

# INTRODUCTION OF INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION IN COMBATING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN UKRAINE

## ABSTRACT

*Early detection of and response to the domestic violence against children, provision of security and necessary assistance, remain major challenges for children's rights protection systems in various countries, including Ukraine. The lack of a systematic interagency collaboration between the institutions responsible for combating domestic violence against children is the most obvious problem in this regard. The article presents the results of data analysis of four focus groups with the participation of 45 employees of different professional institutions, which reflects the main problems and obstacles that hinder effective interagency collaboration. Systematization and generalization of data demonstrate 6 general types of problems within the interagency collaboration: competence of employees; communication and interaction between departments; normative regulation; prevention; level of trust*

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*between all subjects of interaction; and services for families with children. Each cluster of problems contains a list of obstacles of organizational, psychological, competence and mental nature, which fix the initial level of functioning of the protection system of children's rights in the country. Establishing and developing the effective interagency collaboration concerning the preventing and combating domestic violence against children is possible if the situation concerning combating domestic violence against children is monitored, the legal framework for the division of powers and coordination is improved and a model of systematic professional training and support is provided.*

## INTRODUCTION

At the heart of modern child protection and safeguard systems in different countries is the belief that children, due to their limited opportunities to protect their rights, need special attention from various professionals who ensure their protection and well-being. And if such systems have already been functioning in Western Europe for a long time (Spratt and Nett, 2013.; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017.; Department for Education, 2018.), as well as in the United States (Powers et al., 2019.; Liu and Vaughn, 2019.), developing and shifting the focus from a protection-centred approach to the one of prevention (Hardcastle et al., 2015.; Sethi et al., 2018.), then in Ukraine the system of protection of children's rights is actually only at the stage of formation. The biggest concern is the lack of a timely response to the cases of domestic violence against children, the number of which, according to research, is up to 40% of the total population of children in the country (Kachynska, 2017.). There is evidence of an increase of violence against children simultaneously with the outbreak of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine (La Strada Ukraine, 2016.). However, the statistics of detection of domestic violence against children is quite contradictory; as this phenomenon is latent in nature and also complicated by the fact that the detected cases are recorded by different institutions and not summarized in a single register, so they do not match. This situation promotes the study and analysis of effective practices for timely detection and response to cases of domestic violence against children that exist abroad. In addition, the current stage of development of the system of children's rights protection in Ukraine needs reflexive awareness, which should be guided by the industry's best practices.

The changes in the Ukrainian legal field are the example of Ukraine's approximation to the best practices concerning eliminating of violence against children. In 2016, the concept of »the best interests of the child« was introduced into the normative circulation (Zakon Ukrainy Pro vnesennia zmin do deiakykh zakonodavchykh aktiv Ukrainy shchodo posylennia sotsialnoho zakhystu ditei ta pidtrymky simei z ditmy, 2016.). It is interpreted as actions and decisions aimed at meeting the individual

needs of the child according to his or her age, sex, health, personal development, life experience, family, cultural and ethnic identity and taking into account the child's opinion, if he or she has reached such age and level of growing up, at which they can express it. In 2017, the adopted Law of Ukraine »On Prevention and Countering Domestic Violence« (Zakon Ukrainy Pro zapobihannia ta protydiu domashnomu nasylstvu, 2017.) for the first time declared the concept of »interagency approach« in order to solve the problem and regulate issues related to combating domestic violence and child maltreatment; the meaning of the concepts »domestic violence«, »prevention and counteraction to domestic violence« is specified. Key institutions responsible for protecting children from domestic violence and maltreatment are specified as well. Currently, such institutions in Ukraine are: children's services, social protection institutions for children, social service centers, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, health care institutions, as well as organizations that provide social services. According to the Law, combating domestic violence against children is seen as a system of measures aimed at ending domestic violence, providing assistance and protection to children, as well as properly investigating cases, prosecuting offenders and changing their behavior.

These changes reflect the fulfilment of Ukraine's commitments to the Council of Europe with regard to the adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to European Union legislation in the field of combating domestic violence. In addition, the standardization of provisions on domestic violence against children is in line with the context of state reforms of decentralization and deinstitutionalization currently taking place in Ukraine. The expected outcome of the reforms is to improve the detection and response to cases of domestic violence against children in local communities and create support services for families with children.

