



---

***"Violence against women: Good practices in  
combating and eliminating violence against women"***

**Expert Group Meeting**

**Organized by: UN Division for the Advancement of Women  
in collaboration with:  
UN Office on Drugs and Crime  
17 to 20 May 2005  
Vienna, Austria**

---

**Counselling service for women with trauma of violence**

**Expert paper prepared by:**

**Lepa Mladjenovic  
Autonomous Women's Center, Belgrade, Serbia and Montenegro**

## short history

Violence against women as a broad issue with many dimensions. During the war, armed conflict, totalitarian regimes and states under fundamentalist reign, women's movement starts usually with organising support for women and children victims of violence - covering their immediate needs. One of them is psychological trauma recovery. This is as well the case with the example of Autonomous Women's Center (AWC), which was formed in 1993 in Belgrade to organise counseling service for women affected by male violence in wartime and non-war time. The Serbian regime (1991-2000) in that time started and carried on wars in the region. The responsibility of feminists in these political situations are many layered, in respect to women's needs as well in respect to the war politics done "in our name". In all Eastern Europe, in the so called transitional phase (transition from totalitarian to democratic structure) many women's organisations advanced their work in developing counseling service, and on the other hand started programmes for collaboration and education of the state institutions (social work services, community health services, police, courts). After many years of professional and activist work, in every region as well as in Belgrade, higher social transparency of violence against women is reached and this also means higher awareness of women's need for counseling.

The history of women's movement in states that were not in wars show the same rule, the first to be founded by women political activists thirty years ago were rape crisis centers, battered women's shelters and SOS Hotlines, therefore counseling services for women. By now most of the countries in the world have some forms of women's support groups for women victims/survivors.

Three introductory recommendations for services are crucial:

- women's services to women victims/survivors of violence should standardize their experience
- women's services should be recognized by the state and/or government.
- women's services that come out from women's movement should be part of inter-institutional or multi-agency model of prevention of violence against women.

What follows is an example of a of Counseling team in the Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade that address the basic needs of women survivors of violence.

## needs

Traumatic states are formed of three dimensions: emotions, thoughts and deeds. Therefore needs of women, nevertheless constructed by patriarchal cultural system, come from these three recovery aims: emotional awareness, cognitive autonomy, acting in/with autonomy.

### 1. emotional awareness

Psychotherapeutic hypothesis number one is that emotions are one of the major blocks / barriers of women to move out of the violent situations or to be able to overcome trauma from the past. Therefore, in order to support women on her way to autonomy, step one is work on women's emotional awareness through identified steps:

- recognizing one's own emotions
- naming emotions (fear, guilt, shame, helplessness, low self esteem, etc)
- letting emotions out (crying, rage expressing, etc.)
- expressing emotions verbally (talking about her emotions)
- emotional independence (process of controlling emotions)

- information about trauma phases (learning through experience of others)
- awareness of one's victim role (learning about patriarchal conditioning of emotional states)

## **2. cognitive autonomy & justice**

Psychotherapeutic hypothesis number two is that not only emotions block the changes, but as well rational concepts women have about themselves. These concepts are constructed by patriarchal society as well as family model a particular woman lived in. Therefore, in order to support women on her way to autonomy, step two is work on women's own concepts of herself through identified steps:

- awareness of the violence problem (enough to be able to talk about it)
- understanding male-female patriarchal conditioning (enough to know she is not guilty)
- understanding wheel of violence (experience of others structured contributes to cognitive clarity of her own situation)
- positive valuing oneself
- safety plan made (in case a woman is still in danger)
- informed about her rights (information of one's own rights encourages self-control)
- take responsibility for her condition of life (leaving the role of victim)

This dimension as well includes need for justice. Sometimes long period of time injustice has been exercised upon her. Need for justice includes:

- information about her rights
- information how to achieve justice
- support in actual legal process

## **3. acting in/with autonomy**

The post traumatic behavior also means living in silence and non-doing. Therefore, third aim of the counseling is supporting women to act toward the responsibility for their own change by:

- ending silence (when she asked for support she already broke the silence)
- ending non-doing (breaking the logic of the role of the victim)
- deciding according to her needs and wishes (starting a process of taking control of her life)
- acting according to her needs/wishes (instead of obeying the wishes/needs of others)
- using her own support system (her own healthy/positive characteristics)
- using friends that can help her (using all the means to resolve her situation)
- using institutions that can support her as means to her autonomy

Acting in autonomy means living in safe spaces. This dimension implies need for safety. Need for safety includes:

- acting according to safety plan (in case a woman is still in danger)
- moving to safe houses (shelters)
- using legal system, if needed, as means to her autonomy
- exercising legal measures, if they exist, to move out the perpetrator

Counseling service works with women dealing with violence in family, sexual violence, war violence and violence through cultural pressure on women. Whatever of these types of violence women experience, as the final result the aim is that women are encouraged to take control of their life situations and take responsibility - this is the way for them to overcome violence, move toward justice and become responsible citizens. This also means that counselors do not decide whether or not women shall go away from violence situations. Our aim is to stop violence and not

relationships. Experience shows that many women (must) continue to live in the same/similar living conditions as before.

