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## **Providing Safe Shelter to Victims of Domestic Violence in the Light of Goal 16.1 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

**Abstract:** Interest in the issue of domestic violence in Poland has resulted from the rapid development of international law. One of the essential documents in this area is the resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 25 September 2015 titled ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. One of the main challenges associated with domestic violence is ensuring the safety of the victims. Poland has adopted certain solutions to address this issue, including the establishment of specialized support centres. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the essential characteristics and functions of shelter provided by these centres as one of the forms of assistance provided at the municipality level to persons who have experienced violence. The paper also seeks to assess how such centres operate in practice.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, specialized support centres, victims, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

## Introduction

According to the popular theory by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, the need for safety ranks second in the hierarchy of human needs, just above physiological needs, which lie at the base of the pyramid reflecting this hierarchy. Maslow defines this tier as a set of needs that involve ensuring certainty, stability, support, care, and freedom from fear (Maslow, 2009, pp. 65–68). An approach prioritizing safety, protection, and care focuses primarily on the need to be safe and protected from violence (including violence that may occur at home). That need is global, and satisfying it requires the partnership of multiple actors at various levels.

The inspiration and the grounds for an international exchange of experience in the field of violence prevention can be found in the Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 titled ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (United Nations, 2015). According to its Preamble, Agenda 2030 constitutes a plan of action for the benefit of people, our planet, and prosperity, and also aims to strengthen universal peace within a larger freedom. It encompasses a total of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 related targets (Biswas et al., 2021; Kury & Redo, 2021b, p. 768). These goals and targets are interdependent and inseparable, balancing the three aspects of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. Among these, one should particularly focus on Goal 16, according to which nations should aim to ‘[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’. Its associated Target 16.1 is to ‘[s]ignificantly reduce levels of violence in all forms and the associated mortality rate worldwide’ (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

Agenda 2030 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) draws on the tragic history of humankind in the 20th century, and is an example of an instrument promoting ‘thick’ democracy; it should provide guidance for everyone concerned during the years of its implementation (Kury & Redo, 2021a, p. 7.). It offers the clearest form of the ‘language of justice’ the UN has so far produced and has its own genuinely transformative justice language: justice is a journey, not a destination (Redo, 2013; Redo, 2021, p. 596).

The development goals only provide a framework within which the impact of violence can be measured in comparison to other development dimensions (Kusuma & Babu, 2017). Therefore the links between them should be emphasized. Most victims of domestic violence are women and children; it should be noted that according to Polish family law, parents are required, among other things, to protect their children from any dangers to their lives, health, and development (in all areas) (Sitarz, 2022). Therefore Goal 5, which concerns achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, and especially Target 5.1, is also an important tool for

combatting all forms of discrimination against these groups worldwide. Combating violence against children regardless of their gender is to be achieved through the implementation of Target 4.7, which includes 'promoting a culture of peace and non-violence', and Target 4a, which aims to '[b]uild and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all'.

In order to meet these challenges, the Polish legislature has amended the Family and Guardianship Code through what is called Kamilek's Act (Sejm of Poland, 2023). The name of the act is a commemoration of an 8-year-old boy from the Polish city of Częstochowa who died as a result of extreme domestic violence. The amendments introduced include implementation of the serious case review procedure, which involves the requirement to analyse the most serious cases of violence against children. In each such case, it is mandatory to determine, among other things, why appropriate actions had not been taken before the child was harmed, as well as what should be done to prevent tragic events in the future. The same Act also changed the provisions regarding the standards of protection of minors contained in Article 22(b) and (c) of the Act of 13 May 2016 on Counteracting the Threat of Sexual Crime and Protecting Minors (Sejm of Poland, 2016). The obligation to introduce standards for the protection of minors is incumbent on the bodies managing units of the education system (kindergartens, schools, and youth hostels) and other institutions and facilities concerned with education, care, upbringing, rehabilitation, religion, art, health, recreation, sports, and related to the development of interests, which minors attend or where they stay, as well as the organizers of these activities and entities providing hotel and tourist services or other places of collective accommodation.

