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A Learning Process to Inform the Development of Policy and a Series of Innovative Models of Shelters for Women Victims of Intimate Partner Violence and Their Children

An International Literature Review

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Abstract

Background

Until 2020, Israel's domestic violence shelters (hereinafter: the shelters) and transitional apartments were under the responsibility of the Community Division at the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (hereinafter: the Ministry of Welfare). As part of a 2020 reorganization process in the Ministry of Welfare, the Senior Division for Out-of-Home Services and Frameworks (Families, Children & Youth) and Special Placements in the Administration of Personal and Social Services, (hereinafter: the Division for Families, Children and Youth) was put in charge of services for women victims of intimate partner violence and their children, which are provided by the Division as part of its responsibility for out-of-home care.

Following the reorganization, the Division for Children and Family established a committee on shelters assigned with the task of mapping the existing services, identifying needed services, and indicating which aspects of the existing services should be maintained and which should be modified. Based on the work done by the committee, the Ministry of Welfare, in collaboration with Dr. Daniela Shebar-Shapira from Tel Aviv University, set out to develop a series of models of out-of-home services for women victims of intimate partner violence and their children and a systematic policy in this area.

As part of the initiative, the Division for Children and Family invited the Children's Team from the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to join the learning process toward the development of a series of innovative models for the shelters and commissioned the team to prepare an international literature review in support of the learning process.

Goal

The goal of this review was to inform the development of policy and a series of innovative models of out-of-home services for women victims of intimate partner violence and their children residing in shelters, by providing information from the international experience on best practices and on various issues of concern to the policymakers at the Ministry of Welfare.

Method

The review included a systematic review of the relevant international literature, academic papers, and gray literature (policy documents, evaluation studies, websites of service providers, and more) that explored various aspects of the services provided by the shelters and the experiences of the women and children in the shelters. The information was collected from June 2022 to December 2022.

Key Findings

The findings of the literature review pertain to seven issues of concern to the policymakers:

1. Evaluation of the level of risk to women victims of domestic violence and the strategies they employ to reduce the risk of violence. Women victims of domestic violence use a variety of strategies to reduce the risk of violence, its frequency, and its severity, or to avoid it. Studies show that the more passive the strategies used by the women to reduce or avoid intimate partner violence, the lower the level of violence they are exposed to, ranging from low to moderate. At the same time, women who used active strategies, including outright resistance or even counterattack, are exposed to severe or, in some cases, even lethal intimate partner violence.
2. The experience of women staying in shelters. Various studies show that the relationships between the women and the shelter personnel are of critical importance and have a significant impact on the way the women perceive their stay in the shelters.
3. The design of the shelters' physical environment. A design that includes a private space next to the public spaces as well as proximity to nature is conducive to the adjustment of the women to the shelter.
4. The duration of stay in the shelter. Studies show that the longer the stay of women in the shelter the higher their prospects of getting out of the circle of violence.
5. The experience of children staying in shelters. The children are ambivalent about their stay in the shelter. On the one hand, they are unexpectedly cut off from their familiar environment and normal life. On the other hand, they feel safe and secure in the shelter and appreciate the support they receive in various areas of life.
6. Intervention practices for children staying in shelters. Two types of recommended intervention practices have been found, **universal intervention practices**, e.g., maintaining the safety and security of the children and preventing re-traumatization, and **trauma-focused therapy practices**, e.g., unconditional acceptance, based on the understanding of the impact of the trauma on both children and mothers, and assessment of the impact of exposure to intimate partner violence on the children.

7. Interdisciplinary intervention programs for women and children staying in shelters. The literature review shows that collaborations with professionals in the fields of medicine and mental health are rare and limited. In addition, an inclusive model of collaboration with related community-based services is called for. One of the models adopted in recent years by many community-based services for women victims of intimate partner violence is the **coordinated community response model**. This model focuses on coordination between the services provided by various entities in the community and prevention of redundancy of services, and thereby promotes the efficient provision of services.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the literature review were formulated with reference to each of the issues on the agenda. The key recommendations highlight the need for the expansion and improvement of the interdisciplinary collaboration between the shelter personnel and community-based professionals as well as for the development of a continuum of services in response to the unique needs of women victims of intimate partner violence and their children.