### needs met through Counseling service / methods

The needs of traumatised women previously stated are met through different aspects of counseling service.

#### 1. Different dimensions of Counseling service:

- a) **SOS Hotline counseling and information offering** - (from 8 h/day to 12 or 24 hours a day.) Trained counselors give information and counseling on the phone. It is not only informative, but counseling line.
- b) **Individual counseling sessions** - (sessions last from 30-50minutes done by trained counselors). Counseling sessions work on emotional, cognitive, and motivational dimensions.
- c) **Phone legal aid: counseling and informing on women's rights** - lawyers give general legal aid on the telephone, and for complex cases setting sessions with practicing lawyers /attorneys.
- d) **Lawyers/attorneys aid:** individual legal advice, written documents, court representation for women with no income
- e) **Self help groups:** groups of women who survive violence sharing experience in 10-15-20 sessions, lead by 'experienced experts'.
- f) **Advise for safe spaces (shelters):** women in dangerous situations need safe spaces if such exist in town.
- g) **Specific aid:** psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, social work support (this is a scope of aids that during the totalitarian state is indispensable, given that institutions are not friendly and do not function well. Once in a pro-democratic state, these three services should be trained in assisting victims of violence and therefore Counseling team do not need to have them.)
- h) **Written material:** *leaflets* with basic women's rights information, services, etc. *booklets* with psycho-education material ('wheel of violence', phases of trauma, etc).

#### 2. Principles of the counseling methods

- a. In order to reach the aims of fulfilling needs of traumatised women, it is important to follow very precise particular feminist principles of work. They are common in all the regions and come out of the experience of women's movement in dealing with thousand of women traumatised by male violence.
- b. Major distinction between old-fashioned state services and Counseling service is in applying the three basic feminist principles:
  - *trust women's experience*
  - *women victims are not guilty* for the violence they experienced
  - *counseling means not giving advices* but trusting women's self determination
- c. Three major techniques used in the counseling service:
  - *normalization* (everything what woman experience after traumatic event is normal)
  - *validation* (confirming the experience women go through)
  - *ventilation* (giving space to women to feel, cry, be angry, etc)

### 3. Values of the Counseling service:

a. Important for counseling work are the values. Given that counseling means entering easy in deep emotional spaces of women, crucial for consultants is to follow principles and values. (AWC has its principles and values defined in four documents: *Politics of Work*, *Ethical Principles of Counseling Work*, *Codex of Behavior of Counseling team*, *SOS Hotline Feminist principles*.)

b. The main values:

- *confidentiality*, implies absolute word to client that her story will not go out
- *experience of each woman is equally valued*
- *ethics of difference*: working with women with awareness of discrimination they are exposed to: race, ability/disability, nationality, sexual orientation, rural/urban, poverty, physical and mental differences, marital status, religion, political orientation.
- *ethics of care*, implies caring of oneself and the others equally
- *women's solidarity*, implies quest for equality, care, trust and good will.
- *holistic approach of service*, implies taking in account all dimensions of women's lives, and supporting her in realizing different needs
- *naming violence as a political act*
- *against all types of discriminations*
- *social construction of violence and gender roles*

### 4. Training of the counselors

The so called helping professions (psychology, social work, pedagogy, etc) in the transitional states and many others still do not teach about gender violence or trauma recovery. Therefore the counselors talked about in this programme are trained by the senior counselors from the team.

a. training duration: 7 weekends

b. number of trainees: from 7 to 20.

c. Hotline listening: 20 workdays

d. written instruments guarantee the procedure and the process for replication of the SOS Phone counseling service in any settings:

- *Protocol for organising and carrying out the training programme*
- *Programme of training* (standardized)
- *SOS Hotline manual* with text and essays to read (300 pages) for all trainees
- *Evaluation of training*

Replications of the programme for counseling depends on:

- standard protocols
- standard programmes
- standardized values of work
- standardized means of collaboration with other institutions

### evaluation of effectiveness

Evaluation of effectiveness of the service is a very difficult issue. Many women come once for service and never again. Many on the other hand come for couple of years. Some evaluation is still possible. Evaluation is done through analyzing the objectives of the counseling service which are: 1, to increase emotional awareness; 2, increase cognitive autonomy&justice; 3, increase acting in/with autonomy. It is done through different instruments.

