

Fempower

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IS THE RIGHT TO A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE A LUXURY?

Sonja Plessl, WAVE, Austria

"You have already Cadillac-Services", was the answer a women's shelter in a Western European country got after having requested more money and stable financing. The fact that the women's shelter provides overnight care was put forward as an argument that its situation is a privileged one.

That's right, the situation could be worse... and it is worse, for example in Croatia where all autonomous women's shelters, except for one in Istria, are on the point of closing due to a lack of financing.

We are told, by often-cited economists in the media that the financial and economic crisis is already over. However, based on the job market outlook and on cutbacks to social services, this is definitely not true.

The report Spend Now, Save Later by Scottish Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Scotland and Scottish Women's Budget Group says cuts to budgets for women's groups put already vulnerable women further at risk, violence against women will increase. International research on the dual impact of welfare reform and public spending cuts on services highlights compounding disadvantages affecting women.

It seems that the citizen's right to be protected from violence is seen by many politicians as a luxury, when it comes to female citizens...



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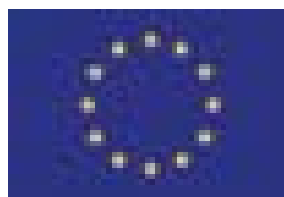
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IS THE RIGHT TO A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE A LUXURY?

Sonja Plessl, WAVE, Austria

Violence against women is an enormous financial burden. However, "it is not the victims or the services to victims which cause the costs. Violence causes the costs", underlines the report Spend Now, Save Later.

With this issue, FEMPOWER presents the second part of its focus on women's shelters (see FEMPOWER 2/2010), highlighting this time the situation in Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Latvia and Sweden. While the latter has good news – Kungsbacka Women's Shelter was able to be saved after several months of struggle – Frauenhaus Wedel in Germany is still at risk of being closed down. A donation campaign was started in March 2011.

Women Against Violence urges all governments to keep in mind that the economic crisis has definitely not been caused by women's shelters – and to assume the State's responsibility to protect women from violence, as it is laid down, among others, in the newly adopted Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

The Convention is a success for women's activists across Europe who have been active in combating violence against women for many years - it is the first legally binding European human rights instrument for the prevention, investigation and prosecution of violence against women. The Council of Europe Convention was opened for signature in Istanbul on 11 May 2011 and signed by - so far - thirteen countries: Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. The Convention was prepared by the Ad Hoc Committee on Preventing and Combating Violence against women and Domestic Violence (CAHVIO) gathering first in 2009 and comprising representatives of the member states and – as observers - NGOs and experts. WAVE submitted comments on the text three times and led, together with other NGOs, a strong campaign for the Convention. NGOs were worried that prior to the adoption of the Convention by the Committee of Ministers, some countries would want to reopen the discussion including the UK denying violence against women as a human rights issue, or Russia excluding the mention of same-sex couples.

The Council of Europe Convention defines and criminalises various forms of violence against women and foresees the establishment of an international group of independent experts to monitor its implementation on the national level. Governments that ratify the treaty will have to take immediate action to criminalise and prosecute a number of acts that all too often go unpunished, including rape, domestic violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment. Excuses on the grounds of culture, custom, religion or so-called "honour" can no longer be used. Governments shall provide for a range of services that are crucial



Sonja Plessl

on behalf of the WAVE TEAM.

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for victims and their children, like shelters, around-the-clock helplines, medical and legal counselling.

Article 22 to 25 lay down that Parties shall provide for, in an adequate geographical distribution, immediate short- and long-term specialist support services, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers, state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helplines free of charge, easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres (including medical and forensic examination) in sufficient numbers and age-appropriate psychosocial counselling for child witnesses. The Convention recognises that children, including as witnesses, are victims of domestic violence.

Hilary Fisher, WAVE's delegate for CAHVIO, underlines: "This convention will help to address the failings of states whose legislation is inadequate or not enforced and where violence against women has in the past been treated with impunity. It will strengthen the protection and support for women in states that have ratified the convention for one of the most severe violations of human rights in Europe today. "

To become a law the Convention requires 10 countries to sign it and then ratify it. The Convention is still controversial. Some countries do not want to ratify it including Bulgaria and Russia, and lobbying from religious organisations disagreeing with the definition of "gender" as "socially constructed roles for women and men" can be expected.

