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Introduction

Women's Center "Gulrukhsor" is the leading provider of free of charge services to women victims of domestic violence in Tajikistan. We are based in Khujand, northern Tajikistan, in the grounds of the regional (oblast) maternity hospital. We are one of three shelters for women victims of domestic violence in Tajikistan, the only one in Sughd region, serving 2.7 million people. Our team of dedicated staff includes psychologists, social workers, lawyers, shelter staff and administrative functions. Established in 1996, we work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, taking calls to our hotline and accepting women and children into our shelter day and night.

Statistics

In the period from 2019 to 2022, we housed 302 women and children in our shelter (2019 - 29, 2020 - 68, 2021 - 104, 2022 - 101). The shelter was opened in 2011 with the financial support of OSCE Tajikistan. Since inception the shelter has housed 813 women and children.

We provide free of charge consultations on cases regarding domestic violence. 95% are provided to women, but we also provide consultations to men. In the period from 2019 to 2022 we provided 10,113 consultations (2019 -1623, 2020 - 2401, 2021 - 3305, 2022 - 2784). Since our inception we have provided 43,670 consultations relating to women victims of domestic violence.

Community outreach is also a very important part of our work. In 2022 we worked with 2142 people in our violence prevention programmes. 214 formal and informal leaders at local level, 107 community police officers, 29 health workers, 39 education professionals, 691 students, 1038 local population (925 women and 115 men).

Levels of violence

In our opinion it is exceptionally difficult to measure levels of violence against women. We note occasional studies that try to establish levels of violence, and in particular value the reporting of the Tajikistan Demographic and Health Survey[1]. We believe that the number of consultations provided by organisations including our own are more representative of the quality of services provided, reputation, the knowledge of the local population regarding services, community outreach and levels of funding. It is hard to make a link to between general levels of violence in society and the operational performance of organisations providing services to women.

Societal attitudes

Despite the efforts of government and civil society, we don't see a noticeable change in attitudes to violence against women. Both women and men alike condone violence against women. These are deep seated and entrenched views. Our most recent work shows that women are blamed for bringing violence upon themselves. Women are thought of as being unduly jealous, meddling in issues that don't concern them, female members of the family causing arguments between themselves, and making unreasonable demands on men. These issues cause men and older women to resort to violence to 'solve' the problems. In 2022 there was an outcry when a young, married woman posted a video of her mother-in-law chastising her for eating bread. In the mother-in-law's view, the young woman had no right to eat without her specific permission. Due to highlighting from the media, the young woman was helped to leave her husband, and the mother-in-law received an administrative fine[2].

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[1] https://www.dhsprogram.com/publications/publication-fr341-dhs-final-reports.cfm

[2] https://www.facebook.com/radio.ozodi/posts/pfbid0fW795svyp3hbUvpJ6PbZJ7i6PcAd8WPi7r4QAw4xYgEn85wjdzvcJEkUHc9SeZNsl?__cft__[0]=AZV3LZz6jlZQds2aAXDnC_n90kboGbKON047b3FJ5mD8W66nf_tDOlZLOsJVNYsZmUz

Nigora was feeling lonely and unloved in her marriage and started meeting up regularly with a male classmate from years ago. A neighbour spotted their meetings and informed her husband. The husband called the woman's father to the scene as well, and the woman was caught talking to the man. The woman's father took her to his house, and strangled her with a belt until she nearly died. He then kept her locked up at home until the bruises were not visible. At the woman's first opportunity she ran away and came to our shelter. The woman was disowned by all; her husband and his family, the ex-classmate, her own parents. She literally had no one. Through our family counselling services the woman was forgiven by her parents, she went to live with them and started to re-build her life.

When communities make suggestions to reduce the levels of violence, the suggestions are always that we should work with women. It is very rare that anyone from the community suggests that we should talk to men about why they use violence.

A desire for change

As a result of these deep seated patriarchal norms, which are defended as much by women as by men, many donors have become tired of working in the sphere of violence against women, citing that it is not possible to change. But our own work, as well as other projects[3], show that it is possible to change attitudes at a family and community level, and maintain these changes in attitudes. When we work with families in conflict, both in our crisis centre and community outreach, we see a real desire from men, women, families and communities to live lives without violence and conflict. Individuals and families are lacking the skills that help them to manage relationships in multi-generational and multi-family (where 2 or more brothers live in the same house with wives and children) households. When we have provided training and counselling on how to de-escalate conflict, find peaceful solutions, develop mutual understanding and improve communication, this knowledge has been powerful in empowering families to reduce and / or stop violence.

Often relationship skills for young people getting married are advocated for. But in our view it is just as important to work with parents and grandparents of the newly married couple, as they have a huge influence on the success of the marriage.

Government support

Women's Center "Gulrukhsor" is grateful for the strong support of government across Sughd region. We have strong working relationships with officials across the region, and across different departments and agencies. This support allows us to reach women most in need (in both preventative work and support to victims). Development of relationships over a long period of time results in referrals of women victims to our shelter and to receive free of charge services. We are able to work together, and this brings strength to all parties.