## 1. Assessment sheet - MY WAY TO AUTONOMY

### a. emotional awareness

This assessment sheet is given to women on the second session. The woman goes through it with a counselor. The Assessment sheet has three parts. First one is *What do I feel*. This part has a list of 25 emotions for clients to grade how much these emotions are present in their life in quantitative scale from 0-10. On the third or fifth session it is done again, and discussed with a woman. For the long term clients it is redone on the 10<sup>th</sup> session.

### b. cognitive autonomy

This assessment sheet in part 2. *What do I think of myself* has 11 statements about oneself, that women grade from 0 to 10.

### c. acting with autonomy

This assessment sheet in part 3. *Strategies I use in my present situation* has 20 statements about woman's activities for herself that women grade from 0 to 10.

The assessment sheet contains lists of emotions/concepts/acts that cover needs of women who survived any kind of male violence (family, sexual, war, cultural). This instrument has three dimensions:

- one, it is important tool for women to support them to name and be aware of emotions, concepts and deeds;
- two, it is a tool for consultants to follow the progress of clients, to possibly quantify the positive changes, and
- three, it is a tool for initiating opening women to talk about barriers and support sources.

For women who are in obviously critical situation, this is a too long list (with three pages of questions), and is rather de-motivating. Therefore there is a shorter list with three items in each of three dimension. Consultants are choosing which if these lists to use, considering the level of crisis women are in.

## 2. qualitative evaluation sheet - by clients

The evaluation sheet is one of the instrument for assessing result of counseling work. It is given to women after every session. The annual study of results from the evaluation sheets shows that 90% of clients put on top grade of what they got in the counseling: 1, understanding her situation (awareness), 2, emotional relief (ventilation), 3, general support and encouragement for their own deeds (support to act and take responsibility ).

The evaluation sheets confirm the above results from the assessment lists, from a different angle.

## 3. qualitative evaluating of work - by consultants

Consultants have different instruments to check their own success of work

- weekly meetings to check upon *current issues*-problems with clients.
- *quantitative analysis*
- *qualitative analysis* of work of consultants according to fix factors for qualitative analysis.

#### 4. quantitative analysis

Quantitative analysis show one aspect of the success of work using data base. The factors that show the success:

- number of total services given (phone and direct)
- number of women for first counseling sessions (phone or directly in AWC) -
- number of women in continued counseling sessions -
- number of women in legal procedures-
- number of women in self-help groups-
- number of psycho-educational material distributed -
- number of leaflets with women's rights information distributed -
- number of women informed about their women's rights and legal procedures-
- number of indirect beneficiaries -

These numbers are compared from one year to the next in order to asses general success of the counseling work.

#### factors that contribute Counseling Team to be 'good practice'

- values & principles of work defined - (in *SOS Hotline Feminist principles* document stated)
- female counselors as default position
- caring for clients - first principle: clients first (in *Ethics of Work* stated)
- caring for counselors (in *Ethics of Work* stated)
  - o entrance training programme
  - o supervision / work on emotional issues of oneself
  - o permanent education
- ethics of professional work defined (in *SOS Hotline Feminist principles* document stated)
- working standards, protocols and inventories
- collaboration with other services and institutions
- clear organisation of team work
- evaluation instruments
  - for clients
  - for counselors
- awareness rising - for general public, policy makers, and practitioners in relevant institutions (social work centers, police, community health centers, courts, etc.) through:
  - education of police, centers for social work and community health centers
  - informative material for general public:
  - regular campaigns: 16 Days of Activism, 8<sup>th</sup> of March, etc.
- affecting state services (if possible)
  - o affecting policy by collaboration with Ministries
  - o affecting work in the institutions, by offering them education
- strategic planning
- good collaboration of team members
  - o knowledge of conflict-resolution techniques and principles
  - o supervision / regular work on one's own emotional issues
- media coordination
- networking - regular meeting with consultants working in the same field
- political passion
- international knowledge shared

## risk factors

1. Implementation and maintaining SOS Hotlines and Counseling services depend very much on enthusiasm of the group leaders to carry on the project.
  2. Keeping standards and principles is not easy to do, given the cultural relativism and general political atmosphere of not keeping standards in political governing - there is a bad model.
  3. Working with women survivors of male violence is hard work, and after some time some of the counselors find out they cannot work this anymore.
  4. The government/state can make standards for the counseling services which most likely will disregard “experience” as a professional factor, so that women working as counselors for many years but without adequate diploma, can be dismissed in the process of standardization of work.
  5. The government/state can decide to open their own SOS Hotline and shelter services and fill them completely with their “professionals” which do not have training on violence against women or counseling trauma.
-