

## COMBATING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – POLISH SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

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### **Abstract:**

The process of recognising domestic violence in Poland begun in 1990s, drawing the attention of the researchers mostly to parent-child abuse. In most such cases, using violence against children was deemed a necessary part of upbringing, a method of discipline forcing children to follow specific behaviour patterns. Social acceptance for corporal punishment was rooted in established moral standards, stereotypes and recurring nature of the cycles of violence across generations. Domestic violence is present in various relations (parent-child, partner-partner, younger-older) and is usually of hidden nature (except extreme cases), therefore, in the first place, the researchers focused on the attempt to assess the scale and effects of the problem (both direct effects, as well as long-term effects), establishing a support system for the victims, as well as educational impact both on national, as well as local levels aimed at changing the social attitude towards domestic violence.

The main goal of this article is to present the Polish system for combating family violence in the light of the scale of the problem and various types of social attitude towards it.

The following issues are discussed in this article:

- established moral standards and stereotypes concerning domestic violence, especially corporal punishment for children
- scale of the problem of domestic violence
- strategies of helping the victims, including the structure of support institutions
- strategies of intervention and correction actions against perpetrators, including the Blue Card procedure as the main intervention procedure used in Poland
- education activities for both professionals and the society as a whole

**Key Words:** Domestic violence, violence prevention program, prevention system

### **Introduction**

The national program for combating violence has been implemented in 2006 pursuant to the Act on combating family violence dated 2005. Before that, local self-governments and self-government organisations were responsible for combating violence. The aim of such program was to coordinate the actions of various public services and to establish a complex, interdisciplinary support system. The ban on corporal punishment for children was introduced in Poland in 2010, yet Poland had implemented laws prohibiting physical and mental abuse many years earlier.

The program for combating family violence is aimed at:

- changing the social attitude towards the problem of violence
- promoting family values
- educating people (children, teenagers and adults) with regard to adverse effects of using violence
- promoting upbringing without violence.

In the Polish system for combating domestic violence, there are 4 areas covered by prevention of violence:

- Preventive actions: -diagnostic, informative and educative actions aimed both at the society and at professionals working with victims and perpetrators of violence
- Intervention actions: caregiving and therapeutic actions for victims of violence, as well as admonitory and detention actions for perpetrators

- Supportive actions: psychological, pedagogical, therapeutic and other addressed to victims
- Correction and education actions addressed to violence perpetrators. The following authorities are responsible for actions provided for in the Program:
  1. Ministry of National Education
  2. Ministry of Health
  3. Ministry of Justice
  4. Chief Police Headquarters

### **Stereotypes concerning domestic violence**

For many years, domestic violence had not been recognised as a serious social issue, even the term „domestic violence” was rarely used, people rather talked about „family fights”, „quarrels” or „misunderstandings”. The process of recognizing such problem has a relatively short, only 20-year history in Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as in the past it had not been brought to light, especially with regard to parental corporal punishment. Such established moral standards passed down from generation to generation and popular myths saying that „you have to beat your child to make him a decent person”, are deeply rooted in a patriarchal model of family with century-long tradition. In ancient Sparta, it was the father, the head of the family, who decided whether his child should live or die. Medieval “upbringing methods” in the form of whipping were used not only against naughty children, but as a preventive measure as well. Numerous stereotypes include the following statements: “slaps are not violence; nobody should interfere with family’s business, even if there’s violence involved.”; “beating does no harm to anyone”; “the victims usually get what they deserve”; or “there is no such thing as rape in marriage”. Such beliefs make it more difficult to react properly to incidents of cruel acts of violence against the closest persons. It seems that the most difficult thing is to convince the society that domestic violence is not a private business and does not occur in dysfunctional families only. Such tendency of “staying out of family business” and making the victims responsible for what is happening is a deciding factor in delaying interventions. B. Zięba accurately states that: „hidden pathologies can appear in „healthy” families as well”, keeping up appearances in the eyes of their neighbours and local community. “For the “sake” of the family, family members try to keep their problems related to alcohol abuse, physical or mental violence or other issues a secret.” (2010, p. 506)

