



ST JEANNE ANTIDE FOUNDATION (SJAF)

51 Triq Hal Tarxien, Hal Tarxien TXN 1090 – Malta

T: 21808981 | 21809011 | 27672367 | 99784784 [office hours]

www.antidemalta.org | FB Fondazzjoni St Jeanne Antide

SOAR SERVICE **peer mentoring and support by survivors of domestic violence**

Annual Report – 2021

Contents

SOAR HIGHLIGHTS 2021	1
PEER MENTORING AND SUPPORT	2
PROVISION OF IN-KIND SUPPORTS	4
GROUP-BASED ACTIVITIES	4
RISK MANAGEMENT AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS	5
INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION	6
OTHER SOAR OUTCOMES	6
SOME COMMON REALITIES AND PLANS TO CONTINUE SUPPORTING THE INVISIBLE.....	8
CONCLUSION	9

SOAR HIGHLIGHTS 2021

113 women supported; 14 of these were new cases of victims fearful of asking support from the Police or other agencies. These women were intensely supported from the outset to nurture a readiness to access support from state agencies. Of the 113 women supported, over 32 were high support cases.

83 different group activities (online and not) were organized and led by SOAR throughout the year. These included: 22 non-formal educational sessions; 15 Wellbeing and self-care activities; 23 Fellowship activities; 25 MERAKI Social Enterprise production practice sessions.

Two SOAR Facebook pages were maintained to keep in touch with survivors.

16 Posters were designed and uploaded on SOAR's Facebook page during the November to December 16 days of activism (each poster had a quote from a survivor).

Of the 113 survivors supported, 53 benefited from much-needed food aid, hygiene bank items, clothing for themselves and their children and emergency debt relief to ward off debilitating financial crises. These were women who felt very isolated and alone with their children and feeling lost because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

SOAR has produced two non-formal educational tools being used by SOAR Peer Mentors: (a) a Budgeting tool which survivors are trained to use to effectively manage their limited income and reduce over-indebtedness caused by accumulating unpaid bills, and (b) an explanatory tool about Water & Electricity Bills.

In late 2021, the St Jeanne Antide Foundation set up a SOAR Youth Group which started connecting to plan a youth-focused and public awareness raising initiative to combat misogynistic mindsets pervasive in our society.

The SOAR Service Coordinator regularly participated in the Inter-ministerial Committee on Gender-based Violence and Domestic violence.

SOAR is run by experienced and trained female survivors of domestic violence who provide personalised Peer Support and Mentoring to other survivors combined with a range of other supports. Since its launch in 2012, SOAR has provided Peer Mentoring and support to 310 survivors of domestic violence.

PEER MENTORING AND SUPPORT

In 2021, the team of 4 SOAR Peer Mentors, between them, supported and regularly followed-up 113 survivors, 32 of whom required high support. Regular telephone calls, office-based visits, online meetings and group activities keep the connection alive. In order to maximise wellbeing outcomes for the women supported, SOAR Peer Mentors collaborated with the women's social workers and support practitioners from other agencies through case reviews.

Motivating and empowering survivors of domestic violence involves constant support and guidance to enable them to take control of their lives. Each woman is at a different stage of rebuilding her life. One commonality is that they all need to learn to be kind to themselves by learning about self-compassion. Some women who lived with an abusive partner often find it very difficult to make simple choices about their life as they either lacked such space and opportunity or were punished when they tried.

Enabling survivors to become self-empowered involves learning to make wise and judicious decisions in different areas of their lives. Encouraging survivors to celebrate small achievements is a key SOAR endeavor. Small decisions may include leaving the house on one's own without fear; paying a bill online; exploring further studies; accessing therapy; meeting a friend for a coffee without looking over one's shoulders in fear; and managing their finances.

Throughout the year, the SOAR team organised the provision of a range of in-kind supports as part of survivors' support plan. Such aid is invaluable in alleviating some of the women's pressures, anxiety and distress; it also nurtures coping skills and hope in difficult times.

