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Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper published in *Nordic Social Work Research*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Ekström, V. (2016)

Negotiating and justifying social services' support for female victims of domestic violence.

Nordic Social Work Research

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2016.1203813>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:esh:diva-5354>

Negotiating and Justifying Social Services' Support for Female Victims of Domestic Violence

Veronica Ekström

Doctoral candidate

veronica.ekstrom@liu.se

Linköping University

Department of Social Work

581 83 Linköping

Sweden

Abstract

The social services in Sweden have become key actors in the field of support for female victims of domestic violence. However, knowledge about what kind of support the social services offer is underdeveloped. The aim of this article is to examine social workers' perceptions of the needs they meet among female victims of domestic violence, what kind of support they offer to meet these needs, and how they use their discretion to negotiate and justify their work. The article builds on a qualitative analysis of interviews with social workers. The analysis shows that the social workers have a great deal of discretion, as a result of framework legislation and a high status among local politicians and managers. However, both specialization and a lack of available services limit their discretion. What an abused woman is offered or is entitled to is negotiated and justified depending on, for example, which services are available, whether the woman is considered to have own resources (not only financial but also emotional and practical), and if the social worker is available. Three main strategies for reducing workload are identified: increasing demands for authority decisions, transferring responsibility to others, and placing requirements on the abused women's actions and attitudes.

Key words: social services, domestic violence, IPV, discretion, street-level bureaucrats

Introduction

In Sweden, the social services' legal responsibility for offering support to abused women has been clarified and strengthened on several occasions since the early 1990s. With help from theoretical underpinnings by Nancy Fraser (1989), we can understand this development as a struggle in which abused women – particularly through the women's shelter movement – have had their needs acknowledged. These needs are then negotiated, reformulated and made concrete in what Fraser calls the administrative system. For the social services to tackle the issue, it needs to fit into their existing operations. What started as a political struggle with demands for the rights of a vulnerable group is being transformed into individual needs and characteristics to be met through efforts within the social services. The scientific knowledge about the results of these negotiations is a critically underdeveloped field, however, so this article aims to contribute knowledge about the social services' support for female victims of domestic violence. The aim is to examine social workers' perceptions of the needs they meet among female victims of domestic violence, what kind of support they offer to meet these needs, and how they use their discretion to negotiate and justify their work. This is done through a qualitative analysis of interviews with social workers.

Previous Research

Holmberg and Bender (2003) argue that there is a tendency among local politicians responsible for the social services and managers to refer domestic violence back to the private sphere, even though it has been defined as a political issue in a national context. According to Holmberg and Bender, the responsibility for offering support to abused women is transferred to the social services or individual social workers, without political directives. This carries a risk that the violence will be neutralized and the women's vulnerability will thus be neglected (Mattsson 2013).

Violence against women occurs in all socio-economic classes and ethnic groups, but its consequences and the need for support differ (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). There is a great amount of research on abused women's needs (see for example Clough, Draughon, Njie-Carr, Rollins and Glass 2013; Hahn and Postmus 2013; Hydén 1999; Gillis et al. 2006; Goodman, Bennett and Dutton 1999; Ekström and Lindström *et al.*), but little is known of how the support is handled within the social services. Social workers and social work have been criticized for failing to adequately address violence against women and to recognize them as victims of domestic violence (von Schantz Lundgren 2011; Münger 2009; Pyles and Postmus 2004;

Seith 2001). According to Saur (2007) the discourse on abused women as powerless victims who need to be rescued from violent men prevents social workers from doing individual assessments. For women with previous negative experiences of the social services, it can be difficult to ask for help (Weisz 2005; Ekström 2015). This is also the case for women who do not categorize themselves as clients or part of the target group of the social services (Ekström 2015). In a British study, Keeling and van Wormer (2012) show how social workers can in fact contribute to the problem of women's experiences of domestic violence. They argue that from the women's perspective, the social services' tactics accentuate their sense of powerlessness.

