

Addressing Violence and Gender Inequality in Greece The Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence (Karditsa Women's Center)

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ABSTRACT: The operation of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Women's Center of Karditsa (Greece) aims to deal with female abuse, to enable women who have suffered violence to regain their self-esteem and to support them for a better quality of life in the future, intra-family or not. This qualitative study highlights the value of the operation of the Women's Centers of the Network of Structures for Gender Equality in Greece, the remarkable work of the executives of the Karditsa Women's Center, and its contribution to the wider region, through semi-structured interviews. However, it was found that reducing and preventing violence against women is equally important to dealing with it. The effective and systematic prevention and confrontation of violence against women is fragmentary in various Centers in Greece. And, this is because power relations between the sexes, prejudices, and deep-rooted stereotypical perceptions lead to violent and aggressive behaviors. The research concludes that dealing with violence against women demands the appropriate education of boys and girls regarding gender equality and a strategic cooperative approach of all stakeholders (police, prosecutor's office, medical services and medical care, social welfare service) involved in the protection and support of the victims.

KEYWORDS: Gender-based violence, domestic violence, Women's Counseling Support Center for Victims of Violence at the Women's Center of Karditsa (Greece), addressing violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This case study resulted from the extreme interest in domestic violence by males against females that was revealed after the mandatory confinement due to the pandemic. Concerning the recent data from the femicides in Greece, supportive action for abused women was in ultimate demand. The Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Women's Center of Karditsa (Greece) is a public organization that focuses on supporting abused women. In this context, the executives of the Karditsa Women's Center were willing to provide information regarding the operation of the Center, their intervention, the characteristics of the victims served by the Center and also of the victims of domestic violence, as they ascertained from the descriptions of the abused women, and the multifaceted consequences of the phenomenon on the individual, family, and social level. Therefore, the research highlights the value and remarkable work of the Women's Centers of the Network of Structures for Gender Equality in Greece. On the other hand, the question remains unanswered as to why there are still cases of male domination between the sexes, prejudices, and deep-rooted perceptions that ultimately lead to violent and aggressive behaviors when institutional bodies have taken actions to deal with violence.

1. The huge issue of Gender Equality

Significant democratic deficits in any modern society are power relations between the sexes, multiple discriminations linked to the sexes based on various prejudices and deep-rooted perceptions, and, finally, the

strengthening of diverse discrimination that creates and exacerbates already existing social inequalities (<https://womensos.gr/ethiko-sxedio-drasis-2/>).

Historically, feminism's contribution to the movements and demands that led to an international dialogue on women's rights and thus, created better conditions for the women's lives and daily routines, has been decisive. However, groups and associations that promote gender equality and are active in democratic societies find that " *at least in Western societies, we are facing a historical regression, due to neoliberal rule and its values* " (General Secretariat for Gender Equality in Greece, 2017: 8).

According to the Gender Equality Report of the European Social Committee, one would not expect women in the 21st century to comprise the majority of the economically inactive, to be the most vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, and violence, and to face major economic difficulties, just as in the previous century. However, no one can fail to recognize that in recent years at a global level, people have experienced health, economic, climate crises, etc. The consequences involve the worsening of the already unequal living conditions of women and men. As research confirms, in all crises of humanity, the female gender is affected more than the male. Under the current circumstances, it can be pointed out that the rights of women and girls are threatened, and there is a fear that the new challenges created by the crises will reverse all the efforts that have been made for years now regarding the recognition of women's rights (EIGE, 2023, Gender Equality Index 2023).

In Greece, according to the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (2017), women's rights have received a multifaceted attack from the economic crisis. This crisis has affected both their right to equal inclusion in the labor market, leading many of the women to unemployment, and their right to participate in politics and society. And, this is because their return to home and the resulting financial deficits limited any freedom of movement and participation. But also during the health crisis with mandatory confinement, an increase in gender inequalities was observed. This fact places the importance of gender equality at the heart of EU policy to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in the short and long term (EIGE, 2023). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2023) surveyed all 27 EU Member States from June to July 2021 on gender equality and the socioeconomic consequences of Covid -19. The results of the research are reflected in the Online report Panel Survey of Gender Equality and Socioeconomic Consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic (2023) where, among other things, not only the effects of the Covid -19 pandemic on work-life balance but also on gender equality are highlighted. In fact, during the Covid-19 crisis, rates of domestic violence increased and this was largely due to financial issues (Sharma & Borah, 2022).

