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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Abstract:

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) with its Optional Protocol is the first binding legal act and leading international instrument regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. One of the principles of CRPD is "respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices and independence", whereby persons with disabilities are recognized as holders of rights taking into account their specific situation. CRPD recognizes in Article 6 that "women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination" and mandates signatory countries to "take measures to ensure their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms." The research was done in order to examine the readiness of the state to institutionally cover the awareness of girls and women with disabilities, their education on the issue of violence, access to services and information appropriate to the needs of each category separately, as well as systemic solutions for their protection from violence. A qualitative research strategy was applied, and the research was conducted with representatives of the Centers for Social Work, representatives from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, professionals who are direct providers of services in the field of non-family protection, as well as the girls and women with disabilities themselves. The main conclusions that emerge from the research say that girls and women with disabilities are more susceptible to violence, especially by their partners or family members. More awareness is needed to recognize and encourage reporting of violence.

Keywords: *violence, girls and women with disabilities, victims of violence.*

Introduction

The social and social inclusion of persons with disabilities are the commitments of the Republic of North Macedonia. The rights that are part of the new approach to persons with disabilities are determined based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted in 2006. Violence as a social phenomenon is also a particularly important social segment in which people with disabilities are inevitably a part. In the Law on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls adopted in 2021, women with disabilities are included in the section of persons who should not be discriminated against during intervention when it comes to violence and are defined as a vulnerable category of women. According to Article 8 of the Law, appropriate adaptation of measures, activities and services according to women's disabilities is foreseen. However, despite all the benefits that are part of the everyday life of people with disabilities, a very small part is devoted to raising awareness about violence with a focus on women with disabilities. The questions: Are women with disabilities sufficiently informed that they have the right to report violence? Does their position as citizens in the state give them enough freedom to face the challenge of violence, or are they dependent on others regarding this issue? Are people who are part of the everyday life of people with disabilities aware of their personal integrity? How much the legal framework is respected by the state services is what leads this paper to research the current situation on the ground and what needs to be done to overcome this challenge.

Gender-based violence, in all its forms, is everyday in the lives of women in the country and in the world. In North Macedonia, almost half (45%) of women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence (physical, sexual and/or psychological) since the age of 15, while almost every third woman (30%) has experienced sexual harassment.

Data show that more than 80% of victims of domestic violence are women. The prevalence of violence against women in the country is significantly lower than the EU countries, which indicates the existence of fear and shame of reporting and mistrust in the institutions.

It is also worrying that three times as many women think that domestic violence is a private matter that should remain in the family, compared to women across the EU, and a significant number of women think that some "minor" violence is normal behaviour. Sexism and sexist behavior are linked to violence against women and girls, with acts of "everyday" sexism being part of a continuum of violence creating an atmosphere of intimidation, fear, discrimination, exclusion and insecurity, thus limiting the opportunities and freedom of women and the girls. Gender stereotypes and prejudices shape norms, behavior and expectations of men and boys, leading to sexist acts. Several analyzes and researches in recent years have shown that the country is still dominated by stereotypical traditional beliefs about the place and role of women and men in the home and in society, which represent an obstacle to the progress of women in

almost all spheres of private and public life. Men are still considered dominant in the home and in public life, while women are expected to put their own needs and ambitions in the personal and professional fields second and devote themselves first and foremost to the household. There is still a significant number of women (37%) who believe that a woman should submit to her husband, even if she does not agree, and a similar number (32%) believe that it is important for a man to show his partner who is in charge. Also, every third woman shows doubt in the statements of other women who reported harassment or violence. Additionally, 14.5% of rural women aged 15-49 justify a man beating his wife if she neglects the children (compared to 4.5% of urban women), 7.3% of rural women believe that it is justified for a man to beat his wife if she argues with him (vs. 2% of urban areas) and 6.7% of women in rural areas justify a man beating his wife if she goes out without telling him (vs. 1.5% of urban areas).

