Domestic violence is a serious social and health phenomenon. It includes a variety of violent behaviours by perpetrators towards victims: including physical attacks and psychological, social, economic, and sexual abuse. The vast majority of violent relationships are characterised as partner or couple violence. In reality, no one in the family is hidden from the violent attacks of the abuser. Domestic violence is a real danger for individuals, family life, and the whole of society in general.

Domestic violence damages families and increases societal costs for treating direct and indirect victims of violence. Ideally, the family is a natural environment for the well-being of its members, a unit that provides protection. Domestic violence creates conditions that force victims to leave home and family and search for safety for themselves. Society often perceives domestic violence through an economic lens, through the increasing costs necessary for treating the health problems of the victims and the absence of victims in the workplace or family.

Those who experience domestic violence exhibit physical and psychological effects; they feel anxious, ashamed, helpless. In addition to the direct victims of the perpetrator's violent behaviour, there are also secondary victims, those who live in the social climate and witness the violence. This group of victims consists mostly of children who exhibit many psychological disturbances: trauma, stress, insomnia, or changes in attitude towards classmates and teachers as a result of the home atmosphere. Some of them learn violent behaviour themselves.

In Slovakia, both domestic and intimate partner or couple violence have been taboo subjects for a long time. The actual situation was such that even the terms domestic or partner violence were not used. To describe these phenomena the phrases 'crisis in the marriage' or 'family crisis' were used. Both domestic and partner violence were not viewed as criminal for a long time and the perpetrators could not be punished. The couples who were living in violent relationships were referred to marriage counselling.

The perception of domestic and partner violence in Slovakia started to change in the 1990s. In the beginning, female non-governmental organisations began to address the issues of violence against women. These NGOs were the first to disseminate information from abroad and to provide help to the victims of violence. They identified partner and domestic violence as social problems that require public attention. At the turn of 2001 and 2002 they organised the first nationwide campaign 'The Fifth Woman', which focused on violence against women. To disclose partner and domestic violence, they used arguments from foreign studies since there was not any systematic collection of knowledge about domestic violence in Slovakia.

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The first sociological survey on domestic violence and violence against women was carried out in 2001 on a clinical sample that was later followed by other studies.\(^1\)

### Prevalence and forms of domestic violence in Slovakia

For the purposes of research, domestic violence has been defined as: ‘[a]ny violent act in which the victim and perpetrator are currently or were in the past in a personal relationship’.\(^2\) The research sample consisted of 856 male and female participants over 18 years of age. The basic selective characteristics for research sample construction were the region of residence, size of municipality, sex, age, and education. Data was gathered from October to November 2002. Eleven indicators of domestic violence, covering five basic forms of violence, were selected to monitor the occurrence of domestic violence:

- **Physical violence**: slapping, pushing, threatening to kill, battering, and injuring;
- **Psychological violence**: psychological abuse;
- **Economic violence**: financial abuse, excessive monitoring of expenses, damaging things in the flat/house;
- **Social violence**: restriction of contacts with a member of the family or contacts with friends, etc., and control of movement;
- **Sexual violence**: sexual abuse.

Occurrence of each of the mentioned forms of violence was surveyed based on the respondent’s personal experience or from his/her knowledge of family members and acquaintances. Thus, information was also gathered about violent acts (in the same structure) in larger families or in the households of friends, neighbours, and colleagues.

Results from data collected showed that much of the Slovak population has both personal experience with domestic violence and knowledge about violence in other households. The rate, however, in occurrence of various types of measured violence is different.

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\(^1\) One of the first sociological surveys on domestic violence was carried out with the cooperation of sociologists and psychologists from Centres for Psychological Counselling Services, which are organisations that focus on counselling. People who go there to find help with various life struggles, including domestic violence. Psychologists working in these organisations asked those experiencing domestic violence to complete a reporting form that aimed to collect information on domestic violence. Within one year, there were 441 report forms. From this point of view, this research sample has the character of a clinic sample (consisted of people who decided to try to find help arbitrarily or they were advised to go there and ask for help). This data is not representative as it was collected in one type of organisation from people who had information about where to go for help. This data was processed and published in Bodnárová - Filadelfiová 2002/2.


