

Episode 4

“Strength in Unity: Enhancing Victim Support for Those Affected by Gender-Based Violence and Building Safer Communities”

Transcript

Featuring this episode:

- The **Narrator** (voice of Dylan Power)
- The **Protagonist** Anna (voice of Aine Hanrahan)
- **Nicole van Gelder**, Researcher from Victim Support Netherlands.
- **Leena-Kaisa Åberg**, Director of Victim Support Finland
- **Kristina Mihaljević**, Head of prevention programs, Women’s Room, Croatia

Transcript episode 4

(Music)

Protagonist

Does the Train Only Pass Once?

Narrator

Welcome to the 2gether4victims podcast

[Soundscapes: train, stations, announcements]

Protagonist

A journey through abundance, plunge and shadow to new understandings, heights and depths, unexpected discoveries or recoveries.

Narrator

A journey by train around Europe through the complexities of coordinating and harmonizing support services for victims of gender-based violence.

This podcast is focused on the latest developments in the field of gender-based violence services in the European Union.

This journey, shaped by Victim Support Europe, the leading European organization advocating for the rights and services of all crime victims, explores how eleven partner organizations in the 2gether4victims project are working together with one goal: improving services for victims of gender-based and domestic violence.

Along the way, we'll examine their current efforts and how these actions are paving the way for harmonized, gendered support services for victims across Europe.

Our 2gether4victims podcast takes listeners on a rail journey through seven countries: Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal. And the journey doesn't end there—it will cross even more borders...

Protagonist

If you work with victims of crime, have been a victim yourself, or know someone who has, please, find your seat. You'll learn about the latest advancements in victims' rights across Europe.

Narrator

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(Music: Upbeat)

Narrator

Welcome to our episode, "Strength in Unity: Enhancing Victim Support for Those Affected by Gender-Based Violence and Building Safer Communities." Today, we'll explore how victim support services are collaborating to assist those impacted by gender-based violence. We'll cover how these services help victims of sexual and domestic violence, the impact of new sexual violence laws, and ongoing efforts to address gaps in support.

We'll also discuss prevention strategies, like teaching consent and respect, and the importance of community involvement. Our experts will share stories that highlight why preventing gender-based violence is essential.

Leading the conversation is Anna, a sound artist and advocate, who's traveling across Europe to connect with those affected by gender-based violence.

[Soundscape: train sounds]

Anna, our protagonist, a sound artist and advocate, who's traveling across Europe to connect with those affected by gender-based violence, has a diverse heritage that spans Ireland, Poland, and Italy, which shapes her view as a world citizen. On her journey, she investigates best practices for supporting vulnerable communities with a mission to create positive change.

[Soundscape: train stopping]

Today, Anna is in Utrecht, Netherlands, where she'll meet three representatives from victim support services: Nicole van Gelder, a researcher from Victim Support Netherlands; Leena-Kaisa Åberg, the Director of Victim Support Finland; and Kristina Mihaljević, the Head of Prevention Programs at the Women's Room in Croatia. Together, they'll explore the theme of "Strength in Unity: Enhancing Victim Support for Those Affected by Gender-Based Violence and Building Safer Communities."

(Music)

[Soundscape: train station, train leaving the station]

Protagonist:

Utrecht is just a quick 30-minute train ride from Amsterdam's central station. While it's still a bit of a hidden gem for those outside the Netherlands, it's gaining a reputation as a chill and alternative to the busy streets of Amsterdam. Travelers looking for something fresh are starting to take notice!

The heart of Utrecht is its charming medieval center, where the lovely old canal adds a special vibe. However, Utrecht is also known for its modern architecture and abstract art, thanks to the famous 'De Stijl' movement. You can spot the influence of pioneers like Piet Mondrian all around, especially at the Rietveld Schröder House, the Centraal Museum, and even the building of Victim Support Netherlands, which is my next stop.

Victim Support Netherlands is one of Europe's largest victim support services, assisting hundreds of thousands of crime victims each year. I'll be meeting three amazing women leaders with different expertise in victim support. I can't wait to see what insights this discussion will offer!

Oh, there's the Utrecht station! The expansive glass façades cascade like elegant curtains from the soaring roof—truly an architectural gem of a new era!