The subject of this paper is to determine the degree of exposure to violence of women with disabilities. The research aims to determine whether women with disabilities are more exposed to violence than women with typical development, whether there is a dominant type of violence to which women with disabilities are exposed, whether they recognize violence, whether the state offers mechanisms to prevent violence against women with disabilities.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights, discrimination against women and refers to all acts of gender-based violence that lead or are likely to lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including direct and indirect threats and intimidation for such actions, coercion, arbitrary restriction and/or deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether they occur in public or private life;¹

Of particular importance was whether they have the support of the social community and whether they would report the violence on their own initiative as part of their trust in the state's system for dealing with their specific situation. In the research, it is important to say that women with intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, impaired vision, impaired hearing as well as women with physical disabilities are included.

According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, every person has the right to enjoy all the rights and freedoms in society as citizens with typical development. Persons with disabilities have the right to live with their families, they have the right to continuous education and upbringing, health care, full inclusion in the social and social environment. These people also have the right to express their sexuality and emotions. Often times due to lack of recognition, ignorance or ignorance of these persons, they become used and cited for many acts that fall into acts of violence. In the course of this paper, we will also come across terms that denote violence.

- **“Domestic violence”** is harassment, insult, threats to security, physical harm, sexual or other mental, physical or economic violence that

¹Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence.

causes a feeling of insecurity, threat or fear, including threats of such actions, against a spouse, parents or children or other persons living in a marital or extramarital union or joint household, as well as against a current or former spouse or extramarital partner or persons who have a common child or are in a close personal relationship, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim or not;²

- **“Physical violence”** is any act of applying physical force or an act that harms the health and physical and mental integrity of the victim³
- **“Psychological violence”** is any behavior using coercion, intimidation or threat, which causes a feeling of fear, threat, anxiety or violation of the dignity and psychological integrity of the victim;⁴
- **“Economic violence”** is any act of restriction or prevention in the realization and/or disposal of personal income and financial assets, for maintaining the joint household and for the care of the child, which causes economic dependence of the victim;⁵
- **“Sexual violence and rape”** is any act of a sexual nature, with any body part or object, on the body of another person without his/her consent. Sexual violence also exists when another person is led or forced to engage in acts of a sexual nature with a third person without their consent. Consent must be expressed voluntarily as a result of the person’s free will, assessed in the context of the circumstances;⁶

Research results

In order to obtain a real picture of what the situation is on the ground at the moment, taking into account that many measures for the prevention of violence and raising the awareness of the population have been taken previously,

²Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence (Article 3).

³Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence (Article 3).

⁴Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence (Article 3).

⁵Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence (Article 3).

⁶Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence (Article 3).

two questionnaires and 2 open interviews were conducted with stakeholders on the issue of women with disabilities and the violence.

The questionnaire, which consisted of 8 questions, was administered to 30 people from the Centers for Social Work from the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia.

To the question "How often do you encounter cases where women with disabilities are victims of violence?" Out of 30 respondents, 44% or 13 respondents answered very rarely, 33% of them answered that they rarely face such reports, 7 of them answered that sometimes. The second question was in the direction of from whom they receive the reports in the Centers for Social Work. In this case, 55.6% or more than half answered that they receive the reports from another person, while 44.4% answered that the report is personally from the victim. Such answers lead to the fact that a large number of women with disabilities either do not have access to report the violence themselves, or it is because they are not sufficiently informed about where and how to report the violence.

In order to get the true picture of the violence, the respondents were also asked the question "What kind of violence is it most often in question?". All types of violence were listed as answers (physical violence, psychological violence, economic violence, sexual violence, violence through the Internet, hate speech, forced marriage, family violence, gender-based violence, stalking, trafficking in women). To this question, 56.7% of the respondents answered that physical violence is the most prevalent in the reports in the centers, 33.3% of them answered that it was about psychological violence, while 10% of them answered that the report was hate speech. To the question "Do you have records of how the lives of women with disabilities continue after the act of violence?" most of them have answered negatively, some of them have answered positively adding that these are cases if they personally know the victim or if the victim has contact with someone close to them. Several quotes have been singled out from the persons who have an amendment:

"It continues to take place in the same course, with partial changes that last during the period of "remorse", "change" and "apology"" or "The person remains in the same unchanged state for a longer period".