The few existing studies on the Swedish social services' support for abused women show that the social services tend to focus on women with children (Hammerin 2010; Ljungwald and Svensson 2007). However, more recent studies suggest that this has changed (Ekström *et al.*). The social services' statutory responsibility for child protection can be experienced by abused women as negative, since their parental abilities are questioned (Agevall 2012). Many, but not all, women express discontent with the social services' support (Ekström and Berg 2008; Münger 2009; von Schantz Lundgren 2011). There is a lack of knowledge of how the social services work and what kind of support they offer (and on what grounds) to female victims of domestic violence. This knowledge is essential if we are to understand and improve the support for abused women. According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats, like social workers, are characterized by a high degree of discretion in their work and their relative autonomy from organizational authority. This discretion enables them to interpret and adjust political and managerial decisions and, in fact, to make policy (Lipsky 2010; Brodtkin 2011; Evans and Harris 2004). Therefore, to understand what kind of support the social services recognize and provide to abused women, it is necessary to study the street-bureaucrat level in addition to legislation, guidelines or written policy.

The Social Services' Responsibilities

In welfare states like the Nordic countries, the government's role is central and social policy reforms are based on universal principles, compared to liberal or conservative welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). Differences in welfare systems affects the range of support activities organized in the community, giving women different options when it comes to the active choice of where to seek help and support (Strand Hutchinson and Weeks 2004). The welfare

sector in Sweden has had a relatively small, but important, voluntary sector, for certain kinds of vulnerable groups such as abused women, vulnerable children and homeless people (Lundström and Svedberg 2003). Even though the social services' responsibility for supporting female victims of domestic violence has recently been fortified, the work done by the women's shelter movement – funded by both the government and, in most municipalities, the local authorities – is seen as important (Ekström 2012). A great deal of the work done in the women's shelters movement rests on the voluntary, unpaid work of individual members. One service offered by them is safe living accommodations; women's shelters ("skyddat boende"). These women's shelter sometimes employ staff, but could also rest on voluntary work. As a result of this, the shelters offer different levels of support. In varying degree, they also provide support like hotline assistance, counselling and accompanying the woman for appearances in court or visits to social services (Eliasson and Ellgrim 2007). Women's shelters where abused women can stay are also provided by some municipalities and by private enterprises. In most cases, a woman needs a decision from the social services to stay at a women's shelter.

The social services' work is regulated in the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453). The act is based on the right to self-determination and is designed as a framework legislation for social goals. The provisions are open-ended, rather than prescriptive. The act gives local municipalities relatively large autonomy in designing how the goals in the act shall be reached within the local context. It is local politicians in the Social Welfare Board who are addressed in the act, not social workers or the social services. A lot of decisions are however in reality delegated to the professionals depending on local decisions. Local politicians are important for the social services both as actual decision-makers and as responsible for the budget and priorities. Åström (1988) shows how parallel norm systems regulate the practical work within the social services: national law, regulations from the National Board of Health and Welfare and local policy. In 2014, the National Board of Health and Welfare issued new binding regulations concerning cases dealing with violence in close relationships, including both adults and children (SOSFS 2014:4). The new binding regulations mainly concern the formalization of investigations and risk-assessments, and not what support should consist of.

An important aspect when the Social Services Act was originally enacted, was the holistic perspective (Pettersson 2014). However, the present legislation mentions several specific target groups: children, elderly, people with functional impairments, substance abusers, family care givers and crime victims. Svensson and Åström (2013) argue that subsequent reformations, like for example adding target groups, in the act have de-

emphasized the holistic perspective. Abused women are especially high lightened within the last category and it is stated that the Social Welfare Board should pay particular attention to women who are or have been exposed to violence or other abuse by relatives and may be in need of support and help to change their situation.

Street-level Bureaucrats and Discretion

According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats – like teachers, police officers, social workers and other public workers – are characterized by a high degree of discretion in their work and their relative autonomy from organizational authority. Street-level bureaucracy organizations involve complex tasks that call for sensitive observation and judgment, for which rules, guidelines or instructions cannot circumscribe the alternatives. However, it is important to stress that discretion is neither good nor bad (Evans and Harris 2004). The result depends on how the street-level bureaucrat uses it, and what kind of result we define as good or bad.

