

YOUTH SEXUAL AGGRESSION AND VICTIMIZATION IN GREECE

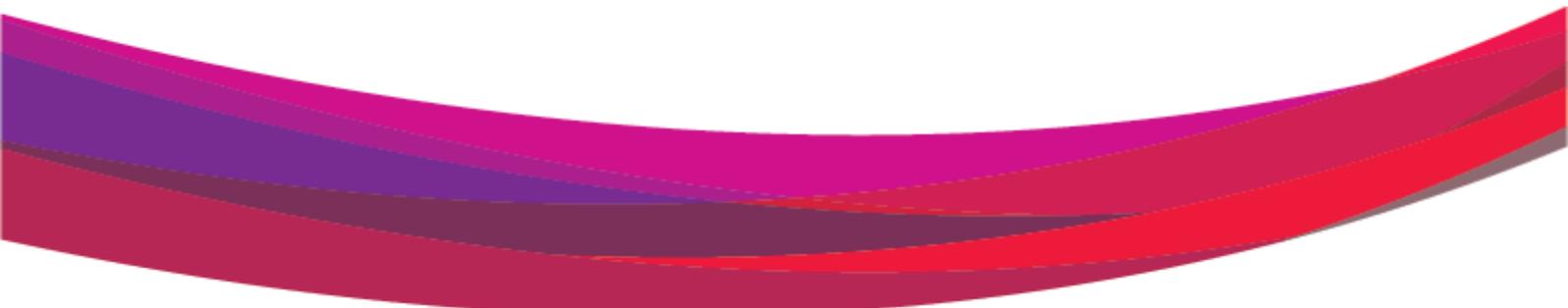
STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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The report is informed by personal interaction with representatives of the scientific community, public authorities, non-governmental organisations and the civil society, conducted between June-December 2012. Information was approved by representatives of the following organisations: The Association of Heraklion Prefecture Female Boards/Shelter for Abused Women and Children (Maria Pachiadaki, Emmanouela Skoula, Agoritsa Maggipa, Marilena Flytzani), Young Women's Christian Association/Branch of Heraklion, Crete (Agoritsa Maggipa), the Administration of Secondary Education of Heraklion, Division of School Activities (Aggeliki Zacharatou), the Society for Systemic Therapy and Intervention (Aikaterini Garefalaki), the Hellenic Society for Research and Prevention of Sexual Abuse 'Obrela', Athens (Orestis Giotakos), Counselling Centre of the General Secretariat for Equality, Athens (Elena Apostolidou), the Institute of Child's Health, Athens (George Nikolaidis), the NGO 'The Child's Smile', Athens (Stefanos Alevizos), The Council of Europe campaign 'One of Five' in Greece (Michalis Katrinis).

1. Youth sexual aggression and victimization: a problem of low political priority

The promotion of the sexual and reproductive needs and rights of youths is a predominantly socially and politically sensitive topic. The problem has not given a high political priority in Greece and youth needs have been ignored in policies and programmes. In particular, the National Action Plan for Reproduction and Sexual Health (2008-2012) has been criticised for paying little or no attention to the sexual and reproductive health of young people. Although youth violence has been neglected in the current political agenda, gender-based violence has been given high priority and a National Programme for prevention and combating of violence against women 2009-2013 was launched in November 2009, including several actions such as the creation of more counselling centres and shelters in the capital city of each region, the operation of a national emergency SOS telephone line, the launch of awareness-raising campaigns to prevent violence. Many actions of the National Plan have already been completed and the results of the first years of implementation were considered by the stakeholders to be very promising and a good starting point towards an improved response to the problem of gender based violence. Although these measures mainly address gender based violence without age-specific target groups, they were thought to have contributed to other collaborative initiatives between the General Secretariat for Youth and the General Secretariat for Public Administration, addressing specifically youth sexual health through campaigns on contraception and other relevant activities. Furthermore, the new counselling centres were viewed by some stakeholders as opportunities to address the needs of young people although they are not the primary target group. In fact, they are expected to serve women of all age groups and offer them information on women's health issues, conception and contraception, artificial insemination, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

2. Services for sexual violence: challenges and threats during the financial crisis

The aforementioned low political priority in youth sexuality and sexual health was thought to affect issues of governance and explain the lack of specialised government-sponsored services for young victimized people, including shelter, medical care, psychological support, and assistance with other basic needs. Support to sexually victimized young people in Greece was thought to be provided by NGOs that are developed to serve cases of domestic violence, are not age-specific and have broad catchment areas with low capacity and limited financial resources. It was further mentioned that although young victims of sexual violence are in need of multiple services for psychological, legal, medical, and other type of support, these needs are handled separately by a variety of services, which are not integrated and thus increase the psychological burden of the young victims. Likewise, special reference was made on the lack of services for young perpetrators of sexual violence and the low attention paid to the treatment of sexual aggression. It was argued that the lack of available services for perpetrators limits the referral options of the service providers and sets them unable to effectively intervene in cases of sexual violence. Serious concerns were also reported about the fact that NGOs, as the main providers of support for victims of abuse, currently strive to survive under very difficult financial conditions affecting the whole country. The financial crisis was also thought to have affected the government-sponsored organisations in many ways through significant budget cuts, staff reduction, administrative reforms, and limitations in their scope and activities as well as changes in their priorities.

