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Violence against women

– Social services support during legal proceedings.

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Social workers and social work have been criticized for failing to address violence against women in adequate ways, of blaming the victim and failing to recognize domestic violence as a problem. At the same time, it is the Social services that are responsible for support to abused women, according to amendments in the Social Services Act (2001). This article examines abused women's own experiences of support in connection with the police investigation of domestic violence. It is a qualitative study with six women who all have received support from the Swedish Relationship Violence Center (RVC) in Stockholm. The main findings in the article suggest that support in connection with the judicial process is important. Women's earlier experiences or preconceptions of the social services might prevent them from accepting support or turning to the social services for help.

Keywords: Men's violence against women, abused women, battered women, domestic violence, support.

For more than three decades, men's violence against women in intimate relationships has been an issue in the political debate in Sweden, as is the case in most Western countries. However, there is no doubt that the problem remains widespread in Sweden, where many women still are victims of domestic violence (Brå, 2013). Many women who report violence are not willing or motivated to participate in the subsequent criminal investigation (Belfrage & Strand, 2002). The Swedish government has stated that it is absolutely essential that people who are victims of crime, not least domestic violence, dare to report the offences to the police and that they are supported in a way that enables them to participate in the police investigation and trial (Enarsson, 2013).

The view of men's violence against women in intimate relationships in Sweden during the twentieth century has changed from being perceived as a private matter to considered as a social problem (Wendt Höjer, 2002). The responsibility for dealing with the problem has thus shifted from the family to the community. Solutions are sought through both legal actions and social interventions (support and prevention). The Social Services Act (2001) has been strengthened in terms of responsibility for crime victims in general and abused women in particular (Ljungwald, 2011). Social workers and social work have been criticized for failing to address violence against women adequately; i.e. by failing to recognize the women as victims of domestic violence (Schantz Lundgren, 2011; Münger, 2009; Pyles & Postmus, 2004). For women with previous negative experiences with the social services, it can be difficult to ask for help (Weisz, 2005). The social services' statutory responsibility to assess the vulnerability of children can be perceived as negative by abused women who get their ability as parents questioned, an experience that can prevent women from asking for support and help from the social services (Agevall, 2012).

Aim and research questions

This article examines abused women's attitudes to and experience of support by the social services in connection with the police investigation of domestic violence and trial. The aim is to increase knowledge about the social services function supporting female victims of domestic violence. The article is based on interviews with six women who have experienced violence in close relationships. The following issues are discussed:

1. What kind of support do the study participants describe that they need?
2. How can we understand the support from the RVC and the support from the social services in relation to the women's experiences and need for support?

Previous research and theoretical underpinnings

Research on domestic violence is extensive and it is done from a plethora of perspectives; e.g. on which women seek assistance, when and from whom (e.g. Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). Two internal factors are identified as crucial to seeking support: that the woman wants a change and that she feels she needs help from others to find a solution (Liang et al., 2005). Research has shown that many women first seek help in their private sphere (informal support) and that they only later seek formal support of the police, women's shelters, health care or the social services (Haggerty & Goodman, 2003; Liang et al., 2005). Recent research supports the notion of abused women as active in their actions to deal with the violence, which puts in question earlier images

of the learned helplessness and passive victims (see e.g. Lewis, 2004; Lewis, Dobash, Dobash Emerson & Cavanagh, 2000; Moe, 2007) Most women seek help in many different ways to end the violence (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Bennett Cattaneo, Goodman, Kaltman & Dutton, 2007; Meyer, 2011).

There has been a shift towards legal responses to domestic violence (Messing, 2011). In response there is a criticism, especially from feminist scholars. Critics argue that the risk of an excessively one-sided focus on legal responses prevent women from getting the support they need (Bennett Cattaneo et al., 2007; Gillis et al., 2006; Kaukinen, 2002; Lewis, 2004). Examples of legal responses are so called "No-drop" policies, where all policereports are investigated no matter what the abused woman wants, and mandatory prosecution.

