

CSO CASE STUDY 13

Title: Domestic Violence in Uzbekistan - An Innovative Approach to Decrease Violence against Women

Country: Uzbekistan

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Introduction

The present case study analyzes the innovative approach taken by the Youth Center 'Ikbol' in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence of Uzbekistan, between 2000 and 2005, to decrease domestic violence and gender inequalities towards women in Uzbekistan by raising awareness of men on women's rights and gender issues.

Type and extend of policy change

The case study focuses on those changes in the policy documents and practices on domestic violence which took place between 2000 and 2004 and continues to date. The Ministry of Defence acknowledged domestic violence as a major problem for women and agreed to follow a series of projects to tackle its source rather than its symptoms. The Ministry agreed to carry out public-awareness raising activities among the military servicemen and military students on domestic violence, women's rights and gender equality in partnership with a CSO (Ikbol). The Ministry of Defence renewed its annual action plans placing more emphasis on raising the awareness of men on women's rights, domestic violence and gender equality. The Ministry also included Ikbol on its list of partners of its action plans. The Ministry has mainstreamed gender education into its training processes.

Some thoughts on the explanation of the policy change

a) Policy context

Domestic violence remains as one of the major problems for women in Uzbekistan. Contrary to the government's statements that women enjoy broad and effective human rights safeguards, they are still victims of domestic violence and suffer at the hands of husbands, their relatives and the State. Nonetheless, there are no statistics on the levels of domestic violence in Uzbekistan and the legislation doesn't even consider the notion of 'domestic violence'. Perpetrators of domestic violence rarely face criminal convictions and, instead, local authorities, under orders from the central government, try to reconcile married couples, thus scarifying the women's safety in favour of low divorce rates. This responds to an underlying discourse of family values that sees marital separation as a social stigma for women. In comparison with the Soviet era, the rate of domestic violence against women is increasingly high, partly because of growing poverty, and partly because of such state-sponsored 'traditionalistic family-centred' ideology with paternalistic attitudes towards women. Such official policy makes the Uzbek Government reluctant to acknowledge that problem and publicly denounce it.

Uzbekistan is a country with a strong and large military apparatus that has a national reach. It plays an important role in the moulding of policies and private life.

b) International Factors

International actors have considered domestic violence as the most difficult and under-acknowledged challenge for women in Uzbekistan and called on the government to protect women from domestic violence and bring their aggressors to justice. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and Human Rights Watch have all made numerous recommendations and calls on the Uzbek Government urging it prevent domestic violence against women and ensure equality of rights. Unfortunately, the Government's efforts still lag behind their demands.

c) The ways CSOs tried to affect policy change

The strategies CSOs have followed to try to change the Government's policy on domestic violence in Uzbekistan depend on the Government's position on this issue. The main problem is that the Uzbek Government does not acknowledge domestic violence as a problem. So, under such circumstances, an obvious objective for CSOs should be achieving the acknowledgement of domestic violence as a problem by the Government of Uzbekistan and the general public. Alas, no such strategies have taken place in Uzbekistan. CSOs focus on the consequences of domestic violence rather than on its causes.

For instance, a common strategy taken by CSOs in Uzbekistan in order to solve the domestic violence problem is creating temporary care-shelters and crisis centres for victims. While remaining a crucial tool for providing initial support and assistance to victims, such strategy does not bring about a change in policies and attitudes towards domestic violence. In fact, it is often the case that the victim often withdraws her complaint and returns home; even after receiving assistance from these institutions. And in addition, it is a common view for most of women's rights activist to consider divorce as a bad alternative that should be avoided by all means; or that stalking and rape by a husband are not crimes.

d) The nature of the research-based evidence and the mechanism used to get the evidence into the policy process

Youth Center 'Ikbol' developed a new perspective on the solution of this problem. Ikbol reached the conclusion that the most effective way of fighting domestic violence in Uzbekistan would be to change the public opinion on it. Research carried out by Ikbol concluded almost 95% of the female population depends on men's decisions and opinions on their personal and professional lives. Moreover, the vast majority of men working in central and local governments also perceive domestic violence and discrimination against women as a 'normal' phenomenon. Other evidence gathered by Ikbol showed that:

- Uzbekistan has the highest number of armed forces in Central Asia – 70.000 soldiers (estimated as of 2000)
- Soldiers in the Uzbek Armed Forces represent all 12 regions of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic and after finishing the military service they return to their regions. By targeting them the project indirectly covers the whole country
- Every Uzbek man between the ages of 17-27 is obliged to serve in the Armed Forces of the country. These ages are crucial for the formation of a person's

fundamental understandings on the important institutes of the society such as marriage, inter-personal, sexual and family relations. Moreover, the violent and strict atmosphere in the Armed Forces towards the young service-men has a negative impact on their behaviours long after returning home. Often such 'male dominated behaviour' formed in the Armed Forces is projected in the form of abuse and violence against women at home

- Most of the Uzbek men usually get married after the military service as it is then when they are customarily perceived to be physically and mentally mature.

