

Human Security Chronicle 5 – Violence against women

- *Injured women from safe house: He threatened to kill my son if I didn't come out.* – Blic, 15.06.2013¹

- *Perpetrator arrested: Hit women to the ground and continued to kick her.* – Blic, 02.09.2013²

- *Strangled his fiancée with a rope because she didn't want to talk about her behavior* – Vesti, 07.11.2013³

- *Domestic violence claims the lives of 45 women.* – Politika, 24.10.2013⁴



Violence against women is one of the most widespread forms of violence around the world and Serbia is no exception. The headlines exerted above are just a few examples that illustrate the severity of the situation in Serbia, whereby women are unsafe in their home and not protected by the wider society. On a daily basis one can read about women getting beaten by their partner, women getting killed as a result of domestic violence, about the inability of the police and other security bodies to provide sufficient protection and respond in time, and about the lack of institutional support to women victims of violence.

Media reports that about 43-45 cases of femicide were recorded in Serbia in 2013, which is an increase from previous years, more specifically, 26 in 2010, 29 in 2011, and 35 in 2012.⁵ Research on the incidents in the previous year, conducted by the Network against Violence against Women, shows that all women killed knew the perpetrator: son (12 cases), husband (10), partner (9), previous partner (3), ex-husband (2), nephew (2), and other family

1 Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Hronika/388121/Ranjena-zena-iz-sigurne-kuce-Pretio-mi-je-da-izadjem-ili-ce-ubiti-naseg-sina>

2 Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Hronika/402814/Uhapsen-nasilnik-Udarcima-oborio-zenu-na-pod-i-nastavio-da-je-sutira>

3 Vesti-online: <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Ex-YU/358022/Verenicu-davio-uzetom-jer-nije-htela-da-prica-o-svom-ponasanju>

4 Politika: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1452707/Ubijeno+45+%C5%BEena+u+porodi%C4%8Dnom+nasilju.html>

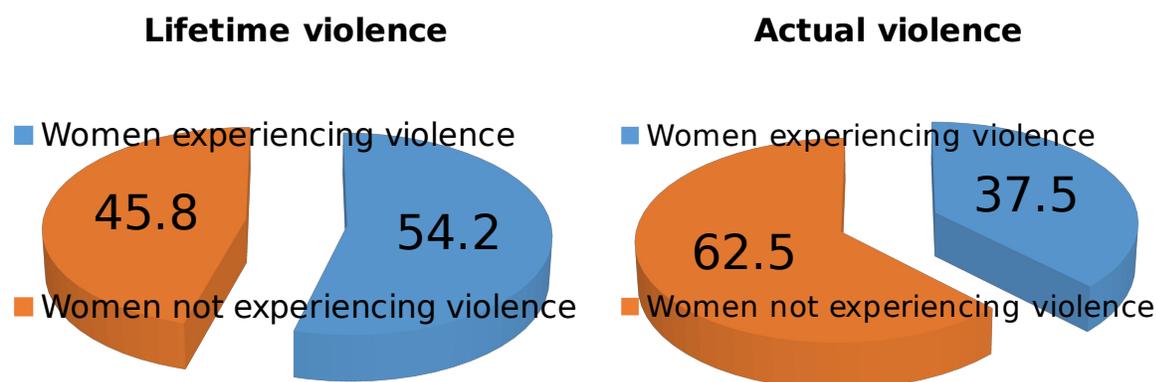
5 Official data for 2013 is still not available and is based on media reports.

members/partners.⁶ In the same report, the Network stresses that a third of the women killed had contacted institutions responsible for assistance and protection. According to the Network “these facts show a profound gap between policy and practice in Serbia in the area of combating violence against women, which suggest only declarative support from the government but not genuine care for the lives of women in the country”.⁷ This outcry is not only limited to the most severe cases of femicide, but rather, to the overall response to violence against women in the country.

Violence against Women in Serbia

Although violence against women is by no means a new phenomenon in Serbia, research and institutional responses on the issue have only started to grow in the last decade. The first comprehensive research on the frequency, types, and prevalence, was conducted as late as in 2010 on a representative sample (2500) of Central Serbia. Here, data suggested a very serious problem in the country.

The actual prevalence of family violence against women (violence experienced in the last 12 months) is 37.5%, while overall prevalence (during life span) is 54.2%.



