



## **ANCORA MATILDE PROJECT**

### **CASE OF EXCELLENCE**

#### **Psychological, legal and social support of women and children victims of domestic violence**

**Association “SOS – Families in Risk Association” – Varna**

By Anna Nikolova

“SOS – Families in Risk Association” is a Non-Government Organization, the main aims of which are orientated to coping with one of the most difficult family problems – violence. The organization was founded in 1998 and it has realised 10 projects so far. It is the biggest and most effectively working non-government organization in North-East Bulgaria, having as its priority the solving of this well – spread in Bulgarian families’ problem. Overcoming traumatic outcomes of experienced violence and successful social rehabilitation and reintegration of the family members involved are a main objective as well as a merit for effectiveness of work. Cases, in which all family members take part, are relatively rarer because those who perform the violence are not inclined to seek help. An adequate legal mechanism providing protection of victims of domestic violence and care for violators does not exist in Bulgaria yet. Therapeutic programmes for men-violators in Bulgaria are a wish. Due to this family consultations are held in organizations similar to ours only at the request and motivation of both spouses or other members of the family. The target group towards the provided services are orientated is represented by women, children and families (formal and informal) with problems related to any present or former experience of different forms of violence (physical, sexual, emotional).

## **Main principles of work:**

- ✓ Confidentiality
- ✓ Anonymity
- ✓ Individual approach
- ✓ Respect of personal choice
- ✓ Strengthening and protection of dignity
- ✓ Unviolation of human rights and feelings
- ✓ Right of information
- ✓ Complex care of clients and their families
- ✓ Team work on the cases

## **Provided services:**

- A telephone line in support of women and children victims of violence
- Crisis intervention
- Psychiatric consultations
- Psychological consultations – individual and family
- Long-term psychotherapy
- Groups for self-assistance
- Legal consultations
- Legal defence and representation at court, prosecution and police
- Social work
- Prevention of domestic violence

The services provided are free and open for anyone who asks for defence and support by the organization, and who states a problem relevant to its aims and subject of activity.

## ***Telephone line in support of women and children victims of violence***

The telephone line is served by trained volunteers (students of psychology and social work) or a telephone consultant (permanently appointed). It is maintained within an eight-hour work day, five days a week. Clients receive information on the telephone number and organization's activity mainly from the distributed by the volunteers' stickers and brochures, as well as from TV or radio programmes, press publications, former clients, telephone information, etc.

The main lines of work are: telephone crisis intervention and referring to a consultant, quick contact with police, hospital, social services or the Department for Child Protection. For the cases when there is no direct danger to the victim's life, the volunteers (the telephone consultant) offer a "Safety Plan" to be discussed as prevention against violence.

The telephone interview continues from 5 to 20 minutes and aims at emotional control of the client, outlining the violent situation, examination of the supporting circle of people (family,

parents, friends, colleagues, etc.) and orientation in her/his expectations. According to the client's needs at the closing stage of the interview s/he is referred to a consultant (psychologist or psychiatrist), a day and time of the consultation are appointed.

### **The following objectives are fulfilled by this type of service:**

- Giving emotional support
- Providing an opportunity for the client to share, observing the principle of confidentiality
- Outlining an action plan for highly dangerous situations
- Providing information on the different ways in which the organization may help in the particular case
- Providing information on the rights and the possibilities of defence by other institutions
- Motivating the client to meet a consultant

### ***Crisis intervention***

Intervention of crisis situations is performed on the telephone or in the reception room of the organization by a consultant - psychiatrist or psychologist. The basic aims of this activity are:

- Emotional support
- Ventilation of negative emotions
- Mobilization of the client's resources for control over the critical situation
- Minimizing the risk of heavy incidents – recurrence of violence or suicidal attempts
- Making an action plan for the specific situation

### ***Individual and family psychological consultations***

Individual and family psychological consultations are conducted in the reception room of the organization by part-time specialists – psychologists and psychiatrists. In an atmosphere of security and confidence the clients share their experiences and receive professional help. In the consultative process are included clients who have stated a specific problem related to the violent situation in which they are involved. The continuation of sessions is: 5 sessions for individual and 12 sessions for family consultations.