A review of research carried out by foreign researchers proves the importance of an interagency approach in overcoming domestic violence against children. According to their point of view, joint and coordinated activities of governmental structures at the national and local levels responsible for education, health, justice, social security, private entities and civil society organizations can reduce the negative impact of risk factors for violence against children (WHO, 2016.).

Patricia A. Schene (Schene, 1998.) outlines the roles in child protection that are played by the child protective services agency, police, the courts, private and public social service agencies, and the community at large. Information on cases of child maltreatment is an important source research issue. According to Ruth Gilbert et al., «the largest percentage of reports come from teaching staff, law enforcement officials, social services staff and health workers» (Gilbert et al., 2009.: 167). Also, these data provide strong evidence that most child maltreatment is not reported. At the same time, the annual frequency of maltreatment is much higher than is reported to

child-protection agencies (physical abuse 4 – 16%; psychological abuse 10%; neglect 1 – 15%; and exposure to intimate-partner violence 10 – 20%) (Gilbert et al., 2009.). In their study, Ruth Gilbert et al. emphasize that child deaths related to maltreatment are under-recognized. Few maltreated children come to the attention of child-protection agencies, indicating a failure of professionals to recognize maltreatment and to report it, and a failure of agencies to investigate or substantiate maltreatment.

Interagency and interprofessional collaboration studies are most often concerned with the interaction of professionals from child-protection services and public services (employees in day care, basic education, social and health services et al.), as well as the detection and intervention into the process of child maltreatment (social service employees and police personnel). Such studies cover a range of obstacles to collaboration, in particular difficulties in communication and information sharing, related with deeply ingrained mistrust, differences in philosophies, practices, and goals; issues around confidentiality, leadership and the role ambiguity problem; and scheduling problems (Vulliamy and Sullivan, 2000.; Green, Rockhill and Burrus, 2008.; Lalayants, 2008.).

It was important to find that even in countries with a developed system of protection of children's rights, the role of the health worker in interagency collaboration remains ineffective. A major problem is the reluctance of health workers and paediatricians to comply with their legal duty to report suspected child abuse. A Swedish researcher, Veronica Svärd, found that the decision of hospital staff not to report cases of violence related to characteristics such as long work experience, access to guidelines and routines, and feelings of stress (Svärd, 2016.).

Australian researchers Yvonne Darlington, Judith Feeney and Kylie Rixon name five obstacles to interagency collaboration: inadequate resources, gaps in interagency processes and confidentiality, unrealistic expectations, and professional knowledge domains and boundaries (Darlington, Feeney and Rixon, 2005.). Canadian researchers Anne P. Vulliamy and Richard Sullivan conclude that most privacy and information sharing issues can be better addressed through collaborative learning and collaborative child protection opportunities (Vulliamy and Sullivan, 2000.).

The authors of the study from Finland reveal that interprofessional collaboration associated with the detection of and intervention in child maltreatment was best accomplished by social service employees and police personnel. Employees in day care, basic education, health services, and police had little knowledge of the methods used in other units.

In fact, there are no studies on interagency collaboration in cases of child maltreatment in Ukraine. Separate publications cover public opinion and public attitudes to the problems of violence (Child Well-Being Fund Ukraine, 2013.; Kyiv international institute of sociology, 2015.; La Strada Ukraine, 2016.; Zachozha et al.,

2018.). Other publications consider domestic violence against children in the context of family dysfunction and the development of socio-pedagogical measures in order to prevent child maltreatment (Stromylo, 2010.; Melnyk, 2013.; Tuntuyeva, 2013.; Voitova, 2013.; Revt and Hrynyk, 2019.). Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the content of legal protection of children in the context of legal regulation of prevention and counteraction to offence on family grounds (Bryzhyk et al. 2010.; Bandurka, 2015.; Kaczynska, 2017.; Kostenko, 2018.). There are studies concerning the role of the health worker in detecting domestic violence and working with victims, as well as psychological support for children affected by violence (Noskova, 2009.; Khimion and Klymas, 2013; Ariayev, 2015.). Despite the fact that the complexity of the problem of violence towards children is recognized by most researchers, the idea of the need to apply an interdisciplinary approach in solving it in Ukraine has little practical implementation.

