

# Information Needs of Vulnerable Groups in the Time of COVID-19: The Theoretical Framework

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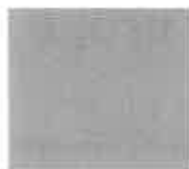
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# Information Needs of Vulnerable Groups in the Time of COVID-19 – The Theoretical Framework

*Dalida Rittossa\* and Dejana Golenko\*\**

## 1 The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Social Stressor

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres has firmly stated that “The COVID-19 pandemic is causing untold human suffering and economic devastation worldwide.”<sup>1</sup> The media have promptly conveyed his message with a call for mutual actions as to prevent violence anywhere, from war zones to people’s homes, due to the fact that social implications of COVID-19 crisis are a considerable social stressor, and fighting the disease in the medical battlefield is simply not enough. The official criminal justice statistics in certain countries have confirmed the rapid growth of criminal offences in-home settings caused by the coronavirus lockdown mandatory cohabitation. Over the first three weeks of citizens’ movement restrictions in France, the family violence increased for 32%-36%.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Italian Ministry of Interior reiterated that staying home policy has caused a considerable decline associated with criminal behaviour. The first three weekly statistical reports for March 2019 and 2020 show that criminal offences in general diminished for 64,2% while the slow-down of offences associated with family violence stopped at the negative rate of 43,6%.<sup>3</sup> However, the activists who support children and women victims of family violence warned us that the noted decline is caused by the lack of opportunity for victims to report the violence. The coronavirus mandatory cohabitation has exposed victims to higher risk of abuse and at the same time, deprived them from physical space to report the incidents. Although there are no official data on family violence incidence in Croatia at this moment, the statement delivered by the former Croatian Minister for Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy Vesna Bedeković that it would be illusory not to expect the rise of

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Covid-19 Response, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/make-prevention-and-redress-violence-against-women-key-part>, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Usher, K.; Bhullar, N.; Durkin, J.; Gyamfi, N.; Jackson, D., Family Violence and COVID-19: Increased Vulnerability and Reduced Options for Support, *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, DOI:10.1111/inm.12735.

<sup>3</sup> Governo Italiano Ministero dell’Interno, Emergenza coronavirus, ridotti gli spostamenti, in netto calo i reati, <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/emergenza-coronavirus-ridotti-spostamenti-netto-calo-i-reati>>, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

family violence,<sup>4</sup> lines up with the noted trend in other European countries and raises serious concern.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous unwanted consequences for children except from these related to family violence. Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, alerted policy officials and activists to the potential of violating children's rights. A global pandemic lockdown has reflected negatively over their rights to education, adequate physical, mental and social development and access to basic health services.<sup>5</sup> The risk of child victimisation in respect of mistreatment, abuse, neglect and exploitation is higher than ever, and there is a great probability that criminal offences against the youngest members of society will increase amidst extraordinary circumstances and restrictive measures. The growth is specifically expected in numbers of criminal offences involving sexual abuse and exploitation of children on the Internet and network bullying. Maja Frankel, Secretary General of Friends Foundation and Anna Karin Hildingson Boqvist, Head of the Swedish child rights group ECPAT, informed the public that perpetrators have already used the social distancing policy and the fact that children spend more time in front of computers as an opportunity to get in touch with children online.<sup>6</sup> According to anti-violence campaigners, children, alongside with women, have become a casualty of COVID-19 pandemic.

The bulk of empirical and theoretical research has broadened our knowledge about different aspects of family violence and crimes against children and offered a valid basis for framing comprehensive social policies. The family violence has become a universal phenomenon that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. There are no economic, racial, ethnic, religious, age, or gender borders that would stop the family violence. Victims who are exposed to physical, psychological, sexual or economic violence induced by a family member or a partner may struggle with fear, anxiety and other psychological consequences, and if systematically abused, may experience injuries and poor social relationships.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the low social and economic status of women is another negative outcome of experienced violence.<sup>8</sup> The additional victimological factor

<sup>4</sup> HRT, Topic of the Day, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore on the COVID-19 Pandemic, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/statement-unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fore-covid-19-pandemic>, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Frankel, M.; Hildingson Boqvist, A. K., Ökad mobbning och sexuell exploatering när barn är hänvisade till nätet, ETC, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnet, F.; Whittaker, V., Intimate Partner Violence, Gender, and Criminalisation: An Overview of American Debates, *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2015, pp. 264-287, p. 267.