Understanding of violence

Because violence against women is so widespread, it can be hard to identify specific causal factors. In our centre we provide services to women victims of violence in every sector of employment; from unemployed to school teachers to government officials to business women. We see all levels of education; from highly educated women to women who can't read or write. We see rich and poor, who both need our services in times of crisis. It affects towns and villages; particularly in towns where people have moved from the regions in search of work, have financial hardship and are lacking the family and community structure around them.

Vulnerable groups

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[3] Report from International Alert, Zindagii Shoista: Living with dignity – Impact after 30 months https://www.international-alert.org/publications/zindagii-shoista-living-dignity-impact-after-30-months/

In addition to vulnerable group that are frequently cited, there are additional groups of women that are particularly vulnerable to violence.
1/ Orphans. Women who are lacking parents, either due to death or abandonment, are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse from men, as they have no support systems from family in place or close relatives to help defend their rights. We regularly see women in abusive relationships, who have very limited options in fleeing violence as they are missing a family support network. This applies to women who have been brought up in institutions as well as those raised by other family members.
2/ Childless women. Society in Tajikistan attaches a huge importance to motherhood, and children are needed to provide care for parents in later life (both financial and physical). So women who are unable to conceive face huge stigma from their husband, husband's family and the community at large. Most men eventually divorce their wife who is unable to conceive, or in some cases polygamy is used as a solution.

Gulbakhor lives in the village and had been married to 7 men. For her first 2 or 3 marriages there was hope that she might conceive, but every time she was not successful and her husband divorced her. Gulbakhor's father was determined that his daughter would not live in his house, and within days of a divorce would find her another man to marry. As time progressed these men became old men, and Gulbakhor basically became a live in carer for each old man. This time she would live with them until they died. When she stayed in our shelter, due to physical abuse from her current husband, she explained that of her 7 husbands, 3 had died when she had been married to them. She had no education, had finished school at 14, no skills to generate income, and no place to live without being beaten or endlessly sent out by her father to marry another old man.

3/ Victims of child abuse. We see that for both men and women trauma in childhood deeply affects their married life. The toxic relationships between men and women that are established as children mean that they cannot have functioning, caring relationships as adults and frequently have violent relationships.

Anvar and Dilya came to our crisis center for marriage counselling. They could not get on with each other and recently Anvar had become violent. Dilya had been abused by her father as a child, often beaten with a belt. She wasn't able to love her husband and couldn't trust her father-in-law. Anvar's mother had left him as a small child. He was repeatedly told by his father and his grandmother that his mother had an affair, didn't love him and left him. He felt unable to trust women as a result.

Fatal cases of domestic violence
As far as we are aware there is no compilation of statistics of how many women and children are murdered each year by men as a result of domestic conflict. The statistics for murder convictions do not differentiate between the reasons for the murder. If these statistics were collected it would help to monitor the levels of the most serious violence against women and children.

In addition, a better understanding of the causes of these terrible acts of violence could help to prevent future deaths. The work of the police is to identify the perpetrator and secure a conviction. There is no community work undertaken to understand the background to the case and to build up evidence of lessons learned, which could be used for communities to prevent violence, protect the most at risk women and monitor the most at risk potential offenders.

In a recent case of pre-mediated murder, a man bought an axe in one local town and a can of petrol in different local town. He killed his wife with the axe and burnt her body. His son saw him killing his wife and tried to phone his grandpa to ask for help. So the man killed his son and burnt his body as well[4]. This case was successfully prosecuted and the perpetrator is in jail.

[4] https://t.co/yMF12OmCLh

There was a particularly high profile killing of a 7 year old girl in Dushanbe in 2021[5]. A male neighbour sexually abused her, killed her, dismembered her body, and buried her in a latrine. His mother was convicted of helping her son conceal the murder. Other cases of sexual abuse of minors, including incest, regularly occur. It is an exceptionally taboo subject. When we have cases of minors who are reporting incest or sexual abuse from male relatives, the victims come under huge pressure from their family and community to keep silent and are accused of bringing shame on the family. Often women family members (wives, mothers) suspect or are aware that a man is sexually abusing minors, but they don't speak out. This taboo results in children not being adequately protected.

Legal mechanisms and women's rights

The law in Tajikistan, through the administrative and criminal code provides recourse for the majority of offenses of violence against women. In the most serious cases of murder and incitement to suicide the courts are handing down lengthy sentences. Administrative fines are also used, but often women don't want to pursue an official complaint against their abuser.

Shahlo was being beaten by her drunk husband. She ran out of her house without even putting her shoes on, and came to our shelter for safety. The police were called, who then visited her husband. Upon entering their yard, the level of poverty was immediately visible. The couple collected plastic bottles from rubbish bins for re-sale, they had no food, no possessions. If an administrative fine had been used in this case the husband would not have been able to pay the fine, and could have ended up in jail. Instead counselling and community involvement was used to help support the couple and monitor the husband's behaviour.

