

Translation from Finnish original

Who takes responsibility?

Summary: Violence against women and the fulfilment of human rights obligations

Dear Reader,

Amnesty has investigated the views of municipal policy makers and leading social workers on responses to violence against women. The research has been conducted for Amnesty International Finnish Section by researcher, Doctor of Philosophy Satu Lidman. Many municipal policy makers have serious gaps in knowledge about violence against women, which affects the level of services as well as the lack of funds. This document includes both the main results and the recommendations of Amnesty.

One in three women living in Finland is subjected to violence by a current or former partner, and every year one woman in four experiences sexual harassment. The needs of women belonging to minority groups who have experienced violence are not recognized. Victims of persecution are left alone with their experiences. Despite of the scope of the problem, there are huge local differences in the amount of help and support received by women who have experienced violence.

This does not have to be the case. Violence against women can be tackled. Municipal policy makers have the power to ensure that human rights are realised everywhere in Finland. Read the recommendations of Amnesty at the end of this document and demand that your municipality takes responsibility for the fulfilment of human rights obligations.

The work for human rights begins in municipalities.

Best regards,

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Amnesty's study of municipalities 2016: Violence against women and the fulfilment of human rights obligations, who takes responsibility?¹

How was the research conducted? A follow-up questionnaire and in-depth interviews

The report assessed the fulfilment of human rights obligations related to the combating of violence against women in municipalities and reflected on how Amnesty's recommendations, presented in a report published in 2006, had been fulfilled.²

The questionnaire was sent to the chairs of municipal councils as well as the leading social workers in all 129 municipalities that had participated in the former survey. We received a total of 118 answers from 88 municipalities. The qualitative material consisted of 15 in-depth interviews in five municipalities (Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Lappeenranta, Maahti, Tornio).

Why was the research necessary? Violence is a major issue in Finland

Violence against women is prevalent in Finland. Nevertheless, combating violence against women is inefficient, and victim support services are poor. Diversified research data, legislative changes, the economic and political situation and the multiculturalisation of society also challenge conventional practices. The obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) are not fulfilled.

Violence against women is a particular problem that requires specific solutions. This does not mean that other forms of violence should be disregarded. It is also important to realize that women who have encountered violence are diverse, not a homogenous group of people.

The responsibility for human rights remains with states, however in the social welfare and health care (SOTE) reform, municipalities are responsible of promoting the health and welfare of their residents. Questions concerning violence against women should be addressed as part of this topic.

What does Finland look like ahead of the reform? Key conclusions

"[R]ecognising violence depends on the definition of violence. Often there's more violence against women than you initially thought." – interviewee (Maahti)

Only 14,5% of respondents thought that the prevalence data on violence against women affected the municipal budgetary solutions.

On average, the ability of municipal policy makers to recognize violence against women as a phenomenon and its prevalence is poor. This may in part explain budgetary solutions that do not sufficiently cover different forms of violence. In most municipalities, no studies on the prevalence of violence against women have been conducted, and the budgets for violence prevention work are insufficient. **In 2017, it is still appropriate to point out that violence against women is not a marginal phenomenon. It affects the wellbeing of society as a whole.**

¹ The full municipality report (only available in Finnish) can be downloaded at:

<https://frantic.s3.amazonaws.com/amnesty-fi/2017/01/Amnestyn-kuntaselvitys-naisiin-kohdistuvasta-v%C3%A4kivallasta.pdf>

² A national survey of the work combating violence against women in Finnish municipalities, conducted by Amnesty International Finnish Section in 2005-2006.

Municipalities must collect, maintain, and make use of local statistics on the incidence of violence. In order to effectively combat violence against women, its specific characteristics need to be recognised. The fundamentals, such as prevention, early intervention, and targeted support, have deficiencies also in the light of international obligations. This is undoubtedly part of promoting the health and welfare of residents, for which the municipalities are responsible.

“In our work, [the SOTE-reform] could mean an opportunity to integrate the practices even more. That people could get the same opportunities for services, regardless of their place of residence.” – interviewee (Helsinki)

Only 15% of the respondents felt they were aware of the challenges of the reform regarding combating violence against women.

The impact of the social welfare and health care reform on preventing violence against women and services for victims during the transition period that begins in 2017 are for the most part unknown. This will be affected by the current level of services and know-how in municipalities.

There are still challenges in the development of comprehensive service models and emergency care at health centres. The shelter network needs to be updated without delay to guarantee the residents of all municipalities equal possibilities to end the circle of violence.

Every person who has experienced violence should have access to high-quality and professional, low-threshold services that can be accessed without unnecessary bureaucracy and regardless of the municipality of residence. The regional inequality of people who have experienced violence must be eliminated.

“That you get to see all the options so you can weigh up which is the best one for you. That you are fully involved in and committed to MARAK.” – interviewee (Lappeenranta)

Of the municipalities that had adopted the multi-professional approach, 78% considered it important or very important.