Summing up the mentioned above information, we can formulate a definition of »interagency collaboration in combating domestic violence against children«. It is a process of cooperation between different institutions that are concerned with child protection and safeguarding from domestic violence in the format of an interdisciplinary team. Its task is to respond effectively to violence, provide assistance and protect affected children using an integrated approach. An interdisciplinary team is formed to conduct a specific case in which specialists from different fields of knowledge work on separate plans and tasks aimed at achieving a common goal. Our study reveals that the basis for combating domestic violence is the effective detection and coordinated response of professionals to cases of violence towards children.

Based on a preliminary theoretical analysis of foreign and Ukrainian scientific sources, we assume that:

- a) each of the institutions concerned with the child protection from domestic violence has its own (autonomous) vision of interagency collaboration in the process of detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence against children;
- b) interagency collaboration in the process of detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence against children is violated due to the presence of certain obstacles, which are related to: 1) imperfection of legal regulation (it is still in the process of harmonising with the international norms; and by-laws are not sufficiently consistent); 2) insufficient competence of employees (inability to recognize and to report the case); 3) mistrust between the subjects of detection and response to cases of domestic violence against children; 4) a large number of responsible structures and problems of communication between them (lack of understanding of powers, poor coordination of interaction, differences in internal policies); 5) lack of re-

sources to support families with children; 6) insufficient focus of the work of institutions concerned with the prevention of recurrence of violence.

## AIM AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The research objective was to reveal the peculiarities of interagency collaboration in detecting and responding to the cases of domestic violence against children in Ukraine. Achieving this goal involves identifying the problems of interagency interaction in the process of detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence against children and the barriers that lead to those problems.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative; the theoretical basis of the research is a grounded theory, a method of collecting empirical material – a focused group interview among the institutions that identify cases of child maltreatment. Sampling type is purposive.

For data collection, we used the guidelines for focused group interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2012.). Processing of empirical material was carried out by the method of content analysis (Titscher et al., 2017.).

In 2017, we conducted four focused group interviews, each involving 10-12 participants and lasting about 1.5 hours. The groups of respondents were mixed, as there were participants from different organizations and different sectors. Table 1 shows the distribution of focus group participants by type of organization they represented. The total number of respondents is 45 people (41 women and 4 men).

**Table 1.** Distribution of focus group participants by type of organization

Type of organization	Number of people (N)	Percentage (n=45)
Children's service	8	17.8
Social service	7	15.6
Police	4	8.9
Education establishment (comprehensive school)	5	11.1
Health care facility	8	17.8
Rehabilitation institution	7	15.5
Public and professional representatives of children's interests (employees of public and advocacy organizations)	6	13.3
<b>In total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>

The objectives of the study are in line with the document »Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles«, approved by International Federation of Social Workers (IASSW and IFSW, 2004.) and »Code of Ethics for Social Work Specialists of Ukraine« (Ukrainian Association of Social Educators and Social Work Specialists, 2003.). That is why the standard ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were followed when we were collecting empirical material. During the study, we paid special attention to the compliance with the principle of care about the well-being of research participants, as the participation of people representing various subjects of interagency collaboration in the field of prevention and counteraction to domestic violence was presupposed. These are staff of different types of organizations, with different powers and inherent corporate cultures, often with established and stereotypical views concerning the partners for interaction. In an effort to maintain and promote partnerships between organizations and improve the quality of customer care, during the preparation for focus groups we took into account that the respondents may have different willingness to discuss compliance, legal communication and cooperation. Therefore, the guide interview was designed so as not to intensify the problematic aspects of the interaction. For example, we did not ask participants to evaluate others, but instead asked, »To what extent, in your opinion, you or employees of your organization are prepared to detect and respond to child maltreatment?«

The guide-interview included the following blocks of questions:

1. Introductory part (acquaintance, relevance of the topic, experience with reports of child maltreatment).
2. Responsibility (limits of competence) and general assessment of competence in detecting child maltreatment.
3. Receiving and transmitting reports of child abuse or threats of child maltreatment.
4. Strong and weak points (contradictions) in the existing mechanism of interagency collaboration in a situation of consideration of a case of child maltreatment.

