

KWDI Issue Paper

Research Title: Transforming the support system for the victims of domestic violence in the post-pandemic era

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Directions and Challenges of Support Policies for the Victims of Domestic Violence in the Post-pandemic Era

Abstract

- ◆ Since Covid-19 officially declared a pandemic in March 2020, the spread of the virus increased the level of personal and societal tension. Concerns were raised that measures imposed to stem the spread of the virus could increase women's exposure to the risk of domestic violence (hereafter referred to as DV) and bring adverse effects on gender equality as public health measures forcibly restricted people's movements.
- ◆ South Korea entered a post-pandemic era in April 2022 in earnest as the government lifted the social distancing measure. While the pandemic exposed problems pertaining to the existing support system and policies for DV victims, little research has been done regarding the limitations of the support system and how problems were intensified during the pandemic, how to address the problems, and what the future directions and challenges of support policies for DV victims are.
- ◆ The problems revealed in the implementation of support policies for DV victims during the Covid-19 pandemic have a potential to resurface in future crises. Therefore, it is important to review and address the problems and improve the support system in order to ensure a stable and reliable provision of support services to DV victims in a potential future crisis.
- ◆ This research will review the concept and structural components of a support system for DV victims, analyze interviews with DV victims and service providers, and examine overseas case studies in order to suggest future directions and policy agendas of support policies for DV victims.

Research backgrounds and issues

- In the early phase of the pandemic, major international organizations, including the UN and WHO, and countries expressed concerns that the pandemic might increase women's exposure to the risk of domestic violence and deteriorate gender equality as the spread of the virus raised personal and societal tensions and restrictive public health measures would prevent women from leaving the place of abuse.
- There was also a similar concern in South Korea that while the likelihood of domestic violence increased as people were forced to spend more time at home, it might be more difficult to get help than before the pandemic. In the early stage of the pandemic, responses to domestic violence fell short of meeting the specific needs of victims. It is thought, however, that crisis response measures in policies on gender violence and domestic violence improved over the course of time.
- South Korea entered a post-pandemic era in April 2022 in earnest when social distancing was fully lifted. While the pandemic exposed problems pertaining to the existing support system and policies for DV victims, little research has been conducted regarding the limitations of the existing system and how the problems were intensified during the pandemic, how to address the problems, and what the future directions and challenges of support policies for DV victims are.
- The problems revealed in the implementation of support policies for DV victims during the Covid-19 pandemic have a potential to resurface in future crises. Therefore, it is important to review and address the problems and improve the support system in order to ensure a stable and reliable provision of support services to DV victims in a potential future crisis.
- This research will review the concept and structural components of a support system for DV victims, examine overseas cases studies, and analyze interviews with DV victims and service providers in order to suggest future directions and policy agendas of support policies for DV victims.

● Concepts and structural components of a support system for the victims of domestic violence

- ▶ Both the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1993 and the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women stipulate that the procurement of essential services and support for the safety and recovery of DV victims is not the responsibility of an individual but of the state and the whole of society. Paragraph (e) of Article 4 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, in particular, recommends state parties to “Consider the possibility of developing national plans of action to promote the protection of women against any form of violence, or to include provisions for that purpose in plans already existing,” highlighting the importance of building an integrated response system for violence against women in national plans of action.
- ▶ According to the UN Women, a national action plan should include the followings as key elements: care, support, and empowerment of victims/survivors; protection and justice; and system coordination and integration (UN Women, 2012: 44).
- ▶ Provision of appropriate support services is essential in order to secure the safety, protection, and recovery of DV victims. According to the UN Women, free essential services for DV victims include emergency helplines, police and justice sector response, health care, safe accommodation, shelter, and psycho-social counseling (UN Women, 2020: 2).
- ▶ Support services for DV victims suggested by the Council of Europe Convention include legal and psychological counseling, financial support, accommodation, education, and training and support for employment. The Convention also stipulates that states should guarantee victims’ rights to access medical and social services, provide such services, and establish legal and other measures necessary to ensure professionals to receive training on dealing with victims.

● Interview outcomes

● Interviews with employees at victim support organizations

- ▶ A total of 16 activists who have five years of experience or longer at Women’s Hotline 1366, counseling centers, or shelters for the victims of domestic violence. All interviewees reported changing policy environments and needs in regard to support for DV victims, acknowledging the limitations of the existing support system. Although there were some differences in the details of their circumstances, all acknowledged a need to review and revise the initial directions and operation models of the existing system, and human and material resources for support for DV victims.

