

A Pandemic in a Pandemic: Domestic Violence in Croatia

By Igor ŠLOSAR*

In the fight against the global pandemic of COVID-19 lockdowns were enforced across the globe in order to protect the population against the virus. Lockdowns and other restrictions led to people spending more time at home than earlier. During the last year, second-hand consequences of long-lasting restrictions became visible. One of those is the rise in domestic violence. Often, the victims of such violence are women. Croatia has experienced a surge in cases of domestic violence and an increased influx of victims seeking shelter. The network of safe houses, shelters and call centers taking in these cases was already underfunded before the pandemic, and the increase in cases will only exacerbate the issues already present. The Croatian government has promised funds to increase the capacities of the system, but that has yet to materialise.

Key words: Croatia, domestic violence, pandemic, COVID-19, women, right to safety.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives and the world we live in. It has transformed the way we perceive things, the way we interact with each other and the way we work. When the Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, most of us could not imagine how serious was the crisis we were about to face. The world was hit by something new that is highly transmissible and with unclear symptoms. Along with that, national healthcare systems were not prepared for the surge in cases. Most poignantly, they were not organized adequately, specialised medical and personal protective equipment (PPE) was scarce, there were not enough hospital beds, and there was a shortage of ventilators and monitoring equipment for the most critical COVID-19 patients. Most importantly, there was no cure for this virus, no treatment, and no vaccine. Finally, the public was poorly informed about the virus and its spread.

When faced with such a dire situation, it was essential first to organize the healthcare system, inform the public of the prevailing conditions, and hope for as few infections as possi-

ble. Lockdowns and other restrictions on the movement, travel, association, and social gatherings were put in place. The lockdown in Croatia was implemented in the second half of March 2020. Restrictions included limitations on public gatherings and events, restrictions on outdoor and indoor activities, suspending public transportation, limiting the number of people in stores, etc. (Civil protection Directorate press release, 2020).

Countries had different approaches to lockdowns and other restrictions, but the common aim was to limit personal contact and transmission of the virus. Unfortunately, for many nations, those were only the first measures.

Less personal contact, less COVID-19 virus transmissions, fewer problems overall. Or so we thought. Further, all these measures, in particular lockdowns, have had significant side-effects. Because the priority of the state system was containment of the COVID-19 virus and the consequences of the pandemic, many other medical conditions were put aside, and their treatments postponed. This will eventually catch up with us and burden us for years to come. After an immensely difficult year, the research and statistics have surfaced regarding the price of putting our focus solely on COVID-19. An exploratory analysis by Elmer, Mephram and Stadtfeld (2020) points out the problematic trajectory of students' mental health in Switzerland between September of 2018 and April 2020. Mental health issues are a serious problem among adolescents (Guessoum et al. 2020). Williams et al. (2020) highlight other medical conditions that were also left unchecked between March 1 and March 31, 2020, such as circulatory system diseases (43.4 percent drop), type 2 diabetes (49 percent drop) and cancer (16 percent drop).

Lockdowns and other restrictive measures to keep people in their homes and prevent socializing with others were introduced. But what if home is not a safe place? What if being locked down with a member of your family or a partner is the very definition of being unsafe and at risk of physical injury or psychological abuse?

Staying at home in a way implied that the general population was avoiding contact with everybody except the members of their own immediate families. The sanctity and safety of home was implied. Stopping the spread of COVID-19 was the main objective for not only the government but also the entire society, and everything else simply became a secondary issue. Remote work was introduced, and it is still in place for many in countries around the globe.

At the same time, worrying issues that existed before the pandemic, such as domestic violence, only continued to rise. Lockdowns were expected to have consequences. Domestic violence has skyrocketed across the globe, most notably in China, during the shelter-in-place mandates (Campbell 2020). Why is that? The answer lies in multiple factors, but one is quite clear: along with the lockdowns came an economic recession. Jobs were lost and incomes have dried up for those who were let go from their jobs. The stress this has caused

people, especially those with violent tendencies and a history of abuse, served as a catalyst for acts of domestic violence, as did uncertainty regarding the future, the meaning of life, and the ability to pay the bills, buy food, and meet medical expenses. Maybe the most important factor of all was a reality where the end was not in sight and new jobs could not be found quickly. The author does not want this to be seen as making excuses for abusers. However, to help the victims of abuse, we should understand, or at least try to understand the reasons behind it.

All forms of domestic violence were on the rise in Croatia in 2020 (Ministry of Interior Affairs. 2020, p.7-8). As an example, attempted rape cases were up by 34 percent, while reported cases soared from 73 in 2019 to 168 cases in 2020. Murders were up by 10 percent.

