

The treatment of women victims of violence in Austria. A snapshot of a challenging mission^{*}

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Summary. *An important but challenging task of our times is to unveil hidden violence and to raise people's awareness of its existence; especially domestic violence that is often unreported. This paper is meant to provide a brief insight into the situation of gender violence and the treatment of victims in Austria. After a basic presentation of the statistical extent of violence in the country and the relevance of the topic, the authors examine the various support providers for victims, focusing on the aid organization "Caritas". A final, rudimentary presentation of current psychotherapeutic work with victims of violence in Carinthia shall round off the picture.*

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Violence has many faces

The scenarios associated with the concept of violence can vary greatly. While one person might first imagine a street fight, others might think of war, or

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the battered housewife. Presumably not many people will associate violence with things like mobbing or emotional neglect. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2011) also neglects the psychological side of violence, defining violence as a “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill”. But especially the non-physical form of aggression is important to be aware of, as it can be much less obvious. Many victims of psychological violence doubt whether it makes sense to report the matter. Many fear that what happened will not be recognized as violence and no one will believe them if they have no visible injuries. Psychological violence remains under the surface too often, making it even more important to find clear definitions and laws in order to protect affected men, women and children.

Violence is not uncommon, even within families and it can occur in many forms. The number of unrecorded cases of violence may be assumed to be very high. In a recent study, conducted by the Austrian Institute for Family Studies, about the prevalence of psychological and physical violence, 2,334 men and women aged 16 to 60 were asked whether or not they had experienced various violent situations. Experiences of violence ranged from rather soft forms such as “repeatedly being insulted”, “being threatened” and “being bitten or scratched” to more severe forms such as “psychological terror” or “being beaten”. The experiences were subdivided into four categories: Psychological violence, physical violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence. The study shows that most assaults are of a psychological nature: 30.6% of men and 39.8% of women report at least one threatening experience of psychological abuse in their lives, since the age of 16. Physical violence comes in second with 27.9% of men and 29.6% of all women reporting physical attacks perceived as threatening, including experiences ranging from being pushed to being severely beaten. Similarly menacing sexual harassment had been experienced by 29.7 % of all women and by 5.6 % of all men. The study also showed that almost one in three women (29.5 %) and close to one in ten men (8.8%) report having experienced sexual violence in the stricter sense (ÖIF, 2011). While men experience physical assaults mainly in public places – one in three men (33.0%) had at least one experience of that kind – women mostly experience physical violence in their close social environment, with their partners (29.1%) or within the family (25.2%) (ÖIF, 2011). The statistics of the Austrian Federal Office of Criminal Investigation show, that among the recorded acts of violence in 2011, in 52.6% (approx. 30,000 cases) there had been a relationship between the victim and the offender. In almost one in three cases, both parties shared the same place of residence (Bundeskriminalamt Österreich, 2012b). In Austria, more than half of all murders happen within the circle of family and friends, the victims are mostly women and children. In 2010, 167 homicides were investigated for the connection between the victim-perpetrator relationship. In 111 of these cases, which is about 70 percent, there was a kinship or acquaintance relationship. (AÖF, 2011a). The association of Austrian women

shelters (Verein Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser - AÖF) estimates, that approximately one in five women in Austria is affected by violence from a close male relative (AÖF, 2011a), but as there are few studies about this paradigm, it is hard to make an exact statement about the extent of the abuse, especially since not only physical violence plays a role but also psychological terror in the form of threats, insults and other forms of humiliation that can and should be counted as instances of domestic violence.

In 1997 a law was passed to deal with cases of domestic violence, that authorizes the police to evict from a dwelling and its immediate surroundings for a period of 14 days (§ 38a ÖSPG, 2009) a person who poses a direct danger. This means a person may even be evicted from his or her own house. Austria was the first Country to pass such a law (Stöckl, 2009) and soon many others followed. The application of this law has increased dramatically since 1997. In 2010 the Austrian executive issued 6759 eviction orders against perpetrators (AÖF, 2011a).

