

Together against Violence

Declaration of the
Expert Group on Violence Prevention

Vision

„A life together in a non-violent society“

Non-violence is impossible without (gender-based) justice. Opportunities for participation, inclusion, a fair distribution of resources and solidarity are basic prerequisites for a non-violent society.

Basic assumptions

„Violence prevention concerns everyone – violence prevention needs a WE“

By violence we mean any form of physical, psychological or structural harm through which people's integrity, safety, dignity or participation are impaired – regardless of whether it occurs directly, indirectly, or by non-action.

The more a society is shaped by **relations of dependence** – whether in the social, economic or personal sphere – the greater the risk that power will be abused and violence will be exercised. The frequency with which violence is experienced in a society is therefore always also related to imbalances of power and the structural **abuse of power**. In order to effectively prevent violence, we must recognise and, where possible, dismantle relations of dependence. Where this is not fully possible – for example due to a particular need for protection, as with children – effective protection concepts are required. At the same time, it is always crucial to critically examine how existing dependencies can be minimised as far as possible.

Relations of violence manifest themselves in complex ways – their real variety must not be underestimated through pigeonhole thinking or simple perpetrator-victim-assignments. Special attention should be given to particularly vulnerable groups such as women, children and adolescents, people with disabilities or health impairments, older people, people with a flight or migration background, people affected by poverty or homelessness, and LGBTQIA+ persons. We can only comprehensively address the dynamics of violence if we take this complexity seriously.

From this, it follows that perspectives and approaches to action should, as far as possible, be interdisciplinary and intersectional:

- The variety of dynamics of violence itself requires multi-layered measures for violence prevention in different socio-political fields such as social affairs, family, education, law, politics, health, culture, finance, etc. (violence prevention as a cross-cutting issue). The necessary **interdisciplinarity** must also be reflected in support services in different areas such as non-profit organisations (facilities for people who experience violence, counselling centres), state institutions (police, justice), clinics, schools, etc.
- **Intersectionality** describes the overlap and simultaneity of different forms of discrimination against a person. These include forms of discrimination like racism, antisemitism, sexism, anti-feminism, homophobia, transphobia and/or ableism, etc. They do not occur in isolation from one another but must be considered as overlapping. For example, women with disabilities and a migration background can experience multiple forms of discrimination and violence: because of their gender, their disability, and their origin. Perpetrators of violence can also face additional exclusions due to their age, disability, gender, nationality, etc. This further complicates sustainable violence prevention.

The responsibility to create a society as free of violence as possible does not solely lie with institutions – it concerns all of us. As civil society we play a central role. **Civil courage** means not looking away.

Those who do not address people who experience violence or who actively ignore them leave them alone with their suffering. Silence can be understood as trivialising violence – and tragically conveys to those affected that violence is something shameful that one does not talk about. But we can all do something: we can build bridges through attention, empathy and consciously addressing those affected. In this way, we help to overcome shame and facilitate the path to receiving support. Each and every one of us can contribute to a more violence-free society with small steps.

Prevention of violence deserves special attention **in childhood and adolescence**. For in this sensitive phase of development, rule breaches are often part of identity formation – whether with regard to one’s body, social relations, performance, material security or personal values. These developmental dynamics demonstrate the importance of a preventive, supportive and at the same time straightforward approach to boundary-violating behaviour. Legal protection provisions also take this into account – for example through the criminal responsibility age of 14 years or through juvenile criminal law with its specific regulations for adolescents and young adults. Effective protection against violence in this phase of life starts early and combines protection, education and relationship building. This can prevent violence and steer the development of young people into safe channels.

Due to extensive experimentation with roles, behaviours and life plans during adolescence, ambiguous situations often arise that cannot be captured by simple **perpetrator- or victim-assignments**. Adolescents are often judged or stigmatised prematurely – even though their real lived experience is often shaped by internal and external fields of tension.

These **ambivalences** are, however, not limited to adolescents: With other vulnerable groups – such as children, people with disabilities, people with psychological burdens or in social emergency situations – it also becomes clear that their realities are multi-faceted and that clear-cut assignments are often inappropriate. Therefore, a careful, differentiated perception and classification of situations is needed – especially when it comes to boundary-violating behaviour or violence. Only in this way can tailored, fair and supportive accompaniment for all parties involved succeed – especially, but not exclusively, when dealing with adolescents.

Fundamental rights and legal bases

„Violence is not a private matter“

This is already demonstrated by the principle of official investigation applicable in Austria, whereby

any suspicion of a criminal offence known to the criminal police or public prosecutor’s office must be pursued *ex officio*.

Thus, the formulated basic assumptions are also reflected in several legal bases.