Inadequate resources, an increasing demand for services, vague or conflicting goal expectations, and non-voluntary clients are other significant aspects that influence street-level bureaucrats' working conditions (Lipsky 2010). The transformation of individuals into clients is a necessary process to make their workload and difficulties manageable for street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). This social process includes fixed categories and standardized units. Lipsky describes this as a process that is often open to influence from prejudice and stereotypes in society as a whole or from the individual street-level bureaucrat. Although agreeing with Lipsky's general theory, Evans (2011) argues that Lipsky pays insufficient attention to the role of professionalism in his analysis. Professional status has an influence on the extent of freedom an occupational group can exercise and their degree of discretion, and also has an impact on the relationship between managers and workers.

Lipsky (2010) identifies three general responses street-level bureaucrats use to manage their work situation. The first strategy consists of developing procedures that limit the demand and organize efforts to find solutions within the financial framework that exists. Modifying the definition of their work so that the gap between business goals and available resources is reduced is a second strategy. The third strategy is to modify the perception of the clients to reduce the gap between business goals and performance.

Method

Empirical Material

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 16 social workers. They work in various municipalities, differing in both population and size. The smallest provide support for about ten women per year, while one of the largest provides support for 350 women per year. The table below describes the 16 participants, their organization (whether they work in a special department for domestic violence or in some other department within the social services) and their main function, categorized as treatment or authority (formal investigations, need assessments and decisions on support):

Table 1. Description of study participants.

<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

The interviews were conducted in two stages. The first stage, consisting of three interviews, constituted a pilot study. After the first three interviews were analysed, an additional 13 social workers were interviewed. To get as rich material as possible, social workers from municipalities with varying forms of organization of work with domestic violence were selected, e.g. with special departments for domestic violence, with special support centres outside the social services office, and without a special organization for domestic violence. The chosen design gives the material width, which was deemed important as this is a highly understudied field. Since the empirical material was not chosen to be representative of all municipalities or all social workers, the results can not be used to for example statements about how common or how large differences are. The study can only describe and analyse differences and aspects of these differences. The pilot study was conducted in spring 2014, and the remaining interviews were conducted during the period October-December 2014.

Prior to the first interview a semi-structured interview guide with open questions was developed based on previous studies (Ekström and Berg 2008; Ekström 2012; Ekström 2015), and was modified after the analysis of the three pilot interviews. Examples of the questions used are: What kind of problem is men's violence against women? What is the social services' responsibility in relation to this problem? What kind of support do you offer? How

do the needs differ among different groups of women? The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Malterud (2001) points out that the analysis of qualitative research must be thorough, well prepared and documented, and the conducting of a pilot study facilitated this. The analysis in this article is done through conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The first step was to read all the interviews in full from beginning to end. Then, the interviews were put into a program for qualitative analysis, Open Code 4:02, and were then read again – this time verbatim, line by line, with statements coded continuously. The codes were developed during the work. After the first screening and coding were done, the procedure was repeated to verify that the codes developed later were not missed in the previously coded interviews. This allows the material to be read both as single interviews (vertical) and as different themes together (horizontal) (Thomsson 2002).

Trustworthiness

Graneheim and Lundman (2004) highlight three concepts in relation to trustworthiness in qualitative research: *credibility*, *dependability* and *transferability*. To achieve this, interview participants with different experiences were chosen to increase the possibility of getting different perspectives on the research question. The participants in this study work in different places, with different tasks and under different conditions. Also, quotations are highlighted in the article to increase credibility. Interviewing, processing and analysis have all taken place in the course of one year, which increases the dependability. Extensive empirical materials can carry a risk for inconsistency during collection. The study consists of semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, which has resulted in a fairly large body of empirical material – seen from a qualitative perspective. At the same time, the body of material is not so large that it is impossible to survey. To facilitate the reader's assessment of the study's transferability, I have tried to account for the interviews as thoroughly as the article format permits.

Ethical Considerations

The study does not contain sensitive personal information, and is therefore not covered by the requirement for approval by an ethical board. All the same, the requirements set by the Swedish Research Council (2011) have been met. The social workers participated voluntarily, and received information about the study's purpose. Further, they participated anonymously

and were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. They also received information on how the interview material would be used and reported.

Results

The results are presented in two main sections. The first – *Policy in Practice* – discusses women's needs and sources of support. Housing, financial and practice support as well as psychosocial support are areas that are discussed. The second – *Discretion in Practice* – analyses the social workers' discretion and their strategies within this discretion.