"If there are no long-term consequences, the victim continues with his life as before and is often not aware of everything he has survived."

"If they have their own family, they get their support."

This indicates an absence of continuous care for women victims of violence or a refusal of help on their part as a result of mistrust.

For the research, the status of women with disabilities was of particular importance when it comes to violence in that direction, and the question was raised whether it is about women who are not financially secure or women who are financially secure.

Out of 30 respondents who are employed in the Centers for Social Work, 27 have answered that they are financially insecure women with disabilities, while 3 of them have answered that they are financially stable women. This

indicates which group of women with disabilities is more vulnerable when it comes to violence .

Due to the fact that in the 21st century, information remains a challenge, despite the fact that globally everyone uses social media as a primary means of communication and information, there is a large amount of information that never reaches the desired audience. That is why the question "Do you think that women with disabilities are sufficiently informed about where they can report violence?" was questioned. 44.4% of the respondents answered that they think that women with disabilities have enough information about where they should report violence, while 55.6% of them answered that women are not sufficiently informed about what kind of violence and where they can report it.

Respondents were also asked if they would like to share any experiences in the survey.

"The victim, out of fear, never confessed to the violence inflicted on her."

"Due to the postponement of the court case from which a verdict should have been issued (in the case it is about the right to contact with the child), justice was not served in relation to the victim, despite all the procedures carried out by the center for social work."

"A woman with a disability who was mentally abused by her husband, after long counseling and support, left her husband and returned to her family, and later married another partner. He has contact with his children from a previous marriage."

"The case ended with the dissolution of the extramarital union and the woman went to live with her parents with their support."

"Disabled woman sexually abused by grown man."

As the last question of the survey questionnaire was asked "Do you think that institutions encourage women with disabilities enough when it comes to violence?" in this case 66.7% answered positively while 33.3% answered negatively.

In order to obtain accurate data regarding reports of violence at the level of the entire country, an open interview was conducted with an employee of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. According to his presentation, at the level of the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, in the past year (2021), there were only 5 reports of violence related to women with disabilities. The interviewee added that despite the ongoing campaigns, the number of applications for women with disabilities is not increasing. As a result of this, the question was raised as to whether, in extreme cases of violence, women with disabilities are placed in shelter centers as the last option for dealing with violence. The respondent reported that there are currently 7 shelter centers in all the planning regions of the country (Skopje, Gostivar, Ohrid, Kočani and Sveti Nikole and Veles) on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. He added that despite the fact that in 2018 the shelter centers were renovated and adapted with adequate bathrooms and toilets as well as access ramps, when it comes to violence against a person with disabil-

ities, they decide on other forms of care, starting from the Day Care Centers and then to small group homes.

From the information obtained from the interviews, we can conclude that women with disabilities face barriers when it comes to reporting violence in the appropriate place. In addition to the accessible shelter centers that represent the most appropriate care for women victims of violence currently on the territory of the state, however, in extreme cases of violence, the victims decide for a different accommodation or do not report the violence at all. Such decisions directly affect their safety as well as the risk of secondary violence by the abuser because despite alternative accommodation they do not enjoy the benefits of shelter centers, because in Centers for persons with disabilities or small group homes they are not protected (secret) location and do not receive the appropriate support that a victim of violence should receive after the act suffered.

A completely anonymous questionnaire was also conducted with women with disabilities, this included women with physical disabilities, women with hearing impairment and women with cerebral palsy. 15 women between the ages of 20 and 40 were included in the survey questionnaire. First of all, of particular importance was the question of where the respondents live in order to obtain a real picture of which group of women we are dealing with. In the given case, 9 of the women answered that they live independently, while 6 of them said that they live with the support of another person who is part of their family. Consequently, the question was asked whether the respondents had ever experienced any kind of violence. To this question, 10 of the respondents answered positively, while 5 of them answered that they had not personally faced violence. Several of the respondents stated as a supplement to their answer that although they do not have personal experience with violence, they have witnessed violence in their immediate vicinity.

