

Solveig Bergman and Lillian Hjorth:

Public Policies and Institutional Practices in Relation to Violence in Close Relationships in Norway

Introduction

Violence in close relationships is defined by using several concepts, such as: domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner violence, spousal assault, intimate partner abuse and violence in close relationships. In addition, concepts like ‘violence against women’ or ‘gender-based violence’ are used to include inter-personal violence both within and beyond the domestic or family sphere.

In Norway, the term ‘violence in close relationships’ is used to describe many different forms of violence, including violence between intimate partners, ex-partners and others in the family sphere, as well as violence and abuse towards children. Furthermore, forced marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other honour related forms of violence are today included in the term. All these forms of violence have common characteristics – the victims are mainly women and children, and the violence is perpetrated by a person or persons known to the victim.

Violence is understood as “Any act directed against another person, which, through causing injury, pain, fear of offence, makes the other person do something against their will or stops them from doing something they want to do” (Isdal, 2000). This includes physical, psychological, sexual, latent, economic and material violence, as well as maltreatment of children and other persons who are dependent on others.

The historical development of the work to combat violence in close relationships in Norway has shifted from being a primarily private initiative spearheaded by voluntary organisations, especially women’s and feminist groups, to becoming part of public policies and responsibilities. Since the 1970s, domestic violence has gained recognition in Norwegian society as a social problem, demanding the attention and focus of the authorities and society as a whole (Skjørten, Bakketeig, Bjørnholt, & Mossige, 2019). The Norwegian state has expressed a zero tolerance for violence against women and domestic violence and considers freedom from violence a prerequisite for an equal society. Nevertheless, and despite Norway along with the other Nordic countries being among the most gender equal countries in the world, they have disproportionally high prevalence rates of violence against women and domestic violence. This ‘Nordic paradox’ (Gracia & Merlo, 2016) suggests that there is still

substantial work to be done to prevent and combat these forms of violence – also in a country like Norway.

Prevalence of intimate partner violence in Norway

A nationwide survey carried out in 2013 (Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2014), showed that 8.2 per cent of women and 2.1 per cent of men over fifteen years of age in Norway have been victims of severe violence (strangled, kicked, beaten up) from their current or former partner one or more times in the course of their lives. Women are more affected by intimate partner violence, both in terms of being more often subjected to the more serious types of partner violence, there being a higher volume of incidents and more severe consequences for their health and well-being. Furthermore, women are far more exposed to sexual violence and abuse than are men. The prevalence of lifetime rape is 9.4 per cent in women and 1.1 per cent in men. Four in ten women who report rape say that it was their partner or ex-partner who was the rapist. Half of the rapes occurred before the women were 18 years of age (ibid.).

There has been a sharp rise in the number of cases of domestic violence reported to the police in recent years. This increase must be viewed in connection with the increased efforts by both the police and the society as a whole in combating and preventing such violence the last years. In comparison, figures on domestic violence from Statistics Norway's survey of living conditions as well as shelter statistics have been relatively stable the last decades (Statistics Norway, 2019).

More than one fourth in every homicide in Norway is an intimate partner homicide. Since 2000, 172 people have been killed by current or former partners, and 154 of these victims were women (VG, 2020). Research in Norway shows that in 70 % of the cases, one or more previous violence episodes of intimate partner violence had been identified or observed by the police or the health care and other support services (Vatnar, 2012). Thus, intimate partner homicides did not arise out of the blue.

Prevalence of violence and abuse towards children

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the basis of Norway's policy concerning children. All forms of violence against children, including corporal punishment and smacking, are outlawed in Norway. Yet, a study conducted in 2015 (Mossige, & Stefansen, 2016) shows that one-fifth (21 per cent) of the 18/19-year olds had experienced physical violence from at least one parent during childhood. The proportion of youth who had experienced severe forms of violence from at least one parent (hit with fist, hit with object, been beaten) was six percent. The results from the first national survey on child abuse and neglect among a representative sample of Norwegian 12-16-year olds (Hafstad & Augusti, 2019) shows that about 1 in 20 adolescents had experienced physical violence such as being beaten up, beaten with an object, or beaten with a fist. One in five had experienced physical violence such as pulling hair, pinching, or slapped. Just over 6 per cent had experiences of sexual abuse by an adult. The perpetrator was most often someone outside the home, however almost 1 in 4 out of those

having experienced sexual abuse by an adult reported a parent (most frequently their father) as the offender.