Common stereotypes undoubtedly result in social acceptance of domestic violence. Studies conducted in Poland by the Public Opinion Research Center have shown that although the number of corporal punishment opponents has risen by 9% in the last 4 years, 45% of Poles still approve of such punishment in upbringing. Also the statement that “beating does no harm to anyone” is expressed by over 1/3 of the Polish society. However, in this respect, the number of opponents of any corporal punishment against children is also on the rise. It is also worth mentioning that mostly the oldest and least educated respondents express the opinion that corporal punishment is not harmful for children. Men, more often than women, accept violence against children. The studies conducted in 2002-2003 shows that violence as part of upbringing was accepted by 55% of parents and 1/3 of teachers and the comparative study conducted 5 years later have shown that the social acceptance for beating children has decreased by 9%. (Maćkiewicz 2009)

### **Scale of the problem of family violence on the basis of selected studies**

The first studies on physical violence against children, including slaps, had been conducted in Poland in 1982-1984 (A. Piekarska, 1991) and showed that parents use slaps in 80% cases, hand beating in 67% and cruel beating (using a belt or other object) – in 40% cases. Other studies in 1990s among school children showed that 1/3 of the parents use physical violence (in various forms) against their children (K. Kmiecick-Baran, 1999). In 2001, studies were conducted on a representative group of adult Poles. Such studies concerned both their childhood experiences of violence, as well as using violence against their own children. The results of such studies showed that „child-raising beating” is a common strategy among parents. 80% of the adults admitted that they experienced corporal

punishment in their own childhood and most of them as early as in the primary school. What is interesting, the adults claimed that they deserved such punishment and most of them (80%) admitted that they use corporal punishment to discipline their own children. (Fluderska, Sajkowska 2003). The experience of violence in childhood is the main factor triggering violence against one's own children in his/her adult life. (Straus, Yodanis 1996, Pollak 2002, Maćkiewicz 2007). Such generation tendency strengthened stereotypical beliefs in next generations. Education campaigns initiated for years have been gradually changing the social understanding of violence against children and related stereotypes, which entails higher rates of reacting to violence. Poll studies clearly show that such slow changes in our mentality result in decrease of incidents of corporal punishment. In the last 18 years, the number of people who have never hit their own child has risen by almost 30%. A statistical image of the scale of the problem is presented in figure 1. The presented data related to incidents of intervention in cases of domestic violence. Such statistics have been gathered by the police since 1999. The data presented in figure 1 clearly shows that the scale of the problem had been on the rise in subsequent years and only since 2006, there has been a visible decreasing tendency. Implementation of systemic solutions has facilitated intervention and support actions, as a result of which the scale of the problem has decreased. The simultaneous educative campaigns aimed at the whole society have also been of importance, as proven by the introduction of ban on corporal punishment against children.