Based on this, Ikbol considered that an effective way of changing these attitudes, particularly among men in the public sector would be targeting military service-men in the Uzbek Armed Forces and students of military schools in Uzbekistan.

The relation between Ikbol and the Ministry of Defence begun with a meeting between Ikbol director and Mr. M. Akhmedov, the Deputy Minister of Defence on Educational Affairs, in January 2002. Contact with the Deputy Minister occurred as a consequence of Ikbol's insistence and conversations with the Minister's aide for over two months. In these conversations, Ikbol placed special emphasis on the possible benefits of such collaboration to decrease in violence within the military. After a series of unanswered requests, the Minister charged his aide to arrange a meeting with the Deputy Minister. During that meeting a series of agreements followed and Ikbol begun a pilot training project on public-awareness rising on domestic violence, women's rights and gender equality in four military camps of the Tashkent region. After the pilot was jointly assessed, plans for broader cooperation between Ikbol and the Ministry were approved.

The following process shows how research-based evidence obtained from the cooperation of Ikbol with the Ministry was transferred into the policy process:

- In 2002 Ikbol and the Ministry of Defence of Uzbekistan signed an agreement of mutual cooperation
- Between 2002 and 2004, Ikbol trainers trained 768 military service-men and 165 students of military schools, of which 86% came from rural areas. Exit surveys conducted among the military service-men who underwent Ikbol training revealed that after the training most of them demonstrated more understanding and respect to reproductive rights of women, family planning, sharing a burden of bringing-up children in the family, effective ways for conflict solution in the family. Interestingly, this intervention also helped to decrease the level of violence, abuse and harassment within military institutions –particularly against the younger and weaker men.
- Ikbol also trained 40 senior officers of the military schools throughout the Training of Trainers program. Those officers who have undergone such training now continue awareness-raising work among the military servicemen.
- In order to support those trainers Ikbol has published and disseminated a book on 'Domestic violence and Mitigation' among senior officers. In 2003 the Ministry made a decision to include this book into military schools' curricula and broadly disseminated it among the teachers of military schools.
- In 2003 Ikbol was awarded a Grandpre For the Innovative Approach to Domestic Violence in a contest conducted among the Uzbek NGOs titled 'Let's Collect Our Resources – a New Reality!'

- In 2004 Ikbol was included into the Governmental Program On Educating The Youth In the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan as one of the implementers and received the first government order to design educational programs for military schools. The organisation remains as one of the implementers of the Ministry's Action Plan for 2005.

Conclusion

The main conclusion this case study tells us consists of the following:

- Governments are more likely to cooperate with CSOs on issues on which they more or less agree. Therefore, it is important for CSOs to construct their strategies considering the government's point of view thus creating enough incentives for cooperation.
- Where straightforward calls on the government to launch reforms do not work it makes more sense to take alternative approaches. In this case study, the government was not willing to take an approach that would openly discredit its 'traditional Uzbek family' approach. On the other hand, by focusing on men's perception of human rights and non-violent conflict resolution methods, they were able to engage in the process. This alternative had an additional benefit that tackled the problem of violence with in the military forces that was troubling the government.
- This type of side-ways policy influence process is particularly relevant in the case of authoritarian political systems because government agencies under such regimes are very monolithic and the decision and policies come only from the top.
- This, of course, doesn't exclude the crucial advocacy and monitoring roles of CSOs.
- Innovation and non-conventional solutions are, unfortunately, conditional of the material and administrative resources that CSOs can rely.

Sources of documentation

Youth Center 'Ikbol' Project Evaluation for 2000-2004, Action Plan of the Ministry of Defense of Uzbekistan 2004 and Agreement on Mutual Cooperation of Ikbol with Ministry of Defense of Uzbekistan. Those documents in *PDF* formats will be enclosed to the case study. There is a written permission of Ikbol to use the documentation.

About the author

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