



*Original Contribution*

---

## VIOLENCE OVER WOMEN IN BULGARIA

**T. Todorova<sup>1</sup>, N. Mechkarska<sup>1</sup>, T. Taneva<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Student, Social Activities, Faculty of Medicine, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Business Administration, Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

### ABSTRACT

In today's world, violence is very common phenomenon. It becomes a global problem affecting every country, every society including Bulgarian. Usually violence is associated with the aggression. Violence can be physical, as well sexual and psychological. The aim of this study is analyze the violence against women in Bulgaria and on the base of the appropriated conclusions to recommend mitigation measures. For research of this important phenomenon existing in the changing Bulgarian society, is used the method theoretical study. The study showed the need of programs and activities for understanding and effectively implementing the rights of women, and programs for adequate preventive measures against violence. Social work in the area of mental health of personality and the consequences of violence is also important to overcome the problem.

**Key words:** physical, sexual and psychological violence, rights of women

### INTRODUCTION

Violence is a fairly common phenomenon in modern times. It is becoming a global problem affecting every country and every society, including Bulgaria. Violence is usually related to aggression. Violence can be physical, sexual and psychological.

The aim of the present study is to make observations on violence over women in Bulgaria, recommending measures for its limitation based on the respective conclusions. To examine this specifically significant for Bulgaria's transitional society issue, the method of theoretical research was used.

According to the Ministry of Interior of Bulgaria, violence is defined as a "result of aggressive behaviour of people among each other, which causes deliberate injury – physical or psychological, to an individual or a group of individuals" (The Ministry of Interior). Article 2 of the Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence states that "Domestic Violence is every act of physical, psychological or sexual violence, as well as any attempt for such violence, forced restriction of person freedom and personal life,

committed against persons who are or were in family or kinship relation, within factual matrimonial cohabitation, or who inhabit the same home" (1).

A solid majority of Bulgarians are personally familiar with people who are the victims of domestic violence, or are victims themselves. 61 out of 100 interviewed know people (mainly women) who had been hit, beaten or otherwise abused by their partners. Every third person (35%) claimed to personally know people who needed treatment or a medical intervention after physical violence. Facts indicate that society looks for the causes of domestic violence in various directions. The greatest share is of the people who try to explain domestic violence with the considerable economic problems that have affected many Bulgarian families – financial issues, unemployment, deteriorating living conditions. This leads to stress, anxiety, tension and nervous disorders – as an accumulator of negative energy. The experts' studies illustrate that "under the conditions of a crisis and increasing social tension, negative emotions are carried over into the family" (2).

**Forms of domestic violence:**

**Emotional violence:** The man enforces his will by causing feelings of fear, shame and guilt. He could force the woman to do things that contradict her convictions and wishes through threats that cause confusion and suffering.

**Physical violence:** For two thirds of the adult citizens of the country (75%), the most common form of violence between partners is physical violence. Using physical violence as a means of coercion, suppression and imposition of one's will over another is an indication of outright human rights violation. Every third interviewed from the examined group pointed psychological harassment as a widely spread form of violence – scandals, ignoring, finance isolation, threats, humiliation. Each form of violence – physical or sexual – leads to a psychological imbalance and cause major trauma. The causes for violence over women in the family are various: from economic problems (76.1%), unemployment (51.2%), bad living conditions (42.2%), and the abuser's personality traits (42.2%) (Egotism, stubbornness or bad temper), disturbed relations within the couple (10.0%) Another major factor in violence over women is the gender differences. Regarding physical strength, the woman is disadvantaged compared to the man. The demonstration of strength is the primary requisite of male behaviour. Violence over women, as a problem, is rated among other major social issues such as drug abuse, AIDS, robberies, and begging.

The issue of gender equality is at the base of the domestic violence debate. Women exhibit considerably greater sensitivity towards this problem, as 68% of them believe that the attitude towards gender equality is negligent. In men, this share is 10 per cent lower – 58%.

**Economic violence:** The man prevents the woman from working, forces her to beg him for money, allows her a limited amount of money, for which he requires a detailed account afterwards.

**Sexual violence:** Forcing the victim to engage in intercourse at a time or manner she does not want. Data from Gender Protect study indicate that the victims of physical or sexual violence at home are the lowly educated as well as the highly educated groups, i.e. women from all

educational levels. The inhabitants of villages and small towns, as well of larger cities and the capital are equally affected.

