VERA

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

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

DELIVERABLE 4.2



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document has been developed within the framework of the European project VERA (Violence Prevention Through Theatre-Based Educational Resources for Women and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder), a transnational initiative aimed at preventing and combating violence and abuse against individuals on the autism spectrum, with a specific focus on young adults and women.

Despite growing awareness surrounding neurodiversity, Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (YwASD) continue to face a dramatically high risk of social vulnerability, isolation, and violence - including sexual abuse. This phenomenon is driven, on one hand, by core challenges in social communication and the interpretation of others' intentions. On the other hand, it is exacerbated by a cultural context that remains heavily influenced by prejudices, stereotypes, and a widespread lack of adequate support for families and professionals.

This Policy Recommendation document serves as a strategic and operational tool designed for stakeholders at the local, national, and European levels.

Specifically, the document is addressed to social services; healthcare services and professionals – including psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, educators, and all those working to promote the well-being of YwASD education and training services; employers; associations and organizations operating in the social sector; law enforcement agencies; and policymakers.

The main objectives of this document are to:

● Analyse the main risk factors and vulnerabilities that expose YwASD to abuse and marginalization.

● Propose systemic prevention strategies rooted in continuous training, body awareness, and tailored education on relationships and sexuality.

● Present the innovative findings and methodologies of the VERA project, focusing on the use of the Theatre of the Oppressed and the implementation of Peer Ambassador Programmes as mechanisms for emancipation and empowerment.

● Urge policymakers and institutions to foster synergistic collaboration among social, healthcare, and educational services, alongside families, to guarantee the protection of fundamental rights and achieve genuine social inclusion.

Through a participatory and interdisciplinary approach that parallelly engaged YwASD, caregivers, and professionals across Italy, Spain, and Estonia, the VERA project demonstrates how individuals on the spectrum can be transformed from passive recipients of care into active protagonists of their own safety and self-advocacy.

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2. THE FRAGILITY OF PEOPLE WITH AUTISM: THE MAIN RISK FACTORS

2.1 SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE VULNERABILITY

YwASD face an increased vulnerability linked to challenges in decoding non-verbal social cues and a frequently literal understanding of language, which can make it extremely difficult to timely identify malicious intent or "ulterior motives" in an interlocutor.

The strong desire for social acceptance and the fear of hurting others' feelings often fuel the phenomenon of "masking", driving the individual to comply with unwanted sexual requests just to maintain harmony or avoid rejection.

This fragility is worsened by difficulties in real-time processing: in situations of high stress or sensory overload, the ability to assess risk and offer a refusal can be compromised by emotional or physical freezing responses, leading the person to passively endure contact because the brain requires more time to process the discomfort and structure a response.

2.2 SENSORY PROCESSING VULNERABILITY

Sensory processing differences represent a critical risk factor, as they directly influence the ability to manage intimacy and exercise the right to consent.

For many YwASD, the sensory system acts as a primary filter that can fluctuate drastically based on stress or cognitive load: in conditions of hypersensitivity, common environmental stimuli such as bright lights, noises, or smells can be perceived with such intensity that they saturate the nervous system, leading the person into a "protection" mode that shuts down vigilance and the perception of pleasure.

Studies hypothesize that this state of overload compromises the ability to correctly identify and interpret bodily signals of discomfort in real-time, making it extremely difficult to distinguish between appropriate affective contact and potential harassment.

These perceptual fluctuations often deprive the individual of the stability needed to assess the situation and promptly assert personal boundaries, leading them to passively endure unwanted contact precisely because of the physical or mental impossibility of communicating a refusal in an environment perceived as sensorially invasive.

2.3 EDUCATIONAL AND SYSTEMIC GAPS

The absence of specific sexual education pathways deprives people on the spectrum of the cognitive tools and vocabulary necessary to distinguish abuse from required physical assistance or appropriate displays of affection.

Many YwASD may face an increased risk of being targeted by perpetrators, who often rely on the subjects' lack of explicit training regarding the concepts of privacy and consent, or on the fact that signs of trauma are erroneously attributed by institutions to the intrinsic characteristics of autism.

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This fragility is exacerbated by a widespread tendency toward infantilization, which prevents access to crucial information on reproductive health and legal protection, leaving YwASD without practical strategies to recognize manipulation and to report violence in healthcare or legal contexts that are often unprepared to receive their testimony.

3. VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

3.1 EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING

Early and adapted sexual education tailored to the cognitive characteristics of the autism spectrum is fundamental for preventing abuse and victimization.

Programs must concretely teach consent, the distinction between public and private behaviors, and the right to say "NO" to counter social compliance and masking.

To be effective as violence prevention, training must transition from theory to practice through role-playing and simulations of real-life scenarios, ensuring that individuals can generalize safety skills across different environments and people.

These interventions should be proactive and repetitive, utilizing visual supports, animations, and multimedia tools to facilitate learning and reduce cognitive load.

Education must also be framed as a lifelong learning process that continues into adulthood to address evolving relationship needs across various life domains.

It is also essential to employ literal and explicit vocabulary, avoiding confusing euphemisms to provide individuals with the precise terms necessary to identify and report boundaries and potential harm.

3.2 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ACTIONS

The implementation of social and emotional support actions represents a fundamental preventive strategy, as it aims to strengthen individual and systemic protective barriers around the YwASD.

Parent training and psychoeducation act strategically to reduce family stress and improve internal communication, allowing the family to better detect early interception of manipulation or abuse dynamics.

At the individual level, the enhancement of prerequisites such as self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-determination constitutes a strategic choice aimed at providing the person with the psychological tools necessary to recognize their rights and oppose external pressures.

3.3 COLLABORATION BETWEEN SERVICES, PROFESSIONALS AND CAREGIVERS

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Preventing sexual violence and abuse requires a systemic and coordinated approach where cooperation between services, institutions, and families ensures consistency across all areas of an individual's life.

Professionals must avoid working in isolation, as a lack of coordination can undermine protective strategies and potentially result in institutional negligence.

It is fundamental to adopt a "nothing about us without us" approach, ensuring the direct and active involvement of YwASD as essential partners in this collaborative process.

Finally, it is crucial to prepare and sensitize the community by debunking stereotypes and myths that often lead to the isolation or infantilization of YwASD. A cultural and systemic change is necessary to transform the social environment from one of judgment and intolerance to one of solidarity, making the community itself an active protective factor against violence.

4. Outcomes of VERA Project

The VERA project focused on creating and field-testing several key deliverables designed to provide the professional community, caregivers, and YwASD with operational tools for prevention, awareness-raising, and training regarding the risk of abuse and violence against YwASD.

The primary tangible outputs of the project consist of two integrated pathways: the Training Programmes and the Peer Ambassador Programme.

The training modules directly target three key stakeholder groups – YwASD, caregivers, and sector professionals (educators, therapists, psychologists, and social workers). These modules combine theoretical content and practical activities to foster the recognition of risky situations, the understanding of consent and personal boundaries, the identification of red flags, and safe help-seeking.

Building directly upon these modules, the Peer Ambassador Programme takes empowerment a step further by supporting YwASD to become active safety advocates and positive role models within their peer communities, both online and offline.

From a methodological standpoint, both pathways are based on the integration of experiential approaches, peer education, and, centrally, the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) developed by Augusto Boal. This technique serves as the core methodology underlying the project's activities: it provides a safe space where YwASD can experiment with and develop essential relational skills (such as active listening, non-verbal communication, and emotional regulation), while enabling professionals and caregivers to move beyond paternalistic approaches. Furthermore, the Theatre of the Oppressed helps verify the learning acquired by participants, enhance the implicit knowledge of groups and individuals, and improve situational communication skills.

Ultimately, the VERA project experience demonstrates how the combined use of these concrete tools and participatory methodologies fosters psychological empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-protection among neurodivergent individuals, thereby providing practice-based evidence on which to ground subsequent policy recommendations.

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5. Policy Recommendations

The implementation of policy recommendations should be grounded in the recognition of sexual health as a fundamental human right, which is often denied to YwASD due to prejudices that portray them as asexual or permanently dependent.

The following section summarizes the main policy recommendations, in particular on actions at the local, regional, and European levels for preventing and addressing sexual violence and abuse against and perpetrated by YwASD, drawing on the evidence and insights provided by the scientific literature.

5.1 Education and Empowerment

Education and empowerment are key to preventing sexual violence and promoting the safety and autonomy of YwASD. Accessible, tailored education can support their understanding of relationships, consent, boundaries, and self-protection, while empowerment initiatives can strengthen self-advocacy, confidence, and the ability to seek help when needed.