A systematic review of 32 studies from around the world up to July 2020 found that the economic impact during the pandemic was linked to domestic violence, and indeed in many countries many victims of domestic violence remained "hidden" (Kourti et al., 2023). Even sadder is the record of femicides: In the year 2021, 720 women were murdered by a close partner, family member or relative in 17 EU member states. In Greece, 12 women were murdered by an intimate partner and 6 women were murdered by a family member (EIGE, 2023).

In Greece, and the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family, the General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights is " *the competent government body for planning, implementing and monitoring the implementation of policies for equality between women and men in all sectors* " (G.G.I.A.D, x.x). In collaboration with the Observatory for Gender Equality it presents data related to social inequalities arising from gender and contributes to the statistical documentation of the phenomenon of violence against women. An event that was particularly criticized was the abolition of the autonomy of the only specialized institutional mechanism for gender equality (General Secretariat for Gender Equality) in 2019 (Stratigaki, 2021). However, the data from various surveys regarding gender equality in Greece are not encouraging. For example, in a recent survey by the National Center for Social Research (EKKE, 2024) that aimed to record, measure and evaluate the public presence of male and female politicians, as well as experts and commentators in the Greek media it was found that 83% were men and approximately (only) 17% women (Gender and representation in the Greek media: Research results with an emphasis on television stations and newspapers <https://socioscope.gr/dataset/media-gender-rep/data> .)

But also based on comparable European data (EIGE, 2023) it is found that Greece is in 24th place in the EU in the Gender Equality Index (with a percentage of 58% and has a relatively low score for the EU as a whole (12.2 points). To this unfavorable finding for Greece it can be added that there are no data for the evaluation of violence against women across Europe according to EIGE.

2. Violence against women – Institutional actions

It is a fact that the unequal living and working conditions of men and women during the period of the last crises put significant obstacles in the path of women's emancipation. In fact, it was found that women are still subject to multiple forms of violence and are oppressed, without the luxury of choices in their lives or their homes, an

environment that should exclusively function as a place of safety. Violence against women is a long-standing social "plague" that spreads across all social strata in all societies. It takes place regardless of women's cultural, social, or economic capital. Violence against a woman or girl is one of the most basic violations of human rights.

Domestic violence is not just aggressive or hurtful behavior in a symbiotic situation (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). According to the US Department of Justice and its Office on Violence against Women: "Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship to gain or maintain power and control over the other, the intimate partner" (OVW, 2023). Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, financial, or psychological actions related to technology, threats of actions, or other patterns of abusive behavior that affect another person in an intimate relationship. Included are any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, accuse, injure, or hurt someone (OVW, 2023). According to Bradbury -Jones & Isham (2020: 2047) domestic violence during the Covid -19 pandemic was the violent psychosomatic culmination of uncontrolled stress and inner loneliness, job loss, and suspension of schools and businesses, to the detriment of family members. As far as women are concerned, domestic violence is defined as the abuse of power against a partner with intimidating, threatening, harassing, or harmful behavior (Ritzer, 2021: 438-439).

International research regarding domestic violence when it is perpetrated against women, generally comes to the following basic conclusions (Ritzer, 2021: 439): a) that it is the main cause of injury to women, b) that women are five times more likely to be victimized than men, c) that women are six times more likely than men to be assaulted by people with whom they have close contact, d) that women with very low to zero economic income, aged 16-24, are more likely to be victims of abuse, e) that vulnerable women (who experience multi-faceted discrimination) are more abused and that a large proportion of homeless women are in this situation due to domestic violence and f) that it is difficult for a violent relationship to cease to exist. Domestic violence causes significant negative consequences not only on a personal but also on a family and social level. On a personal level, the effects are not only evident on the body but also mainly in the psyche of the victim. The female victims are people who, due to repeated violence, acquire mental problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, and alcohol abuse, they are prone to cardiovascular diseases and, dominated by fear or the need to protect children, and finally, do not disclose the exercise of violence against them (Gulati & Kelly, 2020: 1-2).