Similarly to the victims of sexual violence, only 23% of the victims physically abused at home have sought help.

Causes for the occurrence of sexual violence – Alcohol and drugs abuse are accepted to be the primary reasons for sexual violence over women (82%). Moreover, according to the women, the assailants often suffer from psychological problems and that is why they resort to violence (65%). Considerably less often recognised as causes for sexual violence are parameters of socio-demographic nature. It should be noted that, according to the majority of Bulgarian women (91%), the assailants are always men. The study of sexual violence over women in Bulgaria throws light on another aspect of the problem – **transferring the blame for the sexual assault to the victim.**

**Sexual harassment.** Within the work environment, the rights of women are more easily applied and the level of violence over them is low. Sexual harassment, however, is fairly common. Sexual harassment in the workplace can be defined as using one's professional authority and power to introduce sexual demands. Types of sexual harassment include, for example, hints that sexual responsiveness could lead to further rewards; or that the lack of it could lead to some sort of penalty, e.g. delayed promotion, laying off, etc. Surveys have indicated that seven out of ten women in Great Britain have been the subject of prolonged sexual harassment during their professional lives. Sexual harassment could occur as a separate incident or a continuous pattern of behaviour. When it is the second option, women often find it difficult to keep up their normal work routine and are prone to taking sick leaves or quitting their job altogether. Sexual harassment at the workplace is an existing practice in Bulgaria. The problem is that employers, judicial authorities and observers (co-workers, relatives and acquaintances) don't take the problem very seriously and perceive the violence – verbal, psychological and physical – as a harmless, mutually accepted and normal practice. According to data from a study by

Vitosha Research and the Bulgarian Gender Studies Foundation, the phenomenon has been on the rise with the coming of the new economic conditions (3). In the conditions of economic transition and increasing employment insecurity, women are identified as the more vulnerable group. According to the abovementioned studies, the anonymously interviewed 500 women who were the object of passive sexual harassment, exhibited as crude jokes, cynical remarks, inappropriate comments about looks, pinching and touching, were more than half of all interviewed women – 260 of them, with repeating incidents in 60 of the cases. In 73 of the cases, the women shared that they were the objects of direct sexual harassment, which forced them to quit their jobs. In 12 of the cases there were attempts for rough raping. The common forms of pressure were sexual proposals, followed by laying off (or forced quitting), if the woman refused.

Women do not know and cannot apply the legal provisions for protecting their rights, which already exist through the passed Anti-Discrimination Law. It defines the concept of sexual harassment as “any unsolicited behaviour of sexual nature, expressed through physical, verbal or other means, through which the dignity or honour is hurt, or a hostile, offensive or threatening environment is created, in particular when the refusal to accept such behaviour or coercion towards it could affect decisions related to the person.”

**Rape.** The prevalence of rapes is hard to establish with precision. Only a small part of rapes is reported to the police and registered in the official criminal statistics. The actual number is probably 5 times greater than the official data. A study on 1236 women in London showed that one out of six was raped; one out of five of the rest had repelled a rape attempt. Half of the assaults occurred within the victims’ or their assailants’ homes. The majority of raped women would prefer to forget about the incident and do not want to participate in the humiliating process of medical examination, police interrogation and cross-examination in court. The legal process often lasts for long, and the court might need as many as eighteen months to pronounce a sentence.

The traditional idea of what comprises or not rape could be very strong. Studies have revealed that the widely accepted views of rape are wrong. Most rapes are not spontaneous; they are at least partially premeditated. Rape is apparently related to the connection between sexuality and the feeling of power, domination and toughness. For the most part, rapes are not caused by uncontrolled sexual desire but rather by the connection between sexuality and the feeling of power and domination. Susan Brownmiller claims that rape is a part of the system of male threatening, which keep women subordinated. Those who are not raped feel anxiety and the necessity to be more cautious near the men in the daily aspects of life.

**Peculiarities of the relations within the family:** jealousy, imposition of control, isolation, blame, cruelty to animals and children, forced sex, insults.

**Natural reactions of the victim of domestic violence** – Fear: of death or physical trauma of the woman or someone else whom she loves; Helplessness; Grief; Sadness; Guilt; Shame; Anger; Frustration; Hope.

