The ‘Step out of the Shadows’ Project as an Example of Actions Against Violence Towards Women

Abstract: The goal of the presented article is to describe the phenomenon of domestic violence among women, as well as the outcomes of the project implemented in Poland in 2022, placing it within a critical discourse. The project was named “Step out of the Shadows.” It was funded by the “Active Citizens – regional fund” Program. The project targeted ten women from the Inowrocław County at risk of social exclusion due to their experience of domestic violence.

During the project implementation, using participatory action research, empirical material concerning the needs of women affected by domestic violence was collected. Through the analysis of the empirical material, areas for theory and practice emerged concerning the strategies and forms of activities by support organizations against domestic violence towards women. Key words: Domestic violence, women, participatory action research, non-violent upbringing, building a culture of peace.

Domestic violence among women – theoretical foundations

The phenomenon of family violence is increasingly becoming the subject of scientific research. According to the definition of countering family violence, violence is understood as a one-time or repeated intentional action or omission violating the
rights or personal goods of family members. This notably includes actions that endanger health and life, violating their dignity, bodily integrity (including sexual), consequently causing harm to their physical or mental health, as well as inflicting suffering and moral harm. Irena Pospiszyl defines violence more concisely, describing it as “all non-random acts infringing on personal freedom or contributing to physical or psychological harm to a person, going beyond the social principles of mutual relations” (Pospiszyl, 1999, p. 16).

Among the various types of violence, family violence poses a significant social problem, encompassing broadly defined abuses occurring within the family’s functioning conditions. The global scale of the issue is evidenced by research results conducted by the World Health Organization, showing that one in three women worldwide has experienced family violence (World Health Organization, 2014).

The occurrence of broadly defined violence within families is treated as an element of the social marginalization process. This means that domestic violence occurs as a result of social marginalization and can contribute to the social exclusion of individuals and entire families. The fundamental question arising in the context of domestic violence analysis concerns the relationship between this phenomenon and domestic violence.

Risk factors for domestic violence include age, education and occupation. Family relationships and religious beliefs are also significant (Farooq et al., 2008, pp. 453–462). Lack of social support is considered a significant risk factor on the victim’s side (Montesó-Curto et al., 2016). The consequences of domestic violence can also lead to deterioration in physical and mental functioning, including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Ahmadzad-Asl et al., 2016, pp. 861–869).

Brunon Hołyst highlights the existence of the “victimogenic potential,” understood as a system of individual characteristics and social structures that, along with features related to the individual’s living conditions, predispose them to a situation threatening the occurrence of a crime. This potential can manifest in psychological, biological, social, or economic conditions (Hołyst, 2000).

The consequences of family violence impact both physical and mental functioning. Studies on the quality of life of women experiencing family violence during pregnancy have shown a deterioration in physical health and, in the case of psychological violence, a decrease in social functioning and well-being (Tavoli, Tavoli 2016). Another consequence of domestic violence is social exclusion, linked to shame and a sense of guilt frequently experienced by victims. As emphasized by numerous researchers, social exclusion has many faces, including ostracism, discrimination, dehumanization, and social isolation. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon, a broad definition is proposed. Understanding social exclusion as an experience of separation from others, associated with the physical (e.g., social isolation) or emotional (e.g., rejection) aspect of individual functioning (Riva, Eck, 2016). Suzanne Moffatt and Nina Glasgow propose a broader definition, perceiving exclusion as the separation of an individual or group from the broader
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According to Kip Williams, social exclusion threatens four fundamental needs of the victim, leading the individual to strive for their recovery. Williams identifies the threatened needs as self-esteem, a sense of purpose in life, a sense of belonging, and a sense of control (Williams, 2009, pp. 275–314).

Building on this concept, Gili, Williams, and Beer emphasize the need to divide social exclusion into two categories: ambiguous rejection and explicit rejection, with the latter having greater consequences for the needs and emotions of the individual, thus being considered more devastating (Freedman et al., 2016).