At the family and social level, the phenomenon of imitation of abusive behavior by the children of the family is very often observed. Children as spectators of domestic violence consider this type of interaction to be the most suitable for solving intra-family issues. In this way, violence becomes an integral part of their personality and is reproduced from generation to generation. Gradually, and through children's repeated exposure to it, violence can potentially become part of their defense, and the creation of a sense of dominance (as men later) in a relationship eventually leads to their socially reproducing the role of the abuser. Ultimately, an abusive attitude and behavior that is learned within the family is nurtured and reproduced in this way. Social reality is shaped according to the way individuals behave and interpret rules and principles in specific environments (Kernsmith, 2006: 163-164). In addition, the social phenomenon of domestic violence brings about an unbearable economic impact on the state budget. Victims of abuse are unable to meet their work demands. The state should financially cover the medical and legal costs, and often the costs for the victims and their children of staying in the various hospitality centers (Ritzer, 2021: 440).

The legal framework regarding the issue of domestic violence is different from country to country and the rates of domestic violence are modified according to several legal, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts (Gulati & Kelly, 2020: 3). The "Committee of the Parties" of the Council of Europe Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as "the Istanbul Convention", drew the attention of its member states to the dangers of domestic violence during the pandemic and demanded the immediate care and management of the phenomenon (Council of Europe, 2020). The structure of the Istanbul Convention signed on May 11, 2011, in Istanbul guaranteeing the protection of all women regardless of race, social class, religion, culture, and sexual identity, established measures to prevent, protect, and support victims. 2020 was the year of the start of the application of the law 4531/2018 by which the "Istanbul Convention" was ratified in Greece. At the same time, an independent mechanism, the mandated Independent Authority of Experts of the Council of Europe (GREVIO), monitors the implementation of the Convention (<https://isotita.gr/esdif-2021-2025/>).

It should be pointed out here that there is a significant gap in the data on violence against women in Greece that camouflages the intensity of the phenomenon. The rates of domestic violence during the period of mandatory confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic must have increased in Greece, just as in other countries, according to the surveys. However, it is a fact that the Network of Structures, which consists of 43 Counseling Centers, 19 Hospitality Hostels and the 24-hour SOS 15900 telephone line does offer multifaceted support.

The General Secretariat for Family Policy and Gender Equality (GGOPIF) as a public body supervises the operation of counseling centers to deal with violence against women by providing free services with

specialized professional counseling support staff (psychologists, social workers, and lawyers). The action of the Research Center for Equality Issues (KETHI) is also critical, with its main aim, among other things, of eliminating gender discrimination and inequalities and promoting gender equality in all sectors (social, economic, political, and cultural).

With the development of the new National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2021-2025 of the General Secretariat of Demographic and Family Policy and Gender Equality, special emphasis is placed on the first of the four axes, that of "Preventing and combating gender and domestic violence" to protect the female gender from any form of violence, to properly train the competent authorities, to keep them immediately informed and to raise awareness, in parallel with the implementation of the principles of the Istanbul Convention" (<https://isotita.gr/2h-ethsia-ekthesh/>).

II. METHODOLOGY

In this context, in order to investigate how interventions are managed at an institutional level in Greece, we approached an Organization from the Network of Structures, the Karditsa Women's Center, which is active against gender-based violence. The choice of the Center was made on the one hand because of its many years of operation (since 1993) - thus also many years of experience - and on the other hand because within the framework of the Karditsa Women's Center the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence operates. The Organization is a Civil Non-Profit Corporation and is governed by a Board of Directors of nine members. Its seat is in central Greece, in the Municipality of Karditsa, but it is active in the wider region. It participates and collaborates with regional, national and transnational networks promoting equal opportunities, in all areas of women's activity. The Karditsa Women's Center is staffed with many specialties (psychologist, social worker, lawyer, sociologist, employment counselor) whose basic task and mission is to empower women who have suffered violence and to encourage them to get out of the "dark" world that burdens them with anxiety, depression and stress (Belshaku, 2016).

