

Domestic and Gender Based Violence in Bulgaria

The situation for domestic and gender based violence (DGBV) in Bulgaria is mapped systematically for the first time.

This article is based upon the analytical report written by Slavyanka Ivanova, The Center for Study of Democracy (Bulgaria), and has been compiled by Solveig Bergman, Norwegian Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (Norway), and Lillian Hjorth, The Human Rights Academy, Norway.

Introduction

This article is based on a multidimensional study of Domestic Violence (DV) and Gender Based Violence (GBV) that has been conducted as a part of the DGBV-project - National Study on Domestic and Gender Based Violence (DGBV) and Elaboration of Victims Support Model (VSM).¹ The study has been conducted by the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) in cooperation with Partners Bulgaria Foundation and the Human Rights Academy (Oslo, Norway). Slavyanka Ivanova (CSD) has been in charge of the research and has written the analytical report, on which this article is based.

The general objective of the national study was to contribute to the prevention of domestic and gender based violence and to improve the situation of the victims in Bulgaria. A special focus has been on Roma women and girls.

The specific objective was to develop knowledge and expertise regarding the situation of domestic and gender based violence, and to ensure that all stakeholders, including the Bulgarian government, can facilitate better informed and evidence-based policy decisions.

The main findings of the research confirm that domestic and gender based violence is an extensive problem in Bulgaria and that the tools to deal with it are limited and to a great extent not efficient.

It will now be up to the Bulgarian authorities to put domestic and gender based violence on the agenda and develop efficient tools to deal with the problem.

What are we talking about?

As a basis for the study, the concepts of domestic and gender based violence were defined. In cases of *domestic violence*, the perpetrators always have some kind of domestic relation with the victims. This relation is not necessarily based on kinship. The perpetrators can be relatives, intimate or ex- intimate

¹ The National study is developed under Programme Area 29, BG 12: Domestic and Gender based Violence, Measure 3: Research and data collection of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism.

partners of the victims or of their relatives, or cohabitating persons. The gender characteristics can matter in such cases, but need not do so.

In the case of *gender based violence*, the base of the violent act is always the gender, the perceived gender, or some gender characteristics of the victims. There need not be any relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. The large majority of victims of gender based violence are female. For this reason, gender based violence is sometimes wrongly considered to be a synonym of violence against women. Yet, also men, as well as LGBTIQ people² can fall victims of gender based violence. There are no age limits either. All generations can be affected, from new-born babies to elderly people.

Although different in nature, the two major types of violence have very similar forms that are traditionally divided into three or four main groups: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological and emotional violence. Since the last two forms are difficult to differentiate, they are in some cases considered as one group. More recently, several new types of actions have been recognised as violence: stalking, which can be both domestic and gender-based; economic violence that unlike economic discrimination is exerted only within someone's household; and coercive limitation of personal life, freedom and rights that also is committed in a domestic environment.

Background

Bulgaria is among those half of the EU-member states where statistical information about victim-offender relationship is not collected. To assess the share of domestic violence among the crimes committed against a person is thus impossible. Domestic violence is not qualified as a criminal offence and is not included in the Criminal Code in Bulgaria. As a consequence, domestic violence is not included in the statistical data provided by the Police and by the National Statistical Institute. The numbers of complaints for domestic violence registered by the Police and the numbers of cases of domestic violence submitted to the courts are not present in publicly available statistics.

In recent decades, a number of nation- and EU-wide surveys have assessed the prevalence of domestic and gender based violence. However, no survey encompasses all main types of DGBV. They focus on specific types of violence, or on women only, leaving children, elderly people, men and LGBTIQ people generally out of the scope. The existing data regarding definitions, formulations and analysis of refusals and non-response can easily be misinterpreted due to different conceptual and methodological approaches. Furthermore, due to the low level of awareness, shame and general unacceptability to report on personal and family life in Bulgarian society, the figures represented by the surveys measure the shares of those victims who managed to overcome the mass public attitudes, and not the real shares of victims.

² Lesbian, gay, bi-, trans-, intersexual, and queer.

One of the positive aspects of the media in Bulgaria regarding DGBV issues is the increased public attention and public sensitivity to these issues. Although the traditional attitudes to gender issues and general tolerance in respect to domestic violence remain strong and predominant in the country, the publicity and discussions provoke an increased part of the public to reflect on gender and inter-generation relations in society in general and also in their own families.