One can hardly imagine that these goal targets could be accomplished without an immediate and effective response to violence that consists of a permanent isolation of the perpetrator from the victim. The Polish legal system provides for various measures and modes of isolation of perpetrators from victims of domestic violence, according to the principle that the perpetrator should leave the premises occupied jointly with the victim, even if he or she is the owner of such a property (Karaźniewicz & Kotowska, 2023). In practice, however, it is often the person experiencing violence who, fearing for his or her health or even life, has to immediately leave the dwelling and seek shelter (Czarkowska, 2016; Klaus, 2016, pp. 531–553). It has been argued in the literature that other solutions need to be developed in order to protect victims effectively; many report that they were able to leave because they received external support, both informal (from relatives, friends, or neighbours) and professional (from the police or women's aid support workers) (see Heron et al., 2022, p. 686). Research shows that a lack of affordable housing that would provide safety for the victim and their children is one of the most frequent reasons for staying in a violent relationship (Ganley, 1995, p. 33.)

In particular, some researchers recommend creating various types of intervention centres and, at a later stage, residential centres for people who have experienced violence (Klaus, 2016, p. 540). This has been made possible by the Act of 29 July 2005 on Counteracting Domestic Violence (Sejm of Poland, 2005).

One of the forms of free assistance to victims of domestic violence is shelter provided at a specialized support centre, according to Article 3(1)(4) of the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence. Article 4(1) of this Act specifies the support that must be provided as part of the shelter at such a centre for persons experiencing domestic violence, in terms of emergency relief, therapy and personal assistance, and living needs. A similar scope of activities is also the result of commonly used definitions; for example, a 'shelter for victims of domestic violence or "shelter" means a facility that provides temporary residential service or facilities to family or household members who are victims of domestic violence or to persons with whom the actor is or was in a dating relationship who are victims of domestic violence' (Law Insider, n.d.). The legislature chose to indicate that the persons who provide assistance and support to persons experiencing domestic violence should be specialized professionals, including psychologists, educators, social workers, lawyers, and therapists (Piskozub & Wrona, 2023, p. 33).

The obligation to provide shelter was defined by the legislature as a task of the municipality (Article 6(2)(3) of the Act). Even though the obligation to create a local system for counteracting domestic violence has been delegated to municipalities, no additional resources have been provided, which results in numerous problems as municipalities attempt to accomplish this task.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the essential characteristics and functions of shelter provided by specialized support centres (SSCs) as one of the forms of assistance provided at the municipality level to persons who have experienced violence. The paper also seeks to assess how such centres operate in practice. To this end, the main research problem was formulated as follows: Does the current scope of the law pertaining to this form of assistance, as well as its practical application, meet the premises of Target 16.1 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

Assuming that providing shelter to a person experiencing domestic violence largely fulfils the goal and the detailed target stated in Agenda 2030 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), this paper relies primarily on the formal-legal method. The analysis focuses on the relevant provisions of the amended Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence. In order to demonstrate how this form of assistance is provided in practice, relevant information was requested from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy according to the procedure regarding the right of access to public information.

## 1. The legal grounds and organization of specialized support centres for persons experiencing domestic violence

According to data from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, there are 37 specialized support centres for victims of domestic violence in Poland (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2022), and this number has not changed in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Each centre operates according to the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence and performs the tasks set out in the Government Programme for Counteracting Domestic Violence (Rada Ministrów, 2023). Facilities of this kind also meet the standards formulated in the Regulation of the Minister of Family and Social Policy of 20 June 2023 on the Standard of Basic Services Provided by Specialized Support Centres for Persons Experiencing Domestic Violence and the Qualification Requirements for Persons Employed at Such Centres (the 2023 Regulation).

The conditions of such shelter services may vary depending on their location, although they must meet the standard specified in the 2023 Regulation. In terms of living needs, the Regulation guarantees: (a) temporary residence for no more than 30 persons, a number which may increase depending on the capacity of the specific centre and upon approval of the authority in charge; (b) a sleeping room designed for no more than five persons, taking into account the family situation of the person who experiences domestic violence; (c) a common room for daytime stays, with a play area for children and a place for study; (d) a communal bathroom equipped to be used by both adults and children, but by no more than five persons at once; (e) at least one laundry and drying room; (f) a communal kitchen or kitchenette with food preparation areas, whereby the number of the latter should be proportionate to the number of persons in the centre, including children: one food preparation area for no more than ten persons, equipped with at least one cooker, sink, and refrigerator and kitchen furniture, as well as equipment and utensils for the preparation and consumption of meals; (g) rooms for the storage of baby carriages, if the premises allow it; (h) rooms for individual work with persons experiencing domestic violence; (i) food, clothing, and footwear; and (j) personal hygiene and cleaning products (Section 1(1)(3)). These facilities should be adapted to persons with special needs, notably health-related, including persons with disabilities (Section 1(2)).

