



How Poland and Europe are fighting domestic violence towards women during the pandemic

Jak Polska i Europa walczą z przemocą domową wobec kobiet podczas pandemii

Aleksandra Graduszyńska^{1,A-B,D}, Anna Augustynowicz^{2,E-F}, Jacek Borowicz^{1,C,F},
Natalia Anna Pihowicz^{3,B}

¹ Department of Environmental Hazards Prevention, Allergology and Immunology, Medical University, Warsaw, Poland

² Department of Health Economics and Medical Law, Medical University, Warsaw, Poland

³ Polish Association of Social Medicine and Public Health, Poland

A – Research concept and design, B – Collection and/or assembly of data, C – Data analysis and interpretation, D – Writing the article, E – Critical revision of the article, F – Final approval of article

Graduszyńska A, Augustynowicz A, Borowicz J, Pihowicz NA. How Poland and Europe are fighting domestic violence towards women during pandemic. *Med Og Nauk Zdr.* 2022; 28(1): 82–85. doi: 10.26444/monz/147242

Abstract

Introduction and Objective. In parallel to introducing restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic the subject of domestic violence has arisen among the public regarding how the victims may be handling this new, unfavourable situation. The aim of this study was to analyze the impact of these epidemiological circumstances on the scale of domestic violence towards women in Poland and Europe.

Material and methods. The study was prepared based on available literature on domestic violence, reports published by the European Union organisations and legal Acts.

Results. The official police statistics do not indicate a rise in registered cases of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from individual European countries concerning the number of such incidents during the pandemic are not available. However, testimonies of people engaged in counteracting domestic violence suggest that the issue has escalated, both in Europe and Poland itself, because of new regulations.

Conclusions. Taking notice of the above issue during the pandemic has exposed flaws in the currently used methods of counteracting and supervising it. Better control of this problem could be accomplished if methods of collecting data on this subject were to be improved, which is proven by latest reports on the scale of domestic violence towards women. Increased engagement of State institutions of each country and their international collaboration would be necessary in order to solve this issue.

Key words

domestic violence, violence towards women, intimate partner violence, patriarchy, counteracting violence, gender inequality

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie i cel pracy. Wraz z koniecznością wprowadzenia obostrzeń w związku z pandemią COVID-19 podniesiony został na forum publicznym temat ofiar przemocy domowej i prawdopodobnego pogorszenia się ich sytuacji w tych nowych, niekorzystnych okolicznościach. Praca miała na celu zbadać pośredni wpływ sytuacji epidemiologicznej na przemoc domową wobec kobiet w Polsce i Europie.

Materiał i metody. Publikacja została przygotowana na podstawie dostępnej literatury dotyczącej zjawiska przemocy domowej, danych płynących z raportów Unii Europejskiej oraz aktów prawnych.

Wyniki. W Polsce oficjalne statystyki policyjne nie wskazują na wzrost liczby incydentów przemocy domowej wobec kobiet podczas pandemii COVID-19. Statystyki poszczególnych państw europejskich dotyczące incydentów przemocy domowej wobec kobiet w okresie pandemii, tj. od 2020 roku do sierpnia 2021 roku, nie są dostępne. Świadczenia pracowników i pracowników instytucji publicznych oraz organizacji pozarządowych wspierających walkę z przemocą domową kobiet zarówno w Polsce, jak i w innych krajach europejskich sugerują, iż jej problem eskalował pod wpływem zmian wprowadzanych przez regulacje epidemiologiczne.

Wnioski. Zwrócenie uwagi na problem przemocy domowej wobec kobiet podczas pandemii obnażyło wady obecnie stosowanych metod zwalczania i nadzorowania tego zjawiska. Lepsza kontrola incydentów przemocy domowej mogłaby być osiągnięta, jeśli ulepszono by metody gromadzenia danych w tym zakresie, na co wskazują najnowsze dostępne raporty dotyczące skali zjawiska. Konieczne do tego jest wzmożone zaangażowanie instytucji państwowych poszczególnych krajów oraz ich współpraca na arenie międzynarodowej.

Słowa kluczowe

przemoc domowa, przemoc w relacji intymnej, przemoc domowa wobec kobiet, zapobieganie przemocy, nierówność płciowa, narzędzia zwalczania przemocy

Address for correspondence: Natalia Anna Pihowicz, Polish Association of Social Medicine and Public Health, Poland
E-mail: natalia.pihowicz@wp.pl

Received: 18.01.2022; accepted: 09.03.2022; first published: 16.03.2022

INTRODUCTION

The issue of domestic violence has indisputably always been present in Europe and Poland, and is very much a Public Health problem as it affects both the mental and physical health of the victims and overall may result in life-long consequences, including sociological matters in the context of further passing on generational trauma. One of the main causes is that our society is deeply set in a worldwide patriarchal culture which forms the basis for smaller organized communities in which we live our everyday life. Amongst this there are also multiple other factors which impact this problem, more broadly described in a thesis which is the basis for this article, 'The issue of domestic violence in Poland and Europe in the COVID-19 pandemic' [1]. Despite this being what seems to be a never-ending problem, according to European statistics in the past decades, there has been no actual drop in the incidence rate of such cases. Although ways of registering this type of offence may have changed and our awareness may have risen, domestic violence still remains a huge problem and it might remain so if the means used for battling it are not changed. Perhaps the global pandemic might change the perspective of institutions dedicated to helping victims of such gender-based crimes. The aim of this study was to review the methods and tools used to counteract domestic violence extant in Poland and Europe during the pandemic.