Unfortunately, it is expected that these trends will continue in 2021, and the state systems designed to help the victims are now being tested on a scale never seen before. That is if we assume the victims are going to muster the courage and come forward. However, the reality is there is little hope of that happening. It is, of course, to be expected that more women are going to report domestic violence; however, that also means that the number of women who do not report abuse is also going to be much larger. Notably, victims of domestic violence are not always women, although they are disproportionately affected.

The state infrastructure in Croatia is flawed and poorly equipped to help domestic violence victims. For them, reporting the violence means dealing with a multitude of obstacles in starting long criminal proceedings, a lack of sufficient support in the community, and a system that is paralyzed. Before getting a clearer picture of how the Croatian system helps victims, or tries to help them, and what steps are needed to improve the services offered to victims of domestic abuse, we should define what constitutes domestic violence according to international law. Unfortunately, the term includes only physical abuse, and for that reason many do not understand that violence comes in many forms.

What is domestic abuse and why it is important to know that?

Article 10 of the Croatian Family Violence Protection Act of 2020, defines domestic abuse as any act of physical violence without inflicting injury, corporal punishment or other humiliating treatment of children, mental abuse, sexual harassment, economic violence (prevention of finding employment, prevention of the use of personal or communal property, withholding funds, etc.) and negligence toward the elderly or disabled (Zakon.hr, 2020). According to the United Nations (2021): "Domestic abuse, also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence", can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviours that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, ma-

nipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone.” Another definition, that of the UK organization Woman’s Aid, defines it as “an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.” According to the same source, domestic violence comes in following forms: “Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence), psychological and/or emotional abuse, physical or sexual abuse financial or economic abuse, harassment and stalking, online or digital abuse.” Finally, the Mayo Clinic (2020) in the US says that “domestic violence — also called intimate partner violence — occurs between people in an intimate relationship. Domestic violence can take many forms, including emotional, sexual, and physical abuse and threats of abuse. Domestic violence can happen in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.”

Each of these definitions adds a layer to the complexity of the issue. Further, it is challenging to provide one conclusive definition because the world itself is changing and, therefore also the forms of domestic abuse that occur. Decades ago, social media was not present in our everyday lives. While it aims to connect us, it can be used to abuse others. Hence, the definition of domestic abuse is evolving. Crucially, by including these changes in the definition, we could help the abused recognize their victimhood.

There are several motives behind this ever-changing definition of domestic violence. The first is control over every aspect of the other person’s life. This can come in many forms, from controlling their finances to monitoring their use of communication devices and restricting their movements outside the home. Second, the abuse does not need to be physical. The physical element is what most people, even victims themselves, see as abuse. However, the physical element is only a part of it. Third, domestic violence knows no boundaries. Everybody can be a victim no matter their gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, age, or any other characteristic.

In order to address domestic violence properly, all parties involved in the prevention or prosecution of it need to be cognizant of its shapes and prevalence. A crucial party in this chain is the healthcare system. Victims are often in a dire physical state and require immediate assistance. Further, following triage will typically be years of psychological treatment and that may never end.

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone at any point in their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic even more so. Many people not only work from home, but also cannot leave it due to lockdowns, cannot socialize with others, and cannot seek help without first having a negative test for COVID-19. A 2020 study ordered by the Center for Sexual Rights, whose aim was to list all the issues safe shelters and support systems faced during the pandemic while helping victims of abuse, portrayed a very grim picture of the situation in shelters in Croatia. The problems were divided into 3 areas: those related to working di-

rectly with victims, those connected to the work of various government institutions, and issues involving epidemiological measures and the provision of the necessary working conditions. The first area included problems such as the inability to stay in contact with victims of violence except by phone, lack of real insight into the situation in the family, confidentiality of conversations with children, and difficulty accessing crisis counselling where victims did not have continuous systemic support. Government institutions did not provide much-needed help, were unavailable, or failed to enforce court decisions, e.g., the right to see a child, and there was a lack of joint action and coordination with social welfare centers, the judiciary, and public health institutions. Finally, the report listed issues related to the epidemiological measures themselves. Lack of medical equipment needed for testing, lack of proper medical care due to the approach by medical services to deal only with the most critical situations, and further self-isolation of the victims due to unclear safety protocols (Centar za seksualna prava, 2020). Consequently, the only way out of the abusive situation was effectively taken away due to the pandemic. There are of course merits to this approach, however, this could be a matter of life and death. It makes the situation even more difficult when children are involved.