<sup>8</sup> Manjoo, R., Special Guest Contribution: Violence against Women as a Barrier to the Realisation of Human Rights and the Exercise of Citizenship, *Feminist Review*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2016, pp. 11-26, p. 15.

is the fact that, over time, the consequences may increase in lethality, and the less violent incidents may evolve into severe criminal offences against victim's physical integrity and life. At the far end of the violence spectrum is a killing of a current or former intimate partner. According to Stöckl and a group of authors, the estimation rates for 66 countries in the period of 1989 and 2011 show that at least 13.5% of all murders were committed by an intimate partner and that female victims (38.6%) are more affected than the male victims (6.3%).<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, child maltreatment and abuse rates are a part of previously depicted criminological mosaic, and therefore, the conclusion was made worldwide that criminal victimisation of children has become a significant public health problem. Finkelhor's, et al.'s a cross-sectional national telephone survey conducted on the sample of 4549 children in US confirmed that 60.6% of them had witnessed or experienced at least 1 form of crime victimizations in a year.<sup>10</sup> The fact is, child abuse and intimate partner violence frequently occur together. According to numerous studies, subjecting children to abusive acts may cause a wide range of psychological and interpersonal problems as well as immediate and long-term detrimental health consequences. The adverse mental health effects may range from minor psychological disturbance to post-traumatic stress disorder. Children who suffer directly or witness violent behaviours within their family may be associated with poor developmental outcomes including the impaired mental health in adulthood.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies also show that exposure to family violence early in childhood can have long-lasting consequences on a child's socio-emotional and neurological development. Ibabe and colleagues showed that there is a direct link between the inter-parental violence exposure and dating violence as well as sexism.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, harming children can result with cumulative and intergenerational negative consequences and lead to undesirable social and economic inequities.

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<sup>9</sup> Stöckl, H.; Devries, K.; Rotstein, A.; Abrahams, N.; Campbell, J.; Watts, C.; Garcia Moreno, C., *The Global Prevalence of Intimate Partner Homicide: A Systematic Review*, *The Lancet*, vol. 382, no. 9895, 2013, pp. 859-865, p. 863.

<sup>10</sup> Finkelhor, D.; Turner, H.; Ormrod, R.; Hamby, S.L., *Violence, Abuse, and Crime Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth*, *Pediatrics*, vol. 124, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1411-1423, p. 1411.

<sup>11</sup> Mehlhausen-Hassoen, D.; Winstok, Z., *The Association Between Family Violence in Childhood and Mental Health in Adulthood as Mediated by the Experience of Childhood*, *Child Indicators Research*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2019, pp. 1697-1716, p. 1697.

<sup>12</sup> Mueller, I.; Tronick, E., *Early Life Exposure to Violence: Developmental Consequences on Brain and Behavior*, *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 2019, DOI:10.3389/fnbeh.2019.00156.; Ibabe, I.; Armoso, A.; Elgorriaga, E., *Child-to-Parent Violence as an Intervening Variable in the Relationship between Inter-Parental Violence Exposure and Dating Violence*, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1514-1533, pp. 1529-1530.

The current situation is worsened with the fact that as to intensified economic burden and massive job losses, the coronavirus has instigated a sort of social tsunami. All European countries are experiencing rapid economic decline, and according to statistical data, small and medium-sized businesses are mostly affected. Economic analysts have already predicted that COVID-19 pandemic is a nuclear bomb and the state lifeboats are necessary to traverse these coveted waters. Past research has already documented a clear link between unemployment and violence in family settings. Bonnet and Whittaker focused on poverty, unemployment and alcohol abuse and showed that the violence is correlated with social vulnerability.<sup>13</sup> While countries have already reached a grim milestone as to the number of infected citizens, presented research conclusions are a clear warning that another pandemic has been secretly spreading behind closed family home doors.

