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Best practices in liaising between the police and social services in confronting incidents of domestic violence

Sevaste Chatzifotiou, Eleni Fotou, Ignatios Moisides

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Best practices in liaising between the police and social services in confronting incidents of domestic violence

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Καλές πρακτικές στην συνεργασία μεταξύ αστυνομίας και κοινωνικών υπηρεσιών στην αντιμετώπιση περιστατικών ενδοοικογενειακής βίας

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ABSTRACT

The police are often the first port of call for victims of domestic abuse who decide to officially report the violence they are subjected to. In Greece, however, the role of the police in confronting such incidents is not fully appreciated by the public. This leads to a lower number of reported cases than anticipated. This paper aims to demonstrate the role of police officers in confronting incidents of domestic violence, in particular with respect to the training and efficiency displayed in practice. As victims of domestic violence frequently require the assistance of social services, effective liaising between victims and the police is necessary for an effective response in such cases. The present study demonstrates how existing channels of liaising between the police and social services in the prefecture of Kavala in Northern Greece may provide us with a model of best practice.

KEY WORDS: Domestic violence, police, social services

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Είναι ερευνητικά θεμελιωμένο από την διεθνή βιβλιογραφία ότι οι αστυνομικές αρχές είναι το πρώτο λιμάνι βοήθειας που απευθύνονται οι κακοποιημένες γυναίκες προκειμένου να αναζητήσουν υποστήριξη και προστασία εφόσον αποφασίσουν να κινηθούν δημόσια για το πρόβλημα της βίας που υφίστανται. Παράλληλα και αμέσως μετά, φαίνεται να αναζητούν την βοήθεια των κοινωνικών υπηρεσιών προκειμένου να ζητήσουν συμβουλευτική, αλλά και νομική και ψυχολογική ενημέρωση και υποστήριξη. Το άρθρο αυτό παρουσιάζει τα κανάλια συνεργασίας των δύο αυτών κεντρικών φορέων όπου απευθύνονται οι γυναίκες-θύματα βίας, όπως αυτή προκύπτει από το παράδειγμα εφαρμογής τους σε μια πόλη της βόρειας Ελλάδας. Το μοντέλο συνεργασίας παρουσιάζει μια σειρά καλών πρακτικών μεταξύ των επαγγελματιών και επιβεβαιώνει την πορεία μιας επιτυχούς διαδρομής προς την αντιμετώπιση του φαινομένου της ενδοοικογενειακής βίας.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Ενδοοικογενειακή βία, αστυνομία, κοινωνικές υπηρεσίες

1. Introduction

Among scholars researching on the factors that are believed to lead to incidents of domestic violence, an increasing number tend to stress the importance of societal structures in responding effectively to such incidents, and consequently in preventing them (Hamby, 2011).

The increased emphasis on involving the public when addressing incidents of domestic violence has led to a heightened sense of shared responsibility in the effort to end it (Banyard & Moynihan, 2001). Furthermore, victims of violence often report abuse in other settings, such as in mental healthcare facilities, where they are treated for depression, a condition co-morbid with violence (Cavanaugh et al., 2011).

In fact, when the general aggression model is applied to domestic violence incidents, it becomes apparent that the perpetration of violent incidents occurs under environmental, biological and personality stressors (DeWall et al., 2011). This suggests that societal structures such as police authorities are central in preventing domestic violence, the police often being the first to respond to such incidents. Several countries have compiled best practice manuals with recommendations aiming to upgrade available resources, improve results and expedite procedures (Sherman & Berk, 1984; Gregory & Peters, 1998).

2. Police Practices in Domestic Violence Incidents

Domestic assault entails forms of violence that are manifested and committed within the family boundaries. As such, it is a phenomenon as old as the notion of family itself. One might argue that domestic violence and abuse rates would diminish, following the legal establishment of gender equality, women's achievement of economic independence and, more importantly, the improvement of living and educational standards—in Western societies in particular. Yet statistics and data from scientific research point to the contrary: Domestic violence incidents are becoming more frequent and display greater variation in terms of social and individual psychological characteristics (Walker, 1979). This fact makes it more difficult and complex to decode the causative factors leading to the phenomenon of domestic violence.