The campaign for the Convention is not over: The Convention's effectiveness depends of member states signing and ratifying it as well as of sufficient resources to ensure the monitoring mechanism is effective. NGOs need to mobilise their members to put pressure on all countries to ratify it.

WAVE calls on every government in Europe to show its commitment towards the elimination of violence against women by rapidly signing, ratifying and implementing this key Convention for millions of women.

Links:

Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/HTML/DomesticViolence.htm>

Infos on the Convention, CAHVIO and WAVE's comments on the draft Convention:

<http://www.wave-network.org/start.asp?ID=23079>



FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE AUTONOMOUS WOMEN'S SHELTER IN WEDEL

Astrid Otto, Germany

In September 2010, the press revealed the federal state government's decision to shut down the autonomous women's shelter in Wedel that had been founded 25 years ago. From 2012 on, the shelter shall not receive any financial means even though the consequences of closing the shelter would have been obvious – the shelter offering 15 beds provides every year between 80 and 100 women and their children with support and protection.

40,000 women and children seek refuge in women's shelters in Germany

Altogether, approximately 40,000 women and children seek refuge in one of the women's shelters in Germany. Apart from these shelters, there are no other institutions in the social network that would offer "low-threshold" protection to women and children in urgent crisis situations.

According to a study by the BMFSJ¹ published in 2004, one out of four women in Germany are victims of domestic violence. This statistic indicates that domestic violence does not only concern singular individuals. On the contrary, violence against women is a far reaching societal problem that cannot be solved solely by the individuals and supporting institutions concerned. It is rather the state's and society's responsibility to prevent and prohibit violence against women, and to provide protection and support for the victims.

The federal state Schleswig-Holstein intends to cease all funding

The financing of women's shelters in Germany varies strongly in the different federal states. Schleswig-Holstein (SH), the northernmost federal state, initiated an institutional funding initiative (as opposed to funding models geared towards individual cases) in 1996. Thus, the shelters had planning reliability and could accommodate women independent of the individual case, quickly and without bureaucratic hurdles.

In the midst of austerity measures, the federal state government of SH now intends to cease all funding for the shelter in Wedel and the women's shelter held by the AWO in Lübeck (apart from austerity measures affecting other institutions that support women). This would imply the reduction of 48 sleeping units within women's shelters. Yet even today, SH is already not meeting the standard recommended by the European Council, which suggests one space in a women's shelter per 7,500 inhabitants since there are only 16 women's shelters, varying in size, with 344 units altogether.

The autonomous women's shelter in Wedel

The autonomous women's shelter in Wedel was founded by the initiative of the women's center belonging to the supporting non-profit-association „Frauen helfen Frauen e.V.“ Wedel² in 1986. For 25 years women and their children have been accommodated in this building with 15 available beds. Since its inception, high professionalism has emerged from self-organized and partly voluntary commitment through conceptual improvements.

Long-lasting domestic violence leaves deep traumatic effects that cannot be solved by short-term counseling. Women and children that have been affected by domestic violence need support within a time frame that meets their individual needs. A women's shelter provides protection from further violence and a temporary residence in which a professional staff can offer integral counseling and support to the women and children. They are accompanied in the development of new perspectives and the creation of a life free of violence.

The women's shelter in Wedel closely co-operates with other social institutions and has created a sustainable network for women and children affected by violence in Wedel. Furthermore, the shelter's staff offers external counseling to women in the surrounding region. They accomplish essential prevention work against violence through public relations and training for other social institutions and co-operating partners.

The argumentation for the cessation of funding

The declared reason for the cessation of the funding for the shelter in Wedel is the percentage of accommodated women coming from Hamburg and other federal states for whom SH refuses to continue financing. This argumentation entirely negates and ignores the circumstances of women and children affected by violence, since they are often only safe in a shelter outside their former place of residence. Moreover, it is contrary to the self-concept of women's shelters working in a supra-regional network, whose central purpose is to provide protection and refuge, independent of the place of origin.

The city of Wedel is located at the border to Hamburg – a different federal state and major city. Thus, it is obvious that women from other federal states are equally accommodated in the shelter and that the percentage of these women is naturally higher than in comparable shelters in other regions.

Moreover, the number of women and children affected by violence has not decreased. On average, 80% of the shelter's capacities are used throughout the year, taking into account that an average occupancy of 100% is impossible and definitely not desirable at a crisis center.

