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Preventing domestic violence with Men and Boys: Challenges and Opportunities

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Preventing domestic violence in the Czech Republic

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Abstract:

This paper describes the support system for domestic violence victims in the Czech Republic. The Legislation is based on three pillars: the Police of the Czech Republic, intervention centres and courts. According to the results of international as well as Czech researches, almost one in three women in the Czech Republic experiences domestic violence from a partner. In the Czech Republic, domestic violence has been discussed widely in the recent years. First programmes aimed at working with the perpetrators of the violence have recently started to appear. There are many examples of best practices in the Czech Republic, especially the work of non-profit organisations. The possible inspiration for implementing good practice from Sweden the author sees in the focus on men and their participation in solving the problem of domestic violence. The conclusion of this paper focuses on the recommendations for domestic violence prevention in the Czech Republic. The key area that the author identifies is a change in the educational system aimed at higher gender sensitivity.

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can be defined in many different ways. Some authors use a more specific definition than others do; e.g. Fryšták and Střílková define domestic violence as physical, mental or sexual abuse between intimate partners that occurs repeatedly in private out of public control (Střílková, Fryšták, 2009). Other authors provide a broader definition of domestic violence; e.g. according to Marvánová-Vargová it is possible to view domestic violence as a term, which includes both intimate partner and intergenerational violence. Intergenerational violence can be directed from parents towards children and vice versa, intimate partner violence means violent behaviour in intimate relationships (Marvánová-Vargová et al., 2008). In this paper, the term domestic violence will be used for violence happening between intimate partners, „behind closed doors“ (in a shared household), is repeated, long-term, and has an escalating tendency. However, these characteristics of domestic violence are not always valid. Domestic violence does not always take place behind “closed doors”, sometimes it continues even in public as stalking. Domestic violence does not escalate in all cases; sometimes it is brutal even at the beginning. The characteristic present in every case of domestic violence is the imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. There is a clear distinction of roles between the abuser

and the victim, which then causes the victim's fear and the one-sidedness of the violence (it is always clear who is the perpetrator and who is the victim; these roles do not change).

Feminist theories on domestic violence view domestic violence as gender-based, that is violence caused by the imbalance of power between men and women in the society, therefore it happens mainly to women in patriarchal societies. „This abuse is not about marital conflicts or anger management; it is about an exercise of power“ (Voňková, Spoustová, 2008, p. 46).

1.2 Support system for domestic violence victims in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, a support system for domestic abuse victims exists. There is Legislation aimed at protecting citizens from domestic violence - Domestic Violence Act, in effect since January 1, 2007. The domestic Violence Act is based on three pillars: the Police of the Czech Republic (police intervention with the possibility to expel the violent person), intervention centres (surveillance of the violent person and care for the person in danger) and courts (civil law treatment of the situation by the person in danger) (Střílková, Fryšták, 2009). Each region of the Czech Republic therefore has so-called intervention centres where the victims can get help.. In accordance with the Social Services Act, the intervention centres are constituted as specific social services for help and support in the area of welfare consultancy for persons who are in danger of domestic violence (Střílková, Fryšták, 2009). This legislation has enabled a new way of protecting the victims ever since it came into effect, namely the expelling of the perpetrator from the common household for a given time (the expelling is carried out by the police, the period of protection can be prolonged by court on the basis of the request by the person in danger. In case of expelling the violent person, the intervention centres then must offer help to the person in danger within 48 hours since the time the decision has been delivered. Nevertheless, the intervention centres can offer help also on the basis of the request by the victims themselves or on the basis of learning about their situation. Another change in legislation was brought about by adding stalking - dangerous pursuit – among criminal offences in the new criminal code (Act No. 40/2009 Coll., Criminal Code, Section 354, dangerous pursuit).

Apart from institutions established by the state, there are several non-profit organisations aiming at helping violence victims in the Czech Republic; some of them have reception centres (they enable the victim to find safe accommodation). The police, who is often called in cases of domestic violence in the family and can expel the violent person from the common household and is obliged to provide the contact information for an intervention centre in the given region, also plays an important role. In the city of Brno, a Domestic Violence Group, which is unique in the Czech Republic, has been established. This is a group specialised in the issues of domestic violence; it performs the tasks of the Police of the Czech Republic. In case an incident is

reported it carries out the investigation during the infringement or criminal procedure and provides help and protection to the person in danger (Střílková, Fryšták, 2009). This Group is a specialised police department. The group was established on the initiative of the director of the police. It was a reaction to the opinion of citizens and non-profit organisations that helped domestic violence victims, that the Czech Police did not solve the problem of domestic violence. In Brno, there is also an Interdisciplinary Team against Domestic Violence of the City of Brno. In term of domestic violence, an interdisciplinary team means a team of representatives of “collaborating subjects, that is organisations and institutions of the state administration, local administration and non-profit sector, which seeks mainly to coordinate and monitor the situation at the local level, solve specific cases, initiate primary prevention, education and propose new measures to minimise the causes of domestic violence.” (Střílková, Fryšták, 2009, p. 11) Interdisciplinary Team against Domestic Violence of the City of Brno also includes non-profit organisations working with the perpetrators of the violence.

