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Icelandic family justice centre: coordinated support under one roof

"One of the success criteria for Bjarkarhlíð family justice center is that it creates a welcoming and safe environment where victims of violence are met with respect and understanding," says Halldóra Dýrleif Gunnarsdóttir, chair of the board in Bjarkarhlíð.

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The SYNERGY Network together with the staff from Bjarkarhlíð in front of the family justice center in Iceland. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

“In addition, Bjarkarhlíð offers broader and more extensive services than other resources, especially in terms of easy access to legal aid and the police,” Gunnarsdóttir adds in an email.

The goal of SYNERGY’s visit to Bjarkarhlíð was to learn more about the centre’s experiences and success criteria. The visit was part of a project that aimed to improve intersectional approaches to violence and promoting the rights and needs of Roma women (fact box 2).

"When it comes to meeting the needs of marginalised groups like Roma women who have been exposed to gender-based and domestic violence, it is perhaps even more crucial to offer a coordinated and comprehensive response all in one place, like at the centre," says senior advisor Lene Nilsen from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

A low-threshold service

"Bjarkarhlíð is the result of a cross-sector collaboration between government ministries, police, local government, and grassroots organisations," Jenný Kristín Valberg explains while the SYNERGY Network is visiting the centre.



"The biggest benefit of being a member of the alliance (European Family Justice Center) is learning about best practices – being able to consult with someone who is dealing with the same issues," Halldóra Dýrleif Gunnarsdóttir writes from Bjarkarhlíð. (Photo: Private)

Valberg is the head of the centre, which was established in 2017 and offers counselling, support and information to victims of violence. It also offers coordinated services under one roof, such as consultations with legal advisors and social workers.

In addition to Bjarkarhlíðar's advisors, the police and a lawyer are also on site.

“In 2022, 978 individuals came for an initial interview at Bjarkarhlið,” says Valberg.

“When someone arrives at Bjarkarhlíð, a counsellor conducts an initial diagnostic interview with the service recipient. The victim will normally meet the counsellor one to three times,” explains Valberg.

"After the initial counselling, most of Bjarkarhlíð’s users are referred to the Women's Shelter or to Stígamót – a centre for victims of sexual violence – but some are referred to other professionals in the community," explains Valberg.

Support for marginalised groups

The centre provides support to a range of individuals who are rendered vulnerable by their status, such as people with disabilities, migrant women and the elderly.

However, the vast majority of Bjarkarhlíð’s users are Icelandic – about 90 per cent – and about 60 per cent of the users are 18–40 years old," according to Valberg.



"We know that many minority groups find it difficult to trust the police, but they find it easier to come to the centre, where they can choose to speak to the police without having to go to the police station," says Jenný Kristín Valberg from Bjarkarhlíð. (Photo: Private)

"The majority are women, who represent 88 per cent of users, and immigrants make up about 10 per cent of all users," adds Valberg together with the staff at Bjarkarhlíð.

During the visit, Valberg emphasises that the centre is easy to access for all individuals, since all services are free of charge and interpreters are provided when needed.

"You don’t need a referral to attend an initial interview," Valberg adds.

"Do you have a strategy for reaching out to vulnerable groups, such as immigrants?"

"We have been trying to reach out and let people know about our services. The police and social services are also giving out information about our services to people in need. The Women’s

Shelter offers temporary accommodation for woman and children who are victims of abuse, and they also offer services for all women," explains Valberg.

"We know that many minority groups find it difficult to trust the police, but they find it easier to come to the centre, where they can choose to speak to the police without having to go to the police station," says Valberg.

The centre also provides support groups for victims of violence in their own language, such as for Polish women (fact box). Immigrants from Poland make up the largest immigrant group in Iceland.

How to establish a similar centre

Bjarkarhlíð is one of 19 such centres in Europe and is part of the alliance EFJC European Family Justice Center. Iceland was the eighth country in Europe to adopt the concept.

"The biggest benefit of being a member of the alliance is learning about best practices – being able to consult with someone who is dealing with the same issues," Gunnarsdóttir writes from Bjarkarhlíð.



Lene Nilsen, coordinator of the SYNERGY Network, in dialogue with Jenný Kristín Valberg to learn more about the centre's experiences when the SYNERGY Network visited the Centre in September. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

"It means that support and advice can be sought from people who often have extensive experience in the field. The emphasis on the gender aspect of violence is also important, as is the

fact the work is based on the Istanbul Convention," Gunnarsdóttir explains.

“Based on your experience from Bjarkarhlí, what would be the best way for a stakeholder to establish such a centre? What would you recommend?”

"It is vital to become well acquainted with a family justice centre beforehand and to arrange a visit for the most relevant stakeholders. This is to understand how they work and to forge bonds between all those that will be involved,” Gunnarsdóttir writes.

"However, it’s worth being aware that the best approach to take changes from place to place," Gunnarsdóttir says, and add:

"It’s essential to work with grassroots movements and it would also be wise to involve academic communities in order to get some relevant research."

"How has this benefited you at your centre?"

"People experience different types of abuse, so it’s crucial to have counsellors from different organisations," explains Valberg.

“Since it was established, there have been three studies, one master’s thesis and two surveys about Bjarkarhlíð (fact box),” Valberg tells us.

Violence through an intersectional lens

The SYNERGY participants visiting the centre highlighted that the low-threshold services and easy access to support were important ways of reaching out to marginalised and minority communities. This is also documented in the handbook on how to include Roma women and other minorities, which was one of the main goals of SYNERGY's visit to Iceland.

Similar to the experience at Bjarkarhlíð, a lack of trust in the police was highlighted during the presentation and launch of the handbook at the European Conference on Domestic Violence (ECDV), one day after the visit to Bjarkarhlíð. The distrust largely stems from prior negative experiences, such as discrimination, stereotyping and prejudicial treatment.



Jenna Shearer Demir, from the Council of Europe, emphasised the importance of having an intersectional approach to address violence against women and domestic violence, in accordance with the Istanbul Convention. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

"Roma women and girls are most at risk from multiple and intersectional discrimination, and there needs to be specific and equitable measures to ensure their access to justice," said Shearer Demir from the Council of Europe during the SYNERGY workshop, in which more than 50 conference attendees participated.

Shearer Demir's emphasised the importance of having an intersectional approach to address violence against women and domestic violence, in accordance with the Istanbul Convention. Understanding violence through an intersectional lens was highlighted in several sessions during the ECDV conference.



"Roma women remain marginalised in programmes, policies and legislative work, even though this flies in the face of Roma rights and women's equality," said Aida Diana Farkas, from the Council of Europe at the SYNERGY workshop. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

"Roma women remain marginalised in programmes, policies and legislative work, even though this flies in the face of Roma rights and women's equality. This is precisely where initiatives such as the one we are putting forward today come into play," said Aida Diana Farkas, from the Council of Europe and a Roma woman herself.

Read: "We need to listen to the voice of Roma women"

The handbook is based on the expertise and experiences of Roma women and NGOs, the Sami communities in Norway, the Council of Europe and several EEA and Norway Grants stakeholders (fact box 3).

Various stakeholders at the workshop made clear that the handbook will not only be helpful in their work in respect to the needs of Roma women, but also of women from other minorities.

Read also: A new handbook to include Roma women: “Nothing about us, without us”

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