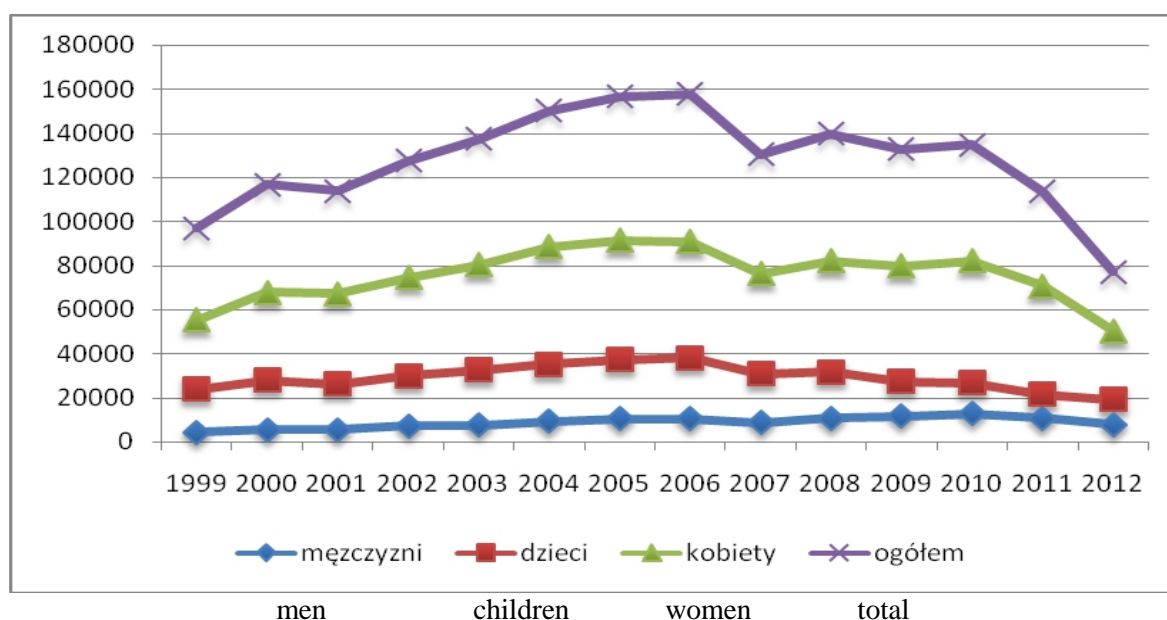


Figure.1. Number of victims of domestic violence according to the police statistics.

### Forms of help and support for the victims of domestic violence

In the Polish system, there are many forms and institutions aimed at helping the victims of domestic violence. These include: consultation points, crisis intervention centres, support centres and homes for mothers with children and pregnant women.

Throughout Poland, there are 1295 institutions run by local self-governments helping the victims of domestic violence. Most of them are consultation points.

All such institutions provide information, cooperate with organisations combating domestic violence, as well as monitor and evaluate their own activities. Other tasks of such institutions are as follows:

Consultation points have the best availability and are responsible for the following tasks:

- providing information on organisations and institutions that can provide help
- providing legal aid, consultations and help in filling in various documents

- providing psychological support
- offering psycho-education with regard to violence
- providing refuge for persons/families at risk of violence. The centre can be contacted by phone and e-mail in selected weekdays, as well as in person on other days.

Crisis intervention centres initiate support actions in the environment of persons affected by violence, provide psychotherapy for the victims and specialist medical services, such as gynecological and psychiatric care, as well as legal aid in the form of an attorney. Such centres offer their help 24h/day, as well as provide immediate refuge and basic living conditions.

Support centres and specialist support centres deal mainly with preparing individual help plans for victims of violence, taking into consideration individual needs, goals, methods and schedule, assessment of the children's situation based on the social enquiry, as well as organisation of individual therapy with a view to support victims of family abuse, as well as to ensure that such victims acquire skills necessary to defend themselves against persons using violence in their family.

The detailed activities of such centres are as follows:

- providing access to medical help, family counseling, psychological support and legal aid
- family mediations
- crisis intervention
- trainings, counseling and education,
- education and motivation activities for victims of domestic violence
- correction and education program for the perpetrators of violence
- social work, social counseling, psychological training
- 24/h day refuge in critical situations caused by domestic violence
- help lines, online contact

In addition, specialist support centres provide legal aid in the form of a legal representative / attorney, medical consultations, as well as run marriage and family therapies.

Homes for mothers with their minor children and pregnant women are aimed in the first place at providing direct protection from violence and changing the destructive life situation of the victims of family violence with a view to improve their physical, mental and social functions (e.g. by regaining strength, health and ability to defend their rights, improve control over their own lives, e.g. teaching them to seek help, give proper parental guidance for their children, as well as to improve their overall living situation by helping them find a job or a place to live). Such support is possible by:

- increasing the social awareness of the problem of domestic violence
- providing safe refuge and immediate material help (such as clothes, food, cleaning materials),
- social work, including the work of family assistants,
- individual consultations, legal aid, psychological and pedagogical support,
- support group for women aimed at dealing with violence,
- individual and group psychological therapy,
- self-defense and assertiveness training courses,
- child-raising skills workshops for mothers,
- social therapy and reeducation activities for children,
- improvement of social life and professional career.