Policy in Practice – abused women's needs and sources of support

Housing – acute, protection and long-term

Accommodation is an important aspect of abused women's needs, according to the interviewees. Sometimes because the woman is threatened and needs to hide from the abusive man and sometimes because the woman needs support due to for example psychological consequences of the violence. In some cases the woman needs a new home. This can be interpreted as three different levels of needs: *need for protection*, *need for support* and *need for housing*. An abused woman can have one or several of these needs and they can vary over time.

A common service for abused women is placement at a women's shelter. Some of the social workers say it is almost never a problem to find a vacant place at a women's shelter, while others say it is often problematic. If many shelters are full, it is time-consuming for the social workers to find a vacancy. It happens that the social workers place abused women in hotels or hostels, when they cannot find a shelter. Some women may be more difficult to find places for, such as those with disabilities or many children:

Sometimes you're refused ten times before you find a place. It may be that "we have room for two nights but then you have to find something else". But sometimes it goes really fast. And if there are special needs, like disabilities or many children, or language skills, and such things. Of course then it's often more difficult to find a place. (...) In the worst case, if everything's full, we have to use a hostel.

A women's shelter is described by some social workers as something that can be an option even in cases where there is not a specific threat but their assessment is that it would be a better option for the woman, i.e. in cases where the woman has a need for support and not a need for protection. Other social workers only use women's shelters if there is a need for protection:

You know, we have no "roof-over-your-head" guarantee in this municipality. If you've been abused and you don't need protection, and can live somewhere, whatever it may be. Then we tend to look at what you have in your own network. Can you live with a family member? Can you stay with an acquaintance or friend where you still feel safe? (...) We look at that first. If that isn't available, yes then we have to look at hostels.

Some of the social workers describe that many abused women have to stay at shelters longer than they need, because it is difficult to find a new place to live. This is expensive for the social services and the social workers also emphasize that it is not optimal to live in an institutionalized environment longer than you have to. Another problem is that women without need for protection or support occupy places in women's shelters that could be used by other women.

The social workers say the most acute situations usually dissipate; it is rather the more long-term support that has its shortcomings. Several of the social workers describe having limited possibilities to actually help the women with finding a new place to live. The support they can offer consists for example of referring the women to the Internet to search for alternative accommodation. In one of the municipalities in the study, the local politicians have decided that some of the apartments within the municipal landlord are to be reserved for the social services' clients; this is one of the few of the municipalities included in this study where the social workers do not talk about housing problems as a major issue. Some of the municipalities have a municipal housing service and a special queue for social priority. In such cases, the social workers write priority certificates. One of the social workers describes writing many such certificates and that this is usually effective, but takes a long time; it usually takes up to a year before a woman gets an apartment. In one of the larger cities, several social workers say it has become increasingly difficult for abused women to get social priority, even with a certificate.

Financial and practical support

Financial support is an important aspect for at least some categories of abused women. Many are in need of financial support, sometimes only temporary while living in a women's shelter and sometimes long-term. Even for working women with financial assets, it can be difficult to have full control of these before the separation or divorce is final. But this is an even more important issue for women who lack financial resources. A social worker at a special department for domestic violence describes spending a great deal of time to dealing with issues related to poverty.

Many women also have a need for practical support, according to the social workers in this study. There is a variety of different things the social workers do, sometimes within the formal investigation and sometimes as a service. Information about parental responsibility, collecting the woman's things from her home, mediating contacts, accompanying the woman to trial and filling in forms are examples mentioned in the interviews. The social workers have a great deal of influence on what practical support the abused women receive or do not receive, due to the low degree of regulation within the law and national regulations. For example, some of them mention that they can accompany women to trials, but they only do it if they have the time. A social worker at a special department for domestic violence, where the majority of the women are immigrants, says that the need for basic information about the community is essential in many cases:

We work very practically. Many (of the women, my note) have never been to the bank and many have never even owned an ATM card. So we go to the ATM and show how to withdraw money. We show how to pay your bills. We show how to ride the subway. We go to the post office. We fill in forms. We help with all the practical stuff around you that has to function. So she'll be able to think one step ahead.