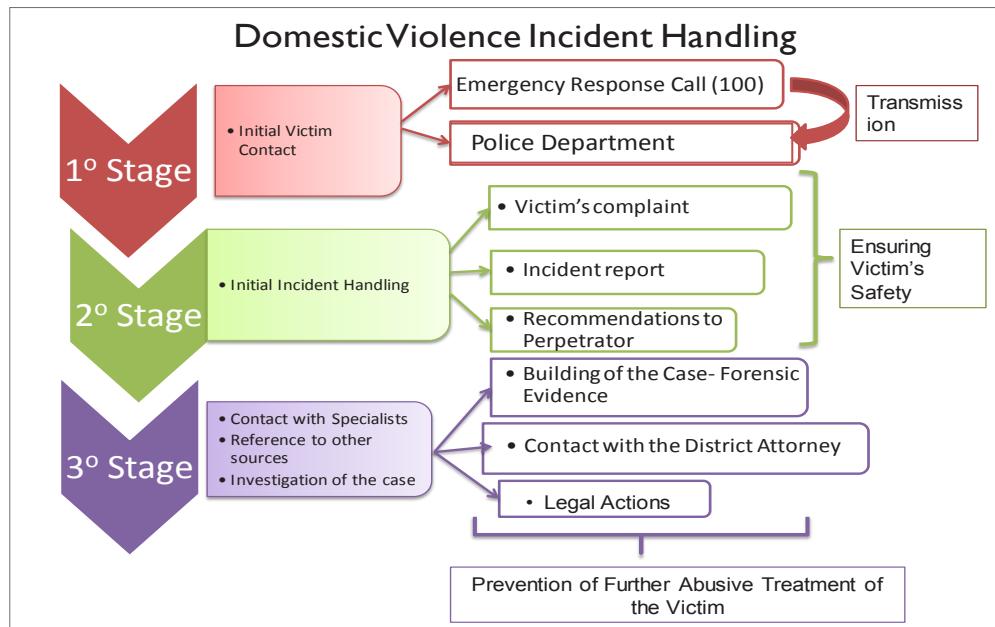
In an attempt to communicate and emphasize its legal hostility toward all forms of violence that occur within the family and to curtail the number of the aforementioned battering incidents, the Greek government instated in 2006 a special law (*Law for the Treatment of Domestic Violence and Other Legislation*), that establishes that any violent activity occurring within the family boundaries is criminal in nature, and must be treated as an inherent offense. This means that from the moment the authorities are notified of any such offense, either by a victim or by a third party,¹ authorities are mandated to investigate the incident(s) and potentially proceed to an arrest.

It should also be noted that in this particular legislation, the term 'family' is used in the broader sense: it includes spouses (active, separated or divorced), relatives of first and second degree (by blood or marriage), relatives of third and fourth degree, long-term partners and dependants (parented by one or both adults). The law's provisions apply to dependants to the extent that they reside in the same domicile. In other words, the Greek state has instated a law that is comprehensive, thorough and, one might argue, quite strict. It treats family as a societal subgroup and provides for severe penalties for all offenses (excepting insults) occurring within

the family context and particularly for all forms of violence (sexual, physical, emotional) that one family member may potentially utilize against another.

Graph 1 below depicts the procedures that police authorities follow when dealing with domestic violence incidents. It also lists the aims and objectives of every stage, while demonstrating the interface with other local authorities.