SOAR Peer Mentors complemented the support work of practitioners from other agencies in the following ways:

- Motivating survivors to keep to the agreed plan so as to move forward in life with renewed hope and determination;
- Fortify survivors' determination to stay away from the very abusive relationship despite the pull to go back because a pervasive sense of hopelessness (reasons vary from woman to woman);
- Accompanying survivors through their transitions. These include:
 - (a) planning in detail the steps involved in changing accommodation: packing belongings by category/ rooms, transport logistics, child minding while packing and unpacking and settling in; informing authorities on change of address;
 - (b) requesting the SJAF Centru Antida manager to solicit donations of furniture, furnishings, bedding and household items from benefactors;
 - (c) mediating with women's relatives since, very often, they are abusive and controlling and contrarian. This support limits potential disastrous intrusion by relatives;

- (d) mobilising survivor members of SOAR who have settled down and wish to support other women in their transition between exiting a shelter, settling down, changing children's school, finding work, etc;
- (e) guiding women to juggle the complex official procedures required to complete a referral to a new service such as admission to a shelter; informing Social Security and Bank about change of address; negotiating payments with landlords; applying for a Housing Authority scheme;
- (f) supporting women to admit their children to a new school/ childcare/ afterschool programme/ skolasajf and finding educational resources through sponsors;
- (g) when the need arises, assisting with access to external emergency interventions and assessments by an Educational Psychologist or Parent Coach;
- (h) emotional support when a woman suffers a loss;
- (i) matching them with a Volunteer Mentor and preparing them for this new person in their life who will guide and support them along their way.

Despite the fact that, for many, the steps described above may be taken for granted, the women supported by SOAR have lived fractured lives and relationships and struggle to find their way through the complexities of rebuilding their lives.

Volunteer Mentors

4 very active and committed Volunteer Mentors continued to offer their support. Unlike the SOAR Peer Mentors, these 4 are not survivors of domestic violence themselves. Rather, they are loving-kind friendly guides whose steady and constant support is a reassuring and constant element in survivors' lives. Volunteer Mentors are sometimes invited to share their views of the survivor's situation during case reviews. They highlight in a non-biased way the strengths and achievements of their Mentees.

Flexibility of SOAR Peer Mentors

One of the strengths of peer mentoring is that Peer Mentors are ready to work flexible hours, even late evenings and weekends. Many survivors work office and would miss out on much support had SOAR offered its services during normal working hours. Peer Mentors base their support according to the schedule of their Mentees. They connect with them through individual and group video calls, phone calls, office-based sessions and at safe public spaces.

“When I have flashbacks, I suddenly remember that I have moved out from our house where he used to abuse me. But the abuse hasn't stopped. I am renting and he is still in the matrimonial house. I wish to give up and go back because I cannot cope financially. But the regular chats I have online with SOAR Mentors, even late at night, keep me aware of why I left and that I must stay strong. Even though it's not fair I had to move out, my life is no longer at risk. I wish the court can see what we are going through.” – a SOAR Survivor

Continuing Professional Development (CPDs)

In 2021, SOAR Peer Mentors benefited from 15 continuing professional development opportunities. They also led 2 in-house CPD for the SJAF Community Social Work team on SOAR Services and signs of abusive relationships and on the financial management tool created by a SOAR Peer Mentor which can be used by the Social Work team as well.

PROVISION OF IN-KIND SUPPORTS

During 2021, SJAF mobilized funds from its network of benefactors and donors to cover financial and in-kind support needs of a number of service users, including SOAR survivors. These included funds to pay rent when there is a risk of eviction; closure of a contract for a telephony service with one provider before moving to new accommodation which covers telephony by a different provider; nappies and hygiene products; food; shoes and clothing; educational supplies; transport costs for a move to a new accommodation; and snacks after long face-to-face meetings. Food packages were delivered, in some cases, weekly. Other in-kind supports provided included: laptops for studies; assistance with application for Scheme 9; back-to-school packages; and medicine. SJAF staff and Volunteers helped with pick-up of donated items, sorting, packing and with delivery. Peer Mentors also encourage a cost-saving clothes-swap system for members.

Of the 113 survivors supported during 2021, 53 benefited from the above-mentioned supports to ward off debilitating financial crises. These were women who felt very isolated and alone with their children and feeling lost because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

GROUP-BASED ACTIVITIES

A range of small group sessions were held online as well as at the Foundation's Ćentru Antida Family Services hub. 83 different activities (online and not) were organized and led by SOAR throughout the year. These included: 22 Non-formal educational sessions; 15 Wellbeing and self-care activities; 23 Fellowship activities; and 25 MERAKI Social Enterprise production practice sessions.

All the 83 activities were aimed at enabling women to further understand the complex and toxic nature of psychological and emotional abuse, in a safe space with others similarly afflicted. They also enable women to re-build self-confidence; speak coherently; reflect about one's life experiences and deriving insights to move forward resiliently; and plan to regain financial independence. Women also learn about boundaries and about the perils of plunging into a relationship because of loneliness and hope for intimacy and need for accommodation and financial support.