Moreover, in accordance with the existing legislation, actions and services are included within the framework of the operation of the Counseling Centers, which guarantees and ensures the integrated character of the interventions. Psycho-social and legal support actions of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Organization we are investigating also include legal counseling and information services about the rights of women victims of violence, the relevant legislation, the required procedures for filing a complaint, lawsuits, etc. (<https://isotita.gr>).

This investigation seeks to highlight the treatment of the abuse of women institutionally in Greece, through the interventional role of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Karditsa Women's Center. On the other hand, we aim to investigate the intervention model and its stages, from which data will be drawn on the abusers and victims, as well as on the consequences of abuse against women.

In this research, the exploratory case study was used because it is intended to operate as a pilot for other studies as well. We hope to extract interpretations, descriptions and the possibility of investigating the case within the everyday context in which it exists and functions (Yin, 2009; Mangopoulos, 2014). More specifically, the qualitative approach of the case study was used for the collection of the research data in this research and the content analysis method was used for their analysis, after the subjects first answered questions in a semi-structured interview (Iosifidis, 2008; Pyrgiotakis & Theofilidis, 2016: 21; Bryman, 2017: 608).

The element of subjectivity emerges through the description and analysis of the events but also through the use of the language code used by the subjects in the description of the events (Tsiolis, 2010). The personal assessments of the researcher are silenced in the context of the objective evaluation of the facts (Straus & Corbin, 1990: 48-54).

The essential purpose of this case study is the in-depth investigation of the interventions of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Women's Center of Karditsa (Greece-Thessaly) in dealing with domestic violence and supporting abused women in the wider region. The specific context in which people took part in the interview is also the specific workplace (Robson, 2007).

The basic questions of the semi-structured interview focus on the following:

1. On the intervention model and the stages of which it consists.
2. On the basic intervention tools at each stage followed and on the basic methodological approaches used in the intervention process.
3. On the specialties of professionals involved in the intervention process.
4. On the profile of the woman who has suffered violence, according to the data collected so far by the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Karditsa Women's Center.
5. On the profile of male abusers.
6. On the consequences of violence for women and society.

Three key personnel of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Karditsa Women's Center participated in this research: the Director, the Social Worker and the Center's Psychologist. These employees have been working permanently in the Organization since its foundation (1993).

Before conducting the interviews, the participants were informed by telephone and e-mail about the purpose of the interview in order to obtain their consent. Our intention to conduct the interviews via technology (Skype) provides flexibility, timesaving, avoiding the interviewee's refusal and creating on the part of the interviewer a condition-situation with elements of positive interaction and understanding (Bryman, 2017: 536).

III. FINDINGS

From the analysis of the answers of the interviewees of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Karditsa Women's Center, the following issues emerged:

A) The intervention model: the stages, the intervention tools and the involvement of other Professionalspecialties.

The experiences of abused women include not only mental and physical violence but also a socialestablishment based on patriarchal norms. As stated:

"...all these issues that concern the female gender seem, at first sight, to be of a personal nature...but by conducting a deeper analysis of them we come to the conclusion that they are the product of social and family inequalities. The unequal battle of women with the male establishmentsometimes results in the appearance on their part of depressive episodes, low levels of self-esteem and abilities...." (Psychologist).

The stages of the intervention model used by the Women's Protection Center that we are looking at are four (4). 1st ^{stage} : the Counselor gets to know the client (female victim) in order to create conditions for the development of emotional security. Then their request is ascertained and the description of the problem begins. In this process, clarifying questions and encouraging questions are used for discussion with the aim of gradually goingdeeper into the problem. Finally, this stage is the one where both members of the counseling relationship are provided with information that generally concerns recording the history of the woman's problems.

"...the goal is to cultivate a climate of trust and confidence so that the abused woman feels relaxed and can safely communicate with us about whatever issues she deems important. We should mention that our goal is not to solve the problem, but to create alternative channels and ways throughwhich every abused woman will be led to the support she is looking for and where shewill develop her individual estimation" (Psychologist).

"The counselor must receive information that will help him/her to evaluate the problem which includes: a) Description of the problem b) History of the problem and c) Brief history of the woman" (Social worker).

