violence against women in the form of lectures and seminars.

These tasks fall mostly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in cooperation with The Coordinating Methodical Centre, as well as other relevant ministries, self-governing regions, municipalities, and NGOs. With regard to these tasks, **the Coordinating Methodical Centre for Gender-Based and Domestic Violence (CMC) has been 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. With regard to these responsibilities, **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. 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 Care²**, as well as an expert study **Standards and Procedures of Implementing Social and Intervention Programmes for Perpetrators of Violence against Women³**.

The above-mentioned study focusing on standards and procedures 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 trainings for psychologists, therapists and social workers working with perpetrators since 2013. The CMC has also published a monograph **Primary prevention of gender-based violence in the educational**

² Manual on Working with Perpetrators of Violence against Women in Penitentiary Care. Retrieved from: <https://www.gender.gov.sk/zastavmenasilie/files/2016/02/Methodika-prace-s-pachatelmi-nasilia-na-zenach-v-penitenciarnjej-starostlivosti-.pdf>

³ Standards and Procedures of Implementing Social and Intervention Programmes for Perpetrators of Violence against Women. Retrieved from: <https://www.gender.gov.sk/zastavmenasilie/files/2016/02/Standardy-a-postupy-zavedenia-socialno-intervencnych-programov-pre-pachatelov-nasilia-na-zenach.pdf>

System in Slovakia⁴ that analyses the current state of realised primary prevention of gender-based violence in the various environments (types and levels) of education in Slovakia.

As of 2018, The Coordinating Methodical Centre is operating as part of the National Project “Prevention and Elimination of Gender Discrimination”.

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 29th March 2019, the Slovak parliament has 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.⁵ This stemmed from a resolution submitted to the parliament by the Slovak National Party (SNS), and 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 criticised by the conservative community in Slovakia as being part of the so called “gender ideology”, that is sometimes represented as a threat to “traditional values”.

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 problematic. This is particularly true with regard to prevention programmes aiming to reduce and eliminate violence, focusing on both victims and perpetrators.

3. Good practice examples

In spite of a certain number of difficulties faced by the public and non-governmental sector in Slovakia with regard to gender-based violence prevention that stem from the current political climate, there have been, in the past two decades, a number of good practice examples in the field of working with men and boys.

⁴ Primary prevention of gender-based violence in the educational System in Slovakia. Retrieved from: <https://www.zastavmenasilie.gov.sk/resources/data/Primarna-prevencia-RPN-a-DN-v-skolskom-vzdelavani-na-Slovensku.pdf>

⁵ The Slovak Spectator: Parliament blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Retrieved from: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22088961/istanbul-convention-ratification-refusal-parliament.html>

In 2005-2006, the NGO EsFem has run a pilot project, “Model of gender-sensitive education for boys”, working with boys in a school setting in collaboration with a teacher of “Ethical education” (a subject taught in Slovak schools). The project was set up to “create pedagogical procedures aiming to foster boys’ personal development, eliminate aggression and enhance a caring attitude”⁶. 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. Other women’s NGOs are implementing similar prevention activities in different regions of Slovakia. The Coordinating Methodical Centre has also carried out a primary prevention campaign in primary and secondary schools, focusing on different issues that are linked to domestic, gender-based, and intimate partner violence.

When it comes to intervening against men that have already used violence, the NGO *Aliancia Žien* along with the team of experts from the CMC, but also from other NGOs and institutions, have been trying to reinforce the efforts and synergies in this field, and to enhance effective dialogue, cooperation, and sharing of good practices. The CMC has also recently 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. Another expert in working with perpetrators of sexual violence, Ms. Slávka Karkošková, has also been active in the field of sexualised violence prevention and child abuse prevention, collaborating with both NGO sector and the CMC, as well as with the National Coordination Centre for Resolving the Issues of Violence against Children where she works on educational projects for relevant professionals working with perpetrators. She has published a number of expert publications, including a manual **Social work with perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse**. This list of good practices and initiatives is not exhaustive.