To deal with violence in general the interministerial “Alliance Against Violence” (“Bündnis gegen Gewalt”) was founded in September 2010 through the cooperation of the Austrian Department of the Interior and the Austrian Federal Office of Criminal Investigation. The aim is to link all stakeholders who are actively engaged in violence prevention, even more effectively than before. Thereby, political, social, economic and scientific as well as policing efforts are being linked together and common approaches are being developed (Bundeskriminalamt Österreich, 2012a).

In Austria every province has a separate Violence Prevention Center that works together with the police. After a police investigation the interested parties are contacted (by telephone or by letter) in order to offer advice. The Center also provides counseling services for those who do not wish to inform the police and will create a hazard assessment and safety plan. The service is free for victims of violence and includes psychosocial as well as legal consultation. The Violence Prevention Center Carinthia is a recognized victim protection facility and is being financed by funds from the Federal Office for Women, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Justice (Gewaltschutzzentrum Kärnten, 2012).

Another institution that supports crime victims is the “White Ring” (“Weißer Ring”) which offers an emergency hotline, emotional support and individual consultation. Through this organization victims can get free legal advice and information about available support options, social services as well as specialized counseling and therapeutic treatment services (Weißer Ring, 2002).

First aid for women in need

A variety of counseling centers, such as the aid organization “Caritas” or women’s shelters, serve as the first contact point for women victims of

violence in Austria. Especially the latter can often provide secure accommodation to the women and their children. Here the shelters are open to all female victims of any form of violence, independent of religion, income, nationality and also the type and frequency of the violent acts. According to the latest statistics of the Association of Autonomous Austrian Women Shelters (AÖF, 2011b) in 2010, a total of 1733 women and 1715 children found protection and shelter in 26 (of the now 30) shelters throughout the country. 85% of these women were abused by their own (ex-) partner. These statistics show that marriage and partnership often represent anything but a safe world. Many of the women seeking help have severe stress symptoms. In many of these cases they can be provided with not only counseling and general support but also psychotherapy.

Caritas

Caritas Austria is a Roman Catholic aid organization whose goal is to offer counseling and support for all people in need, regardless of their social, national or religious affiliation. People in difficult life situations, with illness or disabilities, after accidents or disasters can seek help there. In general, Caritas wants to provide a voice for people on the margins of society, who cannot speak for themselves or cannot be heard. Caritas Austria was founded in the early twentieth century.

During the first decades, Caritas Carinthia's work consisted primarily of providing emergency aid. Free meals and donations of clothes relieved the suffering of the population during and after the First World War and in the course of the recovery initiatives, thousands of children from the cities could find recreation in the countryside. During World War Two, the work continued, despite severe repression by the Nazi government. Even "non-Aryan" families received help from Caritas, for example by providing Jewish children with baptismal certificates, to protect them from the Nazis. Caritas aid in post-war Austria is mainly domestic work: help for the hungry, for refugees and war veterans. Since the early 1990's, the breakup of the Eastern bloc, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the war in former Yugoslavia, induced migration movements and flows of refugees. Caritas Carinthia offers help to foreigners and refugees, by providing them with clothes, furniture or financial means (Caritas Österreich, 2012).

The organization of Caritas Austria has several smaller Institutions, one for every province of Austria. Caritas Kärnten is responsible for the southern Austrian province of Carinthia and is currently run by approximately 1,200 full-time employees and a vast number of voluntary workers (Caritas Kärnten, 2012b). Caritas Carinthia's activities cover almost every field of human life: from providing homes for children, disabled persons, refugees, homeless and elderly people, to counseling for mothers and families, support

for people suffering from alcohol and drug abuse, and legal consultation as well as projects for the long-term unemployed and much more (Caritas Kärnten, 2012a).