Family violence is direct harm to development. The family environment is a space where patterns are formed and transmitted to later relationships. It is in these relationships that strongly rooted personality traits, often conditioned by the relationship with parents, are revealed. The same factors seem to directly decide the risk of social exclusion for abused women and their families (Skwarek, 2001, pp. 44–52).

Methodological assumptions of the research project

For the purposes of the research project, action research was utilized. Action research enables the connection of theory with practice, action with exploration, and learning with teaching. It provides a space to delve deeply into the studied social phenomenon in which the researcher is situated, with the intention of improving and enhancing the quality of their actions during its course. “Research in action is the systematic collection of information about phenomena causing some changes, with the researcher acting as the inspirer and active participant in events. Action research is conducted when there is an opportunity to improve a situation, a project for its improvement is prepared, implemented, and observed for the results” (Bauman, Pilch, 2001, p. 307).

One of the main characteristics of action research is that it involves not only trained, professional researchers but also those usually considered as the research group. The realization of this assumption can take various forms, and research can be conducted by practitioners and members of local communities or in collaboration with them (Góral et. al., 2016, s. 51–52).

Among the most popular forms of action research, Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson mention action research, participatory action research, participatory action research with youth (YPAR), and educative research (Herr, Anderson, 2015).

For the presented analysis, participatory action research was utilized. Participatory action research has evolved as a legitimate scientific approach, involving a unique way of collecting data and developing theories dating back to the 1940s (Lewin, 2010).

The initiation of the discussion on action research is most commonly attributed to Kurt Lewin (Adelman, 1993, pp. 7–24), and sometimes to Jacob...
Moreno (Gunz, 1996, pp. 145–148) or John Collier (Neilson, 2006, pp. 389–399). While K. Lewin did not use the term PAR, his early projects involved clear participation. He tackled solving many practical social problems related, among other things, to improving the quality of intragroup relationships (Marrow, 1969). The inspiration for this approach was the simple assumption that people engage more in collective actions if they have an influence on how they are designed and managed. The PAR trend primarily emerged within the philosophy of pragmatism, one of its assumptions being that truth is discovered in the course of social actions and relies on interactions and consensus (Góral et al., 2019). Over decades, various researchers and practitioners have attempted to adapt this approach to their needs. The popularity of PAR varies in different countries, for example, in the United States, it was in the 1950s, while in Scandinavia, it was in the 1970s. In the 1980s, emancipation movements emphasizing PAR empowerment also reached Europe and North America. Currently, these studies are somewhat niche and are associated with citizen activation or manifestations of democratic processes (Afeltowicz et al., 2021, 1–25).

The original concept of PAR assumes the synergy of three essential elements. The first is participation, meaning that the researcher creates knowledge and problem-solving solutions in collaboration with the researched (beneficiaries). The second element is action, implying that research requires interventions in existing institutions and the design and implementation of entirely new solutions for the considered problems. The third element is cognitive in its nature. As a scientific approach, interventions and collaboration with the researched are meant to enrich science, taking the form of drawing conclusions from interventions for scientific theories (Afeltowicz et al., 2021).

Participatory action research involves a cycle from design through implementation and measurement to the evaluation of actions (Koshy, 2006). Thus, the division between science as an organized system of issues related to a certain field of reality and the resulting practical recommendations applied to it becomes blurred. The resolution of practical and theoretical problems occurs simultaneously (Whyte, 1989, pp. 367–385).

It is essential to highlight the concept of participation as crucial to the idea of participatory action research, distinguishing it from other approaches emphasizing the process of involvement. Participation means taking part in decision-making concerning a particular community. It is participation in the gains but also the costs of these endeavors. In other words, it is full ownership rights to the research process. Participants in the study bear full responsibility for generating knowledge, designing methodology, or introducing and analyzing the effects of changes that occurred. Involvement, on the other hand, rather involves including someone in the research process and enabling them to carry out certain actions prepared by others (Góral et al., 2019).
In conducting PAR, triangulation is applied, combining various methods, techniques, and research tools depending on the problem at hand (Pant 2014, s. 583–588). Therefore, both traditional qualitative research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, or observations, and more innovative methods or research tools associated with new technologies, visual or performative methods, such as photovoice (participatory photography method), drama, storytelling, community art, research walks, and participatory creation of mental maps and community diagrams are utilized (Kindon et al., 2007). Brzozowska-Brywczyńska notes that especially in research involving marginalized communities, tools that allow participants to express themselves in the most favorable conditions successfully increase the inclusivity of the research and reach the broadest spectrum of knowledge and experiences of those involved in the study (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2019, pp. 91–102).