### **Aims of individual psychological consultations:**

- To stimulate sharing of experience
- To build skills for independent decision-making
- To develop alternative behaviouristic strategies for coping with conflicts
- To mobilize the client's own resources for managing in highly dangerous situations

## **Aims of family psychological consultations:**

- To assist the building of bilateral communicative relationship between partners
- To build skills for tolerant attitude towards the differences of the other person
- To build skills for unforced solving of conflicts
- To build skills for coping with conflicts between parents and children
- To mobilize the client's own resources for managing with the family situation

## ***Long-term psychotherapy***

Long-term therapy is applied in cases in which there are indications for psychotherapeutic intervention. The number of sessions is determined by the therapist and the client concerned.

Reintegration and returning to normal and independent life are unthinkable without overcoming the destructive emotions. Even after violence is stopped there still exists the danger of another involvement in a violent relationship which necessitates long-term therapeutic intervention, the main aims of which are:

- To process experiences connected to violence
- Study and integration of former traumatic experience
- Personal progress
- To build skills for independent functioning

## ***Psychiatric consultations***

This service is orientated to work with clients in whose families there are problems such as: chronic alcoholism, social disadaptation, addiction to psychoactive substances or gambling, heavy psychic disorder of a family member. Psychiatric consultations are conducted by a part-time specialist - psychiatrist. Maximum number of sessions is 5.

## **The main aims of psychiatric consultations are:**

- To estimate the client's psychic state
- To prescribe treatment with medicines if needed
- To develop strategies for coping with conflict situations under the threat of family violence, provoked by a family member with a mental disease
- To clarify the procedures for treatment and getting into a psychiatric medical institution
- To execute legal-psychiatric certifications of children victims or witnesses of domestic violence

## ***Groups for self-assistance***

Organizing groups for self-assistance is performed by psychologists and psychiatrists involved in the implementation of a project. The groups are hosted by women who have met with violence in their own personal experience, who have overcome the crisis moment in their lives and have defended their own independence and dignity. For their role as leaders of groups they are trained within a three-day training session (25 hours in total) conducted by specialists with the relevant qualification.

The group for self-assistance is an entity in which women share their identical experience in an atmosphere of calmness, security and support.

### **The main aims of the groups for self-assistance are:**

- To develop skills for empathy and understanding
- To share experiences and give mutual support
- Ventilation of negative emotions
- Development of skills for planning one's future life

## ***Legal consultations and defence***

Legal consultations are preceded by psychological or psychiatric consultation which tests the client's motivation for taking any legal steps. Legal procedures and subsequent events are clarified in the process of legal consultations. Women and children, victims of violence in their families, may be included in the programme "Free legal defence of victims of violence".

### **The main aims of the legal services are:**

- Civil-and-criminal-legal defence of women and children, victims of violence
- To guard the client's legal interests
- Legal assistance in the defence of children, victims or witnesses of domestic violence, in accordance to the Law for Child Protection
- Representation and defence during preliminary legal procedures
- Representation and defence during executive proceedings started after a court order
- To reach an out-of-court agreement between the parties

### **These aims are achieved by means of the following activities:**

- Holding consultations on the Criminal Procedure Code, the Civil Procedure Code, the Family Code, etc.
- Executions of complaints, pleas with the court, prosecutor's office

- Execution of claims for initiating legal proceedings for divorce, support money, custody
- Reference to police and prosecution
- Initiation of criminal proceedings of private nature
- Study and information on all cases up to that moment (if any)

## ***Social work***

Social work is a main aspect of the activities of centres that provide help to families in risk association. Having in mind the specific needs of clients “SOS-Families in Risk Association” offer the following services:

- Representation before the Services for Social Support
- Assistance in finding a job
- Reference to and co-operation with the Department for Child Protection
- Establishing contact with police
- Representation before local authorities
- Reference to and accompanying to medical institutions
- Assistance for accommodation in asylums
- Representation before other non-government organizations and state institutions (schools, institutions for temporary accommodation, medical institutions, etc.)

### **By these social services it is aimed to achieve:**

- Effective and quick social re-integration of victims of domestic violence
- Satisfaction of basic social needs
- Overcoming administrative obstacles in the system of social help
- Engagement of all institutions related to the sphere
- Complex assistance of victims of domestic violence in order to ease their social adaptation

## ***Prevention of domestic violence***

“SOS-Families in Risk Association” develops programmes for prevention of domestic violence among students of different age. Discussions are held at schools with different status by specialists with different professional qualification. In the implementation of preventive programmes are included mainly trained volunteers (students of psychology, social work and law), consultants of the organization, as well as representatives of other institutions (police officers, forensic physicians), sociologists, etc. The number of meetings with students is from 1 to 5. Parents of little children are informed in advance about future meetings and their purpose. The activities on the programme are in accordance to the requirement of non-interference in family lives and unviolation of children’s rights, feelings and dignity.