4. Transferability aspects

Based on the Slovak context described above, there are several points that might be relevant both for Swedish and Slovak context: the Swedish practice could be seen as a good model that could encourage the reinforcement of some of the previous Slovak projects that have been initiated in this field, aimed both at preventing violence from occurring in the first place, as well as on the ability of the criminal justice system to intervene against violent men.

⁶ Model of gender-sensitive education for boys. Retrieved from: <http://esfem.sk/portfolios/model-rodovo-citlivej-vychovy-chlapcov/>

As for the primary prevention system, the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) and working with young men and boys in schools in the field of primary prevention could be seen as a good practice that could be enhanced in the Slovak context, based on the good practice example of Sweden. With regard to the pilot project “Model for gender sensitive education for boys“ that has been run by the NGO EsFem in Slovakia, similar projects might have a good potential for effective primary prevention activities. Among the interesting aspects of the Swedish practice, encouraging bystander intervention would seem to be a new and interesting aspect that could become more developed in Slovakia, not only in the field of gender-based violence prevention, but also in other aspects of human rights education as a whole.

As for the second objective – intervening against men that have already used violence – a greater focus on efficient collaboration both within and between different actors – such as the agencies within the criminal justice system like police, attorneys, courts and correctional facilities, but also social services, the health care sector, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – are considered key in striving for intimate partner violence prevention in Sweden. This is an important aspect that proves effective in combatting violence, and the Slovak system strives to achieve greater progress in the field of multi-agency collaboration; Sweden could therefore be seen as a good model in this respect. In the Slovak context, reinforcing multi-agency collaboration proves particularly important with regard to risk assessments. In Sweden, it is mandatory for police to use structured risk assessment methods when assessing risk for IPV and stalking. This could be a good model when it comes to reinforcing Slovakia’s capacity to assess the risks in the cases of domestic and gender-based violence. By observing the good practice from Sweden where using structured risk assessment methods is mandatory for the police and widely used by other agencies, the transferability of this practice could prove very effective with regard to violence prevention and elimination in Slovakia. In Slovakia, relevant Standards and Procedures for using Risk Assessments have been developed by the CMC, however, this practice is not yet widely used by all the police officers in the country and the process of implementing this practice is still in progress. These are just some of the main points in which the transferability and good practice sharing might prove as relevant when considering the current Slovak context.

5. Recommendations

In Slovakia, the primary prevention aimed at men and boys has been less developed than other aspects of violence prevention. For this reason, the CMC emphasises working with men using violence and sensitising the general audience, as well as professionals working with men and boys, to this issue. After the recent seminar “Programmes for perpetrators of violence against women and domestic violence”, the CMC has published a book titled “Violence can be stopped” coordinated by Alternative to violence (ATV) in Norway in Czech language. The book has been distributed widely, and this initiative has been encouraged by NGOs and professionals who can benefit

from its knowledge. Sensitising the relevant audience to this issue could therefore prove very useful. Enhancing, funding, and supporting initiatives that are aimed at working with men and boys in the field of primary prevention could also be seen as a very positive aspect that could help tackle this issue. Finding solutions that encompass systematic changes at a national level could be very useful in tackling violence prevention. Making training on the topic of violence mandatory for helping professionals and those who work with victims and perpetrators, for example, could prove particularly useful when it comes to preventing violence and helping victims at an early stage. This could also encompass making tools that have been shown effective by both academic studies and in practice – for example the use of risk assessments to manage potential risks and dangers – mandatory for the relevant professionals, such as the police. In Slovakia, applying good practice from other countries could also be particularly helpful, considering that there have been a number of practices that have already been proved useful and efficient.

Making the issue of violence more visible and more understood, and emphasising the importance of early prevention could help implement effective policies and strategies in this field. Making these changes systematic and sustainable, and making sure that the experts and professionals working in this field receive effective, evidence-based training that encompasses an in-depth understanding of violence would be of great importance.