Given the above characteristic of PAR, this approach appears significant and useful in the context of identifying areas for theory and practice concerning strategies and forms of actions against violence towards women.

Collaboration for Change:
Participatory Action Research during the “Step out of the Shadows” Project

In response to the growing issue of domestic violence in the municipality of Gniewkowo (Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship), the project titled: “Step out of the Shadows” was implemented. The initiator and executor of this initiative were the Guild of Superheroes Association. It was funded by the “Active Citizens – regional fund” Program. The project targeted ten women from the Inowroclaw County at risk of social exclusion due to their experience of domestic violence. The project aimed to enhance the coping skills without violence for ten women and their children, who were wards of the Municipal Social Welfare Center in Gniewkowo.

The project activities included twenty-six-hour workshops, conducted once a week (a total of 120 hours). The topics covered various areas, including interpersonal communication, assertiveness, stress management, seeking help skills, self-esteem, toxic relationships, and addictions. This hourly format allowed participants to attend the workshops without time constraints.

Innovative education methods, incorporating superhero motifs, were employed during the sessions. Superheroes served as role models for dealing with various challenging experiences. Their adventures helped participants understand their own experiences, give them proper significance, and discover their own superpowers. Scientific literature already confirms the usefulness of superhero motifs in therapeutic and educational activities for both children and adults. This
innovative approach shifted the focus from deficits and problems to resources and solutions. It also contributed to building the participants’ potential and positively impacted their sense of influence on reality.

Various empirical research methods were used during these meetings, including observation, focus group interviews, photovoice, and storytelling.

The study can be divided into three fundamental stages, cyclically following each other and fitting into the cyclical nature of action research:
1. Planning and Preparation Phase: Development of action plans to improve the current situation, implementation of actions to realize the plan,
2. Implementation and Observational Phase: Conducting actions, observing the effects in the context in which they occur,
3. Analysis and Interpretation Phase: Reflective analysis of the observed effects as the basis for further planning and action (Červinková, 2012, s. 273).

These phases were planned to develop critical thinking skills, stimulate cooperation, substantive discussion, and the development of social and civic competencies that revolve around perception/awareness rather than mere observation. During each phase, there was a permeation of thinking and generating new ideas/solutions, taking action, and its registration, analysis, and evaluation (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2010, p. 327).

The planning and preparation phase involved participants contemplating the knowledge and skills they could gain during the next project through group activities (including the use of photovoice and storytelling methods) and being respondents in a focus group interview. In the implementation and observation phase, openness to an external audience was crucial, relying on public debate with the surrounding community (related to the tragic death of a participant during the project). It was based on full emotional engagement to reinforce continuous learning possibilities (Červinková 2012, s. 276). Thanks to the performative nature of this phase, project participants also had the opportunity to practically assess the confrontation of their domestic situation with the environment. In the analysis and interpretation phase, participants conducted a reflective analysis of the entire project’s course and results. They critically assessed their own and others’ engagement and formulated recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of future actions.

**Implications and challenges in lieu of a conclusion**

The participatory action research conducted during the “Wyjdź z cienia” project identified areas for personal development and forms of activities for support organizations combating domestic violence against women.

The main area requiring additional support among participants is initiating an educational process to avoid replicating violent patterns towards their own children.
and other significant individuals. Through this phenomenon, the construction of another link transmitting violent patterns to the next generation began. Consequently, there is an urgent need to break this chain, teach individuals affected by domestic violence to cope with life difficulties, and raise children without violence. It is essential to note that the psychological effects of prolonged violence include emotional problems, lowered self-esteem, intensified anxieties, a sense of hopelessness, and a lack of possibilities to escape the situation, leading to isolation and the use of violence. Similar effects are observed in children who experience or witness violence. The sooner they receive support, the more manageable the psychological effects will be.