(Music)

Protagonist

Hi, Nicole! Thanks for having me today.

Nicole van Gelde

00:05:03

Thanks for visiting us in Utrecht.

Protagonist

I'm really looking forward to chatting with you about victim support. We're going to focus on how Slachtofferhulp Nederland and various experts are working together to strengthen the one-stop model for helping victims navigate both general and specialist support services. It's such an important collaboration to ensure that victims get the care they need throughout their journey. I just want to add a quick note for our listeners about what we mean by generic and specialized support.

Generic Victim Support Services are designed to help a wide range of victims of crime, regardless of the type of crime they've experienced. These services offer general assistance, such as emotional support, information on legal rights, and help with navigating the justice system. They cater to various needs and can be a first point of contact for victims seeking help.

Specialist Victim Support Services, on the other hand, focus on specific types of crimes or victim experiences, such as sexual violence, domestic abuse, or human trafficking. These services often provide tailored support, including counseling from professionals who understand the complexities of those specific situations. They offer targeted resources and can address unique challenges that victims face in these areas.

Can you tell me more about how generic and specialist support services work together? How do these collaboration models meet the different needs of victims of sexual and domestic violence?

Nicole van Gelde

00:06:44

So, in the Netherlands we have a wide variety of victim support organizations, therefore it's very important to know each other and collaborate. For example, Slachtofferhulp Nederland, or Victim Support Netherlands, is a generic victim support service and we provide free legal aid, psycho-education, peer support, help filling out forms, support at court hearings and with requesting financial compensation. And of course, we also do referrals, for example to the GP but also to specialized victim support organizations, such as the Sexual Assault Center and domestic violence and child abuse services such as Safe Home, or in Dutch: Veilig Thuis.

While it's great that there are so many organizations aimed at supporting victims and each of them is working really hard to provide the best support possible, it can also be overwhelming for both the victim and the professional supporting the victim. Because a victim can access various services independently, but they can also get referred to various organizations by for example the police, Slachtofferhulp Nederland, their GP, the Sexual Assault Center, a victim lawyer, and these organizations can also refer to one another. So, this fragmentation can make it so that people, both victims and professionals, cannot see the wood for the trees, to be honest. So, you have to know the organizations and what they

can offer. And victims often need to tell their story multiple times when various organizations are involved, so we are actually asking a lot from a victim.

For example, in the case of domestic violence Slachtofferhulp Nederland refers the client to Safe Home, as they are the specialist service, but the client comes back to Slachtofferhulp Nederland when they are in need of legal aid because that's a service that Safe Home cannot provide. And, victims of sexual and domestic violence can benefit greatly from a collaboration model where they don't have to search for the support from various organizations themselves and where they also don't have to repeat their story multiple times.

So, therefore, Slachtofferhulp Nederland, the police, prosecution services, Sexual Assault Center and Safe Home are working together on a different model for all victims of online and in-person sexual abuse: the one entrance model. Although there are various reasons why it's not that easy to work together, we are working on a new way of collaborating that tailors services to the victim's needs and also takes into account that those needs can differ over time. So it's a model that coordinates services, that improves collaboration amongst professionals to also prevent missing important signs, and offers clarity on who the director is to prevent overlap and gaps in support.

Protagonist

So Nicole, what is the next step?

Nicole van Gelde

00:09:33

So, in 2025 we are going to test this model in practice, and I can briefly walk you through the three key elements of this model.

(Music)

The first is a well-organized and tailored first contact with the victim, in which a first assessment of needs and safety is made, and also information is registered so that all organizations have the same information to work with, and the victim is of course informed but also included in the subsequent steps. The second key element is a daily multidisciplinary triage meeting in which the first direction for help and support is decided upon. Also, a director will be assigned to the case, and the involvement of other professionals and organizations will be discussed so that everyone knows who does what. Then, the third key element is that the director will keep coordinating and directing for a case while triage is taking place, but also when the collaboration between professionals and organizations demands this, and if it's the victim's need. And, in this way, we hope to lessen the burden on the victim and provide better coordinated and tailored support.

Protagonist

How do these collaborative models fit into what the 2Gether4Victims project is trying to achieve for victims of gender-based violence?