Among many forms of support for victims of violence, one of the most important aspect is the opportunity to talk and receive support online or by e-mail. New technologies are an important tool in combating violence, especially for the elderly, who are often dependent on others and experience various limitations. According to A. Domagała-Kręciach (2012, p.390) „the elderly, fighting the stereotypes, in order to avoid being left behind, should actively take up all the everyday activities, including those based on new technologies. Such activities shape new social awareness and make the elderly valuable members of the society”. Thanks to digital competences, the elderly can find pages

with information and support without leaving their homes. Such opportunities give the victims a feeling of anonymity in such difficult and often embarrassing, from their point of view, situations.

Over the last 6 years, we have been noticing a changing tendency, consisting in a drop in the number of persons using support centres, which can be a sign of the fact that the demand for specialist help is decreasing as long-term experience of violence is less frequent due to coordinated intervention actions. The society also reacts to violence more frequently, therefore families experiencing violence can receive help early enough.

An important part of actions aimed at improving witnesses' protection is to provide proper conditions for interviewing children – victims of sexual abuse and, if possible, adults – victims of domestic violence. This is done by setting up child-friendly interview rooms, the so called blue rooms. Special attention is paid to conditions and legal requirements regulating interviews with young victims. Such interview is always done by a judge together with a child psychologist and as a rule, a child can be interviewed only once, although the law provides for some exceptions in this respect. Most of such centres are equipped with matching furniture and audiovisual devices for communication between the interviewers located in two different rooms separated by a one-way mirror, as well as recording the interview, meeting all the requirements for court procedures involving minors. In 2011, there were over 420 child-friendly interview rooms. They are located at police stations, courts and prosecutors' offices.



Fig. 1. Blue room – a child-friendly interview room for interviewing young victims of violence

### **Strategies of action with regard to perpetrators of domestic violence**

Actions taken up against perpetrators of domestic violence can be divided into interventions and corrective-educative actions.

An important part of the system of combating domestic violence, especially in respect to intervention strategies, is the Blue Card procedure existing in Poland since 1998, initially used only by police officers in cases of domestic violence interventions or interventions following reports of family members or witnesses of domestic violence. Initiation of such procedure does not require the consent of the victim. The Blue Card should be filled in at the intervention site in the presence of the perpetrator. (Sasal, 1998).

In confirmed cases, the cards are sent to institutions, interdisciplinary teams that prepare a plan of action regarding the victim and the perpetrator. However, the victim can reject help offered by the relevant institution – the case is then monitored by a police community support officer. Since 2004, pursuant to the Act on social support, the „Blue Card” procedure has been obligatory for social workers and the amended Act on combating domestic violence dated 2010 put an obligation of following the Blue Card procedure on 5 public services: police, social workers, education, healthcare and commune committees for problems with alcohol. Polish solutions used by the police for combating family violence, with special consideration of the „Blue Card” procedure have become a part of the study entitled *Handbook of best police practices on tackling violence against women*. The handbook, prepared during the Spanish presidency in the EU, has been made available to the police

officers in the European Union and has become a model for numerous European initiatives concerning the issue of domestic violence.

A Blue Card consists of four parts: A, B, C and D. The Blue Card procedure is as follows:

**Card A** is filled in by a police officer (or other officers) during intervention. Such person is obliged to submit the card within 7 days to the President of the Interdisciplinary Team. At the same time, the victim is given **Card B**, containing important information for persons affected by violence, e.g. addresses of support institutions in a given area. The Interdisciplinary Team operates at the local self-governments and can form working groups.

Within 3 days, the President of the Interdisciplinary Team appoints a Working Group, sets the dates of meetings with the victim of violence and the abuser.

**Card C / D** is filled in by the Working Group, which assesses the situation and develops an individual help plan for the victim and witnesses of violence, e.g. children (Card C), as well as a plan of actions to be taken against the perpetrator (Card D).

The Working Group is composed of representatives of services and specialists working with families, usually a social worker, a police community support officer, a school counselor (if there are school children in the family), as well as psychologists or therapists working with people affected by violence or using violence, a healthcare worker, a court officer, a family assistant or other specialist if required. The representatives of the Working Group meet both with the victim, as well as with the abuser and in cooperation with the family, they work on planning and implementation of appropriate help, as well as on monitoring such support. The main goal of such procedure is to provide support to victims of domestic violence and restore normal relations within families affected by violence.

