

Telephone Hotlines Offer Comfort, Support, and Advice to Women in Need

BY KATHRYN UTAN

A teenage girl who has questions concerning birth control and reproductive health . . . a mother who is having trouble coping with the pressures of caring for a family while working full-time . . . a terrified woman who traveled to another country to take a job as a waitress only to discover the employment that awaited her was as a prostitute . . . a new wife who is being physically abused by her husband. All of these women are looking for answers to pressing—perhaps even life-threatening—questions. Thanks to a number of local and international NGOs throughout the NIS and CEE, assistance may be just a phone call away. Responding to the needs of their communities, many organizations—including a number of AIHA partners—now offer telephone call-in services that provide an invaluable resource for women seeking medical and psychological help, or even employment and legal counseling.

For victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and trafficking—the recruitment and transportation, often across national borders, of women who are then exploited sexually or economically by being forced to work as prostitutes or in other forms of illegal labor—the pain of living in an abusive situation is often compounded by the fact that they feel they have nowhere to turn for help or advice. In such cases, reaching out to a sympathetic and knowledgeable person can make a world of difference and may even be the first step toward breaking the cycle

of violence that has these women so firmly in its grasp. But the pain and shame that may accompany abuse often prevent victims from disclosing their suffering to those in a position to offer assistance. The anonymity of a telephone call may be the only way they can feel safe talking about their situation.

Linking Women in Crisis to a Network of Support

Pioneering hotlines for women in the NIS, Arkansas-based Winrock International has joined with a number of grass roots organizations in Ukraine to open three information and crisis call-in services since 1998—all part of the USAID-funded Trafficking Prevention Program, according to Amy Heyden, program associate at Winrock.

In Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, and L'viv, Winrock International has partnered with local NGOs to create “Women for Women Centers” that focus on trafficking prevention as well as on providing women with information on topics ranging from employment opportunities to IPV. “These hotlines serve the dual purpose of being a resource for victims of violence as well as a source of information for women thinking about working abroad or returned trafficking

victims seeking assistance,” Heyden explains. “In some instances—particularly in cases of trafficking—family members trying to locate a missing sister, mother, or cousin do call these hotlines, but the vast majority of callers are the women themselves.”

Operating under the concept that many women can get the emotional support they need over the phone, the Women for Women Center in Dnipropetrovsk established their hotline in March 1999, according to Olena Morhun, coordinator of the facility’s Violence Prevention Program. “IPV has been a hidden issue for so long that many women are unable to admit they are victims . . . They are more likely to discuss their problems openly with an ‘invisible’ person on the other end of a telephone than in a situation where they are face-to-face with another person,” Morhun says.

Hotline advisors are guided by strict principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and their main responsibility is to provide emotional support to the women who call. “We try to discuss ways of dealing

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with each caller’s specific problems and the possible consequences of their decisions,” Morhun explains. “If a woman is a victim of IPV, for example, we provide her with [contact information] for the nearest police station as well as necessary information about community, governmental, and

NGOs that deal with the issue.”

Ludmila Gorovaya, president of the Donetsk Regional League of Business and Professional Women—the organization partnered with Winrock International to operate the Donetsk Women for Women

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Cards such as this one—from the Dailia WWC in Chisinau—encourage communities not to tolerate violence and provide victims with contact information for the Center along with the number of its hotline.

Center—agrees that the element of anonymity is imperative to the success of any program or service dealing with issues as sensitive as IPV. “Of course the problem of partner abuse runs very deep and is a difficult thing for victims to discuss . . . by guaranteeing a caller’s confidentiality, we give a woman an opportunity to seek help and advice without feeling uncomfortable or ashamed,” Gorovaya explains.

Nadia Kopatko, Winrock’s crisis prevention coordinator in Kiev, notes that roughly 25-30 hours a week are spent on phone consultations at each of the three Ukrainian Centers—which is the equivalent of 70-90 calls. “Really there are three types of calls—simple requests for information, more in-depth consultations, and crisis intervention. The length of each call depends upon its nature . . . information requests last no more than five minutes; consultative calls range between 25-30 minutes; and crisis calls are usually 40-50 minutes in duration,” Kopatko explains. The hotlines in L’viv and Dnipropetrovsk are each manned by six consultants per

week and the Donetsk service operates with four consultants and approximately seven volunteers a week. “The busiest times for our hotlines are generally during the late morning and evening . . . the number of calls also increases following television and radio advertisements for our Centers,” which highlights the importance of publicizing such services.

The Dnipropetrovsk hotline is staffed 24 hours a day by psychologists, psychiatrists, and teachers who have all received special training and earned appropriate certification. University psychology students also assist the hotline staff on a voluntary basis. “On average, we receive 70 calls each week . . . the most common problems discussed are domestic, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; concerns about interpersonal relationships; health problems including mental anxiety, severe depression, and even suicidal thoughts; and substance abuse,” Morhun notes. “We also get calls from women who want to seek jobs in other countries . . . they are given a special consultation to alert them of the dangers of human trafficking.”