Nicole van Gelde

00:10:46

Well, one of the aims of the 2Gether4Victims project is to explore how generalist and specialist providers of services can best collaborate and coordinate their response to the needs of victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence. So, this fits in well with designing victim support in a collaborative way. And of course, countries can differ in what would work best for them in terms of how collaboration and coordination between services could take shape but I think we can all agree that it benefits both victims and professionals if collaboration and coordination of victim support services are encouraged and optimized. Furthermore, this is a part of article 25 of the EU directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and I don't know the article by heart so I will just quote from it now:

(Music)

'Member States shall provide the protection and specialist support services necessary to comprehensively address the multiple needs of victims by providing those services, including those provided by non-governmental organizations, at the same premises, by coordinating such services through a contact point, or by facilitating access to such services through one-stop online access.' So, it's something that EU member states will have to take action on if they haven't done so already.

Protagonist

So, in your opinion Nicole, what are the key strategies for effectively addressing gaps in support services for victims of gender-based violence, and how can we, how can collaboration between generic and specialist services be leveraged to implement these strategies?

Nicole van Gelde

00:12:26

It's important that victim support organizations know each other. You need to know who provides which services and how you can work together in a multidisciplinary manner, and in a way that you can add to each other's expertise and services. I believe knowing each other and knowing when you could refer a victim to a partner organization already achieves

a lot in addressing gaps. So, to ensure that victims of gender-based violence receive the support they need, it's important to know what they need and who could provide this. So, an adequate needs assessment is necessary as well as a well working referral system between organizations. For example, in the Netherlands the police will ask a victim who reports a crime if they have any objections to them transferring the victim's contact information to Victim Support Netherlands. And if they are okay with this, we will receive the information from the police in a GDPR compliant manner and then we actively contact the victim to enquire if they need any kind of support. Of course, it then depends on the victim's needs if we can support them or if we refer them to another organization. So for example, if someone is a victim of stalking by an ex-partner, we could provide legal support to them and we could refer them to a specialist support service for victims of domestic violence to enquire if they could for example qualify for a portable alarm system, known as AWARE which stands for Abused Women's Active Response Emergency. And, in that case the police is also involved and, together with for example the domestic violence organization, they can make a risk assessment. I think that generic and specialist organizations can also work together in training each other, with regard to specific expertise and skills.

So, knowing each other, collaborating and having a good referral system in place will also enhance information provision to victims, because then you can better guide them and inform them on various processes. I think if generic and specialist services get to know each other and what they do, they can also spot the gaps together and see who can fill the gap or what they can do together to fill the gap.

[Soundscape: office space, phone ringing]

Protagonist

How do you foresee the future of collaboration between generic and specialist support services evolving, particularly in the context of advancing technologies and changing legislative landscapes?

Nicole van Gelde

00:14:51

Well, with regard to legislation, in the Netherlands we have a new law that came in effect as of 1 July 2024, in which coercion is no longer a condition for rape and assault. And of course I already mentioned the new EU directive on domestic violence and violence against women. So, if legislation changes, then policy and practice in victim support can face changes too, hopefully good ones. And it can have an impact on how victims can find justice and support, so, I think it becomes increasingly important that generic and specialist support organizations collaborate in a systemic, multidisciplinary way.

Then with regard to technologies, so when it comes to victimization in general we can see an increase in online victimization. And this can also happen in the context of gender-based violence, for example with image based sexual abuse. Then again victimization can happen online, but support can also be offered online, for example via an online chat, on an online platform or via an online intervention. We've really seen an increase in online support possibilities since the COVID-19 pandemic. And, for example, Victim Support Netherlands, Sexual Assault Center and Safe Home, we all have online chats available for victims. Furthermore, The Netherlands also has an online self support platform for woman that are victims of intimate partner violence, it's called Safe Women.

So, yeah, I think technology has also shaped part of victim support possibilities as well.

Then, when I do go back to victimization, in the context of technology changes, what we notice with online and in-person victimization is that these types of victimization can overlap, in practice they often do, but that this is not always noticed by professionals and then also the expertise on online and in person victimization is often separated from one another.

