

YOUTH SEXUAL AGGRESSION AND VICTIMIZATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC


STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Principal Authors:
Maria Papadakaki and Joannes El. Chliaoutakis

Department of Social Work
School of Health and Social Welfare
Technological Educational Institute of Crete, Greece

and
Gabriel Bianchi, Slovak Academy of Science

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1. Introduction

Slovakia is thought to have a relatively good rating on the European map of sexual health. In fact, the country has the lowest figure of frequency of sexual intercourse in 15 years old girls (11%) and boys (13%), as well as one of the lowest incidences of induced abortions in teenage girls. On the other hand, due to a low frequency of contraceptive pill use (3% and 9%) and condom use (67% and 65%) among young girls and boys respectively, there is a relatively high teenage pregnancy rate - 50% above the EU average.

In addition, Slovakia has, along with the UK, Hungary and the Baltic post-soviet countries, an extremely low reproduction rate - the lowest in EU with 1.32 children on average for a woman in fertile age.¹

In the Slovak society, the problem of Youth Sexual Aggression and Victimization (Y-SAV) is considered to be a rapidly growing problem along with bullying at schools. Sexual aggression is thought to start verbally at 12-13 years of age and thus the age of 16 years is considered to be late for prevention. Among the most alarming issues raised by the stakeholders included the dominant role of web social networking tools in young people's lives and their contribution to the sexual exploitation of minors. One of the few national surveys in Slovakia, conducted by the NGO 'Odysseus' in 2010 and titled 'All what people do (not) talk about sex'² indicated TV and internet as newly emerging threats for children. Special reference was made on the sexual activity of minors (under the age of 15 years) in ethnic groups, predominantly Roma, and other vulnerable groups such as young people leaving the foster care system. Although the number of victimized youth was thought to be rapidly increasing, systematic monitoring of the problem was said to be missing or to be carried out sporadically by state research institutions (e.g. Slovak Academy of Science, Academy of the Police Force, Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathopsychology), and occasionally by NGOs. The lack of monitoring was thought to result in limited official evidence on the problem and thus limited opportunities for effective intervention. In line with this, sexuality from the human-rights and health perspective did not receive any systematic reflection in analytical publications devoted to the assessment of societal and political development during the turbulent period of rapid social change after 1989 in Slovakia (e.g. the Annual Reports published by prestigious Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava). In this regard, the need to set up a monitoring system at national level was underscored. Among other suggestions, legalisation of sex services was also mentioned as a promising solution to obtain records of the sex providers, particularly off-street and gain control over the number of sexually exploited youth. Some stakeholders however argued that registration of sex workers would amplify existing problems since a significant share of sex workers would never register because of their illegal migrant status.

2. Political influences on youth sexuality

Many of the stakeholders seemed to be very sceptical about the political situation in Slovakia. They characterised the political climate in Slovakia as relatively stable after the early parliamentary elections with a strongly left-oriented governing party, dominated by a parliament clearly pro-European left-wing oriented. Reference was made to the unique Basic Contract with the Holy See (signed in 2000), which is thought to have put Slovakia into a difficult position concerning the performance of individual rights as related to various dimensions of intimate citizenship (gender, sexuality, education). Some stakeholders expressed a strong disappointment from the governing party for remaining inactive while they expected them to pay more attention to the rising incidence of sexual violence and promote favourable conditions for legislative changes. The long lasting missing interest in issues of sexual 'otherness' and sexuality-related human rights in politicians was also underlined by some stakeholders - independently from their left-to-right orientation.

¹ The Reproductive Health Report: The state of sexual and reproductive health within the European Union (2011). *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* (16, Supplement 1), 1-70.