Psychosocial support

One of the social workers at a special department for domestic violence describes how practical issues often prevail over more emotional or psychosocial support:

Many times it happens that these women, when they've received support with all the practical aspects, then they sort of can't cope with more. It's enough. And then you can think, oh no, now when we'd finally be able to work with what you really need help with. Then she's had enough with the social services and maybe it's taken a long time and it feels like most of the practical stuff is sorted out. Well, then you lose that contact.

As shown in the quote, women with a great deal of practical needs never get as far as psychosocial support, even though the social workers consider it to be her main task. It is often women with poor language skills or poor knowledge of Swedish society who have the most practical needs.

The kind of support that varies the most between the municipalities is the kind that can be labelled as psychosocial support, even though of course the need for psychosocial support also differs among abused women. In some municipalities women are not offered any kind of counselling at all, but the social workers provide information about, for example, services offered by women's shelters. In other municipalities, women are offered contact with professional therapists with special knowledge about violence. Some of them use the term "treatment". Others have separate services where women can visit on their own to get support, but this study also shows that there are difficulties in collaboration and that social workers sometimes lack information about what these separate services can offer women as well as whether women actually visit them (see also Ekström *et al.*) The social workers in some municipalities in the study say that women can get psychosocial support if they stay at a women's shelter that provides it. These social workers do not provide support for women who do not live at a shelter. A woman can, of course, seek counselling or treatment on her own at a women's shelter (if the local one provides it for women who do not stay there) or seek therapeutic treatment from the regional psychiatric clinic or a private enterprise. However, in the light of the social services' responsibilities for abused women, the differences are questionable.

To sum up, the social workers' descriptions reveal differences between the municipalities in support for abused women, and these differences can be explained not only by an adjustment to individual needs or local conditions. By focusing on the social workers' discretion (Lipsky 2010) we can deepen the understanding about the support offered by the social services. In the

following section of the article, the social workers' descriptions will be analysed with help from the theoretical perspectives on street-level bureaucrats and discretion, outlined earlier in the article.

Discretion in Practice

The social workers' discretion

Lipsky (2010) defines resources and law as important factors for street-level bureaucrat's discretion (see also Brodtkin 2011). Evans (2011) emphasizes that social workers professional status also has an impact on their discretion. According to this study, working with domestic violence has a high status within the social services. For example most of the social workers have actively chosen to work with domestic violence, and several describe that politicians as well as managers listen to them. Some social workers can make decisions on their own, while others say that their assessment matters a great deal when formal decisions are to be made. There is an awareness of men's violence against women among both local politicians and managers, according to the social workers. Domestic violence is described as a politically important issue and a subject that is prioritized financially, even though the social workers stress that they could do much more if they had more resources to employ more colleagues. Some of them compare their own situation with colleagues in, for example, child-welfare or drug-addiction departments, where the situation is described as worse.

As described earlier, the Social Services Act (SSA) gives both municipalities and individual social workers extensive discretion. However, the new binding regulations from the National Board of Health and Welfare (SOSFS 2014:4) are more detailed, which means decreased discretion for the social workers. Several of the interviewees describe changes as a direct consequence of these binding regulations. One example is the increased demand for formal investigations and risk assessments.

How the social workers choose to use this discretion is an important explanation for why the offered support differs. Social workers can use their discretion to limit support and set up boundaries to clients getting support, but also to push the boundaries and offer special attention and support to certain (worthy) clients (Lipsky 2010). How the interviewed social workers do this will be discussed in the next section.

Using discretionary powers

The need to reduce one's workload is connected to the amount of work and the available time. There are several examples of how the social workers use their discretion to limit support. Some of the social workers describe that they earlier have offered practical and psychosocial support without a formal investigation or authority decision. Limiting both access to and extension of support results in fewer cases and shorter interventions, which reduce the social workers workload (cf. Lipsky, 2010). The social workers can also use their discretion to determine when the responsibility becomes someone else's. The social worker in the quote below answers the question of whether she collaborates with the department for social assistance when a woman has moved to a women's shelter:

I can, but I don't. I don't do it because I think the staff at the women's shelter should do it. That's how I work. It's something you learn eventually. If I take on too many tasks, the list will be long and it never ends. So, we have to limit ourselves somewhere. Since I work with all kinds of stuff.