The basic aim of interventions in cases of domestic violence is to ensure protection and safety for the victims and to detain the perpetrators if necessary.

Corrective and educative actions are also taken against the perpetrators of domestic violence, aimed at changing the behaviour and attitude of such abusers in order to prevent future acts of violence.

Those are programs carried out according to the Duluth Model, aggression replacement trainings, programs for alcohol and drug addicts, as well as own programs. Such programs are implemented for example through workshops, exercises, lectures, discussions, visualisations, drama therapy, role playing, assertiveness training, brainstorming, psychoeducation activities, screening of education films, meetings with law enforcement officers, self-diagnosis based on psychological tests, case studies, relaxation, personality diagnosis, family counseling, elements of individual psychotherapy and activation methods.

The program lasts for 1-12 months. The perpetrators participate in such program at their own will or when persuaded by their partners or therapists and some of the abusers participate in the programs because of a court order or imprisonment for family abuse. Perpetrators of family violence are often obliged to do community work and attend correction and education programs at the same time. A positive consequence of systemic solutions aimed at perpetrators is the fact that during the last 6 years, the number of persons participating in correction and education programs increased almost thrice. It is worth mentioning that over 80% of the perpetrators complete such programs (figure 2).

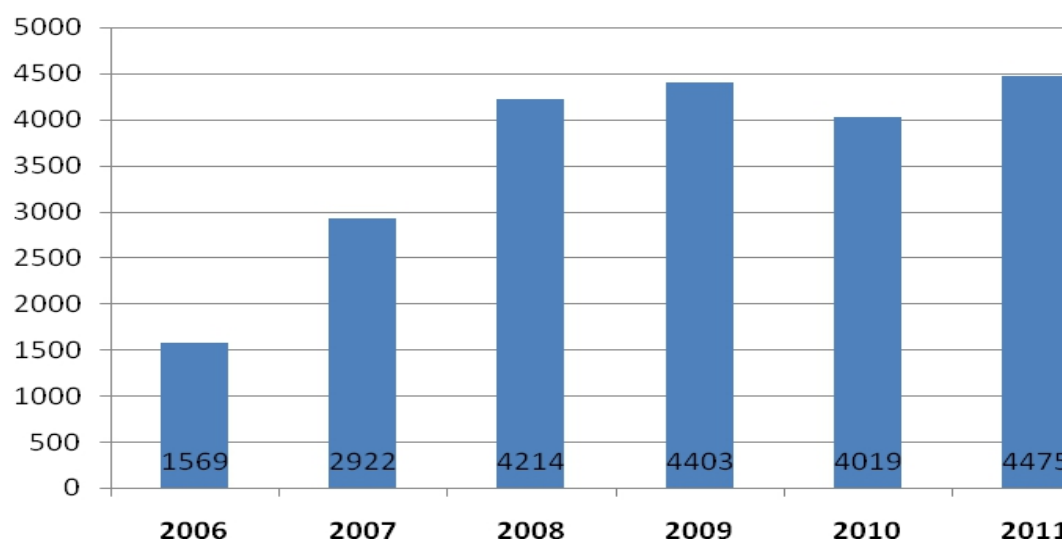


Figure 2. Number of perpetrators participating in correction and education programs.

### Educating the society and professionals

As part of preventive actions, information and education activities are initiated both on national and local levels in order to change the social attitude towards violence and raise the level of sensitivity to violence.

Such actions are carried out through social campaigns which:

- deal with popular myths and stereotypes in support of domestic violence,
- address the generally accepted abusive behaviour of the strongest family members,
- promote efficient methods of preventing violence and limitation of violence shown in mass media.

There are annual campaigns in the media concerning various aspects of domestic violence. For example, the 2010 campaign entitled: *Know your rights – walk out of the shadow. Let us help yourself*, was targeted to the whole society, and especially to the victims.

The goal of the campaign was to propagate information on the rights of people affected by offences, as well as to draw the attention of some professionals, such as judges, attorneys, court officers, police officers and employees of NGOs to the needs of the victims.

As part of such campaign, the national TV stations broadcast spots on the rights of offence victims.

