

PECULIARITIES OF SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF A PANDEMIC

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Abstract. *The article deals socio-educational support for women experiencing domestic violence in the context of a pandemic. Domestic violence is a fairly common problem, but it is still often overlooked. It is usually analysed from a purely social or criminogenic perspective. There is a lack of a holistic approach to the phenomenon of violence, emphasizing the possibilities of educational empowerment. In the context of the pandemic, the possibilities for both social assistance and educational empowerment have changed. The information disclosed in the article is relevant for institutions and communities that face with the need to organize professional help for domestic violence victims during the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The theoretical parts of article contain the analysis of the publications made on the domestic violence and socio-educational support, educational empowerment process of the review. The empirical part of the research present how Covid-19 pandemic situation affects the provision of socio-educational assistance to women experiencing violence.*

Keywords: *domestic violence, educational empowerment, socio-educational support.*

Introduction

The 21st century has not only brought to society a high level of civilization, scientific achievements that have made it possible to live longer and better as well as solve various health problems more successfully, but, in turn, the pace of life, social problems and various mental health trauma have led to crisis situations in modern society (Didžiokienė, 2016). Of course, the world-wide situation of Covid-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated already deep problems of society, cannot be ignored as well. Social isolation has led to an increase in scale of problem of domestic violence against women (Aldrich & Lotito, 2020; Roesch, Amin, Gupta, García-Moreno, 2020; Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, Tertilt, 2020; Ceuterick, 2020). Research has also shown that the number of female suicides has increased as a result of the pandemic (Čepulienė et al., 2021). Although it is too early to draw final conclusions on the impact of a continuing pandemic on mental health of a society, the scientific community is concerned about this particularly vulnerable groups and the effectiveness of the assistance strategies applied (Costanza et al., 2020; Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020).

The scientific literature distinguishes the following types of assistance to women who have experienced domestic violence: social, legal, psychological and educational (Bell & Goodman, 2001; Kaur & Garg, 2008; etc.). If the first three aspects are analysed in detail both theoretically and practically, insufficient attention is paid to educational support, especially to the educational empowerment of women, during which the decision to “live differently” leading to emancipatory processes takes place (Gelbūdienė, 2018).

A woman must become “socially empowered” – to be able to recognize the phenomenon of violence, to find sources of help on her own, to have enough knowledge to solve the situation on her own, and not to remain dependent on assistance institutions (Gelbūdienė, 2018). This is where the importance of educator help comes into play. However, when analysing women’s educational empowerment and the enablers competencies it needs, it is important to note that empowerment often seems a controversial process, as professionals manage professional knowledge, as well as, are considered experts in a particular field and can therefore be placed in a position of power in respect of violence victims. This would deprive individuals of the power to make their own decisions. But empowerment-oriented practices, on the contrary, must provide opportunities to develop knowledge and skills and treat professionals as partners rather than authoritarian experts.

These aspects make up the scientific problematic nature of the article, which can be expressed in two problematic questions: *what is the educator's influence on the effectiveness of assistance (empowerment) provided for women who have experienced domestic violence in the context of a pandemic? and what are the peculiarities of providing socio-educational assistance to women who have experienced domestic violence in the context of a pandemic situation?*

Aim: to expose the peculiarities of providing socio-educational assistance to women who have experienced domestic violence in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature, partially structured interview, interpretive phenomenological analysis.

The Phenomenon of Domestic Violence Against Women

Domestic violence includes all intentional physical, psychological, economic and sexual actions directed against the person with whom the abuser is closely related (by family or partnership relationship), and these actions violate his/her constitutional rights and freedoms as a citizen and a person; also, it causes economic, physical or moral damage (Kurst-Swanger & Petcosky, 2003).

Any healthy woman may get involved in a violent relationship, and, even after breaking free from it, she will never be the same because long-term domestic violence imposes irreparable psychological harm which develops as a response to

a violent situation. The complex post-traumatic syndrome, the syndrome of a battered woman, the condition of acquired helplessness, the violence vicious circle and the Stockholm syndrome phenomena not only damage the mental health of women but also cause tight and complicated attachment of battered women to their abusers and to the abusive environment. Traumatic encounters make victims doubt the fundamental human relationships, encourage exclusion from the family, friends, love relations and community (Gelbūdienė, 2018).

