VERA

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

VERA Project: Comparative Report on the Co-Design Phase and Creation of a Model for Developing a Training Programme

The European project VERA, focused on managing the risk of sexual violence against young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), has produced its first results. Following a series of interviews and focus groups aimed at identifying the needs of the key actors involved, a comparative report was developed to analyse and contrast findings across the participating countries. The report highlights the need to better align educational and family systems with the needs of young people with ASD and to provide professionals with appropriate tools to address sexual and relational issues raised by autistic youth. In addition, a model has been created outlining the guidelines for the development of the training programme that will be built in the next phases of the project.

Launched in March 2025 and running for 24 months, the VERA Project (Violence Prevention Through Theatre-Based Educational Resources for Women with Autism Spectrum Disorder) aims to prevent the risk of sexual violence to which young people with ASD—particularly girls—are exposed. Research shows that 9 out of 10 women with ASD experience sexual violence (Cazalis et al., 2022) and that females are generally at a significantly higher risk than males of experiencing sexual and psychological violence, bullying, and cyberbullying (Cooke et al., 2025).

Over the past months, interviews and focus groups were conducted in all partner countries—Italy, Spain, and Estonia—to carry out a needs assessment. In total, 17 young adults with ASD, 21 parents or family members of autistic children and adolescents, and 19 professionals working with ASD youth (including teachers, educators, psychologists, social workers, and therapists) were involved. Each country produced a national report summarising its findings, which were then compared in a European-level comparative report outlining the main results of this initial research phase.

Overall, the findings show that young people with ASD are not limited by their abilities, but by the environments in which they live. Educational, family, and professional systems are often ill-prepared to understand how autistic youth perceive relationships and safety. Without systemic reforms tailored to their needs, this misalignment continues to foster vulnerability, dependence on caregivers, and mistrust.

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The analysis confirms the importance of sexuality education within autism and the need for co-design processes that integrate the perspectives of young people, family caregivers, and professionals. It also highlights the necessity for professionals to receive adequate training to ensure consistency between the messages delivered at school and at home. Parents, in turn, expressed a strong need for psychoeducation and greater support. Across all groups, there was a preference for visual, concrete, and literal materials, which are essential for accessibility. Finally, the report underscores the need for coherent policy frameworks, guidance, and supervision aligned with the identified needs.

Training content will include autism-specific communication, concepts of consent and relational boundaries, and recognising risk and abuse. Three workshop-based training pathways—one for each target group—will be developed with variable durations. In the upcoming project phases, this model will be tested and implemented through practical training sessions.

This next stage will ensure that the insights and lived experiences shared by participants during the co-design process lead to meaningful and lasting impact within European communities—promoting educational change for young people and families, and equipping professionals with concrete methods to address cases of abuse, violence, and secondary victimisation, the latter referring to the additional emotional and psychological harm suffered when victims are not believed, are ignored, or are judged by those close to them or by institutions.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

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Context:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a range of neurodevelopmental conditions that affect communication, social interaction, and behaviour. Research consistently shows that young people with ASD—especially girls and women—are at a much higher risk of sexual abuse compared to their neurotypical peers, with up to 90% of women with ASD reporting having experienced such violence. This vulnerability often stems from difficulties in recognizing social cues, defining personal boundaries, and interpreting risky situations. Individuals with so-called "high-functioning autism" may seek social relationships but lack the tools to build them safely.

VERA aims to reduce these risks through innovative, education-based prevention interventions.

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