## 2 The Vulnerability Issue in the Time of Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been considered to be a strong social stressor and professional and scientific community mutually agree that these who were vulnerable are now more vulnerable than ever. Although the notion of vulnerability has predominantly entered in public domain and political discourses, the question remains who are the vulnerable one? Past research has confirmed the general misunderstanding of the vulnerability concept as to its definition, legal substance, boundaries and effects.<sup>14</sup> According to the criminal law and constitutional law standards, the vulnerability concept is forged within the human rights framework and state's duty to protect the weakest members of community. Starting from the core concept that human rights belong to everyone, a well-established ECtHR practice has thought us that the vulnerability may be inherent as to personal characteristics or caused by the external circumstances. If both types of circumstances are cumulated, a person is considered to be particularly vulnerable.<sup>15</sup> According to the Court's case law, criminally victimised children and victims of family violence do belong to vulnerability group.<sup>16</sup> The greater

<sup>13</sup> CNN Newsroom, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020; Bonnet; Whittaker, *Intimate Partner Violence, Gender, and Criminalisation*, fn. 7, p. 276.

<sup>14</sup> Schroeder, D.; Gefenas, E., *Vulnerability: Too Vague and too Broad?*, Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics, vol. 18, 2009, pp. 113-121, pp. 113.

<sup>15</sup> Rittossa, D., *Strengthening the Rights of Sexually Abused Children in Front of the European Court for Human Rights – A Tale of Justice, Fairness and Constant Normative Evolution*, EU and Comparative Law Issues and Challenges Series (ECLIC), no. 4, 2020, pp. 529-556, pp. 550-551.

<sup>16</sup> ECtHR, *A. v. the United Kingdom*, application no. 100/1997/884/1096, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998; ECtHR, *E. and others v. the United Kingdom*, application no. 33218/96, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2002; ECtHR, *Opuz v. Turkey*, application no. 33401/02, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009; ECtHR, *C.A.S. and C.S. v. Romania*, application no. 26692/05, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012; *C.N. and V. v.*



degree of vulnerability imposes the greater obligation on states to protect those who need protection the most. The extraordinary circumstances related to pandemic do not relinquish a state from its positive obligations to protect the vulnerable. On the contrary, the call for shielding is more urgent and positive obligations heavier, and in case of passivity or inadequate actions, the state may be held responsible for violating vulnerable person's right to life, personal integrity and dignity and right to respect for private and family life.<sup>17</sup> However, it remains uncertain whether the state may bear the COVID-19 social burden and fulfil this obligation.

The standards of legal protection built within the boundaries of normative systems were not created for the time of pandemic. Except from the fact that movement restrictions have caused obstacles for victims to report violence, the mandatory measures have also slowed down the functioning of criminal justice system. Almost in every country affected with the pandemic, the courts and public prosecution offices literally closed their doors and started to operate in accordance with COVID-19 security restrictions.<sup>18</sup> The general interest to keep the justice system operational was balanced with the interest to stop virus spreading, and the outcome of such balancing was a compromise that only allowed hearings in urgent proceedings in front of the court. The new measures have had critical implications on vulnerable groups' access to justice. One of the possible solutions to overcome the novel problem was the use of new technologies in judicial settings. For example, a series of UNICEF webinars revealed that court work in remote mode is possible if combined with the online hearings.<sup>19</sup> The family violence cases and cases involving criminal offences against children were placed on the list of urgent cases, together with other disputes involving family matters, placement of children in social institutions or in foster care, juvenile crime and suspects' investigative detention etc. The continuity of court's work in enumerated cases was preserved with a help of video conferences. Certain courts have used special court rooms equipped with necessary technology to organise online hearings while physically separating judges from suspects, witnesses or parties and at the same time connecting them by a help of

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France, application no. 67724/09, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012; ECtHR, *Eremia v. Moldova*, application no. 3564/11, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013; ECtHR, *M.G.C. v. Romania*, application no. 61495/11, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016; ECtHR, *Talpis v. Italy*, application no. 41237/14, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Rittossa, *Strengthening the Rights of Sexually Abused Children in Front of the European Court for Human Rights*, fn. 15, p. 538.

<sup>18</sup> Esteves, D.; Economides, K., *Impacts of COVID-19 – The Global Access to Justice Survey*, *Verfassungsblog.de*, 2020, DOI: 10.17176/20200524-133145-0.