The campaign spread through billboards, press, radio and the Internet. Some of the spots were devoted to violence against women and children. The spots included a reference to the website [www.pokrzywdzeni.gov.pl](http://www.pokrzywdzeni.gov.pl).

- A Charter of Rights of Persons Affected by Domestic Violence was developed and distributed in common courts, police stations, Support Centres as a guide for persons affected by family abuse. Such charter contains a list of basic rights of such persons, contact numbers of the police, National Emergency Service for Victims of Violence – a toll-free line, the so called „Blue Line”, as well as a list of support centres together with their address details.

Under preventive actions – an education strategy of the Program, the curriculum of general school education has been supplemented with information on risks connected with domestic violence, promoting positive relations in families.

The program basis takes into consideration relevant information concerning combating family abuse on each education level.

The children leaving kindergartens and starting primary schools are taught to react in situations of violence, know where to seek help and how to ask for help. The problem of combating family violence is contained in social education at the first stage of education, i.e. integrated early



school education (years 1-3 of primary schools). Such content is expanded with each following education stage.

In order to educate professionals, contents concerning causes and effects of violence, identification and assessment of incidents of family abuse, as well as cooperation under a local system of combating domestic violence have been introduced to the professional education programs (for persons dealing with domestic violence). Beata Zięba (2008, p. 24) stresses the fact that „in order to make changes, teachers, tutors and social workers must provide effective counseling and have both psychological, as well as psychotherapeutic competences”. The education strategy also covers development of programs and provision of training courses for teachers, school counselors and psychologists in such respect. Activities related to promotion of the education program entitled School for Parents and Teachers are also worth mentioning here. The program has been implemented throughout Poland through a network of 53 provincial coordinators/educators and over 600 executors.

Individual meetings under the program raise the issues of setting one's goals in upbringing, understanding of the world of one's own feelings and feelings of children, learning to talk about feelings, ability to determine clear limits and requirements, encouraging children to cooperate, solving conflicts together with children, seeking solutions better than punishment, teaching methods of self-discipline, supporting children's independence, releasing them from destructive roles and improving one's level of self-confidence and ability to make reasonable decisions.

The participants of the trainings are provided with teaching materials.

For teachers and parents, there is a handbook entitled “How to love and make demands”. This publication contains the most important guidelines, suggested reactions, auto-reflecting exercises concerning: determining limits in relations with a child, encouraging children to cooperate and work independently, methods of discipline, praising and other positive attitudes. The handbook is available on the Internet site.

Education activities are also directed to:

- representatives of health care, dealing with diagnosing abused children, medical, psychological and legal aspects of violence against children and intervention in cases of domestic violence
- persons providing legal counseling to victims of violence, describing e.g. nature and cycle of violence in families, methods of approaching a specific category of clients, i.e. persons affected by violence, as well as aspects related to the use of law in helping domestic violence victims.

Such activities also include organisation of internship for students and university graduates preparing for work in the sector of combating domestic violence and training in work in interdisciplinary teams for combating domestic violence, as well as police and other intervention services.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Systemic solutions with regard to domestic violence are going in the right direction.

The presented statistical data show that the social attitude to stereotypes has been gradually changing and the number of persons supporting corporal punishment in upbringing is declining. Until 2006, there had been a clearly growing number of domestic violence victims and since the implementation of coordinated actions (under the combating program), there has been a decreasing tendency. The number of perpetrators covered by corrective actions is on the rise.

The implemented education strategies affect the perception of the problem and the improved social awareness, especially among people exposed to violence, is an important element of violence prevention.

Providing the victims of violence and perpetrators with complex help and support is another foundation of the program aimed at restoring normal relations in their families.

Eventually, increasing competences of relevant public servants is the last element of the program that should ensure provision of effective help.

On the basis of the reports on implementation of the program, as well as the results of the conducted studies, changes have been introduced to the program in order to increase efficiency and



reduce the scale of the problem. The most important thing is to improve the social recognition of the discussed problem, deal with myths and stereotypes, as well as to change social attitude towards violence. However, it is a long and tedious process requiring work on numerous levels. Using violence against other, often very close persons, children, partners, older parents, is often a result of experiencing violence in one's childhood, therefore such behaviour patterns cannot be eliminated in the span of one generation only.

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