

# The Role of Civil Society in a Time of Pandemic: Bridging the Gap Between Official Policies and Information Needs of Victims of Family Violence

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## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN OFFICIAL POLICIES AND INFORMATION NEEDS OF VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

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### *Summary*

*A large number of studies have been conducted on the information behaviour and needs of vulnerable groups, especially victims of family violence during (quasi)emergencies and the role of NGOs in providing assistance to their users. Still, in the Republic of Croatia, it is an unexplored area. The lack of research was the reason for conducting a broader study in the Republic of Croatia that would enable a deeper understanding of the described topic. The aim of this study is to fill the gap on the role of NGOs in providing the necessary information to their users in order to identify the best ways and communication channels through which victims who have experienced family violence can access the necessary information in everyday life. The purpose of this study is to investigate the problems encountered by employees of NGOs in accessing and using information from the immediate environment during COVID-19, especially relevant information for preserving and protecting the rights of persons exposed to family violence and potentially other vulnerable groups. Efforts are being made to investigate the experiences and knowledge of NGO professionals regarding the violent victimisation of their users and COVID-19 as a potential criminogenic factor in the occurrence of family violence. A qualitative focus group method was used in the research. Focus groups were conducted from September 2020 to December 2021 in five different cities among NGO employees dealing with the protection of victims of family violence. Given the lack of research on the topic, the research results contribute*

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*to the theoretical and practical reflection on the role of NGOs in providing the necessary information to its users at the national and international levels. In the scientific sense, the conducted research opens the way for further research and increases awareness of this topic in the community.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19; victims of family violence; information behaviour of NGO professionals; communication channels; NGOs.*

## ***1 INTRODUCTION - THE IMPORTANCE OF RELEVANT INFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN SOCIETY***

Throughout its unsteady course, the COVID-19 pandemic has touched all aspects of human life and initiated considerable alterations in different spheres of society. Economic stress, job loss, food insecurity, a rapid surge in poverty, and a dramatic decline in trade flows were experienced in almost every part of the world. Due to an abrupt rise in infected cases, the health system's resilience was tested at its maximum levels, counting lost lives and assessing the gravity of health issues of patients who have recovered from the virus. The impact of COVID-19 on education, social stability and individual and social growth has been associated with grim predictions that call for urgent measures and targeted actions in crisis situations.<sup>1</sup> However, the initial response of several countries aimed at curbing the spread of the virus and reducing its negative socio-economic impacts consisted of an accumulation of various measures that restricted freedom of movement and NGOs. The first phase of the exit roadmap for the crisis initiated by a rapid rise of active COVID-19 cases involved lockdowns, social distancing measures, mandatory stay-at-home orders, and curfews. While these could be good tactics and strategy tools to stop the virus, it was soon evident that the social isolation and measures in focus could increase family violence.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of research confirms that mandatory Coronavirus cohabitation has exposed victims to a higher risk of abuse and deprived them of physical space to report the violence they have suffered.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the lockdown measures caused unintended consequences for women and children, exposing them to another, "shadow pandemic" behind closed doors. This directly contradicts statements by the High Representative, Josep Borrell Fontelles, who emphasised that, *inter alia*, protection of human rights is at the heart of the EU's response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, "*No one should be left behind, no human right ignored*".<sup>4</sup>

1 *State of the Least Developed Countries 2021 - Building Back Better in Response to COVID-19* (New York: UN-OHRLS, 2021), 17.

2 Edidiong Mendie *et al.*, "Nowhere to Run: Impact of Family Violence Incidents during COVID-19 Lockdown in Texas", *Journal of Family Strength* 21, no. 2 (2022): 1.

3 Kim Usher *et al.*, "Family Violence and COVID-19: Increased Vulnerability and Reduced Options for Support", *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 29, no. 4 (2020): 549-552.

4 *Human Rights Day: Declaration by the High Representative Josep Borrell on Behalf of the European Union*, Access 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/nigeria/>

Traditionally, the protection of the rights of victims of family violence is linked through the joint cooperation of all stakeholders, policy-makers, the community, and various NGOs.<sup>5</sup> Recently, this protection has been strengthened due to the adoption of new legal standards according to which persons who have experienced family violence belong to vulnerable groups whose vulnerability needs to be addressed by concrete legal and practical measures.<sup>6</sup> Relevant information is provided to these people on the one hand by professionals and on the other by non-professionals who are most often friends and members of the immediate and extended family. The most common problem faced by all vulnerable groups, including victims of family violence, is insufficient knowledge of how to obtain the necessary information, find a reliable source, and which is the most appropriate communication channel, which can affect the initiation of mechanisms for the protection of their basic rights and freedoms. Insufficient knowledge of how to obtain the necessary information and whom to contact, especially in times of pandemic, might influence the victim's decision to report the abuser and start adequate misdemeanour or criminal procedure. Therefore, one of the key elements in creating policies and communication channels to help and support victims of family violence is to know how to provide them with the necessary and relevant information.

### ***1.1 Information Needs of Vulnerable Groups***

Most papers in the field of information science in the context of the information behaviour of vulnerable groups deal with the question of how those who are vulnerable access the necessary information in everyday life by identifying the needs and types of information, the ways of accessibility and confidentiality of information, and to whom they first turn for help.<sup>7</sup> However, many authors warn that the answers to these questions cannot be applied in general as each situation of family violence is different, and each victim, depending on place of residence, information, wider context, family situation, level of education, financial situation, social norms, disability, and social network, requires different types of information.<sup>8</sup> Dunne, who in his research used

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*human-rights-day-declaration-high-representative-josep-borrell-behalf-european\_en.*

- 5 Jeanine Finn *et al.*, "Unprepared for Information Interactions: Abuse Survivors and Police", *Journal of Documentation* 67, (2011): 933-957.
- 6 See more: Dalida Rittossa, "The Institute of Vulnerability in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic – All Shades of the Human Rights Spectrum", *ECLIC* 5, (2021): 843-845.
- 7 Jerry Finn, "Domestic Violence Organizations on the Web: A New Arena for Domestic Violence Services", *Violence Against Women* 6, no. 1 (2000): 80–102; Lynn Westbrook, "Crisis Information Concerns: Information Needs of Domestic Violence Survivors", *Information Processing & Management* 45, (2009): 98-114.
- 8 Daniel J. Whitaker *et al.*, "A Network Model for Providing Culturally Competent Services for Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence", *Violence Against Women* 13, (2007): 190-209; Joanne Klevens *et al.*, "Latinos' Perspectives and Experiences with Intimate Partner Violence", *Violence Against Women* 13, no. 2 (2007): 141-158; Roma Harris *et al.*, "Searching for Help and Information: Abused Women Speak Out", *Library & Information Science Research* 23, no. 2 (2001): 123-141.