The process of legal and institutional transformation aiming at more efficient counteracting of DGBV and support of the victims is visible, but still slow and ambiguous. From the victims' point of view it is far from satisfactory. It is just a small part of the victims that seek consultation and help at NGO facilities. Very few turn to the Police and bring a suit to the court. While the Fundamental Rights Agency's Violence against Women Survey (conducted in 2012) sets the share of Bulgarian women aged 18-74 who yearly suffer from physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at 6 per cent, or about 170,000 persons, the number of cases of domestic violence in the courts vary between 3,000 and 3,400 a year (2010-2012).³

An analysis made by the Centre for the Study of Democracy in 2013 showed a clear connection between the numbers of cases brought to the court, the activity of institutions and NGOs and the general level of awareness of the population. For this reason, victims from marginalised, closed and low-informed communities, such as the Roma ones, presumably have very limited access to effective support.

Given this background, the need for a systematic study on the prevalence, forms, vulnerable groups, unmet needs of the victims, and possibilities for a further stable improvement of their situation, is beyond any doubt.

Aims and methods

The aims of the study include:

- Gather reliable and actual data on the prevalence of the different forms of DGBV in Bulgaria as a whole and in Roma communities in particular;
- Measure the extent in which the different forms of DGBV are recognised by the victims;
- Examine Roma-specific causes for DGBV, identify possible resources of Roma communities to counteract violence; examine whether Roma-specific support needs exist, and analyse the factors that may limit the access of Roma women and girls to support.
- Gather victims' experiences and extract the main problematic points for which they need more or more effective support;

³The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted a survey on violence against women across the 28 Member States of the EU in 2014, see <http://www.fra.europa.eu>

- Gather and summarise experiences of professionals counteracting DGBV and extract their suggestions for improvement of the support of the victims;

The research methods used in the research project included a national representative survey, a survey among Roma girls and women, semi-structured questionnaires distributed to police officers and social workers, focus-group discussions with Roma community representatives, interviews with social workers at crisis centres for children and adults, as well as interviews with victims.

Findings

Factors and causes for victimisation and re-victimisation

The study focuses on the most typical general factors and causes for (re)victimisation, including possible Roma-specific factors and causes, through the exploration of experiences of the victims and of representatives of Roma communities.

The causes for DGBV should be distinguished from the factors influencing it, although the respondents in general did not make such a differentiation. While the causes produce the violence as an effect of their existence or action, the factors are phenomena that may contribute to the violence to emerge in specific situations, or prevent this from happening.

The study concluded that the types of causes and factors for victims to face the violence might be different from those causes and factors that persist across time. In other words, the factors and causes can be divided in two partly overlapping groups: victimisation and re-victimisation. While the first one predominantly reflects the environment, characteristics and behaviour of the perpetrators; the second one mainly concerns the environment, characteristics and behaviour of the victims. However, this conditional division does not mean that one and the same factors and causes could not fall into both groups.

The study indicates that a number of socio-demographic characteristics of the victims can be regarded as factors increasing the risk for victimisation. Gender, age and ethnicity are significant factors connected with a higher probability or risk of becoming a victim to domestic and gender based violence. The respondents in the study agree that women become victims of both domestic and gender based violence far more frequently than men. On the other hand, it is important to note that men might be less willing to report violence or even to see themselves as victims. When it comes to age and ethnic background, the respondents show differing opinions and observations on whether for example elderly people and children are more vulnerable for victimisation or whether Roma women and girls represent a disproportional proportion of the victims of DGBV in Bulgaria.