Content analysis procedures involved a semantic-pragmatic level of analysis, the object of which was the meaning of words and sentences, as well as the analysis of the effects of messages made in the process of interaction. To ensure an acceptable level of coding reliability, which was performed by two specialists, training sessions on coding the materials of several individual interviews were used, aimed at finding answers to questions similar to the questions of focused group interviews. The primary coding system was based on the results of analysis of research by foreign colleagues, in particular outlined by Yvonne Darlington, Judith Feeney and Kylie Rixon, and the factors and barriers to interagency collaboration (Darlington, Feeney and Rixon, 2005.), which were derivate as themes and categories of text. However,

in the process of coding the empirical material, it underwent modifications, as some categories were omitted, never used at all, or, conversely, new ones were discovered. The first and second authors analyzed the data together, discussing and resolving any differences in interpretation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis of focus group participants’ statements on the problems of interagency collaboration in detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence towards children involved calculating the frequency of categories grouped by pre-defined topics. Key categories reflect obstacles to effective interagency collaboration. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Problems of interagency collaboration in detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence against children

<b>Problems of interagency collaboration (topics)</b>	<b>Obstacles to effective interagency collaboration (key categories)</b>	<b>Number of respondents who provided materials related to this category</b>	<b>Percentage (n = 45)</b>
	<b>In total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>91.1</b>
<b>Staff competence</b>	Lack of a model of interdisciplinary learning	13	28.9
	Turnover of professional staff	12	26.7
	Tolerance for domestic violence against children	7	15.6
	Ignorance of competencies and misunderstanding of the authority limits of the subjects of interaction	6	13.3
	Non-use of developed educational and methodical resources	3	6.7
	<b>In total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>88.9</b>
<b>Communication and collaboration between departments</b>	Lack of coordination between the subjects of interaction	19	42.2
	Maintaining internal documentation without transfer to other subjects of interaction	9	20
	Lack of understanding of teamwork	7	15.6
	The existence of various local practices of interagency collaboration	3	6.7
	lack of effective connections within the departments	2	4.4



<b>Problems of interagency collaboration (topics)</b>	<b>Obstacles to effective interagency collaboration (key categories)</b>	<b>Number of respondents who provided materials related to this category</b>	<b>Percentage (n = 45)</b>
	<b>In total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>68.9</b>
<b>Normative regulation</b>	Non-compliance with the principle of the best interests of the child	12	26.7
	Inconsistency in the regulations governing the various actors	12	26.7
	Non-prosecution of parents for violence against children	5	11.1
	Limited powers of a social worker in dealing with cases of domestic violence against children	2	4.4
	<b>In total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>55.6</b>
<b>Prevention</b>	Lack of a culture of non-acceptance of violence in society	15	33.3
	Absence of aims among the employees for early detection of domestic violence against children	5	11.1
	Difficulties in detecting domestic violence in »seemingly prosperous« families	4	8.9
	<b>In total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>42.2</b>
<b>Trust</b>	Distrust of employees of other departments regarding the effectiveness of their activities and compliance with professional ethics	6	13.3
	Children’s distrust towards the specialists as for receiving care	5	11.1
	Wrong image of a social worker in the media	4	8.9
	Parents’ use of reports of domestic violence against children for selfish purposes	4	8.9
	<b>In total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>31.1</b>
<b>Services for families with children</b>	Lack of educational programs for parents	6	13.3
	Lack of special services for children with special needs	4	8.9
	Lack of special services for parents with addictions	4	8.9

The explanation for each of the selected topics presented in the Table 2 will be provided hereinafter.

## **Barriers that lead to problems of interagency interaction in the process of detecting and responding to cases of domestic violence against children**

### **The disparity of competencies with job responsibilities and lack of systematic training**

As it can be seen in Table 2, the categories related to employees' competence had the highest frequency of mention by respondents – 91.1% (41 people out of 45). The most important obstacles on this topic were **lack of interdisciplinary learning model** (28.9%), **turnover of professional staff** (26.7%) and **tolerance for domestic violence against children** (15.6%). Focus group participants noted that training was insufficient and irregular; training programs in higher education establishments do not provide special training concerning the cases of child maltreatment; even the specialized training courses (for example, for physicians) are unsystematic and do not cover the primary level of employees who directly interact with the child – district paediatricians, family doctors, nurses, teachers, kindergarten teachers, etc. (*»Many trainings have been conducted for managers, but this knowledge does not reach the lowest level – those who see children directly«; »It is important to know not only the legal definition of the concept itself – because it is known to all and enshrined in our legislation. But types of domestic violence are also defined. It is important to have a common understanding of this concept and the phenomenon as a whole by all specialists who have to detect it.«*).