² www.iuventas.sk/files/documents/publik%C3%A1cie/%C3%AFa%C5%A1ie%20materi%C3%A1ly/co_sa_nehovori_o_sexe-preview.pdf

It was further emphasised that during the previous ruling period, the governing party expressed openly their unfavourable attitudes by stating that ‘The topic of registered partnerships (of same sex people) is absolutely unimportant’³ and this topic was abandoned by the right-wing liberals during the negotiations of the Governmental Programme Declaration in spite of the fact that this issue (along with liberalisation of conditions for soft-drug use) was one of their main election-campaign slogans. In addition to that, some stakeholders reported on various efforts geared by conservative politicians within 2011 as well as by Christian Democrat leaders of the Slovak Ministry of Health, to obstruct the liberal abortion/contraception policy in Slovakia or prevent free access to it. In line with the above, some stakeholders stated that both political and societal issues keep Y-SAV matters hidden in the Slovak society and appeared to be quite pessimistic with limited expectations in terms of positive changes in the near future. These pessimistic views were largely attributed to the political situation and more specifically to a lack of political competency and a ‘purposive silence’ of the governing party to avoid stigmatising its political image in the eyes of strongly conservative voters/population, as well in order to negotiate with potential political partners. In particular, the governing party was criticised for intentionally ignoring issues of sexuality in an attempt to avoid the political risk. Some stakeholders criticised the left liberal government for sharing the friendship and following the rules of the Roman Catholic Church to ensure its political support. In other words, it was thought to be political risky for the governing party to raise issues related to Y-SAV, which could meet the disapproval of the church and consequently of a major part of the society. This dominant role of the church in the Slovak society was thought to be historically justified. In particular, church was thought to have gained people’s respect, trust and commitment during the totalitarian communist regime, by offering material and spiritual support to people living under adverse conditions at rural communities and by helping people maintain their cultural and religious identity. In recent years church is funded by the Slovak Ministry of Culture and has gained a strong influence in the society along with a major involvement in political matters and decision making mechanisms. The stakeholders’ view of the position of the church within the Slovak society seemed to be contradictory. Some stakeholders held the opinion that the church should be separated from the state and the political matters. This was attempted in the past unsuccessfully due to the strong political influence of the religious parties. Other stakeholders endorsed the influential role of the church in political matters and suggested taking advantage of this power in local society and using its resources in future preventive efforts for Y-SAV. What was stressed as important by some stakeholders was the influential role of the church in Y-SAV matters. In particular, it was mentioned that every action to address issues of sexuality has met the strong negative reaction of the religious organisations, which in turn have affected the public opinion and consequently the governors’ decisions. Some years ago, the government stated openly that they will not address issues of homosexuality while a TV programme on homosexuality in Czech Republic was very negatively criticised within Slovakia. On the other hand, the newly established Committee on LGBTI issues within the Advisory Board of the Government on Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equity (after a failure to establish it in spring 2011) was considered to be a positive step towards the recognition of the problem. The current post-secular period was considered to be characteristic by radicalising political attitudes on sexuality. The former Minister of Education (representing a left-central political party) called the request for same-sex registered partnership ‘perversion’.⁴ Likewise, approximately 8 years ago (2004) there was a national action plan for sexual and reproductive health prepared for the Ministry of Health but was never put into force due to the strong political influence of the religious parties. This political situation was also thought to affect youth policy in Slovakia, which currently addresses only youth mobility, employment, recreation, and other similar areas but not sexuality. It was however encouraging that the Ministries of Education, Health, Internal Affairs and others are currently in the middle of developing the Youth Strategy 2014-2020 with thematic areas, one of which will be related to youth health and well-being, involving sexual health and prevention. Among other suggestions some stakeholders highlighted the need to stimulate the development of a diversity of discourses around sexuality that would enable to introduce a culture of minority-pluralities instead of the traditional majority decision-making process. It was further underlined that if conflicts in the sexuality arena are to be solved, silence needs to evolve into conflicting discourses.

³ Lajčáková, Petocz a Kolíková. (2011). Ľudské a menšinové práva. In M. Kollár, M. Bútorá, G. Mesežnikov (Eds.), *Slovensko 2010. Súhrnná správa* (pp. 151-167). Bratislava: IVO. (Quote: Pp. 152).

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 153.

3. Conservatism as an obstacle to youth sexuality within the Slovak society

Sexuality was not considered to be an easy topic to discuss within the Slovak family. Parents were thought to efficiently avoid discussing with their children about sexuality due to being uncomfortable or embarrassed. This was largely attributed to the strong conservatism and sometimes illiberalism that seem to characterise the Slovak society. People don't report cases of youth sexual aggression and victimization and thus the problem is thought to be underreported. According to recent research⁵ attitudes towards sexual minorities in the general public were shown to differ significantly from attitudes towards any other minority groups. Moreover, the highest share of citizens refuses to express their opinion on sexual minorities and their needs. This combination was thought to result into a sort of societal synergy in refusal and neglect of sexual 'otherness' in the Slovak society.