Graph 1. Depiction of police handling of domestic violence incidents



In accordance with the new law, investigations into an incident of domestic violence can commence in two ways:

- A report (anonymous or identified) must be filed at the pertinent police department, either by the victim themselves or by another individual. If the incident reported is considered an offense, the perpetrator is arrested, an evidentiary case is built against them and they are ordered to appear before the District Attorney (Public Prosecutor). Yet when the incident does not fall under the aforementioned category of "offense", the police authorities inform the District Attorney, who in turn orders police authorities to begin investigating the case and to collect all evidentiary materials that may support legal action against the perpetrator.
- With a direct report to the District Attorney's office, which in turn orders the pertinent police department to instigate a preliminary investigation (in order to collect and submit all evidentiary materials, as mentioned above).

Thus it becomes apparent that the role of police authorities is quite central in handling and investigating cases of domestic violence (Sherman & Berk, 1984). More importantly, police authorities are involved in the first stages of reporting and communicating the offense and, what is more critical, they are involved in the preliminary investigation of the majority of these incidents.

Yet this involvement of police authorities at an early stage has led to the manifestation of certain problems and weaknesses:

a. Police officers exhibit an unwillingness to follow the offense-related procedure for domestic violence incidents

Certain officers, in an attempt to avoid the cumbersome process of collecting evidence and building a case (especially in the case of offenses, when the entire procedure must be completed in a matter of hours), tend to 'play down' the significance of the incident and discourage the individual/victim from reporting it, on the pretext that the victim might wish to avoid the legal 'hassle' that would follow ("you don't want to deal with the court system"), thus infusing a sense of hopelessness ("your efforts will lead nowhere") and creating the impression of a long and arduous legal process ("you will have to deal with doctors, lawyers, legal experts, etc"). Police officers who, of their own accord, dissuade victims from reporting incidents, are in effect cancelling the most important provision of the new law, that of inherent offense. A compromise is often made in such cases, with the police issuing a caution to the perpetrator, though under the given circumstances they ought to be arrested and brought before the District Attorney.

It should however be noted that the aforementioned reticence among police officers was more commonly observed in the early years of the implementation of the law. In time, and with training courses on domestic violence provided by the Police Academy Further Education Program, police officers in charge of handling domestic violence cases came to appreciate that the inherent offense procedure is key to the successful handling of such incidents. Increasing such training courses for the entire police personnel will greatly enhance the degree to which each officer may be involved in confronting incidents from their respective post (patrol car crew, emergency report operators, detectives, investigating officers, etc).

b. Lack of specialized personnel and difficulties in cooperating with social services

In a domestic violence incident, the assistance of specialized, or forensic expert personnel is required (forensic pathologists, psychologists, child psychologists, etc). The Criminal Justice Codex mandates that the investigating officer consult with pre-appointed experts in domestic violence incidents and, when none are available, to appoint them, in order to verify forensic and other evidence that is available in such cases. However, this procedure is not strictly adhered to, on the one hand because of the limited availability of the aforementioned specialists, and on the other because such specialists are often located far from the place where the incident occurs. It should also be noted that domestic violence incidents are not localized in specific geographic regions, but span the entire nation, from far flung mountain locations to remote islands.

In these cases, the investigating officers should promptly and flexibly assign the incident to the competent scientists who act as legal experts, so as to avoid any additional burden being placed on the victim, but also to ensure and preserve the validity of the forensic evidence.

In addition, cooperation between police authorities and social services has proven to be rather problematic, and the fault doesn't always lie with the police authorities. As crimes are often committed in remote locations, the scientific personnel are often unwilling or languid in their response. As a result, victims frequently do not receive assistance where and when they need it. This reluctance can only be viewed as unacceptable. The effect is that the abused victim is further subjected to abusive behavior, this time by the very state services whose task it is to assist them. What is worse, there is to the present day a complete scarcity of resources available to victims of domestic violence, resources that would provide them with food and shelter in a safe environment, which is essential during the first critical days following the victim's contact with

the authorities. In reality, victims may routinely spend days in police stations, either because of limited space in shelters/institutions, or because social services face great difficulties in organizing their work load and responding to the incident, thus transferring their responsibilities to the police officers or non-profit organizations who have proven to respond more rapidly and efficiently.