So, for example, in the case of ex-partner violence stalking can happen both online and in person and an ex-partner can spread sexual images of the victim online or threaten to do so while also having slashed the victim's tires. But often times we still think of online and offline as separate worlds but nowadays they are very much intertwined and online victimization is not less serious or less harmful than in person victimization. So, this development also impacts a victim's experience and how they can find justice and support. So, I hope and believe that also in this regard, generic and specialist support services will work together and share their expertise more. Furthermore, I think that online victimization, technology in victim support and changes in national and EU legislation will also increase the need for well-organized cross border support, and cross border collaboration between victim support organizations in various countries. So, for example, each year Victim Support Netherlands organizes the Victimology Summer School and in 2023 the theme was online victimization and in 2024 the theme was large scale victimization. And in 2024 we also organized an international track for the first time because we wanted to address cross border victimization and cross border victim support, and bring victim support professionals from various countries together because we do see that it's increasingly important to also collaborate beyond the borders of our countries.

Protagonist

Considering the best practices identified in both generic and specialist support services, what recommendations would you offer to policymakers and service providers to enhance the overall response to victims of gender-based violence across the EU?

Nicole van Gelde

00:18:41

Well of course it's important that there's adequate funding, I think everyone says that, but also protocols or guidelines for practice, for which it's necessary for policymakers to gather input and knowledge from practice, from professionals working with victims. Policy needs to encourage victim support organizations to collaborate and to learn from each other's expertise and skills. And policy needs to facilitate the actual implementation of it. So, of course, with the new EU directive on domestic violence and violence against women, it will be asked of organizations to collaborate more and integrate each other's services, so it's necessary that this is facilitated in law, policy and practice. Victim Support Europe has developed the National Framework for Comprehensive Victim Support and this document, I think, as well as for example the report from VSE's VICToRIIA project, provides all kinds of international best practices in victim support, also when it comes to collaboration between various authorities and organizations.

So I would definitely encourage policymakers and service providers to look into these documents and for example look at the Victims' Rights Directive and the new EU directive for domestic violence and violence against women and, of course, at what's going on in society in terms of victimization, and investigate what is going well and what still needs work and how this work can be done together. Because ultimately, a chain is as strong as its weakest link so everyone needs to work together well to ensure well-organized and good quality victim support, and this will benefit both victims and professionals.

(Music)

Protagonist

Thanks so much, Nicole, for breaking down how generic and specialized support services work together, especially from the perspective of Victim Support Netherlands.

I'm really excited to welcome our next guest for today's episode—Leena-Kaisa Åberg!

Leena-Kaisa Åberg

00:20:40

So I'm Leena-Kaisa Åberg. I'm from the Finnish generic organisation, Victim Support Finland, Riko. We provide victim services to all victims of crime in Finland.

Protagonist

Thanks for joining us, Leena-Kaisa! Building on what we discussed earlier with Nicole about the collaborative efforts between Slachtofferhulp Nederland and various experts to create a seamless one-stop model for victim support, I'm curious—what do you see as the main benefits of combining generic services with specialist services? How has this integration worked in Finland?

Leena-Kaisa Åberg

00:21:16

Yes. In addition to having these generic services in the whole country of Finland, we also have a specialized service for victims of human trafficking. So, combining these two services, we think, have been very useful and there's a lot of synergies found here. For example, the specialized service for victims of human trafficking can use the whole structure we have for the generic services with 30 local services all over the country. So, for example, in Finland, we've had cases of human trafficking with forest berry-picking people coming from Thailand. And this happened in quite remote areas, not in the big cities. So, if you have a service like that only in the capital or some big cities, you wouldn't be so good to be able to provide these services also in the remote areas. But here we can use our offices that are for the generic, but still, they can cooperate and, and also use the volunteers that are there for all victims of, of crime.

Protagonist

Leena, how do you see specialist services supporting generic ones, and in what ways do you think they integrate with each other?

Leena-Kaisa Åberg

00:22:27

Well, we've had this specialized service since 2015, so we've had time also to raise awareness among both the staff and the volunteers in the generic services about what is human trafficking, how can you identify trafficking victims, which is actually quite difficult. So very often we identify these victims in our normal services. They come there with something some other issue, for example, domestic violence or some problems with their employer. And then since there is knowledge, and awareness among the staff and the volunteers so they can start asking more questions that might relate to human trafficking. So, we really have results here. So we have identified quite many victims of human trafficking that come actually to the service or are referred for other issues. And because we know that human trafficking is a very, very serious crime. So, we've been able really to also to help the authorities to, to find this criminality and to get then also the perpetrators to be to be punished. So, I think in that way they really really help each other. Yeah.