Police officers noted different levels of preparation for dealing with the cases of child maltreatment by their colleagues from various units: patrol police, district police and juvenile police. At the same time, they see their responsibility primarily in responding to the challenges of committing offenses related to the threat to life and health of the child.

Doctors generally recognized the importance of interagency collaboration in the process of providing medical care to children affected by maltreatment, but stated that *»this is not within our competence«*, which in fact contradicts regulations. For example, the statement that *»doctors in the polyclinic cannot record violence, they can only report the improper care, that the child is hungry, or was alone for a long time«* can be refuted (according to the International Classification of Diseases, ICD-10, WHO, 2008.). As a result of misunderstandings, doctors avoid using medical criteria during the assessment of the condition of a child who is likely to be a victim of violence (*»the children's service asks the polyclinic for the information about the case, but doctors do not know what to write there«*). This leads to unconscious concealment

of the problem (for example, the statement »I am not aware of any case of violence in polyclinic practice«) and unwillingness to delve into its essence. School staff also reported low rates of violence against children (from 3 to 5 cases per year). As in the study of Maureen C. Kenny (Kenny, 2001.), we see that, in general, most teachers reported having never made a child abuse report, receiving inadequate training in child maltreatment signs, symptoms, and reporting procedure.

Respondents' reflection concerning the strong and weak points of the mechanisms of interagency collaboration allowed deepening of the understanding of such an obstacle to cooperation as **ignorance of competencies and misunderstanding of the limits of authority of the subjects of interaction** (13.3%) and its connection with other obstacles. Without sufficient knowledge about the signs and manifestations of violence (»class teachers and educators are not sufficiently aware of the types of violence and their manifestations«), as well as an adequate understanding of their responsibilities, the staff does not see its place in the general system of combating violence and their participation in social work with families in which parents commit domestic violence against their children. They are not interested in algorithms of interdepartmental interaction, which results in the inability to exercise official powers.

Another obstacle is the **non-use of developed educational and methodological resources** (6.7%). During the previous years, as part of the work on legislative changes and in the course of numerous educational projects, materials on combating violence were developed (Bryzhyk et al., 2010; Panchenko, 2013); they were episodic, but no systematic training was conducted.

## **Disconnections and lack of coordination between different subjects of protection of children's rights**

**Communications and interaction between departments** is the second issue by the number of mentions by respondents. The lack of coordination between the various subjects of interagency collaboration was indicated by the largest number of focus group participants – 19 out of 40 people who worked on this issue (42.2% out of 88.9%, respectively). Among other obstacles on this topic are the following: **maintaining internal documentation without transfer to other subjects of interaction** (20%), **lack of understanding of teamwork** (15.6%), **the existence of various local practices of interagency interaction** (6.7%), **lack of effective connections within the departments** (4.4%).

Thus, the opinion of school staff is that the key role in responding to cases of violence against children should belong to the representatives of the psychological service of the educational establishment (Polozhennia pro psykhologichnu sluzhbu u systemi osvity Ukrainy, 2018.). This service operates under internal regulations

separately from community social services, and its representatives are very rarely members of the interdepartmental commission on the protection of children's rights, the main task of which is to promote the realization of children's rights to life, health, education, social protection, family upbringing and comprehensive development (Zakon Ukrainy Pro orhany i sluzhby u spravakh ditei ta spetsialni ustanovy dlia ditei, 1995.; Pytannia diialnosti orhaniv opiky ta pikluvannia, poviazanoi iz zakhystom prav dytyny, 2008.).

Rehabilitation staff and public and professional children's advocates gave the lowest marks to the work of those responsible for combating domestic violence against children. This can be explained by the fact that these institutions work with the already identified cases of child maltreatment, provide protection to children who have suffered from violence and have been removed from the family. In the process of providing assistance to the child, the responsible institutions are minimally involved in the integrated work with the child and the family. They emphasize that »there is an interagency collaboration, but its effectiveness is minimal«, »detection and response is very ineffective«, and »the system does not encourage professionals to report such cases«.

