

Perception of Agents Assisting Women Experiencing Violence in Couple Relations

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Abstract:

OBJECTIVES: To provide the perspective on perception of women's NGOs, advocacy and health professionals as formal actors assisting women experiencing violence.

METHODS: Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interview and processed using the method of qualitative thematic analysis based on a phenomenological approach.

RESULTS: They point to women's experiences with aid actors located in the so-called formal environment and to a fundamental need in educational practice on this topic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: The approach of the

Police, the Courts and also the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family appears to be insufficiently supportive and helpful. Women's experiences with helping organizations that provide specialized assistance to women are positive.

Introduction

Compared to the past, more attention has been paid to the problem of violence against women and violence in couple relationships in Slovakia in recent years. Changes are taking place at the legislative level, and the number of organizations and institutions that provide help and support services to women has also increased. Funds from public sources are allocated to support the solution of this problem. The prosecutor's office also pays increased attention to the topic of violence against women, which significantly affects the perception of violence by the public.

By violence against women, we understand "any act of violence based on gender inequality, the consequence of which is, or tends to be the consequence of, physical, sexual or psychological harm to a woman experiencing violence, including threats of such acts, coercion or any denial of freedom, whether in public or private life...." (Kelly, Dubois, 2008:9). We can talk about the presence of violence in a couple relationship by one partner if there is an unequal distribution of power and its abuse. Using violence against women, men enforce male privilege and control over them, asserting their own moral order. Combinations of a number of power and control tactics form a pattern of abusive behaviour. Most definitions of intimate partner violence and abuse recognize that its essence is coercive control, with physical violence being only one tactic used to achieve control over women.

The World Health Organization estimates that 30% of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner (WHO, 2013). In 2014, the FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) published a pan-European survey on violence against women. The research is based on data from 42,000 face-to-face interviews with a random sample of women (aged 18 to 74) across 28 EU member states. An estimated 13 million women in the EU experienced physi-

cal violence in the 12 months prior to the survey interviews. In Slovakia, according to research by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 34% of women will experience physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime, and every tenth woman will experience a physical and/or sexual attack within 12 months.

Failure to reflect the latest scientific knowledge by law enforcement agencies and courts and experts, however, remains in some cases an obstacle to the effective fight against violence against women and intimate partner violence. The help provided to women must be targeted and must take into account the individual circumstances of a woman's life, focusing especially on her safety (including the safety of her children). Juhásová, Pavelová, Morávková (2021) state that women experiencing violence, have, in addition to other feelings, also intense feelings of guilt and shame, which prevent them from confiding and, therefore, from searching help. The decision to leave an abusive relationship comes slowly, often in stages, and can take several years.

Theoretical Background

The phenomenon of violence in couple relationships can be viewed through the lens of several scientific fields, while different interpretive perspectives are applied, which are primarily focused on certain aspects of this phenomenon. A feminist and gender-sensitive perspective captures the phenomenon of violence in couple relationships in the most comprehensive way, from gender inequalities to issues of justice to individual help for women who have experienced violence. Bosá (2011) considers the feminist approach in social work to be one of its roots. The main feminist principles and goals in cooperation with women experiencing violence are based on support, help and creation of safety for women, on their acceptance and respect, on appreciating the significance of their experiences, on the protection of their rights or on providing information and space to explore available op-

tions, risk recognition or updating security plans. According to Janebova (2014), feminist theories of social work include a range of streams of social work, with an emphasis on finding, explaining and solving inequalities between men and women in society. Their common goal is to eliminate the marginalization and oppression of women in society.

In the text of the document, we use terms such as “women experiencing violence” or “survivors”, which we consider to be more appropriate and more accurate for the naming of the phenomenon of violence against women, as they do not stigmatize women, do not imply a passive position and, above all, do not silence the active position of women trying to prevent or mitigate violence. Ondrušková (in Ondrušková et al., 2020:12) deals more closely with terminological questions in the field of violence in intimate relationships. We retain the term victim when citing currently effective legislation and in translations of older foreign texts. At the same time, similar to Libáková and Bosá (2018), we replace the phrase “violence in partner relationships” with the phrase “violence in couple relationships”, which reflects the fact that violent relationships are not partners or they are not based on partnership and equality.

