

*Summary of results from*

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN UPPER AUSTRIA

on behalf of Büro für Frauenfragen and Sozialabteilung of the Province of Upper Austria

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### *Aims*

The aim was to establish which social and societal conditions are required to prevent and end violence against women in relationships/in the family.

As primary prevention and the early stage of secondary prevention are concerned the study aimed at ascertaining the reasons for the violent behaviour of their partners (family members) from the point of view of the women, the process of experiencing violence perpetrated by an intimate partner (a family member), in particular the process of becoming aware and defining the experience as violence and to establish the significance of social networks and public service providers such as women's refuges, counselling centres and help lines.

As far as tertiary prevention is concerned the study focused on the difficulties women face after the immediate crisis (e.g. after leaving the women's refuge) and tried to establish the obstacles that prevent a permanent end to violence.

### *Key data*

The research project is based on 12 qualitative episodic interviews with women from Upper Austria who have previously experienced violence. The interviews focused on their experiences and on how they were able to end the violent relationship. These interviews were supplemented by a questionnaire survey (38 questionnaires were analysed) that focused primarily on the support received during the crisis.

In various Upper Austrian and Austrian women's media an appeal was launched to invite women who had experienced violence by an intimate partner or/and family member to participate in the survey. Two interview partners were found with the support of an Upper Austrian women's refuge. The interviews were carried out in summer 2008.

The main reason for the interviewed women to participate was to help that in future women will not have to suffer the same as they had done.

One third of the interviewed women had already experienced severe physical and sexual violence in their childhood. All experienced violence as adults, primarily perpetrated by their husbands. All women have children.

### *Results*

While they were experiencing violence all women permanently lived under exceptional conditions. These conditions made it virtually impossible for them to seek help and to accept help as well. Everyday life was dominated by fear, control, physical violence and emotional abuse. The women themselves spoke of living in a state of shock and complete incapacity to

act. They were unable to recognise what happened to them. "I swallowed everything" and "Everything I did, I did mechanically, I saw all in black and white", as one woman described her situation.

The women felt responsible, ashamed and guilty. "I did not want the others to see ... I was embarrassed." These feelings were coupled with lacking knowledge of the legal situation and of help services. The majority of interviewed did not know where to turn to for help, or thought that a particular service like the women's refuge was not responsible for their problem. Not knowing about their rights enabled the perpetrator to put extra pressure on them, especially as far as child custody was concerned.

Victims of psychological violence faced an even greater challenge since this form of abuse tends to remain unrecognised. The seeming invisibility of psychological violence often completely prevents a process of seeking help. Even if the women knew about women's services such as the women's refuge they had the impression that they did not belong to the target group. Since many violent relationships begin with emotional abuse (intimidation, humiliation, degradation, control, etc.) this seems to be even more severe.

In a crisis situation most women were unable to actively look for support services and to get information on their legal rights. At this point it seems important to stress that a lot of women have lived in violent relationships for many years, sometimes even decades, after they had experienced sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse in their childhood.

Looking back the women stressed that it would have been beneficial had they known about their rights and means of help and support beforehand. They even made suggestions as to how this could be accomplished. Access to information material should be made easier, e.g. by displaying information material at locations which are often visited by women such as pharmacies, doctor's surgeries, super markets, schools and kindergartens, town halls. The women interviewed also regretted that the media report too little and too poorly about violence in the family and in intimate relationships. Most of the women stressed the importance of starting prevention already in childhood. "Support and strengthening a child's resources have to start in early childhood," as one woman summarised it.

As the interviews clearly demonstrated it has been virtually impossible for children to seek help by themselves, even if they knew about help services. "I knew about it (children's help line) but I would have never dared to call," said one of the interviewed. It was also impossible to accept support offered by e.g. doctors if pressure was exerted or it entailed a report to the police or youth welfare authority.

In those cases in which women did receive support from a help provider (usually initiated by somebody else) all interviewed women valued their help. A similar result was found in the questionnaires. The majority of these women had thought help from a women's refuge (81.5%). 76.3% judged the support received there as very good, only one woman was not satisfied with it. The results were similar as far as women's counselling centres and the centre against violence (Gewaltschutzzentrum) was concerned.

As far as the assessment of other institutions such as police, youth welfare and medical sector was concerned the results were very discordant. They ranged from excellent, very good to insufficient. It turned out that the intervention and the support given depended largely on personal attitudes and on whether or not the person had received special training.

After the immediate crisis most women would have wished for psychological and psychotherapeutic treatment on a longer term and special offers for their children. They also stressed the importance of support for the perpetrators.

### *Findings*

The research study has clearly established the importance of the existing network of support services to help women in a crisis situation. The support and care provided show a high level of professionalism and play a key role in ending violence. Only in some regions of the province (Mühlviertel, Salzkammergut) a shortage of support services is evident, in particular women's refuges would be beneficial. The legal provisions introduced over the past decade have improved the situation.

This is however contrasted by the fact that violence against women is still largely a taboo, that gender relations are still predominantly traditional and therefore women are often incapable to realise violence as such and to seek help and support since they make themselves responsible for what happens to them. These deficiencies in the area of primary prevention not only impact the women's capacity to act but they also influence the way the social environment and institutions such as the police, justice and youth welfare react. Lack in understanding the problem of violence against women means that women are not (adequately) supported. General and group-specific awareness raising measures are therefore necessary. It is important to stress that prevention measures need to approach parents, persons closely attached to a child and pedagogues so that this measures bear fruit already in childhood and lay the basis for a self-determined adult life without violence, for both women and men.

Generally speaking public measures strongly focus on crisis intervention. Apart from shortcomings in the field of primary prevention many survivors regret that support ends too abruptly after the crisis although they feel an urgent need for further support, especially psychological, psycho-therapeutical help. This leads to a further strain and women feel left alone. It is often enhanced by a difficult economic situation, primarily caused by low income and a lack of (affordable) child care.

Although the current focus lies on crisis intervention there is still need for action in this field as well. In particular an institutionalised co-operation between women's services, the police, the justice and youth welfare authorities would be necessary to enable a co-ordinated approach and a maximum use of all resources available so to best care and support victims and potential victims (children) of violence.

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