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New research on shelters in Norway and Slovakia

"There is a lack of research on domestic violence shelters, including both their role in the support system and comparative studies between the Nordic countries and Europe in general. I would really like to see more research on this," says Solveig Bergman, project manager and senior researcher at NKVTS.

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Children at shelters are an important part of the project. It will be important to find out what has happened since NKVTS carried out their pioneering work in 2009, according to Solveig Bergman. (Illustration photo: iStockphoto)

The Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) is contributing just such research in an ongoing bilateral research project with the Coordinating Methodical Centre (CMC) in Slovakia (see fact box).

"The purpose of the project is to develop further research on shelters in Norway, including a comparative study with the situation in Slovakia," says Bergman from NKVTS.

"Children are independent human beings"

CMC in Slovakia and NKVTS in Norway have been collaborating ever since CMC was established on the grounds of the Institute for Work and Family Research in 2015.



The research project consists of three different parts: children and young adolescents seeking support from shelters, mothers (and sometimes fathers) in contact with shelters and the societal role of the shelters, explains Solveig Bergman. (Photo: NKVTS)

"During the first phase of the programme, we contributed by way of discussions and providing advice on how to build the centre. CMC is similar to NKVTS – it is like a spider in the web between authorities, politicians, practitioners and NGOs," says Bergman.

“The ongoing research project consists of three different parts,” Bergman explains.

The Norwegian and Slovakian projects are autonomous and are structured in slightly different ways. The first part of the project is about children and young adolescents who seek help from domestic violence shelters in Norway and Slovakia.

"Children at shelters are an important part of the project. NKVTS carried out pioneering work on children at shelters in 2009 (Norwegian only). It will be important to find out what has happened since that time, more than a decade ago," says Bergman.

"In many ways, Norway is a pioneer when it comes to seeing children at shelters as independent human beings – not just as extensions of their parent – but individuals who need education, care, play and also love in the exceptional situation that they find themselves in at a shelter," Bergman says.

Bergman points out the difference between Norway and Slovakia when it comes to the methodology and ethics concerning research with children.

"While researchers in Norway are, with certain limitations, allowed to talk directly with children, this is not allowed in Slovakia. All communication needs to be through their mothers," Bergman explains.

According to Bergman, visitation rights and other parental rights of an abusive father (or sometimes mother) is another topic that has received increased attention in international research over the past couple of decades.

Negotiations about parenthood will be explored further in the second part of the project.

"It will be interesting to ask how the abused mothers, and sometimes fathers, negotiate with parenthood after violence from their partner and how they cooperate as parents. We believe there are number of similarities and differences between Norway and Slovakia that will be interesting to discuss with our Slovakian colleagues," says Bergman.

For both studies, the researchers will use qualitative in-depth interviews with parents, children and adolescents, and will also interview the staff working at the shelters.

The societal role: idealism, realism and tensions

The third part of the project is about the societal role of the shelters. NKVTS will look at how shelters in Norway have changed from when the first shelter was established in 1978 as part of the new women's movement, and up until the present day.

"What role and function do shelters play in policies designed to deal with domestic violence? How has this role changed over time, particularly after the new Shelter Act (2010) was introduced, which gives women, men and their children the right to seek support from shelters," Bergman explains and add:

"Since that time, local authorities in Norway have been required to provide shelter services to their inhabitants."

For this part of the project, NKVTS will interview policymakers and activists as well as managers and employees at some of the shelters.

"We want to talk to experts in the field about their thoughts on these changes, whether they believe that idealism and autonomy have subsequently disappeared from the shelters, and what they consider the pros and cons of such a development," says Bergman.

"Reducing violence should be one of the top priorities"

The Slovakian centre, CMC, have fewer resources for research than NKVTS, and has less research at its disposal about the shelter situation in the country.



Create a broad platform of cooperation and a network of professionals to foster the exchange of ideas and experience, is Barbora Burajová's recommendation to stakeholders in Europe. (Photo: Martina Juríčková)

"When it was established, the vision of CMC was to have a coordinating body responsible for the creation, implementation and coordination of the national policy for the Prevention of Violence against Women," the manager of the centre, Barbora Burajová, writes in an email.

"Today, the CMC supports the Slovakian ministries by channelling its expertise in this field and coordinating procedures for the protection of victims of domestic violence," Burajová writes and adds:

"We contribute through research, monitoring and education activities and by raising awareness. We propose policies and measures to ensure an effective system for preventing gender-based violence, including proposals for legislation."