4. NGOs as main actors in the fight against sexual violence

Stakeholders underlined the lack of services to address youth sexual aggression and victimization either at governmental or at non-governmental level both for young victims or perpetrators of sexual violence. A governmental council on prevention of criminality was indicated as the body in charge of safety at schools, which employs an intersectoral strategy but is not active in Y-SAV matters. It was further mentioned that preventive efforts in youth populations are geared by a special Department under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, Y-SAV matters were thought to be missing from the agenda of this Department. In line with that, the existing youth organisations were thought to be less active on issues of sexual violence.

On the other hand, there are several non-governmental organisations dealing with issues of violence against children, girls and boys, women but none of them addressing sexual violence in children and young people. The NGO 'Slovak Family Planning Association, SFPA' (a national branch of IPPF)⁶ was mentioned as being active in that area. Its activities include the promotion of sexual education in Slovak schools. Volunteers and members of the association organise various educational activities for pupils, teachers and parents at schools but this activity is based on bilateral collaboration with individual school authorities and not universally introduced by the Ministry of Education. There are also anonymous helplines certified by the government to offer assistance to children and their parents in various issues and situations some of them related to sexuality. Anonymity in these services is thought to be attractive to young people and this is the reason why these services are widely used by people of all ages for very sensitive/personal issues. In addition, some NGOs that have been established to address youth sexuality issues are not easily identifiable in local society due to lacking continuity. On the other hand, prevention in youth is thought to be mainly geared by NGOs, which despite focusing on GBV or other risk behaviours of youth, they are in an ideal position to help in Y-SAV prevention. The Children of Slovakia Foundation (CSF), the largest independent foundation providing grant-programmes for NGOs working with children and young people up to 26 years of age has been active in issues relevant to child abuse issues, but not directly to Y-SAV in a number of ways. Most importantly, it has prepared the Alternative report on the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (OPSC) in the Slovak Republic. In cooperation with 10 other NGOs acting in the field of children and youth. The other actual report relevant to child abuse issues prepared in Slovakia was the report on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which includes also children & youth.⁷

Some stakeholders ascribed the role of family and school to NGOs. Young people were thought to approve preventive efforts geared or carried out by volunteer workers than by governmental initiatives as they are not seen as official and are trusted more easily. This is the reason why most stakeholders identified the need to invest on the non-governmental sector by increasing the funds, the funding opportunities and generally by improving their capacity in staff and expertise.

⁵ Bianchi., G., Luha, J. (2010). Názorová neparticipácia: sexuálna a telesná inakosť na okraji záujmu. In *Sociológia - Slovak Sociological Review : časopis pre otázky sociológie*, (42), 548-563.

⁶ www.rodicovstvo.sk

⁷ http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/trafficking/Docs/Reports/GRETA_2011_9_FGR_SVK_en.pdf

They further suggested the establishment of a coalition between NGOs aiming to put pressure on the government to identify the problem of Y-SAV and promote the necessary policy and actions towards effective prevention and intervention. Although NGOs were considered to be the key actors in youth prevention, many of the stakeholders were disturbed about the unequal distribution of funds and the rather limited part of the governmental budget allocated to NGOs for their huge task. NGOs were in fact thought to operate under very unfavourable conditions due to the shortage of staff and funds and many of them are thought to strive to survive. Another issue that caused great frustration was the fact that access to certain governmental funds was only available to state organisations although the major part of their responsibilities is being carried out by NGOs. The lack of preparedness of the professional staff to identify and provide specialised assistance for Y-SAV was also underlined although a movement to train first line professionals is currently in progress within Slovakia, carried out by NGOs under governmental funding and particularly by children psychologists.