Peculiarities of socio-educational assistance to victims of violence and their educational empowerment

Women, who have experienced domestic violence, need external support in order to take responsibility for their own lives, to change their attitude towards themselves and their relationships with those around them, to change their goals and priorities and to increase their need for self-realization and life satisfaction. This also requires the creation of a suitable educational environment, taking into account all the parameters of this environment and the creation of the necessary conditions. Not only teachers but also social workers, psychologists, integration program coordinators, etc. become educators when working with people who have experienced violence or other trauma. In other words - educators - specialists who provide assistance to women who have experienced domestic violence, who create and operate in an educational environment and provide targeted information related to the educational purpose.

According to Langeveld (from Levering, 2012), the main goal of an educator is to help a particular person, in the particular circumstances in which he or she lives, to reach his or her best potential. In this case, the educator is assigned not only rational (theoretical) but also moral responsibility. Regarding the role of educators in providing socio-educational support to women who have experienced violence, it is important to mention the context of interpreting education as relational, which, helps to create relationships that address not only lack of learning motivation but also social adaptation and other people's functioning in society problems Saevi (2015). The aim of the educator (teacher, social worker, psychologist, curator of the integration program) is to help a woman who has experienced violence to acknowledge the experience of it, to perceive the meaning of this experience and to create conditions, while minimizing the threat of secondary victimization, to safely acquire new skills, knowledge, experience and successfully self-individualise by renouncing violent relationships and reintegrating into the labour market and society (Demidenko, 2019).

Regarding the competence of the educator, the versatility of the educator's knowledge is especially important (Gelbūdienė, 2018). One of the essential things for an educator is to understand how a woman, who has experienced domestic

violence, is traumatized both physically and psychologically. What feelings and emotions does she experience as a victim of domestic violence. Why a woman finds it so difficult to break free from a violent relationship and why she finds herself in it at all. Another important aspect in assessing the overall dynamics of a violent relationship is being able to see the individuality of a woman in each situation. Every specialist (educator) must understand how much help he or she can offer to a woman, a victim of violence, within the framework of his or her profession, institution regulations and laws. Of course, the relationship with the victim of violence must be sincere and open, but the educator must understand that he or she is not capable of solving all the problems of a violence victim and this must be said to the woman, emphasizing the specific help that can be given. Only she, herself is an expert of her life, and a specialist is only a partner in helping to achieve woman's goals and needs (Cattaneo & Goodman, 2015). It is especially important not to judge a person - both the woman and the abuser – and that is really a very difficult thing to do, but by helping one, you cannot humiliate the other. Unconditional acceptance of a woman victim is also associated with not judging - accepting a person for who she is, is also a value. The main approach of the educator is intolerance of violence with no exceptions. A specialist, who believes in a person's ability to change, recognizes his or her strengths. It increases person's self-esteem, hope, and motivation to change. It is often questioned whether socially excluded and low-power people can make their own decisions, but empowerment is not just about strengthening power and competitiveness. Empowerment is granting of the power to make decisions about one's environment and goals, living conditions, professional activities, and so on. Thus, not only specialists, but all the participants in the assistance process as well, including those who need help, become responsible for decisions and their implementation (Baranauskienė, 2014).

Thus, an equal relationship between the educator and the woman, a victim of domestic violence; attention to the uniqueness of each woman and her life situation; creating of learning conditions for each woman; the pursuit of restoration of women's power, autonomy, self-confidence, communion with other people and control over their lives in the life change context are the essential “axes” of socio-educational support for women who have experienced domestic violence.

Educators are looking for different ways to empower women who have experienced violence. According to Langeveld (from Levering, 2012), only those teaching methods that promote individualizing and increase the awareness of oneself and the environment, are of absolutely importance. The most important axis in the application of all teaching methods is taking care of the learner. Therefore, the didactics of teaching socially vulnerable people is inseparable from socio-education and psychology - a person experiences certain feelings, life events, possibly experiences trauma, lives in a certain community and is affected

by the processes, which take place in it (Demidenko, 2019). It is not surprising that the method of experiential reflexive education is considered to be one of the most effective in the process of socio-education of socially excluded people (in this case - women who experienced violence). In the broadest sense, the method of experiential education is reflecting on and making sense of one's being and functioning in the environment. According to Gurova and Godvadas (2015), the method of experiential education is a reflection and meaning of one's being and functioning in the environment. Experiential education is understood as learning from the experience. It is a process when a person acquires knowledge, skills and forms their values from the direct experience (Štuopytė & Demidenko, 2021). Experiential education occurs when a person engages in a variety of activities, then reflects on their experiences and, through this analysis, gains useful insights that they integrate into their changing thinking and behaviour patterns.