¹ Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Ed.), 2004: Living Conditions, Security and Health of Women in Germany.

Life-threatening political decision

The reduction of sleeping units in women's shelters to a number that goes well below the actual requirements, the disruption of structures that have taken decades to grow and the professional experience and voluntary commitment is charged to the expense of women and children seeking refuge – this political decision may be life-threatening to some, as even now there is little room left in the existing shelters.

At minimum, the federal states should be obligated to cooperatively undertake responsibility for the maintenance of the established help-systems on behalf of the women and children concerned. They must offer the resources to guarantee access to the shelter free-of-charge, regardless of the individual case and without great bureaucratic barriers in order to provide them with the best possible professional support in a shelter of the woman's choice within and beyond federal borders. The conference of the equal opportunities ministers convening in SH in June 2011 will hopefully provide an opportunity to discuss these issues.

Strong solidarity by citizens and institutions

Since the publication of the plans for the austerity measures in September 2010, there have been various efforts to avert the closure of shelters and other saving measures affecting women and their supporting institutions. In the course of the past months numerous talks with politicians were carried out and organizations aimed to prevent violence towards women published a vast number of statements and resolutions in order to educate the public and politicians about the issues at hand.

The strong solidarity demonstrated by citizens and institutions in Wedel and beyond was manifested in more than 5,300 signatures collected for the conservation of the shelter that were delivered to the minister in November 2010. Yet all these efforts could not avert the federal government's decision.

Large-scale fundraising campaign launched in March 2011

The supporting association "Frauen helfen Frauen e.V." has decided to carry on the shelter despite the termination of the state funding. Thus, a large-scale fundraising campaign was launched in March 2011. The association consists of more than 60 member-women who make these actions possible through their strong voluntary commitment and support.

The goal is to provide a bridge financing for 2012 by means of donations and third-party funding for the shelter and to reinstate the institutional financing from the

state SH by 2013 through continued talks and negotiations with politicians, particularly after the federal elections in May 2012.

The solidarity for the Autonomous Women's Shelter in Wedel is large – until now, several individuals, associations, labor unions, churches and economic institutions have made donations.

The municipality of Wedel, which has been especially supporting the children in the shelter for many years on a voluntary basis, also strongly supports the fundraising campaign.

Information on the fundraising campaign and the Autonomous Women's Shelter in Wedel:

<http://www.frauenhaus-wedel.de>

Donations to the women's shelter:

Account holder: Förderverein Frauenhaus Wedel e.V.

Donation account: 95303

Bank code number: 22151730

Bank: Stadtparkasse Wedel

IBAN: DE97 2215 1730 0000 0953 03

Astrid Otto

Astrid Otto, born in 1971, is a certified social pedagogue and psychotrauma-adviser working since eight years in the Autonomous Womens Shelter in Wedel.



CALL FOR A EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN

Līga Liepina, Latvia

Social repercussions of the economic crisis: numbers of women seeking help doubled

Violence in the family, lack of housing, lack of regular income and unemployment are the major problems for women with children in Latvia. Although lack of housing and lack of income are often the initial reasons why women seek help from crisis centres, it is later discovered that 90 percent of them have suffered from violence in the family.

The social impact of the economic crisis has made the situation even more severe. Women are ejected from their homes or are forced to leave to protect their health and life and that of their children. Violence in the family has increased and the help of crisis centres is more often becoming necessary. The number of women seeking help at crisis centres has doubled since autumn 2009. In September 2010, all crisis centres in Riga were full and victims of violence had to wait to receive help. Victims of violence who do not get support after having dared to leave their oppressor, find themselves in a particular threatening situation and see their belief in the possibility of a positive change in their and their children's lives destroyed.

Another obstacle for victims of violence is the restriction that women can only turn to centres in the city or region of their declared dwelling place, leaving women who are staying in another city without help. This restriction puts victims at higher risks as, due to safety reasons in many cases, it would often be most advisable to leave the usual environment.

Today there is only one centre in Riga financed by the Riga City Municipality, and two NGO crisis centres whose services are paid for by the city. In the rest of Latvia 12 crisis centres offer help and support to persons from the respective regions. Each of the centres has their own specialisation, number of places and volume of services.