If the domestic violence victim is injured, they may first head to a doctor in a health facility. The doctors are the first people who may offer help. „The health professionals play an important role in the prevention and identification of violence cases. In many cases, the victims in fact name other causes of the injuries than violence.“ (Marvánová-Vargová et al., 2008, p. 55-56) Marriage and family counsellors may also be the first contact persons for the victims of domestic violence, as well as counsellors for crime victims or citizens’ counsellors. Marvánová-Vargová and others further note that lawyers and attorneys are also a large but often neglected group of professionals who are often contacted by the victims, for example in the matter of divorce proceedings, property settlement and so on. (Marvánová-Vargová et al., 2008) Domestic violence cases may also appear before infringement commissions or to child welfare protection institutions in case the partners or spouses have children affected by the violence.

In the Czech Republic, first programmes aimed at working with the perpetrators of the violence have recently started to appear. In 2016, there were 10 of them in the Czech Republic (Herdová et al., 2016). For the most part, these programmes are carried out by non-profit organisations and intervention centres. Analysis of these programmes showed, that they had clearly positive impact on changes in client behaviour (Herdová et al., 2016). However, these programmes are not sufficiently available (they are only in some regions and their distance reduces the motivation of the perpetrators of violence to participate in them) and people often do not know about them. The programmes are also not systematically financially supported.

1.2 Awareness about Domestic Violence in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, domestic violence has been discussed widely in the recent years. According to the 2nd representative sociological research on domestic violence

in the Czech Republic carried out by the STEM agency for the White Circle of Safety (Bílý kruh bezpečí) and Philip Morris ČR, a.s., the awareness about the issue of domestic violence has vastly improved. Recently, almost all people above 15 years of age (97 %) know or at least have an idea what this term means. However, the awareness of how to react to domestic violence remains poor (19% of the public currently has enough information). The number of people who think domestic violence is a pressing issue which must not be ignored by the people around (relatives, neighbours, the doctor, the police) and especially by the state has increased (“this is an issue the state should intervene in” 61% in 2001, 84% today) (Domáci násilí II., 2006).

Some contradictions and myths regarding domestic violence persist to this day. The majority of the public on one hand admit that domestic violence is a general issue that concerns all social groups (81 % in 2001 as well as today), on the other hand almost every second person is under the influence of the myth that domestic violence occurs mostly in poor families. The ideas about the victims of domestic violence are similarly inconsistent. Here, the similarly frequent belief that anyone can become a victim of domestic violence (77 % in both years) clashed with the myth about a typical victim who is a weak, fearful woman unable to defend herself (61 % in 2001, 68 % today). In the majority of the households where violence between partners occurs, there are children (80 %), who often become direct witnesses of the violence (in 57 % families with children) (Domáci násilí II., 2006).

1.3 Occurrence of Domestic Violence in the Czech Republic

14 % of the population above 15 years of age has some personal experience with violence in their intimate relationship. It is necessary to note that this data was provided by the people willing to talk about their personal experience and it can be assumed that the real level of domestic violence between partners is probably higher in this country (Domáci násilí II., 2006).

According to the results of international as well as Czech researches, almost one in three women in the Czech Republic experiences domestic violence from a partner. According to the results of the research by the Association of Intervention Specialists in the Czech Republic (Asociace pracovníků intervenčních center ČR) from 2016, more than a fifth of women called themselves a victim of domestic violence. (Akční plán prevence domácího a genderově odměněného násilí na léta 2019 – 2022, 2019). A recent research has shown that young people in a relationship are also in danger of domestic violence. According to this research, 33 % of young people (16 to 26 years old) who have ever been in a relationship have experienced violence between partners (Analýza výskytu partnerského násilí ve vztazích mladých, 2018).

2. Policy debate

In 2019, the Czech Republic has passed a third separate strategy paper of the Czech Government in the domestic violence prevention field called the Action Plan for the Prevention of Domestic and Gender-based Violence for the years 2019 – 2022. It aims to improve the standing of the victims and improve the system of prevention of this kind of violence. The action plan also builds on the Government Strategy for Equality of Women and Men in the Czech Republic for the years 2014 – 2020. One of the priorities listed by the Action Plan is ensuring the accessibility of the programmes for working with the perpetrators of domestic and gender-based violence.

In recent years, the Istanbul Convention has become a political issue. The Czech Republic has accepted, but not yet ratified the Convention. In the Czech media, the Convention has been a pressing issue and there have been a number of public debates concerning it. Some parties have been scaring the public, often because of their misunderstanding of the term “gender” which has negative connotation among the majority of the Czech public.