Women trafficking – a special case of gender violence

Besides the aforementioned goals, Caritas Carinthia has a strong focus on helping victims of gender violence and human trafficking. The Caritas counseling service “Talitha” (Aramaic = girl) offers help to girls and women involved in (forced) prostitution, human trafficking and marriage trade. Although human trafficking is prohibited under human rights laws and punishable with a sentence of up to ten years in Austria (öSTGB, 2011), this kind of modern slavery still exists. The victims’ countries of origin include Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Ukraine but also Austria is involved in this process (Mallmann, personal communication, February 29, 2012, February 29; Mühlberger, 2009). Due to its geographical location Austria is both a transit and a destination country for human trafficking (Mühlberger, 2009). The women experience continuous human rights violations and are often heavily traumatized by the heteronomy and the use of violence such as beatings, rape, forced intake of alcohol, drugs or medication, threats, intimidation or isolation. “Talitha” offers these women psychosocial counseling and support (i.e. assistance in dealing with agencies and authorities, debt advice etc.), food supplies, clothing and hygiene items, secure accommodation, procurement of medical care as well as help with reintegration (application of valid identity documents, arrangement of the return trip to the country of origin, contacts with counseling centers in the country of origin, etc.). In 2010, 13 women were cared for at “Talitha”. In four cases, Caritas offered emergency shelter, supported three women in leaving the sex trade and helped with the reintegration into the job market, made possible the return home for two women and looked after eleven women as part of long-term psychosocial counseling and social assistance. In another six cases, “Talitha” supported victims of labor trafficking with advice and welfare benefits (Caritas Kärnten, 2011).

Sister Silke Mallmann is the director of “Talitha”. In an interview held in February 2012, she describes the three most common situations in which the women seek help: Most women, she says, come because of social crises (partner violence, problems with friends or problems at the brothel etc.), others search for help with extricating themselves from prostitution (finding a new job, help with regular payments etc.). As a third, less common reason she mentions sexual problems (i.e. with demanding partners). She notes that the women’s high levels of psychological stress usually occurs due to the existential crisis that often follows the exit from prostitution not prostitution itself. Suddenly facing poverty and payment of bills often seems to be

perceived as much more threatening and stressful than the violent situations, in which many women find themselves in.

As Mallmann states, an important factor that has great influence on the chances of getting out of prostitution, is the level of education attained. Little education usually makes job placement quite difficult. Nevertheless she describes most of her clients as very Ego strong. She says a great deal of this strength comes from a self-concept they have constructed, that gives them a sense and (real or perceived) control. Often they save themselves by creating the fantasy of being the great savior themselves (i.e. by being able to send money home to their families). As most ideologies, this image may collapse someday but as long as the women are still fighting for survival they need to hang on to this self-concept.

Caritas life counseling

Within the framework of Caritas, life counseling, psycho-social consultation as well as psychotherapy is offered. In the Caritas life therapy model, the person is in the center with his or her individuality and relatedness. By individuality we mean the individual strengths and talents, as well as the vulnerability of a person. By relatedness we mean that of the human to other people, such as partner, family, friends, colleagues but also to tutors like teachers, therapists and doctors. Human beings also permanently stand in relation to social conditions, politics, fashions and trends as well as in relation to the culture in which they live and from which they originate. These realities have shaped them and have created an identity and belonging. In these individual conditions everyone's lives take place and very individual, personal life stories are formed. Thus one goal of counseling at Caritas is to make it possible for people to say at the end: `by confronting myself with my biography I have learned a new way of seeing and understanding myself, I have rediscovered my strengths and power sources, I can see and respect myself despite my wounds and limitations and I am proud and thankful for what I have accomplished!.

Caritas life counseling helps people in burdensome life situations, in life crises and with difficult and serious decisions. The counseling includes: Technical Information (legally, socially, psychologically etc.), provided in an understandable, comprehensive way and tailored to the client's needs, as well as professional support through targeted and methodically guided conversations that bring up all the essential areas of the advice seeking person's life.