Informal support from friends and relatives is important for many women (Yoshioka, Gilbert, El-Basse & Baig-Amin, 2003), and most women are turning mainly to friends or relatives, before possibly seeking formal contacts. The responses that women receive may be perceived either as positive or negative (Moe, 2007; Trotter & Allen, 2009). Women can get formal social support from many different actors. This might include shelters, religious organizations, health care, social services or special public activities for abused women. "Advocacy" as means to empowerment is highlighted in international research and it tends to focus on the legal process (see e.g. Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Weisz, 2005).

However, some but far from all female victims of violence turn to the police. Studies have shown that women who turn to the courts for help often face a system that is characterized by stereotyped and accusing attitudes towards victims (Meyer, 2011). Distrust of the police being able to contribute to a real change, the fear of reprisals and the perceived stigma contribute to women not seeking help from the police (Jordan, 2004). It is important to note that the welfare system is different in different countries (see e.g. Korpi, 2000). This affects the range of support activities organized in the community, giving women different options when it comes to the active choice about where to seek help and support (Strand Hutchinson & Weeks, 2004).

From a Swedish perspective, research on support for abused women in general, and research on the social services support, in particular, is undeveloped. Hammerin (2010) has studied the social services support to abused women from the social workers' perspectives as well as organizational perspectives (e.g. police officers, women's shelters, prison staff, health care workers). Women with children have priority, over women without children exposed to violence. Routines are more clearly established in relation to women with children. Another finding is that the social workers expressed uncertainty about the procedures and rules of their agency. The strong child focus in the social services can lead to the woman's own needs being neglected. The social workers state that they primarily work to transfer abused women to other agencies and that they lack the ability to offer women support from a treatment perspective.

Schantz Lundgren (2011) connects the negative experiences of support from the social services in her study to the power dimension which characterizes the social services. Women lack follow-up and adequate support. They want a "mandatory" support, but a support that is separated from the social services. In a study by Ekström & Berg (2008) less than half of the female respondents

were satisfied or very satisfied with the support from the social services. About 30 percent were dissatisfied. In Münger's (2009) study the image of the social service responses is also generally negative. Many women report a lack of an overarching responsibility from the municipality, and they experience an inability of the municipality to help. However, there are also positive experiences. Above all, the individual therapy the women received from the social services was described as good and meaningful.

Holmberg & Enander (2007) argue that what they call "significant others" often have a major impact on a woman's breakup from an abusive relationship. The lack of support from the community can be an important factor to why women do not leave violent men (Münger, 2009).

A theoretical model for help-seeking and change

Liang et al. (2005) have developed a theoretical model for understanding the process of abused women seeking help. The model emphasizes that individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural influences affect the woman's perception of her situation as well as her decision to seek help and the form of assistance she seeks. The responses she receives will also affect her problem definition and future decision about support, creating a dialectical process.

Figure 1. Model of help-seeking and change.

If a woman, for example, categorizes violence as an aberrant event, it is unlikely that she would seek help (Haggerty & Goodman, 2003). A close relationship, unlike other social relationships, is characterized by close and extensive contacts such as eating, sleeping, co-parenting, socializing and decision-making. Abusive relationships may be characterized by both violence and love. A close and intimate relationship makes subtle forms of violation and abuse difficult to notice and even harder to understand and define (Liang et al., 2005). An individual's definition of the violence she is exposed to is also influenced by the social context shaped by gender, class and culture.

Individual factors that influence women in seeking help are whether the woman perceives the problem as undesirable, and whether she regards it as unlikely that the problem will cease without help from others (Liang et al., 2005). On an individual level the decision is influenced by the woman's personality. For example if she sees herself as a person who is difficult to get to know, a loner and cautious in general when it comes to relationships with others. This will affect her decision-making. Interpersonal and socio-cultural factors such as gender, class and ethnicity also play an important role for abused women's decisions to seek help or not. Women from countries or religions characterized by strong family ties, patriarchal traits and few divorces can have more difficulties seeking help and support from outside the family.

The decision of from whom or what the woman will seek help is thus influenced by individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural factors. The woman's individual characteristics may influence whether she is primarily seeking social support (e.g. from a therapist, a friend or a religious leader) or if she, for example, seeks help from the police or turns to a shelter. Interpersonal factors such as support from family and friends, affects a woman's ability to seek help from the

police, for example. In addition to emotional support, it is, especially for women with limited financial resources, important with practical help from friends and acquaintances. The decision on where the woman turns to for help is also influenced by sociocultural factors. Class, gender and ethnicity all play a role.

