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Social Prejudices and Empowerment in Cases of Domestic Violence on Women – A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate what impact social prejudices have when women who are abused by their spouse try to end the abuse, during their empowerment process, as a focus of social work practice. The issue has always been topical, but the context brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that during stressful times the level of abuse rises. In order to facilitate the intervention of the social worker and to refine their methods in casework, we find it is necessary that some aspects of the empowerment process in such cases be clarified: social prejudices that affect the perception of the status that abused women have in the eye of society must be identified, in order to be able to explore what obstacles these women need to surpass if they wish to evolve beyond the status of being a victim.

Keywords: *Domestic Violence, Violence on Women, Social Prejudice, Empowerment, Social Work*

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1. Introduction

According to the data provided by a study published in 2021 (Laiu, 2021), during 2013-2020, 426 women were the victims of the worst form of domestic violence inflicted by the husband or their intimate partner - murder. The report of the Agency for Fundamental Rights of the European Union (FRA, 2015), published in 2014, shows that 25% of women in Romania are subjected to one form or another of domestic violence, from psychological and sexual violence to physical violence, and often the violence manifest itself in more than one way. The isolation that everyone had to endure during the COVID-19 lockdown brought on feelings of anguish, caused not only by the specter of illness but also by the financial insecurity associated with job loss. All these made intra-family tensions aggravate, thus resulting in an 18% increase of acts of violence committed against women within their households (Laiu, 2021).

The scientific literature on domestic violence and women who fall victim to it is prolific (World Health Organization, 1997, 2005, 2013, 2017; World Medical Association, 2010), but the rapid changes taking place socially determine the need for constant re-evaluation of the phenomena of domestic violence. When doing social work for the benefit of women who fall victim to domestic abuse, one must take into consideration that it is a long-term process, with uncertain results, because the initial help, provided as n intervention in crisis situations (Nistor, 2015; 2017a,b,c; 2020), must be followed by a process of empowerment, after which the victim feels that she has the power to rebuild her life.

The purpose of this article is to theoretically review some relevant works that will constitute a starting point for more in-depth research, based on empirical evidence, that will answer the following research **questions**:

1. which are the essential prejudices surrounding domestic violence against women?
2. do social prejudices delay the empowerment process of abused women?

2. Obstacles to empowerment and the causes of domestic violence

All too often, the forms of violence that are undertaken against women are seen by the victims, when experienced, as particularly shameful and as events that are private and should remain so (Helmersson & Jönson, 2013). Because of this lack of openness and sensitivity to the subject, and because of the vulnerability that abused women experience on so many levels, violence in most cases goes unreported. Studies (DGASPC Teleorman, 2022)

show that only 13% of women who are victims of domestic violence would turn to the authorities (including social work institutions), which is a worryingly low percentage, which reveals a lack of trust or a feeling of insecurity of the victims that by calling on the specialized institutions they would benefit from real help.

Another thing worth mentioning is that 55% of the victims would turn to family members for support and advice, of course, based on the pre-existing bond of trust and affection, but this call can often end in failure, thus as observed in numerous studies (Romanian Police, n.d.), because in many cases the victims run into a series of social prejudices that lead them to make the decision to stay in the criminogenic environment (Necula, 2020).

There are numerous factors that influence the rehabilitation process of the victims, and the most important factor is not the financial one, as some might think, especially in Romanian society, but the psychological and social factors take precedence in many cases. There are laws that guarantee the rights of the victims and their protection, through legal mechanisms to defend these rights (Danis, 2003), and social work comes to support and socially apply the legal framework, the success of the assistance given to beneficiaries depends, however, to a great extent, on the cooperation of the beneficiary, who in turn must overcome their own psychological barriers (Morgan & Coombes, 2013).