Prevalence of forced marriages and negative social control

It is difficult to give reliable figures on the extent of forced marriages and negative social control in Norway. The number of people who approach the support services is increasing, and most of these have a background from Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Turkey and Syria. The number of young adult immigrants and those born in Norway with immigrant backgrounds from these countries is rising, but we do not know if that means that the group at risk of forced marriage is also increasing.

Prevalence of female genital mutilation

It is difficult to provide reliable figures on the extent of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Norway. There are very few reports of FGM performed on girls after arrival in Norway. However, a large number of girls and women have been subjected to FGM before they came to Norway. A new diagnostic code for FGM from the World Health Organization (WHO) has been included in the Norwegian edition of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD). This will eventually lead to statistics becoming available on the number of women with FGM receiving health care in Norway.

Legal Framework

Violence against women and domestic violence are some of the most serious inflictions of human rights globally, and also in Europe.

In 1981, Norway ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. The convention was incorporated in Norwegian law in 2009, through the inclusion in the Human Rights Act (1999). In case of a conflict between the Convention and other legislation, it is the provisions of the Convention that will have precedence. The responsibility of monitoring the national implementation of the Convention, is given to Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud (2006). The Ombud reports regularly and directly to the UN regarding to what extent the Norwegian government upholds the convention.

Norway ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in July 2017. The Convention entered into force in Norway on 1 November 2017. The ratification of the Convention is an important signal from the Norwegian government that this work is given high priority. The Istanbul Convention is an important platform for the further work of the Norwegian government to combat violence against women and domestic violence in years to come. Norway is currently preparing its first report to GREVIO, the monitoring institution of the Council of Europe for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

In Norway, a special penal sanction for violence in intimate relationships entered into force on 1 January 2006. This also covers psychological violence. In the Penal Code the maximum sentence for domestic abuse is six years. For gross domestic abuse the maximum sentence is 15 years.

The Government has tightened and strengthened the duty of prevention provided in section 196 of the Penal Code. This provision involves a duty to contact the police or otherwise attempt to prevent a serious criminal act if one regards it as most probable that such an act will be committed. It is also now a criminal offence to be an accessory to a breach of the duty of prevention. In addition, the duty of prevention has been extended to include a number of serious offences, such as domestic violence as well as several types of sexual offence against children.

Norway passed a law prohibiting female genital mutilation (FGM) in 1995, amended in 2004. This prohibition also applies when the procedure is carried out outside Norway. For certain groups of professional practitioners and employees, it is a punishable offence not to attempt to prevent FGM. In 2003, the Norwegian Penal Code was amended to include a provision on forced marriage. The penalty for causing forced marriage is imprisonment for a term not exceeding six years.

Action plans and strategies

A White Paper on violence against women and domestic violence was presented by the Norwegian Government to Parliament in March 2013, and it was followed by a new national action plan for the period 2014 – 2017. Currently, Norway has several action plans and other 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 such violence in an integrated, cross-sectorial perspective. In order to work most effectively with the various forms of violence separate plans and strategies for each form of violence have been developed. These plans/strategies and initiatives are mutually supplementary and are intended to ensure a coherent approach to combating violence.

The most important Action Plans include:

- Action Plan to prevent and combat domestic violence (2014–2017). Currently, a new Action Plan is prepared. This work is delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but the plan is expected to be launched in Spring 2021.
- Action Plan against negative social control, forced marriages and female genital mutilation (2017–2020)
- Action Plan to prevent and combat human trafficking (2017)
- Action Plan to combat physical and sexual violence against children (2014–2017)
- Escalation plan against violence and abuse (2017–2021)
- Action plan to prevent and combat rape (2018)

Coordinating mechanism

The responsibility for coordinating the Norwegian Government's efforts to combat violence in close relationships and sexual abuse lies with the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. Cross-ministerial working groups has been set up consisting of civil servants from several ministries and directorates. Their 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.

Protection and Support of Victims

Shelters for victims of domestic violence or abuse

In the past 40 years, women's shelters have been important actors in efforts to combat domestic violence in Norway. The shelters have a pivotal role in the provision of assistance and services for victims of domestic violence. Until recently, most Norwegian shelters were private institutions or NGOs relying at least partly on voluntary work from women. Today, about half of the shelters are run and owned by municipalities or are inter-municipal entities (Bliksvær et al., 2019). In the spring 2009 the parliament passed a new act that imposes upon the municipality a legal obligation to provide shelter services and coordinated assistance for women, men and children victim of violence in close relationships. The law emphasizes that it is a public responsibility to make sure that victims of domestic violence receive protection and assistance. However, accommodation for women and for men has to be physically separate (ibid., cf. Wave Country Report, 2019).

