

"The past is always tense, the future perfect."

*Zadie Smith*

## About Maria



Level 3



6 to 30



90 minutes



**Complexity:** Level 3

**Group size:** 6 to 30

**Time:** 90 minutes

**Overview:** This activity deals with the issue of forced sterilisation of women with disabilities in recent history. Using a real story, participants explore, how gender-based violence can affect people. They then reflect on what the history of violence can teach us about preventing and acting against it today.

**Objectives:** To learn about and reflect on cases of gender-based violence and discrimination and consider their effect on people with disabilities today

To understand which human rights are violated in different cases of gender-based violence

To reflect on personal roles and consider the type of actions which could help to prevent gender-based violence today.

**Materials:** Copies of "The story of Maria and her country" (one copy per group)

Copies of the task for each group

**Preparation:** You may want to review some of the terms relevant to this activity, such as forced sterilisation or eugenics.



## Instructions

- 1) Start with a simple activity “Up and down”. Tell participants that you will read out a series of different statements. If they agree with them, they should stand up, and if they do not agree, they should sit or crouch down. Different degrees of standing or crouching are possible: participants can stand with their arms raised if they agree completely with the statement; or they can sit on a chair, if they partly agree.
- 2) Read out the following statements, one by one, allowing people to adopt a position after each statement. This part of the activity should be done in silence.  
Statements:
  - Women should have the right to have babies
  - Women should have the right to decide if they want to have babies or not
  - Forcing women to have babies should be illegal
  - Forcing women not to have babies should be illegal
  - States that have performed surgery to make women infertile without their consent should pay reparations
- 3) Run a short debriefing after this part of the activity. You could ask the following questions:
  - How did you feel during the activity? Was it difficult to adopt a position?
  - How difficult / easy was it to answer the questions? Which ones were the most difficult and why?
  - Did you have any doubts when answering the questions? What were they?
  - Have you ever heard of cases when women have been forced to have an operation which makes them infertile? Can you give details – for example, who was involved, and which reasons were given? (you may want to explain to participants the meaning of the term “forced sterilisation”)
- 4) Now ask participants to make smaller groups of 4-6 people. Give groups copies of the handout “The story of Maria and her country” and ask participants to read it. After they have read it, they should answer the questions below the text and write their answers to the last two questions (How do you think that forced sterilisation affected the rest of Maria’s life? How do such acts affect the understanding of human rights?). Allow about 30 minutes for this part of the activity.
- 5) Once the groups are ready, ask them to present their answers to the last question. Allow some time for discussion of this question. You could also ask them to share their answers to the other questions. Tell participants that the case is about Sweden, and the story is based on the real-life experience of Maria Nordin, a Swedish citizen.
- 6) Finish the activity with a debriefing and evaluation, focusing on the types and extent of gender-based violence and discrimination experienced by people with disabilities today. Discuss how it affects them and relate the issues to human rights.



## Debriefing and evaluation

Start with a general overview of the activity and ask the following questions:

- How did you feel during the exercise? Was it difficult or easy to connect with Maria's story?
- Did you expect the story to be about Sweden? If you guessed, which facts in the story gave this away? Were you surprised?
- Have you ever heard of eugenics? What is it? Can you think of other eugenic ideas or practices from history which classified certain people as inferior, and in doing so, appeared to justify violence against them – even killing them?
- Why do we need to remember gender-based violence and other crimes against people with disabilities which happened in Sweden and other countries in the recent past? What can we learn from such a look at history?
- What can governments of countries that allowed such violent practices do today to compensate the victims?
- People with disabilities face a great deal of discrimination today. Can you think of examples?
- Do you know about other violent practices that threaten bodily and mental integrity, which are performed on people today without their consent?
- Which human rights are violated when such practices are carried out?
- What can young people like you do to prevent or fight gender-based discrimination?



## Tips for the facilitator

This activity deals with the forced sterilisation of people with disabilities in Sweden. However, it is important to remember that it is not only this country that has a history of such cruel treatment against – mainly - women from minority groups. Similar examples can be found in many countries of the world, for example Germany, Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia), Russia, Switzerland, China, United States and Australia. You could also refer to the forced sterilisation of Romani women which happened in Czechoslovakia, and later in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The report of the European Roma Rights Centre, "Coercive and cruel", published in 2016, describes examples of such sterilisation from 1996 to 2016 and analyses the effects of such acts on the people concerned, on communities and on society as a whole.

