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# FEATURE-No one to talk to? Polish charities tackle shame of domestic abuse in UK

By Magdalena Mis, Thomson Reuters Foundation

5 MIN READ



LONDON, April 5 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - When calls to a Polish domestic violence helpline in Britain plunged last year, its founder Ewa Wilcock was puzzled.

Since its launch in 2014, she had been receiving more calls from compatriots living in Britain than she could handle. Yet they halved - to just over a dozen a month - in mid-2017.

“People would start the conversation saying they were not sure if they should be calling at all because they were afraid of the social services,” Wilcock told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Cheshire in northwest England.

Wilcock soon discovered that myths were spreading among Poles on social media - and by abusers - that parents who reported domestic violence would lose their children, making victims too scared to seek help.

“Some people said that social services remove children from homes and put them up for adoption,” she said.


“(They said) that foster families get a lot of money for caring for children, that it’s a great business.”

There is no reliable data on domestic violence among the 900,000 Poles in Britain - its largest overseas-born population - but nearly 2 million people, mostly women, are physically or emotionally abused by a partner or relative each year.

“They are ashamed to tell family in Poland,” Wilcock said.

“They don’t want them to worry but they have no one to talk to in Britain.”

## SCARED

Services provided by Polish charities are often the first point of contact because they make the process  accessing support and finding safety less intimidating for victims.

“When you’re stressed, it’s very difficult to communicate even in your own language,” domestic violence counsellor Anna Janczuk told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“It’s even more difficult using a second language and finding appropriate words to describe what is happening,” said Janczuk, who runs the London-based non-profit Familia Support Centre, which provides legal and psychological consultations.

Katarzyna Zatorski, a family solicitor based in the northern town of Huddersfield, said most of her Polish clients dealing with domestic violence are referred to her by Polish charities.

“The most difficult thing is to seek a lawyer’s help,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

“If it’s difficult for a Briton, then it’s much more difficult for someone living in a foreign country.”

Hanna, who declined to give real name, said her husband used to suffocate and beat her, once breaking her nose. He told her that social workers would take their daughter away if she reported him.

“I didn’t know what to start with, how to do it, because I was very scared,” she said.

“In a situation like this, you don’t even know what your name is. When you speak about legal matters, you don’t understand the meaning of certain expressions.”

Without Janczuk's support "nothing" would have changed, Hanna said, nearly a year after she left her abusive husband.

"Contact (with Janczuk) calmed me," she said.

## **VOLUNTEERS**

Wilcock's helpline only takes calls twice a week while Janczuk's support centre is open for less than 20 hours a week because of funding shortages.

"Some funders don't like it that we help just one minority," Janczuk said, sitting next to a donated computer in the modest room from which she runs her organisation with the support of volunteers.

"We are doing more than the limited resources that we have allow us to do," said Janczuk who helps about 25 victims of domestic violence per month.

"Sometimes it's just this one piece of information that we give the victims that allows them to go on."

Hanna said she still calls Wilcock's helpline about once a month when she is worried about issues like child custody.



She used to call every week.

“If they were open more than twice a week, I would have called them more often,” she said. (Reporting by Magdalena Mis @magdalenamis1; Editing by Katy Migiro. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women’s rights, trafficking, property rights, climate change and resilience. Visit [news.trust.org](https://news.trust.org))

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