Method

This article reports on the findings of a study of six women who accessed the Relationship Violence Center, RVC. The RVC is a support center staffed by social workers providing social support and advice for female victims in connection with the police investigations and criminal trials in cases of domestic violence. The social workers are employed by the social services, but the RVC is located at the regional police office. The RVC cooperate closely with the social services, the police and to some extent prosecutors. The RVC does not exercise any public authority (see BRÅ, 2013; Ekström, 2010; Ekström, 2011; Ekström & Berg, 2008 and Ekström & Berg, 2009).

This study uses a qualitative design. The six women are not selected for being representative of all abused women or all women at the RVC. It is a small sample, but it has not been possible to convince more women to participate, even though the social workers at the RVC and police officers have tried. Another important argument for using small samples is that women may experience discomfort in talking about their experiences of violence and vulnerability. However, since the study is based on a small sample, grand claims should not be made based on the women's stories alone. Previous research and the theoretical model is therefore used for comparing and analyzing the women's stories (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, for a discussion on generalization in qualitative research).

The six women were selected and asked about the involvement by the social workers at the RVC. There were no selection criteria other than that the women would have gone through a trial and would be willing to talk about their experiences and be able to take part in the interview without an interpreter. There is always a risk of bias to use professionals to get access to study participants since they might select people who are satisfied with their work. Because of the high level of security requirements for abused women, this was the only option for conducting the study. Four women were interviewed between November 2008 and January 2009. Two additional interviews were conducted in January and February 2010. Three of the women have other ethnic backgrounds than Swedish. The youngest is in her 20s and the oldest in her 60s. Two of the women have small children. They live in different municipalities in the area of Stockholm:

Table 1: Description of the six women.

The men were convicted in all cases. Five of the women stated during the interview that they had no present relation to the man and one woman stated that she had started seeing her boyfriend again.

A semi-structured interview-guide was used. The themes in the guide were developed from the results from a survey conducted with clients at the RVC during 2007 and 2008 (see Ekström & Berg, 2008). All the interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

In the process of writing this article the original transcripts in Swedish were used. In the first step, all six transcripts were read to get an overall view. Important sections about experiences of support were underlined. In the next step the theoretical model developed by Liang et al (2005) was used and narratives about decisions to seek support, earlier experiences and different kind of support were identified. This can be described as a vertical analysis (Thomsson, 2002). Next, the parts in the same categories were copied in to a new document so that all sections about e.g. the decision to call the police were put together. This step can be described as a horizontal analysis.

Since the women have been victims of violence and in some cases still live with a factual threat from the abusive man, confidentiality and privacy issues are crucial. All personal data is changed along with any other details that can reveal the women's identity. The names are fictitious. To ensure anonymity, details about the women's backgrounds are disguised. Data excerpts used have been translated with the assistance of a professional proofreader. The study follows the ethic requirements described by the Swedish Research Council.

Results

The decision to contact the police

As mentioned earlier, previous research has shown that abused women often seek support in their own network, and often from several different people (Yoshioka et al., 2003). The women in this study describe that they have received support and been "pushed" by friends or relatives. Some of the women describe it in the terms of there being no turning back as the relatives have notified the police, or that the violence has resulted in visible consequences (injuries) impossible to hide. The two women who have young children emphasize the realization that the violence was affecting their children as crucial in their decision to issue a police statement and to try to end the violence. Karin is one of these two women:

Karin: I had lodged a police report two years earlier. Which I withdrew. This time ... previously when I made the police statement, no one was aware of it. This time, the beatings became so rough that it was impossible to hide anymore. I started to tell my family what had happened. I felt that it had gone so far, and I saw how my child was doing. There was no turning back.

