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Project “ONE STEP CLOSER: Coordinated Community Response to Violence against Women”

(Nr.JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/MULT/9830)

A report on the results of the focus group interviews conducted with victims of violence

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With the financial support of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union the project "ONE STEP CLOSER: Coordinated Community Response to Violence against Women" is being implemented by the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia in cooperation with the “MARTA Centre”, the State Police of Latvia, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Latvia and the Association of Rural Family Doctors of Latvia.

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- ✓ to determine from victims factors that will empower to report and to encourage reporting;
- ✓ to develop, test and implement a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary victim centred institutional cooperation model for cases of violence against women - Coordinated Community Response (CCR);
- ✓ to institutionalise knowledge and skills of professionals working with or likely to come into contact with victims of violence against women by providing relevant tools (risk assessment and protocol) to respond to the cases effectively and taking into consideration the needs of the victim;
- ✓ to ensure replicability of CCR targeted interventions in other communities across Latvia;
- ✓ to raise public awareness on violence against women by involving regional media representatives.

The mission of the “MARTA Centre” is to ensure that the victim's perspective is incorporated in all of the project's activities and that the multi-agency cooperation model is tailored by also taking into account the victim's perspective. To fulfill this aim, the “MARTA Centre” organized 3 focus groups in March and April, 2017, and found out how do women see the current intervention of the responsible institutions in the instance of abuse. Altogether approximately 120 women from different age groups and regions were interviewed, all who have experienced the legal regulations for temporary protection against violence.

In total, 24 Latvian and Russian-speaking women from Riga and other regions in Latvia participated in the focus groups: women who had been in long lasting (even more than 20 years) or not so long violent relationships, whilst married or in unofficial relationships, as well as women who had been stalked or followed. The citations used in this report represent the general attitudes of interviewees. Despite this, the conclusions of this report are not representative to the whole Latvian society.



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All of the women in the focus groups had contacted the police or their relatives had done so, and the participants had had experience with the temporary protection mechanism against violence introduced in 2014. Even though some of the women had violence experience that spanned multiple years, the investigation of the institution responses to these cases only spans over the period since the temporary protection mechanism against violence was introduced, namely, the last three years.

The conversation was divided into three main parts, first- clarifying the police's response to the call, second- the court's response to women who filled out the application for granting temporary protection, as well as the parameters taken by the police to enforce the court sentences. At the same time, women were encouraged to express how they would like for the law enforcement agencies to respond to violence against women cases.

POLICE'S RESPONSE TO CALLS FOR SERVICE

A number of aspects were identified in the discussion about the police's response to violence cases.

It was asked how many women called the police in order to stop violence- did they call, or did they not call, and how often.

All of the women had previously called the police, but they acknowledged that they often tolerated violence, because they did not believe that calling the police would solve anything. Often, after their first time of contacting the police, women decided not to burden the police anymore, which is illustrated by the words of several women:

"When the violence took place, I maybe called the police twice. But given their attitude, I lost the eagerness to do it again..."

"... The police arrived, there is no decision from the courts, technically there is no reason to scold him. And what will happen after the police leaves and the doors close? So, I think very carefully about whether to call or not to call. Will it not make things even worse?"

"He's trying to run me over with a car or threatening me, or something else, but you realize that while you ... call ... the police will come, you won't be able to bear it, you will find a place to hide..."

" And at night, for example, when he starts acting out, I go outside with the little one- outside is the only place where I can go. I actually wait until he goes away, to go back in because I don't just know- I do not know where to drive or what to do- because I do not have a place to go. "

However, in emergency situations when there has been a threat to the mother's or a child's life, the police were called, either by the child, relatives or neighbors if the mother was unable to do so anymore:

"He came for a visit, became hysterical, overcome by jealousy- and hit me so hard that my son jumped up and called the police ... The neighbors brought me back to consciousness. My child was hysterical. Then the police came."



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There have been instances where the women called the police several times: mostly when living together with the abuser, or when being chased, after gaining a court order granting temporary protection. Likewise, there have been instances where the women have had to flee in order to save their lives. They rushed to the police, begging their employees to get dispatched to the household, because of fear for the child's safety, who was left with the abuser. There have been situations in which the abuser had taken away the woman's phone so that she could not get help:

"When my husband starts to act like this... He took away the phone from me. And I could not call. "

The women admitted that their partner usually had been at home. Often the woman considered where she and her child could hide whilst the police arrived. (Sometimes the victims had to wait up to two hours for the police to arrive and there have been cases where the police failed to appear even after a three-time call, which included the victim's address.) There have been cases when the police did not even react to the call. There have been cases when the abuser, knowing that the police has been contacted, left the house and later denied that he had been there.

