

## St. Albert Shelter for Single Women and Mother with Children in Lodz as the example of reality of homeless women and children in Poland

What are the main reasons for coming to the shelter?

1. The first and the most common situation which leads to crisis of homelessness is a situation of domestic violence. Unfortunately there still not enough protection for victims of domestic violence in Poland. In spite of current legislation which theoretically demands from perpetrators of violence to leave immediately, in practice is absolutely dead. When the domestic violence appears, the victims are pushed to run away and abandon their place of living searching for help. Women and children find such an institution as a shelter to protect their family.

It is also very often (almost always) connected to lack of support and good enough relationships with their close relatives who are also burdened with various dysfunctional models. Those models and systems of behavior are multiplicated and carried on through next generations. For that reason homelessness seems to be kind of result of emotional and social deficits which had come into existence many years before.

Children are the natural receivers of those patterns and deficits which their mother had experienced and learnt.

That's why it so important to embrace with full and complex but at the same time on the very basic level support both mother and the child.

This picture of trans generational emotional deficits was very clearly seen when for example mothers and children were proposed to engage in various activities. When those were activities in which mother and children could function separately, in other words, when the mother was able to care for herself only like e.g. in some body experience, dancing, fitness etc. Then there was a lot of takers. Probably because of that mothers could act and behave like children by letting themselves to be spontaneous, full of joy and breaking their protective barriers of fear and shame. Of course children as much gladly as their mothers were taking part of such activities.

But when the music therapy appeared as a form of shared activity where mother was expected to accompany the child then the effort to be in close responsive relation with the child was apparently too much to take for most of women. And the interest in this activity disappeared in short time.

2. The next reason for crisis of homelessness among women in shelter is a wide spectrum of mental health issues. Starting from borderline, narcissistic or other personality disorders to depression, bipolar affective disorder, anxiety disorders or psychotic disorders. And many more. It is often related to domestic violence as well. Not so rare is a situation of

struggling with mental suffering with alcohol or other psychoactive substances like e.g. drugs or benzodiazepines.

And when those circumstances appear then mother is not able to get in close and save relationship with her child. This emotional abandonment in which the child grows up into can cause a lot of difficulties such as lack of sense of security, lack of emotional balance and consequently has small chances to learn how to self-regulate efficiently. And as we know it is vital to deal with tension and stress.

So where is a difficulty in impulse control there is a fast way to problems in relationships, hyperactivity (which is, to be honest, just a way to deal with too much tension), low self-esteem or even more severe disorders.

Women who experience a mental crisis are hungry for childlike needs to be taken care of. Definitely far more difficult for them is to find an internal space to contain strong emotions of their children. Accordingly, children start to develop several ways to deal with such deficits:

- either they are acting out their emotions, involve into sharp conflicts including physical or psychological violence, they literally fight for attention and they unfortunately get it by making mother angry and desperate
- or they quickly learn to hide all the emotions, they start to be shy, withdrawn, introverted, they stick to the people who are seen as safe and they remain in pathological dependence (sometimes becoming dependent personality disorder). This is also a picture of a nice, polite child which is strengthened by environment as less troublesome. But at the same time for this child it is definitely only a survival strategy which can lead to suppression of feelings and being on touch with ones needs up till complete isolation from those needs. Then it can be a basis for becoming a victim of violence in the future. And the circle is closing again.

What can we do to make a change?

There are a lot of various activities dedicated to women and children during the stay in the shelter. Some of them are especially for women alone like parental competence training. Some of them are only for children like various workshops (sports, kitchen, arts, photography, science). And finally some of them are joint like preparing and then taking part of traditional polish celebrations e.g. Christmas time, Easter, Children's Day, Mother's Day, Carnival etc.

In everyday life staff of the shelter offers help in solving current problems. Every inhabitant has her individual key worker with whom she is mapping out a path to get out of difficult situation.

In my point of view, the most important thing in that kind of situation is a good relationship. Without it, the whole work, no matter how much sophisticated and complex, is just a piece of work so that results are quickly disappearing. That is why I've always put a great emphasis

on building a personal not only professional relationship. And I am encouraging women and children to be in a safe therapeutic relation outside the shelter. So that they are independent of what happens in the institution and they still could be supported in spite of what they have done or not.

An Institution such as the shelter has its limits. There are rules which do not fit to every situation. Also there are people who have their own emotions and not always have them in full control. And when there is no outside, objective supervision it seems to be easy to dive into deep, negative emotions which inhabitants of the shelter are full of. There is a lot of fear, lack of safety sense and loads of frustration in their internal world as a consequence of their hard life history. And on the unconscious way those feelings are passing over to others. So if we don't have awareness of this process we are easily exposed to be deep in it. But our job is to be aware of that and do not act out but to contain and give it back as an understanding and wise support like Winnicott's "good enough mother" does.

Thank you,

Malgorzata Ciolkowska