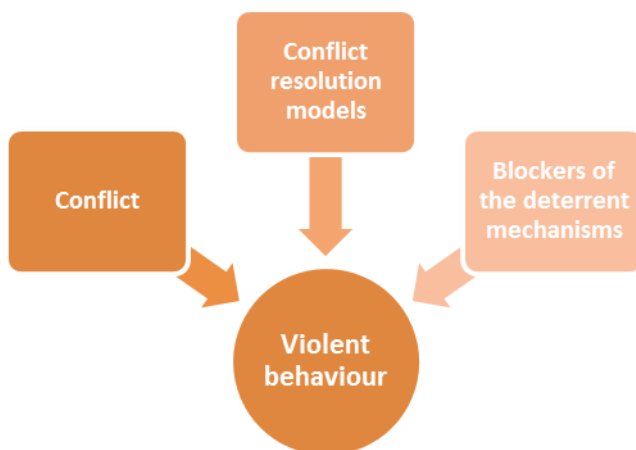
The most frequently observed factors that were regarded as being connected with DGBV, were different types of dependencies, such as abuse of alcohol and drugs, and gambling dependency. Other factors mentioned include financial issues, "jealousy" or controlling behaviour, violence in the perpetrator's childhood, early marriages, insufficient parental skills, traditional perceptions of women and children etc. All these are factors that according to the informants may influence the risks for becoming victims of domestic and gender based violence.

Similarly to the risks for victimisation, the study indicates that the risk for re-victimisation is connected to certain socio-demographic characteristics of the victims, such as gender, age and ethnicity. In addition, for example economic dependency, lack of supportive environment, discrimination and social exclusion, hypertrophied responsibility, inadequate institutional response, and traumatic experiences, are mechanisms that can increase the vulnerability for re-victimisation.

Causal mechanisms

A cautious analysis of the opinions and the experiences of the different groups of respondents suggest that none of the described phenomena could be defined as an explicit cause for DGBV, as it is not able to cause violent behaviour as such, but only to enhance the probability for violent behaviour. For this reason, all of the mentioned phenomena can be defined as factors. The study indicates that DGBV is produced by a specific combination of three types of factors: factors representing some type of conflict, conflict resolution models that the perpetrators follow, and factors that could block/neutralise the internal deterrent mechanisms of the potential violators.

The factors connected with a conflict could be defined as the core ones, or the more important ones. They could be of different nature, but the perpetrators and the victims always represent the opposite sides in the conflict.



The victimisation is produced, or caused, by a combination of three types of factors:

- **Factors representing some type of conflict.** It could be a conflict between different perceptions of gender that could serve as a base for sexual violence and hate crimes against LGBTIQ people; it could be a conflict between different perceptions of roles in the family; between contradictory economic interests; between economic needs and economic resources within the family; between the family status of the perpetrators and their actual relationships within and outside the family, etc. that could light up a variety of types of domestic violence.
- **Conflict resolution models that the perpetrators follow.** A lack of conflict-resolution skills could be a result from early marriages or from lack of proper education, or a result of the influence of models of violence from the childhood or the social environment, the individuals could step back, react with fear or aggression.
- **Factors that could block/neutralise the internal deterrent mechanisms** of the potential violators. These could be alcohol and drugs dependencies or abuse, or lack of deterrent mechanisms built due to a socio-cultural background of an extremely low level.

The re-victimisation is produced or resulting when both of the two following types of resources for dealing with violence are lacking:

- **Lack of internal resources**, for instance, when the victims are economically dependent on the perpetrator; or when they feel hypertrophied responsibility for the situation of violence; or when they have lost psychological resilience after traumatic experiences.
- **Lack of external resources**, for instance a lack of supportive environment of relatives, friends, colleagues, etc., or it could be an inadequate institutional response to the victims' needs for protection and support; or it could be a result of discrimination and social exclusion.

Scales and prevalence

The study confirms the hypothesis that DV and GBV are phenomena with high levels of concealing and unawareness, not only by the perpetrators but also by the victims.

For this reason, the figures do not represent the shares of people really affected by different forms of DGBV and this is valid for all surveys presented in this context. Three main factors influence the reporting: real occurrence, awareness of the occurrence as violence, and willingness to report it. Although a quarter of men and a third of women in the general population, as well as nearly half of Roma women and girls, reported that they had experienced some type of DGBV in their lifetime, the shares of those who are aware that they have become DGBV victims are several times smaller.

Men in the general population and Roma women and girls show significantly lower awareness of victimisation than women in the general population, and hence, the scale of underestimation of the actual

shares of victims is expected to be bigger for these two groups. The awareness levels of GBV victimisation are even lower than those of DV, and the difference is far bigger among the men.

The real occurrence of DGBV is also hidden by the reluctance for reporting by some of the victims. Certain socio-demographic differences in the reporting, such as differences in age and type of settlement where the respondents live, prove that the scales of underestimation of DGBV prevalence rates are significant. The underestimation probably varies between different socio-demographic groups. The groups with the highest scales of underestimation are children under 14 years of age, the elderly, people from small settlements, and men.