Mara's centre

One of the crisis centres in Riga is Mara's centre. It was established by 'Latvijas Samariešu apvienība' (Latvian association of Samaritans) and was opened in July 2006 thanks to donors from Latvia, USA, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and Great Britain, along with financial support of the Riga City Municipality. The aim of this centre is to provide children and women with children in crisis with short-term psychological and social help. Clients can stay at Mara's centre for up to six months. In case of need, this period can be prolonged. Mara's centre is the biggest crisis centre in Latvia with places for 45 persons. Until autumn 2009, there were only 15 places for women with children. Today 30 places for women with children are provided. At the moment, services for 40 persons are financed by the Welfare Department of the Riga City Municipality.

Mara's centre provides:

1. basic resources for living – shelter, food, clothing
2. medical care by a nurse
3. consultations by specialists
 - social workers
 - psychologists
 - social pedagogues
 - social rehabilitation specialists

Day-to-day activities include:

- creative and educational classes
- support groups
- cultural events

No help for women without children

Women victims of violence who are childless, pregnant or retired face the most difficult situation in Latvia. There are no possibilities for them to receive help from any of the crisis centres as the centres have been established for women with children. The existent bureaucratic system does not provide for help for victims of violence without children. The support of childless victims is not financed, leaving the centres with no means at their disposal to provide services to them. At Mara's centre, however, women can seek help by submitting an application, this is not the case at other centres. There, women can only get support after having been forwarded by Social Services thereby confirming the need of the person concerned and the willingness to cover the costs.

No "follow-up principle"

In Latvian society, knowledge about the causes and consequences of domestic violence is still not widespread and there is a lack of understanding that, for example, the trauma of prolonged violence cannot be overcome within three to six months. Crisis centres provide crisis intervention, support and education for survivors of violence. Women are empowered, their self-confidence and knowledge about their rights is enhanced, but they still need further support after leaving the crisis centre. To be more precise – their rehabilitation has only started. The period of time in the crisis centres is too short to change habitual models of behaviour and to become self-reliant etc. In Latvia, Social Services should provide continued support, but this is often an administrative support. Usually women get social allowances and safe physical environment but their psycho-emotional rehabilitation does not continue. It would be essential to integrate the „follow-up principle”, continued support and consultations by specialists, who have already worked with the respective women and gained their trust. Until now, the commenced work of the crisis centres is left unfinished and sustainability of achieved changes is not assured.

No “half-way homes”

Specialists at Mara’s centre believe that “half-way homes” are both necessary and effective to sustain positive changes and facilitate women’s integration in society. The half-way homes would allow for two to three women to live together in transitional apartments after having left the crisis centre and start a „physically” independent living while at the same time being supported by the centre, visited by social workers, and having the possibility of consultations by specialists at the centre. This transitional period between the centre and independent living could also shorten the stay at the centre by helping women to become fully self-reliant. As of now “half-way homes” do not exist in Latvia.

Project for continued support

In April 2010, Mara’s centre, with the support of the Soros Foundation - Latvia and financing from the Open Society Foundations Emergency Fund, started a project to facilitate the integration of women in crisis into society. Women got the opportunity of receiving continued consultations with their specialists (psychologists, social workers and other professionals) and having of the possibility to attend support groups and creative classes for one year. Such projects focusing on long-term goals would be necessary for most of the clients of crisis centres, as many of them frequently return to crisis centres or become exposed again in unfavorable situations.

Call for a European campaign

Latvian legislation is still lacking a definition of ‘violence in the family’. This reflects a general lack of understanding of the causes and consequences of violence within Latvian society, including the government, as well as of the work done by crisis centres. Nongovernmental organisations such as crisis centres should be seen as a strong team empowering wom-

en to reintegrate into society and the labour market, thus facilitating the transition of victims of violence from people in need into taxpayers. Survivors of violence cannot overcome the trauma on their own, the support and knowledge of professional specialists is vital. Wide scale discussions and educational campaigns at all levels are essential.

Probably, in order to facilitate the dissemination of violence-related knowledge among government members of Latvia it would be necessary to involve members of the European Parliament and to organise a united campaign in all European countries. Within the framework of this campaign, a common website could be created providing knowledge and support available in each European country.

