

Women's eNews

September 6, 2007

Dating Violence Warnings Candy-Wrapped in Croatia

By Bojana Stoparic, WeNews Correspondent

In the former Yugoslav republics, dating violence is common and boys are typically reared to understand force. One organization is using educational brochures and school workshops to teach teens an alternative.

ZAGREB, Croatia (WOMENSENEWS) – To their teachers, parents and friends, Tanja and Mario seemed to be typical high school sweethearts. But after a few months of dating, Mario became increasingly possessive and jealous, demanding to know where Tanja was at all times and telling her to stop dressing like a whore when she wore a low-cut shirt.

One night, at a friend's birthday party, he saw her talking to other boys and flew into a rage, slapping her hard enough to make her fall across a nearby table.

Tanja and Mario are fictional characters in a small hardcover booklet packaged like a chocolate bar and distributed to Croatian teens in schools and youth centers. Although the two may not be real, the abuse depicted in their story is.

Sixty percent of Croatians between 16 and 19 years of age have experienced some form of violence in a romantic relationship, according to a 2004 survey by the same organization that created the booklet, the Center for Education, Counseling and Research, in Zagreb, Croatia. The survey also asked these high school students about their views on physical, emotional and sexual violence.

The center is taking part in a three-year initiative across Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia to educate young people about all forms of prevalent gender-based violence.

Surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004 by local nongovernmental organizations have found that between one-third and two-thirds of women in Croatia and Bosnia have experienced some sort of abuse from their partners. In addition, a 2003 study by the World Health Organization reported that 23 percent of women in Serbia have suffered physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner.

“The violence that exists in everyday life, that young people see at home and in society, gets replicated in adolescent relationships,” said Jadranka Milicevic, project manager in CARE International’s office in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

The humanitarian organization, which has headquarters in Chatelaine, Switzerland, is providing financial and technical support to women’s groups in all three countries as part of an effort against gender-based violence that began in 2006 and will expand with the beginning of the new school year this month.

Violence Widespread During War

No statistics can be found to measure whether violence against women has increased since the wars that took place in the region from 1991 to 1995 following the break-up of Yugoslavia. During that conflict, sexual violence was used as a weapon and an estimated 20,000 Bosnian Muslim women were raped.

Milicevic says that present-day violence against women has to be understood in relation to the social and political changes that took place during and after the war.

“Men took on the role of fighters, protectors and leaders in public and political life, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere,” said Milicevic. “Women’s high unemployment rates have further made them vulnerable to violence.”

Joblessness may prevent women from leaving abusive relationships, and can put them at risk of being trafficked or forced into prostitution. According to government statistics, in 2006, 35 percent of Bosnian women were employed.

Young men in Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, as well as neighboring Montenegro, are expected to use physical violence in order to prove their masculinity, according to field research by the International Center for Research on Women, in Washington, D.C.

The findings also indicated that fathers and friends in particular encourage young men to be violent towards other males; to use force to defend their families and friends, as well as their pride and reputations. Fistfights in response to bullying by peers become a normal fact of life for boys starting in primary school.

Culture of Male Violence

Violence against women, on the other hand, was decried as “cowardly” almost unanimously by the 64 young men who participated in the study. At the same time, many did not view pushing and slapping a woman as violence.

“They did identify situations to justify violence that were primarily related to times when men needed to retain their sense of authority,” said Aparna Jain, public health and stigma specialist with the International Center for Research on Women.

These situations include anything from a woman cursing a man's father to breaking up with him.

The Center for Education, Counseling and Research survey of Croatian high school students reported that 25 percent of young men and 12 percent of young women do not think forcing a person to have sexual intercourse is violent behavior. The survey also found that 26 percent of young men and 13 percent of young women don't think slapping your girlfriend or boyfriend is abusive behavior.

To start changing these attitudes, the Croatian group has focused on training teachers and school psychologists on violence in adolescent relationships. Most of the educators then go on to organize extracurricular workshops for their students.

Sanela Stubelj, a high school teacher in the town of Krizevcima, told Women's eNews she has had to scramble to find space and time for these workshops in a building occupied by two high schools. But when she edited an episode of a local youth radio program, the animated discussion among teens on what constitutes abuse showed her that her efforts were paying off.

Students Pass the Message

Biserka Savora, a school psychologist at the Rudolf Peresin vocational school for aviation mechanics, near the Zagreb airport, also found that students who participated in her seminars were eager to pass on what they learned to their peers. They created posters on dating violence that were displayed in the windows of the local bookstore and held presentations for other students and parents.

"The school administration supports these activities as long as I don't ask for money and don't create any scandals," said Savora.

Meanwhile, the Autonomous Women's Center, CARE's partner in Belgrade, Serbia, has targeted local university students preparing to become lawyers, judges, social workers and psychologists.

According to Natasa Jovanovic, the group's project coordinator, these future professionals need to be educated about gender stereotypes so that they will be able to do their jobs without the prejudiced attitudes and strong stigma that victims of gender-based violence currently encounter. The center has been training some of these students to educate their peers through creative games and discussion groups.

"Some people come to the workshops with an open mind, and afterwards you can see that you've made them think," said Tijana Todorovic, one of the peer educators and a law student at Belgrade University. "Others continue to hold on firmly to their existing beliefs."

Engaging men and boys has been a challenge in all the countries. Both Jovanovic and Natasa Bijelic, the education coordinator at the Center for Education, Counseling and Research, said that the teachers and students who participate in these voluntary activities have been overwhelmingly female.

But young men will be targeted by a social campaign promoting non-violence that CARE is developing this fall, based on the research by the International Center for Research on Women. The campaign might include media outreach and community education, but details have not been determined yet.



Natasa Bijelic

Credit: Bojana Stoparic

Bojana Stoparic is a freelance writer based in New York. She reported this story from Croatia.

For more information:

Center for Education, Counseling, and Research: <http://www.cesi.hr/eng/>

Autonomous Women's Center: <http://www.womenngo.org.yu/english/>

Medica: <http://www.medica.org.ba/english/about-us/>

Copyright © 2007 Women's eNews.