The number of places at individual centres varies greatly. In 2022, 2,110 places enabling residential stay were available in all such facilities in Poland. Based on data from recent years, it should be noted that the number of places is systematically and rapidly increasing. Compared with 2015 (591 places), the number increased more than three-and-a-half times (by 357%). Interestingly, only two provinces saw a very

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1 In 2015–2018 there were 35 such establishments in the country. A new centre was opened in 2019 in the Małopolskie Province and another in 2020 in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province (Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, 2024).

significant rise in terms of SSC capacity: specifically, the number of available places in the Świętokrzyskie Province increased from 18 to 943 in 2021 and 973 in 2022. Likewise, in the Śląskie Province, 36 places were available in 2020, but the number grew to 529 in 2021 and 563 in 2022. In the remaining provinces, the number of places has remained at a similar level and has even decreased in some cases. (The detailed data are presented in Table 1.) The spike in the number of places in the Świętokrzyskie Province is not surprising, given that the relevant indicator in that province – the average number of ‘Blue Card – A’ forms completed by the police in 2022 per 100,000 inhabitants – was equal to 296, the highest in the country (Województwo Świętokrzyskie, 2023).

Table 1. The number of places for residential stays at specialized support centres for persons experiencing domestic violence in 2015–2022, by province.

| Province            | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021  | 2022  |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Dolnośląskie        | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55    | 55    |
| Kujawsko-Pomorskie  | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 32   | 32    | 32    |
| Lubelskie           | 50   | 50   | 50   | 50   | 50   | 50   | 50    | 50    |
| Lubuskie            | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 22    | 22    |
| Łódzkie             | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24    | 24    |
| Małopolskie         | 30   | 30   | 30   | 30   | 55   | 55   | 55    | 55    |
| Mazowieckie         | 51   | 51   | 51   | 41   | 60   | 41   | 51    | 41    |
| Opolskie            | 25   | 25   | 25   | 25   | 25   | 25   | 25    | 25    |
| Podkarpackie        | 88   | 88   | 88   | 88   | 88   | 88   | 88    | 88    |
| Podlaskie           | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24   | 24    | 24    |
| Pomorskie           | 23   | 23   | 23   | 23   | 23   | 23   | 23    | 23    |
| Śląskie             | 36   | 36   | 36   | 36   | 36   | 36   | 529   | 563   |
| Świętokrzyskie      | 10   | 10   | 10   | 10   | 18   | 18   | 943   | 973   |
| Warmińsko-Mazurskie | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55   | 55    | 55    |
| Wielkopolskie       | 60   | 60   | 60   | 60   | 60   | 60   | 60    | 60    |
| Zachodniopomorskie  | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20   | 20    | 20    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        | 591  | 591  | 591  | 581  | 633  | 626  | 2,056 | 2,110 |

Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, 2024.

The SSC in Olsztyn, which can accommodate 15 persons in three rooms (with bathrooms), may serve as an example of how such a centre operates. Its premises also include a communal day room, a children's playroom with a study area, a therapy room, a therapeutic clinic-room, a communal kitchen, and a laundry and drying room (Specjalistyczny Ośrodek Wsparcia dla Osób doznających Przemocy Domowej, n.d.).

The location where victims of domestic violence may seek shelter is not necessarily the same as the address of an SSC; occasionally, a centre may send the victim to another location. For instance, in Wrocław, victims may seek shelter at the Specialized Support Centre for Victims of Domestic Violence, the Crisis Intervention Centre, and the Home for Women. Moreover, as part of the SSC's tasks, two separate apartments are available in the Śródmieście and Psie Pole districts of the city (Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Akson, 2024).

Specialized support centres achieve their objectives in close cooperation with non-governmental organizations. One such institution is the Women's Rights Centre Foundation (Centrum Praw Kobiet), which runs a shelter for women who experience violence and their children in Warsaw. Through its website, the Foundation solicits donations from individuals, listing the current needs of the SSC; these include toys, books, films, and games for the children's playroom, as well as a supply of towels, blankets, bedding (pillows, comforters) and bed linen (pillowcases, sheets), waterproof mattress covers, silverware, a small couch and armchairs (Centrum Praw Kobiet, 2024). In this manner, the foundation actively engages the local community in helping to provide shelter for victims of violence. This is one of the ways of building an inclusive society in which any person willing to help others in need can get involved.

