

SafeShelter

SafeShelter is an EU co-funded project promoting the development and implementation of child safeguarding policies designed specifically for women's shelters. The project was implemented from January 2021 until December 2022 in 6 European countries: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Spain. The project team is composed of the Association of Austrian Autonomous Women's Shelters, Verein AÖF as project Coordinator- Austria, and the partners Psytel-France, Gesine-Germany, Conexus-Spain, and the European Family Justice Center Alliance, EFJCA- Belgium/Netherlands.

A child safeguarding policy in a women's shelter describes how the specific shelter and staff will respond to any concerns related to child safety, security and wellbeing in the best interest of the children, inside as well as outside of its premises. Child safeguarding policies based on international standards plus the expertise of shelter staff allow women's shelters to excel in their safeguarding competences and provide the safest environment possible for children affected by violence.

"I never thought I would be able to live my own independent life, but now after 20 years of violence I learned, thanks to the learning programmes in the shelter and the support of the staff, to stand up for myself and the wellbeing of my children. I have never seen my children so joyful and free."

- Mother living in a women's shelter -



The SafeShelter project has diverse types of impacts:

Social

- Child and Mother Advisory Panels were performed with children and mothers residing in women's shelters in 6 European countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, on how to improve children's experiences, safety and wellbeing while in shelters; the interviews or focus groups were done with children as a group and separately with mothers as a group, either face-to-face or via online video meetings because of the pandemic.

- Interviews with shelter staff working with children and women in shelters in 6 European countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, on challenges faced by staff to safeguard children in the shelters and best practices for addressing these.

- Webpage safeshelter.aoeff.at with relevant information for professionals about the project, trainings videos and downloads. All project partners used their own social media platforms, like posts on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube, to disseminate information about the SafeShelter project and relevant links within their national and international networks. More than 60 social media activities were conducted during the project.

Capacity building and training

- Training courses for shelter staff/workshops performed in the 6 EU countries

and summary information shared at stakeholder meetings and conferences in the EU.

- SafeShelter training manual/guide, power point for shelter staff and awareness raising videos on child safeguarding for shelters exist free of charge on the website.

- Quotes and comments on training from feedback/evaluation forms are available in the evaluation report.

- France provided an exceptionally high number of trainings to shelters throughout the Paris region, including shelters specialising in families.

Political

- The project partners conducted 23 Stakeholder meetings with policy makers, national and regional government, experts and peer organisations.

- 4 official Stakeholder Letters were directed at high level policy makers in Germany and France.

Health

- The trainings and guide and the implementation of the safeguarding policies have as their main objective the improvement of protection, safety, wellbeing and health of children in shelters.

Cultural

- The SafeShelter Guide and videos are available for free in 4 languages

(English, French, German and Spanish) to promote a culture of safeguarding children who are victims of domestic violence and to better support equality, diversity and inclusion.

- Implementing child safeguarding policies was a new concept in most shelters and for partners. This in itself represents a large culture change in these organisations' understanding of safeguarding in its entirety.

- Child Safeguarding Policies are due to the project now signed in women's shelters in Austria, France, Germany and Spain to serve as a good practice example for the other shelters in these countries, but also in other European countries. In Belgium and the Netherlands similar Child Safeguarding Policies have already been implemented.

Academic

- The project has disseminated its results at European and national conferences in order to share lessons learned with a diverse group of stakeholders including academia.

"Somebody is really listening to me, to what I have to say and is interested in how I feel, wow!"

- Child residing in a women's shelter about interaction with shelter staff -





Conclusion

The SafeShelter project has provided guidance on the various aspects of Child Safeguarding in women's shelters, with the best interest of the child as the focus. Almost 600 professionals working in or with women's shelters in 6 European countries were trained and have become aware of Child Safeguarding policies. For some of them, this is new information, for others an addition to their existing knowledge.

Based on the outcomes of the evaluation it meant a strengthening of their capacity building for all participants and a positive impact on their knowledge and their daily work. Shelter staff members can use the project resources to support the developments and use of their own Child Safeguarding policy to improve the safety, security and wellbeing of children placed under their care. The importance of developing and implementing Child Safeguarding policies are beyond any doubt considered by all participants as very valuable and needed.

This is also true for the training sessions/workshops and within the materials developed as part of this project. Also, all participating organisations agreed on the principle that children in women's shelters must be protected and a safeguarding (protection) policy is essential.

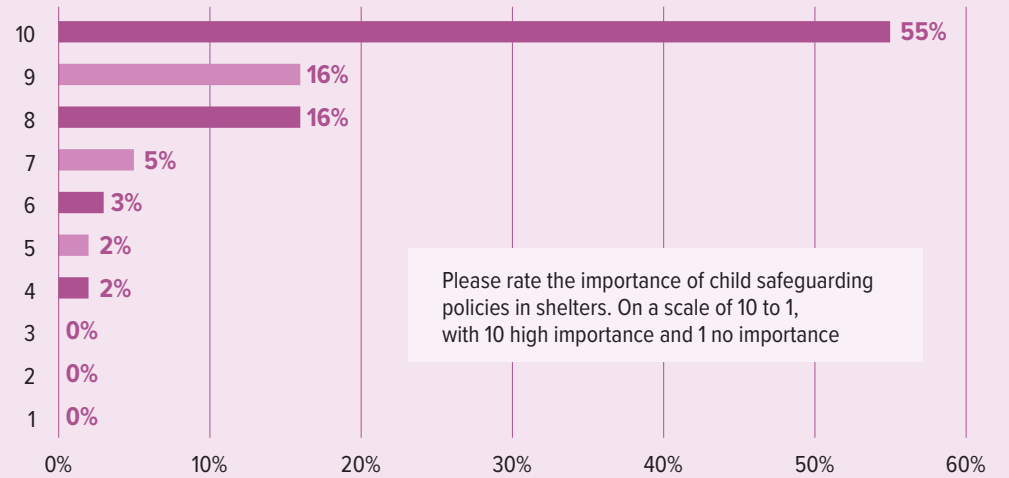
The SafeShelter project has shown that there is significant gap in sufficient skills of shelter staff members when it comes to Child Safeguarding and that training is needed.

There's also strong need to devote more attention and time to Child Safeguarding policies and measures. Not only with the workers in the shelters, but also with the women and children who are staying there, the organizations with which the shelters work closely and the local/regional and national governments who have a responsibility for the shelters in their area. The will and intention are absolutely present among the women's shelters, but unfortunately there is not always the knowledge and time to implement them.

"Children in shelters are among the most vulnerable children. Nearly all have experienced potentially traumatic events and are traumatized. Children are also very flexible and working with them, supporting them and listening to them gives them trust; it is indescribably beautiful to experience. We can help them to overcome trauma by just doing the right things with and for them."

- A women's shelter staff member -

Importance of Child Safeguarding in shelters



Knowledge of Child Safeguarding in shelters