In Donetsk, the 24-hour hotline began serving its community in mid-April 1999 and is operated by four staff professionals and some 15 trained volunteers who include physicians, psychologists, and social workers, according to Gorovaya. The women who call—up to 90 each week—express similar concerns to the callers in Dnipropetrovsk. “Most are victims of some sort of emotional or physical abuse or women who are thinking of working abroad,” Gorovaya says.

Public Outreach Programs Help Inform and Educate

Both Women for Women Centers actively engage in educational outreach programs and make ample use of local print and broadcast media to promote their services as well as public awareness of issues such as IPV, trafficking, and substance abuse. The activities and services offered by the Donetsk Center, for example, have received extensive coverage in regional newspapers and a television program highlighting the facility and its concerns titled, “Women for Women,” aired twice a month for most of 1999, according to Gorovaya.

“The local community has responded positively to our services,” Morhun says. “Really people are quite satisfied . . . for most women who call, this is their last chance . . . our counselors can actively listen, provide emotional support, and help find a decent way out of a critical situation.” Concurring, Gorovaya notes, “People generally feel that IPV is a problem that needs to be addressed by programs such as ours. It’s good to have community support, but the real reward comes from helping women who feel they have no where else to turn.”

AIHA Partners Use Hotlines to Reach Out to Women in Crisis

Partners from the Women’s Wellness Centers (WWCs) in Kiev, L’viv, and Odessa

have drawn upon the experience of supervisory staff from the Winrock-sponsored facilities who conducted a training course for phone line consultants June 6-9 in L'viv. The interactive workshop used a number of teaching techniques such as lectures, role-play exercises, and practical skills sessions geared toward enabling the participants to adequately address the wide variety of issues they are likely to encounter as hotline advisors. Telephone call-in services have already been installed at the WWCs in Odessa, Kiev, and L'viv, and one is set to open later this year in Kharkiv.

The "Women's Hotline" at the Odessa WWC was established in June and currently operates six days a week between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., according to Dr. Svetlana Posokhova, director of the Center. Noting that the hotline was a top priority in the Center's newly implemented programs addressing the issue of IPV, Posokhova says the call-in service deals with questions on topics ranging from birth control and STD prevention to fam-

"On average, we receive 70 calls each week . . . the most common problems discussed are domestic, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse . . ."

ily relationships and partner abuse. "Our telephone counselors have all received special instruction and also attend ongoing training sessions. They are members of the WWC staff and include nurses, obstetricians, and psychologists."

The Center staff first realized the need for such a service when they began receiving numerous calls from women seeking advice and assistance. "Many people are afraid to discuss issues such as violence and abuse openly . . . it is a big problem, but not one that is easily recognized or admitted. The hotline doesn't eliminate the problem, but it can help women to avoid crisis situations," Posokhova explains.

In Chisinau, Moldova, a hotline was established in January 1999 at the Dalila WWC's Center for Education Against Violence (CEVA). Dr. Boris Gilca, director of the WWC, explains, "Most of the calls we receive deal with issues such as physical violence, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and family relationships. Our psychologists respond to callers' questions and offer emotional support . . . if necessary, consultants refer women to physicians, lawyers, or the police."

The hotline at Dalila operates Monday through Saturday between the hours of 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. and receives, on average, seven calls per week. The Center also works closely with community au-



A volunteer consultant responds to incoming calls at the Winrock-sponsored information hotline located at the Dnipropetrovsk Women for Women Center.

Courtesy of Amy Heyden, Winrock International.

thorities and organizations to educate the public about IPV, and women in crisis situations are often told about its services by police officers. "We have tried to use other organizations as well as print and broadcast media to disseminate information about the hotline and our programs . . . so far the community reaction has been quite positive. People—especially women—have been very receptive to the idea that IPV is a community problem that needs to be addressed any way possible."

Underscoring the important function of hotlines and similar programs, Winrock International's Heyden notes, "There is such a lack of information available on IPV, trafficking in women, and the services available for victims . . . these call-in lines are really filling a void in the communities they serve." Moreover, they seem to act as a catalyst for additional programs, she says. "At each of our [Ukrainian] Centers, spontaneous support groups for victims of IPV were started by women who had called the hotlines and visited the facilities," which demonstrates that finding support is often the first step to breaking the cycle of violence.

Kathryn Utan is AIHA's staff writer.



Newsletters such as the one produced by the Dalila WWC promote awareness about IPV, as well as provide information on issues related to women's health and services offered at the center, including an IPV hotline.