Allen's<sup>9</sup> model *Everyday life information seeking* (ELIS) based on "A person-in-situation approach", warns about the described problem as a basis for the analysis of the different information needs of IPV survivors who escaped from violent situations and lived independently.<sup>10, 11</sup> Westbrook continues on Dunne's research, applying the ELIS (ELIS) person-in-progressive situation approach" for IPV survivors by setting a framework for 16 "specific information needs from different angles of victims of family violence (e.g. *considering the choice to leave the abuser; either temporarily or permanently; building a viable life immediately after escape and constructing the basis of viable, long-term independence after escape*).<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 Vulnerable Groups Seeking Information

Another group of papers relevant to our research addresses how vulnerable groups who have experienced violence obtain the information they need and to whom they turn for help. It is also necessary to determine the role of various stakeholders in providing the necessary information to vulnerable groups, such as police, public prosecution officers, judiciary, social services, and NGOs given their contribution to creating a safety net that helps survivors to cope with life situations or escape from violent situations.<sup>13</sup> Finn *et al.* emphasise that in such situations, it is extremely important that government bodies have the necessary communication skills to provide information in order to effectively meet the needs of those in crisis.<sup>14</sup> Harris and Dewdney warn that existing systems and services have not adequately met the needs and expectations of victims of family violence. One of the key findings from their study is that seeking help is influenced by factors unique to each person's situation, and the decision to seek or not seek help is influenced by a number of variables.<sup>15</sup> They also found that one of the main obstacles is that women know what kind of help they want but cannot get it in their community.

- 9 Allen Bryce, "Information Needs: A Person-In-Situation Approach", in: *Information Seeking in Context: Proceedings of an International Conference in Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts, 14-16 August, 1996, Tampere, Finland*, eds. Pertti Vakkari, Reijo Savolainen, and Brenda Dervin (London: Taylor Graham, 1997), 111-122.
- 10 Reijo Savolainen, *Everyday Life Information Seeking. Encyclopaedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Dekker Encyclopaedia, 2004).
- 11 Jennifer E. Dunne, "Information Seeking and Use by Battered Women: A "Person-In-Progressive-Situations" Approach", *Library & Information Science Research* 24, (2002): 343-355.
- 12 Lynn Westbrook, "E-Government Support for People in Crisis: An Evaluation of Police Department Website Support for Domestic Violence Survivors Using "Person-In-Situation" Information Need Analysis", *Library & Information Science Research* 30, (2008): 22-38, 25.
- 13 See more: Heidi L. M. DeLoveh, "Where Do I Turn? A Qualitative Investigation of College Students' Help Seeking Decisions After Sexual Assault Victimization" (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2014); Julia Skinner, and Melissa Gross, "The ISSAS Model: Understanding the Information Needs of Sexual Assault Survivors on College Campuses", *College & Research Libraries* 78, no. 1 (2017): 23, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.78.1.23>.
- 14 Finn *et al.*, *Unprepared for Information Interactions*, 933-957.
- 15 Roma M. Harris, and Patricia Dewdney, *Barriers to Information: How Formal Systems Fail Battered Women* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994).

Going a step further is a study conducted by DeLoveh on the moment when women who are victims of sexual abuse make the decision to seek help, which is linked to four behavioural choices: dealing independently without the support of others; seeking support from friends/family; seeking support from formal sources; or covertly seeking help, where needs are met without data disclosure.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this research, it is important to mention the Skinner and Gross study in which the authors propose a model, “Search for information from survivors of sexual abuse” (ISSAS), by exploring the process and barriers to seeking information through different stages of healing.<sup>17</sup> The primary context surrounding the ISSAS survivor are the three recovery phases described by Harney, Lebowitz, and Harvey.<sup>18</sup> These three phases (restoring security, remembering and grieving, reconnecting with others) are located around the user and provide a context in which an individual, both an adult and a minor, constructs a new meaning based on information.

### ***1.3 Information Channels of Vulnerable Groups***

The research shows the importance of creating different networks through which vulnerable groups can access the necessary information, a topic that is discussed by many authors.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in some countries around the world, various services, websites, and platforms have been created on a practical level that offer victims of family violence and underage victims of abuse various types of relevant information that can help them in everyday life in times of crisis.<sup>20</sup> Such online services can be seen as a kind of communication channel, which makes it easier for victims to access the necessary information. Members of various NGOs certainly contribute to this.<sup>21</sup>

## ***2 GENERAL PRESENTATION OF CURRENT CONDITIONS***

Most authors emphasise that knowing how to provide credible, reliable and relevant information to victims of family violence is one of the key elements in creating policies and communication channels for help and support. Operating in a constantly changing external environment, NGOs have proven to be one of the important stakeholders in providing and managing the necessary knowledge and information for their users, especially in times of pandemics and (quasi)emergencies.<sup>22</sup>

16 DeLoveh, *Where Do I Turn*, 4.

17 Skinner, Gross, *The ISSAS Model*.

18 Patricia A. Harney *et al.*, “A Stage by Dimension Model of Trauma Recovery: Application to Practice”, *Clinical Psychology* 3, no. 4 (1997): 91-103.

19 Tameka L. Gillum *et al.*, “The Importance of Spirituality in the Lives of Domestic Violence Survivors”, *Violence Against Women* 12, no. 3 (2006): 240-250; Whitaker *et al.*, *A Network Model for Providing Culturally Competent Services for Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence*, 190-209.

20 See more Elizabeth A. Edwardsen, and Diane Morse, “Intimate Partner Violence Resource Materials: Assessment of Information Distribution”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 21, no. 8 (2006): 971-981.

21 See Westbrook, *E-government Support for People in Crisis*.

22 Martha Sabelli, “Information Behaviour Among Young Women in Vulnerable Contexts and

Sabelli also points out that NGOs are an important bridge in providing the necessary information to victims of family violence and gaining the necessary knowledge about the daily life of individuals and their lives within the community.<sup>23</sup> Their role becomes even more essential during crisis situations, such as the outbreak of COVID-19 and lockdown when many facilities were closed and their users were unable to obtain the necessary information.<sup>24</sup> Their work is based primarily on the knowledge, skills and experiences they develop in everyday work with users and the so-called “person-centred approach”.<sup>25</sup> For them, at a time of great social stressors that cause a stalemate in the work of traditional, state aid systems, and services to victims of crime and misdemeanours, this is certainly an advantage that is not easy to find in any other type of institution.<sup>26</sup>

Since most NGOs can be described as local organisations that are very flexible and adaptable, the question of their role in reaching and providing the necessary information to their users, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, proved to be challenging and interesting.