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, *Access to Justice for Children and COVID-19 – Sharing Experience from Different Legal Systems and Contexts*, <https://agora.unicef.org/course/info.php?id=27058>, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

technology. In certain countries, like Brazil, Australia and Albania, the Microsoft Teams has been proven to be a suitable tool to organise online hearings.<sup>20</sup> First reports show that there are examples of using WhatsApp application among local judges, public prosecutors, police and social service in order to facilitate their work and organize access to justice for vulnerable groups. When submitting files was banned over-the-counter due to social isolation measures, the electronic submission of legal documents using the court's portal has proven to be a suitable solution.<sup>21</sup> The example of good practice to keep open access to justice in time of pandemic concerns countries with already established intervention protocols due to previous crisis or enacted legislation, implemented technical infrastructure and completed judiciary trainings.

The professionals mutually agree while new technical solutions are indispensable to surmount pandemic challenges, especially knowing that the scenario of the second wave has become a reality, additional effort is needed. The support services for vulnerable have to remain operational and upgraded on three different levels. The first level concerns dissemination of information, the second access to already established services including the access to justice and the third level is related to prevention of vulnerable group rights' violation. In order to access the services in the time of COVID-19, skills and knowledge to assess the information have never been more important. News-manipulation, fake and unverified information have become an extremely dangerous social phenomenon that obstructs the source evaluation process in terms of reliability and relevance. Thus, each individual person, and particularly, a vulnerable group member is faced with the dilemma of finding efficient ways to protect himself from fake news and to receive a relevant and credible information. Certainly, one of the possible solutions is to develop awareness about the importance of information literacy (henceforth: IL) and improvement in information skills of each individual in society. The authors firmly believe that the academic library should play a prominent role in this respect.

### **3 The Importance of the Development of IL Skills for an Information Literate Society**

The concept of IL can be observed in correlation to the two concepts that make it: the concept of *information* and the concept of *literacy*. Information is a source that is interpreted in different ways, depending on the format, the medium in which it is stored and transmitted and the discipline that determines it.

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<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, *Access to Justice for Children and COVID-19*, fn. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Smyth, B.M.; Moloney, L.J.; Brady, J.M.; Harman, J.; Esler, M., COVID-19 in Australia: Impacts on Separated Families, Family Law Professionals, and Family Courts, Family Court Review, 2020, DOI:10.1111/fcre.12533.

Case gives a broader definition of the term information and interprets it as: concise knowledge, packaged knowledge, a source of large amounts of data, a source that takes different forms, that is stored, transmitted and delivered using different media, methods and persons: family, friends, teachers, institutions, e.g. national health service experts and help centers.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Cappuro points out that the pragmatic character of information is especially evident in the moment of the new, which is the main criterion for distinguishing between the concepts of information and news. With information we denote newly communicated knowledge, it is, given the character of the new – an announcement of new knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Vakkari states that information and knowledge have the same dimension and are structured the same, i.e., information is the knowledge base, and knowledge is the manifestation of information.<sup>24</sup> In general, from the aspect of living and existence, information, together with matter, energy, and consciousness, represents one of the four fundamental, discernible components; *Information is the content of what a system (living being, device) exchanges with the outside world in order to adapt the environment to itself and itself to the environment; Information is what reduces or completely eliminates the initial uncertainty of the observed phenomenon or system; information is a measure of choices in message selection.*<sup>25</sup>

In relation to information, the concept of literacy in Chambers' dictionary is defined as *the state in which a person is literate*. Also, a literate person is one who is [...] *educated; who can read and write; which possesses certain competences.*<sup>26</sup> Thus, in order for a person to be considered information literate, he must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to find, evaluate, and use information effectively.<sup>27</sup> IL emerged as a phenomenon with the advent of the information society and the explosion of information in the mid-20th century.<sup>28</sup> Numerous definitions emerged from portraying differ-

<sup>22</sup> Case, D.O., *Looking for information: a survey of research on information seeking, needs and behaviour*, Academic Press, New York, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Capurro, R., *Epistemology and information science*, <http://www.capurro.de/trita.htm>, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Vakkari, P., *Library and information science: its content and scope*, *Advances in librarianship*, vol. 18, 1994, pp. 1-55.