2nd ^{stage} : the recognition of the problem and the definition-determination of the goals are realized. At this stage the abused woman has already begun to subject herself to introspection, in a process of internal discussion in which, gradually, she is confronted with her weaknesses, fears and expectations.

"At this stage and once a climate of trust has been created, an attempt is made - through the narration of events and experiences - for the abused woman to come into contact with and recognize her real feelings and her fears, analyze the weaknesses and strengths of her personality, identify her needs and formulate her expectations. At the same time, future goals are defined. The main axis of this stage is the reconstruction and redefining of the self of the abused woman with the aim of creating a positive self-image and empowerment, enabling her to make decisions using her own criteria and individual evaluations" (Psychologist).

3rd ^{stage} : an attempt is made to strengthen the skills of abused women through the provision of counseling support and their participation in experiential exercises aimed at re-framing the issues that concern them and trying to give new meaning to their lives in a positive way.

"...the choices made are aimed at strengthening the skills of abused women, through the creation of a new constructive framework which includes the provision of counseling and the application of experiential methods and techniques (e.g. role plays)" (Psychologist).

4th ^{stage} : the cycle of counseling closes with the expectation of achieving a substantial change in the woman's attitude towards her problems. The most important point in this stage is the elimination of fears and a dynamic attitude towards future life. *"... She has now learned to stand on her own two feet and not be afraid. She begins to "see the world through different eyes ..."* (Social worker).

Intervention tools

Specific intervention tools ("Life course", "Talking about me", "I - life axes", "Personal network"), are used as the way to shape the approach of the abused woman to her experiences. The female victim is strengthened in her attempt to reorganize her life in relation to the goals she sets for her present and future. By using these tools, the self-esteem and self-confidence of the woman seeking supportare boosted. The aim is for the abused woman to acquire a positive image of herself, which will lead her to effectively assert her autonomy.

"The Counselor tries using tools based on biographical and narrative methods to understand the way abused women experience the traumatic events of their lives and to delve into the way they initially perceive and then reproduce reality through the prism of individual and social representations" (Psychologist).

"As the "Life Path" tool is used, the abused woman is pushed to narrate the particular events that marked her life and important personal moments. Using the "Talking for Me" tool, the Counselor helps the battered woman describe her personal desires and anxieties. The Ego-Life Axes tool is used to identify the abused

woman's future goals and the Personal Network tool records and identifies the existing social network that supports the victim (Psychologist).

Apart from the Reception Counselor, who initially records the request and the data of the woman, it is important to mention that during this whole process in which actions and activities are brought into play with the aim of meeting the needs of abused women, the approach to the issues that concern them is carried out by an interdisciplinary team, which consists of a social worker, a psychologist, a lawyer, a sociologist and a labor consultant.

"...appointment with the social worker to take the social history... for her social support (information and counseling)...problems will be identified. Psychologist for her emotional and psychological support. Lawyer for legal advice and legal support. Work consultant for empowerment...job search...their referral, if required to other specialties (sociologist) and support and social integration structures" (Social worker).

B) The profile of the victimized woman

According to the description of the Psychologist of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Karditsa Women's Center, the most basic characteristics of victims of domestic violence are visible on the faces of every abused woman: low self-esteem, guilt, fear, passive attitude, isolation, depression.

"... they are addicts with low self-esteem...doubt about their abilities.... downgrade any success they have " (Psychologist).

"For the abused woman, the husband-abuser is identified as the "head" of the family, despite the fact that in many cases she is the one who supports the family financially but also essentially through raising the children [...] The guilty world in which she lives renders the battered woman powerless to face domestic violence and abandon her fears [...] She passively experiences the escalating violence, the terror that overwhelms her...and despite the fact that she is afraid and sometimes angry [...] she does not manage to break free and change the flow of her life, usually experiencing control, intimidation, terror and isolation" (Psychologist).

" Depression is a disorder that occurs very often...the social environment is critical...the theory of "Learned Helplessness " claims that it has to do with the guilt that she still carries " (Social Worker).