What the social worker does, in other words, is to transfer responsibility to the staff at the women's shelter. This is an example of how she handles a work situation in which she finds it necessary to establish limitations. Another example of using discretion to limit support is to place demands on the abused women. Below, a social worker describes how she and her colleagues place different demands on women:

I think we work a bit differently. We have different flexibility in accompanying women. We're a bit different in trying to challenge her to do things on her own or establishing contacts for the woman.

One could of course argue that "challeng(ing) her to do things on her own" is about empowerment. However, without an individual assessment of each woman's needs, it might also be an effective way for social workers to limit their own work.

Some of the social workers require that the woman wants to leave the abusive man if she is to receive support from the social services. One of the social workers explains that they do not work with women who are ambivalent. Another says she can provide two or three meetings with women who are ambivalent, but no more than this. Other social workers say that they do

not want a “holding function that makes it bearable” for the woman to stay in the relationship, but can offer support in the form of talking about this ambivalence. This becomes a way of limiting the access to support by deciding who will receive it and who will be denied. Social workers in other municipalities have no such requirements. On the contrary; in some of the interviews it is emphasized as important to not have such demands since it is considered important to reach out to all abused women.

The way the social workers use their discretion to limit their work can be categorized in three strategies: 1) limiting access to open services by demanding formal investigations and authority decisions; 2) placing requirements on the abused woman’s attitude towards leaving the abusive man; and 3) defining the social services’ task concerning abused women and transferring responsibilities to the abused woman, other departments within the social services, or other agencies or organizations. These strategies share similarities with the strategies described by Lipsky (2010).

The interviews also consist of examples of how social workers use their discretion to benefit clients. Social workers describe how they can contact colleagues in other departments and discuss different solutions, for example a certain women’s shelter they believe would be better. One of them describes being able to choose to handle the financial support (social assistance) and that they do this sometimes because it is better, especially if the woman is staying at a women’s shelter. Again, this is a way of using one’s discretion to improve the support for certain clients:

We’re not more generous, but we can make faster decisions and we can also grant...if you need diapers or clothes. Even if you have it in the apartment, you might not have access to it. It can be that kind of decision and then we handle the case.

Boundaries for discretion

In addition to what has been discussed in the article – legislation, resources and status – according to this study there are two aspects that affect the social worker’s discretion: organization and the market of services. I therefore suggest that Lipsky’s theory of discretion (Lipsky 2010) might be refined if we include these two additional aspects.

Municipalities that have chosen to create specialized departments working exclusively with domestic violence are more likely to develop specialist skills and fast decision-making, tailored for abused women (Ekström *et al.*). None of the municipalities in this study, however, have gathered all the support for abused women within the same department, which means that all social workers need to collaborate with colleagues in other departments. This creates a great deal of frustration, due to different assignments and levels of knowledge:

I think it's a lack of knowledge and probably a...they're surely under a lot of pressure regarding what they can do, and time pressure. They have enormous amounts of cases and haven't had the possibility to visit women's shelters if we invite them. They never have the time to do it. We probably have very different realities, and I think it becomes a culture that differs a lot from our culture, and how we see our work and role and how they do.

The social workers' discretion is limited by difficulties in collaboration, and when assessments differ within the social services. A social worker at a department for child protection describes a case in which an abused woman was only granted housing and food, but nothing more, by her colleagues at the department for social assistance:

It gets really...this woman lives under enormous pressure from this man. And then she suffers from economic pressure as well. Living on assistance for food that has to also cover medicine and everything else you need. I have a case like that right now, and it's something you...it's really heart breaking.

The social services in Sweden have undergone the same marketization as many other parts of the welfare sector under the paradigm of New Public Management (Blom 2006). The social worker's task is to investigate needs and make assessments and, after this, make decisions about support that (often) someone else will provide. The social workers are thereby dependent on what kind of interventions or services are available. This is evident, for example, when it comes to difficulties in finding vacancies at women's shelters; the lack of services limits the social worker's discretion. As mentioned earlier, some municipalities offer

no services in the form of counselling, unless the woman happens to be staying at a women's shelter that provides it.

In other cases, services might exist but are not always suitable for or adjustable to the individual woman's needs. One example of this is a special treatment programme, developed by social workers at a special department for domestic violence. The programme consists of a series of predetermined topics:

We work with violence and therefore think we've processed everything worth processing when the woman's gone through this programme of 17 topics. If she has problems with other things, she has to have contact with other people. But the violence will be more or less...that process...we've done all we can in that process.