Non-formal educational sessions focused on public speaking and presentation skills, skills important for court hearings, why therapy is important for personal growth and development, how to find courses that fit one's interests; personal health; how to support others and introduce them to support services; parental alienation; financial management; and training on maintaining a 21-day personal journal on gratitude.

Full-day fellowship activities were also held outdoor in small groups. These included discussions; painting; enjoying nature; meditation; having fun with one's children; quality time for older SOAR members to reach out to new ones. These outdoor activities involved survivors who were isolated during the COVID-19 months and were seriously deprived of any leisure activities.

The noon to 6pm Saturday SOAR Club was re-started in 2021 following its closure during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic months. SOAR is a real lifeline for survivors and the Club re-inforces this. Members cook, produce MERAKI Soaps, lunch together, participate in an activity of their choice and, most importantly relate in a meaningful and fun manner.

SOAR members eventually become volunteers. Some of these have also joined the Meraki initiative to produce SOAPS as wedding gifts for guests and as tokens during parties. Others help during events such as the Reverse Advent Calendar food aid initiative of SJAF, do reception work and assist with sorting and storage of donations.

Emphasis on self-care: 15 self-care activities were organized during the year. Our motto: *“We cannot pour from an empty jar.”* For many survivors, self-care is regarded as a frivolous notion – important but impossible for them in their situation. SOAR activities re-awaken one’s lost inner caregiver. Some of the self-care activities consisted of seminars aged between 19 and 56. One poignant outcome was the frequency of the question of how they could be trained to help someone going through what they have been through. For SOAR Peer Mentors, this signifies the readiness of a number of SOAR members to move on to access SOAR training in peer support.

“As a single parent who has been through a lot and have close to no support, this concept may be something impossible to achieve, exhausting or pointless to consider, mainly due to time and my financial situation. But, thanks to SOAR, I am here, and I am really feeling good. I will continue to practice these routines at home.” – a Soar mother

“I Like to see mommy smiling. It makes me happy.”

-- a young child survivor

When mentoring survivors with no support system, SOAR steps in to help each woman build a support system. Between September and December 2021, SOAR organised a number of birthday parties to help mothers provide beautiful memories to her children. Through these activities, survivors realise how awful the impact of abuse has been and the toll it took.



The truth, however, is that Soar has had hundreds of calls in the last three months of 2021 from women seeking support, feeling isolated, lonely and under immense pressure to parent, home school and keep their jobs so as to pay the bills. *“My children call you ‘aunties’. You back me up when I fall. You know from experience that if I fall, my children fall with me. Thanks for the constant support.” – a young Soar mother*

RISK MANAGEMENT AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

Even though SOAR is a service for women and child survivors of domestic violence, SOAR team members still find themselves in situations where SOAR members find themselves in new abusive situations causing risk or new cases of victims who reach out to SOAR for support because they are at a loss as to what steps to take to flee from an abusive relationship.

In 2021, SOAR Peer Mentors dealt with 32 cases needing high-support since their past partners escalated their harassment. SOAR swiftly mobilised interventions by other agencies to protect the women and their children.

Expressions of suicidal thoughts continued to be common among survivors of domestic violence since, despite all their efforts to disconnect from the toxic relationship, ex-partners never give up. **(see Fondazzjoni St Jeanne Antide facebook post 31st August)**. SOAR's constant support is a preventive and women regularly express relief at finding such an understanding, loving-kind and supportive family. Challenges are unavoidable but the fact that SOAR staff are present so intensely in their lives is an anchor for the survivors-in-crisis.

Following a meeting with Dr Lydia Abela in early 2021, where SJAF proposed the need for research into the link between suicide/ suicide ideation/ suicide plan and domestic violence, the Dean of the Faculty for the Wellbeing of Society at the University of Malta held a meeting with SOAR Coordinator and CEO to discuss the Faculty's plan for such a research project. SOAR will help in any way possible. Until December 2021, no funding has been found by the Faculty to undertake this much-needed research of such a hidden phenomenon. SOAR also accompanied a number of service users to the Police GBDV Hub and to Victim Support Agency (VSA) because of re-victimisation.

INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION

Soar works in collaboration with the Gender-based Violence and Domestic Violence (GBDV) Unit falling under the Vice-Squad of the Police, Community Police, the NGO Victim Support Malta, the state Victim Support Agency (VSA), Legal Aid Malta, the Domestic Violence Unit (DVU) of Aġenzija Appoġġ of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) and social workers from other services within FSWS, the Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence, the Department of Gender and Sexualities within the Faculty for the Wellbeing of Social at the University of Malta, the Dean's Office of the Faculty for the Wellbeing of Society, and with other NGOs such as the Women for Women and Women's Rights' Foundation.