In Greek legislation, the term "vulnerable social groups" (KETHI 2013) includes population groups that have unequal opportunities regarding basic rights such as education, work and, in general, a decent way of life. They are groups that are at greater risk of living in poverty and on the social fringes. Characteristically, such groups could have: psychomotor problems, chronic health problems, live in geographically excluded areas, have an inability to access information, lack essential qualifications and skills, etc.

Frequently, the traditional perceptions of the role of men regarding their superiority and their traditional role within the family lead the woman to identify her role as "duty" towards the man. Any attempt to move away from the relationship and leave the male abuser is perceived as guilt. An incriminating mood is created internally in the woman's psyche which stems from the man's attitude, periods of silence follow and "a gap" is created in the perception of the two people in the relationship about their roles and themselves.

"...the emotional world of the abused woman is characterized by feelings of guilt and low self-confidence...The thought of leaving the marital home makes her feel even more guilty despite the fact that she feels betrayed[...]and she quickly turns away from the thought of running away from the family home [...] A large number of abused women end up blaming themselves for the abusive attitude of the abusive husband (another indication of the abuser's manipulative character) resulting in the creation of a drastically different perception – at the extreme edges of the gap - about the self-image and the roles of the two members of the abusive relationship" (Psychologist).

C. The profile of the abuser - the male abuser

The male-abuser expresses control and dominance towards his woman-partner-wife through the exercise of violence, consciously or unconsciously, accompanied by changes in expression, voice, mood in general. He tries to prove his worth as a husband, as a father, as a human being through violent behavior and authoritarianism. It is not always a given that alcohol use precedes or that economic reasons push him to this behavior. His competitiveness, low self-esteem, the patriarchal-traditional values with which he was raised or even the abusive behaviors he experienced in a traumatic way from his family, very likely contribute to the impetus for his own violent behavior (<https://kakopoiisi.gr>).

"The abuser's imposition of social control occurs through the exercise of physical or other forms of violent behavior towards the victim. His ultimate goal is none other than the expansion of his sovereign boundaries and intimidation. The means he uses threats, blows, facial expressions, the posture of his body, the tone and timbre of his voice as bullying strategies in order to achieve his goals. "(Psychologist).

A contrast is often observed in male behavior inside and outside the cohabitation space with the female victim.

"Regarding the perpetrator's profile, we would say that his violent attitude is manifested within the family environment against his children and his wife, in contrast to his extra -familial attitude and image, which is

distinguished by elements of kindness and friendliness. It is worth talking about the fact that the perpetrator is a socially adapted person with a behavior that in no way betrays his innermost tendencies and moods. Characteristic elements of his personality are moody behavior, anxiety, hostility, aggression, selfishness, low self-confidence. Another characteristic element of his behavior, which is worth dwelling on, is that the abuser seeks to humiliate his wife and impose a kind of social and economic exclusion on her" (Psychologist).

D. The consequences of violence

The consequences of violence are physical, psychological, social and economic. It is worth noting that precious time, up to five years, is lost for women who experience domestic violence.

On a physical level, the victims show obvious damage, they receive multiple blows that often lead to loss of hearing or sight. Cases have been recorded at this Center where pregnant women experience aggressive, violent behavior from their partners or husbands, resulting in the loss of the children they are carrying.

"...we find a lot of physical injuries...It is really painful that the abuser inflicts violence even on the woman who is pregnant...indeed in many cases the injuries are so severe that these women are faced with permanent vision and hearing problems, due to the violence of the blows they receive." (Psychologist).

On a psychological level, the consequences of violence often lead women to alcoholism and suicide. The abused woman is socially isolated, has a disturbed psyche, experiences anxiety, depression and severe psychosomatic problems. But the most basic thing is insecurity and the fear of violent incidents.

"[...] violence in the relationship is the most important reason why many abused women are driven to alcoholism and suicidal tendencies. The "abused woman's syndrome" is characterized by feelings of fear, worry of constant danger, anxiety and depression and under the influence of the memory of past traumatic experiences (the abused women) show uncertainty and fear of the future" (Psychologist).

Socially, domestic violence affects the effective action and participation of women in public life, "making it difficult for them to remain in work ". Where the welfare state is unable to fulfill its role, and in particular in Greece where a deficit is found, it is the woman's burden to provide every care service, which additionally deprives her of personal time and the possibility of being an active citizen. This condition, combined with domestic violence that does not allow her to react, poses even greater obstacles to her path of emancipation, e.g. labor market, free time, etc. Therefore, it also brings about an economic impact on their lives (Duvvury et al., 2013).