Methods used in data collection and processing

We collected research data using a demographic data questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, which were strictly anonymized so that women’s safety would not be jeopardized. Ethical rules for data acquisition and processing were formulated in an informed consent specified for participants, organization workers and researchers, personally signed by all parties. The data collection was carried out by professional employees of the organizations (only women), who were trained in the research methodology by a personal meeting with the members of the research team, where the training took place, and they had the opportunity to communicate all interview questions. At the same time, they received methodological instructions for filling out the questionnaire and conducting interviews and had the support of the research team. The questionnaire contained questions focused on

basic demographic data: age, size of the place of residence (the current one, the one relevant to the relationship in question), change of the place of residence, stay in safehouse for women, marital status, educational level, employment, number and age of children.

The semi-structured interview consisted of six basic open questions aimed at finding out the experiences and behaviour of women in situations of violence, in a violent relationship and supporting, helping or other actions of actors in the informal and formal environment.

The data obtained in semi-structured interviews were processed by the method of qualitative thematic analysis in the program ATLAS.ti 8 and MS Excel 2013. We applied predominantly the processes of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Willig, 2013), which puts emphasis on the importance of experience for respondents. The qualitative data (transcripts of interviews) were divided into segments according to the research objective and research questions: (1) women and their behaviour, (2) individual factors, (3) men and their behaviour, (4) child/children, (5) informal actors, (6) formal actors. First, the data were arranged to segments/categories. Categories represented the most general level of data classification, created on the basis of a pre-determined criteria. Encoding was conducted by researchers divided into smaller groups, confronting their procedures, and creating criteria for designing categories. The resulting tables and procedures were discussed by the whole work group.

Characteristics of the research sample

44 women participated in the research, who were approached through organizations providing specialized services to women who experience violence in couple relationships. The condition for approaching a woman (and inclusion in the research sample) was that the woman had been working with the organization for at least two years. This condition was intended to prevent women from being secondarily victimized or repeatedly traumatized.

Participants were ranged between 22 and 65 years of age. The age range was quite wide. Most participants were aged 36-49, with high school education, followed by women with university

education. Almost 60% of them were divorced. Most of the worked full time, two participants were old-age pensioners. Two women (out of 44) were childless.

Research findings – women’s experience with formal actors

Situational strategies with the involvement of the formal environment or actors from the formal environment are typical mainly by filing a report with the police, asking the police for help or seeking medical help. Long-term strategies in which women used the help of the formal environment can be understood mainly as: filing a criminal complaint, filing a divorce application, working with psychologists or seeking legal help or contacting workers in the social and legal protection of children and youth and social guardianship.

In the process of analysing the segment: formal environment, categories of formal subjects, actors were created, which were: police, health workers, workers of the Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (ÚPSVaR), legal aid providers (lawyers, advocates), judges and non-governmental organizations working with women experiencing violence.

Subcategories were created based on the evaluation of women’s experiences with their actions (or inaction) or interventions. As a rule, these are two subgroups of subcategories. Those where the woman expressed a good experience and useful help and support, or interventions shaping the woman’s bad experience, rejection or experiencing unprofessionalism. Procedures of formal actors that hindered women in the process of stopping violence, such as failure to act (e.g. trivializing the situation, failure to provide information, discouraging reporting, delays in proceedings) or unprofessional procedures (inappropriate personal approach, mistrust of women). Table 1 illustrates the perception of the approach of formal actors in dealing with violence experienced by women.

Among the supporting factors that defined women experiencing violence in couple relationships, identified by the activity of non-governmental organizations, the following can be included in particular: moral support, acceptance and recognition of the individual, creation

of a sense of security and provision of specific legal and psychological assistance. They experienced this type of support and attributed it mainly to cooperation with non-governmental organizations working with women experiencing violence. Some participants reported that they met with understanding for the first time and “finally” someone believed in their story. The experience when a synergistic effect is achieved through the cooperation of several entities is helpful for women. The so-called multidisciplinary approach of formal actors, which is irreplaceable in helping women experiencing violence, was highly appreciated.

„Then I contacted the assistance centre for such women here in XY and they helped me.“ (ID 48:57)

„I addressed you and the organisation X, they helped me psychologically, and the lawyer from organisation Y helped me in legal issues.“ (ID 49:09:00)

„I was psychically supported by the centre. The psychologist and all people I came into contact with. Then also the police, during our second interaction, the first one did not go so well. During that second meeting I perceived the officer as the one who will stand for me“. (ID 48:109)

„...the judges were full of doubt, because he did not kill me or beat me, and asked why didn’t I switch off the phone and ignore him.“ (ID 48:182)

„So it is going to the district court again, to the higher court, and back, and there is no end to it. And who knows what the end will be? “ (ID 48:184)

„Even my lawyer remembers a case where she had a bribed expert.“ (ID 50:66)

An important professional group that was in direct contact with women experiencing violence were medical professionals (including clinical psychologists). Their approach was perceived positively, while they had sufficient knowledge about helping women experiencing violence and also provided them with psychological support. On the other hand, doctors expressed mistrust towards the group of women and acted against it.