Respondents who answered positively to the previous question were asked what type of violence they face most often. 4 of the respondents answered that they had faced physical violence, 3 of them had faced psychological violence, the remaining three had declared that they had faced hate speech, economic violence and online violence.

The next question was asked "By whom was the violence committed?" to this question, the ten respondents who suffered violence answered that the violence was committed by a person in the immediate vicinity, 4 of the respondents answered that it was their acquaintances, 3 answered that it's about members of a close family and the other 3 answered that it's about members of an extended family.

Of particular importance for the research is the data on whether the respondents reported the violence according to their answers, 8 of them did not report the violence, while only two of them did not report the violence. The interviewees who reported the violence did so in an association or in the Center for Social Work.

All interviewees were asked the question of whether they think they are sufficiently informed about where they can report violence. To this question, 4 of the respondents have answered positively, while 11 of them believe that they are not sufficiently informed about where and how they can report the violence. Each of the interviewees believes that a key part after committing an act of violence is psychosocial support, but that none of them has ever been involved in this type of service.

The last question was asked "What would you like to change in the system for protection against violence?". Some of their statements were the following:

"To be more accessible to everyone and everywhere and to be marketed to the public with greater intensity."

"I want to change the way victims are protected."

"Greater protection for women by opening up more forms of protection".

Taking into account the possibilities of all participants in the research and the involvement in the virtual tools that allowed access to the surveys, an inclusive approach was implemented for women with intellectual disabilities. According to the above, open interviews were conducted in small group homes where supported living is implemented.

10 women placed in the small group homes over the age of 30 were interviewed. When we discussed the violence with them, 6 of the interviewees answered that they had been faced with violence so far, 3 of them answered that it was physical violence, while 4 of them said that they had been faced with psychological violence and hate speech. In a direct conversation with them, the fact was revealed that most often such forms of violence were from their close ones, that is, people who are part of their everyday life. The caregiver who is part of the small group homes was also included in this interview. He emphasized that forms of violence can be said to be a part of everyday life for people with mild intellectual disabilities, it can be said that it is the ridicule of the community or when some procedure is done by the users that is not socially accepted, we encounter condemnation and insults that then affect the mood of the users.

"Physical violence in our small group homes is not a common case, it can be said that it only happens as a misunderstanding between the users, but we solve it by talking," said the carer.

He pointed out that they are open in communication with the users and that when any form of violence occurs, the users immediately come to them or to the manager or to the carers. He emphasized that so far they have not been faced with situations with which the institutions have become familiar, and if they had such a situation, they would certainly inform the competent center for social work and appropriate measures would be taken.

The women were asked if they think they have adequate support after the violence they suffered, we selected some of their statements:

“The carer always gives me the support I need”

“I talk to my friend with whom we live together, and that way the problems I have are easier to overcome”

“If I have a problem, I feel sad and then the people who take care of me feel it immediately. I share all the things that happen to me with them.”

Conclusions

With the results obtained from the researches that were carried out for the purposes of the preparation of the paper, more questions were opened and how mainly from those questions can be singled out “How much are women with disabilities really protected from violence?”.

The results fully confirm that:

- There are differences in the type of violence that women with disabilities are exposed to
- Women who are unemployed are more exposed to violence than women who are employed
- Place of residence is associated with degree of exposure to violence.