Closer examination of the forms of violence these women experienced shows that the most frequent form of violence is psychological (31.8% in the past 12 months and 48.7% during life span). Physical and economic violence are less frequent, respectively 10.1% and 11.4% in the last 12 months and 21.6% and 15.8% during life span. And lastly, sexual violence was reported

⁶ Women against Violence Report, *Femicide in Serbia in 2013*.

http://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/images/pdf/FEMICID_Saopstenje_za_2013_godinu.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

in 1.2% in the last year and 3.8% during life span.⁸ It should however be noted that one form of violence usually coincides with another with a third of women reporting exposure to multiple forms of violence in the past year.⁹

The most frequent perpetrators of violence are male family member – 89.9% in physical, 79% in psychological and 85.3% in economic cases of violence. Here again, husbands and partners are usually committing the violent acts. In many cases women have experienced violence in all important social networks, from their family of origin, to their current families, creating a circle of violence and risk which is difficult to exit.

There are several key factors intrinsically correlated to the above stated figures uncovered by the research. Firstly, in terms of structural factors, one of the most important factors is poverty. Women who are materially deprived or are living in poverty are more likely to be victims of violence. Secondly, when looking at cultural factors we can see that women with partners/husbands who have patriarchal or inconsistent (neither patriarchal nor liberal) value system are in greater risk of violence than women with husbands/partners who have liberal values. Here it is also important to mention that women's own attitudes towards violence are important. Tolerance towards violence increases the risk of their exposure. Thirdly, economic dependence, as a significant individual factor, shows how women who do not have access to financial resources in the household are in an especially vulnerable position. And lastly, almost all family factors examined (alcoholism, drug use, participation in wars, family and adolescent problems) proved to be correlated with an increased risk of family violence.¹⁰

Institutional responses to Violence against Women

While prevalence of violence is high, institutional responses and protection of women victims of violence is insufficient. It is predominantly the civil sector which has continually lobbied and advocated for this issue to be taken seriously by policy makers and for the establishment of a social service systems which can provide support. These efforts have contributed to some important steps that have been made: important laws have been adopted (Criminal Law, Family Law, Equality Law, and the Anti-Discrimination Law); strategies have been adopted (National Strategy for improvement of the position of women and gender equality, National Strategy for the prevention and combating of violence against women in the family and partner relationships); and protection and support to women victims of violence have been integrated in

⁸ Although this is considerably lower than other forms of violence, it should be noted that only forced sexual intercourse was used as an indicator.

⁹ Babovic, M, Ginic, K, Vukovic, O. (2010). *Mapping Domestic Violence against Women in Central Serbia*, SeConS, Belgrade.

¹⁰ Ibid.

institutional responses (special procedures and education of police and health workers, Centers for Social Work provide access to safe houses and financial support etc.).

However, despite these efforts, the institutional response is by the CSO as “declarative support” without substantial commitments. In the most recent independent report of the Observatory for Monitoring Violence against Women it is stated that there are still inconsistencies in the recording systems of the police and Centers for Social Work in regard to violence against women, a lack of follow-up measures taken in cases of violence, and an insufficient legal response and criminal charges against perpetrators.¹¹ In addition there is, across Serbia, a lack of safe houses (far below recommended ration of one safe house per 10.000 inhabitants) where women can retreat for immediate protection, and moreover, the safe houses that do exist are not proficiently protected from intrusion of perpetrators.

Human Security and Violence against Women

All this data illustrates the importance of a human perspective on security. In the most private of spheres, the home and family, individual security is often at the greatest risk. Not only are women as individuals unable to live quality lives and fulfill their potential, but they are often not even given the possibility before it is too late. Furthermore, the data shows that protection from violence cannot be provided through physical protection alone, but that it has to be approached through a holistic understanding of violence against women and its connection to gender equality, poverty, attitudes and values, family problems and wider social relations.

This is of course not only the case in Serbia. The most recent survey on violence against women in EU countries shows that actual prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence is 8%, while a third of women have experience this form of violence since the age of 15.¹² Hence, even in countries with more comprehensive legal and institutional basis for combating violence against women, this is still a threat. As such, violence against women is one of the most pressing human security issues.

Human security gives a new lens into understanding and combating violence against women and giving women and girls a life free of fear and deprivation. Putting a greater emphasis on gender in human security is an ongoing debate among human security academics and policy makers. One of the main debates is that a gender perspective can take the attention away from the individual focus of the approach. Still, as one author notes, “a gender-sensitive human security may contribute to highlighting the structural inequalities and discrimination that cause general

11 Brankovic, B., Ignjatovic, T., Jovanovic, S., Lukic, M., Macanovic, V. and Z. Mrsevic (2013). *Annual Report: Observatory for Monitoring Violence against Women in 2012*, Autonomous Women Center, Belgrade.

12 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, (2014), *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey*, Belgium.

conditions of vulnerability for women and girls at the collective level, a challenge that is hard to address when looking at the individual violations of human rights as isolate events”.¹³



13 Estrada-Tanck, D. (2014). *Human Security and Women's Human rights: Reinforcing Protection in the Context of Violence against Women*, Rapoport Center Human Rights Working Paper Series 02/2014.