Although the shares of male victims of different DGBV forms seem significant and are higher than expected, women are still more vulnerable to DGBV, as they more frequently suffer from multiple, repeated and systematic violence. Also, Roma women and girls are more vulnerable than other groups in the general population. Furthermore, the gender analysis of the most recent cases of DGBV that the respondents reported shows that nearly two thirds of the perpetrators are men, while women clearly predominate among the victims. Still, four out of ten victims of DGBV are men.

The analysis of the information for the most recent cases of DGBV shows that three quarters of both the female and the male perpetrators direct their actions towards the opposite gender. This could mean that gender conflicts, or conflicts between different perceptions of gender, could be the reason not only for GBV but also for a substantial share of DV.

Consequences for the victims

The consequences of DGBV for the victims can be summarised in four main groups:

- **Safety-related consequences**, such as the fear of re-victimisation, real occurrence of re-victimisation in a substantial proportion of the cases, increased brutality of the violence and threats to life;
- **Health consequences**, such as provoked auto-immune disease or life-threatening physical trauma, short-term or long-term disability, life-long chronic conditions, triggered or deteriorated heavy mental disorders, depressive, panic and sleep disorders;
- **Economic or educational consequences**, such as loss of dwelling (usually the only one), long-or short-term inability to work, loss of employment, loss of qualifications or educational opportunities, all of them connected with deteriorated current and future labour market opportunities;
- **Social consequences**, such as the deprivation of the usual environment, inability or reluctance to form new relationships and friendships. Regarding the children, a risk of internalisation of problematic behavioural, family and gender models as well as a number of social deficiencies, i.e. communicational, behavioural, verbal problems.

The representatives of the Roma communities identify several severe consequences of DGBV that do not concern the victims only, but also their families and communities. These include cases of deaths and life-long disabilities; kinship feuds that disintegrate the communities; harmful effects on children due to the destruction of families and adoption of violent behavioural models; and loss of health- and social-insurance rights contributing to the poverty and social exclusion of Roma people.

Public responses

Personal reactions

With few exceptions, the study shows that men in the general population are more inclined than women to tolerate the acts of DGBV they have experienced. This trend can best be observed in the majority of sub-forms of sexual violence and abuse, stalking and psychological violence. This could be explained by men perceiving the situation as liable to their control, or that they are more hesitant or ashamed to report such incidences.

The Roma women and girls also demonstrate more tolerant attitudes to the acts of DGBV they have experienced than women and girls in the general population. However, the most probable cause for the relatively tolerant attitude of Roma females could be the mass character of these types of actions. It is alarming that all types of physical and sexual violence, with the exception of attempted murder, are not defined as unlawful by the majority of Roma victims. This could illustrate the relatively low importance of corporal suffering for Roma women, compared to the material harms, wellbeing of close persons and the honour of the person in front of the community.

Generally, the majority of victims do not recognise the economic coercion and controlling behaviour they have experienced as a violation of their rights that is prosecuted by law.

Reactions of Roma communities

As a whole, the representatives of Roma communities enumerated numerous negative effects of DGBV and hence, showed negative attitudes. However, the cases when women are violators against men were rather positively commented, as signs of strength of the character and even as some kind of revenge because of the behaviour of men towards women.

The Roma representatives reported that as a rule, people avoid to intervene if they witness cases of violence because they fear that they could suffer themselves as well. The exceptions are the cases when somebody could be killed, and when the relatives of the witnesses are involved. In cases where victims are women, they could share it only with their closest friends because they fear that if the perpetrator learned

about it, he would commit even more severe violence. When victims are children, they would report and seek help from grandmothers and -fathers, or other close relatives they love and trust.

Generally, the Roma representatives see external rather than internal solutions for the reduction of DGBV: employment measures, including anti-discrimination policies and practices, local security patrols, youth clubs for leisure activities, etc.

Responses from the victims

Although the majority of the interviewed child victims needed *medical help or certification for the violence they suffered*, most of them did not get it, mainly because of parental neglect or ban to get out of home/to be late after school. Regarding the adult victims, only a third of them had not sought medical help or certification: half of them did not need it and the other half felt ashamed. The experiences of those who received medical help is mixed. Besides medical care, the victims have been referred to the police only in exceptional cases; and in none of the cases have they been referred to organisations providing help and assistance.