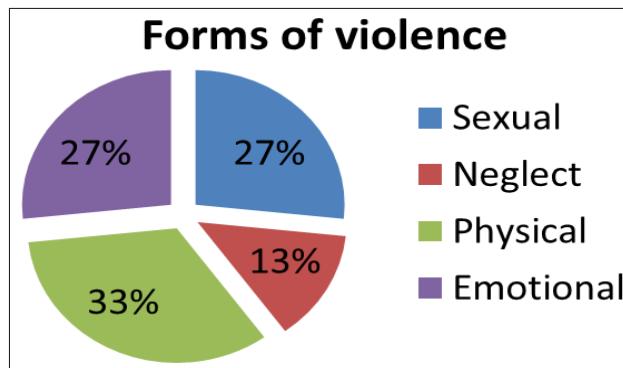
In order to address this problematic situation, a common action plan should be devised for police authorities and social services. Such a plan could comprise of common training courses and provide—with the cooperation of non-profit organizations—for at least one shelter per geographic prefecture for adult and underage victims of abuse.²

While taking into consideration the disturbance that the recent socio-economic crisis in Greece has caused in family relations, statistical data and relevant scientific studies seem to point to an increase in incidents of domestic violence in recent years (KETHI, 2003). And if we account for the fact that a code of silence governs the majority of cases, which thus remain unreported (e.g. because of the implication, directly or indirectly, of individuals and neutral observers in the incident), then it seems that statistics only show us the tip of the iceberg. Police authorities play a crucial role in carrying out procedures with respect to domestic violence incidents, and there is doubtless room for improvement in terms of practices and actions. Yet confronting the domestic violence phenomenon means having the collaborative involvement of all authorities and services; it also means the involvement of society in general, which must be informed and must strive to protect the family, its 'primary cells'.

3. Incidents of domestic violence in the Municipality of Kavala

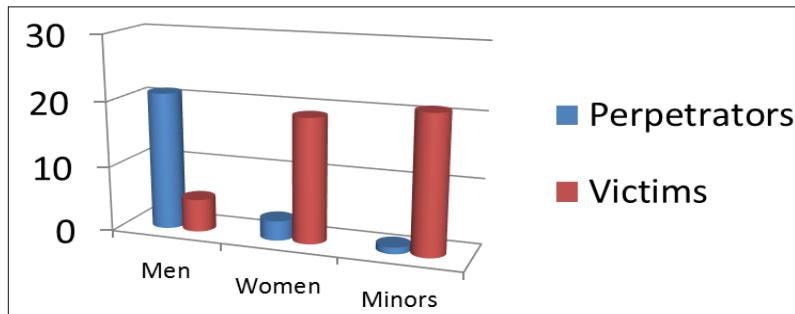
The proposed action plan for the integration of resources focuses on the wider region of Kavala, a city in the northeast of Greece. In order to fully explain the degree to which various parties have been involved in the handling of such incidents, it is beneficial to present data depicting the phenomenon as it occurred in 2011.

Graph 2. Kavala General Hospital, Archives 2011



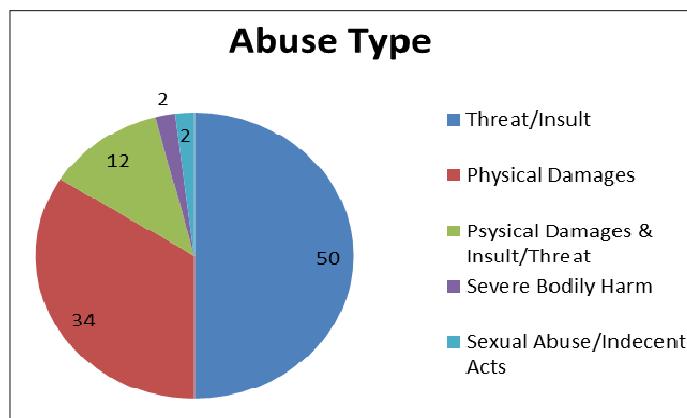
As depicted in the graphs and charts above and below, there is a uniform distribution in the violence that takes the form of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, while neglect shows a slightly decreased rate.