### **3 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

A large number of studies has been conducted on the information behaviour and needs of vulnerable groups, especially victims of family violence during (quasi) emergencies and the role of NGOs in providing assistance to users, yet, in the Republic of Croatia, it is an unexplored area.<sup>27</sup> Several papers on the information behaviour of vulnerable groups in society have been published. However, no paper has focused on the role of NGOs in providing, finding, and using the necessary information for their users during crisis situations.<sup>28</sup> The scarcity of literature was the reason for conducting broader research that would enable a deeper understanding of the described topic in the Republic of Croatia. The aim of the study is to fill the gap on the role of NGOs in providing the necessary information to their users in order to identify the best communication channels and networks through which victims of family violence

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Social Inclusion: The Role of Social Mediators”, *Information Research* 17, no. 4 (2012): 1-16.

23 Sabelli, *Information Behaviour Among Young Women in Vulnerable Contexts and Social Inclusion*, 1.

24 Alexandra Zbucea *et al.*, “Knowledge Sharing in NGOs: The Importance of the Human Dimension”, *Kybernetes* 49, no. 1 (2020): 182-199, <https://doi.org/10.1108/K-04-2019-0260>.

25 Lindsay Bloice, and Simon Burnett, “Barriers to Knowledge Sharing in Third Sector Social Care: A Case Study”, *Journal of Knowledge Management* 20, no. 1 (2016), 125-145.

26 Zbucea, *Knowledge Sharing in NGOs*.

27 See more: Finn *et al.*, *Unprepared for Information Interactions*, 933-957; Sabelli, *Information Behaviour Among Young Women in Vulnerable Contexts and Social Inclusion*, 1.; Dalida Rittossa, and Dejana Golenko, “Information Needs of Vulnerable Groups in the Time of COVID-19: The Theoretical Framework”, in: *Exploring the Social Dimension of Europe: Essays in Honour of Prof. Nada Bodiroga Vukobrat*, eds. Gerald G. Sander, Ana Pošćić, and Adrijana Martinović, (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2021), 407-419.

28 See more Snježana Stanarević Katavić, “Informacijske potrebe i obrasci informacijskog ponašanja oboljelih od rijetkih kroničnih bolesti u Republici Hrvatskoj” (PhD diss., University of Zadar, 2013), 3.

can access the necessary information in everyday life. The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify problems encountered by NGOs in accessing, using, and providing information from the immediate environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to explore how NGOs find the most necessary and relevant information to protect the rights of vulnerable groups, especially victims of family violence. Moreover, we will try to identify the role of NGOs and determine policies and services designed to promote and facilitate access to and the use, dissemination and sharing of information to victims of family violence. The study also aims to open the debate on how confinement due to the global pandemic can affect the rights of victims of family violence and their exposure to violence.

Several research questions arise from the above:

1. What are the experiences of NGOs in dealing with the protection of the rights of victims of family violence and other vulnerable persons in dealing with information in their daily work, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

2. Who are the most frequent users of NGOs' services that provide protection of the rights of victims of family violence and other vulnerable people – especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

3. What are the victimological characteristics and types of violent behaviour experienced by NGO service users, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

4. How do NGOs provide information to their users in their daily work, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

5. What is the position of NGOs on how victims of family violence and other vulnerable groups obtain the information they need in everyday life, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19, and in which cases do they turn for help?

6. What sources do the NGOs use the most, and how do they find and obtain the necessary information important for helping their users in their daily work, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

7. What problems and obstacles do the NGOs encounter in accessing and using the information in their daily work with their users, especially during the lockdown and COVID-19?

8. What is the position of the NGOs on the most appropriate communication channels and strategies for providing the necessary information to both victims of family violence and NGO professionals?

9. What types of training do NGO professionals attend to help them provide the necessary information to their users?

#### **4 METHODOLOGY**

We sought answers to these questions in a study that included extensive research using a qualitative focus group research method. Today's trends in the field of studying information behaviour recommend researching users in small groups in order to understand someone's behaviour and discover the cause of behaviour.<sup>29</sup>

29 See more: Christine Bruce, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy* (Adelaide: Auslib Press, 1997), 6, 84; Donald O. Case, and Lisa M. Given, *Looking for Information: A Survey of*



The qualitative focus group method is one of the most frequently used methods in researching information behaviour that is particularly useful for uncovering the underlying reasons for opinions and motivations for actions, emotions and feelings.<sup>30</sup> Focus group methodology is a powerful research strategy that is well suited for exploring family violence, a social phenomenon that might be considered a forbidden topic in certain contexts.<sup>31</sup>

#### ***4.1 Participants in the Focus Group***

The sample included 21 NGO participants dealing with the protection of victims of family violence from five urban centres of the Republic of Croatia: Rijeka, Poreč, Zagreb, Osijek, and Split. The following factors were taken into account in the selection of participants:

1. NGO employees from various urban centres were selected to gain insight into the bigger picture and identify similarities and differences in the work of NGOs during the pandemic with emphasis on the lockdown, March 16 to May 10, 2020 (see Table 1).

2. In order to gain a comprehensive insight into the work of NGOs and to identify challenges and types of services provided to their users, NGO employees of different professions participated in the study, e.g. psychologists, lawyers and NGO directors (see Table 2).

**Table 1** Representation of NGO Professionals with Regard to Urban Centres Where the Research Was Conducted

<b>FOCUS GROUPS (URBAN CENTRES)</b>	<b>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</b>
Rijeka	6
Poreč	3
Zagreb	5
Osijek	3
Split	4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>21</b>

- Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behaviour*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bingley: Emerald, 2016), 245.
- 30 Peggy Mullaly-Quijas *et al.*, "Using Focus Groups to Discover Health Professionals' Information Needs: A Regional Marketing Study", *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 82, no. 3 (1994): 305-311; Naomi M. Wright *et al.*, "Development of a Legal Service Needs and Barriers Measure for Victims of Family Violence and Other Crime", *Journal of Family Violence*, (2022): 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00348-4>.
- 31 Victor Jupp, ed., *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 121-122.

**Table 2** Occupations of NGO Professionals Covered by the Research

NGO EMPLOYEES PROFESSION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Psychologists, psychotherapists	6
Lawyers	8
Other	7
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>21</b>

Most of the participants completed the study of psychology or psychotherapy (six participants) or the study of law (eight participants), while seven participants completed other studies and are heads of offices or coordinators of the NGOs (e.g., economists, a professor of Croatian language, a master of sociology etc.) or manage a web portal of the NGOs (a computer scientist). The main motive of the participants for working in the NGO field was their desire to provide support and assistance to vulnerable groups in society. Some of them decided to join the NGOs because of their history of previous victimisation or the victimisation of close friends or family members.

The study was conducted in the period from September 2020 to December 2021. Focus groups were conducted on the premises of NGOs and recorded on a dictaphone of a mobile device. Recorded conversations were processed with VLC Media Player.<sup>32</sup> Three to five participants participated in the groups, depending on the number of employees in the NGOs who work directly with users.<sup>33</sup> The interviews lasted an average of 90 to 120 minutes, depending on the readiness and interest of the participants in the topic and the interview. As the participants knew each other, the atmosphere was relaxed and pleasant. The moderators did not have to intervene much as the participants were happy to participate in the discussion, answered questions spontaneously, listened to each other and did not feel insecure or afraid when expressing their opinions. Questions within each block opened new ones and spontaneously followed up on a new topic.