Local Level

- **Implementation of structured educational programmes:** Promote school-based sexuality education programmes that are clear, explicit, and based on visual supports (e.g. videos and digital social stories) to accommodate different learning styles across the spectrum.
- **Peer-to-Peer Social Groups**: Since YwASD are significantly less likely to obtain information from peers - often due to social isolation or rejection - local communities should fund inclusive social groups. These groups can facilitate the informal social learning that neurotypical individuals use to navigate safe sexual practices.
- **Caregiver Support and Training Programs**: Provide local training programs for caregivers (family members and legal guardians) to overcome stigma around discussing sexuality and relationships, enabling them to serve as safe, reliable sources of information.

National and Regional Level

- **Mandatory Comprehensive Sexual Education**: Introduce national legislation mandating sexual education tailored for neurodivergent populations, using concrete and explicit definitions of sexual acts and consent.
- **Relationship and Self-Protection Education in School Curricula**: Include modules in national curricula on healthy relationships, assertiveness, emotional regulation, and recognizing "red flags" related to bullying and abuse.
- **Prevention of Harmful Behaviors**: Establish national guidelines for access to emotional regulation programs and mental health support to prevent conflict or distress among autistic youth.

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European Level

- **Empowerment Initiatives and Best Practice Exchanges**: Fund European exchange programs promoting self-protection tools, accessible information, and rights awareness for neurodivergent youth. VERA project is a concrete example.

5.2 PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING AND SAFEGUARDING

Another important area of intervention is the training of professionals who work closely with YwASD. Equipping them with appropriate tools and providing specific training to recognise risk factors and effectively manage potential cases of abuse, while avoiding secondary victimisation, is essential to ensuring the protection and safeguarding of young people and their families.

Local Level

- **Integration of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)**: Use the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology for awareness-raising actions and participatory training in schools and local community settings.
- **Access to specialist consultations:** Establish local consultation points with figures such as clinical sexologists experienced in disability to support professionals in managing complex cases and dysfunctional sexual behaviors.
- **Adopting the "Iceberg Theory"**: Train local staff and caregivers to look beyond visible "challenging" behaviors to identify and manage underlying causes (e.g., sensory overload, physical pain, emotional distress).

National and Regional Level

- **Mandatory Cross-Sector Autism Training**: Mandate autism-affirming training for all frontline professionals (teachers, law enforcement, healthcare staff, and social workers) to avoid misinterpreting autistic traits as threats or disobedience.
- **Preventing Secondary Victimization**: Provide specific training for all report-receiving roles on empathetic, trauma-informed listening to prevent secondary victimization, drawing from gender-based violence best practices.
- **Countering Stereotypes in Public Services**: Roll out national training campaigns to dismantle professional stereotypes that associate autism with asexual behavior or dangerousness.

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European Level

- **Harmonization of Safeguarding standards**: Promote common European criteria establishing specialist competence as a deontological obligation for protecting the human rights of neurodivergent individuals.
- **European Professional Training Standards**: Promote common EU guidelines and training modules focused on neuro-affirming approaches and violence prevention for professionals.

5.3 Accessible Reporting, Justice and Victim support

Accessible reporting, justice, and victim support are essential to ensuring that YwASD can report abuse safely, be heard, and receive appropriate protection and legal support.

Local Level

- **Local Specialized Advocacy Services**: Activate and support local advocacy and legal counseling services to assist YwASD in navigating reporting processes and accessing support.

Regional/National Level

- **Prioritizing Direct Testimony**: Update health and legal protocols to validate and prioritize direct self-reports and testimony from YwASD.
- **Accessible and Concrete Reporting Tools**: Implement anonymous, digital, and literal reporting methods within police and justice systems to reduce sensory stress and social pressure during statements.
- **National Legal Protection Funding**: Allocate structural funding for specialized legal counseling and advocacy services for neurodivergent minors and young adults.

European Level

- **Unified Standards for Accessible Justice**: Monitor the implementation of the EU Victims' Rights Directive with a specific focus on YwASD victims, ensuring minimum protection standards across all Member States.

5.4 Coordinated and Participatory Services

Coordinated and participatory services are essential to ensuring continuity of care, effective collaboration among stakeholders, and the active involvement of YwASD and their families in

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decisions that affect their lives. Strengthening collaboration and participation can help create more personalised, consistent, and inclusive support systems.