Burajová points out that the centre is constantly exchanging knowledge and experience with its Norwegian partners (see fact box 1), especially when it comes to the centre's research and monitoring activities.

> We see this as a long-term investment that will ultimately translate into improved statistics in the future.

"Collaborating with NKVTS and the Norwegian Health Directorate also helped us establish new contacts and significantly accelerated the processes we had to go through while planning research activities and developing methodologies, as well as identifying relevant stakeholders and developing relationships with them," Burajová writes.

"Why are centres such as CMC needed in Slovakia and other countries in Europe?"

"The CMC promotes the premise that reducing violence and protecting and supporting women and girls subjected to violence should be one of the top priorities when it comes to the protection and support of human rights in Slovakia, and that all interventions must be based on the victims' needs," Burajová writes.

Important partnerships with the police and NGOs

CMC is not an executive body, meaning that it is independent and can propose measures supported by evidence and good practice. An essential part of their work has been creating partnerships with relevant institutions.

"We have instigated joint initiatives with the police and social services, as well as non-governmental organisations," Burajová explains.

These partnerships have allowed them to educate police officers to be more sensitive to the needs of victims, to develop programmes for the perpetrators of violence, and to cooperate with non-governmental organisations that provide services to victims and promote the interests of women and children subjected to violence.

"We see this as a long-term investment that will ultimately translate into improved statistics in the future."

"Do you have any advice for other stakeholders in Europe that want to establish similar centres?

"The situation in each country is unique. Expertise is distributed differently, institutions are structured differently, and the level of awareness about violence, its causes, consequences and the needs of survivors is different," Burajová writes.

If Burajová had to recommend one thing, it would be creating a broad platform of cooperation and a network of professionals to foster the exchange of ideas and experience.

"It is vital to involve not only policymakers or decision makers, but also to involve service providers, as they represent the victims. When it comes to CMC, it was developed as a platform that addresses the problem of violence against women from the bottom up. For some countries, taking inspiration from such an approach may be a god idea."

CMC relies on funding to sustain and continue its services in the future.

"CMC has received funding from Norway Grants and the European Social Fund. Although the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Women has the task of sustaining services at CMC, we don't yet know what will happen after the funding from Norway Grants comes to an end," Burajová writes.

Time for solid long-term support services

The needs of support and specialised services, and how to sustain those needs, is on the agenda at the conference about services for survivors of domestic, gender-based and sexual violence that will be held in Slovakia in a few weeks (see fact box).

Primary and secondary prevention of violence will also be discussed at the conference. While primary prevention takes place before violence occurs, secondary prevention takes place immediately after an act of violence.



"We hope that discussions among stakeholders will lead to proposals for measures that need to be taken by relevant actors," Natália Kotuľaková writes. (Photo: Private)

"As well as the importance of primary and secondary prevention of violence, the discussion will focus on the future of support services for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and the possibilities for systematic state funding, particularly in Slovakia," Natália Kotuľaková, one of the conference organisers from the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic, writes in an email.

While the COVID pandemic revealed the critical state of support services for victims of domestic and gender-based violence, according to the Ministry, the issue of the lack of systematic funding has not yet been resolved.

"The fact that Slovakia has not yet introduced a systematic method of funding shelters and specialised services for women and children experiencing violence has created a space of uncertainty. That makes it difficult for organisations to operate and means that victims of violence do not receive adequate support and assistance."

The organisers hope that the conference and the SYNERGY meeting will raise the issue of the current needs and long-term sustainability of support and specialised services for women exposed to physical, sexual and intimate partner violence.



Richard Raši, minister of investments, regional development and informatization of the Slovak Republic will held one of the opening remarks at the conference in Bratislava in December. (Photo: The Ministry)

"We hope that discussions among stakeholders will lead to proposals for measures that need to be taken by relevant actors and thereby help to improve policies that address domestic and gender-based violence," Natália Kotuľaková writes.

Sustainable solutions of support services are also on the agenda when Richard Raši, minister of investments, regional development and informatization of the Slovak Republic will held one of the opening remarks at the conference in Slovakia.

"Our government is committed to ensuring that appropriate conditions are created for the coordination of all public and non-public partners in preventing and addressing violence against women. At this conference, we would like to search for systemic and sustainable solutions for the future," Raši writes in an email.

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