As the global pandemic of COVID-19 emerged in Europe in 2020, it took a great toll on people's lifestyles and habits. Enforced restrictions, isolation, quarantine and lockdowns were only few legal tools introduced to prevent the virus from spreading. With all these changes taking place, the subject of domestic violence has arisen among the public; which gives rise to the questions: how are the victims dealing with violence, having nowhere to escape, while the authorities are occupied with pandemic-related actions? How can they find help if they are locked in their houses with their tormentors? The situation of the victims has undergone change for obvious reasons and the risk of them getting hurt has become much more realistic.

When being constantly in the company of violent partner, making a phone call or using the internet may be practically impossible. Ending an unhealthy relationship by finding a job, moving out, or searching for help in designated institutions in the reality of the pandemic is extremely challenging, considering all restrictions which sometimes even involve the banning of any travel. Additionally, some institutions require taking a test for COVID-19, which needs money and time, and then possibly being quarantined before taking someone into a safe facility – quite abstract thinking. How is the victim supposed to do that, in their household where their safety is at risk, or perhaps isolated in a room with their psychological state could be in doubt? Unfortunately, the pandemic has also caused huge delays in court sessions, moving further away decisions about releasing the victims from their tormentors and bringing to life their worst case scenario. It is difficult to find motivation to take any steps in finding further help when the legal system which is supposed to protect the victims, abandons them to their nightmare.

Tools used to counteract the issue. All these factors, once brought to light, have forced European governments to take some measures to combat domestic violence. By examining

them, we can investigate whether they are adequate and if real action was taken. In Poland, at the end of April 2020, the government modified the so called 'anti-violence' Act, implementing a new law which seemed to be quite revolutionary, allowing the immediate isolation of the victim from the violent partner and issuing a restraining order [2]. The victim could then apply to the court for an extension to the period of isolation. Polish non-profit organizations supporting women had been fighting for introducing this law since 2005, and even though the original Act had been amended multiple times, it was not until 2020 that it actually happened and Poland reached the European standard for legal actions in such cases. Although this was a great step forward, the government did not seem to have thought it through entirely, because the amended Act had a six-month *vacatio legis* period. This means that these new rules came into being at the very end of November 2020, when the first wave of COVID-19 occurred and the most strict regulations introduced, e.g. leaving home without a valid reason, were almost over. Another issue was at the administrative level, and raised by the police. They reported not being adequately prepared for these new mechanisms; they neither received nor were trained in using the new forms which were required to be completed when initiating the isolation procedure. In apparent fear of malpractice or abuse of their power, the police began to pass all the domestic violence cases over to court prosecutors, which ultimately created a vicious circle since, as mentioned above, the courts did not actually provide any form of help during the pandemic.

Staying focused on Poland, the Ombudsperson, Adam Bodnar, and his office, collaborating with non-governmental organizations, created a so-called 'emergency plan' [3] aimed at collecting all necessary information regarding finding help for the victims, and taking action if they were at risk of domestic violence during the pandemic. The plan included emergency numbers, the steps to follow when being attacked, and a link redirecting to a map tagging all institutions offering help. Similar plans have also been created by some Social Welfare Centres and published on their websites. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy developed a set of instructions and recommendations for ways continuing to work during the pandemic for aid centres and the police, which also clarify the 'Blue Card' procedure for the police. Provincial offices were asked to create databases to collect data on all institutions helping victims of domestic violence during the pandemic. The Ministry has also strongly highlighted the role of national and local helplines during the crisis. The Polish police, working together with their colleagues in Germany, Lithuania and Latvia, created a mobile app called 'Your Umbrella' [4], the main role of which was to provide a discreet site for calls for help when there was no possibility to find help elsewhere. The site was designed as a 'weather checking' application, which after being tapped twice by the caller, opened another version where the victim could call an emergency number, or reach out to a certain e-mail address which had to be entered beforehand. It also allowed pictures to be taken, as well as audio recordings and videos, or take notes – all in order to collect evidence for potential lawsuits. This application met with a quite positive feedback because it was keeping abreast of the times, although many technical issues were also raised, e.g. some options not being visible when the victim was in actual danger. It should also be borne in mind that in such situations mobile phones can easily be

taken away from the victim. The Polish government did not provide any other legal solutions and did not undertake any further actions (e.g. increasing accommodation in relevant institutions or hiring additional staff).

