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# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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A guide for identifying and addressing  
violence against women

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## **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN GENERAL**

- Violence against women is a human right violation and a crime
- Violence against women refers to any kind of violence that one is being exposed to only because of being a woman
- Exposure to VAW does not depend on education, religion, social nor economic status but instead is a common problem in all societies and social classes
- In Finland it is estimated that every third woman and in Europe every fifth woman is exposed to violence at some points of her adult life
- Most often, a woman faces violence with her current or former partner
- Majority of the VAW cases does not come to the attention of the authorities, but are so-called hidden criminality
- At municipal level, the problem is not sufficiently identified to amend it and therefore decision-makers do not take the work against VAW into account when planning the budgets
- Violence against women is not a private matter, but a crime and has serious psychological, social and physical consequences
  - o In Finland many violent acts are offences subject to public prosecution, which means that the police can investigate them and a public prosecutor can bring charges, even if the victim does not demand punishment.
  - o In Finland, legislation against VAW has been reformed, for example, through the criminalization of persecution (2016) and the implementation of Victims Directive (2012/29 / EU). The main content in the Victims Directive is to ensure the victim's rights and access to help. In practice the Victim's Directive requires the authority to notify the victim during the preliminary investigation about her rights for support, counseling, interpretation, compensation and protection.
  - o Finland has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1986. The CEDAW Convention obliges the participator states to act to achieve equality between men and women among legislation, public authorities, third sector actors, businesses and private persons.
  - o Finland has also ratified the so-called Istanbul agreement in 2015. The Istanbul agreement aims to prevent and eliminate violence against women, protect victims and prosecute perpetrators

## **DIFFERENT TYPES OF MANIFESTATIONS OF VAW**

- Physical violence
  - o e.g. hitting, pushing, pulling hair and other injuring with physical contact
  - o easy to identify, though often the perpetrators try to hurt the victim on body parts that are not so visible, e.g. middle body
  - o consequences differ from bruises to permanent damage depending on the seriousness of the violence
- Psychological violence
  - o deliberate and often long-lasting personal insulting and humiliating
  - o psychological violence is characterized by an unequal power relationship between the perpetrator and the victim
  - o mental violence is hidden violence, i.e. identifying it is difficult for the victim and for an outsider
  - o the consequences are both psychological and social
- Sexual violence
  - o all sexual action that is against person's own will
  - o humiliation, creating a threatening atmosphere, degradation, body parts criticism, forced sex, etc. are all forms of sexual violence
  - o sexual violence is not sex, but distorted use of power and oppression
  - o sexual violence can cause physical and psychological damage
- Religious violence
  - o religious violence is often used as a means of enforcing certain religious norms and rules or, on the other hand, prohibiting the practice of religion
  - o can be both physical and psychological
- Economic violence
  - o violent economic control targeted at the victim
  - o is present in all kinds of families and relationships
- Honor-related violence
  - o honor-related violence is often a reaction to the violation of communal modesty norms
  - o perpetrator sees the protection of woman's virginity and modesty as a duty
  - o can manifest as threatening, isolating, restricting and pressuring or forcing
  - o typical causes of honor-related violence include, for example, views towards women's dressing, movement, studies, social relationships or modesty, and questioning or violating these views
- Forced marriage
  - o a marriage that happens against the will of its parties NOTE! Arranged marriage is not always a forced marriage, because arranged marriage might be an agreement of the family in which all parties are been heard equally
  - o most common form of honor-related violence in Europe
- Female genital mutilation, i.e. circumcision of girls
  - o Non-nurturing operation in which the genital organs of a woman are partially removed or damaged

- The operation is unlawful in Finland and violates person's self-determination
- Human trafficking
  - In human trafficking, a person or a group takes advantage of another person
  - human trafficking is a severe crime and a human right violation
  - human trafficking might occur as e.g. selling other person's sex services, forced labor, trade of organs, coercion in begging money or committing crime
  - it is difficult to identify a victim of human trafficking, because the victim seldom know her rights and cannot seek for help (often in foreign society)