Generally women do not seek help from either police or courts in defending their rights. Women need to be encouraged to speak out and be sensitively dealt with by law enforcement when they do seek help. Protection orders are rarely used by the police, with women not wanting to leave their husband's home. But more consideration should be given to how they could be used to protect women in situations specific to Tajikistan, and better follow up for when protection orders are broken. We have seen that in Dushanbe administrative fines and short jail terms are being used for men who are abusive to women in public[6]. This is very welcome, and if this could be replicated in other towns and rural areas it could have a positive impact on reducing public harassment of women.

Property rights for women is an extremely difficult area for women to find a 'liveable' solution. This is due to family traditions where parents should provide housing for their sons, and daughters are provided with housing by the family of their husband. In the cases of divorce, these traditions are up-ended, with neither family wanting to provide expensive housing for the divorced woman. Under the law the woman can be entitled to continue to live in the house of her ex-husband, and provided with a defined space. But this involves moving back in with an abusive family, and access to shared facilities such as toilets and kitchens can be problematic.

Why women don't leave their abuser. Understanding women's position in society

There is sometimes criticism that in Tajikistan too much effort is placed on reconciling families and sending women back to their husband and abusive family. But the reality is that in Tajikistan there are often no good alternatives for women, and women themselves don't want to leave. There are a number of factors behind this.

Shame. This is a massive cultural factor in Tajikistan. If a woman leaves her husband and their marriage breaks down she is putting huge shame on herself and her family. And the concept of shame is real for women themselves. They personally feel shame in their marriage breaking down.

[5] https://m.facebook.com/saida.inoyatova/posts/4081337175249159

[6] https://t.co/1sV7BRDtOx, https://t.co/5LI80Qt9im

The practical realities of where to live and caring for children. If the woman's parents will take her back in to their own house, then this can help a woman to leave her abuser. But we often see women whose parents have died, who are categorically against taking her in (often because of shame) or who just don't have room for the woman and her children.

If she moves back in with her parents she can face further abuse from her brother(s) & their wives who see her as an imposter coming back home putting financial pressure on them or cramping their living conditions. If she has rent somewhere to live it's very difficult to survive economically. It's hard / impossible to pay rent plus all your other bills with only 1 salary, even if you have a good job.

If she's nursing a little baby, it's not very often that she can work enough to support herself. If children are at kindergarten they are looked after from 8 till 5 but generally places cost money. School is free of charge but short days. If the woman works all day then school children would be mostly by themselves[7].

There's a huge stigma surrounding divorced women. No one wants to be divorced. Society judges that it must have been the woman who is at fault for the divorce. Divorced women get a lot of harassment from men; unwanted looks, compliments, offers of dinner, sex, constant phone calls. Divorced women are seen as unclean. When other people are getting married, their presence is seen to bring bad luck on the new couple, so they are asked to stay away, particularly from the religious parts of the ceremony. In your national passport your marital status is stated. As soon as you need to prove your identity, you are identified as divorced. This sometimes stops women being recruited into jobs/ from renting a flat.

In our view social housing could play a very positive role in helping women to leave abusive families and start to rebuild their lives.

Economic Empowerment

For every woman to have a means of income generation, even in very small amounts, is crucial to provide the woman with some empowerment. When a woman has no income of her own, she has to ask her husband or his parents every time she wants to buy something; like personal hygiene products for herself, medicine for children, transport costs for visiting her parents. These small requests for money are often the cause of arguments and tension within the family, where there are demands from many family members on scant finances. If the woman is able to cover some or all of these small expenses by herself, it means that she doesn't have to ask for money and the number of arguments reduces.

Financial aspects of crisis centers and shelters

In 2022 the funding for Women's Center "Gulrukhsor" was made up of 96.85% of grant funding from international donors and embassies, 3% from private charitable donations, and 0.15% from government. In our view, the general provision of social services related to violence against women is not adequate to the size of the problem. There needs to be better coverage in rural areas, through improved relationships with police and local government, so that women can be referred for appropriate help.

As a crisis center, shelter and community outreach organisation, we feel continually on edge in the need to source funding, to be financially stable and sustainable, and to support our staff; their work load, their salary, training and capacity building, motivation, and their self-protection for working in this emotionally difficult area.

Recommendations

- Work more with men on their role in preventing violence and contributing to peaceful family life.
- Put family relationship skills for all age groups, men and women at the heart of prevention work.

[7] https://twitter.com/SGulrukhsor/status/1622356067484041224

- Promote positive family models where divorced women can return home to their parents, and make a positive contribution to the economic viability of the family and the caring responsibilities for elderly family members.
- Continue to urge women to seek help; in either speaking out about family violence and seeking legal advice to protect own rights.
- Continue to assist all women in starting small-income generating activities.
- Better understand the risk factors specific to Tajikistan in violence against women, murder of women, incitement to suicide and sexual abuse of minors.
- Continue to work with community leaders and those who interact with women victims of violence to ensure an effective response to cases of violence.
- Remove marital status from national identity documents.