The effectiveness of the experiential reflexive education method in empowering women, who have experienced violence, is confirmed by a study conducted by Jonava District Social Services Center, in 2020-2021. The aim of this study was to determine the links between emotional competencies, stress coping mechanism and alcohol consumption in women experiencing social exclusion and intimate partner violence (Gataveckienė, 2021). In addition, the study revealed that socio-educational and psychological support interventions, using the method of experiential reflexive education, help to increase women's emotional competencies, enable them to break free from the role of the victim of violence. Thus, experiential reflexive education is an important construct in applying both interventional and preventive measures among women experiencing social exclusion and violence.

Peculiarities of Socio-Educational Support In The Context Of A Pandemic

Violence has generally been found to increase in the face of pandemics. Scientists analyzing domestic violence describe the situation of violence during a global pandemic as a "double pandemic", „hidden epidemic” or „shadow pandemic”: the lockdowns and other social isolation measures implemented by all affected countries have forced women to be confined to their homes despite the fact that they are subjected to family violence, with limited or no social support options available (Maji, Bansod, & Singh, 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO) provided guidance to both professionals and victims of domestic violence on what help is available during this difficult period for society, already in April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic. In exceptional cases, it was recommended to provide assistance by telephone, online, as well as by developing of the security plans, but the main

means of assistance remain the victim's withdrawal from the home or his or her accommodation in specialized help centers.

In assessing the risk of domestic violence to quarantined people, different countries have tried to adapt traditional methods of assistance, taking into account the uniqueness of the current situation. For example, in France, grocery stores and pharmacies were equipped with emergency buttons, and those who experienced violence were able to report the crisis by giving special code words to sellers, who, in turn, informed the responsible public authorities. In Australia, specialist authorities prepared special guides for a closest circle of people: relatives, friends or neighbours on how to deal with ongoing violence, when noticed. The National Domestic Violence Hotline, USA, has also been offering service via online texting chat so that victims of domestic violence can seek help. In Beijing, a judicial court has been using cloud-based platforms and online court hearings to deal with cases of gender-based violence in the times of pandemic. Indian non-governmental organizations asked for the phone numbers of police officers to be made public by sticking them in visible places; the construction of a temporary shelter was also initiated (Mittal & Singh, 2020).

Based on the above literature review, it can be maintained that there is a need for a holistic response model to deal with the issue of domestic violence during current and possible future pandemics. Assessing the fact that the role of both NGOs and educators remain an integral part of assistance to victims during a pandemic, a study was conducted in one of the Lithuanian Social Service centers, which revealed the peculiarities of provision of socio-educational assistance to women experiencing domestic violence in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as assessing the role of the educator in the process of empowering the female victim.

Methodology of the empirical research

The methodological provisions of the research presented in the article are determined by the specificity of the research goal. In particular, the study seeks to understand the availability of socio-educational assistance to women who have experienced domestic violence in the context of a pandemic situation. It is qualitative research that, according to Merriam Sharan (2009), Carenza (2011) is most appropriate for analysing people's experiences in different contexts to reveal why and how such phenomena occur. The choice of a qualitative research strategy inspired the choice of a partially structured interview. This method is ethical, suitable for working with the experiences of women who have experienced violence; allows the collection of complex, multi-layered data on educational empowerment and the availability of socio-educational assistance in the context of a pandemic and is sufficiently open to contingency data.

Research design and methods

The participants of the study were selected purposefully, according to the identified need for socio-educational assistance. A mixed selection strategy was applied to the participants, combining several selection methods:

- 1) Criterion selection (women have experienced domestic violence, they have been identified as in need of socio-educational assistance);
- 2) Convenient selection (participants are clients of Jonava District Social Services Center, identified during the pandemic).

Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees (made by authors)

Name* (changed)	Age	Education	Family status	Socio-economic status	Duration of SSC assistance received
Marija	37	vocational	married	unemployed	1 year
Ona	32	vocational	lives with a partner	works seasonal jobs	1,5 years
Irma	45	vocational	married	works seasonal jobs	8 months
Toma	28	secondary	lives with a partner	unemployed	5 months

The method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for the analysis of the findings of the partially structured interview. This method emphasizes the importance of interpretation and is often chosen to examine not only what individuals (in this case, women who experience violence) experience, but also how they perceive their experiences. The method emphasizes the idea of man as a “self-interpreting being” (Taylor, 1985 from Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In addition, the chosen method of data analysis also emphasizes the fact that a person is constantly exposed to external world factors, so the analysis of his personal experience also identifies social world factors - which is very important in the context of socio-educational assistance during the pandemic.

