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POLICY BRIEF

PROVIDING STRONGER PROTECTION FOR VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN GHANA



GHANA

This brief was developed by the authors as part of the ELLA Programme. It was developed based on a Regional Evidence Paper [Beyond Domestic Violence Laws: Women's Experiences and Perceptions of Protection Services in Ghana](#) by the same authors, which contains an overview of regional evidence, as well as original data collection and analysis, on a particular research topic. All publications can be found in the [ELLA programme website](#).



Providing Stronger Protection for Victims of Domestic Violence in Ghana



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SUMMARY

Ghana passed the domestic violence act as far back as 2007 but the absence of a legal instrument backing the law has left the provision and coordination of support services, such as shelters for domestic violence survivors, in the hands of mostly non-state actors. Until recently Ghana had only one shelter, owned and run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) – the Helpers Foundation. The Government has now set up another shelter in Accra but there is little empirical evidence to help us understand the nature of these shelters and the services they provide to domestic violence survivors. The Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA) has conducted a study on the Helpers Foundation’s shelter which is indicative of the kinds of policy interventions needed to improve protection services in Ghana. In our study we found that though the shelter faces financial constraints and does not offer a wide variety of services, domestic violence survivors gained security and support that helped them in the recovery process. On the other hand we also discovered that the shelter’s policies undermine clients’ economic independence and family ties and that because the shelter has no clear exit strategy clients have difficulty leaving the shelter to lead more secure and independent lives.

In this policy brief we advocate a more comprehensive approach to protective services in

Ghana is one of only six countries in West Africa and 20 in sub-Saharan Africa to have enacted legislation to combat domestic violence. Although the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2007, there are still no decrees for

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Ghana, including the provision of shelters. We share the experiences of both clients and staff at the shelter established by Helpers Foundation and recommend a model of shelters that provides strong protection and support to clients, taking into account the need for them to generate income and have contact with family. We also recommend firm exit plans that support survivors to transition out of shelters as soon as practicable. We acknowledge the financial implications of setting up shelters and suggest that it is better to take an incremental approach to providing shelters for survivors of domestic violence in Ghana than to provide none at all.

ensuring its full implementation. Consequently, the law is not yet fully operationalized.

Although there is a plan to address domestic violence more comprehensively, it is not being implemented.

Ideally, effective legislation should focus on the three P's – Prevention, Protection and Punishment. In Ghana, the focus is primarily on Punishment thus the state provides legal interventions to survivors of domestic violence such as specialised courts designed to fast-track domestic violence cases and a specialised police unit – the Domestic Violence Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU).

Ghana needs to improve the protection of domestic violence survivors by adopting a more holistic approach. Such an approach should include measures that provide space and support for the recovery of survivors of domestic violence.

The Case for Shelters

Shelters are an example of the kind of protective services that help survivors recover from domestic violence. They are facilities designed to shield them from their abusers and prevent future harm while offering opportunities for rehabilitation. When survivors find violence unacceptable they tend to seek the services of a shelter, especially when the abuse is sexual and the perpetrator is a family

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member. Unfortunately, although such facilities are mentioned in the Act, shelters are not central in Ghana's domestic violence interventions.

This Policy Brief highlights the need for shelters as a way of improving protection services in Ghana. Studies have shown shelters are important interventions that provide space, security and support to survivors on their road to recovery from domestic violence.

Research conducted by the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA) of the University of Ghana at the Helpers Foundation – one of two shelters currently operating in the country – reveals the inadequacy of protection services in Ghana and highlights the important role shelters can play in this regard. Conducted in July 2015, the research documents the experiences and perceptions of protection services by survivors. Interviews with staff (social workers, program managers, nanny) yielded information on how the shelter was managed and what services were available to clients. We also interviewed survivors of domestic violence living at the shelter to ascertain the nature of violence they had experienced, the kind of help they had sought in the past, their perception of the services received at the shelter and their aspirations post shelter. Staff perceptions of what protection is and how it can be improved, also formed part of the research.

Conditions at the Shelter

The Helpers Foundation's shelter is located in a small undisclosed town in Ghana. It has the capacity to house up to 30 people, including children. At the time of the interview the shelter was home to six women, mostly from low economic backgrounds, with little education. Some had children ranging from age one to eight.

The facility has five on-site staff some of whom have some training in dealing with gender-based violence. They include a caretaker who is a trained social worker; a housekeeper who holds a Senior High School Certificate and has training in gender and advocacy; a 60-year old nanny and two security staff. There is also a manager who is located in the offices of the Helpers Foundation in Accra who oversees activities at the Shelter.

The shelter focuses on providing psycho-social support and skills training to its clients. Specifically, it offers clients a place to live, psychological counselling and therapy, food and clothing, as well as medical care. It also assists clients to access vocational and other educational training and covers all costs associated with it. Children are placed in schools in

the vicinity and the shelter provides day-care services to those who have not attained school-going age. The shelter also mediates between clients and the various state institutions mandated to provide services to survivors such as the police, courts and healthcare centres. Clearly therefore the shelter is playing a central role in helping survivors to better access essential services and to take control of their lives.

Experiences of Shelter Survivors

Clients reported that before arriving at the shelter they had experienced a combination of different forms of abuse such as sexual (including incest), physical and emotional (threats of violence, threats of withdrawal of financial and material support) abuse. They also experienced low levels of cooperation from their families in their efforts to access help, and mixed reactions from institutions charged with the responsibility of providing services to victims of

domestic abuse. Survivors' experiences with legal interventions were generally negative with most clients feeling poorly treated by the police and the courts. Clients also faced obstacles in receiving medical care because though the law states it should be free, domestic violence survivors are made to pay medical fees which they often cannot afford.

In-shelter experiences, however, are generally positive, enabling survivors better access to many of the services and help they need. The shelter has therefore become the main support system for victims when the extended family system fails. Those who felt rejected by family saw the shelter as a place of refuge where they and their children found safety and peace and could heal and ultimately make decisions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We advocate a more comprehensive approach to protective services in Ghana, including the provision of shelters.

Ghana needs to provide integrated treatment and protection for women and children who survive domestic violence. This requires taking a comprehensive approach involving stronger links among multiple sectors such as the education, health and judicial systems, mass media, police and social services. These stakeholders must work together to create an efficient social programme that prioritises the care and protection of women. Importantly it would require also improving shelter services across the country. We therefore suggest the following actions:

- Activism around domestic violence and the need for the provision of more shelters with requisite services to support survivors of domestic violence.
- Implementation of the National Domestic Violence Policy and Plan of Action.
- The establishment of a model of shelters that takes into account the cultural expectations of work and family. Shelters must offer strong protection and support to clients,

and at the same time address client's need for income generation and contact with family. A more rigid exit plan for each client that is time bound in order to reduce dependence of clients on the shelter and bolster their independence.

- Dissemination of information on the services of shelters, and the provision of hotline numbers as well as contact information for the general public.
- Continuous training on the special needs of domestic violence survivors and the importance of ensuring that they do not experience secondary victimization targeted at frontline staff and duty bearers likely to come into contact with survivors, especially at health posts, police stations, courts, and shelters .
- Educational programmes at different levels such as schools, workplaces, places of worship, markets and through media aimed

Further reading

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