Prior to the wider research, a pilot study was conducted to test the set methodology and guided questions. The pilot study was conducted in September 2020 among employees of the Rijeka NGO for the protection and support of victims of family violence. The main problems that arose in the pilot study were the terms used that may have different meanings in certain disciplines (e.g., law, information sciences, psychology). Therefore, the questions originally asked have been redrafted, further clarified and supported by examples to avoid possible doubts.

32 VLC Media Player is a free open source multimedia player, and it is an alternative to Windows Media Player, iTunes, and RealPlayer. VLC Media player, Access 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022, <http://vlc-media-player.en.softonic.com/>.

33 Ljubica Paradžik *et al.*, "Primjena fokusnih grupa kao kvalitativne metode istraživanja u populaciji djece i adolescenata", *Socijalna psihijatrija* 46, no. 4 (2018): 442-456. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/214846>.

#### **4.2 Focus Group Tool and Research Flow**

After the pilot study, seven main groups of questions were formed about NGOs' opinions and attitudes about the access, use and provision of information to users and gaining insight into users, the environment in which they live, victimological characteristics and types of violent behaviour. Within each group, subcategories were further developed, emphasising lockdown time, in an attempt to identify differences in ways of communicating with users. The first group included questions about the education of employees of the NGO and their reasons for working in the NGO. The second group contained questions on age, gender, marital status, education, living space, internet access and mobile networks. The aim was to explore the experiences and situations of their users, which may play an important role in identifying ways to obtain the necessary information in their everyday lives.<sup>34</sup> The third group of questions was related to the victimological characteristics of their users, types and intensity of experienced violent behaviour in the family circle, and the most common offenders. In cases of physical violence, the types of bodily injuries inflicted on users were also investigated. Furthermore, special attention was paid to whether the lockdown and COVID-19 affected the change in the frequency of victims' exposure to family violence. For the third group of questions, the three-level understanding of family violence as a legal concept coined in the misdemeanour and criminal spheres was used as a basis.

Depending on the type, intensity, consequences for the victim and other relevant circumstances, violence against a family member may be a misdemeanour under the Law on Protection from Family Violence,<sup>35</sup> a family violence criminal offence<sup>36</sup> or one of the qualified criminal offences with elements of violence committed against a close person.<sup>37</sup> The fourth group of questions was related to the ways of communicating with users and situations in which users decide to make contact, especially during COVID-19. The questions covered the specific information needed for vulnerable groups and the types of information NGO professionals most often provide to their users. For the fourth set of questions, the Westbrook study, which used the ELIS person-in-progressive-situation approach to IPV survivors, was used as a framework, setting out 16 specific information needs from different angles of victims of family violence.<sup>38</sup> The fifth group of questions included questions about how the NGOs get the necessary information that can help them to protect the rights of users, which sources they use, and problems and obstacles that affect the access, use, and flow of information in everyday work with users. The sixth group of questions examined their

34 Westbrook, *E-government support for people in crisis*, 1.

35 Art. 10 and 22 of the Law on Protection from Family Violence, Official Gazette, no. 70/17, 126/19, 84/21.

36 Art. 179.a of the Criminal Code, Official Gazette, no. 125/11, 144/12, 56/15, 61/15, 101/17, 118/18, 126/19, 84/21 (hereinafter CC/11).

37 Art. 111, Subpara. 3; Art. 116, Para. 3; Art. 117, Para. 2; Art. 118, Para. 2; Art. 119, Para. 2; Art. 136, Para. 3; Art. 137, Para. 2; Art. 139, Para. 3; Art. 140, Para. 2; Art. 154; Art. 166 of the CC/11.

38 Westbrook, *E-government Support for People in Crisis*, 1.

views on the most appropriate communication channels and communication strategies to provide the necessary information to users. The seventh group of questions intended to investigate whether members of NGOs received some form of additional education and training in the context of information skills in accordance with the needs of their work environment, which would help them provide the necessary information to their users.

After the focus groups, transcripts were made and e-mailed to the participants for confirmation before the next stage of the research – analysis of results – began. In Chapter 5, participants are coded with the following codes: N1, N2, N3, N4, N5, N6, N7, N8, N9, N10, N11, N12, N13, N14, N15, N16, N17, N18, N19, N20, and N21. Given the described and limited space in the paper, we will reveal the most important results of the research according to the described main groups of questions.

## **5 RESULTS**

### ***5.1 Users of the Services of NGOs that Provide Protection of the Rights of Victims of Violence and other Vulnerable Groups, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19***

The results showed that the most common NGO users are adult female victims of violence that corresponds to one of the misdemeanours prohibited under the Law on Protection from Family Violence or the criminal offence of family violence. In addition to adult female victims of these prohibited behaviours, other types of users are represented, depending on both the geographical location of the city centre of the NGO and its field of work. Thus, in the Osijek NGO, in addition to adult female victims of family violence, professionals work with other vulnerable groups, such as the homeless and the elderly, who receive free legal aid services (e.g., in the case of fraud committed through a lifetime maintenance contract), and the veteran population. The average age of the users is 55+, and in terms of education, the users are mostly women of lower financial status, most often with completed primary and secondary school, who come from both rural and urban areas of Slavonia and Baranja. [N15-N17] The research showed that only two NGOs, one from Rijeka and the other from Split, have family violence offenders as users.

*We are not working with the offenders; we are somehow still at a distance on this issue; we do not want to actually cause some distrust in the victims; we would certainly lose their confidence if we worked with the offenders...* [N15]

The Zagreb NGO has the largest range of different groups of users from all parts of the Republic of Croatia, but the primary users are mostly women exposed to family violence from Zagreb and its surroundings. [N7-N11] In Rijeka, the most significant number of users are still adult female victims. However, NGOs also work with adult offenders, juveniles and young adults, and young people with learning, behavioural or family difficulties who are directed to NGOs through the public prosecutors' offices or social welfare centres. [N1-N3; N12-N14] In the Poreč NGO, the largest number of users are female victims of violent behaviours aged 25 to 55. There have also been

incidents of violence against children in kindergarten and young people in violent relationships. [N4-N6] The Split NGO mostly provides services to adult female victims of family violence. Still, as stated above, NGO professionals run a special programme dedicated to male offenders of these violent acts. [N18-N21]

During the lockdown, new users, such as parents who had experienced violence at the hands of their children, also contacted the NGOs. Young men exposed to violence from their parents and people who experienced neighbourhood violence also sought help. In the Osijek region, adult victims of family violence, both female and male, came forward and asked for free legal aid. Among the users are also older adults who want to file for divorce (persons + 70 years) or send a request for resolving property and legal issues (e.g., lifelong support). [N15-N17] In the Split region, the number of services related to resolving property and legal matters, such as the issue of inheritance due to increased fear of existence, has increased. The Split NGO has also noted a rise in contacts made by older adults, the long-term unemployed, mostly women, and middle-aged men (35 to 55 years). The number of services related to psychosocial support has also increased. [N18-N21] Cases of neighbourhood violence have been reported in Rijeka's NGOs. Regarding the living space of users, most users have access to the internet and mobile devices regardless of the urban or rural area from which they come. [N1-N3; N12-N14]