<sup>25</sup> Lipljin, N., *Čime se bave informacijske znanosti?*, *Journal of Information and Organizational Sciences*, vol. 17, 1993, pp. 67-91.

<sup>26</sup> *Chambers English Dictionary*, 9th ed., W. and R. Chambers, Edinburgh, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 1856.

<sup>27</sup> Doyle, C.S., *Outcome measures for information literacy. Final report to the National Forum on Information Literacy*, ERIC Clearinghouse, Syracuse NY, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> Zurkowski, P. G., *The Information Service Environment Relationships and Priorities. Related Paper No. 5*. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, [Washington, D.C.], 1974.

ent points of view of individual authors. For example, it has been studied within the context of lifestyle, as a way of managing information, and within the context of learning.<sup>29</sup> A large number of definitions determine IL as a group of competences.<sup>30</sup> Horton defines IL as: *a set of skills, attitudes of knowledge needed to solve problems and make decisions, shaping information needs into search terms, effective search, retrieval, interpretation, understanding, organizing, evaluating credibility and authenticity and relevance of information.*<sup>31</sup> In addition to the definitions of IL related to individual competences, a new direction emerged in the mid-1990s that connected it to critical reflection on the nature of information and its social, cultural, economic and philosophical context.<sup>32</sup> This direction is followed by the 2005 Alexandria Proclamation, which emphasizes the contextual rootedness of the phenomenon of IL as a phenomenon influenced by social and technological variables.<sup>33</sup> The importance of developing the information skills of each individual is particularly pronounced in major social crises, and especially in the context of vulnerable people.

#### **4 The Importance of Relevant Information in the Context of Vulnerable Groups in Society**

Traditionally, the protection and rights of victims of family violence have been connected through the joint cooperation of all stakeholders in society, the state, governments, the community and various NGOs. Relevant information is provided on one hand by professionals and on the other by non-professionals who are most often family members. The most common problem faced by vulnerable groups is insufficient knowledge on how to obtain the necessary information, the most appropriate communication channel, finding a reliable source, all of which

<sup>29</sup> Bruce, C., *Information Literacy as a Catalyst for Educational Change. A Background Paper*, in: Patrick, A. (ed.), *Danaher Lifelong Conference, 13-16 June 2004.*, Yeppoon, Queensland, 2004, [www.nclis.gov/libinter/infolitconf&meet/papers/bruce-fullpaper.pdf](http://www.nclis.gov/libinter/infolitconf&meet/papers/bruce-fullpaper.pdf), October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, C., *The Seven faces of information literacy*, Auslib Press, Adelaide, 1997; Doyle, C.S., *Outcome measures for information literacy. Final report to the National Forum on Information Literacy*, ERIC Clearinghouse, Syracuse NY, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Horton, F.W., *Understanding Information literacy: A Primer*, UNESCO, Paris, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> See Shapiro, J.J.; Hughes, S.K., *Information literacy as a liberal art: enlightenment proposals for a new curriculum*, EDUCOM Review, vol. 31, no. 2, 1996, <http://www.educause.edu>, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020; Webber, S.; Johnston, B., *Conceptions of information literacy: new perspectives and implications*, *Journal of Information Science*, vol. 26, br. 6, 2000, pp. 381-397.

<sup>33</sup> *Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong learning. The final report of the High-Level Colloquium on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning, held at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 6-9 November 2005*, <http://archive.ifla.org/III/wsis/info-lit-for-all.htm>, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

can very well affect the quality of their daily lives. Insufficient knowledge on how to obtain the necessary information, who to turn to, especially in times of the pandemic, also means a higher frequency and susceptibility to anxiety and symptoms of depression.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the knowledge on how to provide necessary and relevant information to victims of family violence is one of the key elements in creating policies and communication channels for help and support. However, for support and information services and programs to be appropriate, it is necessary to explore the informational behaviour and needs of vulnerable groups and their handling of information in everyday life.