The programme described by the social worker in the quote above is a service that will be assessed and determined by her colleagues. It has a predetermined form about what topics will be discussed and the program is what they offer abused women; in other words, the social worker who makes the formal decision has little or no possibility to adjust it or demand other psychosocial interventions.

A social worker who only works with domestic violence describes other interventions she feels are missing:

Women are usually very worried about the children, and it's because of the children's need that they have acted, and they require support and assistance for the children. We've been told many times that they (the abused and the abuser, my note) shouldn't get the help as a couple. You should talk to them separately. And it's become almost like a kind of prohibition to even talk. In some cases, they might want help to talk to the other parent about what's happened and how to deal with it in the future. Like that. You want the children to get help and support. I think they often ask for that. And we've even said no, we don't offer that, unfortunately. And then I think it's a bit tough.

A social worker from a department of social assistance emphasizes the lack of interventions as the hardest part when it comes to cases of domestic violence, especially services after placement at a women's shelter:

I actually think it's the lack of interventions. Yes. The lack of interventions and support after a women's shelter. It's not hard to put her in a women's shelter. It's not hard to arrange protection. The hard part is to help her with her life after that. That's what I'd like to develop much further. The time after the stay at a women's shelter.

Conclusion and Final Comments

The aim of this article was to examine social workers' perceptions of the needs they meet among female victims of domestic violence, what kind of support they offer, and how they use their discretion to negotiate and justify their work. The results indicate that housing (both women's shelters and permanent residences), financial and practical support, and counselling or treatment are needs they see among their clients and try to address. Finding a women's shelter is more difficult for certain groups of women, for example those with disabilities or many children. Permanent housing is troublesome in several municipalities because of the housing market. Women without financial assets have little chance of obtaining a new apartment in several parts of Sweden. Even though many women who contact the social services need some sort of economic or practical support, it is especially poor women and those from other countries who need a great deal of support. The practical needs sometimes stand in the way of psychosocial support. Whether abused women get psychosocial support seems to differ. The social workers emphasize that it is primarily the long-term support that is hard to accomplish, while the acute situation is usually manageable, in their view.

The analysis of the discretion available to the social workers in this article shows that they believe that support for female victims of domestic violence has a high status within the social services and among politicians. Even though resources are described as limited, the situation is also described to be worse in other parts of the social services. The framework legislation that governs the social services gives social workers wide discretion, which, however, is restricted by the recent binding regulations set by the National Board of Health and Welfare.

For example, the Board's requirement for formal investigations is something that several of the interviewees describe as transforming their work.

What an abused woman is offered or is entitled to is thus negotiated and justified depending on, for example, which services are available, whether she is considered to have her own resources (not only financial but also emotional and practical), and whether the social worker has the time.

This also means that regulations (law and policy), financial resources and status are not sufficient for explaining the social worker's discretion, according to this study. Both how the social services organize and specialize their work as well as the available interventions are important factors. This is illustrated in the figure below:

Figure 1: The social workers' discretion

<FIG. 1 ABOUT HERE>

The figure above illustrates that it is more than formal law, status and resources that affect social workers' discretion. How collaboration within the social services function is an aspect of organization and specialization. Since support for abused women is often handled in several different departments, organizational aspects become important for understanding support for abused women (Ekström *et al.*). Specialization is also linked to factors such as external supervision and training, which are also important for the support social workers offer and how much discretion they have. The lack of available interventions on the market that is constituted by the social services, women's shelters, private enterprises and others, sometimes creates barriers to social workers providing support to meet the needs they see in women. Housing is a concrete example that is evident in this study, psychosocial support is another.

While social workers within their discretion negotiate and justify what becomes the social services' support for abused women, the negotiations are also part of the ongoing process concerning how abused women's needs are negotiated, reformulated and made concrete to be handled within the framework of the social services (cf. Fraser 1989). This also raises other questions. What constitutes reasonable differences between municipalities and individual social workers? The differences this articles show among social workers raise a number of questions about what the social services' task is when it comes to offering support to abused women. What are abused women entitled to, and how can they defend their rights in an organization so strongly influenced by the local supply (e.g. psychosocial support or housing) and social workers' discretion?

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