„Then the physician advised me a psychologist, because she thought it was a mental issue.

Table 1 Selected formal actors and their approach

FORMAL ACTORS	CRITERION	SUBCATEGORIES	
NGOs	Evaluation and experience of women with actions of NGOs	Approach of formal actors	
		Hindering change	Supporting change
			<i>Encouragement towards emotional opening;</i> <i>Listening to a woman, providing the feeling of understanding;</i> <i>Consultancy;</i> <i>Psychological and moral support;</i> <i>Support for positive qualities;</i> <i>Providing the feeling of safety;</i> <i>Understanding NGOs as „safe islands“;</i> <i>Multidisciplinary approach; Networking of experts;</i>
ADVOCACY	Evaluation and experience of women with actions of lawyers	Approach of formal actors	
		Hindering change	Supporting change
			<i>Filing a petition with the court;</i> <i>Immediate actions;</i> <i>Specific legal advice;</i> <i>Expert reporting;</i> <i>Assistance of a lawyer;</i> <i>Women’s feelings, that finally there is someone on her side;</i> <i>Professional approach of a lawyer;</i> <i>Legal advice regarding the child custody and parental agreement;</i>
HEALTH SERVICE	Evaluation and experience of women with actions of health service professionals	Approach of formal actors	
		Hindering change	Supporting change
		<i>Physician not knowing about violence in family;</i> <i>Physician not willing to believe in violence in family;</i> <i>Actions of health service professionals only in favour of a man;</i>	<i>Psychological or psychiatric intervention;</i> <i>Physician providing help and support to a woman;</i>
SOCIETY	Evaluation and experience of women with actions of society	Setup of system measures for assistance and protection	
		Hindering change	Supporting change
		<i>Unsatisfactory protection against a violent person;</i> <i>Men (father) escaping the liability to pay;</i> <i>Insufficient support for women with financial problems</i>	

Source: own processing, 2023

I don't know when she told me that, but I went and visited the psychologist...“ (ID59:55)

„The best of all was the psychologist, who didn't just open my eyes – she talked with me and I was in need of talking. She told me I cannot carry on living like that, I need to do something. She told me: You are a young woman, you need to think about children.“(ID59:61)

In today's society, women perceive many reserves and shortcomings, especially in the form of weak support and understanding or protection from violence, as well as in the form of insufficient help for survivors.

„ What does our society even want? They do not know, but they are judgmental. „ (ID 47:217)

„This is our society, not protecting women. And absolutely not in this town. Unless a woman is dead or has her throat slit, everything is seemingly okay. But then it is already too late. Nobody cares then, there is nothing more to do. They should wake up, in the social office, in the court, because it does not function. I think there are more of women like me. So I beg, if there is a way to help, help the women. And educate and control the office employees, because their decisions are often arbitrary.“ (ID 47: 224).

Based on the statements of the participants, the fact is that there are still procedures and interventions by formal actors that are part of the so-called helping sphere, which are insufficient or victimizing, influenced by inappropriate gender stereotypes and prejudices. There is also a lack of professional preparation of formal actors who may come into contact with women experiencing violence. The reason for the failures of formal actors can also be found in the low level of awareness of the problem and the underestimation of women's experiences, which results in their stories not being heard.

The importance of the availability of specialized services for women who experience violence in couple relationships is clearly shown. Operating organizations work on the basis of standards and procedures that are sensitive to the protection of women's safety, they have professionals who can provide qualified service and support.

Conclusion

The analysis of the formal environment segment (formal actors) in research aimed at

identifying the strategies that women use to prevent, mitigate and stop violence in couple relationships and the factors that influence the choice of these strategies led to the creation of a category of (formal) subjects (actors) who in the women's statements stand as actors from whom they expect help. The categories corresponded to institutions that, directly by law and based on their competences and expertise, have or can provide help or support to women who have experienced violence in couple relationships. Subcategories were created based on the evaluation of women's experiences with their actions or interventions. Findings on formal actors show different experiences of women. A professional multidisciplinary approach, willingness, help and support for women were identified as the so-called supporting factors. The opposite experience of women, associated with the unprofessional approach of formal actors, or the experience of not providing protection led to the identification of the so-called hindering factors.

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