A unique hand signal, also called #SignalForHelp, is the latest example of how women can silently ask for help via a video call while their abuser is around. The signal is performed by holding your hand up to camera with your thumb tucked into your palm and then folding your fingers down by symbolically trapping your thumb.

Comprehending domestic violence is the first and most important step towards a solution. If a victim does not know s/he is a victim, how is s/he going to report a crime? Also, even if the abuser ends up in a jail (which may take a while in Croatia), s/he could be released very soon. This way, inadequate jail sentences can also be a motive not to report domestic abuse. Such minimal sentences may reflect that this kind of crime is either not taken very seriously by the prosecutors or that only a small part of the society considers it reprehensible.

Consequently, the number of unreported cases may rise. If a legal framework is flawed and the system does not have the capacity to deliver justice for the victims, how can we know the true extent of the problem? If a safe place for victims is available only to those who have experienced physical abuse, how can we claim success in addressing all forms of the problem? If the community does not believe the victims and does not provide support for them, how can we expect them to muster the courage to speak up about the abuse? For the victims, having support among friends, family members, or others who care is crucial for putting a stop to the abuse. For many women, who are victims, the most important aspect of getting out of the abusive relationship is what is going to happen to their children if they report the crime. The idea of losing access to her child is often enough for a woman not to report the abuse. Not only do they not want their children to be handled by other people, but they also do not want to risk their children ending up with the abuser.

Rise in violence both globally and in Croatia

The rate of domestic violence rose across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the cases in the United States went up by 8.1 percent from the start of the year 2021 through mid April (*National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice*, 2021). Further, according to the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (2020), the rise in domestic violence began as soon as the initial lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020. Also, according to the newly released *Insecurity and Delinquency Report of 2020* by the French Interior Ministry, domestic violence in France in 2020 rose by 14 percent compared to a year earlier. In the Chinese province of Hubei, the number of cases of domestic abuse tripled in February 2020 (Ebrahimian in Rauhaus, Sibila, Johnson, 2020). Finally, according to the Australian Institute of Criminology (2020), "During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, one in 20 women (4.6 percent) experienced physical or sexual violence over the last three months, 5.8 percent experienced coercive control, and one in 10 (11.6 percent) experienced at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour perpetrated by a current or former cohabiting partner".

On a global level, developments are also worrisome: "Globally 243 million women and girls aged 15–49 years have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months. The number is likely to increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic as security, health and money worries and strains are accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions" (Anant, 2020). Further, "nearly a fifth (18 per cent) of women and girls aged 15 to 49 who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months (UN Women, 2020)". Many countries have therefore established hotlines and shelters, along with declaring those who are in contact with the victim a part of essential services (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020), as a first step in combating these problems.

These sources attest to the fact that the rise in cases of domestic violence is not limited to any nation. The global surge is attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and to its unfortunate consequences. The economic recession that followed the lockdown and the global fight against COVID-19 in general has caused uncertain prospects for people's lives and well-being. Stress and anger in many situations make a bad situation even worse. To make things even more problematic, the victims cannot go anywhere. Being in close proximity to their abuser only exacerbates the situation and leads to more violence. By far the worst aspect of the current situation is that there is no clear end in sight. Many nations are facing multiple COVID-19 waves in combination with a never-ending lockdown. The situation that used to look inescapable now looks even more dire.

Furthermore, working from home might continue as the preferred way of working or running a business. In such a case, victims have no exit except to call for the state system or

other civil organizations to help them escape the situation.

Governments should have been prepared for these developments from the onset of the pandemic by providing further resources to programs that aim to assist victims. Unfortunately, that did not happen, or at least not to the extent needed.

The situation in Croatia in 2021 is only deteriorating. Croatia's Gender Equality Ombudsperson presented a report revealing that the rise in domestic violence against women in 2021 was up by 43,4 percent in comparison to 2019 (Vlada Republike Hrvatske, 2020). The numbers from civil organizations combating domestic violence speak to the same issue. Svjetlana Knežević of B.a.B.e., an association providing help to abuse victims, said that there was a 25 percent rise in calls within the first two weeks of the lockdown in Croatia back in March of 2020. She added that most calls came from mothers of underage children who had been exposed to the violent behaviour of their spouse or partner.

Research by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2019) shows that 70 percent of women in the Western Balkans (Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo) experienced some form of violence in 2018. Although Croatia was not included in this study, we conclude that, based on geographical proximity as well as cultural and other similarities among these countries, Croatia could be experiencing the same worrisome trend of violence against women.