- a. *European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)*: The ECHR guarantees fundamental human rights and freedoms and also offers protection against violence and discrimination.
- b. *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)*: The Istanbul Convention explicitly addresses violence against women, whereby the term “women” also includes girls under 18 years. Other groups of persons, such as boys or men, are taken into account in the Convention, however only insofar as states are encouraged, but not obliged, to take measures for their protection and support.
- c. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*: The CRC sets out specific rights of children, including protection from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect.
- d. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*: The CRPD guarantees the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities and demands measures against violence and discrimination.
- e. *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)*: The ICERD aims at the elimination of any form of racist discrimination and thus also protects against racially motivated violence.
- f. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*: CEDAW obliges the signatories to combat all forms of discrimination against women, including gender-specific violence.
- g. *Yogyakarta Principles*: These principles relate to the protection and promotion of the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons, including protection from violence and discrimination.

Principles of action

„Violence prevention must start early, be diverse in design, and be consistently implemented at all levels: preventive, interventive and following-up“

Measures are needed for generally preventing the emergence of violence (**primary prevention**). In addition, targeted services for risk groups are important in order to recognise early signs of violence and intervene (**secondary prevention**). In cases where violence has already occurred, supportive and stabilising measures are needed to prevent further violence and to address long-term consequences (**tertiary prevention**).

Considering that violence prevention encompasses all areas of life and has diverse causes, this work requires the efforts of all institutions and professionals. We recognise the different tasks and the importance of the police, the judiciary, politics, facilities for people affected by violence, organisations/facilities for perpetrators of violence, etc. However, providing effective and professional violence prevention in this multi-faceted context requires cross-institutional and interdisciplinary **co-operation and professional exchange**.

Information on wide-spread myths and prejudices in connection with experiences of violence is an essential element. These myths are often about assigning (co-)blame to people who experience violence (e.g. “a single log does not start burning on its own”). Sometimes they are also processes of victim-blaming (perpetrator-victim reversal) that lead to a relativisation of violence. Knowledge about these processes is an essential part of violence prevention.

The support of people who experience violence is based on the **principle of critical partiality**. This means clearly positioning oneself on the side of those affected – but always with a reflective, professional stance. Effective help starts with perceiving and understanding their individual situation and is consistently guided by their needs. Critical partiality means taking the person affected seriously in their lived experience – with their history, their decisions and their boundaries. The focus is not on “speaking for them”, but on empowerment: those affected themselves decide which steps they want to take. Professional support aims at

strengthening resources, restoring control and promoting self-determination.

At the same time, partiality has clear limits – precisely at the point where the rights and welfare of others are endangered. Accordingly, partiality towards an adult person affected by violence ends where the child’s welfare is at risk. The **priority of the child’s welfare** remains a central standard of professional action.

Even though the **self-determination** of people affected by violence is crucial, there are situations in which they are (still) not able to make decisions independently or to take responsibility for protective measures. Especially in contexts of acute violence it can be relieving and even lifesaving for others – such as authorities or professionals – to make straightforward decisions. One example of this is police intervention in cases of violence in the private sphere: It is not the responsibility of the person affected to decide on measures such as expulsion or restraining and non-contact orders – this responsibility is consciously borne by the intervening authority. Only in this way can the necessary protection also take effect when the person affected is overwhelmed, ambivalent or for various reasons unable to act. Therefore, professional protection against violence also means recognising the right time for and the appropriate degree of self-determination – always with the aim of returning long-term stability, security and capacity to act.

The **protection** of those persons for whom relations of dependence could not yet be completely overcome or for whom, due to their situation or limitation, a dependency cannot be completely eliminated, is of central importance. This protection requires a clear legal framework and a lived culture of **participation, self-determination and attentiveness**.

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Federal Constitutional Act on the Rights of Children (BVG-KRK), the principle of the primacy of the child’s welfare serves as a fundamental and action-guiding principle. Particular care and a multi-perspective professional assessment are required when investigating risks to a child’s welfare and deciding on appropriate measures. The often conflicting will of the child in

relation to the child's welfare must be taken into account.

In addition to supporting people who experience violence, sustainable **opportunities for perpetrators of violence** are needed. In the spirit of a humanistic view of humanity, we see the potential for change and want to support a life without violence. Despite the violent act(s) committed, respect for the dignity and integrity of every person remains. Professional work with perpetrators of violence also requires critical partiality. They are supported in seizing their opportunities and in exercising their rights, while it is always ensured that the boundaries and rights of other parties are respected. Working with perpetrators of violence necessarily includes working on taking responsibility for one's own actions and their consequences.

Commitment

Based on the conviction that effective violence prevention needs a strong collective WE, we actively commit to preventing violence in all its facets. We connect civil society, institutions and politics, make relations of dependence visible and dismantle them. We stand by the victims and work with perpetrators on their paths to a violence-free future. Thus, we jointly shape a life together without violence – step by step.

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