

The Sun Center, n. o. is a nonprofit organization that has been working for more than 19 years on the issue of abused, sexually abused children, victims of domestic violence in the context of prevention, as well as specific intervention. It operates a number of specialized counseling but also residential facilities for both child and adult victims of violence, implements a number of programs for concrete assistance to children and families in crisis, and educates professionals in the field of violence and prevention of secondary victimization as well as prevention of violence in general. Experts of The Sun Center, n.o. created the original Slovak preventive program under the name of KOZMO and its adventures aimed at preventing violence, conflicts, accepting inactivity for children in the age from 4 to 7 years. More info at www.centrumslniecko.sk.

Domestic violence, violence against children and women is a serious violation of fundamental human rights and freedoms. In fact, it is one of the most frequently violated human rights in the world, and Europe and therefore Slovakia, which is part of it, is no exception.

The results of the research confirm the persistence of a high prevalence of violence against women, reaching the EU average. However, some indicators for Slovakia are significantly higher than the European average. In Slovakia, a total of 34% of women experience physical or sexual violence during their adult life (EU-28 average) and 10% during one year. In childhood 36% of women in the Slovak population met with violence on the part of the adult. Partner violence is the most common form of violence against women. Experience with this kind of violence, from a partner or a former partner, has 26% of women during their adult life, and 7% of women during 12 months. Many Slovak women have visible injuries, fractures or burns on their bodies as a result of physical or sexual attacks. Only 8% of women with partner violence are contacted by the police. Sexual violence during childhood is exposed to 4% of girls and physical violence 33%. *

* Source: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Violence against Women: Pan-European Research, 2012.

The most common perpetrators of domestic violence are individuals from the immediate social environment of the victims. Taking into consideration the socio-economic conditions prevailing in Slovakia, there are many victims of domestic violence to escape violence forced to leave the home and protect their lives, children's lives and seek protection and help. The Slovak Republic has adopted a number of legal measures (introducing the possibility to report a 10-day offender, transposing the European Crime Victims Directive into a new law in force since 1.1.2018, introducing the Plenipotentiary Institute, defining the crime victim, allowing the development of counseling centers and specialized facilities, etc.). Nevertheless, the system of protection and subsequent assistance to the victims of domestic violence has several "blind spots" that do not allow early victims of domestic violence to provide comprehensive expert assistance and protection in time, and thus fail to fulfill the dictum of the Victims Assistance Act.

What is then lacking in the field of domestic violence? Insufficient access to services, assistance and legal protection, absence of professional assistance and services in individual regions, inadequate interconnection of professionals entering domestic violence, absence of specialization in the field of domestic violence, uncoordinated approach, procedures that cause secondary victimization of victims and retraumatization (repeated interviewing methods as a method of working with a rapist and victim, method of confrontation, underestimation of violence in families, inappropriately conducted interviews ...) absence of a network, disconnection of counseling and residential services for victims of domestic violence, non-interconnection of the system of reporting a police rapist with services victims (e.g. in the Czech Republic, the reporting institute is also linked to the Legislative Center with the Intervention Centers, where the police have to inform the IC within 24 hours after the declaration and within 48 hours it is obliged by law to contact the victim of violence and provide professional help and advice. This connection is missing in Slovakia.) In the final consequence, there is also a lack of social assistance and re-launching support in the life without violence (absence of social housing so that victims can afford to pay with their children, retraining on the labor market is often necessary - the victim leaves, loses her background, social status - the environment is condemning her, because in society there are still myths such as

"It's not violence, it's a quarrel" or "She is responsible for his behavior, she should have done what he asked of her..." .

A victim often feels guilty of violence, and a dysfunctional system only assures her about it.

We have created the “Safe place“ project for victims of domestic violence in Nitra and partly also in the Nitra Self-Governing Region to provide comprehensive services ranging from counseling (legal, social and psychological) crisis intervention, legal representation to the possibility of placing victims of domestic violence in specialized equipment in a secret place where they are especially safe and where expert team helps them stand up again and find a place without violence in their lives.

Providing comprehensive services helps, in particular to psychologically stabilize the victims and gradually overcome their barriers, as well as processing traumatic experiences and eliminating secondary victimization (eg, a needless multiple recurrence of the victim's experiences of violence).