Protagonist

Conducting needs assessments for victims is crucial in helping them access the right support. It's fantastic to hear how your training and awareness efforts among staff and volunteers are making a real difference for victims. Thank you for being here today, Leena!

Leena-Kaisa Åberg

00:23:51

Thank you

(Music)

Protagonist

Now, let's move on to the next part of our chat, where we'll talk about creating safer communities: preventing sexual and gender-based violence. I'm excited to welcome Kristina Mihaljević from Women's Room. The Women's Room is a feminist non-profit organization that started in 2002 in Croatia. Their goal is to prevent sexual violence and support survivors while promoting sexual rights. At the Center for Victims of Sexual Violence, which is part of Women's Room, they offer direct help and support to survivors and their families.

So, Kristina, thank you for meeting me here today. My first question is can you tell us more about the sexual violence prevention programs developed by the Women's Room?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:24:40

Thank you for inviting me. Yes. So, women's room is an organization that specializes in sexual violence, and it's been working for more than 22 years now. And prevention was always one of the big program areas of our work. But we didn't have systemic prevention programs until 2018 because it was really challenging to enter the schools with the topic of sexual violence. But something happened, and a lot of schools were contacting us for educations when sexual violence against children happened in school and they didn't know what to do in those cases.

So, in 2017, actually, we decided to start with the development of systemic prevention in Croatia, because there's no other programs that are educating children about sexual violence. So even when they listen to some workshops on the topic of violence, sexual violence is not even mentioned there as a form of violence. So, there's a there was a huge gap in our educational institution system and children did not have any information, they didn't know where to seek help and support, educational professionals didn't know what to do, how to approach to this subject.

So, since we live in Croatia, that's a strong, conservative, patriarchal society we started with development of programs for high schools. Because we knew that if we start with lower grades of elementary schools, it will not be possible to introduce topic of sexual violence in such early, early age of children.

So, we developed the first program in 2018 until 2020. We were developing it for two years. Because we wanted to make a quality program that's effective, that has a good impact on knowledge, attitudes towards sexual violence, and to giving children information about facts

of sexual violence and not like believing in prejudice that are surrounding the topic. And, what happened was really good because we got support from our Ministry of Science and Education who verified our first program, and schools now can put it in their preventive curriculum. And, after that, we saw that “okay, it's a great time. Let's continue working on this”. So, we developed a step two junior program for higher grades of elementary schools that was also verified by the ministry.

Then Covid happened, and we realized that children when they don't have access to school, they don't have access to any information about sexual violence. So, we developed an online tool, like an online tool platform where children can go and educate themselves about many different areas, I think we will talk about it a bit later regarding sexual violence. And, and this moment, we are developing step three kits, so it's for lower grades of elementary schools, so we just keep up until kindergarten, this is something that happened.

Protagonist

Thank you, Kristina, for sharing the journey behind these programs. It's inspiring to hear how you identified such a critical gap and took action, especially in the face of challenges. You really highlighted how the educational system needed a structured approach to bring awareness on sexual violence, and I'm really impressed that you took that on, starting from high school programs and expanding down to younger ages.

It's also encouraging to hear about the support you've received from the Ministry of Science and Education, and how these programs are gradually becoming part of the school curriculum. And with the addition of an online platform, you've opened up more opportunities for students to learn, especially when in-person schooling isn't available. Can we dig a little deeper—how do these programs teach students about topics like consent and building healthy relationships?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:28:40

So, all of our programs give information, knowledge generally about sexual violence, about forms, about prejudice. We teach children about other children who survived sexual violence. So, there we are working on their empathy towards their peers. And programs for high school and for elementary schools is covering many different topics. So, we are teaching them about sexual violence in family, electronic sexual violence- that's now in a big, big increase in Croatia. Last researches show that 93% of high school students experienced some form of electronic sexual violence.