Principle methods used in the work with children are: brainstorming, discussion, talk, discussion on different cases, role play, and presentation. The youngest learn to differentiate between high risks situations using pictures, by colouring books; the teenagers are offered films and video clips.

### **The main aims of the preventive programmes are the following:**

- People to be better informed on the nature and mechanisms of aggressive behaviour
- To establish atmosphere and attitude which facilitate sharing problems
- To develop skills for identification and adequate reaction in risk situations
- To inform about the rights and possible ways for getting help in cases of experienced violence
- To establish a tolerant attitude to the opposite sex and to develop sensitivity to aspects of communication between sexes.

In order to achieve one of the basic aims of the organization – to make the society sensitive to problems of domestic violence and to establish an adequate social attitude, media campaigns are held; the following are distributed: brochures, stickers and posters with slogans directed to victims and violators, as well as to all members of the society.

## **Results**

During the four-year practice of the organization 1200 women and children, victims of domestic violence, asked for help. Two thirds of them seek specialized help by the consultants. Telephone calls by men are not absolutely absent, but are an exception. Most often they are connected with cases of emotional harassment by the wife or misunderstanding in their partner relationship.

280 signals for domestic violence were registered only in 2001. 82 individual and 14 family consultations were held. Two thirds of the clients made an independent decision at the end of the consultative process. Alas not a small part of them return to the violent relationship or get involved in a similar relationship with another partner. However, the client's choice is respected as her own personal choice, but she has the opportunity to contact the organization again. Clients who have stopped the violent influence take part in groups for self-assistance or in a long-term psychotherapy if they are motivated. In almost half of the women who are no more subject to risk there are indications for a deep psychotherapeutic process.

Psychiatric consultations are held with 83 clients of the organization. Single meetings are often followed by a consultation with a jurist; the rest of the meetings continued in several consecutive sessions. Psychiatrists executed a number of legal-psychiatric reports of children witnesses of domestic violence or victims of their parent's aggression. Assistance was provided for admitting into medical institutions of several violators and victims, suffering from heavy mental disorders.

Social work contributed to the successful social rehabilitation of women and children who have overcome the critical moment of their lives. For those who came back to their old way of life this

service was helpful because finding a job and the support of social services is the first step to the process of development of their independence.

One of every three clients received legal assistance. Information on the client's rights and legal proceedings give them a bigger chance to make the right choice according to their needs and desires. Ten legal proceedings (mainly criminal and divorce) were initiated only during the previous year, 5 of them have already been completed.

As a result of the prevention of violence may be pointed: receiving more information; presence of the topic in the public space; increased sensitivity to the phenomenon and report of its real parameters for certain communities.

## **Evaluation of offered services**

The results of the offered services cannot be measured in numbers because feed-back is possible only at the client's desire. For that purpose there is a book for impressions, wishes and recommendation in the reception room. I will allow myself to quote some of them.

*"Life is too hard for you to be closed in yourself. This is the place where you can share your problems, because a shared pain is half a pain." Y.G.*

*"It is good to know that there is someone who cares for you in this world full of suffering and cruelty." M.D.*

*"Thank you that you were here in this difficult moment of my life; that you helped me to get up and go ahead!" R.Zh.*

As strong aspects of the organization's work may be considered: flexibility when providing complex help to clients, creating the feeling of security and protection in them.

Free and professional servicing makes it possible to provide help for everyone in spite of their social, economical or educational status.

The offered legal services provide defence of women and children and contribute to the elimination of discriminative attitude towards women.

The work in a network with other organizations and state institutions contributes to the establishment of a mechanism for support and defence of women and children, victims of domestic violence.

A positive result of the four-year work of the organization is that the problem was made known and an open public discussion on the matter was provoked. As a result of the work for change of attitude, a lot of young girls realising the seriousness of the problem in their family or relationship referred to the organization.

The absence of adequate legislation and the difficulties in the co-operation with state institutions may be pointed out as basic weak points.

The offered services are limited in time because their implementation is provided for within the frame of the current project which most often lasts for one year.

Lack of additional services, for example providing shelter, impedes the work or makes the implementation of the rest of the services difficult or even impossible.

To complete the circle of offered services are also necessary possibilities for out-of-court solving of conflicts, related to children of parents who have put an end to the violent relationship by separation or divorce