What is happening is, in other words, that the women begin to define the violence also from their children's perspective and thereby change their understanding of the problem (cf. Liang et al, 2005). The very first response from the police and the support from the RVC are described as important. The acknowledgement that they are right, that they should stand up for themselves and that there is help to get plays a role in the decision to participate in the legal process. This

becomes particularly clear in the interview with Amineh. She has made several statements to the police before:

Amineh: It took almost six years before I dared to acknowledge it (police report, my note). We had been in touch with the police for the same reason, but I felt completely at the mercy of my destiny. If I were to report him, what would happen then? If he was released? Because the times when he had been put in jail and was released the next day it felt as if I was exposed to this for the rest of my life.

Amineh chose, on several occasions, not to answer questions when the police approached her on the grounds that she or someone else had called the police. In the quote below, it appears that she believed that the police would pursue the matter anyway, which was obviously not the case:

Amineh: I didn't understand what the police said when they called me every time. They said: do you want to collaborate? It felt like I would be there and run a trial (...) it made me say no each time. And then I took for granted that the police would pursue the matter so that he would end up in prison, so I would not have to because I did not have the courage. Each time it resulted in me being disappointed in the justice system.

When lodging the previous police reports, she had not experienced the same level of support and had not gotten the impression that help was available. Her own experience in contacting the police, but also the image she had of the police and the community being able to provide assistance, has influenced her (cf. Liang et al, 2005). All women talk, however, about "having had enough" or wanting to end the violence, as the main reason for why they contacted the police. Wanting to end the violence, however, is not the same as the women wanting the man to be punished or wanting the complaint to result in a trial which several of the women in this study emphasize (see e.g. Grovdal, 2012).

Support needs

In the interviews, the women describe support from various individuals, agencies and organizations. Ulrika describes that she was able to get answers to many practical questions and support, which was crucial for her:

Ulrika: She (the social worker from the RVC, my note.) has given me a feeling of tremendous security. It has made me function and has given me a feeling that I have control of the process. I have not even been close to this situation before. And this particular feeling of security in having a person who really knows all this. She knows what she's talking about and she helps me until it's done. (...) I could have ended it this long ago and said that I would withdraw the police report. (...) If she had not existed, I would have never gone through with this.

Several of the other women describe that they had a need for information about police investigations and how a trial takes place. They have received this support primarily from the RVC. Some of the women say they have had good legal counsels that gave them some support.

Some are dissatisfied, saying that the counsels have had too little time and have not been able to provide the support or information that the women needed.

All six women have had one of the social workers from the RVC present at the trial. It is described as very important. For many of the women there has not been an option to have a friend or a relative present because they do not want to give them detailed information about the violence. In other cases, friends or relatives have been witnesses and thus have only participated in the trials during the testimony. Karin chose not to have relatives there, but she still felt that she needed assistance:

Karin: I did not want it (relatives or friends at the trial, my note.) The second day, there were many who would testify. But the first day, it was only the police who were there. I thought it was very nice. But at the same time I could feel that I needed support. Especially when the drugs were mentioned, and that it had been going on for several years. To have Asa (social worker from the RVC, my note.) there all the time, and the fact that she, as soon as she noticed anything, put her hand on my shoulder. It is something that during the trial really has attached to me.

The social worker from the RVC has in most cases been sitting next to or near the woman in the courtroom and has been able to assure her, for example with glances, nods or a hand on her back. It has given the women the support and acknowledgment needed to be able to answer questions and able to sit in the same room as the man. Ulrika mentioned the time before and between court hearings as times when the risk of feeling lonely and left out is substantial. The social worker from the RVC was already in place when she arrived and it was significant. They also had time to go through the practical questions that Ulrika had. Her counsel walked away to talk to the man's lawyer when there was a pause in the trial hearings. For Ulrika it was important that the social worker from the RVC was there for her and was able to answer her questions.

In addition to practical support (advice and information on how a preliminary investigation and a trial is carried out) the most important need of assistance, according to the women in this study, has been to have someone to talk to. The RVC has given them an opportunity to talk, cry and get assurance about all the emotions and fears that are brought up in connection to the police investigation. The high level of availability is described as important. They have known that they are able to call at any time and often the RVC themselves have made contact just to ask how the woman is feeling. Maria is the woman who has had the least support in her own network and just to get someone to talk to has been important:

Maria: The only thing I needed was to talk it out with someone. This I could not broach with my family or my friends. It is so embarrassing to say that I have been beaten. But now I can, sure, I have not told everyone, but there are some people I've been able to talk to. But when this happened, I could not talk to anyone. I was not brave enough. Or, I was not strong enough.