Liga Liepina

Liga Liepina is the director of the Maras Centre, a crisis center for children and women with children, and the director of the Soros Foundation-supported project to help women in crisis integrate into society. She is also a practicing psychologist and sand play therapist. Liepina worked previously as a psychologist for the Latvian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs telephone crisis line, and was a supervisor for the crisis line “Skalbes.” She holds a Master’s degree in clinical psychology from the University of Latvia, with additional training sand play therapy, and is currently studying Psycho-Organic Analysis.



HOW WE SAVED KUNGSBACKA WOMEN’S SHELTER FROM CLOSING DOWN

Maria Corneliusson, Sweden

For many years Kungsbacka Women’s Shelter has had financial problems due to the fact that local politicians have not understood that it was their responsibility to support the work that must be carried out as a consequence of domestic violence.

Although Kungsbacka’s leading politicians have spoken about the importance of this problem, they have provided no concrete solution.

Kungsbacka on the Westcoast of Sweden, with 75,000 inhabitants, is a conservatively ruled community that stands for freedom of choice, except when it comes to supporting the voluntary Women’s Shelter. But where is freedom if one is not protected from violence? I, as many other female politicians, have for many years been engaged with fighting for our shelter’s survival in Kungsbacka. Unfortunately, we have not had any success when it comes to receiving economic support. The most

remarkable thing is that violence in close relationships is seen as a women's political issue.

In the autumn of 2008, the situation became so severe that those of us, who ran the Women's Shelter, could not continue with such a large deficit. Previously, we had a loosely organized network for women politicians and organizations in Kungsbacka, which called for a meeting in November 2008. At this meeting, it was made clear to me that a person with strong marketing background was needed. As I am a politician for a local party and have experience as an entrepreneur and have a large network within our community, I assumed the leading position and got other female politicians to join. We decided to put everything on one card; it was either win or lose.

We continued with a meeting at the beginning of December and then decided that the roll-call to the budget team should be signed by two female politicians from each party. We decided to write an open letter to the Chairman of the Council and also a letter to Social Services, where we urged them to allocate more money to our shelter in the budget for 2010. We were determined to keep pressure throughout the budgeting- process.

While reaching out to our large network, I had come into contact with business people who work with event planning and they wanted to plan a fund raising event for the benefit of the Women's Shelter. I presented this idea at the next meeting with the network and all were keen on the idea. We decided that a day around the International Women's Day would be ideal.

It was now time to call the Press. Previously, I had very good working relations with the different media in Kungsbacka and surrounding districts. The local press has always been generous when it came to publishing articles about the shelter and our problems. I did know, however, that it was not enough to just send out a press release, it would be drowned in all the other materials going out, so it was back to making personal phone calls. I called every journalist I knew of and asked them kindly to help us spread the word. The difference this time, from the previous times, was that all the political parties signed on, and that we had our open letter to the Chairman and the Committee along with the fund-raising show at a theatre.

When the time arrived for signing our open letter, early on a cold winter morning in December, all the media were present, Local Radio, Television, local and regional press. I was well prepared with copies for everyone and of course with morning coffee. We promised to provide the media with information on which artists would perform at our charity show and to keep them informed on how our letter was being received and how the budget work was proceeding.

Not only did the published articles send shock-waves to the established politicians, they had a similar effect on the

readers who started writing to the press and to the Mayor's office.

Together with an entrepreneur and a restaurant-manager, I started to organize the charity show. We set the date for 12th of March 2009. There had already been a big response from local artists, so there was no problem with finding participants. We submitted new articles to the press at the beginning of February with the names of the artists and we had additional articles published each week, either about the shelter, the show or the budget, to keep everyone focused on the problem.

The Fund-raising Show was a great success and an enormous benefit for the Women's Shelter. It was a fantastic evening and the show resulted in a profit of nearly 80,000 SEK. We also received many donations from businesses and private individuals and received collections from churches, so the total turned out to be 100,000 SEK for the six months of work. This meant that the economy for 2009 was ok, even if it was tight.

At the end of April, we were informed that the budget committee had agreed to allocate 200,000 SEK extra for 2010 to the Women's Shelter in Kungsbacka. This budget was agreed to at the meeting on the 13th of May. Fantastic, the extra money is now in the framework of the next budget and it is unlikely that they would remove it due to political repercussions. It is no longer possible for Social Services to refuse the finances we need to continue our work bearing in mind all the press and attention it has received during 2009. We had an election in September 2010 and the issue of Women's Shelter was again on the agenda.