Some other promising action currently undertaken by NGOs involves the development of a coalition of NGOs under the leadership of the Children of Slovakia Foundation and UNICAF called 'Coalition for children', which is going to collaborate with the Committee on children and youth within the Advisory Board of the Government on Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equity within the 1st quarter of 2013 towards the update of the actual National action plan for children and youth for the next years. Representatives of the Children of Slovakia Foundation expressed the further opportunities to address Y-SAV matters through the CSF biggest grant making programme called 'Children's Hour' as well as through its new grant-making programme under the NGO Programme of EEA Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 under the call titled 'Empowerment of Vulnerable Children and Youth'. In addition to the above plans, the Council for Slovakia Higher Education, as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education is planning to recommend the improvement of the undergraduate education of first line professionals to the Ministry of Education as well as to develop a national action plan for Y-SAV with a core group of young higher education students.

5. Sexuality education: A missing issue from the school curriculum

As regards to education, it became clear that no official sexuality education is currently offered at schools but there are instead several initiatives funded by the government and implemented by NGOs. Schools in Slovakia seem to focus on traditional education with limited or any reference to issues of young people's sexuality. Some stakeholders particularly mentioned that sexuality education in schools has been recently 'downgraded' by removing it from the portfolio of compulsory school subjects. Moreover, sexuality education offered in schools that are operated by churches and other private schools operating under different value imperatives (all financed equally by the state budget), may miss fundamental parts of the sexual health agenda due to the lack of a defined binding minimal content for sexuality education. The need to introduce universal education at schools about sexuality topics was underscored while some stakeholders suggested that it needs to be optional in order to enable pupils to refuse attendance, when necessary. Others stressed the need of consensus development among all the stakeholders in education (Ministry of Education, religious groups, civil organisations etc.) on the minimal requirements for a compulsory sexuality education in primary and secondary schools.

It was also mentioned that, based on the school reform in 2008, the National Institute for Education (ŠPÚ) introduced a two-tier model of governance in schools with the following characteristics: public education program (70%) and school education program (30%). Through this model, SPU provides a common curriculum for all schools and puts some standards for elementary and secondary education, which address 70% of the content of the curriculum while the 30% of the curriculum is selected by the school authorities based on certain available options. Several schools use this option to introduce sexuality education as a separate school subject in a particular grade of 0.5 (16 hours during the school year) or 1-hour (33 hours during the school year). This 30% was considered by some stakeholders as a good opportunity to address sexuality issues within the school curriculum although it would not be common for all the schools due to being optional. Despite the benefits of this model, some stakeholders stressed that the strong influence of Roman Catholic Church deters the school authorities from selecting sexuality-related topics in this 30% portion of the school curriculum.

It was further mentioned that some schools offer basic information about sexuality through the courses titled 'ethics' and 'catechistical'. The first one is taught by a specialised pedagogics and the second by a priest. Some stakeholder considered 'catechistical' as a good opportunity to promote sexuality education by using the power of religion on pupils through training the priests to offer this type of education. In response to this suggestion, it was argued that a human rights and health-based sexuality education can never be sufficiently performed by a Catholic priest as he has to follow the normative regulations of his church, which come in contrast with practices such as the use of condoms, access to certain medical services, etc.

It was also noted that since 1997, there is education on marriage and parenthood included in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. This course is cross-sectional in nature and its content and teaching methods depend on the school authorities and the teachers. There are schools that ignore this course within their curriculum, while others address it effectively.

It was further underlined that some teachers offer sexuality education despite not been officially included in the school curriculum and these teachers are usually stigmatised and considered as 'trouble makers' within the municipal authorities in charge of school monitoring. Except from the efforts of certain NGOs to promote a compulsory minimum content of sexual education in schools, supported by members of the ruling party and some opposition right-wing liberal parties, nobody is thought to have the courage to confront the leaders of the church and undertake the political risk.