In September 2020, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković presided over a meeting of the National Team for the Prevention of Abuse Against Women and Other Forms of Domestic Violence, where he pointed out that the increase in the number of offences related to domestic abuse is a problem, confirming the Ombudsperson's data as well as that of the Gender Equality Committee to the effect that that domestic violence has risen by over 40 percent (ravnopravnost.gov.hr, mrosp.gov.hr).

Capacity of accommodation for the victims of domestic violence in Croatia is at 45 percent (136 individuals using the facilities), while at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it was 71 percent at the national level. Moreover, despite the fact that, for a multitude of reasons, only a small percentage of victims actually seek help, we are talking about 50 - 71 percent of the total capacity of the system (vlada.gov.hr). If women reached out for help just a little bit more, the system in Croatia would not be able to handle it.

Two sets of questions should be addressed at this point: first, why do women not step forward in greater numbers? What are the obstacles they face if they decide to do so? And what needs to be done to help the victims and to provide them with a peaceful and violence-free life? In the next section we will explore shortcomings in the government in Croatia, as well as in the organizations that aim to help the victims of domestic abuse. Specifi-

cally, what are the plans to improve care in the future, and are these plans achievable?

Domestic violence in Croatia

According to the 2018 Croatian Interior Ministry report, the ratio between women and men as victims of domestic violence is five to one. In total, in 2018, Croatian police recorded 56 cases of rape, and 11 cases of attempted rape. In 2019, the numbers went up a bit, with 73 cases of rape and 12 attempts, but in 2020, the numbers were significantly higher, with 168 rape cases and 16 attempts reported (Secretary of Interior Statistics, 2021). All of these categories are treated as felonies.

The European Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) reports that when it comes to acts of sexual violence in Croatia, only one in ten cases is reported, while the EU average is 14 percent. The reason for the underreporting is a myriad of different obstacles at every step. Let us start with public awareness of domestic violence. Many victims do not have the support of the community. People who live in the urban areas of the country can be more inclined to take action after noticing that kind of violence, and might be aware that domestic violence can be psychological as well. Help would also be more accessible. On the other hand, women living in rural areas might not get any kind of help. Their closest community, starting with their own family, can be indifferent to their situation. It could be regarded as the norm and not something that should be addressed.

The second reason why some women do not report abuse is their children, as it might end badly, not just for the mother, but also for the children.

Another major reason for not reporting abuse is a slow judiciary system. While certain progress in this area has been observed in the last decade, Croatia is still below the EU average, with an average of 374 days until the first hearing. By comparison, in Switzerland it takes on average 11 days for a court to start the proceedings (CEPEJ, 2018). Further, in Estonia, the judiciary is empowered to issue temporary restraining orders, protecting victims from homelessness and pinning accountability on the abuser from the moment the reporting occurs.

Finally, many women are ashamed of what happened to them. Many believe that they are the ones to blame for the abuse and that they deserve it. Others feel that they should have picked a better partner, or that abuse is a private, personal matter.

Is Croatia going to address these issues? Maybe, but the change cannot happen overnight. The government must primarily inform the public through coordinated campaigns and raise awareness of domestic violence. Second, Croatia must increase its the capacity of its shelters for victims of domestic abuse. As one of the major steps, the government in 2020 announced that it would provide 400.000 EUR in financial assistance to around 20 organiza-

tions who assist victims of domestic violence. The government is also providing free food, accommodation, and legal and psychological help to victims for up to 12 months. Further, the Ministry of Labor, the Pension System, and Family and Social Policy will support women living in safe houses and ensure that they receive 50 percent of the minimum wage. Furthermore, a new hotline has been set up to provide victims with much-needed help. However, there is some question as to the qualifications of the those answering the calls. Therefore, a more systematic approach to this layer of the issue is also called for. In 2021, a national campaign to raise awareness of domestic violence called "Let's stop violence against women and in the family" will be put into place by the Croatian government. While these steps seem positive and their implementation raises hopes, similar promises have been made before. As an example, the government promised six new safe houses for women by the end of 2019, but none were built.

Finally, Croatia has been a member of the European Union for eight years. Funding for programs is available for institutions that help victims of domestic abuse. Such funds could allow for an upgrade to facilities or the purchase of additional equipment.

Conclusion

When we talk about domestic violence over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to know which factors serve as a catalyst. We also need to be cognizant of what needs to change to better help the victims. The most important thing is to realize that addressing the domestic abuse issue is a matter of concern for the whole society. Further, no single act of government will be enough. Change must be systemic if we are to prevent a collapse of the support system in Croatia, which is flawed, underfunded and slow at almost every level.

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