We continue to focus on our work with "violence in close relationships." It has been difficult work but worth the effort, and we are looking forward to the future with confidence. We now know how to operate and influence the political establishment. One should never give up but put forward targets and firmly work towards them. Even if we sometimes despaired, it went well in the end. We did not lose, we won.



Maria Corneliusson

Maria Corneliusson has been active as a boardmember of Women's Shelter in Kungsbacka for three years. She is working as a liaison between the Women's Shelter, the public, politicians and media. Her other job involves working with female entrepreneurs and helping them to develop their businesses. Additionally, she holds seminars on gender issues for organisations and businesses.



INTERCULTURAL INITIATIVE

Rada Grubic, Germany

Fempower

First sponsoring organisation of a three step intercultural women's shelter

The „Interkulturelle Initiative e.V.“ was founded in 2001. It is the first sponsoring organisation of a three step intercultural women's shelter in Germany. The purpose of the “Interkulturelle Initiative e.V.” project is to provide protection, psycho-social support and legal consultation for women and children victims of domestic violence. These offers of support are open to all women in violent situations, but specialise in the very difficult situation of migrant women.

Extremely difficult situation of migrant women and children

The situation of migrant women and children in Germany is usually extremely difficult. Migrant women living in the shelter suffer from structural disadvantages such as uncertain residence status, frequent racial discrimination, lack of a working permit, limited opportunities on the labour market, intercultural differences, social marginalization and insufficient knowledge of language. Bad or no medical and psychological services are exacerbating already existing problems caused by violence. As a result, these women and children require special assistance and care.

Many of them put up with domestic violence because they do not know that there is an alternative. They believe to be in a desperate situation with no chance of change. In order to offer these women support, in 2001, the Berlin senate for economics, work and women began to fund a women's shelter which specialises in assistance for migrant women.

The project

This project consists of three branches - a publicly available consultation center, where women and/or their friends and family can get social as well as legal consultation, a shelter for abused women which is accessible 24/7 for women in need, and a halfway home where women who need long term assistance can live for up to three years. The project offers support and assistance that ranges from short-term crisis intervention and acute protection over middle-term stabilization phase to longer-term, providing aid to develop an independent perspective for a violence-free life. The public consultation center brings women in touch with the other two parts of the project.

More than a half of the occupants of shelters in Germany have been immigrants. Taking into account this fact and the experiences in the daily work, it is evident that the needs of migrant women and their children have to be met in a different manner than has been applied until now. Staff with different cultural backgrounds and intercultural competences are needed as well as profession-

alisation of the staff, organisation of language and integration courses and creation of possibilities for longer residence permit.

Intercultural concept

Our work is based upon an intercultural concept implemented by a team of multilingual female colleagues. They all have different origins and versatile cultural backgrounds and language competences. We aim to offer mother tongue counselling to as many women as possible. We offer or arrange for German courses and help in acquisition of everyday information and skills about living, working and dealing with public authorities and social structures in Berlin.

The social workers in the Intercultural Shelter mainly work on basic problems, in particular legal problems related to residence, while at the same time supporting the women to end violent relationships. During this process they carry on elementary stabilisation work which is necessary for the processing of traumatic and complex psychological experiences. This is an important precondition for moving on in life for women who have been repeatedly and heavily traumatised.

In addition to that, we offer legal consultation and support against everyday racism and discrimination in all different sectors like work, school, housing. The interaction between the shelter and the residents aims to work toward accepting intercultural differences and processing and dealing with the experiences of violence and racism.

A shelter for women is always also a shelter for their children

Besides the support offered to women by social workers, the shelter and halfway homes have their own children's division, because a shelter for women is always also a shelter for their children. The workers offer traumatized children pedagogical care and support in a safe, violence-free zone. They also aid mothers and children in interacting in a new and in difficult situation for both parties, finding their new “role” in the family and getting through the crisis.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK TO STOP DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Inger Stistrup, Denmark

For the last three to four decades women's shelters in Denmark have developed in many different ways. Some are small, some big, but they all have a common goal: to intervene and stop domestic violence by providing information, counselling and helping the family affected by violence.

Domestic violence is gender based, being both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Men practice violence as a way to obtain power and control. Societies have failed to demonstrate that this is not acceptable and against the law.