The conversation revealed where and how the interrogation of the victim and the abuser took place.

Typically, the abuser and the victim were interviewed in the presence of one another. The children likewise were interviewed in the presence of a violent parent. Often the police, in the absence of significant physical injuries, did not even go into the apartment. There was no inspection of the apartment and no inspection of the woman's body. Often, police officers simply asked the victim to go to the station the next day. Often the protocol was not drawn up on the spot.

Women shared their experience in discovering that the police wouldn't even enter the apartment, wouldn't inspect the grounds and their body if there was no visible blood.

"Now he is attacking me with a knife and they (the policemen) tell me - there's no basis for inspection until something has happened."

"... whilst talking to the police inspector, she explains that, as long as, forgive me but, there is no victim..."

" They have no legal right to do anything with the abuser on the basis of suspicion. '

Women were asked if and how the police made sure whether there had been an incident of violence and what did the police officer do that made the victim trust or distrust them.

Women admitted that often police behavior left them even more hesitant to turn for help. The police reconciled the woman and the perpetrator, separation of the two parties wasn't even offered, often they themselves had to ask the police to take the perpetrator away.

"They (the police) said- the more you call the police on him, the more aggressive he will become."



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There were cases where the police asked the women to go to the police station and fill out documents.

"In my case, my ex-husband himself was a policeman, so I also know the ins and outs of the police work, and the key phrase in the call is that the children are at risk- if the phrase is not there, they simply do not go. In my case, well, on a daily basis I have to deal with the administrative process, therefore, my knowledge is greater. In my case, they had to accept my application, because I insisted on it when I myself arrived at the police station because they simply did not come. And then for 2 hours, they tried talking me out of writing the application because the man was a policeman, they tried intimidating me by appealing to the consequences he would face. "

They discovered that there was solidarity between male police officers and male abusers.

"In my case, I called the police, I do not know, 10 times, you wait, the policeman shows him the gun, how to disassemble it and put it back together and he comes home and he is not really afraid of it all. Likewise, ... he has no respect nor is he intimidated by the law."

Often, when the police arrived, the abuser was able to create the impression of a reasonable person, in stark contrast with the psychological distress in which he had put the woman, completely masking who is the primary perpetrator of violence.

"Often, the attitude of the police when faced with the abuser was along the lines of- "don't exaggerate, he is an intelligent person, has a leather briefcase, and is even a doctor"- something like that."

"I felt uncomfortable because you can't really figure out whether it is male solidarity, or the police officer happens to be a colleague, which if he was- I guess I would do the same thing."

There were women whose experiences reveal that they and their children were evicted from their own homes, and not the abuser.

"There was an instance where the police took me and my child, at the time three months old, from my own home, instead of throwing out the man who had no authority over my property. We had to leave. That was not right."

Also, when turning to the police in the event of a threat, women were often not taken seriously:

"I showed the text messages, they (policemen) replied - there is no direct evidence, whatever you have there, he just wants to hit you, that's all."

All women admitted that the police did not treat the abuse directed towards them and their children as a serious problem.



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We asked women what out of the things done or questions asked by the police officers was the most important, and what they thought was good that the police asked or did and what they would have wanted for the police to ask.

Although at the time of the call the police rarely treated the victim with respect, nonetheless later, when women turned to the police precinct, there were women who received the necessary help to prepare an application for the court to grant temporary protection, which resulted in a court ruling siding with the victim.

The following example was also mentioned: every time the woman contacted the police, they arrived and took away the abuser for 2 days. The woman expressed that it was precisely the arrival of the police that saved her life, even though the call was interrupted by allowing only the address to be given during the conversation. Women recognized that they should be questioned separately from the abuser and that the police, without asking for the consent of the victim, should decide on taking away the abuser.

The women were asked whether the police informed them about the types of assistance available and if so, what types did they name.