In 2010, Caritas life counseling completed 12,593 counseling sessions working with individuals, couples, families and groups (Caritas Kärnten, 2011). Advice covers all key areas of life and interpersonal relationships. Counseling is conducted in a safe and confidential atmosphere using

accepted counseling methods. This creates a deliberate and planned relationship in which trust can be established. Clients may wish to remain anonymous. At the beginning of the consultation process, clients formulate a counseling goal together with the counselor. Openness, respect, value consciousness, empathic understanding, as well as the theoretical and methodological expertise of the counselor allows the clients to cope with crises constructively and to develop new perspectives. At the same time the autonomy and competence of the clients are strengthened and individual solutions can be worked out. The counselor selects from the possible diagnostic and methodical alternatives those that are most helpful for the client in clarifying the current situation and achieving the counseling goal.

According to counseling statistics, marital and relationship problems are dealt with the most, (around 40% of cases). These include:

- Heavy disputes that keep leading to hurt and personal offences or disputes that escalate into violence
- Mutual devaluations, lack of understanding
- Couples or individuals thinking about separation or divorce

When violence is involved, Caritas life counseling also works together with the Violence Prevention Center and women's shelters, to discuss the next steps together and to help enhance security and safety.

Psychotherapy with victims of violence

Psychotherapy at Caritas Carinthia is defined as a comprehensive, deliberate and planned treatment of psychosocial or psychosomatically induced behavioral disorders and suffering by means of scientific and psychotherapeutic methods. The basis of successful psychotherapeutic treatment is provided by a trustworthy, stable relationship between patient and psychotherapist. Within the Caritas life counseling services, predominantly individual psychotherapy with adults and adolescents is offered. The psychotherapists there are trained in various psychotherapeutic methods. The goal of the psychotherapeutic work is to facilitate changes that will help to reduce or even end suffering and disorders related to restrictions in key areas of life such as work and relationship.

Another contact point for victims of violence in Carinthia is ASPIS, an institution, that has specialized in treating trauma, offering medical and psychotherapeutic help for people, who have suffered from crime, serious accidents, torture and war experiences(ASPIS, 2009). It was founded by Klaus Ottomeyer, a psychology professor and psychodramatist in 1998. The clients of ASPIS come from Austria as well as from abroad. While the Austrian natives are mostly victims of robbery, rape and domestic violence, the foreigners have often suffered trauma by expulsion, torture and war. The disorientation in the strange environment is an additional burden for these

refugees. Fertschey (1999) describes these clients as people who neither eat nor sleep any more, and can no longer function as they are constantly haunted by the same horrific images. In 1999 ASPIS received Carinthia's Human Rights Award (Fertschey, 1999) and in 2011 the Bruno Kreisky Prize for Services to Human Rights (www.kreisky.org).

Within and around ASPIS, psychotherapists often work with trauma-tized victims of violence by means of psychodrama (Lackner, 2005; Lind, 2006; Ottomeyer, 2004) but this is only one of the many different psychotherapeutic methods offered in Austria. In contrast to neighboring Germany, in Austria 22 psychotherapy approaches are officially recognized and supported by the National health insurance (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2003).

Conclusion

The psycho-social system and the supply of various aid organizations are already well developed in the urban areas of Austria, while it still remains a challenge to expand their prominence to the rural regions. Now it depends on the politics, the police and the facilities themselves to develop effective programs both for the prevention of (domestic) violence and the treatment of the victims. It is important not only to improve the efficiency of the interventions but also to raise the level of awareness for services offered and violence in general. An example of great support from the state is § 4 (5) of the Austrian Victims of Crime Act (Verbrechensopfergesetz - VOG, 2011). The act was passed in 1972 and determines that under certain circumstances, crime victims have the right to full financing of psychotherapy. This has created the basis, that long-term care for victims of violence can be assured.

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