Some of the women have had a need for relief during the most acute phase of the preliminary investigation and trial. Karin describes that she could not think ahead because of the fear of the man. She "lived by each second" and the social worker from the RVC gave her a sense of

security. The social worker from the RVC had a coordinating role between the social services and the counsel:

Karin: She has helped me with everything. All I have needed. We had a lot of telephone contact during this time. I could always call her and ask legal things that came up and she found the answers. Until the trial, she was my contact, and even the one who was in contact with my lawyer. Moreover, she had contact with the social services.

Several of the women express a wish for help to change residence. They have not dared or wanted to stay in the apartment where they lived with the man. In Stockholm, it is very difficult for most people without substantial assets to acquire a new residence. Maria shared the apartment with the man who abused her. She wanted help in getting a new apartment in the same area, but it was not possible. Based on the women's descriptions, it also seems to be difficult to make an apartment swap. Amineh says she needed help changing her apartment, but has not been able to get help from someone and that is why she now lives with a relative:

Amineh: The only thing I think is still lacking for women who are prone to the same problem is accommodation. (...) Maybe not a permanent residence, but an accommodation when the woman is in such a bad shape, both physically and mentally. Not having to share a room at a shelter where you do not know what is happening and who is there. But a home is the only one thing you think there should be resources for.

I: Is there anything that you have asked for or been in need of?

Amineh: I was not homeless. I had an apartment, but I did not want to continue living in it. It was a matter of safety, I did not dare. Of course you don't. There should be help, especially for those who have a home, to swap it. Not that a homeless suddenly should get an accommodation. Just these things should be emphasized more. I think there is a real concern for many. (...) I was afraid to stay there, but paid the rent anyway. I had to go on sick leave and had a low income, lower than what the rent was. All that was a drawback that makes the whole thing worse. I worried about how I would cope with everything financially when all this is over.

Karin received an apartment from the municipal Housing Service. The social worker at RVC arranged a request for priority access to the housing office and the woman got a new apartment in a few months. She says she probably could have received help with the request for priority access through the social services or the women's shelter, but it would have taken much longer. Tanja says she is waiting for priority access for changing her apartment, but it has been six months since the police report was made. The women describe how they need and tried to get help to change their residences, but in several cases it has not been possible for the social services (or anyone else) to assist them with this. It is an example of structural elements, in this case a very severe housing shortage, affecting the assistance available.

The women in this study talk about many different support contacts, which is consistent with results from other studies (see e.g. Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Bennett Cattaneo et al., 2007; Meyer, 2011). All have had counsels, but the experiences differ. In some cases, women have had very little contact with their legal counsel and are disappointed in the lack of support, even if they think that the legal counsel have done a good job during the actual trial. Several of the women

have had contact with women's shelters. Contact with psychologists is mentioned by several women. Some of the women have turned to health care.

The Social Services

There is only one woman (Karin) who has had a lot of contact with the social services. The RVC worked, according to her, as a link between the social service efforts, the RVC's support and the police. She is very pleased with the support of the social services, including income support, accommodation at the women's shelter and counseling for her child. Tanja, the other woman with young children, has also been in contact with the social services. When she made a police report, she met with the social services almost every week. Tanja had lived in Sweden for three years and had no income of her own. She was therefore in need of income support when the man was arrested. Tanja expresses no criticism of the social services, but during the interview, she reveals that the man still has the keys to the apartment and since he is on parole at the time of the interview, she becomes very worried when we hear sounds from the door. It turned out that it was just the postman. The event makes me ask her if she should not change the locks:

Tanja: Yes, I will. The problem is that I have no money. I have to get it.

I: But you will get help from the social services to change the locks?

Tanja: I'm waiting on a call about income support. I do not know how I will pay my bills.