**Consequences of violence against women:** silence, inner conflict, guilt, loss of faith in oneself, state of dependence, contradicting feelings, change in interpersonal relations, suicidal thoughts or attempts, crisis. There are no state programmes either for helping the victim or re-educating/rehabilitating the assailant. There is no widespread media or educational campaign, as well as an attempt to mobilise society to take a stand against domestic violence.

The systematic and incidental suffering from violence leads to a change in personality. Experiencing violence reflects on the quality of dealing with daily problems. It causes negative psychological phenomena, which disrupt the built dynamical stereotype. Experiencing violence is perceived as an event, which causes an existential crisis. The abused, humiliated, injured, raped person lives in fear. Fear changes the victim’s self-confidence.

A major part of the people in Bulgaria does not clearly know to whom they could turn for help in case of violence. The family, friends and the Police are the formal and informal institutions

society is willing to trust. Hopes are also directed towards the state, medical and social services, and the people who give professional advice – lawyers and consultants. The majority of women in Bulgaria assess the measures for protection against sexual violence as more or less insufficient (85%).

Why does the woman stay with the abuser? People stay with their violent partner for a variety of reasons. The fear of beating could be too great. The abuser could threaten to find her and kill her, or to harm her children and close relatives. She could be dependent on the abuser for shelter, food or other bare necessities. She has no one to talk to or to believe her. She believes that the children need two parents and does not want to raise them on her own. She wants to preserve the family and stay faithful to the religious convictions of her community. She is afraid that she would not be able to take care of herself and the children on her own.

What should be done to restrict domestic violence?

A very important condition is trust in the state's institutions – police, detention institutions, security forces, etc. The most significant step towards active counteraction to violence is related to the passing of laws penalizing the behaviour of domestic violence perpetrators.

### PRIMARY CONCLUSIONS

- Bulgarian women are insufficiently aware of the problem of sexual violence over them and its basic aspects. They related sexual assault primarily to physical violence and rarely take into account verbal and psychological sexual violence.
- Despite the prevalent opinion that sexual violence occurs only in certain situations, the real concerns about where they could be assaulted are related to the places of daily habitation.
- Among the social layers, which most often admit to cases of physical and sexual assault and which consider it more likely to be the victims of it, are the women of Roma ethnicity and those with low income and social status.

The public opinion in the country defines these groups as the most risky. The general idea of the social-demographic groups threatened by sexual

violence is an indication of the prevalent stereotypes in Bulgarian society. The belief that sexual violence happens only to certain women, from certain social groups, predisposes towards underestimating the problem in general.

- The study detected a relatively low extent of trust in the Bulgarian institutions involved with the issue of sexual violence. The police and the courts do not recognize the men as reliable partners in the cases of sexual assault.
- The negative attitudes of the Bulgarian women towards the legislation regarding the cases of sexual violence delineate as a main problem the lack of sufficient engagement on the part of the Bulgarian institutions. The main disadvantage and weakest link in the system are the insufficiently harsh measures against sexual offenders, which cannot serve as a deterrent. Apart from the penal, prevention measures, increasing awareness throughout society as well as funding for protected shelters for the victims of violence are recognised as a serious and crucial responsibility of Bulgarian institutions (4).

**The main recommendations** of the specialists regarding violence include the following activities:

- Popularising the problem and increasing the awareness of it within society.
- Organising educational and informative campaigns in order to acquaint the victims with the main mechanisms of seeking help.
- Prevention should begin at as early age as possible, through which to stimulate “respect to the child's person and personal boundaries.”
- Organising training of police officers and medical personnel, who are to be “aware of the law's requirements” as well as approaching these problems of violence victims with greater understanding and tact.
- It is necessary to build up consultative services and rehabilitation centres for the women victims, as well as programmes for the rehabilitation of the assailants (5).

### CONCLUSION

The study has shown that programmes and activities for awareness of and real upholding of the rights of women are necessary, as well as programmes for adequate measures toward preventing violence. The populace needs to be educated about the issues of personal

psychological health and the consequences of violence. It is high time everyone realised that personal psychological health should be a national priority.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Law on Protection against Domestic Violence, Chapter I, General Applications
2. Animus Association, Violence and its

*TODOROVA T., et al.*

- Victims, S., 2008
3. Anthony Giddens, Sociology, Prozoretz publishing, 2003
4. Alpha Research – “Sexual violence over women in Bulgaria,” January 2011
5. Strategies for Combating Domestic Violence, Handbook of the means and ways to achieve this.