Women admitted that in all cases, except for one, the police did not exercise the option to separate the abuser from the victim for eight days. In one case, a neighbor, who was a journalist, knew that the police had such rights, and the victim herself, with the help of the neighbor, asked the police to exercise this right to separation. There were some police officers working in the precincts that told the victims about the temporary protection against violence (hereinafter - TPAV) when they went to give an account of what had happened. It was often not clear to the women what to do next, which resulted in the women not seeking further help until the next time their or their children's life was put in danger by the abuse.

Women expressed that they would have wanted to know about the options for seeking help. Some police officers had told them about “MARTA Centre”, and then women themselves had turned to the organization. They acknowledged that they would be grateful if, in the event that all of the aid institutions (the social service, the orphan's courts, the police) know and see that a woman is suffering from abuse and that the local community also is impacted by the abuser's destructive behavior, they would not wait for the woman to act and, knowing the vulnerable state in which she is in, would turn against the abuser, separate him from the victim and offer further assistance.

Women were also asked where they would like for their children to stay if they need to go to the hospital due to the incident of abuse (either for medical treatment or for examining the injuries)?

Women certainly did not want for the children to stay with the abuser. In the cases where women were taken to the hospital or when they had to come to the police station to testify about the incident, the women had asked relatives or even neighbors to look after their children.

REGARDING THE COURTS



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Women were asked about several aspects of the court system. It was clarified whether they themselves applied for TPAV and whether they would have liked the TPAV application to have been submitted on their behalf by a competent institution after having found out about the violence, such as an Orphan's court, a social service, or the police; or did the victims, think that it was important that they themselves worked up the courage to file the application for TPAV.

Women responded positively to the fact that the abuser and the victim are assigned separate court sessions and that there was no contact between them.

"We had separate court hearings. It was automatically set up that way ... He had to appear at court at one time, and I – at another."

On the other hand, the victim, who had been in the courtroom together with the perpetrator, revealed that in this situation she was unable to maintain psychological balance.

Women were asked how they felt about the possibility of providing contact between the violent husband/partner and the children, during the time that the police decision on separation is already in place or a court has ruled on granting temporary protection against violence for the victim. It was made clear that mutual communication between the victim and the abuser, to set the times of interaction, endangered the victim and that the violent partner used this time for communication to offend, humiliate, intimidate or otherwise affect the victim.

Women said that in cases where the court had granted protection for the woman, the child was used to influence the woman and her behavior. Often, the orphan's court also recognized that the victim was being emotionally violent against a child. There have been instances when the court granted the abuser contact with the child only in the presence of the woman, and the abuser used this situation to humiliate the victim and turn the child against their mother:

"I have a fairly similar experience with the protocol on emotional abuse against the child, being discussed in the presence of a child, then here is ... the thing is that virtually no evidence is admissible, even an audio recording, which was in my case. In my case, I acted completely passively and did not object to anything, I simply sat and remained silent on the couch, because it was the court's decision that contact with the child could only take place in my presence, and it took place in my place of residence, and he, upon his arrival at the place, constantly provoked me, constantly. I have an audio recording, I of course recorded all of it so that I had evidence, but even the audio recording, as it turns out is not considered as evidence. In the recording, he says, in the presence of the child, -go, hit your mother, do not listen to mom, do not hold your mom's hand, your mom has mental problems, she is sick, do not eat what your mother buys, go ahead- hit your mom. All this is in the audio recording. And the only thing I did on my part is - I told him on several occasions that he should not speak like that in the presence of the child.

When I complained to the police for the first time about this situation and filed an application, the police almost, yes, almost drew up an administrative protocol, but in the end, after, yes, after nine months- I think nine months is the maximum time that can pass before they have to draw up the protocol - after nine months, with great



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difficulty, the protocol was finally filed and the administrative committee ended the case on the grounds that there was no evidence, even though I had submitted recordings not only from the specific meeting, but also many others. Altogether 11 audio recordings, 11 meetings, where it can be heard how the child is crying, where it can be heard how he pushes me, where it can be heard how he throws the child... he throws a child's bicycle at me in the presence of the child, where it can be heard how he [the abuser] says- go and hit mom. And, yes, none of these recordings are admissible, because as concluded by the administrative commission, they cannot verify the authenticity these recording in the case that I myself have falsified them.”