IV. DISCUSSION

With the specific exploratory case study as a method of investigating the action of the Network of Structures in Greece (through the interview as a data collection method that accompanied the specific case study) and specifically of an Organization of the Karditsa Women's Center, we sought answers regarding the institutional protection of abused women in Greece.

Through our focus on the action of the Counseling Support Center for Women Victims of Violence of the Women's Center of Karditsa (Greece), which is supported by the General Secretariat of Family Policy and Gender Equality (GGOPIF, (which operates the Counseling Centers in Greece), we highlighted the completeness of its services, its mode of operation and its dealings with abused women. We took into consideration that gender equality would prevent the multiple forms of violence which women experience and to which they are unable to react, and the fact that, at the same time each form of violence creates significant obstacles in the path of their emancipation.

The research showed that the role of the Karditsa Women's Center is very important in terms of the individual and social support of the women of this region who have experienced or are experiencing abuse within the family or within their partner relationships. The Karditsa Women's Center is an Organization staffed with many specialties (psychologist, social worker, lawyer, sociologist, employment counselor) with a basic task and mission to empower women who have suffered violence, to encourage them to become active again without stress and anxiety, to gain their self-esteem, to feel safe and above all to free themselves from guilt. Based on the excellent help offered by the Center, it is considered appropriate for all abused women to be made aware in every possible way of the operation of the Center. The research showed that the Center's executives focus their actions mainly on the activation of women who have suffered domestic violence, (from the phone call of the complaint to the visit to the center) and this is particularly important as it makes the female victim an active citizen again. Attempts are made to change the quality of their lives, starting with moral and psychological support, legal and advisory information on women's rights, the procedures for submitting a complaint or lawsuit, and ending up with employment counseling and finding a job when there is a problem of unemployment, or offering referral services to hostels or to support agencies for themselves and their children. This is essential help that gives abused women hope for the future. On the faces of abused women, not only domestic violence and conflicts, disagreements and frictions are expressed, but also the patriarchal social establishment, traditional concepts of the two sexes and gender inequality and above all the violation of human rights (Usta et al., 2012; Ambuel et al., 2013).

With reference to the method of intervention and the stages used by the Center for abused women, it is found that practices are followed which are based on the literature of the Counseling Guide for Violence of the General Secretariat for Gender Equality, as well as approaches which are more often used for the psychological support of abused women (Simson et al., 2007; Gomez & Yassen, 2007). More specifically, they start by welcoming them, getting to know them, having them describe, and then recognizing their problem, and then they seek to strengthen the skills of female victims, identify new goals and eliminate the fear and emotional abuse that each woman has suffered. The intervention process with abused women is not an easy task. Barriers include women's mistrust of confiding in someone, passive expressions of their anger, disconnection of experiences due to intense anxiety (Roberts, 1996; Follingstad et al., 1988) but also many times the woman's denial that she is being abused. It therefore needs proper handling by the Counseling psychologist who has sufficient knowledge to gain their trust.

The above shows how important the role of specialized personnel is in such organizations. The staff of the aforementioned Center (Director, psychologist, reception counselor, social worker, lawyer, sociologist, employment counselor) and also the value of the interaction of the scientific specialties involved in a holistic approach, make their work effective in addressing the issues that concern abused women. Of utmost importance is the delicacy in the way they are treated and the empathy shown by the staff of the Center towards the sensitive issue of domestic violence and the abuse of women. The research points out that abused women are mainly characterized by their passivity, low self-confidence, and the reduced initiatives they take in the context of the abusive relationship. Therefore, visiting the Center to seek help is an important step on the way to their liberation and emancipation (Sullivan, 2012; Karakurt et al., 2022). Each stage of the intervention has its own importance, as it needs special care in the way the abused woman is approached. It is an arduous, demanding and time-consuming process for the abused woman to travel a distance that begins with the narration and description of traumatic experiences and reaches the point where, with the help of professionals, she will be able to regain her strength and look forward to her future with optimism and self-confidence (Wathen & MacMillan, 2003; Karakurt et al., 2022).

