

The value of bilateral cooperation between Bulgarian and Norwegian partners regarding domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria

By Lillian Hjorth and Solveig Bergman¹

From December 2020 until February 2022, *PULSE Foundation* and the *Centre for the Study of Democracy*, both Bulgarian NGOs, together with the Norwegian non-profit foundation *Human Rights Academy* cooperated in the project: “Development of a monitoring methodology and conducting national monitoring of policies and institutional practices regarding domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria”. The project has been implemented with financial support of Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria under the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area. This article focuses on the value of the project’s bilateral cooperation. What has the Norwegian contribution added to the project? What has the Norwegian partner learned from the cooperation with its Bulgarian colleagues? Is it possible to say something in general about the value of bilateral and/or international cooperation regarding the efforts to prevent and tackle domestic and gender-based violence?

Background, goals, and methods

In all countries, many people – especially women – suffer from gender-based and domestic violence (GBDV). During 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID- 19-pandemic, there is increasing evidence across the world indicating that the phenomenon has intensified to such an extent that it can be called a “shadow pandemic”. Confined to their homes, many women find it even harder to seek help than previously. The same applies to other vulnerable groups – children, the elderly, and people with disabilities who fall victim to physical and psychological abuse.²

Gender-based and domestic violence in Bulgaria has been in the center of this project’s analysis. Its aim has been to develop a methodology for monitoring policy, legal instruments, and institutional practice in relation to domestic and gender-based violence, and – by using the new methodology – to write a monitoring report which describes the current situation. What challenges exist? What are key areas for improvement? Where are additional legislative, strategic and policy efforts needed?

The Bulgarian partners, PULSE Foundation and the Centre for the Study of Democracy, have had the main responsibility for developing the methodology, collecting data, as well as writing the monitoring report. The Human Rights Academy’s experts have been consulted regularly and have commented on

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² “Policy brief: Tackling Domestic and Gender Based Violence in Bulgaria: Challenges and Next Steps”

drafts. In addition, the Human Rights Academy has contributed with underlining the project's human rights dimension and included experiences and good examples from Norway.³

Even though the pandemic created obstacles for implementation of some of the project activities, both the methodology and the monitoring report have been successfully developed. Both documents were presented, together with a policy brief, at the final conference in Sofia, 24 February 2022.

Key findings

A main conclusion is that Bulgaria is still struggling to adopt adequate and comprehensive measures to counter gender-based violence and violence against women. The authorities continue to fail to fully grasp the seriousness of these phenomena and must become more vocal in denouncing them.

Key recommendations and challenges include inter alia:

- Clear, well-crafted, evidence- and data-based policies to counter domestic and gender-based violence that involve multiple stakeholders and define their mandates, rights, and duties are urgently needed.
- There is no official definition of gender-based violence amidst widespread misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation regarding the term 'gender'.
- Certain components of the current definition of domestic violence remain highly contested, such as the requirement for 'systematic' violence.⁴
- Domestic violence, and intimate partner violence in particular poses a serious challenge, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, accurate, detailed, and relevantly disaggregated statistical and administrative data is not collected.
- Abuse of the elderly, sibling violence, dating violence, and violence in the digital sphere, are types of violence that are yet to be understood and addressed in detail.

The value of the bilateral cooperation. Contributions from the Human Rights Academy

The Human Rights Dimension

As a human rights organization, it has been essential for Human Rights Academy to emphasize the human rights dimension in the project. The human rights perspective is important because it underlines that it is the Bulgarian state that has the main responsibility both to put the phenomenon on the agenda and implement preventative and restoring mechanisms.

³ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the cooperation between Bulgarian and Norwegian partners mainly took place through online-meetings and electronic communication. One in-person meeting was organized in Pernik, Bulgaria (February 2020).

⁴ The requirement of "systematic" violence is problematic because it accepts that other violence than "systematic" (and how is this to be defined?), is not severe enough to be defined as a crime.

The right for human beings to be protected from violence, including domestic and gender-based violence, is confirmed and regulated in several human rights instruments. Key documents are the UN *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979), the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and, not the least, Council of Europe’s *Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (2011), the so-called *Istanbul Convention*.

Norway has ratified all the above-mentioned documents. Bulgaria has ratified the two first but has strongly opposed ratification of the *Istanbul Convention*.⁵ This makes the Bulgarian government’s obligations weaker when it comes to protecting their inhabitants from domestic and gender-based violence. This in turn, deprives victims of vital safeguards, and obstructs policymakers, experts, practitioners, and activists from tackling the violence through better measures for protection, prevention, prosecution, and integrated policies.

Experiences and ‘best practice’ from Norway

The most important contribution from Human Rights Academy in the project has been to include key points from over 40 years of experiences and examples of ‘best practice’ to counter gender-based and domestic violence in Norway. The Human Rights Academy’s article “Public Policies and Institutional Practices in Relation to Violence in Close Relationships in Norway”⁶, gives a more detailed description. The information has been presented at meetings and seminars for partners and other Bulgarian stakeholders.