Regarding healthy relationships and consent we have more workshops, but one topic. So, we are covering the topic of sexual violence in youth relationships, where we are educating them about healthy relationships, how to recognize the red flags. For example, if you ask them, they will all tell you that being jealous is a sign of love, and it's a first sign of violence,

actually. Because they learn about this through movies, through songs that are just perpetuating prejudice that already exist in our society. And a lot of time is given to teaching them about consent, because if you ask them in high school, they have no idea what's the legal boundary for consent in Croatia, for example, they all give you wrong answer. And that's ridiculous that they have 17 years old, they are sexually active, and they don't even know if they can consent to some activities.

[Soundscape: Train arriving to station]

So, a lot of time is given to work on consent, different elements of real consent. Of course. Everything goes to direction only. Yes, means yes. Not how to say no. But that it is important to communicate and to listen to other people say yes. And we have like a lot of interactive materials in our workshops. We have a lot of video materials that help them engage and also help them to critically think about all of these topics and to engage actively in communication about these all of these subjects. And that's something they really actively participate in, too. Because they all are, first of all, they are sexually active in high schools. These are topics that they really want to know more about, they want to talk with someone, they want to have correct information and there's no place where they can get it, get them except on these workshops. And every time when we finish with our program, they are always, “oh, when will you come back? When will we do this again?” So, we keep up with our work and we are not stopping.

Protagonist

Thank you for sharing all of that, Kristina. It's really powerful to hear how these programs are helping students shift their understanding of consent, relationships, and the boundaries around them. For me, it's eye-opening how misconceptions, like jealousy being seen as love, can be so ingrained through media and culture—especially for young people trying to navigate relationships for the first time.

Your approach to educating on these topics sounds interactive and relatable for students. By addressing issues like consent in a way that's clear and approachable, and giving young people a safe space to talk openly, you're truly setting them up with knowledge they can carry forward. And the fact that students are eager for you to return really speaks to how essential this information is and how little they're finding it elsewhere.

So, building on this—why do you think it's crucial to have sexual violence prevention as part of the school curriculum?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:32:28

If we see the Statistical data of the Council of Europe, it says that 1 in 5 children will survive some form of sexual violence until the age of 18. Our last research in Croatia showed that in elementary school, one of four children already survived sexual violence, so up until 14 years. And we have so many children that survive these forms of violence and they did not tell anyone about it. And in the educational system is the place where all children go, and that's the best place where they should be taught about so many different topics, but also sexual violence, because we see and we know that they are experiencing it, they are not reporting it, they are not telling anyone about it, and they are not receiving any help and support.

And learning about sexual violence is not just learning about sexual violence, it is learning about boundaries. Learning about consent, learning about communication, some basic skills that are necessary for some healthy relations, not just intimate relations, but with peers and friends and the relation towards themselves. And if it's not part of curriculum, then its implementation just revolves on the good will of those who are willing to implement it. And those are not everyone. Of course, as I said, we are quite a conservative society, and sexual violence is a huge taboo still in our country. So that's why it's important that we have our ministry support and that we have more and more schools who are willing to put their programs into curriculums.

Protagonist

Oof, those statistics are both powerful and heartbreaking, Kristina. Hearing that one in four children has already faced some form of sexual violence by the time they're 14—it really underscores just how essential it is for schools to play a proactive role here. Schools are one of the few universal touchpoints where nearly every child can be reached, which makes them uniquely positioned to offer support, resources, and education that so many young people wouldn't otherwise get.

And you're right—teaching about sexual violence is about so much more than just that; it's about boundaries, consent, and the foundational skills needed for healthy relationships. It's striking that if these topics aren't built into the curriculum, they rely solely on the goodwill of a few individuals, which leaves too many kids without access to this critical knowledge. The ministry's support and the schools willing to add your program really do sound like major steps forward.

So, looking at this journey, what challenges have you encountered while getting these programs into schools, and how have you managed to work through them?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:35:31

Yeah, I'm trying to go back in 2017. So, the first challenge I think was resistance of educational institutions to even talk about sexual violence. Sometimes they asked us, can

you can you call your workshop something else, like other side of flirting? Like, not even name the problem, which is a huge, huge wrong thing to do. That was one of the problems. Second problem were parents, sometimes they had idea that we are educating children about sexual activities and how to do them. I mean, it's ridiculous, but that's what they perceived. And some parents were strongly against that we touched the topic sexual violence in the family because okay sexual violence, okay maybe sexual violence against children, you are protecting them, but don't touch the family. Family is the core of our society. And that's where the most children are actually surviving sexual violence up to age of 12 or 13.