Graph 3. Via-stop Records, NGO, Kavala, 2011



Data collected by Via-Stop clearly shows that while most perpetrators are male, most victims are female and minors. The overwhelming majority of victims (96%) are female, while only a fraction (4%) of reported victims are male. In addition, data from the Kavala Police Department shows that verbal offenses (e.g. threats) present the majority of reported incidents (50%), whereas severe physical abuse and sexual acts reflect smaller percentages, with each accounting for 2% (Kavala Police Department, 2011).

Graph 4. Types of abuse, Kavala Police Department Archives 2011



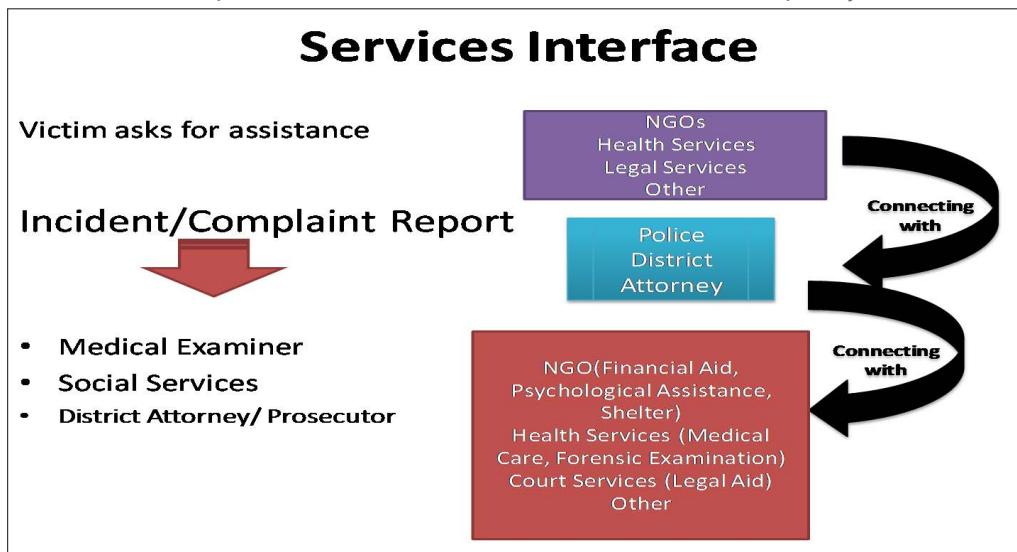
In addition, 96% of victims are married to the perpetrator, 7% are separated, 2% are co-habiting and in 5% of incidents the perpetrators are family members, but not spouses. Finally, 90% of perpetrators are Greek citizens, while only 10% are foreign nationals (Kavala Police Department, 2011).

4. Via-Stop and police cooperation in Kavala

The Institute for the Prevention and Treatment of Violence and the Promotion of Gender Equality, Via-Stop, was founded in Kavala in 2008. It has since been actively involved in handling domestic violence incidents and has worked in close collaboration with local authorities at all levels, to ensure a speedy, efficient and successful handling of incidents. Via-Stop is comprised of academics, healthcare workers, forensic experts, police officers and psychologists who specialize in domestic violence and are experts in their respective fields. After five years of actively supporting victims, Via-Stop formed a large network among local authorities. This was made possible by the recognition the organization earned in handling incidents. The plan proposed by the authors is based on intervention programs that have demonstrated successful results in other contexts, such as the U.S.A. (Jackson, Feder, et al., 2003)

Graph 5 below maps out the network currently in place in Kavala, involving medical, police and legal authorities, social services and NGOs (Via-Stop records, 2011).