## ***5.2 Victimological Characteristics of NGO Service Users and Types of Experienced Violent Behaviours, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19***

The analysis has shown that violence experienced by specialist family violence NGO users is a complex, highly dynamic, and regular rather than episodic occurrence. Most victims are women in abusive relationships aged 20-50 years who live in economically deprived circumstances, as well as a smaller number of children. They have been exposed to a number of different violent behaviours in the family environment for a considerable period of time. [N1; N4; N7-N9; N13] Although family violence is a conglomerate of many diverse behaviours marked by the use of force or threat, NGO participants are unanimous in noting that psychological and/or physical violence prevail. Psychological blows and emotional deprivation are almost a common experience for every woman who has sought support and assistance from NGOs. Coercive control, forced confinement in the home, threats of physical violence, insults, and ignoring create an offensive or intimidating atmosphere seriously impairing the victim's psychological integrity. [N1; N4] Physical attacks usually follow creating a general pattern of abuse. [N17; N21] The issue of family violence becomes worse in cases where a woman is not employed and suffers economic harm being economically dependent on her partner or spouse.

*...more or less all types of violence are represented constantly when we talk about family violence... however, one form of it, as N17 said... the psychological is always present. The physical sometimes; but I say, the economic aspect, it is added if... a woman does not work... these are (the perpetrator's) manipulations.* [N16]

*...she knows it's not her money, so her husband keeps the household income, he has a car etc. He makes all the rules. [N9]*

In certain cases, the economic deprivation combined with psychological harassment in the form of ignoring may last for 20 years and sometimes even longer. Without financial freedom, low prospects for employability, and burdened with other issues like poor health or disability, victims can suffer emotional distress at the hands of their abusers for many years [N16], and remaining in an abusive relationship seems to be the only option. [N16-N17]

One of the significant issues in the support and assistance system for family violence victims is the commonly acknowledged fact that the victims themselves, and their closest environment, are the ones who fail to recognise violence. [N1; N5; N7] A lack of perspective may lead to systems of control and new forms of abuse resulting in more short and long-term detrimental effects. For example, due to social perception of sexual marital rights, forced sex between husband and wife or intimate partners is not recognised as a criminal offence, rather, it is perceived as a woman's duty that she fulfils for the sake of "peace in the house". [N4] The participants stress that the most easily recognisable form of violence arises when a victim is subjected to physical abuse, and physically violent episodes in family settings are the main reason why victims come forward and turn to NGO-run services. Once they disclose the physical violence and continue to use the available services, the degree of awareness and their knowledge about the experienced violence increases, and attitudes towards personal victimisation change. [N1-N21]

*Users mostly contact us because of physical violence for the pure reason that it is easiest for them to recognise that they are victims of violence... then, of course, in a conversation, it turns out that she is also a victim of psychological violence. You have to know that very rarely we will have physical violence without (acts of) psychological (abuse), and then follow both the economic and sexual. In most cases, we have to deal with a combination of all types of violence. [N7]*

*We also got to that part when I asked her if there was sexual violence. She said something like, "He has needs"... She even said that it was not a rape, it was more like mutilation ... even though it had happened in a horrible way in front of children. [N8 and N9 discussing a case from Slavonia]*

For the most part, infringement of sexual freedom is the rarest subgroup of family violence. According to Zagreb NGO's statistics, less than 10% of all female users seek psychological help to work through difficult circumstances to heal after experiencing sexual violence inflicted by a family member [N8] (in most cases by a current or former spouse or intimate partner, older brother, father, grandfather, or uncle). [N4; N13] Their primary need is to find someone who can help them with their grief. [N7] As a result of rape in the family context, victims may experience significant negative impacts on their physical and social wellbeing and psychological distress. [N18]

Focus group participants acknowledge that all types of violence in the family environment can bruise or severely harm a victim's mental health, physical integrity and personal safety. The NGO professionals are aware of the full range of

consequences associated with family violence; however, the impact of consequences is particularly striking in cases of physical abuse. The manifestation of it covers the whole spectrum of bodily injuries, including swelling, redness, burns, cuts, broken teeth, and hematomas as well as injuries that require urgent medical attention. [N1; N4; N21] Victims often experience a direct assault on the body by slapping, pushing, punching, throwing down, and choking. [N1-N3] The offender's abusive behaviour may also result in serious bodily injuries and aggravated assaults. According to NGO records, a father was accused of inflicting serious bodily injuries on his three underage children by beating them up so severely that one child suffered both physical and mental trauma that needed to be addressed and likewise worked through in psychiatric treatment. [N16] A shocking and extreme example of physical abuse included regular violent attacks, and at some point, the offender unleashed his aggression and assaulted his wife by whipping and beating her. [N20]

Depending on the types of services they provide and the geographical area they cover, certain participants confirm a link between the COVID-19 virus and the rise in family violence. In contrast, others report an equal incidence or a diminution of delinquent behaviour in focus. If the frequency of users' phone calls is an indicator of family violence prevalence, NGO professionals from Zagreb maintained that the national lockdown generated a 25% increase in family violence because, during that particular time, violence behind family doors that had started earlier intensified and became more visible. [N7-N9] Furthermore, the NGO from Rijeka confirmed that statistical parameters before and during the lockdown did not show any variation in users' exposure to violence within the family. [N1] Additionally, a decrease in demand for NGO services was also noted, [N12-N13] and the general hypothesis of service providers for such phenomenological construction was based on the fact that

*...during the lockdown, everything stopped, but really everything stopped... at that point, public prosecutor's offices and courts closed. Hearings were cancelled.* [N4]

Besides, some believe that the lockdown situation caused feelings of distress and loneliness and the belief that users had no one to contact. [N19] However, as the restrictive measures imposed to control the pandemic proceeded, participants noticed a notable increase in phone calls and other ways of communication. [N4; N12-N13] The phenomenon is multidimensional and caused by multiple, diverse factors associated with the victims' personal situation and external social circumstances.