So those were, I think, some big challenges, but we developed some ways how to overcome them regarding schools. We provided them with our specialized educations that lasted for six days, where we educate them about what do we do? Who are we? What do we want to achieve?

[Soundscape: phone ringing, office setting]

And then about sexual violence topic and what we want to achieve with our programs. And then schools actually realized, okay, this is actually great. We will get some quality material that we can implement and that it can serve for protection of, of children.

Regarding parents we are still working on that challenge, but most of parents actually were positive after we organized lectures for them. So, we also involve them in the prevention because they are one of the key actors and they have important role in their children's lives, of course. So, we provide them also with education. And they I think they have like a lot of prejudice what women's room is and what do we do. And they also stated, okay, it's great, at least we don't have to talk about this topic with them. That's not good. We are still, I say, working on the parents and how to act more actively involve them. But they didn't have any problems then for their children to participate in our activities. And as our programs grew and were implemented in more schools challenges slightly started to disappear. But we have a problem that not every school wants to implement SNAP because if the principal is right conservative person, they will not allow that SNAP goes into that school. So, I think this is not challenge just for our prevention program, it's challenging for our society. So, we have a lot of work to do there. Yet on sensitizing our whole society on gender-based violence, sexual violence, and gender inequality.

Protagonist

It's clear just how complex these challenges are. From navigating school administrations that might hesitate over the language used, to overcoming deep-seated social taboos, it sounds like each step forward has required patience and adaptability.

[Soundscape: Trains, train station]

I can imagine it's frustrating when even the terminology—like simply naming it as “sexual violence”—is met with resistance. Yet, your approach of gradually building understanding and creating space for dialogue with both schools and parents seems to be paying off. It's impressive how you're engaging parents as well. It sounds like involving them in the education process is essential, especially when they are such a huge influence in their children's lives. The fact that they're beginning to see value in your work, even if it means they avoid the topic themselves, is certainly progress.

So, thinking about the professionals who work with these children every day, how do you train them to recognize and respond to signs of sexual violence?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:39:56

So, as I said, we have specialized module of education. It usually lasts for six days where we really try to give them all relevant information about topic. We do a lot of work on their attitudes towards sexual violence and their own prejudice because their own attitudes and prejudice are usually stopping them into helping children or believing children or believing that sexual violence is possible in some families. So, we equip them with knowledge, we tackle their prejudice and we give them skills to work on this topic. Because we also work directly, I work directly with children, and that's, I think, the best way for me to learn what works, what doesn't work, what do they want to know? So, I can easily transfer what I learned to them and motivate them and encourage them not to be afraid to work on this topic, because I think adults are usually more afraid to get in front of the class and say, sexual and sexual violence. Children want to talk about it; they don't perceive this as a as such a taboo topic. So, we continuously implement education's and for every school we work with, we are always open to give them help and support if something happens in their schools because when they need to report suspicion of sexual violence, they also need some kind of support because sometimes they don't have support of their collective or their principals or parents or and they are sometimes alone in that. So, I think like just a lot of education and a lot of providing support from our side to them.

Protagonist

It's powerful to hear how your approach goes beyond just training—it's about addressing attitudes, assumptions, and even the fears educators might have around discussing these topics. It sounds like you're creating a supportive community for them too, where they feel backed up when handling these sensitive issues.

And lastly, how can other countries learn from your approach to sexual violence prevention in schools?

Kristina Mihaljević

00:42:10

So, I think that all our programs are available in English, so every country can look at what we did. I think that firstly, it's really important to understand the context of your own country and what can you do. For example, it would be much better for Croatia for us that we started to develop programs from kindergarten, because that's what that's what you would normally do in a normal country. In Croatia that wasn't possible. So, we went from high schools. But it's important to understand context. It's important to have good cooperation with key stakeholders because without ministries or other agencies that are in charge of educational institutions, it's not easy to enter the school system. And they are controlling the quality of the programs that are being developed. So that's not so bad, because we don't want our children to be learning from some programs that are not evaluated or that don't have some quality assurance. And I think the most important thing is to make good cooperation with educational professionals because they are the key when it comes to working on sexual violence prevention.