## 5 Information Needs of Vulnerable Groups

Most papers in the field of information science in the context of information behavior of vulnerable groups, deals with the question of how vulnerable groups get the necessary information in everyday life, by identifying the needs and types of information, ways of access and confidentiality of information and who to contact for help.<sup>35</sup> Numerous authors warn that the answers to these questions cannot be applied generally, since each situation of family violence is different, and each victim, depending on their everyday situation, requires different types of information. For example, Westbrook, in her model called *Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) information needs of IPV survivors* using the *person-in-progressive-situation approach of ELIS*, set out 16 specific information needed from four viewpoints of victims of domestic violence: 1. thinking about the life with an abuser; 2. living with an abuser; 3. survival and how to survive after escaping or leaving and 4. long-term survival after leaving the abuser.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, she found that the specific information need of vulnerable groups depends on situations in which information can play an important role and the importance of identifying / recognizing useful / necessary data. That is, these four situations differ depending on the experience and situation of each vulnerable individual: place of residence, information, broader context, family situation,

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<sup>34</sup> Kovačić Petrović, Z.; Repovečki, S., Učestalost anksioznih i depresivnih simptoma kod obiteljskih i profesionalnih njegovatelja koji skrbe o oboljelima od Alzheimerove bolesti, *Socijalna psihijatrija*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 93-104, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/162822>, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Finn, J., Domestic Violence Organizations on the Web: A New Arena for Domestic Violence Services, *Violence Against Women*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2000, pp. 80-102.

<sup>36</sup> Westbrook, L., 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*, vol. 30, 2008, pp. 22-38.

level of education, financial situation (e.g. low income), worldviews, social norms, disability, social networks, actual support, immigrants, etc.<sup>37</sup>

## 6 Seeking Information for Vulnerable Groups

In addition to information needs and determining the type of information needed given everyday situations, another group of research explores how victims get the information they need and who they turn to for help. It is also necessary to determine the role of various stakeholders in providing the necessary information to vulnerable groups in everyday life, such as NGOs, police, social services, judiciary, given their contribution to creating a safety net that helps survivors cope with life situations or escaping violent situations. Several papers researched the information needs of victims of sexual violence and how they obtain the necessary information and to whom they turn to after the attack.<sup>38</sup> Finn, Westbrook, Chen and Mensah point out that in such situations it is extremely important that government bodies possess the necessary communication skills in providing information, in order to effectively meet the needs of those in crisis.<sup>39</sup> Harris and Dewdney warn that existing systems and services have not adequately met the needs and expectations of victims of family violence.<sup>40</sup> They also found that one of the main obstacles is that women know what kind of help they want, but they can't get it in their community. As a basis, they built a set of six principles related to the behaviour of victims of family violence in finding the necessary information: 1. the need for information arises from the situation of the individual seeking assistance; 2. the decision to seek help or not to seek help is influenced by many factors; 3. people find it harder to search for information that is most accessible; 4. people usually seek help or information from informal sources, especially from people like themselves; 5. information seekers expect emotional support; and 6. people use common patterns in searching for information.

<sup>37</sup> See, Whitaker, D., et al., A network model for providing culturally competent services for intimate partner violence and sexual violence, *Violence Against Women*, vol. 13, 2007., 190–209. Brownridge, D.A., Partner violence against women with disabilities: Prevalence, risk, and explanation, *Violence Against Women*, vol. 12, 2006, pp. 805-822.

<sup>38</sup> See Deloveh, H.L.M., *Where Do I Turn?: A Qualitative investigation of college students' helpseeking decisions after sexual assault victimization*, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, 2014. Skinner, J., Gross, M., *The ISSAS Model: Understanding the Information Needs of Sexual Assault Survivors on College Campuses*, *College & Research Libraries*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2017, pp. 23-34.

<sup>39</sup> Finn, J., et al., Unprepared for Information Interactions: Abuse Survivors and Police, *Journal of Documentation*, vol. 67, no. 6, 2011, pp. 933-57.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, R.M., Dewdney, P., *Barriers to Information: How Formal Systems Fail Battered Women*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1994.