The “Safe Place” project responds to the needs of domestic violence victims and partly covers what they are missing from the domestic violence in in real life. It includes two key integral parts:

- **The Counseling Center for Domestic Violence Victims**, established in 2002, first with only one Soc. worker and gradually evolved to the present day, where the Domestic Violence is available to the victims daily when a team of professionals is providing social, psychological, legal advice and representation in criminal and civil proceedings, even for those victims who cannot afford a lawyer. The counseling center provided assistance to more than 1,600 victims of Domestic Violence, helping 133 women and 21 children in 2018. The huge contribution of the counseling center is that it helps victims of domestic violence in the long term, after inclusion in normal life, e.g. after staying in a safe house, if, for example, some legal acts are still ongoing.
- **Safe women's house**, built in 2015 with the support of the NFM, the contribution of the Slovak Republic and several donors. Safe women's house provides victims of domestic violence with crisis intervention, a safe place, specialized counseling, protection, and a comprehensive support system (social, legal, psychological, therapy) aimed at alleviating the trauma caused by violence, in the context of minimum EU standards for providing services to victims of violence. Safe women's house has a secret address, it is connected to a security agency, and outside is monitored by a camera system. It meets all personnel, spatial and operational standards. (it is available 24 hours a day, children have a psychologist and a special worker only for work with them, women, victims of domestic violence have a social counselor, a psychologist, and therapists come to the facility - therapists - art therapy, canistherapy, music therapy aimed at alleviating the consequences of violence, children have their own room - a playroom, 2 therapeutic rooms are available, each room has its sanitary facilities, the inhabitants of Safe women's house have 2 kitchens).

From 2016, the Safe women's house also includes a specialized space that is equipped for the hearing of children's victims, it includes a one-way mirror, camera and audio system for recording of hearings in order to eliminate secondary victimization. When interviewing child victims of violence, friendly environment is extremely important as it was experienced in past by investigators from the Nitra police force. The Safe women's house was established in August 2015, since then 65 women and 79 children found a shelter there. Victims of domestic violence are incorporated into the decision making of the Safe women's house and participate actively in the preparation of the program. After the crisis intervention, many can stand on their own feet, which is very demanding in the current system, but thanks to supporters, sponsors, different companies, cooperation with the city and some municipalities, they are going to start a new life without violence. Many victims of domestic violence go through a complete transformation of life, literally changing their identity, finding a new job, retraining. We also provide this opportunity in Safe women's house. The effort is to get the most out of the needs of victims of domestic violence in the context of their further independence.

The counseling center and safe house of women and experts in it often become victims of domestic violence not only by professional guides through their life crisis, but often also by a family they did not have or no longer have.

The Safe Women's House was created within the framework of the project " Safe women's house - a Space for a Full Life Without Violence" from a Norwegian Government grant through the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and was co-financed from the state budget of the Slovak Republic as well as other sources of finance from private and corporate donors. After the end of the project, from May 2017 to March 2018, the main source of financing was money from the government reserve. Other sources to cover costs are contributions from private and corporate donors and a contribution from the Nitra Self-Government Region. Since August 2018, we have also contributed to its implementation from the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund under the Human Resources Operational Program and the Counseling Center from the MS SR.

But were there also times when we were facing the dilemma of how to continue? We did not have sufficient resources to continue, and the individual project challenges did not work together. Have we ever had a dilemma whether to close this safe house? Safe house was never completely closed, however, there was a time when we have been unable to accept new victims of violence. We would not want to experience such a situation in the future. As continuity of operation would be lost as well as security for the clients and employees, the complexity of the services, excellent professionals could be leaving to pursue other opportunities.

Based on these experiences, we have begun to communicate with service providers for victims of domestic violence in United States. We have prepared a roadshow in the 6 regional cities, we have launched a media campaign called "Life is possible without bruises," with Trnava University we have co-organized an expert conference on "Blind spots in the protection of victims of domestic violence", in which we identified problems in effectively protecting victims of domestic violence. In December 2018, we made a round table on the situation of domestic violence victims in Slovakia. We initiated a working group of experts and legislators to change the situation for victims of domestic violence in Slovakia, and to obtain legal protection and services that are legally entitled to. We also involved several organizations working with victims of domestic violence.

Contacting Media Spots:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBnOHcXzDsY>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtBKASc_EfY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivgX4y1xdQ8>

Road show in Nitra

https://www.facebook.com/pg/centrum.slniecko.nitra/photos/?tab=album&album_id=2004092686277401

“Every victim of domestic violence has the right to protection and assistance,” and we at The Sun Center want to believe that every victim of domestic violence will find it.