

# How to support survivors of domestic violence in rural Kyrgyzstan better?

Resource-development guide for international organizations

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## Introduction

Violence against women and girls is a global issue and a complex phenomenon entrenched in gender stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes, cultural, religious, and traditional norms, as well as state inaction. Since the 1990s, international development aid has been committed to financing and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Kyrgyzstan, a country that received more aid than any other Central Asian state between 1991 and 2018. Yet, recent shocking cases of 36-year-old Asel Nogoibaeva, whose now ex-husband cut off her ears and nose, or the video of a husband beating and pouring buckets of water on his shaken wife who cried as she stood outside with two car tires hanging from a rope around her neck, and many others, once and again demonstrate that violence against women and girls, domestic violence in particular, is rampant and manifests in various forms in Kyrgyzstan. Addressing such a complex problem requires a comprehensive, multidimensional response that tackles a range of interconnected issues and engages diverse audiences.

This report is a pilot introductory analysis of the current context of gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence in particular, in rural Kyrgyzstan. In what follows, we first highlight recent developments, both international and governmental, such as programs, projects, or initiatives related to GBV in the country; we then present and analyze case study findings, which consist of 15 interviews with domestic violence survivors from rural areas, and 15 interviews with professionals, including legal advocates, psychologists, healthcare workers, committees members, and law enforcement officials; in the concluding section, we provide recommendations to the state, donor agencies, and civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan.

## International Development Aid Addressing Violence against Women and Girls in Kyrgyzstan

The rise in general donor engagement in the region coincided with heightened global activity in gender and development (Hoare, 2009). Championed by feminist activists from both the 'global North' and 'global South,' the mainstreaming of violence against women as a human rights issue and the recognition of the impact of gender inequality and gendered power relations on development led to the creation of two important documents: the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Since then, international donors have remained committed to addressing gender as a crucial development issue. International donors and agencies operating in Kyrgyzstan took the lead in initiating and supporting various projects aimed at ensuring the provision of essential services to GBV survivors. They also work to strengthen local laws and policies, build institutional frameworks, foster changes in attitudes, norms, and behaviors, enhance the accuracy and availability of GBV data to inform policies, guide program activities, and provide support to responsible state structures and local civil society actors engaged in the sector. At the moment, such organizations as the World Bank, UNDP, the European Union, UN Women, the OSCE, USAID, ADB, Swiss

Agency for Development and Cooperation, and many others, as well as local state and civil society partners, work on projects addressing GBV. Infrastructure development and capacity-building were among the initial manifestations of development aid addressing GBV, which among other efforts included establishing essential service infrastructure such as crisis centers and training for their staff and leadership. It is crucial to highlight that providing essential services to survivors of violence was one of the primary donors' focus and support, which fits in both the infrastructure (supporting operations of crisis centers) and capacity-building (providing financial, technical, and expert support to train specialists) assistance pillars. Awareness-raising about the issue is another important focus of the international community in Kyrgyzstan. The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence is a great showcase of awareness-raising efforts. It is an international campaign taking place in Kyrgyzstan annually since 1998 between November 25 (International Day Against Violence Against Women) and December 10 (International Human Rights Day). Every year organizers agree on a common theme for the campaign. In 2019 it was "Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands against Rape!" and in 2023 the campaign theme was "Invest to Prevent Violence against Women & Girls".

### **National Framework Developments in Kyrgyzstan**

The Kyrgyz Republic was quick to ratify key international documents promoting gender equality and protection of women, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) in 1997, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) the same year and its Optional Protocol in 2002. In 2001, Kyrgyzstan joined the global initiative to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At a national level, the country also took meaningful steps to align its legislation with international standards starting from its Constitution to specific laws and by-laws. These included, for instance, the 2003 Law on Social-Legal Protection from Domestic Violence, Election Code of the Kyrgyz Republic amended in 2007 to introduce a special measure of 30% quota for women to increase women's participation in the decision-making processes, a law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women adopted in 2008 to achieve parity status of women and men in all spheres of life of a society, including political, social, economic, and other activities. The country's Criminal Code was updated in 2016 to include penalties, including imprisonment for 3-5 years, for those who conduct or facilitate religious marriages of children. The country's 2017 Law on Prevention and Protection Against Family Violence is among the most progressive in the region and requires police to respond to domestic violence cases reported either by the victim or any other person.<sup>1</sup> It also establishes a comprehensive institutional architecture, comprising 17 bodies dedicated to preventing and addressing family violence. The bodies include the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Ministry of Labour and Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic - an authorized state body for coordinating the activities of entities involved in

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<sup>1</sup> Previously only the victim could report the crime

prevention and protection from family violence, determined by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, the court, the prosecutor's office, bodies of internal affairs, social development, healthcare, education, bodies of justice, an authorized state body for child protection, the Ombudsman (Akyikatchy) of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Bar, local state administrations and local self-government, the court of Aksakals, mass media and other organizations (referring here to many non-state and international organizations operating in the country).