The National Organisation of Women's shelters in Denmark have had for the last couple of years an ongoing discussion on the topic of what can and should a shelter offer beside protection? Some shelters believe that offering only protection is the right approach, others believe that providing comprehensive psychosocial, medical and judicial counselling in respect to the families' needs is a more holistic approach.

We know that domestic violence can lead to other common emotional traumas such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse. Abuse can trigger suicide attempts, psychotic episodes, homelessness and slow recovery from mental illness. We also know that children who are exposed to domestic violence, especially repeated incidents of violence, are at risk for many difficulties, both immediately and in the future. These include problems with sleeping, eating and other basic functions. Other problems include depression, aggressiveness, anxiety and problems in regulating emotions; difficulties with family and peer relationships. Furthermore, children can experience problems with paying attention, concentration and school performance. Despite this, public authorities still have to recognize the magnitude of the problem. Knowing the scope of the problem, the work of domestic violence experts is all the more important.

The National Organisation of Women's shelters in Denmark focuses also on the 26,000 women and 21,000 children in Denmark annually that are exposed to domestic violence but do not seek help in a shelter. We want to help them but as it is today all we can offer is a hotline. We want more!

In 2009, a new minister for Gender Equality, Lykke Friis was appointed. She has launched a comprehensive, holistic action plan to stop domestic violence.

"Violence in close relationships, also called domestic violence, simply has no place in a society based on equality and personal freedom. We all – men, women, colleagues, friends, neighbours – share a responsibility to break the taboo and prevent partner violence. It is a central message of the new approach to family violence that it is not a private problem and everyone must help to put up a stand and say no to domestic violence."

Minister for Gender Equality Lykke Friis.¹

With the new National Strategy the government will launch 30 specific initiatives to stop domestic violence. The strategy will aim to prevent domestic violence and ensure that fewer women, children and men experience violence in close relationships. With 30 new ambitious initiatives against violence, we might be on the right track to stop domestic violence.



Inger Stistrup

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¹ <http://www.lige.dk/Default.asp?Id=134&AjrNws=1479>



WOMEN'S SHELTERS IN ESTONIA

Eha Reitelmann, Estonia

Fempower

Background

The topic of violence against women emerged in public discussions in Estonia as recently as in the early years of this century, when the results of the first surveys commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs showed that more than 40,000 women are injured yearly as a result of violence committed against them.

Experts working with women experiencing violence (police officers, health workers, social workers, child protection specialists, psychologists) had not received any prior training relating to violence against women, thus women who had suffered from violence often did not receive the necessary professional help. The government had neither a relevant action plan nor a working system for preventing violence and helping the victims. Measures for extending help had to be developed by civil society organisations.

Women's shelters in Estonia

The first shelter opened in Tartu in 2002. Several support groups for abused women started up in different places across the country in 2003. These groups were coordinated on a project basis by the NGO Estonian Centre for Social Programs, which is not active any more.

From 2005 onwards, women's organizations started coordinated efforts in order to set up safe shelters and make professional help available to abused women and children. In 2005, a women's shelter was opened in Tallinn and in 2006 in Jõhvi, in the Ida-Viru county which is a predominantly Russian-speaking region in North-East Estonia. In spring 2006, the two shelters Tartu and Jõhvi founded the umbrella organisation Estonian Women's Shelters' Union.

From the beginning of 2007 until the end of 2010, seven women's shelters were founded: in Tapa (2007), in Viljandi (2008), in Paide (2008), in Valga (2008), in Rapla (2009), in Pärnu (2009) and in Võru (2010). These shelters mainly provide support victims of domestic violence. Today, there are ten shelters and one helpline for abused women in Estonia.

The shelters are, as a rule, relatively small providing accommodation for four to six persons at a time. The biggest shelter is in Tallinn, which can accommodate 14 persons. Most shelters also provide free psychological and legal counselling. Altogether more than 1,500 women contacted the shelters and the helpline in 2009 and more than 1,600 in 2010.

National Action Plan 2010-2014

In the early 2009, the Ministry of Justice began to draft the National Action Plan to reduce violence, which was adopted in spring 2010. The document deals with three areas: crimes committed by and against minors, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

One of the aims of the National Action Plan is reducing and preventing domestic violence including violence against women. Violence is defined as follows: "Domestic violence has a broad meaning, which includes violent acts at home and couple relationships in addition to family relationships. In the case of domestic violence, the abuser and the victim are from one and the same family, violence is usually used between family members or between a family member and a close relative. The most widely spread types of domestic violence are abuse between spouses, cohabitantes, children, grandparents or siblings. If a child witnesses violence between adults at home or any other place, it is also considered to be violence."