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Occurrence of domestic violence (personal experience and knowledge of occurrence) in Slovakia (in %)³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of violence</th>
<th>Personal experience or knowledge of occurrence of violent behaviour</th>
<th>Of which</th>
<th>Knowledge of occurrence in other families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slapping...</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing, jostling,...</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening with death</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health injuries</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological abuse</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial abuse (refusal to contribute to household expenditure...)</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive monitoring of household expenditure</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of social contacts, control of every step</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damaging items in the household</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surveying personal experiences with violent behaviour as well as knowledge about occurrences of domestic violence in families nearby and in larger neighbourhoods has revealed that, in Slovakia, the less harmful forms of physical violence are the most common. In all monitored dimensions and for all monitored indicators of violent behaviour in families, it has been shown that women are definitely more frequent victims of domestic violence.

Personal experience with violent behaviour in the family in Slovakia according to the selected variables of sex, age and size of settlement (in %)⁴

⁴  Ibid, 3.


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### Types of Violent Behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Violent Behaviour</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>55+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapping</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing and jostling</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening with death</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health injuries</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological abuse</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial abuse (refusal to contribute to household expenditure)</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive monitoring of household expenditure</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of social contacts, control of every step</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking things in the household</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The personal experience of those interviewed also differed according to age. People between the ages of 35 and 54 were the most frequent to admit to a personal experience of violent behaviour from a member of their family. The only exceptions were 'being slapped by a member of the family', where there was a slight prevalence of younger age groups, and 'sexual abuse', where there were more answers from persons over 55.

Households with domestic violence differ in their characteristics according to the relationship between perpetrator and victim. According to data received in the clinical Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!, “Domestic Violence in the Slovak Republic”*, Bernardína Bodnárová, 2010.

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sample, 95.5% of households with domestic violence had one perpetrator and 4.5% had multiple abusers. In households with one perpetrator, the majority of these perpetrators were husbands/intimate male partners (85.3%). Other family members were rarely indicated as perpetrators: wife/intimate female partners were indicated to be abusers in 3.5% of households, children in 2.4%, parents in 4.3%, and other relatives in 4.5% of households (27.4%).

**Causes and triggers of violent behaviour**

Sociologists paid close attention to the causes of domestic violence in their surveys. They tried to identify the reason for domestic violence or the situation at the initiation of domestic/partner violence.

Our data showed that respondents interpreted many phenomena as reasons for domestic violence in Slovakia. The most frequent thought cause reported was alcoholism of the violent person (87.6%). Other often mentioned causes listed by respondents included incorrect upbringing during childhood (68%), and the personal characteristics and violent character of the perpetrator (61.9%). Data revealed that violence is not the result of only one cause; usually it is the result of many complex factors.

In most cases of partner violence, it was reported that violent behaviour started after marriage (31.3%). In 12.2% of cases of married couples, the violent behaviour started when one of the partners established an extra-marital relationship, and in 9.5% it was triggered after a child was born. In most families, the violent behaviour started after the perpetrator became inebriated (49.4%). In the second largest portion of families (42.6%), violence erupted after the victim was contradictory/offensive to the perpetrator. In many families, violence is the result of complex factors and it is difficult to identify the main factor. Some victims of domestic violence share the opinion that violence in their families is continually present and the abuser does not require any trigger to act violently towards the victim. According to the study, the atmosphere of violence in the family lasts varying lengths of time, though on average it lasts over approximately fourteen years.