*At the very beginning of the lockdown... life stopped for all of us. We waited to see what would happen. Then, when we got used to it, and accepted that it would take some time, we started with calls and information gathering... Moreover... victims were locked down with their abusers. This means they were not even in the condition to contact us. My assumption is that a considerable number of family violence cases went unreported.* [N14]

Participants reveal that apart from influencing the phenomenological oscillations in demand for NGO family violence services, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a criminological factor significantly associated with the new forms of violence. The offenders used the virus as an excuse to prevent child contact with the mother in

custody cases. [N21] Coercive control in prohibiting the victim from leaving home because “she will catch the virus and spread it to all household members” was also reported. [N7-N10, N20-N21] A number of abusers inflicted psychological harm on their victims, threatening them with COVID-19 infection to gain additional power and control. [N8]

Therefore, it does not come somewhat as a surprise that in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic,

*...when looking at all crime victims, working with victims of family violence is the most complex.* [N15]

### **5.3 NGOs' Ways of Communicating and Providing Information to Users, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19**

Several factors have to be considered when NGOs communicate and provide information to their users. NGOs most often provide two types of services – psychological and legal counselling. Due to this fact, the specific information needs of their users and the types of information they offer mostly differ. For example, the service of psychological counselling is longer and is provided by the professionals of the NGOs on a continuous basis. Providing legal services may involve less complicated cases, and the legal issue may be resolved during only one meeting. [N1-N21]

The number of applications for legal advice remained on average during the lockdown, and even a smaller number of calls were recorded in some NGOs (e.g., the Rijeka NGO). The amount of psychological counselling for people who need conversation or emotional support greatly increased, as did psychological help during self-isolation or quarantine [N1-N5].

*...I think that the number of users of our psychological and legal counselling services is average, but there was an increase in those calls made by people who are not actually our registered users...* [N1]

The most common way of communicating with users in their daily work before the pandemic outbreak was in person and via the free SOS telephone line. [N1-N21]

*I have continued to work with my users, and most often, how we communicate on a daily basis and constantly is by phone. This is most convenient for people because they can adjust the place where they can talk safely, during the time when it suits them.* [N4]

During the pandemic, and especially during the lockdown, the means of communication changed primarily because the offices of the NGOs were closed, and personal attendance was mostly prevented. Therefore, employees turned to working from home with users and redirected phones from NGOs to their homes and personal cell phones. They also communicated with the older users by phone and via Facebook, while they communicated with the younger population more via Instagram. [N15]

*First, in the lockdown, everything stopped. However, we still maintained communication. What I personally did was I called all the current users myself. I asked them where they were and if they had a problem. I explained that I was still there if something went wrong. Therefore, in that sense, we continued to provide the same services.* [N4]



If a user personally visited the NGOs office, the visit was announced by phone in compliance with the highest epidemiological measures and social distancing or was arranged in an open space. NGOs communicated with users using ZOOM, Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc. and published information and notices via social networks (e.g., Facebook) or on the NGO website. [N1-N21]

#### ***5.4 NGOs' Opinions Regarding Ways in Which Victims of Family Violence and Other Vulnerable Groups Obtain the Necessary Information in Everyday Life, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19, and in Which Cases They Seek Help***

According to the participants, users obtain the necessary information most often through NGOs, families, police, the internet, social networks (e.g., Facebook support groups), lawyers, social welfare centres, recommendations and acquaintances if someone has already used the services of the NGO. [N1-N21]

The NGO users, primarily adult female victims of family violence, decide to turn to NGOs for help in different life situations. Some users ask what kind of procedures they can expect during, for example, divorce; others ask how to persuade the abusive partner to engage in psychiatric treatment for alcohol addiction or how to stop the violence. The NGOs also receive requests for information related to finding accommodation after leaving the abuser or what to expect when going to a safe house. [N1-N21]

Participants also pointed out that their users do not take the next step to leave the abuser due to difficult employability and insecurity. [N1-N3; N4-6]

*70% of our calls and our users are victims of family violence. Our conversations are mostly about victims' individual situations. What did they do? Are they safe now? Do they call immediately after the violent incident, or are they just thinking about their options (i.e., leaving the abuser, getting the accommodation in a safe house...)? I explain to them what is available. I offer them the opportunity.* [N7]

At the same time, all participants emphasised that the most common trigger for asking for help is the moment when the offender starts to be violent towards children. [N1-N3; N4-N6]

*...women can suffer years of violence, both economic and psychological, physical and whatever you want. I think their first trigger for reporting is when children get involved in any way... Women report when violence becomes extremely brutal and intensive or when it starts happening in the presence of children and towards children.* [N4]

Participants believe that their users turn to them for help because they feel safe with them, and they are bound by mutual trust in a friendly, safe environment without judgments or bullying. [N4]. Their users often state that they have not received feedback from other institutions they had previously contacted, that the system does not want to listen to them or that they do not understand the system. The users ask NGOs for help and assistance because their inner feelings tell them that something is wrong. However, they do not know whom to turn to etc.

*It is always very surprising to me when they open up and when they really gain that unreserved trust; It is unbelievable that these people have been suffering for years, and they had no one to talk to. [N4]*

*...a person does not feel supported at all stages. (...) This is the feedback from the users... therefore, we cannot say that she is confident that she will receive help and support no matter if she already reported the abuser or is just thinking about reporting. [N18]*

Participants stated that the described situations were further aggravated during the lockdown when all institutions were closed, and the process of providing the necessary assistance was very difficult. [N1-N21]

On the other hand, a number of contacts associated with new users emerged during the lockdown due to the fact that NGOs were intensively represented in the media or because of users' ignorance of where to find the necessary information. [N1-N21]

*...it should be said that a lot of users who contacted us actually in these times of crisis only needed a person to talk to. There were a lot of older people, a lot of lonely people. Then these people don't even know whom to call. "Well, we know about your NGO. You know everything. You can do anything, so let me hear what you think about this or that." [N7]*

### **5.5 Sources for Finding Relevant Information in Daily Work with Users, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19**

Participants cite their colleagues and associates as the most common source of information in their daily work with users. At the same time, they point out that they rely mostly on colleagues because of their expertise, knowledge, and work experience. Depending on the type of services they provide, they communicate with many experts from different fields, but primarily lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, etc. The important sources of information are higher education institutions, such as law faculties and legal scholars. [N1-N21]

*I think that Croatia is a small country, and the NGOs working with the family violence victims are few, and we all know each other somehow. There are those few places we always know we can call. [N1]*

In their daily work, NGO professionals use electronic sources (e.g., websites of ministries, legal databases, etc.), textbooks and papers in the field of law and psychology, depending on the service they provide [N1-N3; N7-N11; N15-N17].