Forty Years of Development of Policies and Practices

Since the late 1970s, the work to combat violence against women in Norway has shifted from being a primarily private initiative spearheaded by NGOs, especially women’s and feminist groups, to becoming part of public policies and responsibilities. During this period, domestic violence has gained increasing recognition in Norwegian society as a social problem, demanding the attention and focus of the authorities and society as a whole. Substantial work has been carried out to tackle all forms of domestic and gender-based violence. Today, a key part of this work is the implementation of the Istanbul Convention that Norway ratified in 2017.

Characteristic for the Norwegian approach to domestic violence is a mix of public policies and measures, collaborations, and civil-society initiatives. In this section, we highlight some of the major policies and measures that have been developed. These include the emphasis on a coherent and coordinated approach to violence at both national and local levels, the importance of preventive work, the role of the shelters as key institutions for helping victims, and the need for a solid knowledge-basis for developing policies and practices.

⁵ 35 member states have so far ratified the Convention.

⁶ Solveig Bergman and Lillian Hjorth. February 2021.

Comprehensive and Coordinated Approach

Norway has established comprehensive national action plans and strategy documents in the field of domestic violence that also intersect with the goals of the Istanbul Convention. These plans emphasize the need to see the work against violence in an integrated, cross-sectorial perspective. Domestic violence is a field that requires broad coordination with diverse policies and strategies. To work most effectively with the various forms of violence, separate plans and strategies for different forms of violence have been developed. These plans and strategies are supplementary and intended to ensure a coherent approach to combating domestic violence.

The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security has the responsibility for coordinating the government's efforts in this policy field, including the work with the Istanbul Convention. In addition, a cross-ministerial working group has been set up. Its mandate is to ensure implementation of measures in the national action plans and the Istanbul Convention, as well as to coordinate the activities of different stakeholders and levels of government implementing the plan.

At a municipal level, there is a similar need for cooperation and coordination of the work against domestic violence between e.g., the health and social sectors, as well as the police. The central government strongly recommends the municipalities to launch local action plans. Yet only half of the municipalities have established such plans. The elimination of domestic and gender-based violence cannot be achieved without dedicated and comprehensive work also at the municipal level, in cooperation with civil society-based projects and initiatives.

Prevention and Awareness-raising

In addition to dedicated and comprehensive political and judicial efforts at both national and local level, targeted prevention programmes and information campaigns that can change public attitude are crucial. Such initiatives are launched by both central and local authorities and civil society-based NGOs. Furthermore, challenging stereotypes and biases through the education system, as well as working with young people, is essential.

The main focus of the Norwegian prevention strategy has been on primary prevention and measures that address factors influencing vulnerability. The Government has strengthened the cooperation with NGOs through the establishment of a new grant scheme and a joint forum for discussions on domestic and gender-based violence.

Treating perpetrators of violence also has preventive effect. The government provides funding to the NGO *Alternatives to Violence* (ATV) for providing treatment to perpetrators of intimate partner violence. In recent years, the family counselling services have introduced specific provisions for perpetrators, and families and children that have suffered violence.

Shelters as Key Institutions

There are 46 shelters or ‘crisis centres’ across Norway, a country of 5.4 million inhabitants. The shelters are key institutions for doing preventive work and providing assistance and services for victims of domestic violence. Since the late 1970s, shelters have been established by volunteer activists across the country. Until recently, most Norwegian shelters were run by private institutions or NGOs. The tendency has been towards increased professionalization, and today the shelters are mostly run by paid employees. In 1981, the Government initiated partial funding of the shelters, and since 2010 all municipalities are responsible by law to provide shelter services for women, men and children who are exposed to violence.

Today, about half of the shelters are run and owned by municipalities or are inter-municipal entities. Since the provision of shelter services is mandated by law, they are fully funded by the local authorities. However, several shelters continue to be hindered by limited budgets. Thus, the legal obligation to provide shelter services of equal quality and accessibility throughout the country has not been fully realized. Yet, in a cross-national comparison, Norway is one of the very few countries in Europe that meet the Istanbul Convention-requirements for shelter provision.

Data Collection and Research

In order to prevent and combat domestic violence, it is essential to collect systematic and adequate administrative and judicial data and to conduct population-based surveys at regular intervals, as well as to carry out other forms of research. In Norway, several population-based surveys have been carried out at the national level to study the prevalence of violence and abuse against children, adults and the elderly. Yet, there is also a need for better data on lower administrative levels and for different groups of victims. To strengthen the knowledge base needed for improving policies on domestic violence, the Ministry of Justice has provided funding for large research programmes at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) and Norwegian Social Research NOVA (2014–2019 and 2019–2024).

Surveys and other forms of quantitative and qualitative research are important to explore both the phenomenon, as well as the causes and consequences of violence and abuse. Research findings can encourage action and help us to take up the challenge in a targeted and systematic way. The findings can also be used for awareness-raising campaigns and to inform about available support services.

