



Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor

About the monitoring findings of publications on the field of mental health disseminated via Mass Media outlets in 2016

Summary of Reference

Vanadzor

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Table of Contents

Foreword	4
Nature of publications and their impact on formation of public attitude.....	6
Reflection of cases of human rights violations in the publications	7
Summary.....	8

Foreword

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor pays special attention to the protection of the rights of persons with mental health issues. To this end, one of the Organization's major functions is the conduction of human rights monitoring at institutions providing care and treatment to persons with mental health issues and implementation of legislative analysis and submission of relevant recommendations, as well as undertaking of measures directed at the approval of the recommendations.

Starting from 2011 the Organization has been also conducting monitoring of publications on the field of mental health disseminated via Mass Media outlets and official websites aiming to reveal the elucidation level of the state policy regarding the field of mental health and the problems related to the elucidation of the challenges of persons with mental health issues.

In 2016 16 websites were monitored, 4 of which were official websites of state agencies including police.am, genproc.am, moh.am, mlsa.am, while 12 were Mass Media websites: news.am, a1plus.am, lragir.am, 168.am, 7or.am, slaq.am, ilur.am, galatv.am, armlur.am, lin.am, operativ.am, hhpress.am: Overall 620 publications were collected and analyzed.

The publications were categorized in accordance with the sources of information dissemination: publications via the official websites of state agencies and publications via Mass Media outlets, which were further categorized pursuant to relevant state agencies, organizations and group of people.

Publications were also categorized according to the contents: regarding implementation of criminal procedure actions, general informative, and expressing a disposition.

The collected materials were assessed from the viewpoint of the impact on formation of public attitude towards persons with mental health issues and their problems: forming a positive attitude, forming a negative attitude and of neutral nature.

Publications containing descriptions on violations of the rights of persons with mental health issues or those addressing the alleged violations of their rights were viewed separately.

Sources of publications

27 out of 620 publications collected in 2016 were disseminated via the official websites of state agencies, while 593 via Mass Media outlets. 11 out of the 27 publications were disseminated via the website of the RA Police, 10 via that of the RA Ministry of Healthcare, and 6 via the website of the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Via the official websites of state agencies monitored since 2011 more information collected regarding the field of mental health was provided by the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in 2014. In the meantime, the number of the publications by the RA Ministry of Healthcare in 2014-2016 has increased more than three times as compared to those of 2011-2013. Therefore, it can be recorded that the interest of the ministry towards this field has increased. In the meanwhile, during 2011-2016 the great number of publications regarding the field of mental health by the RA Police is observed (it constitutes over 36% of the publications collected from the official websites of the state agencies in 2011-2016).

4 out of 27 publications disseminated via the official websites of the state agencies relate to the implementation of 2 significant projects directed at the reforms in the field of mental health. The publications concerned the process of incorporating community-based services, namely, the community-based service in Spitak community: Spitak Care Home and legislative regulations. However, there were no publications regarding other components of the projects directed at the reforms.¹

In 176 out of 593 publications disseminated via Mass media outlets also the information was provided by a state agency or the publication provided by a state agency was disseminated. In these publications the information provided by the RA Police (over 30%) and by the Investigative Committee (over 28%) constituted the majority. The number of publications based on the information provided by the RA Ministry of Healthcare takes the third place, which is more than twice less than the number of publications based on the information provided by the RA Police and the RA Investigative Committee.

In 423 publications based on the information provided by private organizations or non-officials the information provided by NGOs, relatives of persons with mental health issues and citizens prevail.

Thus, the information provided by the law-enforcement agencies prevails (over 58 %) in the publications based on the information provided by the representatives of the state agencies or via the official websites of the state agencies. This testifies to the fact that information regarding judicial actions in the field of mental health is elucidated far more via the websites of state agencies and mass media outlets. Obviously, the main focus on the facts of committing crimes by persons with mental health issues is highlighted, where the motives for crimes are often touched upon. At the same time, the negative impact of such publications on the

¹ The key agencies responsible for the implementation of these projects approved by the RA Government are the RA Ministry of Healthcare and the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (“Action Plan for 2013-2017 of the Concept on Providing Alternative Social Care and Support Services to Persons with Mental Health Problems” approved in September 2013, and “Action Plan for 2014-2019 ensuring the implementation of Strategy of Preserving and Improving Mental Health in the Republic of Armenia” approved in April, 2014)

formation of public attitude towards persons with mental health issues is apparent. In this respect, it is remarkable that publications revealing the problems of persons with mental health issues and those existing in the field of mental health constitute a small number. Moreover, in the monitored websites more often the representatives of civil society address the aforementioned issues.

Nature of publications and their impact on formation of public attitude

473 out of collected 620 publications don't form a positive or negative attitude towards persons with mental health issues, while 143 contribute to the formation of negative, and 4 to the positive attitude.

In 2016 a rise in the number of publications contributing to the formation of both negative and positive attitude towards persons with mental health issues was recorded. However, if the publications contributing to the formation of a positive attitude constitute only 1%, the publications contributing to the formation of a negative attitude are over 23%. It is obvious that this fact may entail more marginalization of persons with mental health issues in the society and require greater contributions from the state for the recognition of the rights of this vulnerable group and change of public attitude towards them.

