

Social Welfare and Support to Domestic Violence Victims during the Pandemic - Management Challenges

ljubo.lepir@fpn.unibl.org

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the gender-based violence and domestic violence in two ways ...

First,

due to the overall unpreparedness to the new circumstances, shock, fear for your own life, economic and material insecurity, uncertainty over the future, the pandemic has introduced new interpersonal tensions into personal lives and family relations, which increases the risks of intra-family conflicts with the potential to escalate into violence

Second,

the devastating effects of the pandemic on the structure of society have brought about the risk of sustainability of the existing emergency response mechanisms, which may result in reduced quality of services concerning the protection and support for victims of domestic violence

- The analysis that was done on the example of Republic of Srpska dealt with the institutional responses to domestic violence
- The research was conducted on several local communities that are included in the system of protection and support for victims of domestic violence
- The actions of protection and support entities were analyzed: social work centers, police, mental health centers and prosecutor's offices

The analysis was based on two research questions:

- How did the system of emergency interventions work in the conditions of the pandemic?
- Did the extraordinary measures, used to fight the spread of the infection affect the achieved quality of institutional protection and support for victims of domestic violence?

Elements of protection and support system management were analyzed:

- 1. organization** of work of the relevant services;
- 2. planning** of activities, material and human resources;
- 3. application of standard procedures** in the work with beneficiaries;
- 4. monitoring and reporting**
- 5. implementation of multisector cooperation** in case processing;

1. Organization

- The analysis done on the organization of work of the institutions providing protection and support has shown that all organizational changes were only focused on the adjustment of the hygienic and epidemiological measures, without any adjustment to the emerging needs caused by a possible increased incidence of domestic violence.
- Not a single institution which provides protection and support has introduced any organizational changes related to the work on cases of gender-based violence and domestic violence.
- All organizational changes have been introduced in accordance with the needs to adapt the general functioning of relevant units in the circumstances in which human health and lives are directly endangered.

2. Planning

- After the onset of the pandemic, all planning activities in the area of protection and support for victims of domestic violence have come to a standstill
- No activities which resulted from previous plans in this area were implemented
- Also, no new services are planned, nor are there planned increased funds for the protection and support for victims of domestic violence

3. Application of standards in interventions

In an emergency, it is very difficult to ensure standardised action.

The specifics that come with an emergency often lead to departure from standard procedures

The problem arises when these changes occur as a result of a mismatch between institutions, which jeopardizes the functionality and efficiency of the system. In which case users feel the consequences

This is exactly what happened in Republic of Srpska

Changes in the centers for social work occurred in all phases of the implementation of the interventions:

- preventive activities were not carried out, especially in the first months of the pandemic;
- the detection of cases of violence was reduced only to direct reports by victims or family members, and the initiation of procedures based on reports ex officio was avoided;
- no case management techniques were applied in the work with beneficiaries;
- no safety risk assessment was conducted;
- urgent interventions were reduced to a very small number;
- interventions were often postponed;
- the practice of the inclusion of the victims into the planning and selection of measures was abandoned;
- the interventions were not monitored;
- there were no secondary field visits and there was no monitoring of families at risk.

The greatest challenge in the work of social welfare centers during the pandemic was related to ensuring contact between divorced parents and their children

- The health and epidemiological measures strictly prohibited any contact, including contact between a child and the parent with whom they do not live.
- If the relationships between former spouses were conflicted, such a situation was used as an argument of additional pressure of 'one side on the other'.
- The specialists at social welfare centers addressed such situations using the 'self-help' model, because they simply did not have any instructions on what to do or how to behave.
- The appeals to relevant institutions were not successful, because these provided controversial information, which could not resolve the specific dilemmas faced by the specialists at social welfare centres

4. Data collection, monitoring and reporting

- The results of the conducted research showed that the area of monitoring and evaluation was neglected
- No special mechanisms have been created to collect data on the incidence and specifics of domestic violence during the pandemic.
- There were no special reports of institutions on this topic.
- As a result of such a situation, it was impossible to obtain real data and assess trends in the field of domestic violence

5. Multisector cooperation

- Multisectoral cooperation in the system of protection and support for victims of domestic violence during the pandemic was reduced to the level of formal-administrative communication.
- All cooperation was limited to the exchange of official letters and official telephone conversations.
- The communication with relevant institutions and crisis centres has been reduced to unilateral provision of instructions or orders.
- Letters and general answers were received to the questions sent to the competent institutions, from which it was often not clear what their goal was.

- The respondents found the reasons for inefficient multi-sector cooperation during the pandemic in this area to be issues of prioritization.
- The majority of respondents agree with the position that *"Extraordinary situations require the establishment of new mechanisms of multisectoral cooperation in the area of protection and support for victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence"*

Table 3: Level of agreement with the opinion

	frequency	%
I completely agree	7	17.1
I partly agree	22	53.7
I do not know, I do not have an opinion	8	19.5
I disagree	3	7.3
I completely disagree	1	2.4
Total	41	100.0

Conclusion

- As in other areas and in the Republic of Srpska, public systems that provide protection measures and support services to citizens were taken aback.
- Their actions were completely unexpected and guided exclusively with the epidemiological measures prescribed by medical institutions, and not adjusted to the specific needs of victims of domestic violence.
- The obtained findings show that the systems of social action were not at all prepared for functioning in extraordinary circumstances.
- It was objectively and justified to expect that there would be some disagreement in such a situation, but it could not be assumed that the interest of the user would be set aside.