As opposed to Sweden, the education system is not gender sensitive in the Czech Republic. Teachers often treat young people according to gender stereotypes and they support the boys and girls in their respective traditional roles. There is no focused work with boys and traditional masculinity, which connects men to violence, is not treated as problematic. Furthermore, there are no organisations aimed at gender sensitive work with boys. In the Czech Republic, there is only one organisation (Liga otevřených mužů" - Open Men League) initiated and lead by men, which aims at tackling violence against women, however, it works primarily with adults

One of the goals of the Government Strategy for Equality of Women and Men in the Czech Republic is to increase identification of men (and women) with gender equality agenda. Unfortunately, for most politicians, this agenda is not a priority, on the contrary, they often speak publicly against it. So this goal still remains a challenge in the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, work with domestic violence perpetrators as one of the basic tools of domestic violence has recently started flourishing. Several organisations concentrate on therapeutic interventions, education and practice of various skills such as conflict and anger management with the aim to prevent violence repetition and diminish the probability of serious domestic violence. The form of working with perpetrators, the methods used and the scope of work is different in each organisation. Only two of the programmes use the term violent person and the perpetrator of domestic violence. Others speak more of managing aggression, anger and violent behaviour (Herdová et al., 2016). One organisation provides services exclusively to men; the other provides its programmes to both men and women. Clients most often come to them of their own choice, on the recommendation of an

expert or experts (psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, etc.) (Herdová et al., 2016). Organisations most often work by the method of therapeutic work. Some organisations are inspired by foreign methodologies and standards – from Norway and Great Britain (organisations Spondea and LOM).

3. Good practice examples

In the Czech Republic, there is a number of organisations that focus on promoting gender equality and highlight the issue of gender-based violence including domestic violence. There are also several organisations aimed at helping domestic violence victims. For example, proFem has outsourced a research focused on the occurrence of partner violence among young people, and it focuses on working with them, for example while using social networks such as Instagram. This organisation has also published a paper raising awareness about the impact of domestic violence in the Czech Republic.

According to many organisations, the promotion of equality between men and women and fighting gender stereotypes is also key. For example Gender Studies, NORA, Masaryk University (Gender Studies Programme), organise seminars for lecturers so that they apply more gender sensitivity while teaching, and highlight the issue and causes of gender-based violence. NESEHNUTÍ organises workshops on the issue of gender-based violence and develops long-term educational programmes for the students of secondary schools that focus on gender-based violence, gender stereotypes and the representation of men and women in the media. In cooperation with the Austrian organisation Poika it tries to introduce good practice from Austria to gender sensitive work with boys.

Liga otevřených mužů, an organisation that works with men, takes part in the White Ribbon (Bílá stužka) campaign – men against violence against women and children.

4. Transferability aspects

In the context of the Czech Republic, the Swedish practice is very inspirational; above all because it concentrates not only on safety measures for violence victims but also on men's participation and responsibility in the work against violence. This approach is only starting to develop in the Czech Republic. The offer of programmes for violence perpetrators is still limited. Individual programmes appear in the recent years, however they are not available in every region and their financing is insufficient. The Swedish educational system based on the values of equality between men and women is also inspirational. The Czech Republic is lacking both in gender sensitive educational system and in working with boys from an early age (for example at elementary schools) that would focus on questioning the boys' ideas about power, masculinity and gender roles.

5. Recommendations

Assuming that domestic violence is the result of power imbalance while in a patriarchal society, power is held mostly by men, I find the changes in education system key – starting at the kindergarten level. Such changes would lead to gender sensitive educational system where the equality between men and women would be the basic principle. The schools would play the role of a place which prevents violence in society. Children and young people would be able to realise the value of equality of all people all throughout their education. They would receive education in an environment where no one would be afraid to reflect upon the relationships in the society as well as in the classroom; in an environment that motivates students to ask questions regarding power and the causes of violence between different groups of people (for example in the relationship of men and women or in male collectives). Young people spend most of their time at school, therefore the school environment is a key source of their ideas about how to communicate, how to form relationships, how to solve problems, work with emotions and so on.

This is why, in my view, it is crucial that schools are ready to work with the topic of violence, either regarding prevention (the ability to understand the societal causes of violence, to recognise the acts of violence, to know how to react to them) or creating a safe space of trust in which it is possible to discuss the topic of violence and talk about possible solutions.

Another key area is direct work with boys focused on critical reflection of traditional male roles and masculinity.

The following things are also important in my view:

- Challenge the myths about domestic violence,
- Raise awareness and improve information regarding the places where domestic violence victims can seek help
- Education of support workers leading to higher sensitivity towards domestic violence victims,
- Better support of organisations helping domestic violence victims, especially by better financial support from the state,
- Support of programmes working with violence perpetrators,
- Monitoring domestic violence prevention measures and evaluation of the prevention programmes.

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