According to shelter statistics, 1,800 adult persons (92 percent of them women) and 1,450 children were residents in shelters in Norway (2019), and over 2,600 persons (91 per cent of them women) used the daytime services of the shelters. The proportion of residents with migrant /ethnic minority background has risen steadily in recent years. In 2019, 63 per cent of all residents and 47 percent of daytime users had a non-Norwegian ethnic background (Shelter Statistics, 2019).

There are, as of 2020, altogether 46 shelters distributed throughout Norway, a country of 5.4 million inhabitants. Since the provision of shelter services are mandated by law, they are fully funded by the local authorities. However, an evaluation of the implementation of the Shelter Act (Bakketeig et al., 2014; see also Bliksvær et al., 2019) indicates that several shelters in Norway 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 as yet been 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 (Wave Country Report, 2019).

Examples of other measures

Full-time family violence coordinator positions have been appointed in all police districts in Norway. The coordinator is to help ensure that the police meet the victim of violence and her family and friends with understanding, knowledge and insight – in both professional and human terms.

In 2004, the police initiated a nation-wide system of mobile violence alarms. Used in combination with other measures, like ban of visit (restraining order) mobile violence alarms are intended to give persons under threat of violence greater freedom of movement and help prevent violence and threats.

In 2013 the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security introduced an electronic monitoring scheme or the use of so-called “reverse violence alarms”. This measure is in line with the perspective that insists that the abuser must take responsibility for his acts and that it is the abuser – and not the victim – who must bear the consequences of his actions in that his freedom of movement is restricted.

The police have implemented the risk assessment tool SARA (Spousal Assault Risk Assessment). SARA is a checklist and has a score form to screen for risk factors of spousal assault so that preventive measures can be taken.

A network of Children’s Houses has been established in Norway and currently there are 11 of them in the country. These houses are a service for children and young people under 16 years of age, and adults with cognitive disabilities, who are thought to have been exposed to violence or sexual abuse, or to have witnessed such violence. Children’s Houses are child advocacy centres where judicial examination, medical examinations, treatment and follow-up are carried out in the same place.

In 2017, the Government decided to establish 12 support offices for victims of crime. The offices are located in police stations and are financed by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security. The offices give advice and render practical help; they inform and assist the victim in contacting other public services. They also inform on the pending of a criminal case, from the bringing of charge to the court’s judgment, and the rights of victims, and they assist with preparing applications for criminal injuries compensation and ex-gratia payment.

The Government provides funding to 22 Support Centres against Sexual Abuse. There is at least one Support Centre in each county. At these centres, men, women and youth receive support in their healing process after experiencing sexual abuse. The Support Centres are also open to family members, partners, friends or anyone affected by sexual abuse, or who needs information, counselling and assistance. Some centres also provide services to children.

In 2016 the Government established a web portal on domestic violence and rape for persons exposed to such violence and for the health and social services; dinutvei.no. The web portal’s

purpose is to provide easy access to information about rights and assistance. The Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) is tasked with developing and running the portal (dinutvei.no).

In 2018, the Secretariat of the Shelter Movement was allocated funds by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security to establish Norway's first national helpline for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Research and training of professionals

The government established a National Knowledge Centre on Violence and Traumatic Stress (NKVTS) in 2003. The objective of NKVTS is to integrate and strengthen expertise in violence, family violence and sexual abuse. The Centre is engaged in research, development work, training, guidance and counselling. Five Regional Resource Centres (RVTS) for the field of violence, trauma and suicide prevention have also been established, which assist the service apparatus with information, guidelines and expertise development, and create networks between all relevant partners in the region.

To strengthen the knowledge base on violence in close relationships funds have been provided for two five-year research programmes at two research institutes (NKVTS and NOVA, in 2014–2019 and 2019–2024) to investigate such issues as the causes of domestic violence, domestic violence in a life-long and generational perspective, and particular vulnerability for violence in minority groups in society.

Norway has introduced routine questions for detecting violence against pregnant women in social and health services. Under the guidelines for antenatal care, physicians and midwives who practice antenatal care should be aware of signs and symptoms of abuse.

Prevention and awareness-raising

A national prevention strategy has been developed. Its main focus 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 forum for discussions on violence against women.

Treating perpetrators of violence also has preventive effect. The government provides funding to the NGO Alternatives to Violence (ATV). ATV provides treatment to perpetrators of domestic violence. The government has also strengthened the family counselling services with provisions for abusers, and families and children that have suffered violence. The important work done by Alternatives to Violence and by the family counselling services contributes to breaking the cycle of violence.