A Gendered Understanding of Violence

Domestic violence affects women disproportionately, despite the gender-neutrality of the term. Thus, it is important to connect the term to ‘gender-based violence’, which relates the violence to the gendered social structures. Gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of violence against women. Violence seriously constraints women’s ability and right to participate fully in political,

economic and public life. As long as discrimination against women remains embedded in the social fabric of our societies, it is not possible to effectively prevent and respond to domestic violence.

Gender equality and women's rights remain a crosscutting priority for Norway, and for the country's policies on domestic violence. Today, a zero tolerance for domestic violence prevails in society. Nevertheless, and despite Norway being among the most gender equal countries in the world, violence against women and domestic violence continues to be a major problem.

Finally, in addition to underlining the importance of a gendered understanding of the phenomenon of 'domestic violence', we need more knowledge about the specific ways violence affects various groups in society. Domestic violence is not only about gender, but also relates to numerous aspects, identity markers and social categories beyond gender, for example on the basis of ethnicity, generation, regional and cultural background, sexual orientation or gender identity.

What has Human Rights Academy learned from the cooperation with its Bulgarian partners?

Human Rights Academy has confirmed that the bilateral cooperation in this project regarding domestic and gender-based violence has been valuable and important. The fact that the Norwegian society has come further in dealing with the challenges - even if they still continue to be a major problem - makes the exchange of knowledge and experience essential. Even if many aspects of the phenomenon are similar in the two countries, the problems seem to be more extensive in Bulgaria, partly because the development of policies and practices to tackle violence started later than in Norway.

One observation is that many civil society actors in Bulgaria today are important drivers in putting domestic and gender-based violence on the political agenda. Another is that there are more women engaged in the issue than men. These patterns have similarities with the Norwegian experiences, where NGOs and private initiatives, especially women's and feminist groups, were key players in the first phase. By systematic and increasingly more professionalized work, they eventually succeeded in getting the state's response and the challenges higher up on the agenda. The experience from Norway can function as an inspiration for the Bulgarian partners.

Many NGOs working against domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria, including PULSE foundation, are highly competent and deal with a broad range of challenges. In addition to offering shelter and caring for the victims, they develop school campaigns, materials and awareness raising programs. They also initiate research and lobby municipal and state authorities. As an independent research institution, Centre for the Study of Democracy has done an excellent work with the methodology and monitoring report. Both project partners use their knowledge and platforms also for raising political demands. One tool they are using is the international human rights. One main demand from all partners in this project has been that Bulgaria should ratify the Istanbul Convention,

and thus strengthen the state obligations in regard to protecting their inhabitants from domestic and gender-based violence.

Despite the different historical and political contexts in Bulgaria and Norway, Human Rights Academy has learned that the Bulgarian partners share many of the same perspectives on how domestic and gender-based violence is to be understood, and the effectiveness of preventive and restoring mechanisms. This common fundament has been essential for the good cooperation in the project, as well as its successful results.

The value of international cooperation regarding the work against domestic and gender-based violence

Domestic and gender-based violence have negative effects on individuals, families, and the society at large. Because all states, in various ways, struggle with handling these problems, it is obvious that countries need to learn from each other. Mistakes done by some, should not be repeated by others. On this background international cooperation is essential. By using the experiences gained in this project, we will try to say something general about the value of international cooperation regarding domestic and gender-based violence.

Even if representatives from NGOs and research institutions come from states with different cultural, historical and political backgrounds, they can share much of the same knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon of domestic and gender-based violence. Common perspectives can have a positive impact on the cooperation and create a good fundament for exchange of experiences.

A prerequisite for sustainable handling of domestic and gender-based violence and increase in focus and resources, is that the issue must be recognized as political important. A broad approach is needed which includes legislation, practical measures and prevention. This cannot be done by NGOs alone. The states must take responsibility. In view of this, international cooperation projects could have as an aim to include cooperation with official authorities, either at municipal or state level, or urge them to do more.

As we have seen in both Bulgaria and Norway, NGOs have been important drivers in encouraging the states to take more responsibility in tackling domestic and gender-based violence. International cooperation should be aware of the important role civil society plays and support them. The more professional the NGOs become, the better chances will they have in influencing the states to take on more responsibility.

Work against domestic and gender-based violence should also take into consideration the complex nature of the phenomenon. As long as discrimination against women remains embedded in the social fabric of our societies, it is not possible to effectively prevent and respond to domestic violence. For this reason, work against domestic and gender-based violence should include knowledge and awareness raising about inter alia women rights, stereotypes, biases, and gender roles both through

the formal as well as the non-formal education systems. Girls should be encouraged to participate at all levels in the society. With increased participation of women in politics and leading positions in society, the problem with domestic and gender-based violence can come higher up on the political agenda and probably be better handled.

Domestic and gender-based violence, as well as gender equality and women's rights are areas where international cooperation is highly needed. The good news is that such cooperation has a great potential to tackle shared challenges.