Over the years, they have developed different techniques and tools for finding and evaluating the necessary information in performing daily tasks depending on the expectations and requirements of NGO users. They explain that due to different services (legal and psychological counselling) and types of information, the ways of finding the necessary information may be different. [N1-N21]

*...we have a completely individual approach to every person who comes here... we use all our knowledge, acquaintances, abilities, possibilities, and we work together with the users on what they want, the outcomes they set, goals, changes they want to achieve... [N12]*

During the pandemic, and especially the lockdown, NGO professionals used relevant websites of various ministries, networks of institutions and organisations at the national and international level (e.g., the official website of the Government of the Republic of Croatia on Coronavirus and the Croatian Institute of Public Health, the website of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy and the Ministry of the Interior) and legal databases (e.g., IusInfo, Official Gazette). The reliable sources of information were proven to be the websites of Croatian and international courts, as well as the official portal of the European Union (EUR-Lex), the European Court of Justice, and the European Court of Human Rights. [N1-N3; N7-N11; N15-N17]

*...specifically, I personally inquired about COVID-19 recommendations using the ministries' websites. What can we do now? What do we need? (...) Have we followed all the measures?* [N7]

Participants regularly informed the public about their services and activities through various media (e.g., publishing texts on the NGO's websites or Facebook) while trying to provide their users with the necessary information. Some NGOs printed leaflets and delivered them to victim and witness support departments at county courts. [N4-N6; N15-N17] Some even went a step further and participated in campaigns on violence against women, took part in television and radio commercials, and advertised their activities on local radio stations. One NGO has also opened its own YouTube channel and has been creating new online platforms for special user groups. [N7-N11]

### ***5.6 Problems and Obstacles Encountered by Employees of NGOs in Accessing and Using Information in Their Daily Work, Especially During the Lockdown and COVID-19***

One of the main challenges faced by NGOs, which was pointed out by all participants regardless of the pandemic, is stability, i.e., sustainability for further development since their work is funded by different projects. [N1-N21] The number of services they will be able to provide for their users will also depend on the financial resources they receive. This problem was particularly intensified during the lockdown, when they needed to resolve issues related to payment of rent and purchase of hygiene products in accordance with epidemiological recommendations. [N15]

Another problem that emerged during the lockdown was the lack of IT infrastructure to communicate with users, [N7-N11] particularly in situations when users did not have internet access or access to Viber and other mobile networks. [N1-N3]

The issue of credibility and reliability of sources was stressed during the focus group discussion. Participants are aware of the importance of the relevant information their users receive given that such information may determine their future decisions and pathway to end violence.

*...when a woman turns for help, the first information she receives is very important; her whole further journey may depend on it, and this is frightening.* [N13]

The person who provides information must be a person of trust, someone who is informed, educated and has a certain responsibility. [N4; N15]

The implementation of the lockdown measures has created obstacles in managing family violence proceedings, which were not conducted in a timely manner. As a result, most NGOs have created new services by providing community assistance within their capacity (e.g., accommodation of users in safe houses, testing of users for COVID-19 disease). [N1-N21]

### ***5.7 NGOs' Opinions on the Most Appropriate Communication Channels and Communication Strategies for Providing the Needed Information***

Over the years, participants have developed a number of informal communication channels, creating a network of people with whom they cooperate. Members of their network are professionals from different institutions and civil society – police officers, prosecutors, social welfare professionals, county court employees working for the victim and witness support departments, city administration officers, volunteers engaged in emergency telephone services, and the staff of shelters and safe houses. [N1-N3; N7-N11; N12-N14]. Given the sensitivity of everyday life situations of family violence victims, the most appropriate communication channel has proven to be phone conversations, including the emergency telephone calls. While talking to the NGO professionals, family violence victims maintain their privacy and a sense of distance. [N4]

*They always have the opportunity to visit our office. When I'm in Pula or some other city, and I know they need to talk to me, I let them know and arrange a meeting. However, I really think that the telephone communication channel is the most acceptable to them. They feel close enough because we hear each other and distant enough to have their own sense of privacy and the non-personal.* [N4]

The internet offers a large number of information choices, and consequently, family violence victims may face difficulty in finding the relevant information. [N4; N12]. Different factors may influence users' decision to use a certain communication channel while seeking the necessary and credible information, e.g., the victim's age, social context, availability of the internet, and their information skills. According to NGO professionals, younger generations prefer to use Instagram, while middle-aged users focus more on seeking information via Facebook. Bearing this in mind, they firmly believe that the necessary information for vulnerable users exposed to family violence should be available in various media. In addition to the above, the information has to be clear and written in a comprehensive manner, avoiding the excessive use of terms specific to a particular profession. [N12-N14]

*The biggest problem in Croatia is information sharing: What is the target media that suits victim's needs the most? There is none... For children, you can always find children's TV shows; for adults and the elderly, we also have special shows... However, victims of family violence come from all spheres of society... it seems to me that institutions such as emergency rooms, social centres and*

*police stations are the ones who should immediately inform the victim that there is another circle of support and help they can have access to, apart from the institutional and formal one. [N4]*

Another worrying issue is the fact that there is no unique website that would provide relevant information that can be used in NGOs' daily work with users. [N15-N16] In future efforts to create such a communication channel, first and foremost, the victim's information needs must be placed in the centre of attention, and available options have to be created via cross-sectoral cooperation. [N4; N15-N17]

*...the need for cross-sectoral cooperation is important, i.e., actors involved and those working with victims – they all have to be connected because one of the biggest problems is a mutual misunderstanding, and ignorance about who has to do what and when... [N4]*

Publicly available information bears significant importance, and thus, the example of good practice can be seen in police forms that contain information on NGO services for family violence victims. [N1; N4; N15, N18] However, NGO professionals believe that in the digital age, it would be highly important to create an online interactive map for victims of violence to rapidly access all the relevant and critical information. [N15-N17]

### **5.8 Education and Training of NGO Professionals**

NGO professionals have attended different education and training programs to enhance their competencies and skills depending on the type of services they provide and the needs of their working environment. A certain number of participants have a special licence to carry out activities within their NGOs. In order to gain additional pedagogical competencies and social and psychological skills, NGO professionals attend a variety of interdisciplinary seminars and activities. For example, they gained a special knowledge of how to communicate with children involved in the criminal justice system and enhanced their competencies while attending the education programs created in cooperation with the victim and witness support departments at county courts. [N1-N21]

*...I often participate in various training programs... and in all these training programs, you get new information, solutions to specific cases... and every time, I hear something useful from practitioners or scholars... [N16]*

NGO professionals are left to decide by themselves whether or not to attend certain forms of education due to the fact that in the Republic of Croatia, there is no formal training to work with users, particularly with victims of violence. Nevertheless, their official reports have to be supported with evidence that they are trained to work with this special group of vulnerable users. [N1-N3]

*...in Croatia, there are no specific, formalised or approved training seminars to work with victims of violence... Since last year, the Ministry of Social Affairs has been asking NGOs to provide evidence and certificates from formal training programs, and this does not exist. [N2]*

Most of the participants did not attend any training to develop their information skills, which would help them provide the necessary information to their users, nor did they attend information literacy programmes on how to evaluate, use and search

for relevant sources of information. [N4-N21]

## 6 CONCLUSION

Family violence is a highly negative, pervasive, and persistent social phenomenon that inhibits personal and community growth. In recent years, the general and scholarly public has been focused on family violence and associated issues, and the common conclusion is that due to intensified societal and concrete legislative measures, it has begun to transit from the private sphere to the public view. Unfortunately, a series of recent brutal attacks on women in the family context seriously call into question the effectiveness of the current system for the protection of the rights of family violence victims.<sup>39</sup> To a certain degree, the system has been remodelled and upgraded, and elements of multisector cooperation are more strongly interconnected in order to facilitate the access of victims to protection services;<sup>40</sup> however, a question emerges: Is this system sufficiently operational, particularly in a time of crisis?