- ▶ Since the establishment of the 1997 Act on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims, laws and programs designed to facilitate support for DV victims have gradually evolved. However, a lot of problems have been overlooked while new issues have emerged and added on top of old problems. It is time to check if the existing support system would be sufficient to address these problems or if a comprehensive overhaul is needed.
- ▶ When it comes to victim support services during the pandemic, interviewees experienced difficulties due to lack of operation manuals/guidelines and links between different support programs, closure of service providers, and/or changed services. These reports suggest a need to revamp the support system for DV victims.

Interviews with victims

- ▶ A total of 15 women who received services from law enforcement, Women's Hotline 1366, counseling centers, and/or shelters between February 2020 and the time of this research were interviewed.
- ▶ Most victims started experiencing abuse from the beginning of their relationship with their spouse or their marriage, rather than abuse having been caused by environment factors related to the pandemic. They experienced control and isolation imposed by their abusers. According to interviewees, the degree of abuse worsened over time and often developed into obsession and stalking with intensifying verbal, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and economic abuse.
- ▶ Offenders often sought forgiveness after inflicting abuse and used the need to protect the family and children as an excuse to prevent their spouses from reaching out for help. The more forgiving a victim was, however, the less sensitive to violence the family became; and sometimes the victim was accused of being responsible to isolation and continued abuse.
- ▶ As to reasons for not having reported to police in the early stage of abuse, the majority of victims said that they had thought it was "not bad enough to report." The predicament of victims was aggravated by social prejudice against domestic violence, that it is a personal or trivial matter, a sense of responsibility to protect the family, and social perception that victims are responsible for abuse.
- ▶ According to the interviewees, the services they received from police, Women's Hotline 1366, counseling centers, and shelters were greatly helpful. When it comes to policy needs, interviewees called for strengthening policies to support victims' self-reliance efforts, separation of offenders from their victims and strengthening punishment, limiting custody rights for the offenders of domestic violence, improving counseling centers to be more adaptable to a pandemic situation, and modernizing shelter facilities.

Overseas case studies and implications

- ▶ Overseas cases examined in this study prioritized the safety of victims in all aspects of support services, along with an emphasis on victim-centeredness to ensure the voices of victims to be heard and to protect victims' right to self-determination. Important elements in victim support policies included the provision of sustained services, expansion of services to meet the diversifying needs of victims, strengthening the capacities of service providers, improving policies regarding funding, providing service guidelines and evidence-based services, and assessing program effectiveness.
- ▶ National-level organizations for DV victims served as a communication channel and intermediary for organizations that provide direct services to victims. Here, a gender perspective on domestic violence was key to communication with and among service providers. This seems to enable national organizations to have the power and status to steer the direction of DV services amidst the changing landscape of service environments. These organizations also provided technical support and programs for service providers in order to help facilitate support for victims during the pandemic.
- ▶ Local service providers strived to help fulfil the varied needs of victims based on the understanding of the unique aspects of victimization in domestic violence. They offered practical support that helped victims to sustain their lives by linking and relaying to varied services; helping victims to engage in economic activities while raising children in a safe environment; providing a safe place for victims' pets; and ensuring that no victims are excluded from services due to age or disability.

Policy suggestions

Shifting policy directions on support for DV victims

Approaching domestic violence from a gender perspective

- ▶ Given the hierarchical nature of gender in domestic violence, it is important to understand that domestic violence is not an accident that occurs due to one's particularly violent trait but is a gender-based violence that occurs due to a gendered social structure. A gender-sensitive approach is essential.
- ▶ Approaching domestic violence from a gender perspective is understanding the hierarchical nature of gender and that domestic violence is a social problem caused by a gendered social structure rather than an unfortunate accident. A gender-sensitive approach can lead to the understanding of social contexts behind domestic violence and practices that encourage moves toward gender equality.

Strengthening victim-centeredness

- ▶ One of the most important things to consider in policies on support for DV victims is the provision of direct services and programs for victims, the goals of which should be to secure the safety, restoration of life, and self-reliance of victims. The work of support organizations should be focused on the development and provision of direct services for victims.

Understanding the diverse and intersectional nature of victimization

- ▶ Due to a changing landscape around family and society, it is expected that gender-based violence would increase and diversify. In order to guarantee appropriate support for all victims of domestic violence regardless of gender, marital status, age, income, ethnicity, gender identity, and disability, it is necessary to review and improve the overall support system based on a solid understanding of diversity and intersectionality of victimization in domestic violence.