While all of the adult victims have voluntarily contacted *crisis centres and other supporting organisations*, some of the children are placed there against their will. This is the main reason for the different attitudes and levels of satisfaction with the helping organisations of the two groups. This is especially valid for children, who wander, have been involved in begging or pick-pocketing by their families, or perceive cohabitation with intimate partners, engagement in prostitution or distribution of drugs as their own choice. In addition, in all cases children are restricted in their movement and contact and sometimes perceive their stay at crisis centres and other residential facilities like a punishment.

The experiences of the victims with *law enforcement bodies, i.e. the police and the court*, are ambivalent, including within one and the same person. On the one hand, some victims reported that they could observe positive change in the way the police acted when they called them: from behaviour rather empathetic to the violators, to strict implementation of the law. On the other hand, the evidence both of victims and crisis centre representatives show substantial differences in the way the police acts in different settlements, and even in different police directorates within one and the same settlement.

The satisfaction with the actions of the courts is generally bigger than of those of the police. The main reason for this difference is the phase when the victims contact these institutions. The contact with the courts is usually made with the active cooperation of the crisis centres that provide legal advice, as well as logistic and financial support. Nevertheless, some contradictory practices are reported by victims. For instance, the perpetrator is not expelled from the common dwelling even for a certain limited period, but is just given a warning to abstain from violence. Also, as a principle, in the majority of cases the perpetrators are allowed to live in the common dwelling after or even during the limited period and keep their property in it, so basically victims and their children have two choices: to remain homeless or risk being victimized again.

Responses from the representatives of agencies

The majority of the police officers, social workers and employees at the crisis centres who participated in the study give positive assessments of the effectiveness of the work for protection and help to the victims, although relatively small proportions of them see a decrease of the repetitive and systematic violence in recent years.

Moreover, the majority of the policemen and the social workers see positive changes in the levels of effectiveness. These two groups outline as effective all main aspects of their activities for protection and help. However, many of the aspects pointed out as effective are identified as ineffective as well. This fact indicates significant differences of the situations in the different regions of the country.

The aspects of the activity of the crisis centres that the employees point out as being relatively effective comply to those emphasised by the victims, and these are the very basic things that crisis centres are actually created to provide: safety, shelter, food and psychotherapeutic help. The respondents also see high effectiveness of the free services that would be expensive for a victim who is not placed in a centre: medical certification, and legal consultation and services.

Although the assessments of the effectiveness provided by the representatives of law-enforcement bodies and support organisations are high, they list a significant number of unmet needs of the DGBV victims and respectively, deficiencies in their protection and recommendations for improvement. These unmet needs can be grouped into the following main types:

- **Direct needs** for overcoming of trauma and economic and psychological dependence, for crisis centres and subsequent accommodation, extended psychological treatment and consultation and financial support;
- **Protection-related needs** for overcoming the re-victimisation and the feeling of unpunishment of the perpetrators, including claims for criminalisation of all DGBV forms, more power for the law-enforcement bodies to intervene when the victims are unable or unwilling to accuse the perpetrators, and more severe sanctions;
- **Perpetration-oriented needs** or recommendations for more and more effective prevention activities, monitoring and analyses of the causes, measures against the perpetrators, as well as measures to help the perpetrators to overcome the causes to commit violence;
- **Needs of the professionals** to meet the needs of the victims, including more and better trained human resources; regular supervision and professional support; improved material resources for implementation of the tasks, as well as better cooperation with and more active contribution from other state and municipal institutions.

Conclusions

Neither public actors engaged in counteracting domestic and gender based violence, nor the general public in Bulgaria, possess systematic statistical data and expert evaluations needed for regular monitoring in the field. Moreover, the prevention activities in the country are occasional and largely dependent on the good will and resources available to specific actors. The system for crisis intervention, protection and support for the victims (such as crisis centres) have proved for their adequacy and usefulness. However, the provision of victim support remains inaccessible for a large part of the country. Also, a system of after-crisis measures should be developed and implemented depending on the specific needs of victims. Measures targeting the perpetrators of violence need to be developed and enforced, including educational programmes on violence prevention among boys and young men. Finally, the inter-institutional cooperation should be further developed and regulated in the legislation of the country.