VERA
VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH THEATRE-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR WOMEN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

VERA project: Innovative approaches to preventing sexual violence against young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A new CERV DAPHNE programme initiative is breaking ground in safeguarding young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from sexual abuse. The two-years VERA project brings together international partners to co-create accessible, inclusive training using theatre-based methods and peer-led approaches. With a strong focus on empowering young women, VERA equips participants with the skills to recognise, prevent and respond to risky situations and will also engage policymakers to drive long-term systemic change.

The VERA project (Violence Prevention Through Theatre-Based Educational Resources for Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder) was launched in March 2025 and is set to run for 24 months. It was created to address the heightened risk of sexual abuse experienced by young people with ASD. Studies indicate that young individuals with ASD, particularly young women, are significantly more susceptible to sexual victimisation than their neurotypical peers. Studies suggest that they are three to four times more likely to experience sexual abuse, with up to nine in ten women with ASD reporting sexual violence, which often begins in childhood or adolescence (Thrundle et al., 2022; Gibbs et al., 2021; Gotby et al., 2018; Weiss & Fardella, 2018).

Young people on the autism spectrum are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse, largely due to the core challenges associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), such as difficulties in interpreting social cues, setting personal boundaries, and managing emotions. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2022), ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by persistent challenges in social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour. It affects individuals differently, hence the term "spectrum", encompassing a broad range of abilities, support needs, and lived experiences.

This diversity means that some young people with ASD - especially those with so-called 'high-functioning autism' - may find it particularly difficult to identify unsafe situations or report abuse, often fearing disbelief or misunderstanding. Despite their strong intellectual and language abilities, they may misinterpret others' intentions or struggle with social problem-solving, making them more vulnerable. The VERA project seeks to address these risks through innovative, evidence-based educational resources and training, co-designed with young people with ASD, families and professionals. Using theatre-based techniques, including methods from Theatre of the Oppressed, the programme equips participants with practical skills to recognise, prevent and respond safely to sexual abuse. Role-play, socio-drama and scenario-based exercises help young people rehearse responses to real-life situations in a safe and supportive environment.

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A key component of VERA is the Peer Ambassador Programme, empowering youth with ASD to become trusted advocates in their communities. These ambassadors use their shared experiences to educate peers about safety, consent and healthy relationships. This peer-to-peer approach builds trust, boosts confidence, and encourages open, relatable communication, creating a more supportive and protective environment.

Beyond education and empowerment, VERA also seeks to drive policy change. By engaging service providers and policymakers, the project aims to promote systemic improvements and sustainable support for young people with ASD. Accessible materials and policy recommendations will be developed to support this mission.

The VERA partners officially launched the project on 29th May in Valencia, marking an exciting and energising start to this important initiative. The discussion covered all key areas of the project, with a strong focus on the co-design sessions now underway across partner countries. These participatory sessions, involving autistic young people, families and professionals, are central to ensuring the project materials truly reflect the community's needs. The meeting also included training on the evaluation toolkit, equipping partners with the knowledge and resources to monitor the project's progress and impact consistently and effectively.

NOTES TO EDITORS

VERA is a project funded by the European Commission's CERV-2024-DAPHNE programme under agreement no. 101194892 and it is implemented by a consortium coordinated by Anziani e non solo (Italy) and composed of GIOLLI (Italy), Tartu Ulikool (UTARTU) (Estonia), MTU NAISTE TUGI- JA TEABEKESKUS (Estonia) and Fundacion MIRA'M de la comunitat valenciana (Spain).

Background:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) includes a range of neurodevelopmental conditions affecting communication, social interaction and behaviour. Research shows that young people with ASD, especially girls and women, face a significantly higher risk of sexual victimisation than their neurotypical peers, with up to 90% of ASD women reporting such experiences. This vulnerability stems from difficulties in recognising social cues, setting boundaries and interpreting risky situations. Those with so-called 'high-functioning autism' may seek connection but lack the social tools to do so safely. The VERA project seeks to reduce these risks through targeted education and innovative, preventative interventions.