Amongst the preventive measures, we can mention information campaigns to prevent domestic violence and sexual abuse. For example, the campaign carried out by the police,

("How Little Should You Tolerate?") aimed to increase knowledge of domestic violence and the assistance police can provide, so that persons subjected to such violence can seek help to escape from a violent situation.

Another campaign launched by the police was called "Good Guy", targeting young people. The campaign was intended to prevent so-called "party related rapes", emphasizing young men's own ability to take responsibility for themselves and others.

The government also funds an awareness campaign "Red Button – End Violence against Women", which is fronted by a broad alliance of NGO's. The campaign encourages men and boys, alongside women and girls, to see themselves as agents and beneficiaries of the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Concluding remarks

In this short report, we have presented an overview of the work carried out in Norway to prevent and combat violence in close relationships. It should be noted that the overview is not a complete description of everything that has been done within the last years, or that currently is being done. Yet, we have tried to highlight practices from Norway that are a mix of public policies and measures, collaborations, and civil-society initiatives. We hope this overview shows the multifaceted approaches in Norway aiming at preventing and combating domestic violence in all its various forms.

References

Bekketeig, E., Gording Stang E., Madsen, C., Smette, I., & Stefansen, K. (2014). *Krisesentertilbudet i kommunene. Evaluering av kommunenes implementering av krisesenterloven*. [The development of shelter services in the municipalities. An evaluation of the implementation of the Shelter Act by the municipalities]. NOVA Rapport nr 19/2014.

Bliksvær, T., Skogøy Bjørg, E., Sloan, L., Bakar, N., Johnson, R., Kosuta, M. (2019). *Kommunenes krisesentertilbud. En kunnskapsoversikt*. [Shelter services in the municipalities. A knowledge overview]. NF Rapport nr 13/2019.

Gracia, E. & Merlo, J. (2016). Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic paradox. *Social Science & Medicine*. Vol. 157: May 2016, pp. 27–30.

Hafstad, G.S., & Augusti, E.M. (2019). *Ungdoms erfaringer med vold og overgrep i oppveksten: En nasjonal undersøkelse av ungdom i alderen 12 til 16 år*. [Young people's experiences of violence and abuse: A nationwide study of youth aged 12-16]. Oslo: Nasjonalt kunnskapssenter om vold og traumatisk stress. NKVTS-rapport nr 4/2019.

Isdal, P. (2000). *Meningen med volden*. [The meaning with violence]. Oslo: Kommuneforlaget.

Mossige, S. & Stefansen, K. (2016) (red.). *Vold og overgrep mot barn og unge. Omfang og utviklingstrekk 2007–2015* [Violence and abuse against children and youth 2007–2015]. NOVA-rapport 5/2016.

Shelter Statistics (2019). Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. Retrieved from <https://bufdir.no>

Skjørten, K., Bakketeig, E., Bjørnholt, M., & Mossige, S. (2019): *Vold i nære relasjoner – et felt i bevegelse* [Domestic Violence – A Field in Movement]. In Skjørten, K., Bakketeig, E., Bjørnholt, M., & Mossige, S. (eds.): *Vold i nære relasjoner: Forståelser, konsekvenser og tiltak* (pp. 13–29). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Statistics Norway (2019). *Sosiale forhold og kriminalitet*. [Social conditions and criminality]. Retrieved from: <https://www.ssb.no/sosiale-forhold-og-kriminalitet>

Thoresen, S. & Hjemdal, O. (2014). *Vold og voldtekt i Norge. En nasjonal forekomststudie av vold i et livsløpsperspektiv*. [Violence and rape in Norway. A national prevalence study of violence in a life-long perspective]. Oslo: Nasjonalt kunnskapscenter om vold og traumatisk stress. NKVTS-Rapport nr 1/2014.

Vatnar, S.K.B. (2012). *Partnerdrap i Norge 1990-2012. En mixed methods studie av risikofaktorer for partnerdrap*. [Partner homicides in Norway 1990-2012. A mixed-methods study of risk factors for partner homicide]. OUS: Kompetansesenter for sikkerhets-, fengsels- og rettspsykiatri for Helseregion Sør-Øst.

VG (2020). *Partnerdrapene 2000-2020*. [Partner homicides 2000-2020]. Retrieved from: <https://www.vg.no/spesial/2016/partnerdrapene>

Wave Country Report 2019. *The Situation of Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe*. Wave – Women Against Violence Europe. Vienna.