## **2. Shelter as a special form of assistance to persons affected by violence**

The decision to leave one's own home is extremely difficult for many reasons. Due to the violence experienced, a person is deprived of a sense of agency while being convinced that nothing can be changed (Romańczuk-Grącka, 2022, pp. 77–82). The complicated relationship between the person experiencing violence and the abuser makes it difficult to hope that the situation may improve. Finally, the victim may believe that he or she has nowhere to go. Therefore the decision rests entirely with the person who experiences violence, but once he or she has made it, the centre can help him or her to go through that change and reclaim his or her own life without violence and fear (Wykluczeni, 2021).

Providing shelter primarily means that residential accommodation is free of charge at the request of the person experiencing domestic violence. The 2023 Regulation defines the standards applicable to such a service in terms of emergency relief, therapy, personal assistance, and living needs.

As regards emergency relief, the principal standard is to provide shelter to the person who experiences domestic violence and the children under his or her care for a period of up to three months, with the possibility of extending that period in cases justified by the circumstances of the person concerned, particularly with a view to ensuring his or her safety (Section 1(1)(1) of the 2023 Regulation). As a result, persons coming to the shelters are, most importantly, guaranteed separation from the perpetrator of violence, protection, and safety (Ulatowska, 2007).

The possibility of benefiting from such assistance is reserved for those who fear for their own life and health; the relatively small number of available places does not allow assistance to be provided to less severe cases. A person experiencing violence should present a document stating his or her identity, e.g. an ID card, passport, or other similar official document, as well as providing his or her personal identification number. If possible, such a person should carry documents confirming that he or she is a victim of violence: a Blue Card or a medical certificate stating the cause and type of injury, for example. However, this is not mandatory (gov.pl).

The fact that the number of persons requiring assistance (and not just accommodation at residential support centres) is definitely larger than before is evidenced by the data on the number of people using the services of SSCs. For example, in 2022, SSCs offered 2,110 places for residential stays, while 5,047 people benefited from their support in that year. Regrettably, the Świętokrzyskie Province still leads in the statistics. Even so, the analysis of data from recent years indicates that the number of persons receiving support at SSCs is decreasing. The detailed data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The number of persons who received assistance from SSCs in 2015–2022, by province.

| Province           | 2015 | 2016 | 2017  | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|--------------------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Dolnośląskie       | 443  | 254  | 1,490 | 794  | 190  | 129  | 111  | 274  |
| Kujawsko-Pomorskie | 483  | 432  | 397   | 465  | 346  | 352  | 354  | 355  |
| Lubelskie          | 875  | 766  | 1,103 | 207  | 117  | 65   | 44   | 204  |
| Lubuskie           | 315  | 244  | 78    | 44   | 51   | 25   | 33   | 41   |
| Łódzkie            | 166  | 148  | 163   | 133  | 127  | 103  | 118  | 124  |
| Małopolskie        | 129  | 115  | 205   | 148  | 216  | 191  | 672  | 222  |
| Mazowieckie        | 141  | 317  | 485   | 393  | 804  | 648  | 317  | 522  |
| Opolskie           | 634  | 665  | 675   | 557  | 531  | 406  | 419  | 464  |
| Podkarpackie       | 417  | 379  | 439   | 442  | 366  | 392  | 289  | 400  |



|                     |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Podlaskie           | 78    | 87    | 91    | 120   | 90    | 75    | 97    | 103   |
| Pomorskie           | 430   | 538   | 608   | 633   | 325   | 174   | 63    | 86    |
| Śląskie             | 757   | 720   | 663   | 553   | 576   | 524   | 619   | 634   |
| Świętokrzyskie      | 1,887 | 1,716 | 1,570 | 1,714 | 1,696 | 960   | 943   | 973   |
| Warmińsko-Mazurskie | 458   | 407   | 371   | 383   | 455   | 394   | 421   | 391   |
| Wielkopolskie       | 194   | 187   | 197   | 183   | 228   | 146   | 158   | 164   |
| Zachodniopomorskie  | 47    | 29    | 23    | 23    | 21    | 27    | 104   | 90    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        | 7,454 | 7,004 | 8,558 | 6,792 | 6,139 | 4,611 | 4,762 | 5,047 |

*Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, 2024.*

Providing shelter is only a temporary solution. For this reason, persons under the care of SSCs benefit from other, comprehensive forms of support, no less important and intended to equip them with the tools they need to cope with crises they experience in the future. The literature on this topic emphasizes that the process of preparing the victim to leave the shelter starts at the moment he or she is accepted at that facility (Thunberg & Arne, 2024). With regard to ongoing living needs, housing in particular, the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence provides for another mode of assistance in Article 3(1)(6), which provides that a person who experiences domestic violence and does not hold a legal title to the dwelling occupied jointly with the abuser is to receive help in obtaining housing. This is a measure that requires analysis that is outside the scope of this paper.

It is worth noting that shelter provided by SSCs to persons affected by violence serves a variety of functions, as the role of SSCs in the system for counteracting domestic violence is not limited to ensuring a roof over the victim's head. One of the SSCs' tasks is to support the victim in making the decision to continue living away from the aggressor and to plan further steps accordingly. While staying at an SSC, victims of domestic violence can also expect essential therapeutic and assistance services at the least, the goal of which is not only to ensure their safety but also to aid and support them according to their needs related to their actual situation. This function involves (a) formulating a diagnosis concerning the circumstances of the person experiencing domestic violence who resides at the centre and the children in his or her care; (b) supporting them through expert counselling, notably legal, psychological, social, and medical; (c) organizing support and therapeutic groups for them; (d) conducting individual therapy that, in addition to supporting the person experiencing domestic violence, will enable him or her to acquire the skills needed to protect himself or herself from the perpetrator of violence; (e) providing access to medical assistance; (f) assessing the situation of the children under the care of the person experiencing

domestic violence by means a family interview, as referred to in Article 107 of the Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Welfare (Sejm of Poland, 2004); and (g) providing the person staying at the centre with educational consultations by professionals employed there (Section 1(1)(2) of the 2023 Regulation).

Such assistance and support are ensured by the staff of the SSC, including psychologists, educators, social workers, lawyers, and therapists, as provided for in Article 4(1) and (2) of the Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence (Bieńkowska et al., 2023). This includes fostering proactive attitudes and self-reliance when facing a crisis and dysfunctional relations in the family or helping the person to find employment. Moreover, the shelters must also strive to create a normal family atmosphere, thus meeting more than just the basic needs of victims of violence (Ulatowska, 2007).

The tremendous need for legal, medical, psychological, social, occupational, and family counselling is evinced by the substantial number of people who have received such assistance from SSCs. In 2022, there were nearly 170,000 such people. The number of people who require counselling is systematically increasing. The detailed data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The number of persons receiving assistance in the form of counselling (medical, legal, psychological, occupational, family, and social) in 2015–2022, by province.

| Province            | 2015   | 2016   | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   | 2020   | 2021   | <b>2022</b> |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------------|
| Dolnośląskie        | 11,107 | 9,131  | 13,192 | 12,975 | 12,898 | 13,111 | 17,494 | 17,098      |
| Kujawsko-Pomorskie  | 6,098  | 6,291  | 5,796  | 6,718  | 6,147  | 7,377  | 7,266  | 7,211       |
| Lubelskie           | 10,705 | 10,370 | 11,943 | 11,609 | 10,105 | 7,962  | 9,413  | 7,926       |
| Lubuskie            | 4,091  | 3,803  | 3,640  | 5,116  | 4,953  | 3,023  | 3,905  | 5,086       |
| Łódzkie             | 7,015  | 8,491  | 9,685  | 11,040 | 8,357  | 6,480  | 8,468  | 7,911       |
| Małopolskie         | 13,680 | 12,818 | 10,637 | 9,864  | 10,598 | 9,423  | 7,526  | 10,805      |
| Mazowieckie         | 23,921 | 24,443 | 22,635 | 22,948 | 25,265 | 25,727 | 18,842 | 19,425      |
| Opolskie            | 5,251  | 4,857  | 5,130  | 4,270  | 4,405  | 4,091  | 4,429  | 5,225       |
| Podkarpackie        | 5,788  | 6,646  | 5,949  | 6,288  | 5,729  | 5,371  | 7,515  | 6,738       |
| Podlaskie           | 6,100  | 6,301  | 5,843  | 5,536  | 6,698  | 5,410  | 5,804  | 7,941       |
| Pomorskie           | 12,496 | 10,653 | 11,819 | 10,117 | 9,090  | 9,072  | 13,774 | 12,125      |
| Śląskie             | 16,218 | 18,150 | 15,604 | 15,301 | 15,755 | 14,131 | 13,899 | 15,965      |
| Świętokrzyskie      | 9,467  | 6,707  | 5,665  | 4,515  | 5,357  | 5,108  | 7,939  | 8,405       |
| Warmińsko-Mazurskie | 10,094 | 9,783  | 8,928  | 9,045  | 9,177  | 6,673  | 7,531  | 8,274       |