3. Legislative gaps and priorities

As regards to legislation, several concerns were reported about the early initiation of sexual activity of young people, which does not conform with the minimum age of informed consent to any kind of sexual behaviour provided by the Greek law at the age of 15 years. It was argued by some stakeholders that law makers should take into account the age of mature thinking and responsible decision-making instead of the age of initiation of sexual activity when setting the age of criminalisation of sexual acts. Much discussion was also made on the fact that rape and other similar sexual acts are categorised as 'crimes against sexual freedom and crimes of economic exploitation of sexual life' and not as 'crimes against personal freedom'. Criticism was also made on serious gaps of the law such as the low punishment of sexual crimes and the capability of a victim to withdraw charges and end prosecution due to psychological trauma.

Furthermore, some stakeholders were concerned about the victim-oriented procedures of prosecution in Greece, which discourage victims from reporting sexual abuse due to being time consuming and psychologically damaging. Most importantly, the stakeholders emphasised the lack of legal protection when reporting abuse to police or other authorities, which was considered to be a reason explaining the low reporting practices by first line professionals. The law against family violence (3500/2006) was considered to be a legislative achievement of recent years, which acknowledged rape within marriage for the first time but failed to address youth violence. A serious gap in the law indicated by some stakeholders, referred to the lack of punishment in cases of teachers' unconformity with mandatory reporting of suspected students' victimization. Another gap of the family violence law indicated by stakeholders was the lack of reference on the role of the health care professionals in the management of victimized patients, despite the fact that they are often confronted with abused patients at primary and secondary health care services. Finally, the lack of respect in the laws and the ineffective enforcement mechanisms and strategies were cited as major barriers of effective response to cases of youth sexual aggression and victimization.

4. Primary prevention of youth sexual aggression and victimization within schools

It was underlined by most of the stakeholders that sexuality education at schools, as a means of primary prevention of youth sexual aggression and victimization, is not provided within the school curricula although it has always been among the action plans of the Greek government. Many concerns were raised about the fact that sexuality education lies on efforts of both governmental and non-governmental agencies operating outside the school setting and acting as substitutes of formal education in terms of this sensitive topic. Co-curricular activities, sometimes used by teachers to work with highly motivated students on several self-identified interesting topics outside the school programme, were indicated as opportunities for sexuality education at schools. It was however mentioned as uncommon for the teachers to select topics related to youth sexual aggression and victimization due to lack of training, skills and overall preparedness to elaborate on such topics with their students.

5. Preparedness of the health sector to respond to youth sexual aggression and victimization

As regards to the health care sector, some stakeholders expressed increased concerns about the lack of health care providers' training and expertise to handle cases of sexual violence, in both the public and private sector. Most importantly, they underlined providers' lack of skills in detecting victimized individuals and providing post victimization treatment and support. Health care providers were also thought to lack communication skills to deal with such uncomfortable topics and were further criticised for pretending not to see the problem or dealing with the problem superficially. It was also mentioned as very common for health care providers to hold discriminatory attitudes, which discourage young people from seeking help at health care services and thus resulting in underreporting of cases. In addition to the absence of health care providers' specialised training, the health care sector was criticised for lacking protocols and guidelines, screening tools, referral resources, interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration, resulting in the poor treatment of sexually abused young people. Great concern was also caused by the fact that early detection and effective treatment of psychiatric patients in Greece is insufficiently addressed although it is common for perpetrators of sexual violence to suffer psychiatric disorders. Special reference was made on the lack of psychiatric care and follow up of sexual perpetrators after discharge from prison, which was thought to contribute to recurrence of violence. Finally, the follow up of psychiatric patients in the community was thought to be very important but quite neglected.

6. Promoting research and monitoring of youth sexual aggression and victimization

The lack of statistical evidence and epidemiological studies in Greece were emphasised as barriers of monitoring, evaluation and appropriate intervention to the problem. Great importance was attributed to a large epidemiological study,¹ which was recently completed in Greece and 7 more Balkan countries, aiming at mapping child abuse and neglect (CAN) in the general population of 11 to 16-year-old children that attend and those that have dropped-out school and at identifying the number of reported/detected cases of abuse and neglect.

¹ BECAN, <http://www.becan.eu/>

Another issue stressed as important was the need to introduce mechanisms to collect data on the problem systematically as well as the need to unify the information collected from victims and perpetrators through introducing common registration tools in the various agencies involved in victim support. In line with this, the National Programme for prevention and combatting of violence against women 2009-2013 was considered to be a promising initiative including plans for establishing a National Observatory on combatting violence against women.