Women's shelters faced several challenges during their lobbying efforts to influence legislation and policies. To make our opinions heard, the Estonian Women's Shelters Union partnered with other NGOs interested in participating in the drafting of the National Action Plan, mainly with the Estonian Women's Associations' Roundtable (EWAR). The Ministry of Justice, which carried overall responsibility for coordinating the process, officially involved the representatives of the Union and EWAR in the working group for drafting the National Action Plan. Unfortunately, the representatives of the ministries who were participating in the drafting process - except for the Ministry of Social Affairs and its gender equality experts - lack adequate understanding of the structural nature of violence against women. As a result, they failed to consider the recommendations by the UN as well as the EU and the Council of Europe in the field of combating violence against women. The whole process turned out extremely frustrating for our NGOs.

Some suggestions by the NGOs that were taken into account dealt rather with the sections about specific measures and actions than with the explanatory part of the document. In the implementation strategy, it is envisioned that the funding for women's shelters and for the helpline for abused women comes from the budget of the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, the above mentioned measures come with the clause that they will be implemented only in case sufficient resources are available.

How we ensured the operation of the shelters during the recession

The shelters in Estonia are/were mainly financed by a project which received funding from the Gambling Tax Council, the agency distributing grants using proceeds from gambling. Only the municipal governments of the two bigger cities, Tallinn and Tartu, gave considerable financial support to the shelters.

In January 2009, it became clear that the Gambling Tax Council would provide only one third of the funding needed by the shelters for the year. This posed a clear threat that the system developed in recent years might collapse. The Union wrote a letter to the Minister of Social Affairs,

where we proposed that measures be implemented to guarantee secure government funding for the shelters.

However, this would not have been enough to sustain the shelters' operations. Hence, additional support was sought from the crisis program of the Open Estonia Foundation which was launched in the summer of 2009. For the first time, we decided that the Union would submit a joint project application for 73,000 EUR for the seven shelters. This was also a test to the shelters' aptitude for cooperation and financial management. Our application was approved, enabling the shelters and the helpline to continue full scale operations for five months – from October 2009 until the end of February 2010.

In November 2009, the Ministry of Social Affairs helped us establish cooperation with the national TV program Jõulutunnel (Christmas Tunnel). This traditional Christmas time charity program was used to raise money for women's shelters and the helpline for abused women. The Union was to propose topics and people to be interviewed, including women victims of violence ready to discuss their experiences. The program encouraged public debate about domestic violence and helped gain visibility for the work of the shelters. 94,000 EUR was raised with the help of the program. This sum was divided equally between the nine shelters and the helpline.

In 2009 and in 2010, part of the shelters could not deliver round-the-clock service and immediate help was not available for women approaching the shelter at night. Not all the shelters could also offer victims free counselling. And yet, all shelters managed to continue functioning in the face of the economic crisis and hoped for a brighter future.

Recent developments

We were confident that after the adoption of the National Action Plan, all women's shelters would be guaranteed funding for their operations in 2011, at least in the amount necessary to meet their minimum expenditure requirements. However, we were quite shocked when we learned in mid-September that in the draft state budget for 2011, no sums were allocated clearly for women's shelters and the only option to keep the shelters running was again to start preparing and submitting project proposals to the Gambling Tax Council, and engaging in short-term planning.

The new government that assumed office in April this year intends, within the next three years, to analyse the need for the shelters' services, develop requirements for service quality and proposals for funding. Estonian shelters are currently preparing their development plans and service specifications that would help determine the amounts requested for service delivery. For the Estonian shelters' the current period is a time for reflection and deciding if and in which way they should continue given the uncertainties.

Eha Reitelmann

Eha Reitelmann is the Executive Director of the Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable Foundation. She has been actively involved in women's movement since 1999. Her main fields of interest are violence against women and gender perspective in education. Reitelmann is a founding member and board member of the Estonian Women's Shelters Union (established in 2006) and has helped to launch the activities of seven regional women's shelters in Estonia.