In Ukraine, there is a large number of institutions (departments, divisions) that are responsible for the supervision and / or coordination of activities to prevent and combat domestic violence against children, which indicates the recognition of violence towards children as a complex problem (Sethi et al., 2018.). Such agencies include: Department of Adoption and Child Protection, Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, Ministry of Interior of Ukraine, National Police of Ukraine, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Ministry of Health of Ukraine, Regional Commission for Child Protection; Interministerial Commission for Child Protection. On the other hand, it »disperses« the responsibility between these numerous subjects in combating domestic violence, making it difficult to understand the tasks and competencies of each subject, not only in terms of effective interventions, but even in monitoring the detection of cases of violence against children. In addition to the above-mentioned structures, which have their own tools and reporting forms, Ukraine has an office of the Ombudsman for Children under the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, as well as an office of the Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights. Accordingly, they and their subordinates collect data on violations of children's rights and cases of child maltreatment. Thus, a huge list of different indicators is formed, which do not form a single system picture: often the indicators duplicate each other, and some important data are not subjected to fixation at all.

## The tangled legal regulation and policies of interdepartmental interaction in cases of domestic violence against children

In the third place among the most important issues was **normative regulation** – it was discussed by a total of two thirds of participants (68.9%). Among the key obstacles are **non-compliance with the principle of the best interests of the child** (26.7%) and **inconsistency in the regulations governing the various actors** (26.7%). (*»In the current conditions of reforming various spheres of social policy, in the field of protection of children's rights there has been a kind of »deregulation«: even those regulations that were previously more or less consistent, are not concurrent now. Often the solution depends purely on the human factor«*). In particular, with regard to the first obstacle, respondents believe that the interests of the child are not a priority in decision-making, and that the responsible subjects, while seeking to comply with the law, are contrary to the interests of children (*»Unfortunately, decisions are not currently in the best interests of the child«*). As it was already noted, the concept of *»ensuring the best interests of the child«* is a new category in Ukrainian law, because as a principle of activity it is still unfamiliar to practitioners. Employees do not always understand how to use it, so it is a misconception that a child's interests may conflict with the law. Less prioritised, but important obstacles in practice are: **non-prosecution of parents for domestic violence against children** (11.1%), and **limited powers of a social worker in dealing with cases of domestic violence against children** (4.4%).

It is clear from the study that the subjects are best acquainted with the procedures for receiving and transmitting reports of domestic violence against children, which are regulated by normative documentation. They are well acquainted with the emergency response procedure and the family visit to assess the situation. At the same time, describing the real practice, respondents complained about the poor implementation of these procedures (for example: *»everything is well written at the legislative level, but it does not work«, »each of the bodies conducts its work, but there is no coordination«*). In particular, this is due to the presence of a large number of departmental documents and inconsistencies in the algorithms of action of different structures. Thus, employees of medical and educational establishments pointed to the need for internal reporting, which is considered sufficient and does not require further action outside a particular institution (the case remains *»... within the system and the institution«*). Such *»autonomy«* does not lead to a comprehensive solution to the problem and ultimately results in a violation of the basic principles of combating violence.

## The invisibility of domestic violence and tolerance of violence against children

The issue of **prevention** united the categories of **lack of a culture of non-acceptance of violence in society** (33.3%), **lack of goals for early detection of domestic violence against children** (11.1%), and **difficulties in detecting domestic violence in »outwardly prosperous« families** (8.9%). More than a half of the focus group participants (55.6%) indicated these obstacles. They concern the high level of tolerance of society against violence, the unwillingness of employees of various organizations and agencies to notice the signs of domestic violence within the family, to intervene in a timely manner and to take measures to prevent recurrence (*»Reports of violence are confirmed or unconfirmed, largely not. So, only 6 from 34 reports last year were confirmed. But we should realize that there are not only children from poor families. There are children from complete and wealthy families also. The fact of violence is often concealed, hidden so that it does not become public.«*). The sensitivity of employees to any manifestations of violence against children is insufficient, and there is unwillingness to investigate cases and work not only with the problem of the identified offenders' treatments (*»Early detection of domestic violence against children would be possible if specialists of all agencies and services were involved, especially medical staff. For this, changes are needed in the curricula for the training of medical students, namely future district therapists and district paediatricians«*; *»Overcoming child abuse will be possible only if parents are trained from the moment of pregnancy and the preparation for the birth of a child«*; *»There is a need to work in schools to teach not only children, but also teachers so that they can teach parents«*). But the child protection system in Ukraine is still focused primarily on dealing with the worst and most obvious forms of violence. Changing approaches to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children are linked to the values, beliefs, personal and professional standards of employees. Potentially, they can be the basis for an effective prevention of violence against children, but they have not yet become sufficiently widespread in Ukrainian society.