7. Gender equality: a challenging issue in the Greek society

Major concerns were raised about gender inequality, the dominant gender stereotypes and gender-discriminatory conceptions in the Greek society. Despite the Greek Constitution declaring equal rights and obligations between men and women as well as equal pay for work of equal value, gender inequality and gender disparities of power are still evident within the Greek society, which strongly maintains patriarchal structures. Women are still assigned with the traditional role of mothers and dependent of family members, responsible for home and family duties and men are given the role of wage earners. These multiple social roles and tasks of Greek women along with the lack of welfare services for the reconciliation of family and working life, was mentioned by the stakeholders as introducing great limitations for women who either cannot enter the labour force or they have to abstain from work for long periods. High rates of unemployment of women were mentioned, while on the other hand they are thought to be greatly discriminated at work as they are allocated little power, they are less paid than men and are assigned with inferior tasks of low responsibility. Likewise, the way people regard men's and women's sexuality is also indicative of the dominant gender-discriminatory conceptions in Greece as men are expected to be masculine to gain women's attention, while women are expected to be sexually desirable. The subordinate role of women was emphasised by most of the stakeholders as a leading cause of gender-based violence in the Greek society, which makes women more dependent to men and thus more vulnerable to situations of sexual abuse. These submissive or violent gender-based profiles of Greek parents are thought to be transferred to youth through imitation and thus working with parent and family relationships was considered as very important for effective prevention. It was mentioned as promising that gender-based discrimination has been the subject of the National Programme for Substantive Gender Equality 2010-2013, which includes four strategic goals and several measures such as improvement, enhancement and implementation of legislation, development of affirmative actions for certain groups of women, gender mainstreaming public policies, enhancement of administration mechanisms; empowerment of civil society and women's organisations as well as campaigns to sensitise public opinion in order to prevent and change gender-based stereotypic roles. It was further emphasised that the General Secretariat for Equality and the Research Centre for Equality Matters (KETHI) have been established to promote the advancement and development of women, however, both seem to lack human and financial resources and thus many questions remain about the effectiveness of these actions to address the problem effectively.

8. New technologies - New freedoms: issues of safety and appropriateness

Serious concerns were raised about the role of the mass media and the communication technologies in the prevention and promotion of healthy sexual lifestyles. In particular, it was noted that gender discrimination is largely reinforced by the mass media, which are overrepresented with images of women acting as sexual objects. Such practices are thought to greatly influence young boys and girls who imitate these images and try to adopt similar profiles. In addition to that, concerns were raised about the mass media for promoting abnormal sexual situations as normal in the name of 'sexual freedom'. On the other hand, much discussion was made about the way media present rape, usually as an extremely uncommon and horrible act, which discourages young people from reporting it when it happens. Furthermore, the media were criticised by many of the stakeholders for lacking a sensitive approach in cases of young people's crimes and for superficially safeguarding the victim's anonymity and dignity. In line with the mass media, the web and the social media were also criticised for young people's engagement in risky sexual communication with unknown people, which facilitate situations of sexual abuse. What highly concerned many stakeholders was the fact that young people usually turn to peers and the media to get information about sexuality in the absence of sexuality education within the school and in lack of friendly discussion on sexuality matters within the Greek family.

This was considered to entail serious risks for the sexual health of young people and was underscored by many stakeholders. In light of this concern, educating parents in addressing their children's sexuality issues with a subtle way was underlined as being the most effective preventive measure. A promising initiative with the potential to serve as an opportunity for preventive action on youth sexual violence was the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse ('Lanzarote Convention'), which was thought to represent a significant advance in the prevention of sexual violence, the protection of children and combatting impunity in Greece and many other European countries. Under this initiative, a national campaign is currently in progress² across Greece involving several key players such as local and regional authorities, children's ombudspersons, civil society organisations, parents' associations and professional networks (in the medical, teaching, welfare, health, justice and caring sectors) and aiming to raise awareness and help parents, carers, teachers and other professionals to talk to children in a positive and child-friendly manner about their right to define their personal boundaries.

9. Some recommendations for policy and practice (as by December 2012)

Governance

- Development of specialised and youth-friendly services for young sexual perpetrators and victims.
- Development of a special agency to coordinate, monitor and evaluate national action towards the prevention and management of Y-SAV.
- Introduce alternative preventive strategies less depending on state funding e.g. based on peer groups, voluntary community groups, etc.

Legislation

- Introduce more strict penalties for sexual crimes.
- Include Y-SAV provisions in the family violence law.
- Define the role of health care providers in the family violence law.
- Introduce more efficient law enforcement mechanisms.

Education

- Introduce sexuality education within the school curriculum.
- Promote peer-education methodologies in sexuality education.

Health

- Develop training opportunities for health care providers.
- Introduce tools for the management of Y-SAV in the health care services.
- Improve detection, treatment and follow up of psychiatric patients in the community.

Research

- Develop surveillance systems for Y-SAV indicators.
- Introduce opportunities for NGOs to conduct research on Y-SAV.
- Introduce common registration tools in agencies.

Society

- Introduce parent training and awareness raising opportunities on Y-SAV.
- Improve women's social status through effective interventions in all spheres of everyday life.

² www.coe.int/t/dg3/children/1in5/default_en.asp