Operating sustainable and permanent support facilities

- ▶ It is necessary to establish support facilities for DV victims as an essential service that should be provided regardless of circumstances and to have in place a firm principle of operation so that support facilities can be operated in a stable and predictable manner in any potential crisis.

Improving the support system for DV victims

Shifting the directions and methods of operating service providers

- ▶ Establishing victim-centeredness and support for their self-reliance as a principle of operation
 - The provision of direct services to victims should be a top priority in the operation of service providers. Victims should be seen not as a subject for protection but as an agent who could achieve independence through appropriate support.
- ▶ Providing barrier-free support facilities to all
 - It is important to make support services available and accessible to all DV victims regardless of gender, abuse type, marital status, having children or not, age, social status, gender identity, and disability.
- ▶ Establishing an integrated support system for DV victims
 - It is necessary to establish a system for referral and sharing of information and data among service providers. Related information should be disseminated to the employees of service providers through in-service training or handbooks.

Areas of improvement by facility type

► Women's Hotline 1366

- As a frontline responder to domestic violence, Women's Hotline 1366 should review and strengthen its role, perspective, and identity.
- In order to secure a stable provision of initial counseling and shelter services, both of which are critical elements in hotline services, standardized guidelines on service provision should be made available and reviewed on a regular basis.
- It should make its emergency shelters adaptable to the changing status of shelter residents. It also should seek measures to improve their shelters in the longer term.

► Counseling centers and shelters for DV victims

- They should have clear goals of in-person and online counseling and have in place standardized counseling techniques suited to the characteristics of different counseling channels.
- It is necessary to create an integrated counseling management system encompassing in-person and online counseling.
- Once standardized counseling techniques and an integrated counseling management system are established, related training should be provided to the employees of counseling centers and shelters so that they can be seamlessly implemented in the field.
- Topics in training programs for service providers may include victim-centeredness, the importance of the self-reliance of victims, diversity and intersectionality of victimization, the importance of providing barrier-free services to all.

Improving laws and institutions

► Revising the Domestic Violence Punishment Act

- The term "protection of the family" should be deleted from the purpose of the law. The law should be revised in a way to clearly focus its goal on the safety, recovery, and self-reliance of victims.
- Research is needed to review the effectiveness of the existing Family Protection Case System and to identify areas of improvement by using overseas case studies and expert consultations.

► Separating offenders from their victims and strengthening punishment

- In order to protect the victim and her children in an incidence of domestic violence, the offender rather than the victim should be isolated and subject to increased punishment when violating the separation order.
- For offenders who violate restriction orders imposed to protect victims, immediate interventions should be made. Such interventions may include using an offender tracking system, detention, or aggravated punishment.

- ▶ Restricting custody rights
 - It is necessary to consider the introduction of custody rights restriction as to those with a history of domestic violence.
 - Important points for consideration in determining the wellbeing of children should include the history of victimization in domestic violence and child abuse, as well as the concept of a main offender.
- ▶ Improving the standards of operation for shelters
 - The operational standards for shelters should be revised in a way to enhance the independence and autonomy of shelter residents.
 - It is necessary to examine the effectiveness of the “one room for one family” policy at shelters and to create ways to expand it in the longer term.
 - The standards for support facilities should be gradually improved over the course of a long term with a goal of providing a barrier-free access to support facilities for all.
- ▶ Revising the existing asset-based support system
 - Budgets may be secured in order to provide an immediate livelihood subsidy to victims when they are admitted to a shelter. Then, their assets may be assessed to decide whether to draw the subsidy from national or local funds.
- ▶ Expanding support for self-reliance and housing
 - Information-sharing with related organizations, such as the Korea Land and Housing Corporation, may be considered in order to improve accessibility and efficiency of housing support for DV victims.
 - Continued research and development of programs, such as the temporary program to secure basic income for DV victims, are needed to promote the self-reliance and decent living of victims.

Identifying blind spots in the areas of victim support

- ▶ Finding ways to support victims beyond shelter residents
 - It is necessary to actively seek ways to reach out to victims who are not shelter residents.
- ▶ Introducing a support system through which victims can receive support for self-reliance and recovery while maintaining their daily lives and economic activities
 - It is necessary to develop programs to help victims receive support for independence and recovery without the need to break from their lives. Examples may include a paid sick leave or a safety leave.
- ▶ Surveying the experiences and policy needs of victims and service providers on a regular basis
 - It is necessary to conduct regular research to gather the experiences and opinions of victims and service providers regarding support services.

References

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