It was also mentioned that a manual on sexuality education was developed targeting students of ISCED 2 (11-15 years of age). The manual aimed to assist the school authorities and the teachers in addressing sexuality matters and Y-SAV and was funded by the IPPF. It was developed by volunteers of the SFPA (academics, psychologists, teachers with long experience in sex education).⁸ The material consists of two parts: a methodological guide for teachers and worksheets for students. The manual contains a separate chapter regarding the prevention of sexual abuse and violence in the context of sexual and reproductive rights and health. Although this manual was positively evaluated by the Ministry of Education it remained unexploited by school authorities due to strong arguments posed by the religious parties. Nevertheless, copies of the manual were distributed to schools, educational institutions and other professional offices and are successfully used at present. SFPA has also conducted a number of training seminars for teachers focused on the use of this manual in schools. This educational material became also available on the web by the lead organisation⁹ and many teachers are currently using the material as guidance for their lessons. Besides the material on sexuality education, there are directives of the Ministry of Education for NGOs and schools on how to address bullying at schools within lesson, which is available on the web.¹⁰

Some stakeholders also referred to the specialised staff employed in schools depending on the school budget. In particular, it was noted that some schools employ psychologists or specialised pedagogics to provide professional assistance to the pupils and the teachers. It was however mentioned that these professionals raise the school expenditure and they are usually employed as part time employees. Some stakeholders were frustrated with the fact that the school budget depends on the number of pupils and thus many schools are discriminated due to lacking the financial capacity to employ professional staff. Schools that can't afford to employ professional staff have the alternative option to refer cases for psychological assessment and assistance to certain governmental psychological centres that operate at big cities to address the school needs of the whole district. Several concerns were however reported about the preparedness of the professional staff to address Y-SAV matters in these city centres and the need to improve the staff knowledge, detection and management skills on Y-SAV cases was underscored. Besides that, it was mentioned that schools in most cases use the services of the psychological centres to address student dropouts while bullying, aggressive behaviour and everything related to sexuality is intentionally concealed although quite often it is suspected.

⁸ Rovňanová, L. - Lukšík, I. - Lukšíková, L. (eds). (2007). *Metodická príručka pre sexuálnu výchovu na druhom stupni základných škôl v rámci osnov výchovy k manželstvu a rodičovstvu*. Bratislava : Okat Plus pre SPR, 2007.

⁹ <http://rodicovstvo.wordpress.com/metodiky/metodiky/>

¹⁰ www.prevenciasikanovania.sk

Serious concerns were also reported about the major role of the local government in the school function. The stakeholders were uncertain about the effectiveness of self-governance in Slovak regions and serious concerns were reported about the insufficient knowledge and training of local governors to address Y-SAV as well as their susceptibility to political interests. Serious doubts were raised about the level of preparedness of local governors to make correct decisions about educational matters without holding the appropriate education, attitudes and the culture on the one hand and without having the political autonomy to decide based on the school interests on the other hand. Increasing the autonomy and the overall capacity of schools to address Y-SAV matters was mentioned as a priority. Besides the limited knowledge and expertise of teachers to identify and effectively address the problem in schools, they are also thought to be reluctant to report the problem due to unpleasant consequences following such practices such as stigmatisation to local authorities. It was also mentioned that the low socioeconomic status of the teachers justifies their low engagement and commitment in addressing Y-SAV. It was thus stressed as important to have professional staff such as primary prevention coordinators, school psychologists and social pedagogues to address these issues at schools. It was further mentioned as important to train the teachers along with other first line professionals in against the strong stereotypes they hold and to be more alert. To have the autonomy to report cases of Y-SAV without been afraid of stigmatisation and bad criticism. Although the employment of appropriate staff for sexual education in schools has been thought to be a long pending issue due to insufficient school funds, certain stakeholder seemed to hold a different view of the situation, attributing highest responsibility to the lack of political will. Schools were thought to suffer a shortage of staff, specialists and money. Furthermore, parents don't seem to have realised their power to affect the school program and they show low intention to collaborate with the school authorities. Although they have a voice in the 30% of the school curriculum they have limited influence.

6. Some recommendations for policy and practice

- Set up a monitoring system for victimized youth at national level.
- Legalise sex services to control sexual exploitation of youth.
- Separate the church from state and political matters.
- Invest in the non-governmental sector by increasing the funds, the funding opportunities and their capacity in staff and expertise.
- Improve undergraduate education of first line professionals.
- Develop a national action plan for youth aggression and victimization.
- Introduce sexuality education in the school curriculum.
- Collaborate with all stakeholders in education to reach consensus on the minimal requirements for a compulsory sexuality education in primary and secondary schools.
- Increase the autonomy and the overall capacity of schools to address youth aggression and victimization.