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global stressor that has created penumbras of uncertainty and insecurity associated with overwhelming consequences for health, social, and economic domains, which may generate tensions that could increase the likelihood of abuse within the family. Social distancing and lockdown measures have additionally increased the risk of family violence, creating the opportunity for the abuser to tighten his controlling grip on his victim. The conditions of isolation and movement control imposed by the lockdown measures are part of the everyday reality of life for many victims of family abuse. In circumstances when such reality is spread out nationwide, likewise affecting the offender, violence may surge. With this in mind, it is no surprise that all NGO professionals who participated in the research, regardless of the number of calls received during the national lockdown period, expect a rise in family violence incidents. Due to external circumstances and limited access to support services, their clients were exposed to physical attacks, psychological harassment, economic deprivation, and violation of sexual integrity. The current pandemic has amplified the severity of abuse in the family context, generating new forms of violence. Evidence shows that offenders used threats of spreading the virus and infecting their family members. Coercion and control in child custody cases using the virus as an excuse as well as a method to isolate the partner further from friends and family was also reported in the ambit of oppression and manipulation. Although COVID-19 has confirmed itself to be a strong driver of family violence, the research has disclosed that its effect on incidence and metamorphosis of abuse is significant

39 Hina, "Muškarac koji je pucao na bivšu suprugu prijavljen za pokušaj teškog ubojstva", *Jutarnji list*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/crna-kronika/muskarac-koji-je-pucalo-na-bivsu-suprugu-prijavljen-za-pokusaj-teskog-ubojstva-15176474>; Ivana Šilović, "Ubojica bivše partnerice prijavljen za teško ubojstvo", *HRT News*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/hrvatska/tragedija-u-splitu-sluzbenih-potvrda-o-motivima-ubojstva-jos-uvijek-nema-3631590>.

40 For more details about the need to reform Croatian family violence system services, see in: Marissabell Škorić, "Obiteljsko nasilje u praksi Europskog suda za ljudska prava s posebnim osvrtom na presude protiv Republike Hrvatske", *Hrvatski ljetopis za kaznene znanosti i praksu* 25, no. 2 (2018): 387-415.

but not fundamental. Women who have been victims of family abuse also face other challenges such as unreported employment, job loss, financial hardship, alimony issues, childcare and home-schooling.

*The bigger problem associated with the lockdown was that the system left people who were either in poverty or at risk of poverty to fall anyway. The system collapsed for the most vulnerable, it really did. [N13]*

Therefore, research has shown that at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of finding and obtaining relevant and credible information has never been more crucial. Given the everyday life situations of family violence victims, the right information can be vital for choosing the first step to get out of the abusive relationship. There are different situations in which users decide to turn to NGOs for help and assistance; yet, all these personal circumstances can be divided into three basic groups from Westbrook's study: considering the choice to leave the abuser, either temporarily or permanently; building a viable life immediately after the escape and constructing the basis of viable, long-term independence after the escape. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that every victim has different access to the necessary information or uses a different source of information depending on cultural, social, and other life circumstances. Consequently, the credible information source is actually the key to accessing relevant information and users' previously acquired information and digital skills.

The research has shown that victims exposed to family violence face difficulty finding the necessary information on the internet due to the large amount of information and their personal lack of knowledge of where to find the right information. A considerable obstacle on this path is also the absence of a unique website dedicated to family violence victims that would include various types of relevant information. While creating the best communication channel that would provide the necessary and credible information, creators of public policies and NGO representatives have to take into account a variety of victims' personal circumstances, such as their age, social context, availability of the internet and information skills.

The study opened the door in the information literacy field and criminology for considering the necessary information skills of NGOs and their users as a prerequisite for effectively protecting their rights in times of crisis. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first research that investigates the issues in focus in the Republic of Croatia. This study has raised a large number of new questions that require broader research from different angles and perspectives. Protecting the rights of victims of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic requires an interdisciplinary, holistic approach that should be the backbone of a strengthened, upgraded and user-friendly service system. Such a system can only be built through the critical engagement of all parties involved in finding the best way to provide the needed information to the user in each individual situation.

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Sažetak

## **ULOGA UDRUGA U DOBA PANDEMIJE: SPONA IZMEĐU SLUŽBENIH POLITIKA I INFORMACIJSKIH POTREBA ŽRTAVA OBITELJSKOG NASILJA**

O informacijskom ponašanju i potrebama ranjivih skupina, osobito žrtava obiteljskog nasilja tijekom (kvazi)izvanrednih situacija i ulozi udruga u pružanju pomoći svojim korisnicima proveden je veliki broj istraživanja u svijetu, no u Republici Hrvatskoj ono je neistraženo područje. Upravo je stoga neistraženost teme bila povod za provođenje šireg istraživanja u RH koje bi omogućilo dublje razumijevanje opisane tematike. Cilj je rada ispuniti prazninu o ulozi udruga u načinu pružanju potrebne informacije svojim korisnicima kako bi se utvrdili najbolji načini i komunikacijski kanali putem kojih bi žrtve koje su iskusile nasilje u obitelji mogle doći do potrebne informacije u svakodnevnom životu. Svrha je rada istražiti probleme na koje nailaze djelatnici udruga u pristupu i korištenju informacija iz neposredne okoline osobito u doba bolesti COVID-19, posebno relevantnih informacija za očuvanje i zaštitu prava osoba izloženih nasilju u krugu obitelji i potencijalno drugih ranjivih skupina. Nastoje se istražiti i iskustva i saznanja djelatnika udruga o nasilnoj viktimizaciji njihovih korisnika i bolesti COVID-19 kao potencijalnom kriminogenom čimbeniku u nastanku nasilja u obitelji. U istraživanju je korištena kvalitativna metoda fokus grupe. Fokus grupe su provedene od rujna 2020. do prosinca 2021. u pet različitih gradova među djelatnicima udruga koje se bave zaštitom žrtava obiteljskog nasilja. S obzirom na nedostatnu istraženost teme rezultati istraživanja doprinose su teorijskom i praktičnom promišljanju o ulozi udruga u načinu pružanja potrebne informacije svojim korisnicima na nacionalnoj i međunarodnoj razini. U znanstvenom smislu provedeno istraživanje otvara put daljnjim istraživanjima i povećava osviještenost o navedenoj tematici u društvenoj zajednici.

**Ključne riječi:** *COVID-19; žrtve obiteljskog nasilja; informacijsko ponašanje djelatnika udruga; komunikacijski kanali; udruge.*

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