Multi-professional violence prevention work has proved a highly promising method and new MARAK-workgroups are constantly getting established. Multi-professional workgroups and procedures must still be adjusted to the size of the municipality and the situation of violence prevention work: there is no single good practice. There is a need to reflect on the best ways to develop multi-professional practices while taking the SOTE-reform into account.

The potential of the existing and future multi-professional workgroups should be more widely utilized for example in the coordination of local violence prevention work. This requires adequate human resources. In the future, there's a need to invest more in multi-professional violence prevention work.

“But I do think the professionals are aware of these things. [...] It's just that information always becomes stale.” – interviewee (Jyväskylä)

Only 8,5% of the respondents remembered any advocacy work on violence against women in their municipality during the last five years.

Nationwide, violence information and training of employees are irregularly conducted, even though a couple of municipalities have succeeded in this. The lack of circulation of information to residents and between policy makers and field workers is worrying. Despite the recommendation of the

Finnish institute for health and welfare, all municipalities still have not appointed a person responsible for coordinating violence prevention work.

There must be more up-to-date information available. Training needs to be continuous both on the basic level as well as on specific issues and, when possible, it also needs to be multi-professional. Regardless of the place of residence, people who have encountered violence must get professional help.

The dominance of concepts such as 'intimate partner violence' and 'domestic violence' weakens the understanding of the specific characteristics of violence against women: women without children, women living alone, and many victims of sexual violence are being left outside the phenomenon. Attitudes need to be influenced also by dismantling heteronormative assumptions. Violence against women is a broad and diverse phenomenon.

“[W]hether you are Finnish or have poor skills in the Finnish language, procedures and steps are always the same, there is no special treatment.” – interviewee (Tornio)

89,5% of the municipalities that responded do not treat women with disabilities as a separate group in violence prevention work services.

The position of specific risk groups of violence against women in relation to violence prevention work services is very weak throughout the country. There is little understanding on how belonging to one or more specific risk groups affects the violence situation. Especially women with disabilities, sexual and gender minorities, women seeking asylum and women with poor knowledge of Finnish are at risk of being excluded from services.

The human rights of this heterogeneous but extensive group that consists of many minorities will require great attention in the future. There is a need for research, training, and public debate, as well as practical approaches in violence prevention work. Taking specific risk groups into account is also closely linked to international obligations, which currently are not being fulfilled (for example the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

It is typically considered fair to take all victims into account in a similar way, and not raise the specific needs of individual groups for discussion. However, this is necessary in order to realize the human rights of victims of violence: offering the same services for all victims of violence does not guarantee equality.

Amnesty's recommendations for municipalities in 2017

1. Municipalities need to systematically collect statistics on the extent of violence against women and make the statistics available for all municipal residents.
2. Municipalities must integrate measures to combat violence against women into politically accepted welfare and security plans and into the monitoring of their implementation. Indicators³ for combatting violence against women should be developed in municipal welfare reports.
3. Municipalities should reserve appropriate resources for violence prevention work, such as sufficient facilities, employees, and budgetary resources. Municipalities must ensure the professional development of the employees, for example through systematic training.
4. Municipalities must increase the use of existing forms and models for raising the question and documenting any experience of violence (such as "neuvolaseula", the model in maternity and child health clinics).⁴
5. The differences and specific needs of people who have experienced violence must be taken into account in violence prevention work, especially in the development of services. Municipalities must ensure that services are accessible to everyone: to people with disabilities, people with an immigrant background, undocumented persons, senior citizens, and sexual and gender minorities, as well as other groups.
6. Municipalities need to further develop effective models for service chains and multi-professional work to help all parties affected by violence, and make sure that they are systematically recorded so new employees can continue their use.
7. Municipalities must invest in work preventing violence against women, such as providing information about violence, the different forms of violence and the existing support services for municipal residents and professionals. Every municipality should have information about violence against women and support services for victims of violence on their website.
8. Municipalities must actively bring the development of support services for victims of violence into the conversations on the SOTE-reform and point out the need for them in their own area. In the future, every region should have a shelter and a support centre for victims of sexual violence. The development and support of low-threshold services and services without accommodation must be part of the preventive work for which the municipalities are responsible.

³ Indicators can include for example the statistics on the level of violence and changes to it, the training on violence against women and the number of participants, the amount of undertakings to prevent violence against women, and the resources in the municipal budget dedicated to low threshold services and services without accommodation for victims of violence.

⁴ The forms, lists and other tools that have been developed are available at https://thl.fi/fi/web/lapset-nuoret-ja-perheet/tyon_tueksi/vakivallan-ehkaisy/lomakkeet_vakivallan_puheeksi_ottamiseen_ja_kirjaamiseen