Moving on to other European countries, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) prepared a report presenting how the pandemic affected domestic violence rates [5]. At the very beginning, the report emphasizes that none of the European Union countries were prepared for such a rise in domestic violence. Additionally, considering how hard it is to obtain data on this subject, it was also said that the report did not depict the actual scale of the issue. All EU countries took some steps to minimize the rise in domestic violence and to somehow soften its consequences. However, only 14 of them decided to actually introduce changes in their existing laws, with the newly introduced regulations mostly focused on creating more places in aid centres or decriminalizing victims who travelled when it was banned, instead of finding solutions which would allow the removal of the tormentor from the household, and improve the work of the police. Given the above, still, only 11 countries actually implemented changes, only four of which were organized by the government, not by NGO's or private institutions. Most of these solutions were also assumed from the very beginning to be temporary and valid only during the epidemiological restrictions. EIGE noted that in almost all countries some sort of governmental campaigns were created in order to disseminate information where victims could find help and support, for example, building special mobile applications or improving the work of helplines. The Irish police took a proactive role by contacting women who had already reported domestic violence incidents in the past, and Irish courts decided to prioritize cases concerning this type of abuse. The French government, after observing the sudden rise in domestic violence in their country during the pandemic, planned on improving their methods of collecting data on this issue to guarantee immediately isolate the victim from the abusive partner.

Luckily, in addition to governments improving their ways, multiple social campaigns and actions have been created during the pandemic. In Poland, a young woman designed and constructed a fake online drugstore which she heavily promoted on the internet. The shop had its list of products which were a disguise for the form of violence which had to be touched by that a potential 'buyer'. When the victim placed an order, volunteers reached out to her to investigate her situation further. For example, they asked questions whether the buyer's skin was sensitive to alcohol, which actually meant if alcohol was an issue in their household. They also asked whether children were a part of the problem and how worrying was their situation. Thanks to this scheme, support was offered to over 350 women, some even outside of Poland [6]. Also online, a hand gesture was popularized – covering the thumb with the other fingers – which meant that the person making the sign was in danger [7]. In Spain, victims of domestic violence could go to a drugstore and ask for a 'mask 19' – a signal for the pharmacist that the woman is in danger and the relevant authorities should be called. The victim would then leave her name, phone number and address at the pharmacy, and could either wait there for help or return home. This public awareness campaign was called 'Mascarilla-19' [8]. The same form of help was adopted in pharmacies in France [9]. Airbnb, an Irish company in

the hotel sector, announced that they will be sharing their accommodations with victims of domestic violence in the greatest need [10].

Data analysis. Considering all the above measures, one would think that the percentage of domestic violence according to official statistics should have dangerously increased during the pandemic. Interestingly, in Poland, the police statistics reveal something quite different. In 2020, the number of completed 'Blue Cards' was approximately 72,000, while in the previous year it reached about 74,000 [11], yet, at the same time, workers from the Women's Rights Centre alarmed the public by saying their helpline was called twice as much as in the prior year [12]. Their words were confirmed by social workers in Blue Line, another institution helping victims of domestic violence [13]. They also said that in multiple cases there was no 'Blue Card' created for the victim, as the police did not show up, blaming it on staff shortage, more urgent interventions, or simply because they decided to ignore the call for help claiming it must have been a typical domestic squabble – obviously.

The World Health Organization has recognized an increase in reporting domestic violence incidents on helplines in all its member countries [14]. A member of EVA Cooperativa, an Italian helpline for abused women, mentioned that although she herself had not seen an increase in phone calls, it was definitely visible in text messages or e-mails, which only proves how hard it may be to simply use the phone under certain restrictive conditions [15]. The UK has also observed a growing need for any tools that would help the victims. In Spain, even the very beginning of the pandemic was tragic in terms of domestic violence – in March 2020, a young woman was murdered by her husband while her two children watched [16].

DISCUSSION

Wishing to somehow evaluate all the measures that were taken in order to tackle the emerging rate of domestic violence towards women during the pandemic, having a closer look at Poland one should say that the six-month *vacatio legis* period for the amendment allowing the isolation of the victim from the abuser, to say the least, is controversial and worrying, especially when social workers and others from NGO's raised this issue back in March 2020 when the first restrictions were introduced to the public. Actions taken by different ministries and the Ombudsperson which were supposed to calm the situation were merely correct but inadequate to the existing circumstances. They did not suggest any new solutions specific for the pandemic reality. The ways of implementing these materials into real life were also of concern – they may have been possible to download and print, but there was no specific order to do so from the government and aimed at aid centres. Thinking of smaller villages where access to the internet is completely different from in the cities, the online guides did not really change anything.

The magnitude of social campaigns organized by citizens and NGO's, both in Poland and in other European countries, and their raging disproportion compared to actions taken by the governments, only show their complete lack of preparation for such situations. The temporary and topical

character of surged control over domestic violence is simply cruel, as it indicates that something as extreme as a pandemic needs to happen, in order for better care to be taken of the victims. Based on this, governments should draw serious conclusions from this period of time and create new tools allowing better supervision of this issue, and even reconsider how women are perceived in society in general.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, official Polish statistics do not indicate a higher rate of registered incidents of domestic violence during the pandemic. As for other European countries, there are no official statistics to verify this, only assumptions. Therefore, it is impossible to truly evaluate the rise or decrease in this problem under the pandemic circumstances. Nevertheless, despite the lack of data on the subject, the testimonies of people involved in combating domestic violence and providing help to the victims, in the whole EU, strongly suggest that these new factors have escalated the problem.

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