Starting from the conditions in which they live, what is their position in society, how are they accepted in schools, social spaces, traffic, hospital, institution, this group of people is still marginalized in society. Most often, people who are directly involved with work processes that affect people with disabilities are more aware of their existence in general as well as their daily challenges. But it is not the same for everyone. With the start of the deinstitutionalization project,⁷ people with disabilities are more visible in society, which directly contributes to the improvement of their quality of life. Measures for inclusion in kindergartens have been introduced, educational assistants have been introduced⁸ to help children with disabilities integrate into the educational system, and despite all these “sterile” measures taken, it is forgotten that people with disabilities spend most of their time outside of school. It is not health care, but their daily life in their immediate environment. Here it must be taken into account that they face the same challenges as people with typical development.

Violence as a phenomenon is part of history, the present and will be part of the future until the awareness of the population is raised about its meaning and the impact it has on the mental health of people who are victims of violence or witnesses of violence. The first picture that is obtained from the research itself is that people with disabilities rarely report violence, this can be seen from the statements of people with disabilities and from employees

⁷The project to support social services <https://socialservicesplatform.eu/mk/za-nas/>.

⁸Law on Basic Education.

of social work centers. In addition to the campaigns⁹ implemented by all relevant factors in the country, the level of knowledge of the forms of violence, as well as where they should be reported, remains low. The fact that more of the respondents in social work centers think that people with disabilities are not sufficiently informed about where they should report violence indicates that the improved approach to these acts is still not part of the everyday life of women with disabilities. During the examination of the two main groups of respondents, it was found that most often it is about physical violence suffered by women with disabilities, while after this form of violence comes psychological violence. It is of particular importance that women with disabilities are aware of this form of violence and recognize it in their lives, but report it less frequently than physical violence. From the analysis of the questionnaires, it was observed that violence occurs more in the form of living of persons with disabilities, which includes living in their own homes, than living with support (small group homes). The people who were examined and live in the small group homes feel safe with the employees and acute forms of violence usually do not occur. While people who live with their families are more exposed to hate speech or domestic violence.

From the examination of an employee of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, it was concluded that despite offering the service of temporary stay in the shelter centers in which psychosocial support is also implemented, women¹⁰ with disabilities decide not to use this service, but instead opt for the alternative form of temporary stay. Such a decision endangers the safety of the person who is in danger and there is a possibility of re-victimization. The reason for this is that shelter centers are in a secret location that is unknown to the abuser while small group homes do not offer that.

In the answers of women with disabilities, it was noted that in the last question "What would you like to change in the system for protection against violence?", the respondents answered that they would change the ways of protecting victims. Such an answer states that it is necessary in working with victims of violence with disabilities to have a special protocol according to which the employees who are directly involved with the violence will be guided.

Taking into account the above, the protection of women with disabilities from violence requires continuous work with them, raising awareness and a special approach that meets their needs.

⁹Campaign "We are with you - together against violence against women and girls" <https://mtsp.gov.mk/media-centar.nspk>.

¹⁰Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from the previously stated conclusions:

- In order to successfully deal with hate speech and raise awareness about disability, in addition to the fact that children with the inclusion process are increasingly involved in preschool upbringing and education, appropriate preparation is needed for children with typical development who have not previously been faced with direct contact with people with disabilities for their differences and understanding of them.
- Greater education about violence, what it means, how we can report it and which acts are considered violence. Such education can be conducted in a formal or informal way. This can be part of formal education as a segment of the curriculum in schools or it can be in the form of trainings, games, activities that provide the necessary knowledge on the subject.
- Associations of persons with disabilities should be included in educational campaigns and campaigns to raise public awareness. Through them, access to the largest number of people with disabilities will be facilitated.
- The Internet is not a place where information about how to protect ourselves from violence should be shared most of the time. Despite the easy access to information on the internet through smartphones, this target group cannot always be informed in such a way. Virtual tools are still too advanced for some and people with disabilities or simply because of their greater security do not use phones. That is why it is necessary to target the places where people with disabilities move the most, places that are accessible to them or simply where printed material can be shared in their homes.
- Regarding the violence that most often happens in the homes of women with disabilities, it is necessary to organize an advisory service that will work with families in terms of raising their awareness about the person living in their home, regardless of whether it is their child, their parent or their spouse. Through such advisory services, we work directly on the prevention of violence.

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