## **IDENTIFYING VIOLENCE**

Only a small part of the women who are experiencing violence seeks for help. Often women seek for help after the violence has already lasted for a long time and tolerating it becomes either physically or mentally impossible. Almost everyone who experiences violence has a high threshold for seeking help; often the experience of violence involves feelings of shame, fear and guilt, and in some cases the victim also wants to protect the perpetrator. Often, the perpetrator is restricting the privacy of the victim. The woman may not be able to access the services alone but the man is involved, making it difficult for a woman to take the opportunity to ask for help. A victim of violence with an immigrant background may not know Finnish society, Finnish law or their own rights enough to seek help. Among the undocumented and unregistered migrants the threshold for seeking help in the case of violence might be even higher, because their access to services is restricted. Within these communities it is rare to seek for help. Thus, it is important that the workers who encounter undocumented and unregistered women to be vigilant to identify and on the other hand to hear of the violent experiences. It is important to remember that in Finland violence is always a crime and everyone in Finland has the right to seek and get help after a violent experience.

The injuries of victims of violence are not always visible but there are certain signs that may indicate a violent experience.

- physical injuries:
  - o external injuries such as bruises, bone fractures, concussions etc.
  - o internal injuries, such as repeated miscarriages, burns
  - o Physical injuries are often difficult to detect
  - o injuries that the woman may or may not be able to explain
- signs of sexual violence:
  - o repeated infections in the genital area
  - o Lower abdominal or pelvic pain
  - o difficulties with walking or sitting
- signs of economic violence:
  - o no information about one's own monetary affairs
  - o debts, unpaid bills
  - o conflict between revenue and life levels

Discussing about and identifying violence is difficult, but the worker must be prepared to face a possible maltreatment and take the matter on the agenda within the work community or directly with the woman who has experienced violence. There is help available, but it is a duty of the worker to direct the woman to receive help from professionals. In some services (e.g. maternity clinics) it is easier to ask about violence if it becomes a routine. In other services, where the client is not encountered regularly in private, asking about violence might be more difficult. The following routine questions can be used every time you encounter a woman in private at work:

- Have you experienced violence in your relationships?
- Do the experiences still affect your health, well-being or life management?
- Is the violence still going on?

## **INTERVENTION**

The violence experienced by the undocumented and unregistered immigrant women must be addressed and tackled. Often the violence is explained by culture but in reality VAW occurs in all cultures. The manifestations of VAW might be culture related, but violence cannot be justified with culture. It is valuable to understand that respecting the culture does not remove the responsibility of tackling the violence and that nonviolence is not taking any of cultural capital.

Many immigrant women experience multiple discrimination on the basis of their sex, ethnical background and/or legal status. Women whose legal status is unclear are in a very vulnerable position because they do not necessarily have means to seek help. The possibilities of the women to seek help independently are affected by beliefs and experiences gained from their own countries in terms of women's rights, justification of violence and possibilities to get help. Victims of violence from patriarchal and communitarian cultures may find it difficult to apply for help because they are afraid of the community's stigma and the risk of being compromised in the community. It is often difficult to intervene in cultural-related acts of violence, especially in honor-related cases, as there are prejudices and fears towards them. However, all experiences of violence are individual and need to be tackled.

Undocumented and unregistered women need the exact same services than other citizens and furthermore, the services need a culturally sensitive approach and readiness to use interpreters. At present, undocumented women's legal status leave them outside of services in which they are routinely screened for violent experiences and they do not necessarily have positive interaction experiences with the authorities, so getting help can be tricky or almost impossible. Therefore, services that reach to undocumented and unregistered women are in a key position in intervening in violence.

Intervening in violence may seem contradictory to women's self-determination, as the victim of violence cannot always say or even identify the need for help. Thus, addressing violence and creating a trust between the client and the worker is important. In addition to self-determination, it is good to weigh the woman's ability to consider her own situation and her possibilities to express her own will, whereby the employee's responsibility for defending patient's rights is emphasized. Woman's self-determination should always be respected whatsoever.

