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Domestic Violence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia: Building the Bridges Between Organizations in Central Asia, FSU, and the US

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

Addressing the problems of domestic violence and trafficking – abuses which prevent women from playing an active role in their communities, is one of the main focus areas for US foreign policy. This research addressed the problem of domestic violence in Kazakhstan, the Central Asian Islamic country where economic and social turmoil of the last decade affected the issue of women's rights to a very high degree. In Kazakhstan, the principle of equal rights and equal opportunities is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However the harsh reality is such that Kazakh women are increasingly exposed to abuse and trafficking. The level of unemployment in Kazakhstan is much higher among females, compared to males. Deteriorating social infrastructure, decreasing amount of pre-school and nursing establishments, and the absence of childcare facilities in the workplace negatively affect the social status of women in Kazakhstan.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

The Global Health Network Supercourse project (www.pitt.edu/~super 1) works on improving the networking among various women's health organizations in the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU). Supercourse is a network of over 18,000 public health professionals worldwide from 151 countries, sharing for free a library of over 2000 lectures on public health, women's health, and preventive issues. The Network already has over 400 health professionals in FSU, including several colleagues from Kazakhstan's health professionals, who were eager to join efforts and exchange their health information in the Global Health Network Internet Library.

Domestic violence organizations in Kazakhstan have very low participation levels compared to other entities. There are over 30 women's health/women's rights organizations within Kazakhstan. However these organizations are poorly connected with their colleagues in the countries of the FSU and the Western world. Although many organizations in Kazakhstan have Internet excess, the Internet is not effectively utilized to speed up the communication and information exchange between domestic violence organizations in Kazakhstan and their FSU and Western counterparts. The purpose of this project was to explore the Internet connectivity in women's health/domestic violence organizations in Kazakhstan and identify ways to improve the information exchange between Kazakhstan, US, and other countries.

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology

This project was locally organized by the Union of Crisis Centers of Kazakhstan. The Union of Crisis Centers is a registered NGO with 14 members in 12 regions and 14 collaborating organizations in the area of domestic violence. The Union's mission is to develop democracy programs to protect women and children from domestic violence and to define a new culture that values relationships free from abuse.

Our project was thus significant in that:

- We targeted central mission of IREX in encouraging women's empowerment and domestic violence issues
- We identified some of the key obstacles to DV information sharing between women's health organizations in Kazakhstan and their colleagues in FSU and the US
- We explored the trends of Internet utilization in DV education in Kazakhstan and identified some of the ways to improve DV information flow in the region
- We worked toward establishing an Internet-based information distribution system on DV unparalleled in this field
- We are planning to publish several papers in the leading peer reviewed journals and develop a proposal for a larger research project

On-site activities in Kazakhstan included short term training on the Supercourse with the local domestic violence/women's health organization and administration of the survey upon the completion of the training. Additionally, a focus group was held to explore factors influencing connectivity beyond the factors disclosed in the survey. This tool was based on another research tool that was utilized for exploring organizational networking in Latin America and validated at the University of Pittsburgh. The tool was translated into Russian prior to the trip.

The research survey study was designed to explore the barriers that prevent effective collaboration between Kazakh domestic violence organizations and their foreign partners. The short survey distributed among 15 women's health organizations in Kazakhstan was designed to identify both cultural as well as the technical barriers for effective information exchange and played an important role in determining ways to speed up the information flow on domestic violence prevention in Kazakhstan. This small study will be just a pilot project. The next step of our group will be design a large project to network all domestic violence organizations in Kazakhstan, the FSU, the US, and other countries.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

The major barriers identified through surveys and via a focus group were lack of time, poor and expensive access to Internet, concern about copyright issues, lack of desire to work collaboratively and share information, lack of English knowledge, an overall sense of exhaustion from using computers, etc. With the help of the survey, we found that the majority of participants either do not have regular access to the Internet or have slow and expensive modem connections. Despite problems with Internet access, the majority of participants have access to Pentium II and Pentium III computers, suggesting that it may be possible to encourage them to exchange information through inexpensive CD-ROMs or ISB memory keys. Workshop organizers had a wonderful opportunity to visit the office of the Union of Crisis Centers for women, a women's shelter, a men's crisis center, and a local NGO informational resource center. The concept of the Supercourse was viewed very positively by the audience and many participants expressed interest in sharing their informational resources. Supercourse CD-ROMs were distributed to all 20 participants of the workshop.

As the result of this research, a DV website on the Supercourse will be developed to provide a place for DV-related organizations to share teaching materials, literature resources, data collection tools, and events. IN the future, at least 5 papers in top journals will be published with he results of this effort. These publications will draw more attention to the problem of domestic violence in Kazakhstan. The publications, as well as the new DV website on the Supercourse, will have a dramatic impact in the area of DV research.

Suggestions for Future Research

This small research study and any larger research studies that can potentially come out of this effort will have significant policy implications in the region. Our research study had and will draw more attention to the problem of domestic violence and encourage collaborations among various DV programs in Kazakhstan, the FSU, and the US. Several key emerging public policy issues identified from the literature were discussed with the representatives of DV organizations in Kazakhstan. These included access to materials on the universal DV screening by health care providers, appropriate training for health care providers, mandatory reporting of DV by health care providers, and integration of health services into community response. Interestingly, local representatives of DV organizations had access to many translated domestic violence materials originally developed in the US. The main problem that we have seen in Kazakhstan is not limited access to US materials, but limited access to the information within Kazakhstan. Future research should concentrate on improving barriers identified above.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, the US has supported the transition of the Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — from Communism toward democratic political systems and market economies. Kazakhstan is a very unique area, where people are very highly-educated. However, they lack exposure to information on gender equality and other democratization processes. A great deal of progress was achieved in Kazakhstan over the past 15 years, but much still remains to be done. My greatest belief is that the US Policy Community should always consider Kazakhstan as a country that has a great potential to improve democracy in Central Asia, and potentially other countries of the former Soviet Union.