|                    |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Wielkopolskie      | 7,177   | 10,557  | 12,796  | 12,802  | 14,457  | 13,920  | 17,704  | 19,488  |
| Zachodniopomorskie | 5,443   | 3,844   | 4,944   | 4,808   | 6,412   | 4,000   | 6,947   | 8,892   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | 154,651 | 152,845 | 154,206 | 152,952 | 155,403 | 140,879 | 158,456 | 168,515 |

Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024.

From the very first days of their stay at a dedicated institution, victims of violence are included in the education process involving individual and group meetings. Consequently, they may follow individual plans for leaving their violent environment, which aim to help the victims avoid exposure to violence in the legal sense (e.g. through divorce), find out about the underlying mechanisms of violence, and learn to recognize and express their own needs and feelings. Each resident is assigned an individual mentor, usually a social worker, who develops a list of goals to be achieved and the methods to achieve them. Failure to actively participate in the programme leads to a loss of the right to stay at the shelter (Ulatowska, 2007).

### 3. Cooperation with other institutions in providing shelter

As Ostaszewski (2022, p. 19) observes, crimes against the family have historically been largely ignored by the criminal justice system, criminal jurisprudence, and criminology as being a private affair.

Counteracting violence requires the cooperation of multiple actors, including public authorities, institutions, and organizations established to combat and prevent violence, as well as society at large. It is important for various institutions and individuals to work together, form coalitions against violence, and create support networks for victims of domestic violence that include local partners (Ulatowska, 2007). Assistance to victims of domestic violence should be provided by both natural support systems (relatives, friends, and acquaintances) and institutional frameworks that respond professionally in emergencies. Institutional assistance is mainly provided by social welfare, crisis support systems, helplines, consultation points for victims of domestic violence, shelters for victims, foundations and NGOs, medical facilities, schools, and the police (Mazur, 2002, pp. 144–150, 156–162).<sup>2</sup>

Due to the unique characteristics of domestic violence, quick and effective assistance to victims depends primarily on clear procedures and the quality of the cooperation between institutions and organizations that form a local coalition. In practice, the crucial element is adequate coordination between all organizations and institutions involved in helping victims (Ulatowska, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the operation of a local system of assistance to victims of domestic violence through the example of Rzeszów, see Urbańska (2016).

The literature on this topic emphasizes that helping persons affected by domestic violence is one of the principal areas of action for the so-called 'outreach administration', which should get involved whenever the societally important needs of an individual cannot be satisfied by that individual and difficult life situations cannot be overcome by their own efforts (Sierpowska, 2017, p. 285).

Shelter facilities for victims of domestic violence are part of the system established to counteract this problem and, together with other coalition partners, promote higher competence among local entities and raise public awareness of domestic violence through direct exchange of experience and good practice, joint problem-solving, and partnership-based mutual support. However, it needs to be noted that the system cannot work on its own, as everything is contingent on the activity of the individual coalition partners. To give a simple example, the absence of (or poorly kept) statistics concerning the number of victims of violence who have received assistance may lead to an underreporting of the scale of the problem, which consequently affects the amount of funding for activities in this area. On what grounds, then, could support be requested (Ulatowska, 2007)?

#### **4. Providing shelter to victims of violence: Practical issues**

The above functions of shelter in the domestic violence prevention system cannot be carried out without adequate funding. The operation of shelter facilities relies on the volume of institutional aid and support from private persons, since this determines the type of assistance and range of services made available to victims. Shortage of financial resources leads to a mismatch between the number of staff at the shelters and the responsibilities they have; excessive workload and, simultaneously, low wages are the most common reasons for them quitting their jobs. Consequently, the economic aspect plays a vital role in the system of assistance to victims of violence and affects the performance of tasks that shelters are required to complete within the violence prevention system (Ulatowska, 2007).

