

Third World Conference of Women's Shelters

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Good morning everyone, I am Jamila Mejdoubi researcher at Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's history in the Netherlands. My research focuses on Violence against Women and this is Professor Renée Römken, CEO of Atria.

It is an honour for us to present at such an important conference with very interesting speakers. In our presentation we are going to discuss the importance of prevention in addressing violence against women, also from a Human Rights perspective. We are also presenting an example of a good practice in the prevention of domestic violence in the Netherlands which is called VoorZorg. VoorZorg is a home visiting program for young disadvantaged pregnant women with an increased risk of domestic violence. This was the subject of my PHD thesis which I defended exactly one year ago.

As we all know, domestic violence is a serious public health problem. Women and children are especially vulnerable to domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence can experience negative health consequences throughout their lifespan. The societal impact of domestic violence is huge, not only in costs but also in a higher use of resources and less participation in society, for example because of lower labour participation. Violence can be transmitted from generation to generation; it is therefore important to break the cycle of violence by prevention.

Many researchers highlight the importance of handling a gender perspective to address violence against women and children effectively. Handling a gender perspective means that one should take in to consideration that social and cultural norms regarding gender roles and the therewith systemic unequal distribution in power and resources between men and women lead to gender inequality. Gender inequalities increase the risk of violence against women and inhibit the ability of victims to seek protection.

VoorZorg is a prevention program that was not initially designed as a program with a gender perspective. However, there are definitely gender specific elements in this program, although sometimes in an implicit way. At the end of my presentation I will discuss these elements. Renée is going to discuss the importance of prevention from a human rights perspective.

VoorZorg is the Dutch translation and cultural adaption of the Nurse-family partnership. This program is developed by David Olds in the United States. It is an intense program consisting of 40-60 home visits from pregnancy until the child's second birthday by trained and experienced nurses. The target population of this program are young disadvantaged pregnant women with an increased risk of domestic violence, because they have a history of violence or financial difficulties. During the home visits the nurses focus on six domains:

1. Health status of the mother, for example by giving health education about substance abuse and also by addressing domestic violence. This shows that in an implicit way there is definitely a gender approach
2. Child's health and safety, this could range from practical issues like healthy eating to emotional or cognitive learning by providing learning material like books. But also how to act when there is a suspicion of child abuse. It is unknown if the nurses specifically ask whether there is child maltreatment or child sexual abuse, but they definitely address this issue. Also building secure attachment between mother and child is an element.
3. Personal development of the mother, education or job
4. The mother as a role model, how the mother can be a positive role model for her child this could range from education but also by enhancing her self efficacy
5. Relation of the mother with her partner, family and friends
6. Improve utilization of resources

The main goal of VoorZorg is the primary prevention of child maltreatment.

The nurse tries to address partner violence in different ways. The nurse attempts to mitigate risk factors for IPV by reducing stress, by trying to make women financially independent, or by providing housing assistance. In addition, nurses helped women (and their partners) to be aware of IPV, to identify abusive relationships by use of the Power and Control Wheel and to make them aware of the consequences of abuse for the child. The power and control wheel is probably familiar to most of you. This instrument is developed in the Duluth programme in 1980 and demonstrates the different types of abuse that perpetrators use to control their victims.

VoorZorg has been evaluated in an RCT among 460 young disadvantaged women. The effect study showed no results on pregnancy outcomes, like birth weight and gestational age. However, positive effects were measured on cigarette smoking: cigarette smoking reduced and no cigarettes were smoked near the baby. Also, women who received VoorZorg breastfed their child for a longer period. Furthermore, the number of child protective services reports was 40% lower among women who received VoorZorg. Another important result is that the prevalence of partner violence during pregnancy was significantly lower among nurse visited women and also during 24 months after birth. And because the women were less violated they also used less violence against their partner. VoorZorg is also cost effective because of an increase in employment rate. And also because women who received VoorZorg were better educated.

What can we conclude regarding working principles of VoorZorg? We are aware that preconditions are necessary for successful implementation of a prevention program. We will discuss these conditions at the end. I will now focus on the working principles of VoorZorg. How is quality maintained? By sufficient training of the nurses. Nurses receive regular training before implementation but also during the program. They receive also regular supervision. Furthermore, all home visits are structured and described in manuals. These elements also contribute to intervention fidelity. Also because a full-time nurse home visitor carries a caseload of no more than 25 clients.

VoorZorg is an intensive program to fulfil the needs of high risk pregnant women. Nurses intervene at a crucial period. During pregnancy women are more likely to engage in behavioural change and the period of pregnancy and the first two years of life is crucial for the development of the child. Nurses can refer women to other health care professionals if necessary. But most important according to the nurses is the relationship between mothers and nurses. It should be an enduring relationship built on trust. Nurses are always positive and non judgemental and provide social support.

I would like to show you a short movie about a woman named Alyssa who will graduate from the Nurse-Family partnership to give you an impression of how this program works.

VoorZorg was not designed initially as a program with a gender approach, as I mentioned before. However it definitely has some gender specific elements. VoorZorg focuses on the empowerment of women by: helping them get a job or education. And also by helping women solving practical issues like day care. Also the power and control wheel used by nurses is a gender specific tool; because it offers an explanation of the tactics men use to batter women. It makes them aware that they are in a violent relationship and how this behaviour affects them and their children. The mothers can then make safe choices to protect themselves and their children by for example ending the relationship. The primary target population are women. However, the nurse tries to involve the father in taking care of their children. Unfortunately most women who receive VoorZorg are single and the father is not in the picture and mothers raise their child alone. VoorZorg does not focus on gender autonomy or gender awareness among children.

The Nurse Family Partnership has also been evaluated in GB. I would like to briefly discuss the results of this study. Interestingly, the study showed no short-term results. This raises a lot of questions which we can discuss in the end. But this emphasizes the need of formulation preconditions.

In conclusion, VoorZorg is an effective intervention program for the prevention of violence among young high risk pregnant women and their children with some gender specific elements. VoorZorg can be enhanced by focusing also on gender awareness among children. VoorZorg is being implemented in the Netherlands. We should keep in mind that this program can only be effective under specific conditions in a specific context.