More than 83% of publications contributing to the formation of a negative attitude is about judicial actions and particularly touch upon the unlawful acts committed by persons with mental health issues, such as: murder, house arson, and self-injury.

The rest of publications, also addressing the commitment of unlawful acts, draw special attention to the health issue of the accused persons by linking the aforementioned act to the presence of the health problem.

Overall, in 2016 the number of publications of judicial nature is 184, which has increased as compared to the previous years. During 2011-2016 their number constituted over 29% out of the collected 2055 publications. 405 of the collected 620 publications in 2016 were of informative nature, 31 contained a concrete disposition, such as a statement, an open letter directed at the protection of the persons' rights. It is noteworthy that the number of publications expressing a disposition has also increased as compared to the previous years.

The descriptions used in the publications are also concerning. 154 (over 25%) of the collected 620 publications particularly contain texts which can foster the strengthening of stereotypes and stigma against persons with mental health issues existing in the society, such as "psychopath", "schizophrenic", "insane", "paranoid" and etc. Such labels are used both during introduction of citations and by Mass Media outlets.

It is worth addressing also the publications², where especially in discussions about various political issues "schizophrenic", "psychopath" wordings are used for criticizing unacceptable and inconceivable behaviors. As a result, though such publications persons with mental health issues are labeled, a false opinion is rooted that all people with mental health problems do not have adequate behaviors and can not make the right decisions.

² These were viewed separately from the aforementioned 620 publications

It can be recorded that dissemination of negative stereotypes via publications contributing to the formation of a negative attitude against persons with mental health issues is concerning, where the publications of judicial nature prevail.

Meanwhile, in 2016 the increase of the publications, which mainly elucidate the issues existing in the field of mental health and express alternative opinions regarding various issues, is a welcoming fact.

Reflection of cases of human rights violations in the publications

23 out of 620 publications regarding the field of mental health collected in 2016 concerned the alleged violations of 5 persons' rights. According to those publications, the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment, the right to health and the right to personal inviolability were breached. Both in 2016 and during the whole period of 2011-2016 information regarding the alleged violations of the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment prevailed.

Another 35 out of the collected 620 publications related to filing a criminal case against civic activist Vardges Gaspari and ordering of a forensic medical examination within the framework of the criminal case. The publications regarding Vardges Gaspari also contain information about the violations of the right to fair trial and the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment. The ordering of a forensic medical examination in relation to Vardges Gaspari was highly criticized in the publications by lawyers and civil society representatives: it was specifically noted that in the instant case the mental hospital served as a punitive measure against a person with active civic disposition in order to instigate him to give up his civic activism.

In 2016 85 materials were published, where the persons' right to the protection of personal data was violated, since they contained personal data of a person with mental health issues: besides the name and surname, they also contained the diagnosis of the disease and etc, without any note on permission to publish the aforementioned data. In 2016 as compared to 2015 the number of publications breaching the right to the protection of personal data has twice increased. Moreover, 64 of the 85 publications (over 75 %) were disseminated via the official websites of the state agencies or based on the information provided by the state agencies.

It can be inferred that in 2016 the presence of publications breaching the right to the protection of personal data of persons with mental health issues in the mass media and in the official websites of the state agencies remains concerning.

The use of psychiatric facilities as a punitive mechanism, regarding which information was disseminated in several publications, as well as the fact that especially the alerts on alleged breaches of the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment prevail in the publications on the alleged violations of human rights are also concerning.

Summary

Thus, 27 out of overall 620 publications regarding the field of mental health collected as a result of monitoring of 16 websites in 2016 were disseminated via the official websites of the state agencies, while 593 via Mass Media outlets.

Publications about criminal procedure actions take a substantial place (over 30%) among 620 publications collected in 2016 as well as in the previous years. Whereas, publications on the problems existing in the field of mental health and their solutions, as well as publications directed at breaking the stereotypes against persons with mental health issues are sporadic.

The texts and expressions used in the publications, as well as the large-scale elucidation of unlawful acts committed by persons with mental health issues in its turn contribute to the aggravation of negative stereotypes in the society against persons with mental health issues, which causes the latter to become more vulnerable in terms of human rights protection.

The use of stereotypical wordings during the introduction of persons with mental health issues in publications describing and presenting various unlawful acts, as well as the presence of publications containing violations of the right to the protection of a person's personal data and their growth as compared with the recent years continue to remain concerning.

Aiming to resolve the problems identified through the study, we recommend:

The RA state agencies

1. To exclude the publications containing identification data of persons with mental health issues without a legitimate goal.
2. To undertake measures directed at the elimination and prevention of negative stereotypes existing in the society against persons with mental health issues.
3. To expand the volumes of public awareness on the actions implemented by the state directed at the solution of legal, healthcare and social problems of the persons with mental health issues.

We urge the Mass Media outlets

1. To refrain from the promulgation of personal data that will enable to identify the persons with mental health issues when its legitimate goal is absent.
2. To refrain from publications reinforcing the existing negative stereotypes against persons with mental health issues, as well as the application of texts, wordings and expressions labeling and creating stereotypes against them.