## The deep mistrust between all participants in interagency collaboration

The issue of **trust** was mentioned in the opinions of 42.2% of focus group participants. We noticed the emotional involvement of the participants in the discussion of issues related to the peculiarities of building trust. Low level of trust is a social and professional problem, which is a significant factor in detecting violence against children. The main obstacle in establishing cooperation is the distrust of employees

of other structures regarding the effectiveness of their activities and compliance with professional ethics (13.3%). Respondents also noted a low level of children's trust in specialists as for the receiving of care (11.1%).

One of the important features of establishing trust is the observance of the principle of confidentiality in the process of providing socio-pedagogical, psychological and medical care. This problem considers various ethical issues. Meysen T. and Kelly L. (Meysen and Kelly, 2017.) conclude that, despite a shared commitment to the protection of children, deliberations and perceived ethical dilemmas suggest interdependency between differences in system cultures and policy approaches that inform the character of professional interventions in different countries. In our study, ethical dilemmas were most emphasized by health professionals. Despite the fact that *»there is an order that where even if there is a suspicion of violence, the doctor is obliged to report...«*, *»doctors have a deterrent – the concept of »confidential information«: parents and doctors sign the document that the information is not passed to anyone without parental permission«*. These results are correlated with the results of the study of Pasichnyk, Pasieshvily and Dzurabaeva (2012.). They found out that the primary care professionals, prenatal doctors and medical university graduates, in 72% of cases consider it permissible to disclose confidential information when there is a threat to health and lives of others, and only in 42% of cases when it concerns the protection of the interests of a minor child.

Another aspect of mistrust is the mutual negative perceptions and expectations of the child, parents, family and various other subjects concerned with the issue of child protection. Children do not trust teachers / social educators / social workers / police / doctors, they trust each other, social services trust their parents and vice versa, and so on. Even in the countries where significant progress has been made in building interagency collaboration, service providers from different systems, such as: child welfare, treatment providers, and the court systems – face the problems of *»deep-seated mistrust and continued misunderstanding of the values, goals and prospects of other systems«* (Green, Rockhill and Burrus, 2008.:29). The media and social advertising should play an important role in breaking down negative stereotypes, but so far this potential of the media plays the opposite role, distorting the image of the social worker and the functions of social services.

## **Lack of training, support and rehabilitation services**

One more obstacle to combating violence against children is the underdevelopment of **services for families with children**, as noted by almost a third of focus group participants (31.1%). Respondents stressed the need for accessible and diverse services for vulnerable families and the introduction of training programs for parents.

Here are some examples of the respondents' statements: »Overcoming the issue of child maltreatment is possible if parents are taught from the moment of pregnancy, at the stage of preparation for the birth of a child«; »There are some parents who are aware that they are committing violence and can admit it themselves, but do not know how to behave. It is important for them to have an access to *counselling on parenting and interaction with the child*«; »*Working with parents should include both the prevention of child maltreatment and the correction of adult behavior*«.

Particular attention should be paid to the creation of special services for children with special needs (*»The big problem is child psychiatry. There are no services for parents raising children with mental health problems or children with addictions«*), and for parents with addictions.

## Research limitations

A number of limitations of the study are related to sampling. We have not been able to ensure an equal representation of employees of different subjects of the child rights system. Also, the focus groups themselves were formed without taking into account the principle of proportional representation of the management and executive levels of the system. This could result in a status barrier in focus group communication. Some participants, who represented different institutions and probably aimed at maintaining a positive image of their organization, may have experienced limitations in the degree of openness of stating opinions about their work.

This study does not provide definitive answers to the necessary components of the model of effective interagency cooperation. The questions for focus group participants focused on current issues of practice and barriers to interagency interaction and did not address their vision of the prospects for solving these problems. To better explore the topic of promising areas for interagency cooperation in the field of prevention and combating domestic violence against children requires a separate study.

## CONCLUSIONS

Domestic violence against children is a multifaceted problem that requires an integrated approach and coordinated efforts by the state, society and citizens. Though based only on non-representative focus-groups with a limited number of practitioners, we were able to understand the reasons for the low level of detection and response to domestic violence against children better, which is associated with poorly established interagency collaboration. Analysis of foreign research in recent years has shown that the search for a solution to the problem focuses on the ef-



fectiveness of detecting and responding to cases of violence against children in the practice of different professionals, identifying obstacles and finding ways to improve communication between employees and between different institutions of the child protection system. In Ukraine, interdisciplinary cooperation in combating violence against children has not yet become an effective practice.