The increasing need for various forms of support for and assistance to victims of domestic violence is recognized by the state. The amount of funds allocated for the day-to-day operation of SSCs and the establishment of new centres is increasing every year; PLN 25,080,000 has been earmarked for the former and PLN 900,000 for the latter in 2024. The detailed data on the financing of SSCs are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Funding allocated annually for the day-to-day operation of SSCs for persons experiencing domestic violence and for the creation of new centres between 2015 and 2024.

| Years | Day-to-day operation of SSCs | Establishment of new SSCs |
|-------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2015  | PLN 12,180,000               |                           |
| 2016  | PLN 12,180,000               |                           |
| 2017  | PLN 13,440,000               |                           |
| 2018  | PLN 13,824,000               | PLN 200,000               |
| 2019  | PLN 15,540,000               | PLN 200,000               |
| 2020  | PLN 15,540,000               |                           |
| 2021  | PLN 15,895,200               |                           |
| 2022  | PLN 16,827,600               |                           |
| 2023  | PLN 21,428,000               |                           |
| 2024* | PLN 25,080,000               | PLN 900,000               |

*\*As part of the Government Programme for Counteracting Domestic Violence 2024–2030, launched in 2024*  
*Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Policy, 2024.*

In 2015, the Supreme Audit Office (SAO) launched an audit on its own initiative (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2016), with the aim of assessing the efficacy of the measures taken to assist victims of domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> The audit, covering the period from 2012 to the first half of 2015, focused on the availability of expert counselling – medical, psychological, legal, and family-related – and shelter for people experiencing violence. The audit was carried out at 27 institutions in 24 municipalities, including 11 cities with the rights of a district. This covered 24 social welfare centres, a crisis intervention centre, a specialized support centre for victims of violence, and an independent public healthcare facility (Celińska, 2017).

All the centres audited by the SAO provided shelter to victims of abuse in circumstances that required immediate intervention, although only some of the institutions, especially those operating in larger cities, had their own facilities. Support centres operated in five of the 24 municipalities, with a total of 199 residential places available. Three municipalities ran homes for mothers with children and for pregnant women, with 40 places each. Specialized support centres in seven units of local government offered 131 residential places, while crisis intervention centres in 14 municipalities had 248 places (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2016). A total of 8,915

3 The report contains the most recently available data. The Supreme Audit Office has not conducted any comprehensive nationwide audit since 2015.

people received shelter in a crisis situation across all the audited institutions. Of those, 3,656 stayed at crisis intervention centres, 3,120 benefited from the assistance offered by support centres, 1,960 persons, including 617 children, benefited from the services of specialized facilities, and 179 women resided in homes for mothers with children and for pregnant women. Units of local government without their own residential centres used the premises offered by neighbouring municipalities. Five audited institutions signed agreements or contracts with centres or associations with appropriate facilities and financed the stays of persons referred there. Due to the considerable distance from their place of previous residence, some of the affected persons could have refused to receive assistance in such a form, which meant that they had to continue staying with their abusers (Celińska, 2017, pp. 68–69).

The imposition on 20 March 2020 of the state of epidemic due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a number of restrictions, which limited personal contact, movement, and certain services and business activities. This reduced the ability to counteract domestic violence effectively and led to more conflicts in isolated families (The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19, (n.d.).<sup>4</sup> As a result of the prolonged pandemic, the social welfare system not only had to face the challenges posed by the new or exacerbated difficulties experienced by families, but also needed to focus its crisis outreach activities on enhancing methods of preventive and intervention work.<sup>5</sup> Support for families that experienced difficulties during the pandemic was subject to a planned audit by the Supreme Audit Office, which covered the activities of 12 social welfare centres (SWCs),<sup>6</sup> as well as six district family support centres (DFSCs) in six provinces: Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Lubuskie, Łódzkie, Mazowieckie, Pomorskie, and Zachodniopomorskie, in the period from 2019 to 28 October 2022 (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023).<sup>7</sup>

Four of the audited DFSCs offered temporary residence for persons and families in crisis at crisis intervention centres (CICs). Emergency accommodation was not available during the COVID-19 pandemic at the Municipal SWC in Płock (Mazowieckie) and the CIC in Chełmno (Kujawsko-Pomorskie), but this did not result in a possible failure

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4 The COVID-19 pandemic led to what has been termed a 'shadow pandemic of violence against women'. Studies suggest that the number of violent incidents affecting women, and their frequency, increased during that period. The hindering of access to help is also highlighted, given that victims of domestic violence found it difficult to contact dedicated institutions while remaining isolated with their abusers. Furthermore, centres providing shelter did not operate at their usual capacity, for example due to personnel shortages caused by isolation or quarantine of their staff. This topic is discussed more broadly in European Parliament (2023).