Local Level

- **Permanent Multi-Agency Coordination Tables**: Establish permanent coordination tables centered on the YwASD, bringing together schools, social services, health structures, and families to co-create clear operational protocols, defined roles, and regular reviews that respect autonomy and maintain a strong, personalized safety net. The voice of the YwASD must always be at the forefront.

- **Caregivers as Important Support Partners**: Actively involve caregivers and families as important partners in designing individualized educational and support plans.

Regional/National Level

- **Life-Span Service Integration**: Enact legislation and allocate resources to guarantee continuous care from diagnosis through adulthood, eliminating support vacuums after leaving the school system.

- **Developing National Participatory Frameworks**: Mandate the active involvement of YwASD and self-advocacy organizations in designing public policies on inclusion and safety.

European Level

- **Mandatory Participatory Frameworks in EU Funding**: Condition EU funding for safety and inclusion projects on adopting participatory models that directly involve the autistic community.

5.5 SYSTEMIC INCLUSION, RESEARCH AND MONITORING

Finally, systemic inclusion and stigma reduction are essential to creating environments in which YwASD can live safely, participate fully, and be protected from discrimination, exploitation, and social exclusion. Policies should focus on removing environmental barriers, challenging harmful stereotypes, and promoting equal participation and well-being.

Local Level

- **Environmental Adaptation in Community Settings**: Adapt local environments (schools, day centers, workplaces) by reducing sensory triggers and rigid structures to foster personal well-being.

- **Protection Against "Mate Crimes"**: Foster community awareness and vigilance to protect YwASD from manipulation and exploitation by "fake friends."

Regional/National Level

- **Eliminating the "Blame Myth" and Affirming Diagnoses**: Eradicate outdated theories blaming families from national healthcare protocols, while communicating diagnoses in a way that promotes self-understanding, self-esteem, and empowerment.
- **Promoting Systemic Inclusion**: Shift essential care levels and social policies toward removing environmental barriers rather than correcting autistic behaviors.

European Level

- **Standardized Vulnerability Monitoring:** Develop common European metrics to map environmental risk factors and negative life experiences (such as unemployment, isolation, and poverty).
- **European Anti-Stigma Campaigns:** Launch EU-wide public awareness campaigns to dismantle false narratives associating autism with violence, highlighting research showing YwASD are significantly more likely to be victims than perpetrators.

HOW CAN THE VERA RESULTS HELP IMPLEMENT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

The outputs and methodologies developed within the VERA project can contribute to operationalize these policy recommendations across all levels:

- **Capacity-Building & Methodology:** VERA training modules integrate the Theatre of the Oppressed to equip professionals, educators, and caregivers with skills to recognize abuse and prevent secondary victimization.
- **Empowerment & Participation**: The Peer Ambassador Programme provides an adaptable model to strengthen peer networks, support self-advocacy, and empower YwASD as active agents in violence prevention.
- **Multidisciplinary Design**: Grounded in comprehensive needs assessments involving autistic individuals and professionals, VERA's framework demonstrates how to combine research, clinical expertise, and direct participation to create effective, rights-respecting public policies.

Discover the VERA Project Training Programmes: https://www.anzianienonsolo.it/online/vera-results/

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6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the VERA project and the present Policy Recommendation document underline the urgent need for coordinated and long-term actions aimed at preventing violence and abuse against YwASD. The findings emerging from the project's needs assessment, stakeholder consultations, and field-testing activities suggest that YwASD may face particular challenges related to exploitation, coercion, and social exclusion, including communication barriers, social stigma, and limited access to appropriate educational and support resources.

The VERA project has demonstrated the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary and participatory approach that actively involves YwASD, caregivers, professionals, and institutions in the development of prevention strategies. Through needs analysis, tailored training programmes, peer empowerment initiatives, and the use of experiential methodologies such as Theatre of the Oppressed, the project has provided practical tools and innovative educational models capable of promoting awareness, autonomy, emotional safety, and self-advocacy.

At the same time, this document highlights the necessity of strengthening public policies and services dedicated to autism, particularly in the areas of sexuality education, violence prevention, caregiver support, professional training, and interinstitutional collaboration. Prevention should not be understood as an isolated intervention, but as a continuous process requiring accessible resources, inclusive practices, and sustained investment at local, national, and European levels.

Ultimately, the VERA project represents both a concrete prevention initiative and a call for cultural and systemic change. Promoting the rights, dignity, safety, and active participation of YwASD means building communities that are more inclusive, informed, and capable of recognising neurodiversity as a value rather than a limitation.

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