The study revealed that the main problems of interagency collaboration are: the level of competence of employees; the nature of communication and interaction between departments; features of normative regulation in the field of combating violence against children; quality of activities aimed at prevention; the level of trust between the subjects of protection of children's rights, children and families; level of development of services for families with children. Each of these problems contains several barriers to effective interagency collaboration, but some are considered more serious:

- the lack of a model of interdisciplinary training and the turnover of professional staff, which affects the level of competence of employees. Representatives of different agencies do not have a common understanding of the concept and signs of violence, understanding of authority and responsibility;
- the disconnection and lack of coordination between different subjects of protection of children's rights. There are a large number of subjects (departments, divisions) that are responsible for preventing and combating domestic violence against children. However, the statutory coordinator for dealing with cases of violence against children – the Children's Service – does not work well enough while performing the tasks beyond the initial stage of work. Children's services do not handle the case as a whole, which hinders integrated interagency collaboration. Coordination of interaction is best established at the level of response in critical situations, when crimes against the life and health of the child have already been committed, i.e., tragic events have already taken place;
- the presence of a large number of departmental documents and inconsistencies in algorithms of actions between different structures, which complicates the legal regulation of interdepartmental interaction. Due to the inability to apply the principle of »best interests of the child«, employees of various structures do not always report cases of domestic violence against children. Employees of children's services and social services are most active in detecting cases of domestic violence against children, while teachers, doctors and police officers see their role in interagency collaboration as rather limited.
- the invisibility of domestic violence and tolerance of violence against children. The lack of a culture of non-acceptance of violence in society and the prevalence of harmful stereotypes hinders preventive activities. It is

important to change cultural and social norms that contribute to the high level of tolerance towards violence;

- the presence of a deep mistrust between all participants in interagency collaboration, as well as those to whom their efforts are directed: children and parents. Overcoming this obstacle requires special attention from researchers and practitioners to professional ethics;
- the lack of training, support and rehabilitation services for children and parents.

This study provided an opportunity to look at interagency collaboration in combating domestic violence against children as a factor in the development of social work in Ukraine. Future research should be focused on the views of professionals at different levels (national, regional and local) on the necessary practical actions, activities to improve interagency cooperation in the context of building an effective system for preventing and combating domestic violence against children in Ukraine.

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## UVOĐENJE MEĐUAGENCIJSKE SURADNJE U BORBI PROTIV NASILJA NAD DJECOM U UKRAJINI

### SAŽETAK

*Rano otkrivanje i djelovanje protiv nasilja nad djecom, pružanje sigurnosti i nužne pomoći ostaju glavni izazovi u sustavu zaštite prava djece u raznim zemljama, uključujući Ukrajinu. Nedostatak sustavne međuagencijske suradnje između institucija odgovornih za borbu protiv obiteljskog nasilja nad djecom je najočitiji problem u ovom pogledu. Rad prikazuje rezultate analize podataka za četiri fokusne skupine u kojima je sudjelovalo 45 zaposlenika različitih profesionalnih institucija što naglašava glavne probleme i prepreke koji priječe učinkovitu međugeneracijsku suradnju. Sistematizacija i generalizacija podataka ukazuje na 6 općih tipova problema unutar međuagencijske suradnje: kompetencija zaposlenika; komunikacija i interakcija između odjela; normativno uređenje; prevencija; razina povjerenja između svih dionika u interakciji; te usluge za obitelji s djecom. Svaka skupina problema sadrži niz prepreka organizacijske, psihološke, kompetencijske i mentalne prirode, što učvršćuje početnu razinu funkcioniranja sustava zaštite prava djece u zemlji. Uspostavljanje i razvoj međuagencijske suradnje u pogledu sprečavanja i borbe protiv obiteljskog nasilja nad djecom mogući su ako se situacija vezana uz borbu protiv obiteljskog nasilja nad djecom nadzire, ako se zakonski okvir za diobu ovlasti i koordinaciju poboljša, te ako se osigura model sustavne profesionalne obuke i podrške.*

**Ključne riječi:** zlostavljanje djece; intersektorska suradnja; nasilje u obitelji; zaštita djece



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