Results and discussion

Several general thematic groups or clusters were identified in the analysis of the findings of the semi-structured interview using the IPA analysis. The clusters of topics and sub-topics that emerged during the interviews are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Topics identified during the analysis of the findings of the interviews with women who experienced violence (made by authors)

Topic clusters	Initial phase	Phase of change	Achievement phase
	Pandemic-fear-despair	Hope – education and change	Self-discovery, new meaning
Topics /subtopics revealing the experiences of women who have experienced violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of fear, shame and despair intensified during the pandemic. • Questioning the effectiveness / appropriateness of the proposed assistance. • Establishing a connection with the educator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education by participating in socio-educational assistance classes. • Pandemic - experience of unusual forms of education / learning. • The role of the supporting person - the educator. • Change, transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Discovering Your New Self” • "Ceiling effect" • "The meaning of injuries suffered - a positive perception"

The initial stage. Pandemic-fear-despair:

Sharing their experiences of violence and access to help during a pandemic, the women talked about the feelings of fear and shame that were exacerbated by the quarantine announced for the Covid-19 pandemic. It deepened ***feelings of fear, loneliness and despair***, according to the participants:

"When they closed everything and told us to sit at home - I was scared ... I always tried to be at home with him as little as possible ... I didn't know what to do if it started again, where to go ..." (Toma, 7); *"I was always afraid of him ... and I felt ashamed that I was suffering ... with that Covid it would be even worse - you would not go anywhere, you would not tell anyone ... the first thoughts were really like this ..."* (Marija, 12);

On the other hand, it was the pandemic and the fear of not receiving help that led some women to seek help themselves:

"... then I probably realized for the first time that I was left completely alone ... with him alone ... you understand ... well.. that now it doesn't matter to him that I'm with bruises and someone will notice ... I would still not go anywhere, it won't be seen at work, in kindergarten, at school ..."(Ona, 11); *"... social (worker) has talked to me ... invited me to events ... events about violence... well, maybe they have suspected ... but I never went... I felt ashamed ... I thought - if anything happens - I would come, I would say... And I felt calmer because of this then ... And when we were closed, everything became hopeless ..."* (Irma, 8).

The findings of the interview correlates with Boeckel, Blasco-Ros, Grassi-Oliveira, & Martinez (2014), Yamawaki et.al. (2012) statements, that victims of long time spousal or partner violence experience feelings such as: loneliness, loss of self-confidence, doubts about the ability to manage one's life; guilt and shame; fear, anxiety and negative self-esteem.

Establishing a connection with an educator:

Responding to questions about the availability of help during a pandemic, women not only shared their fears of not receiving help due to quarantine, but also stressed the importance of establishing **connection with an educator**:

"... I was scared ... and I thought, that's it - I'll tell the social (worker) ... I was so sure ... That's it, enough, but I wasn't able to go then ... I don't know what it would be like if the social wouldn't call ... Well, she said that they call all their families, they ask how they are doing ... and for me, that she calls, and asks, and it's not the same for her... I somehow believed her and told ..." (Ona, 18)

"... We mostly talked on the phone then. It was somewhat calmer when she called, but when he was at home, what would I say... Then she said that the center was working, if it's locked – to press the call button. And then I went out to the store and went straight there... I was lucky, that my social was working, she immediately understood me - we took the children, clothes and they drove me to that crisis center ... I don't know ... but if Inga (the name of the social worker has been changed) wasn't there, then I would probably not have said anything to somebody other than her ..." (Marija 21).

The phase of change. Hope - education and change:

Sharing their experiences about the period after seeking help, the women who experienced violence talked about **hope** that arose. They also talked about how **their perception of themselves, their relationship with the abuser** changed after counselling and socio-educational activities, and shared **new experiences of unusual forms of education** and experiential reflexive learning:

"... somehow everything seemed easier ... the quarantine was freer, I went to talk to a social worker and a psychologist alone - it was already possible ... and then I was offered to attend women's group - not to attend - you know, just by phone ... it all seemed very strange to me ... well, nonsense, I thought ... Well yes, they showed, explained ... not bad. They gave my child a tablet to study, and then I took a phone call in the kitchen ... Giedrius (the child's name was changed) laughed at me, that his mother was also learning ..." (Irma, 22); *"... I thought I'd rest now, but it was hard ... he kept calling ... so he (confirms speaking about a partner) – one time he would apologize, another, he would try to scare me ... oh, well, he was talking nonsense there ... somehow it was hard, the kids and everything ... I was even thinking of leaving ... Yes, social has supported me ... we talked a lot ... then those activities ... topics - everything seemed about me ... I don't know how, but it helped – I started looking at myself differently, began to look at my children differently, at him ..."* (Marija, 29); *"... consultations and classes ... I liked that no one instructed you, didn't moralize you ... just spoke to you ... a lot of psychology, a variety of knowledge ... but nobody preached anything, we talked ourselves ... situations, movies there ... we tried to try new things ourselves ..."* (Toma, 14).