Tanja's story shows a clear gap in the social service support system. She has received emergency assistance in relation to the police investigation and it is likely that the social services made a child investigation about the child's situation (hence the frequent meetings). But she has not yet received any more long-term support. That is why she, during the interview, is waiting for a call, while the man can in fact enter the apartment at any time.

Amineh, who during the interview lived under an assumed identity, began an application for income support at her social services office, but felt the requirements for completion of the documents impossible and she therefore did not go through with the application. She does not describe any other help from the social services office:

Amineh: I do not know why, but it has never happened that I have received help at some point. (...) I was offered to seek social support during that time because I had a low income. But at the same time I know that it is so demanding. I should complete one paper after another (...). It felt as if I don't care about the money. God, I have no energy to think about those things. Gather a bunch of documents and send for a few hundred. I felt so bad so why should I care about it? (...) I needed help and it felt like they could not do anything.

Ulrika explicitly says that she cannot imagine going to the social services office for support. For her, the social services office is a place where you go if you need money:

I: Would the social services be an option for you?

Ulrika: No, never. For me ... the social services... no, why? The social services for me is about if you were to be without a job and need money. It's my first thought. I have no children or other problems. (...) I would never contact them. You solve it in some other way.

Ulrika also says that it is an advantage that the RVC is on the police premises. Turning to the social services office would be just "one more thing to do".

To sum up, women's view of support, particularly support from the social services, are influenced by what Liang et al. (2005) define in terms of individual, interpersonal and socio-cultural influences. This applies to the perception of the "problem", i.e. their perception of the violence, as the decision to seek help and who to seek help from. This process is not linear, but a process where the woman's perception of herself, the violence and her support needs are constantly changing.

Discussion

The findings in this article show that support in connection with the judicial process is important for abused women. It has been important to have someone to talk to and to get advice and information about legal aspects. Support for women in the legal process also increases the chances of her wanting to turn to the police and the courts again for help (Gillis et al., 2006). Sullivan & Bybee (1999, 2002) have shown that women who receive support in connection with the judicial process, have more alternative support contacts and to a lesser degree are subject to repeated violence, compared to women who did not receive the same support (see also Bell & Goodman, 2001; Weisz, 2005 for similar results). Several studies have shown that there is a need for a holistic support that combines financial support, employment, child care, transportation, counseling about the lawsuit, etc. (Gillis et al., 2006). It is important to emphasize that support during the judicial process should not replace other support, e.g. from social services or women's shelters. Support in connection with the judicial process also excludes all those women who do not choose to turn to the police, which is important to keep in mind when support for abused women is discussed.

The social services have increasingly been charged with responsibility for support to abused women (Ljungwald, 2011). This article shows that women's perceptions of the social services are crucial to whether they seek the social services' support or not. In Amineh's case it has to do with negative experiences of, as she sees it, unreasonable and formalistic requirements. For Ulrika it is her general perception of the social services that prevents her. She does not define herself as a client. The two women in this study who have had contact with the social services have children. Under Swedish law, the police must notify the social services when they become aware of cases of domestic violence where there are children in the families. This means that the social services also work actively towards women with children (Hammerin, 2010). As Agevall (2012) points out, the contact can be perceived as a questioning of parental ability and thus pushing women away from support from the social services. This is not the case for either Tanja or Karin. In Karin's case, cooperation between the social services, the RVC and the police worked well and she is happy with the support she has received. Tanja's story unfortunately shows the gaps in social service work, which is even subjecting her and her child to an increased risk.

Interestingly, although Amineh is deeply critical of the response from the social services and

Ulrika specifically says she is unwilling to seek help from social services, they have received support from the RVC, which implies they in reality have received support from the social services. The social workers at the RVC are employed by the social services, but they work without authority. They thus have a freer role in relation to the women. This, coupled with the clear geographical link with the police, is creating a form of bridge that helps the municipality reach abused women reluctant to the social services.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings in this articles gives examples of how earlier experiences or preconceptions of the social services might prevent abused women from accepting support or turning to the social services for support. This is important to consider in policy work concerning domestic violence. Arranging support outside the social services, as in the example of the RVC, is a way of reaching women in need of support. Another important implication for policy is the notion that abused women are in need of different kinds of support, depending on their own capabilities, networks and the nature of the violence.

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