Project participants also pointed out the need for development in specific areas or the enrichment of existing ones, including:

1. Non-violent communication in the family [Julia: *I care about being able to speak to my partner without yelling, without blackmail. I want to speak without fear; anger, and disgust towards him.*];
2. Elements of parenting school [Monika: *"We would like, and I think I speak for all of us, to understand our children's emotions, as it is very difficult."*];
3. Taking care of one's needs and boundaries without violating the child's boundaries [Katarzyna: *"I think I would like to know how to take care of myself in relationships to feel good on my own."*];
4. Child safety online [Kamila: *"I want to know how to protect my children from the negative influence of the Internet. So much evil lurks there: pornography, violence, and more."*];
5. Interpersonal communication [Teresa: *"I sometimes don't know how to talk to my husband because it seems to me like talking to a brick wall."*];
6. Assertiveness [Milena: *"We would like to have our own opinions, express our emotions, and say 'no.'"*];
7. Stress management techniques [Milena: *"What can I say; I'm so stressed and I don't know how to deal with it."*];
8. Coaching [Joanna: *"I often find that I can't stay on course. I plan something, set a goal, and then something happens, and I lose motivation."*].

Above are the statements of women participating in the study, indicating their specific needs for equipping them with knowledge and skills that can contribute to improving their domestic situation.

In addition to the identified areas and forms of action resulting from the analysis of the collected empirical material, it is also worth examining the challenges that accompanied the researcher in using the participatory action research (PAR) method itself.

Martyn Denscombe outlines the following key characteristics of PAR. Firstly, they are based on the active participation of the participants. Secondly, they serve to solve practical problems that primarily arise from the needs of the community, not scientific ignorance perceived by the researcher. Thirdly, they are
oriented towards changing social reality. These are characteristic features of PAR that determine their specificity, but at the same time, they come with certain challenges. Through PAR, emphasis is also placed on the active involvement of participants at every stage of project implementation. This naturally changes the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the dynamics of power relations in the research process (Denscombe 2010).

In line with this assumption, there were sometimes certain obstacles. On the one hand, the person conducting the study aimed for the project participants not to perceive her only as a researcher but rather as a person co-creating the project with them. On the other hand, as the person conducting the study, she had to effectively manage actions and the educational process.

The person conducting the study during the implementation of the “Step out of the Shadows” project realized that building the right relationship during the implementation of participatory research affects both the process itself and its results. Building relationships based on trust is therefore the foundation on which the success of the study depends. These relationships represent a way of being with people and often require scholars to unlearn the approach that promotes distance and objectivity. Transparency and clear definition of mutual expectations are essential. Being honest and authentic, with sincere interest in the project participants as individuals, is particularly important and at the same time a challenge when the research participants are people at risk of social exclusion. Another important issue related to relationships in research is that in typical scientific research, the researcher generally has some power, an advantage over the members of the researched community. They usually conduct research “on” some issue or “in” some sample. However, PAR assumes joint research “with.” In the case of this type of empirical-social studies, the researcher must skillfully share this power. This requires the researcher’s awareness and reflexivity. Action research involves combining thoughts and actions, theory and practice, through collaboration with others to achieve practical solutions to burning issues for people and, more broadly, to support the development of both individuals and entire communities (Červinková, 2012, p. 7).

Thanks to, among other things, the conducted participatory action research during the “Step out of the Shadows” project and the involvement of the community, this resulted in another project of the Association of Superheroes Guild titled “Reach for Help,” also funded by the “Active Citizens – Regional Fund” Program (May – September 2023). It responds to the diagnosed needs, offering women assistance in raising personal and parenting competencies, learning to cope with educational and life difficulties without violence, coaching, and individual psychological support. Simultaneously, it foresees support for their children.
References


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