UPHOLDING THE DECISION OF THE POLICE OR COURT

Women were also asked if they took any action when the violent party disobeyed the separation order or court's decision for TPAV and how the police acted in this situation.

Women indicated that every time of the abuser violated the granted TPAV, they called the police. The corresponding attitude and actions of the police officers differed from woman to woman. There were cases when the police officers made up excuses not to come, like their 'busyness' or simply did not respond to the call. There were cases when the police responded adequately and even initiated criminal proceedings against the abuser.

OUTSIDE HELP MATTERS TO STOP THE VIOLENCE

Women acknowledged that it was precisely the outside help and the time that they managed to spend separately from the abuser that played the major role in acting to improve their situation.

"You (MARTA) are so persistent, but in a good way- if it weren't for you, I would be alone with my things ... Thanks to the psychologists, MARTA, I am especially grateful to Irina because she really helped. She said - go there, do that, I will write to you this document ... “

“And this therapy course I underwent for emotional abuse. Really lifted me up, yes”

"... in the courtroom a photograph was shown – such a photo that even court members had to gasp. I had no face at all, my hair in a mess, I did not have a face ... after that – ‘I cannot live without you, I beg you.’ I did not contact him afterward because it was just too much stress. And when ... at the end of the month he writes- I thinking about you, come and I'm so sad. I was in shock. You know, I was sitting at home, when I again had a panic attack, because... You know what, to be honest- be grateful if something like that happens to you, you cannot forgive something like this, people do not change. If there had not been a trial, and if I had not seen him there with the attitude- I did not do this. You know, I'm sitting and thinking - either I'm a fool, or ... This is not me! I finally understood.... Thanks again, to your center, I've really been "brainwashed" here! People do not change. And thanks for the trial which let me distance myself from the situation, believe me, because people form habits, if he had appeared, I would have forgiven him, I would be with him again, I would again have subjected my child's and my own future life to the abuse."



Many women revealed that they themselves took care of their safety - they changed their place of residence, work, children's school or kindergarten so that the abuser could not find them.

The women were asked in how many institutions they had to tell about their experience of abuse in order to receive support and how they would view the possibility that a single case description form was sent to the involved institutions that cooperate in dealing with the incident.

Women said that they had had to retell their story in every institution - the police, the social services, the orphan's court. However, they appreciated the work done by the “MARTA Centre” consultants, which prepared the court applications, giving an in-depth description of the violence, up to the length of ten pages. Consequently, the court did not have questions about emotional abuse.

"It was not necessary to describe, because indeed the information, all that was written down, helped a lot. And described in as much detail as possible, even the details that were painful to recall needed to be written down. Then they can themselves read and evaluate."

SUGGESTIONS BY THE VICTIMS OF ABUSE:

- ✓ **Women revealed that they would like for the police officers, responding to their call, to be understanding and have a respectful attitude toward them; to not victim-blame, not to condone their actions, not to try to reconcile the parties and not to doubt what they were saying.**
- ✓ **They wanted for the interrogation to take place separately from the abuser.**
- ✓ **They stated that they were ready to tell what had happened if the police were ready to listen.**
- ✓ **There were women, who said that police officers who were women were more compassionate, but most confirmed that the gender of the police officer did not matter- the important thing was the attitude toward the victim. They even said that there should be specially trained police officers or a police department that is equipped with the understanding necessary to deal with the phenomena of domestic abuse.**
- ✓ **It is important that the abuser is immediately separated from the victim, without waiting for the woman's consent.**
- ✓ **Women also spoke about the drawing up of the protocol. Quite often, in writing the report, the police officers shortened the victim's story, skipping significant details. There were women who proposed that the account is written down in computerized form, as often afterwards the police officers themselves could not read their handwriting. It is also important to leave one copy for the victim, as that could serve as evidence in the courtroom.**
- ✓ **Victims would be happy if the police, after the separation from the abuser, would also direct the abuser to receive help. They acknowledged that they had been able to turn to “MARTA Centre” or, in some cases, had received support from a**



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social service in Riga, but for the perpetrators, it would also be crucial to be directed to receive help.

- ✓ **Women admitted that it is necessary that separate court sessions are appointed for the abuser and the victim.**
- ✓ **Women pointed out that the Orphan's court and the court should involve the third party in matters relating to the joint property and the child's rights to contact with parents and to also provide temporary protection to the abused parent and their children.**