With reference to the search for the characteristics of the victim (abused women), it is found that, as in other research, the female victims experience the same feelings. These are mainly fear, depression, guilt, low self-confidence and anxiety about the future. Of all these characteristics, guilt is the most important for the rehabilitation of the victim, as it further degrades the role of women in the family and society in general, and the traditional patriarchal standards contribute to this. The woman feels guilty because she decides to leave the brutal husband-partner who abuses her emotionally, psychologically, physically or sexually and because she refuses to submit to conservatism and the patriarchal-dominant ideologies that want her without any will, without reason, without initiative, without personality. The woman feels guilty because by reporting the violence she experiences within the family, she feels that she is becoming the cause of the breakup of the family. Thus she is stigmatized and marginalized both by the close family and by the wider social environment who traditionally want her to "support" family life at any cost (Tam et al., 2016; Avdibegovic, Brkic & Sinanovic, 2017; Weiss et al., 2018).

We find the same with the characteristics of the abuser as expressed by the Center's executives. In all the research it is pointed out that the abuser does not have a stable type of behavior within the family and outside it. What is certain is that the exercise of violence and power in the family context causes a number of negative consequences at the individual, family and social level. The dominant characteristics of the abuser are control and the imposition of power, consciously or unconsciously, on the woman. His violent behavior is not always linked to alcohol, drugs or mental illness, nor does his social background appear to be a moderating factor of his behavior. Of course, unemployment, financial problems and the use of alcohol are factors that may lead to an aggravation of the situation, but they are in no way the main reasons for the manifestation of this specific aggressive behavior (Boughima et al., 2018).

As for the consequences of violence against women, it is also established with the present study that they are physical, psychological, social and economic. More generally, our research shows that the death rate of women who have experienced violence amounts to 7% between the ages of 15-44 worldwide. Abused women lose at least five healthy years of life. In cases of physical violence, bruises are usually visible on the bodies of abused women, and in some cases the beatings cause loss of sight or hearing, even in pregnant women. On a psychological level, battered women suffer from the "battered woman syndrome" (anxiety, depression, social isolation, psychosomatic trauma, tachycardia, post-traumatic stress, etc.). Mostly, though, they feel as though they live in constant fear and danger. One in ten suffers from psychological-emotional fatigue. Socially and economically, the consequences of domestic violence equate to less income for the woman, reduced ability to work and contribute to the family and society (Belshaku, 2016; Fernández-González et al., 2018). The research (case study), therefore, highlights on the one hand the value of the Women's Centers of the Network of Structures for Gender Equality in Greece through their operation and their remarkable work. On the other hand, the question remains unanswered as to why there are still dominant relations between the sexes, prejudices, deep-rooted perceptions that ultimately lead to violent and aggressive behaviors.

V. CONCLUSIONS

It is significant to establish the value of the work carried out by the Women's Centers of the Network of Structures for Gender Equality. Furthermore, the reduction and prevention of violence against women is of utmost importance. Nevertheless, an effective and systematic prevention and treatment of violence against women cannot be achieved in various Centers across Greece. First of all, it is necessary to properly educate boys and girls regarding gender equality to develop relationships free from violent and aggressive behavior, focusing each time on men and the expression of masculinity. Getting rid of stereotypes and traditional notions of the dominant role of men can be achieved with proper training. However, an integrated strategic approach requires the cooperation of all stakeholders (police, prosecutor's office, medical services and medical care, social welfare service) involved in the protection and support of victims.

The principle of gender equality is an investment in women's empowerment and is a key component of social and economic development. In the context of the UN (UNIFEM 2013), and concerning key strategies to eliminate violence against women and girls, the promotion of primary prevention and the conduct of research, data collection, and analysis for better monitoring and accountability are emphasized. Within the framework of these strategies, the present research gave us important answers regarding the operation of Women's Centers and the protection of women from the violence inflicted on them by men. Hence, the findings call for a thorough investigation in other institutions as it was found that with fragmentary actions we will not cover the large deficit in democracy constituted by discrimination and gender inequality.

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