Graph 5. Service interface in the Kavala Municipality



5. Initial contact - Exit plan

When a victim first makes contact with police authorities, legal authorities, or health/social services, key individuals at these posts contact Via-Stop. An appointment is arranged, during which the incident is assessed and a hierarchy of needs is established. An exit plan for the victim is then devised, a plan for psychological treatment is drawn and all additional information is provided to the victim. The principal objectives of this procedure are: a) to ensure the bodily safety of the victim, b) to support them in exiting the process of violence, c) to provide them with psychological support and assistance, d) to ensure safe exit from the abusive environment and e) to ensure full cooperation with local authorities in terms of informing the victim of their rights and safeguarding them.

The exit plan is a specialized method for exiting the violent/abusive environment, custom-built for every individual who reaches out and seeks assistance. It is shaped around the victim's needs and requirements, outlining clear steps that the individual can follow safely and legally. It should be noted that many victims, even after seeking assistance, eventually return to the abusive relationship. The exit plan can be valuable to those individuals in the future, when they make the decision to finally quit the relationship, making the exit plan a useful tool in many situations.

The first stage is an assessment/scheduling stage. It involves drawing up a case history, establishing a risk assessment for the incident and drawing up a hierarchy of the victim's needs. Then, further activities with the victim are scheduled, as is networking with other local resources. More importantly, the actions of immediate priority are implemented. These include reporting the incident to police authorities, establishing shelter for the victims and any dependants, and assisting with any medical needs the victim may have.

The second stage is an implementation stage, aiming to implement all actions scheduled at the first stage. These could include legal actions, such as obtaining protective orders, legally safeguarding the victim, and taking legal measures for the custody of any minors. This stage also includes establishing a therapy plan, initiating individual and/or family counseling and finally scheduling further contact/actions with the victim.

The final stage of the exit plan is an evaluation stage, and aims at reviewing the entire process, at assessing potential risks and the current situation. It also involves scheduling further contact/actions with the victim, in addition to contributing other, external social and legal resources. This stage also includes a therapy plan for the perpetrator. That is, the perpetrator receives therapy, either at the mandate of a court or at their own request.

Finally, it is crucial that this plan be devised with the victim's best interests in mind. Furthermore, its success depends on the full assistance of other services such as the police, the public prosecutor and medical services. Although several victims respond by terminating the abusive relationship, some individuals decide to return to the relationship, for either finance-related or family reasons. It should be noted that this plan is designed to empower the victims in any choice they make, to make that choice as informed as possible and to assist the victim in any course of action that they decide upon.

6. Conclusions & Recommendations

The proposed plan was first implemented in 2009 in a series of different cases, with successful results. It has since been applied to most domestic violence cases handled by Via-Stop. Since 2009, local and national networking with authorities, key officials and judicial authorities has led to the expedited handling of domestic violence cases. In addition, community outreach programs designed to raise awareness regarding violence in general and domestic violence in particular, have led to community involvement in confronting violent behaviors. It could be said that the proposed program succeeded in its initial goals, as it is largely recognized by all stakeholders involved, including service users and the local community as a whole. However, future research should be carried out to raise further awareness among professionals and laymen at all levels.

Notes

1. Incidents may be reported by a neighbor, a professional such as a professor, teacher or social worker. Individuals reporting incidents may choose whether or not to disclose their identity. Reports may either be oral or in writing.
2. In order to be efficient, shelters must operate on a 24-hour basis as most offenses occur after public sector working hours, during the evenings (Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

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Ignatios Moesides is a Police Officer, having the Rank of Police Captain. He has achieved a degree in Sociology from the Department of Social and Political Studies Panteion University (2003). He has received training in Domestic Violence and Sexual Crimes from the department of Continuing Education of the Greek Police Academy and has written articles on domestic violence, pedophilia and child criminal behavior on journals such as "Heitros", "Apopseis", etc. He is a member of the Institute of Prevention and Treatment of Violence and the Promotion of Gender Equality "VIA-STOP".