Women who experienced violence shared stories and situations that revealed the important **role of a supportive person** in sharing their learning experiences while receiving socio-educational support. Given that this supportive person was usually (according to the interviewees) a specialist (social worker, psychologist), it is appropriate to call him an **educator**. The importance of the relationship with the educator is reflected in the stories of the interviewees:

"... I don't know, I liked the relationship, that nobody force you, doesn't condemn ... well, we just talked, I participated in the group, then with the psychologist ... you know, humanly ... and when somebody believes in you, you start believe in yourself as well. Become more and more confident... I was always afraid of quarrels, I remember in the group they even taught us

to react, pretending we're quarrelling... I never liked to learn, but here naturally, humanly – it suited me ...” (Toma, 22).

The fact that specialists who use psychological and social education resources become a source of education, empowerment and support for people who have experienced violence or other traumas is confirmed in the research of Demidenko (2019), and Gelbūdienė (2018).

Achievement phase. Self-discovery, a new meaning:

Assessing their current situation, women who have experienced violence highlighted changes in self-perception and a review of interpersonal relationships:

“...now... I'm stronger now... less afraid... I realized that I can live without him... I began to trust myself...” (Marija, 33);

“...I have become wiser, I do not allow him to harm me, I do not surrender to him...” (Irma, 29);

“...it changed... I am different now with Petras (husband's name is changed) ... I communicate differently than with Antanas (husband's name is changed) and he treats me with respect...” (Toma, 31).

Researchers in post-traumatic growth also emphasize the importance of changes in self-discovery, self-perception and self-esteem during the process of helping women who have experienced domestic violence (Oginska-Bulik, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Elderton, Berry, Chan, 2017).

Some women, while acknowledging the benefits of socio-educational support and empowerment provided, spoke of **reaching the limits of their change** (the “ceiling effect”):

“...my social (worker) then really helped me... I live with Vydas (husband's name is changed) ... I don't know if I forgave... I have changed, you won't destroy me so easily now... I think he feels it too... children, they also feel... the relationship has changed now, and what more is needed? ...” (Ona, 27).

Healing for a victim of violence is a long, complex process, so the sharing of women about the extent to which they have reached the limits of their change is authentic and can be seen as an effect of a “ceiling reached” or a “glass ceiling”. Although the term “glass ceiling effect” was introduced to define inner barriers regarding women's careers, there has been an increase in analysing the experience of the glass ceiling effect on other socially vulnerable groups research in recent decades (Demidenko, 2019; Janušauskienė, 2016).

Interesting interviews about discovering a **different - bright - meaning of experienced violence**:

“... I didn't think I'd ever say that, but it's good that it all happened ... otherwise I might suffer until now ... me and kids ... sometimes, you know, it has to be very bad to understand, that enough is enough – it's either now or never ...” (Marija, 38);

“... I often think, if I survived then, I managed, I went out ... I'm not afraid of anything now ... I know how to live now...” (Irma, 35).

Analysing these interview data, the correlations between the findings of the selected interviews and the data of Saigi-Schwartz and others (2008); Bakaitytė (2018); Mažulytė & Skerytė-Kazlauskienė (2015) research, which identify not only the negative but also the positive consequences of trauma or violence, are

observed. Awareness and reflection regarding traumatic experience can strengthen person's psychological resilience to other life difficulties, motivate them to pursue higher goals, learn, adapt and function successfully in everyday life (Gelbūdienė & Demidenko, 2019).

Conclusions

Summarizing the analysis of the scientific literature and empirical data presented in the article, it can be stated, that the situation of Covid-19 pandemic deepened the feelings of fear, loneliness and helplessness for women experiencing domestic violence. Covid-19 has not only led to an increase in cases of gender-based violence but has disconnected the victims from their support networks. Women thought, that help had become inaccessible. But individuals who did decided to seek help during the pandemic – succeeded in finding it.

It should also be noted that women positively assessed their experiences of socio-educational support, empowerment, and experiential reflexive education, pointing to fundamental changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and values driven by newly acquired knowledge and skills. The study confirmed the important role of educator in the process of providing socio-educational assistance. Specialists, who take on the role of educator, support women, provide new knowledge and skills through experiential reflexive educational methods and thus enable them to change the violent situation.

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