SOAR also participates in the regular meetings of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Gender-based Violence and Domestic Violence so as to better highlight survivors' perspectives of the systems created to support them and to make recommendations to policy makers present. SOAR contributed to the panel presentation during a public consultation on Violence, Abuse and Exploitation on July 9, 2021 organised by the Office of the Director General for Research and Social Policy at the Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights.

In 2021, 3 SOAR members took part in Triple R trauma-informed 12-week evening course designed to empower survivors of domestic violence organised by Victim Support Malta. 2 SOAR staff members completed the training and will be offering the same training to 25 SOAR survivors in early 2022. Following this, SOAR will continue to extend the training to more survivors.

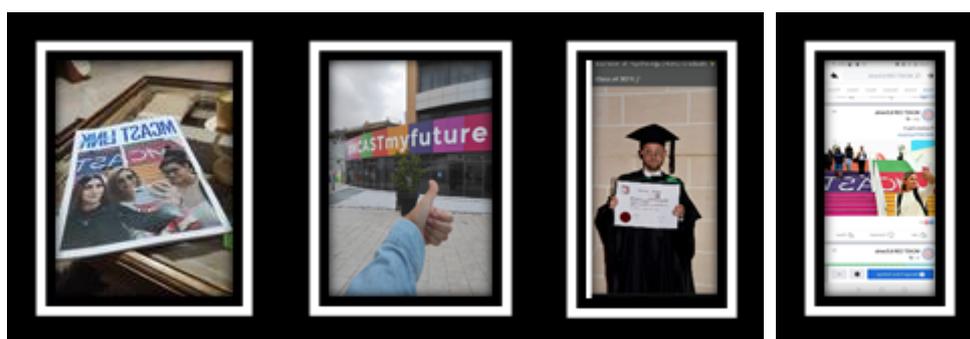
OTHER SOAR OUTCOMES

During the Christmas period, there was an increase in calls for support. Being at home alone with the children and lacking a social support network, anxiety, fear and tiredness exacerbate their situation.

Late 2021, the SOAR team started a process of taking stock. One of the outcomes was the deployment of a new SJAF Social Worker to support the SOAR team especially in situations where victims contact SOAR and initially refuse to seek support from the official state channels because of intense fear, especially fear that going to the Police is a useless step which might further endanger their lives. At such a stage, Social Work intervention was being considered as crucial by the SOAR Team members. SJAF embarked on this professional support measure for SOAR through new fundraising approaches.

Proud Moments 2021

Some of the proudest moments SOAR had in 2021 was that of having helped, in October 2021, four Survivors and a young male child of a survivor to invest in their educational journey to make a go of their plan to move ahead in life.



“You have been a lifeline to me! I was about to give up on my last year of studies. Your regular calls were what kept me motivated and truly helped me to overcome my fears which were holding me back. SOAR helped me find inner strength when I needed it most.” (source: a young graduate)

SOAR Peer Mentors are where they are because SOAR was there for them in the past. It was SOAR that encouraged them to access educational courses and training. SOAR Peer Mentors know first-hand the value of education especially when their hope is to look forward and shape a new life for themselves and their children with resilience and hope. The majority of the 131 survivors supported during 2021 expressed that their main need was to secure a job that would give them a regular income and financial security. Furthering their education, they realise, is crucial for this to become a reality. Although they are ‘survivors’, many continue to suffer invisible abuse and harassment which is insidious and meant to run them further to the ground.

Unfortunately, in 2021, 5 SOAR members had to make the sad decision to drop out of their university or MCAST course of studies because they could not continue studying while constantly struggling with the never-ending aftermath of domestic violence. Unfortunately for many survivors, the systems are not working well for them. Lengthy court cases; incessant unnecessary filing of petitions (rikorsi) by the perpetrator; failure by perpetrator to pay maintenance; refusal to appear in court for mediation and for separation hearings; refusal to sign off on sale of matrimonial home; accumulating debts due to failure to meet bill payment deadlines; having to stay at home when school classes were online; inflexible supervised visit dates and time; and many other traumatic situations.

CASE: In one case, for example, the survivor dropped out of her studies as she was constrained to take her daughter for supervised access visits (SAVs) twice a week by bus. Each time, she had to catch four buses. Apart from that, their son has a condition and he needs physiotherapy once a week, taking four bus trips each time. In the meantime, the father is still fighting a court battle to (a) have

child support reduced; and (b) be given UNSUPERVISED access to their son even though he was found guilty of exposing the same minor to physical abuse and neglect. Court sessions have already dragged four years. Finally, this January, justice was served. After much advocacy work by SOAR and support to the survivor so as to keep sane. Next year she again enrol to a full-time course!

