**Case Study: Providing Telephone Counseling**

**to Domestic Violence Survivors in Viet Nam**

**Overview**

As the telecommunication network in Viet Nam developed in 1995, a telephone line 108 was established within the post office in each province to provide information on social and cultural issues, attracting a large number of customers. People called the line to ask questions on various issues, with centres often becoming overloaded with the calls. In particular, many people called seeking assistance for love and emotional issues. Staff were obliged to respond to callers, though were not often well-equipped to address these problems.

In response to the growing demand, a reporter of the Radio Voice of Viet Nam led an initiative to establish a telephone line designed to provide counselling on love and emotional issues - the Psycho-emotional Counselling Centre.

Within the first three years of operation, there was a significant drop in calls to the 108 line, with the Psycho-emotional Counselling Centre receiving thousands of customer calls each month at a cost of US$1 for 10 minutes of counseling. The counselling group realized that many women were experiencing violence by their husbands and other intimate partners, even if it was not defined that way by the women callers.

During that time domestic violence was viewed as a private family matter reinforced by social norms that perpetuated the belief that a husband has the right to beat his wife. The term ‘violence’ was rarely if ever used in the context of family issues and it was rare for men who beat or murdered their wives to appear in court. Research and data about the issue was also limited and at times even the counselling group lacked knowledge on this issue, often advising callers to reconcile with their partners, contrary to a human rights-based and survivor-centred approach.

In 1997, the Psycho-emotional Counselling Hotline partnered with the [Population Council](http://www.popcouncil.org/countries/us.asp) to better support survivors of domestic violence. Through the partnership experts from Australia trained counselors on gender, domestic violence, and telephone counseling methods. They also supported centre leaders to develop guidance material on how to counsel survivors.

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| **Data of domestic violence phone calls over 3 years (2008 – 2011)** |
| **Type of Violence** | **2008** | **2009** | **2010** | **Jan- July 2011** |
| Physical | 127 | 36 | 196 | 196 |
| Psychological | 73 | 32 | 80 | 117 |
| Sexual | 40 | 38 | 22 | 18 |
| Economic | 48 | - | 7 | 10 |
| Mixed | - | 356 | 71 | 49 |
| Total calls | 288 | 462 | 376 | 390 |
| % compared with total calls in all hotlines | 0,3% | 0,6% | 0,4% | 0,8% |

The centre’s work continued with support from the Ford Foundation, and in 2001, the Centre for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender – Family – Women and Adolescents (CSAGA) was established by the hotline organizers. The Centre staff visited Thailand, India, Cambodia, the Philippines, and the United States to learn good counseling models, collecting materials and lessons learned. During this period, the centre continued to receive calls and documented an increasing number of domestic violence cases.

In 2005, with financial support from the [Global Fund for Women](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/), CSAGA established a **free** hotline for domestic violence survivors. The hotline number was disseminated in mass media, through leaflets and by word of mouth, with phone calls increasing rapidly. Along with separating the free hotline for domestic violence from other lines, CSAGA continued to develop specialized counselling tools and automatic statistics software. The CSAGA also looked for official and unofficial support from police, women’s unions, etc. and expanded its list of safe spaces to refer women seeking support.

**Staffing and Protocol:**

Key operational features of the CSAGA hotline include:

* Counsellors are trained through practical and short courses
* Staff are employed to work in five-hour shifts
* If somebody in danger calls CSAGA, staff refer them to the emergency police line (113) or calls this hotline directly if the victim can’t contact them
* An agreement with a women’s shelter in Viet Nam that follows shelter procedures to ensure survivors calling CSAGA can access the facility, as relevant

**Challenges:**

CSAGA’s work faced many challenges, including the lack of a strong legal framework to protect women from domestic violence until recently. The country’s 2004 membership into the World Trade Organization required it to observe and implement international commitments (e.g. related to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and pressured the government to address poverty and the increase the average income for citizens. These changes created an environment which facilitated the adoption of the [Law on Gender Equality](http://www.csaga.org.vn/Desktop.aspx/News/Library/LAW_ON_GENDER_EQUALITY/) and the 2007 [Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control](http://www.csaga.org.vn/Desktop.aspx/News/Library/Law_on_domestic_violence_and_control/) (which regulates domestic violence prevention, victim protection; and responsibilities of relevant individuals, families, agencies and organizations). Even with laws in place, local authorities and police lacked cooperation with each other, and gave less consideration to domestic violence cases in which the victim did not have significant physical injuries or report the violence. Many people did not believe supporting survivors was effective, which created additional barriers to CSAGA’s efforts to advance implementation of the Domestic Violence Law and assist women who had experienced abuse. Although the hotline received active cooperation and encouragement from government offices, the state has not provided financial support for its operations. Human resource support contributed from international organizations (e.g. the Global Fund for Women). In order to maintain the hotline, CSAGA engaged in fundraising events with local businesses.

**Results and lessons learned:**

* As of 2011, CSAGA was the first and only professional counselling hotline that providing support to survivors of domestic violence nationwide. Hotlines run by the domestic violence shelter only support residents of the shelter and do not provide counselling. This has offered safe and time-sensitive support to other survivors.
* The hotline has been able to maintain and expand its operations over the past 10 years, through key actions such as:
	+ Utilizing new technology available (telecommunications)
	+ Understanding the needs of women seeking support
	+ Popularizing the hotline in all mass communication channels
	+ Seeking and collecting information on experiences and materials from other countries and adapting them to local cultures and conditions to inform local practices
	+ Identifying advocacy opportunities alongside political changes (e.g. WTO, CEDAW)
	+ Prioritizing sustainability by launching a fundraising campaign to maintain the hotline and seeking domestic sources of support. CSAGA is approaching domestic businesses and inviting them to events related to domestic violence and gender equality in order to raise their awareness of the problem and encourage them to contribute funding
	+ Documenting counselling cases and practices, which contribute toward improving overall support to survivors
	+ Raising government awareness of the capacity and the flexibility of NGOs, which helps to improve cooperation between relevant civil society and government agencies
* The experience of the hotline has helped CSAGA to prepare for other support for survivors, such as a hotline for trafficking victims and gender-based violence survivor self-help groups.
* Reflective practices, such as documenting counselling cases, which may be difficult to keep updated are critical and contribute to improving the telephone support services.
* Linkages with professional psychologists ensure survivors with trauma have access to appropriate support. CSAGA is currently in the process of developing a network with psychological therapists to treat people with psychological trauma.
* Beyond advocacy and engagement with government, local non-governmental organizations must find ways of mobilizing government agencies to support free emergencies hotlines (with a number that is easy for survivors to remember), which is critical for addressing the long-term financial stability of the hotline.

**Source:** Van Ahn Nguyen forCentre for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender – Family – Women and Adolescents. 2011.