The forced sterilisation of women constitutes an example of very cruel gender-based violence and a serious human rights violation. It violates such rights as the right to life, the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment, the right to safety, the right to privacy, and freedom from discrimination. The European Court of Human Rights has dealt with several cases concerning forced sterilisation, e.g. V.C against Slovakia (on the forced sterilisation of Romani woman) or A. P.,

E. Garçon and S. Nicot against France (on the forced sterilisation of transgender people). In both cases, the Court found forced sterilisation to be a human rights violation. Yet, in 2017 there were still 22 countries in Europe that demanded sterilisation for transgender people before they transition to another sex.

During the activity, participants may ask you whether sterilisation (including unforced) is allowed in your country, or anywhere in the world. You may want to check this fact before running the activity. There are many countries which do not permit sterilisation unless it has been recommended by a doctor for medical purposes. Sterilisation is usually permanent, but in some cases it can be reversed, although such a procedure is very risky and does not often end successfully.

You may want to read the first chapter of the manual, where you can find different examples of violence, before you run the activity. This may help with debriefing the activity.

## Suggestions for follow-up

If the group is interested in exploring other historical examples of violence, you could suggest the activity “Dosta” from *Compass – the Manual for human rights education with young people*, in which participants plan and carry out an action project to raise awareness about Roma victims of the Holocaust.

You could also propose that participants look at the section on Intersectionality and multiple discrimination (in Chapter 4) to learn how gender intersects with other characteristics, such as skin colour, class, disability, ethnic origin or age.

## Ideas for action

You could explore with participants whether forced sterilisation has ever been carried out in your country. Organise a visit to a local organisation which deals with challenges that people with disabilities face in your community and ask them what they do against gender-based violence.

The story is based on Sam Rowlands, Jean-Jacques Amy, Sterilisation of those with intellectual disability: evolution from non-consensual interventions to strict safeguards, Centre of Postgraduate Medical Research & Education, Bournemouth University and Learning Disabilities – Toward Inclusion, Helen L. Atherton and Debbie J. Crickmore (Ed.), Churchill Livingstone, Elsevier Ltd., 2011.





## The story of Maria and her country

(based on a real story)

Maria lived in a country which she loved, but just as with every other country in the world, it had some sad historical chapters. In 1909, her country established *The Society for Racial Hygiene*, with the aim of influencing public policy and public opinion by spreading knowledge about eugenic methods, and their results. The Society distributed pamphlets about the importance of “racial hygiene” and presented the sterilisation of women considered ‘unfit’ as one way of maintaining a higher genetic pool within the country. The Society was later replaced by a government department called The State Institute for Racial Biology, which operated until the late 1950s.

In 1934, Maria’s country adopted a law which allowed for the forced sterilisation of people with intellectual disabilities. Later, this law was extended to other groups of people who were considered ‘unfit’ for society.

When Maria was 17, she was identified as having a very low level of intelligence and was diagnosed by the school doctor as ‘feeble-minded’ (this is the term that was used to refer to people with intellectual disabilities). The doctor also said that because of this fact, Maria would be unable to raise children. She was later called to sign some papers. She was not sure what she was signing, and it turned out later on that by signing these papers she had agreed to be sterilised. In 1943, the doctors performed an operation on her and removed her ovaries, which made her infertile. It emerged later that the reason she was classified as ‘feeble-minded’ was because she was short-sighted (and had no glasses). This had made her unable to read the blackboard.

In 1997, in a newspaper interview, Maria (who was by then 72) said: “I’ll never forget when I was called into the headmistress office... I was aware of it well before. I hid in the basement bathroom, crying all by myself. I thought of killing myself, and I have been thinking of it ever since. But I never wanted to give them [the government] the satisfaction of getting rid of me. I tried to let my hatred go, to melt it away. But it isn’t possible for me’.

Maria demanded compensation from her government in 1996, but her claim was initially rejected. However, after prominent newspaper headlines about her story, an *ex-gratia* payment was made to her.

The law allowing forced sterilisation was operational until 1975, and it is estimated that some 60,000 people were sterilised, mainly women. How many of these sterilisations were on the grounds of intellectual disability is unknown. A similar law applied to transsexual people, who had to undergo sterilisation before a sex change. This law was abolished in 2013.



## TASK FOR THE GROUP

After reading the story of Maria and her country, discuss the questions below in your group. Prepare a short report to present to the rest of the group, based on your answers to the last two questions. You will have about 2-3 minutes for your presentation.

Questions:

- What did you think about the story? Did it shock or surprise you? Why, or why not?
- Which country do you think Maria was from? Give a reason for your guess.
- Can you imagine Maria's feelings when she understood that she would be sterilised?
- How do you think that forced sterilisation affected the rest of Maria's life?
- How do such acts affect the understanding of human rights?