

Training for a multiagency approach



In brief

A monitoring exercise carried out in Košice in 2008 showed that public agency personnel working with women surviving domestic violence had no access to training. A course was therefore devised by the local women's NGO Fenestra with ministry support.

The course was delivered in four districts of the city. Thirty-six professionals – police officers, social workers, health professionals, psychologists and lawyers. – working in these institutions attended specialised training workshops, which sensitised them to the subject of partner violence. The main topics covered were common myths related to intimate partner violence, its real causes and nature, the risk factors, the safety of women, who is responsible for violence against woman, and the health impact of partner violence on women and their children.

A manual was created describing in detail the competences and procedures of each support agency, and the course has inspired a similar project in another region of Slovakia, Prešov.

A holistic approach requires coordination

In Slovakia, the national political agenda on domestic violence and violence against women (VAW) is closely associated with gender equality policies. Equality between men and women was put on this agenda in the second half of the 1990s, mainly as the result of international commitments made as part of the EU accession process. Until 2004, VAW was included in the national plans for women (1997) and was framed within the context of equal opportunities for women and men (2001). The approval of a strategy addressing VAW went together with numerous struggles, discussions, staff changes and pressure from NGOs. The main conflict was related to the recognition of the concept of gender-based violence and the choice of targeting exclusively women.[1] It was decided to follow a holistic approach embracing criminal law, delivery of assistance, prevention and research. Close coordination among all stakeholders was deemed to be essential.[2] This was especially true as the cross-cutting nature of the issue means that the actors in VAW policy represent a wide range of areas: security and protection, criminal law, social and health services, civil society and research. The ministries most closely involved have been those for Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Interior, Justice and Health. In accordance with the decentralisation and democratisation process, more and more responsibilities have been delegated to the regional authorities. At the same time, NGOs play a significant and indisputable role, even taking over the state's responsibility for tackling domestic violence.

A need for training

In 2008, the situation of support and protection of women surviving domestic violence in the town of Košice was monitored. This monitoring revealed strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for development. One of the weaknesses revealed was the lack of training and education of public agency personnel working with women surviving domestic violence.

A training course was therefore developed, targeted at police officers, social workers, health professionals, psychologists and lawyers. The training aimed to improve the effectiveness of the work of professionals belonging to the Working Group for Prevention and Elimination of Violence Against Women in Košice (which was set up in 2008), to encourage cooperation among them and to create a learning platform for meetings and the exchange of knowledge among the institutions involved.

Developing the course was an initiative of Fenestra, a women's NGO in Košice, and was funded by the Committee for Crime Prevention under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior. Four districts of Košice were chosen for delivery: Sever, Západ, Dargovských hrdinov and Nad jazerom.

The main institutions responsible for domestic violence service delivery in each district were chosen. The first criterion was the potential of the institution to be the place of first contact for women surviving partner violence and searching for support. These were police stations, social and family services offices, hospitals, field social workers, centres of psychological consulting and prevention and prosecutors' departments.

Professionals working in these institutions attended specialised training workshops, which sensitised them to the subject of partner violence. The main topics covered were common myths related to intimate partner violence, its real causes and nature, the risk factors, the safety of women, who is responsible for violence against woman, and the health impact of partner violence on women and their children.

A manual was created describing in detail the competences and procedures of each support agency in case of partner violence. The chapters on specific areas of intervention were written by the representatives of the agencies – members of the Working group for Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women in Košice.

Thirty-six people were trained. They rated highly the information delivered during the training and the opportunity to exchange their experiences with people from other professions. This has opened up useful informal channels of cooperation among professionals.

Exchange between professions

The training was useful in bringing together professionals with different backgrounds and roles in dealing with domestic violence, and was embedded in a broader project fostering a multiagency approach among the members of the Working Group for the Prevention and Elimination of VAW in Košice. It proved to be an effective way of disseminating standardised procedures to support women survivors of domestic violence, and it enabled agencies to exchange information and knowledge.

It is based on a victim-centred and multiagency approach that brought together several different organisations involved in domestic violence, who signed formal protocols. During its implementation, it involved experts directly working with victims.

It was built on a definition of domestic violence based on international documents and agreements that define violence against women as gender-based violence, and as the cause and consequence of a historically and socially constructed imbalance of power between men and women. These assumptions give a good foundation for impacting on the wider environment because they highlight gender inequalities in areas such as the risk of poverty for women experiencing violence, and the threat to women's bodies as a consequence of inappropriate or insufficient responses from state and local government agencies.

No evaluation or monitoring of the training as such has been conducted. However there are several ways in which its effectiveness could have been improved. A first step would be to formalise procedures through the approval of protocols of intervention within each agency and amongst agencies that work together. A second step further would be to transform the training into an ongoing practice. Thirdly, the delivery of the training would benefit from periodically evaluation. In spite of the involvement of national Ministry of the Interior in the initiative, no specific plans have been made to continue the initiative.

A model for other regions

Good points about the training were that it was grounded in practice and aimed to remedy the deficiencies revealed by monitoring the situation on the ground. It was built on a multiagency approach involving different representatives from statutory agencies working with domestic violence victims, and it has created a manual, written by agency representatives, which describes the appropriate intervention procedures for each agencies involved and is of long-term value. The manual is available online on Fenestra's website and can be used by any statutory agency that wants to improve its professional support in cases of domestic violence.

The transferability of the training may be limited due to the specific people and institutions involved. Moreover, the typology of institutions involved in the training is associated with the legislative setting and the resulting responsibilities of each institution. However the training has served as a model for other regions to start similar cooperation (e.g. the region of Prešov), showing that the practice could be transferred and be a learning example in other contexts.

The lessons learned from the process are firstly that the starting point for a positive training experience is the analysis of training needs amongst the targeted professionals. Secondly, multiagency training has the potential to initiate cooperation amongst different agencies. Thirdly, knowledge exchange amongst different agencies on how to respond to domestic violence can be stimulated by the compilation of a manual that takes stock of individual agencies' procedures.

[1] Barbara Holubová, Violence against Women and the Role of Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Strategies, National report prepared for the EGGSI Network, European Commission, 2010

[2] The National Strategy on Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and in Families

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Website



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