And, also, I think that all who are developing something should try to implement this program by themselves. They should see how it is to directly work with children. For us is also important that we have a center for victims of sexual violence, the only one in Croatia. So, we learned a lot from survivors. What they were missing when they experienced abuse when they were children in their schools. I can't give you one answer because it was like almost 16 years of work of Women's Room for us to do this. So, we learned a lot from our own mistakes. We learned about from other countries because we also did, like, a lot of desk research. So, what's good in Spain? What's good in in Germany? How can we try to implement that in our own countries? So, a lot of, a lot of steps were necessary to get here. And our organization is now established organization and people trust us. So that's also important if you want to enter some system and do some systemic changes within that system.

Protagonist

Thank you so much for sharing all of your insights Kristina

[Soundscape: "ding", train leaving the station]

Narrator

00:44:40

As Anna continues her journey through Europe on the train, she's filled with anticipation for the new countries and experiences that await her.

[Soundscape: typing]

Protagonist

3,2,1... started.

(Music)

Reflecting on my day in Utrecht, I'm filled with optimism about the path forward in victim support. Today has been both grounding and inspiring. Thanks to the incredible professionals I met at Victim Support Netherlands. Each person I spoke to brought a different piece to the puzzle, showing how collaboration between generic and specialist support can create a truly holistic framework for victim care.

Sitting in Utrecht's medieval heart, surrounded by the tranquility of the canals, I feel the weight of our conversations today. Utrecht may be quieter than Amsterdam, but the work happening here speaks volumes. Nicole shared insights on the seamless one-stop model that Slachtofferhulp Nederland has developed, bridging general and specialist services to streamline victim journeys. From addressing the nuances of gender-based violence to the increase in reported cases due to new legislation, Victim Support Netherlands has created a support network designed to catch victims wherever they may have fallen out previously. This holistic approach ensures that victims are guided through their journey with a clear sense of continuity, an invaluable framework that resonates deeply with me.

Talking with Leena-Kaisa from Finland reinforced how adaptable and responsive these collaborative systems can be. In Finland, her team's experience with human trafficking victims highlighted the immense value of integrating specialist knowledge into broader, more accessible support services. Through her stories—like helping Thai berry-pickers trafficked to remote areas of Finland—Leena-Kaisa illustrated how crucial it is to make specialized care reachable, no matter where the victims find themselves. Her reflections on training generic service providers to recognize complex cases, such as human trafficking or labour exploitation, underscored the potential for even broader impact.^[1]

After chatting with Kristina from Women's Room, the organization in Croatia, I'm inspired by her efforts to prevent sexual violence in schools. She addresses a critical gap by creating safe spaces for discussions about consent and healthy relationships. By involving students and parents, Kristina encourages open conversations and empowers young people to seek help. With one in four Croatian kids facing sexual violence by age 14, her work is urgent. She also trains educators to spot signs of abuse, fostering a supportive school culture. Her approach shows how vital prevention programs are for safer communities and sets a strong example for others. It's all about understanding local needs and listening to kids when

creating effective solutions.

[Soundscape: Train announcements]

Leaving Utrecht tonight, I feel a profound admiration for these professionals and their commitment. Today has shown me how, through collaborative models, we can close gaps in support and create an EU-wide standard that truly centres on victims' needs. There's much work ahead, but we're well on our way to a more responsive and compassionate support system for all victims. I have a lot of hope for the future.

[Soundscape: typing]

Narrator

Thank you for tuning in! We hope you'll join us again next time as we continue our journey on the 2gether4victims podcast. In our next stop: 'Elderly Voices: Addressing Domestic Violence Among Older Adults.', we'll explore the often-overlooked issue of domestic violence among older adults.

(Music: outro)

Tune in as our expert guest, Željka Barić, shares her insights on the unique challenges faced by elderly victims and the tailored support they need.

(Music)

[Soundscape: train]

Protagonist

Does the Train Only Pass Once?

Narrator

You're listening to the 2gether4victims podcast, focusing on gender-based violence services. This podcast was produced by the 2gether4victims project, led by Victim Support Europe in collaboration with ten partner organizations and funded by the CERV program of the European Commission.

Thank you very much for listening.

(Music: exit)

Protagonist

Thank you very much for listening.

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