**Public attitudes towards punishment of children**

It is proven that children who have lived in violent family atmospheres may learn violent behaviour. They can use such behaviour against their peers or later, in their adult life, against partners or children. Also, children whose parents used beating for discipline may learn violent behaviour and use violence to take power in situations where they want to promote something. A new approach to child upbringing prefers positive activity, including talking with the child and explaining the situation, instead of using physical punishment. There are still many people who accept corporal and other forms of punishment for children. Many parents agreed with the occasional spanking of a child’s bottom by hand when the

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5 Ibid, 2.
6 Ibid, 3.
7 Ibid, 2.


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situation requires (68.8 %), but only 2.8 % agreed with repeated battering. Physical punishment is accepted mostly by the elder population.\(^8\)

**Public opinion and domestic violence**

Many people in Slovakia have adopted the idea that domestic violence is not only a private family matter and that violent behaviour must be stopped. They agree with procedures that reduce domestic violence with the support of policy makers, services, police, health workers, the education system, etc. The public condemnation of this phenomenon helps to approach a social zero tolerance of domestic violence. It appears to be very helpful to educate people that violence is a criminal act, not a private matter. Those who commit violence in the family violate human rights and it is not justifiable.

Communication with the public about various spheres of domestic violence is essential, as it makes the public sensitive to situations in violent households. It is also necessary to share knowledge of where to find help widely. Public support helps to implement more effective procedures for stopping domestic violence.

The most effective measures used to reduce domestic violence among the Slovak population were police intervention and education systems, teaching that no one is allowed to harm another person anywhere, even in the privacy of home. Also, social services, including shelters providing asylum and safety for women who suffer from domestic violence, were much preferred measures.

**Summary**

In a relatively short period of time, much work has been done in the area of domestic violence and violence against women in Slovakia. From the very beginning, women’s NGOs contributed massively to change. They attracted the attention of policy makers, the support of public institutions to help victims of violence, and contributed to the formation of public opinion.

Laws protecting victims of domestic violence have been adopted. Changes in legislation establish legal background for police intervention in violent homes. Further laws support service formation, including shelters for victims and their children. Police have been authorised to remove the perpetrators from the home and in this way ensure the safety of threatened persons. Experts say this is not enough to ensure the victim's safety, because this protective measure is only valid for two days.

The Social Services Act created conditions for establishing various kinds of services that, among other things, could assist the victims of domestic violence. These services could be provided by public, non-profit, non-governmental bodies. The law on social-legal protection and social guardianship created the environment and procedures for protecting abused and neglected children.

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\(^8\) Ibid, 3.


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The services area is still considered underdeveloped and there is more work to be done. They play a very important task in the safety, security, prevention, discovery, and treatment of the impacts of domestic violence. Effective services have to be complex and well coordinated to be able to help victims of domestic violence and return them to common daily life without anxiety, fear, or trauma. There is a gap in services to be filled.

There are many households in which children are abused and neglected but there are many more households in which children witness violence in the family. We have a lot of knowledge about children who are direct victims of violence, and we have the legislation and services to help those children. However, we have less knowledge about and services for children who witness domestic violence. Until recently, little attention has been devoted to this area. Similarly, there is not enough work done researching how to train professionals in various occupations to address this problem.

Thus, many reforms have occurred in Slovakia since the early 90s in efforts to work for the identification and prevention of domestic violence, as well as to protect victims and raise awareness about this hidden phenomenon. The latest research findings show that there are still many women who are not satisfied with the assistance they were provided with. In addition, relatively large regional differences in assistance are seen, which shows that still more is needed to improve the response, mostly in bodies that provide assistance immediately after the case of violence is reported, e.g. police. Much must still be done, and the work of both education and prevention continues on.

Bernardína Bodnárová studied sociology and political economy at Comenius University in Bratislava. Now she works as a senior researcher in the Institute for Labour and Family Research. In her professional life, she dealt with family and social policy and in recent years has concentrated her attention on family violence. She has participated in national and international research teams and is the author or co-author of several books and articles.

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