A step further is the research conducted by DeLoveh on the moment when women victims of sexual abuse make the decision to seek help. In doing so, she found that deciding who to turn to indicated three key points: determining whether there was a problem related to SA (“Do I need help”), considering options (“What can I do”) and weighing the consequences of these options (“What will I do”). The result of this process is one of four behavioural choices: dealing independently without the support of others, seeking the support of friends / family, seeking support from formal sources, or covertly seeking help, where needs are met without disclosure.<sup>41</sup> Further to this research, it is important to mention the Skinner and Gross study in which the authors propose the “Sexual Abuse Survivors Information” model (ISSAS) by exploring the process and barriers for seeking information through different stages of healing.<sup>42</sup> The primary context surrounding the survivor in the ISSAS model are the three recovery phases described by Harney, Lebowitz, and Harvey.<sup>43</sup> These three phases (restoring security, remembering and grieving, reconnecting with others) are found around the user and provide a context in which the individual, both adults and minors, constructs a new meaning based on information. In this research, the authors also emphasize the role of the academic library in creating library services for such vulnerable groups of users, with an emphasis on respect for privacy and the provision of appropriate professional services.

## 7 Information Channels for Vulnerable Groups

The research conducted shows the importance of creating different formal and informal networks through which vulnerable groups can access the necessary information.<sup>44</sup> Informal channels and networks include family contacts, medical staff or priests. Since the 1960s, formal channels and communication systems have been increasingly used to find the necessary information, primarily due to changes in public opinion and the abandonment of the policy of “non-interference in family matters” by providing essential information to vulnerable groups.<sup>45</sup> In many countries around the world, based on conducted research, various services and websites have been created on a practical level, where family violence victims and children victims of abuse can find various relevant

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<sup>41</sup> DeLoveh, *Where Do I Turn?*, fn. 37.

<sup>42</sup> Skinner, Gross, *The ISSAS Model*, fn. 37, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Harney, A. P., Lebowitz, L., Harvey M. R., A Stage by Dimension Model of Trauma Recovery: Application to Practice, *Clinical Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1997, pp. 91-103.

<sup>44</sup> Gillum, T., Sullivan, C. M., Bybee, D., The importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors, *Violence Against Women*, vol. 12, 2006, pp. 240-250.

<sup>45</sup> White, M., Goldkamp, J., Campbell, S., Beyond mandatory arrest: Developing a comprehensive response to domestic violence, *Police Practice and Research*, vol. 6, 2005, pp. 261-278.

information that can help them in everyday life in times of crisis.<sup>46</sup> Such online services can be seen as a kind of communication channels, which facilitate access to necessary information, for example for victims of family violence. Members of various associations also contribute to this, as well as libraries that provide support and support to their protégés. Westbrook, for example, developed a model of information services for people in crisis based on her work on violence against intimate partners and her research on the social responsibility of libraries towards the community. Her model emphasizes the library as a safe space, the need to provide services with respect and emotional support, the importance of helping survivors develop information skills, especially in the area of information assessment, and the need for professional staff.<sup>47</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

The analysis of the researched literature clearly shows the importance of developing information skills in finding, evaluating and using the relevant information skills of every individual in society, and especially vulnerable groups. This leads us to the conclusion that well-developed information skills are crucial in effectively navigating today's democratic society. Libraries can certainly play a major role in this, which should help individuals exploit the full potential of digital tools, while developing critical thinking skills. Providing service to populations that may be hesitant in self-identification is one way for libraries to continue the tradition of user-centered services by providing the necessary information to those who may or may not want to request it, based on an understanding of specific population needs for information. It is in this context that the role of the library in the community as a place of exchanging ideas, experiences and dissemination of knowledge in finding a communication channel between vulnerable groups and persons responsible for protecting their rights in the time of COVID-19 is more pronounced than ever. On the other hand, the analysis of the researched literature confirmed the fact that the study of this topic must be approached from different angles by all parties involved. Therefore, the importance of an interdisciplinary approach and mutual cooperation, as well as encouraging discussion on this topic in the wider community is seen. This will provide for a more complete picture that will help define guidelines for finding the best way to provide the best and timely information needed not only by vic-

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<sup>46</sup> See Westbrook, *E-government support for people in crisis*, fn. 35, p. 1, Edwardsen, E. A., Morse, D., *Intimate partner violence resource materials: Assessment of information distribution*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 21, 2006, pp. 971-981.

<sup>47</sup> Westbrook, L., 'I'm Not a Social Worker': An Information Service Model for Working with Patrons in Crises, *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2015, pp. 6-25.



tims but also by other stakeholders, society, government, community and various NGOs to respond promptly and adequately and to each individual situation.