These barriers are enhanced by the status of being a victim. According to existing studies, both national and worldwide, the causes why the victim remains in the abusive environment are determined by:

1. lack of formal education, which generates fear from the part of the victim that they will not be able to manage on their own (Busch & Valentine, 2000);

2. the lack of financial resources, which causes the victim to accept the abuse just to have financial stability, which is ensured by the violent partner (Kasturirangan, 2008);

3. the victim's lack of social status, which generates the feeling of isolation (considering that victims of domestic violence even manifest, psychologically, a tendency towards isolation) (Russell & Light, 2006);

4. lack of social support from close friends (friends or family), who impose social prejudices principially, which potentiates the victims' sense of shame (Visaria, 2008);

5. lack of legal education, which makes the victims unaware of their rights and unaware of the state bodies they can turn to for help and advice.

Punctual help given to victims is welcome in crisis situations, but if the victim later returns to the violent environment, the abuses are repeated, with increasingly drastic consequences for the victim (Sinha et al., 2017). That

is precisely why the victim's empowerment is so important, because it is likely to solve the problem in a fundamental and definitive way: the victim becomes autonomous, no longer accepts the abuse, rebuilds the socio-economic framework in which they live and thus the abuse stops (Jones & Mattingly, 2016).

3. Types of domestic violence and social prejudices

Domestic violence can take many forms (Fischbach & Herbert, 1997): physical abuse (hits, injuries or even murder), psychological abuse (insults, humiliation, attack on dignity, insults, threats, blackmail, isolation etc.) (Mitrofan & Buzducea, 2011), sexual abuse (rape, sexual perversions), economic abuse (depriving the victim of the necessities of life or preventing the victim from earning their own income).

The causes of family violence (Delara, 2016) are: pre-existing latent conflicts in the family, low financial level, consumption of alcohol or narcotic substances, excessive traditionalism and religiosity, lack of formal education, lack of information regarding the support possibilities that the victim has to be autonomous from the aggressor, the tolerance of the social environment in which the victim and the aggressor live towards violence in general.

Apart from the physiological effects brought on by each and every form of abuse (García-Moreno & Riecher-Rössler, 2013) , the effects of domestic violence are much deeper and more complex, and for this reason, much more difficult to overcome: anxiety, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, fear-sometimes unjustified, self-devaluation, self-doubt, depression, hopelessness, shame, aggression, cognitive distortions, irrational thoughts, difficulties in making decisions, loss meaning of life, excessive feeling of guilt, decreased ability to concentrate and attention, loss of desire to take care of oneself, dependent behavior, loss of self-esteem etc.

The obstacles that victims most often encounter, that prevent them from overcoming the status of being a victim are:

- fear of the aggressor's reaction if the victim tries to stop the abuse, leave the home or report the abuse to the competent authorities (Bent-Goodley, 2007);
- psychological reactions to abuse generate a lack of self-confidence and demotivation, which make the victim believe that they will not be able to survive financially or socially without a partner (Davis et al., 1994);
- feelings of guilt and exaggerated self-blame, which are the effects of abuse, lead in turn to feelings of shame towards others (Roche, 1999);

- low self-esteem leads the victim to believe that they deserve the abuse and must endure it (Kanuha, 1998);
- family and friends put pressure on the victim to maintain the relationship and make efforts to make it work, increasing the feeling of guilt and shame, especially when there were children from the relationship or there is deep religiosity in the social environment in which the victim lives, of a nature to impose a series of social customs or prejudices on the victim (Iverson et al., 2022);
- the lack of financial resources brings along the fear that they will not have the means of subsistence if the abuser does not provide them – in general, victims of repeated or extreme abuse are isolated by the abuser to the point where they cannot hold a job (Hadjimatheou , 2022);
- the victim's low level of education reduces their possibilities to find a job or the possibilities of accessing a job that would ensure her sufficient means of living, especially when the victim would also be responsible for raising children, after separation from the aggressor (Gelbūdienė & Demidenko, 2022).