Existing legislation allows for exchanges of information between authorities, especially in the case of serious violence, as well as violence against a child or an otherwise subordinate person. According to Chapter 15, Section 10 of the Criminal Code, every citizen must report to the police or to the person to whom the offense is subjected to about an aggravated crime, which is possible to prevent. These crimes are e.g. rape, aggravated child abuse, murder and aggravated assault. Additionally, the law on the rights and status of a patient (which is also applied in the social care field) allows "without preventing by the obligation of professional secrecy, notify the police of the information necessary for the assessment of a threat to life and health of the person and a threat of intentional conduct if, in the performance of his duties under this Act, he has been informed of the circumstances under which he has reason to suspect that someone is in danger of being subjected to violence. (20.3.2015 / 271)" Intervening in violence is also in accordance with professional ethics of those who work in the social service sector as they have by swearing an oath committed to defend the client's human rights and dignity as well as by their actions to "promote social performance, equality and inclusion and to prevent exclusion and increase prosperity".

In preventing VAW, it is important for the workers to scrutinize and update their own knowledge, attitudes and perceptions about violence. In the work community it is useful to think together what is considered violence and are the ethical principles of the workers consistent.

Violence is easier to discuss about when it is made visible. In the services, it would be useful to have as visual and easy-to-understand material as possible concerning women's rights and work against violence available. Woman's interest and questions provoked by these materials gives the worker a possibility to address possible violent experiences of the woman. A confident relationship with a woman begins with a first encounter, where there is still no doubt about violence, and it is therefore important to face every person who is coming to a service on an equal footing. Asking about violence can be made routinely and then it is good to explain the woman that the question is being asked from all women in that service. Routine questions about violent support also the principle of equality as well as helps to identify the forms of violence that are difficult to detect.

When asking about violence it is important not to use threatening, judgmental and accusative words and gestures. The victim won't necessary tell about the violence at the first time when being asked, but by asking the worker can show professional responsibility and establishment of trust.

Many experts emphasize the importance of listening in the process of identification of violence, as well as courage, empathy and activity in addressing the issue. When addressing the violence, it is important to first discuss about client's home and family life but when asking about violence it is better to be straight forward. When asking, these questions can be useful:

- In Finland many women experience violence in their close relationships and it is being monitored, so I am asking all women clients this: Do you experience violence?
- Is someone treating you wrong? Is someone hurting you?
- Are you afraid at your home or while you are outdoors?
- Is someone following you or your daily activities?
- Is someone preventing or prohibiting you from doing or discussing certain things?

If the client has physical signs of violence or she is fearful, you can ask:

- What has happened to you?
- Why are you timid/crying/afraid?
- How did these injuries happen?

When asking about violence, it is also good to say out loud the employee's responsibilities to protect the client and to tell about the options for resolving the situation. When asking about violence, it is important to be culturally sensitive, but at the same time make it clear that culture does not justify violence and that it is possible to get help regardless of the client's legal status, culture or origin. Challenging the client's culture and perception of violence might lead into a counter reaction and defending the violence but it is good then to encourage the women to amplifying her agency and wellbeing and to state firmly that violence is not acceptable in any case.

When hearing about a violent encounter, it is useful to write important notifications down. However, the client needs to be told why you are making notes and at least during the first time of hearing client's

account about experiencing violence, it might be better to concentrate on listening and if possible, make notes afterwards.

In order to be ready for encountering and supporting a victim of violence, the worker should think in advance about the helping path and to make it suitable to the context of the work place.

## **EMPOWERING THE WOMAN AN HER WHOLE COMMUNITY TO RESIST VIOLENCE**

A woman who has gained a positive service experience will bring valuable knowledge about women's rights, nonviolence and possibilities to get support into her own community. Within the communities of undocumented and unregistered women, it is important to inform about their rights and to encourage them to distribute this knowledge to the other women in their communities as well.

Peer support groups and communities might comprised anywhere after the experience of support services and peer support might also happen independently among the women, if it is encouraged and helped to establish. Peer support after a violent experience will help in acknowledging that what happened was wrong and it should not happen again.

Women who cherish nonviolence and who have survived violence are likely to raise their children nonviolently and to nonviolence so breaking the cycle of violence is important also in the long run.

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