SOME COMMON REALITIES AND PLANS TO CONTINUE SUPPORTING THE INVISIBLE

Plans for 2022: SOAR plans regular weekly outreach with SOAR women who are isolated while combating the pandemic in silence. Such an approach proved to be a real life-saving lifeline in 2021, especially for those who are suffer from a mental health difficulty and are slowly shutting off connection with the world around them.

In 2021, as highlighted above, SOAR supported a few women who could not extricate themselves from the clutches of the perpetrator. While doing so, Soar used its experience and risk assessment skills to analyse women's risk and, when risk is not present, to continue supporting them in various ways, depending on each woman's situation and needs.

CASE: SOAR has helped an older woman who was blocked from accessing medical treatment for cancer. We have since helped her move to a safe and supportive home elsewhere and will continue supporting her post surgery and recovery.

Raising a Family Alone

Long before Covid-19 restrictions were introduced, loneliness and isolation were a common experience for those parenting alone after domestic abuse - where fathers tend to abdicate their responsibilities but create this false social media persona to fight for their fatherhood rights. Living alone with children has meant that parents often feel isolated and in despair. For many, the stigma, obstacles, judgementalism and discrimination that single mothers face can force parents, often without realising it, to keep to themselves, working hard to get it right for their children so no one can point fingers at them. The stigma around single mothers on welfare benefits is still an unfortunate reality in Malta.

"If we women, mothers, were to abdicate our motherhood and parenting responsibilities as so many fathers are doing, our government will have a serious problem with providing accommodation and care for neglected and abandoned children. We should be thankful and support single parents who are doing their utmost to dedicating their lives to care for their children – against all odds and the unfair abuse of the legal system by responsibility-shirking, abusive fathers." – SOAR Survivor

Managing one's life and family life single-handedly often leads to high levels of stress and anxiety. One's self-confidence, self-esteem and mental health often take a dive. Survivors start to find themselves more and more disconnected from the world around them. Accessing therapy for their children too becomes a nightmare as the abusive parent has to sign his consent. In all of this, it is no wonder that children of survivors of domestic violence and abuse start presenting oppositional and challenging behaviour. Oftentimes, survivors disclose that their body feels as it is about to fail them. Many of fall ill multiple times a year. For those in employment, this situation becomes a nightmare as they unsuccessfully try to grapple with keeping their job. About a third of children of survivors of domestic violence helped by SOAR have parents struggling with poor mental health.

Poor mental health makes it harder for a parent to effectively manage their daily struggles. The constant pressure of parenting and handling everything alone is often too much some days.

Marika: *“With the help of the long-term support from SOAR I became determined to live to tell my story after many years of abuse and dependence on support services. I have regained my voice. Now i can safely say “No more!” even though it took me a very long time to do so. The SOAR community – their patience and love and understanding and respect – help me re-inforce my purpose to move on in life, not to give up, and to sustain hope. I want to be able to be like my SOAR Mentors – strong to support others living the ugly trauma of domestic abuse and violence. After therapy and support by state services I asked myself – ‘But what next? To whom can I turn to after office hours?’ The ugly effects of trauma often resurface. I cannot forgive and forget and let go because I am still co-parenting with a Narcissist; he tries all the tricks and tactics possible to make my life a non-stop living hell. He loves being violent by proxy – using the children to hound me incessantly. But, to the world around him, he is charming, rational, caring, jovial..... No one believed me. Not even my own family. He managed to hoodwink everyone; even lawyers and judges. Who can I talk to when my own family members have no idea what it is like to live with a narcissist? My identity was stripped away. I felt a nobody. For many years, he showered me with insults, belittling me... until I came to believe him. Today, I have my SOAR friends to talk with. They keep me sane and grounded. Each morning, I wake up and think of them and their understanding and unfailing support.”*

CONCLUSION

What SOAR women wish: When domestic violence is proven in court and the perpetrator sentenced, the victim should NOT have to spend the rest of her assets, time, money, and life fighting to separate from her abuser. The criminal justice system and family court should work in tandem and be aware of the tactics adopted by perpetrators to misuse the legal system to continue abusing victim. Tactics include repeatedly not showing up for court hearings; not signing legal documents; bombarding the victim with false Police reports. Such tactics jeopardise a timely case resolution.(END)