The role of the social worker in assisting women who are victims of domestic violence is particularly important, due to the diversified methods of intervention (Buzducea, 2009) which, properly applied, can lead to successful results. In this sense, three intervention models are mainly identified in the specialized literature:

- the case work model – the main goal of this model is to reduce trauma and ensure the protection of the person, because only after removing them from the violent environment and their physical and mental recovery, a long-term intervention plan can be built, which involves the real empowerment of the victim;
- the network intervention model – involves the formation of a group of specialists to monitor and advise the victim in the recovery process, but also of a circle of socially close friends to support the victim in their efforts to break away from the aggressor – here the problem of social prejudice comes into play for the first time, since their existence and influence can considerably reduce the group of people to whom the victim can turn;
- the model of awareness campaigns within the community and by political lobbists – involves the creation of a socio-cultural context that favors the success of interventions in case work and in the network – in this case, the problem that arises is

combating prejudices and of social ignorance through education and advocacy.

Empowerment theory in social work involves the use of intervention methods to guide beneficiaries towards achieving a sense of control and personal autonomy. Victims of domestic violence are affected by a strong sense of helplessness, and this theory focuses on how the victim's suffering contributes to the acquisition of life experience and the transformation of the negative experience into an element that can be harnessed for a better life. Practical applications of this theory focus on helping victims at the individual, group and community levels to achieve personal, interpersonal and social autonomy in order to improve their lives. In addition, the model seeks to challenge systems, prejudices, preconceptions, excessive traditionalism, or other elements that may constitute barriers to achieving the intervention's goal.

The Romanian population presents a series of social particularities that we believe are likely to indicate a series of specific needs of the victims, which in turn generate the need to adapt the social work intervention models accordingly. Such social characteristics have been identified in the relevant literature as (Apostu, 2016; Sandu et al., 2020) being emphasized by traditionalism and religiosity, but also low living conditions or, sometimes, even extreme poverty (Preda, 2002).

4. Conclusions

The social prejudices that target the women who are abused by their spouses have a high capacity to become real obstacles when the social worker will try to empower the victim to take action against the aggressor. If the victim does not feel socially accepted, they will not have the courage or the psychological strength to fight against the abuse, therefore they need to feel that they are treated with empathy by the people they interact with. Abuse often brings along anxiety and the feeling of low self-esteem and the women tend to isolate themselves, which is the way to depression. Often a victim will feel discouraged from taking action if they feel they are being judged for their particular situation, therefore they postpone deciding and pursuing the separation of the aggressor.

Sometimes these prejudices are appropriated by the victims themselves, as part of the process of primary socialization, when value judgments are taken for granted and not questioned, or through identification with some examples of failure during childhood, which they tend to copy during adult life. That is precisely why both self-imposed and externally imposed prejudices can seriously damage the process of extracting the victim

from the criminogenic environment and rehabilitating them socially. These obstacles are realities of social work practice, which the social worker must take into account when developing the intervention plan for the beneficiaries.

Financial, educational, and social status obstacles are just as many reasons for the victim not to report the aggressor to the authorities, not to relocate, and not to get out of the aggressor's influence. These obstacles overlap with social prejudices and, together with these, can lead to the failure of efforts to help victims. That is why, in many situations when the social worker makes a crisis intervention after that stage ends, the victim returns to the aggressor or to the environment that exposes them to the aggressor's actions. Real victim empowerment occurs only when the victim becomes truly autonomous from the abuser and regains the emotional balance, physical health, self-respect, and socio-economic status that inspires them in a state of security.

Continuous cooperation is required between the social worker and the victim. The social worker proposes, but the beneficiary decides. The social worker cannot impose one solution or another on the victims of domestic violence, but has the obligation to present them with alternatives for action. Of course, we are not referring only to interventions for crisis situations, which main purpose is to physically secure the victim (by removing them from the environment in which the aggression is carried out and providing medical treatment), but we consider post-crisis interventions as a priority, in the long term, which involves a laborious and complex process of recovery of the victim (not only physical, but also emotional, psychological, through resocialization etc.). Within this complex process, the causes of domestic violence, the objective obstacles faced by the victim (economic, legal, educational etc.), as well as the subjective obstacles (here we include psychological, but also social prejudices, as they affect the victim's perception of their own status and their possibilities of empowerment).

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