5 For information on new challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of the staff of shelters for victims of domestic violence, see Pless et al. (2024).

6 The SWCs included those at municipal, city-municipal, or city level, and the Centre for Social Services in Koźienice.

7 The DFSC and the city SWC in Płock are organizational units of the social welfare system in a city with district rights, where the audit covered the implementation of district tasks assigned to the DFSC.

to provide shelter to those in need. SWCs also provided assistance in the form of shelter: two SWCs operated night shelters as part of their structure, while other institutions of this type provided emergency and provisional shelter places for homeless people and other persons in need under agreements and contracts with organizations helping such individuals and families or other entities which ran facilities where such places were available. Nearly 1,700 individuals and families received assistance, 33% (547) of whom benefited from it in 2020 (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023).

## Conclusions

Goal 16 of Agenda 2030 consists of 12 hierarchically arranged and interdependent targets. It begins with a recommendation to 'significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere' and finally stipulates that it is necessary to 'promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development'. It is most likely no coincidence that the sequence of tasks appears to underscore more concrete and empowered efforts for global peace, inclusiveness, and justice. As Redo aptly observes, Agenda 2030 does not envisage any kind of social reform but a reform aimed at progressive social transformation (Redo, 2019, pp. 850, 855).

Providing shelter to a person affected by domestic violence is part of Target 16.1 of Agenda 2030. The current scope of legislation pertaining to such assistance and its practical application in Poland partly meets the premises of this target. The Act on Counteracting Domestic Violence contains solutions that make it possible to reduce violence in all forms. However, it should be stressed emphatically that violence cannot be eliminated from social life and, quite reasonably, Agenda 2030 refers to 'reducing the degree of violence' rather than to a fictitious 'eradication of the phenomenon'.

It may be noted that as far as the implementation of Agenda 2030 is concerned, Poland currently ranks 12th among the 195 Member States of the UN. The task of measuring this progress is within the purview of Statistics Poland, which launched a special website to present its results. Apart from the global indicators adopted by the UN, the site provides additional national indicators which have been developed domestically in order to keep closer track of issues that are relevant at the national level. In addition, Statistics Poland periodically releases a digital publication titled 'Poland on the Way to SDGs: Environmentally Sustainable Development', which outlines the process of social and economic transformation against a global and an EU background, making it possible to compare Poland's achievements (Kampania 17. Celów, 2023).

When evaluating Polish law on combating domestic violence, it can be determined that it is being systematically developed, and the protection of victims is one of the most important elements of this law. The regulations provide a wide range of assistance to victims ensuring their physical safety, as well as legal and psychological assistance. However, the reality is far from perfect; this is primarily due

to the scale of the problem of domestic violence. The establishment of new SSCs and the increase in the number of places available should be assessed positively; however, it is still an insufficient offer. According to data on the 'Blue Card' procedure, in 2022, there were 71,631 people suspected of being affected by domestic violence. In 2023, the number rose significantly and 77,832 victims were reported. At the same time, in 2022, only 2,110 places for 24-hour stays were available in SSCs; the need is therefore much greater. It is also important to keep in mind that legislation defines the standards for the operation and equipment of SSCs, which make it possible to meet the needs not only for shelter, but also for a relatively normal life. This is very important, especially since minors constitute a large group among the victims of domestic violence (10,982 in 2022 and as many as 17,039 in 2023). Research shows the need for a broader consideration of the impact of stays in a shelter on minors and a greater attention to their needs (Thunberg et al., 2022); this requires huge financial outlays. Attention should also be brought to the necessity of taking into account the special needs of the disabled (cf. Ballan et al., 2022). The amount of funds allocated for the day-to-day operation of SSCs and the establishment of new centres is increasing every year; however, taking into account the indicated scale of domestic violence, these resources are not sufficient. Attention must also be paid to the costs of the support provided in the fields of legal, medical, psychological, social, professional, and family counselling. Thus Poland still faces major challenges in helping victims of domestic violence, although much has already been done.

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