Despite these efforts, gender-based violence remains a serious issue in Kyrgyzstan. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security has repeatedly rated Kyrgyzstan as the most dangerous country in Central Asia for women (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023). The WPS Index assesses women's status across three dimensions—namely, inclusion, justice, and security—using 11 indicators. These indicators cover aspects such as education, women's representation in parliament, discriminatory legislation, levels of organized violence, and more. Data on different forms of violence against women, including economic and psychological violence, often go unreported and are not included in country statistics. The data primarily focus on reported cases of homicide, domestic violence, rape, and physical assault. There is an annual increase in the number of cases of domestic violence and the number of protection orders issued by law enforcement agencies in response to these incidents. According to the Deputy Minister of Labor, Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic Zhanyl Alybaeva “the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic registered 10,416 cases of domestic violence over 10 months of 2023, a 20 percent increase when compared to the same period of 2022” (U. S. Embassy Bishkek, 2023). The Ministry also noted a significant surge in the number of domestic violence victims, which increased by 5.1 times in 2021 compared to 2010 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic and UN Women, 2023).

According to the former Ombudsman of the Kyrgyz Republic, Atyr Abdrakhmatova, *'In 2021, of the 58 reported cases of "Beatings," 57 were suspended. In the category of "Family Violence," there were 28 cases in 2020, and 15 were closed. In 2021, 104 cases of violence against children were documented, with 95 suspended. In 2020, all 95 cases related to 'Forced Suicide' were closed. We observe a rise in the number of terminated cases.'* (Azattyk Radio, 2022).

One of the issues affecting both the reporting of crimes and access to justice is that survivors do not believe in seeing perpetrators held accountable. Weak enforcement against sex offenders is exacerbated by existing loopholes and deficiencies in criminal law. In 2022, a mere 16% of those accused of violent acts received actual sentences (Ruslanova, 2022). Research, published in 2022, focusing on the *Barriers to Help-Seeking for Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Perspectives of Criminal Justice, Social, Health, and Educational Professionals*, adds to the data (Childress et al., 2022). Based on the results of 20 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus groups with 83 professionals, including legal advocates, psychologists, healthcare providers, educators, and

law enforcement officials they list structural and legal impediments that hinder survivors of domestic violence from seeking formal assistance. Among the structural barriers they list financial dependence on the perpetrator, the stigma and shame associated with seeking help, insufficient number of crisis centers in the country, rigid criteria for temporary protection and acceptance to crisis centers, GBV normalization and societal acceptance, lack of property rights for women, and a general distrust of formal services. On the legal front, barriers include inadequate sanctions for abusers, unclear provisions and deficient law enforcement, a low likelihood of prosecution, flawed procedures, prevailing stereotypes of survivors, and the risk of revictimization during investigations, coupled with protective measures for abusers in positions of power. It is important to note that the research does not include interviews with the survivors and does not specify the geographical scope.

## Methodology

The majority of existing reports and policy recommendations on the issue are based on interviews with experts and practitioners, and while we do not aim to negate the importance of such reports, it is crucial to give agency to survivors of domestic violence and to understand their perspectives. Our preliminary pilot research aims to draw on in-depth interviews with domestic violence survivors and interviews with professionals, to better understand and analyze the underlying patterns related to mechanisms of domestic violence pointed out by both women survivors of domestic violence in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan and experts working on the issue.

Participants were selected using the snowball method. Survivors of domestic violence who participated in the interview were women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their husband, father, or other male relatives over the past two years; living in all rural regions; women who have sought or attempted to seek help from law enforcement agencies, crisis centers, family protection agencies, or other institutions. The composition comprised 8 women in the age category of 18 to 35 years and 7 women in the age category of 36 to 65 years. Of the 15 respondents who experienced domestic violence, 1 was from the Naryn region, 5 from the city of Karakol in the Issyk-Kul region, 1 from Novopokrovka in the Chui region, 3 from the Alai district of the Osh region, and 5 from the Suzak district of the Jalal-Abad region. The interviews with professionals included 4 psychologists from crisis centers, 3 lawyers, 2 local deputies, 2 members of Committees for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (КПНЦ); 2 representatives of law enforcement agencies, and 2 representatives of the Department for Social Protection of Families.

The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, and conversations with participants were conducted using the semi-structured interview method to focus on the following aspects: causes of domestic violence; women's openness in expressing facts of domestic violence; level of trust in law enforcement agencies; awareness of women who have experienced domestic violence about the existence of crisis and rehabilitation centers for women; as

well as the implementation of projects to prevent violence against women by international and non-governmental organizations.

It is important to note that protecting the anonymity of the respondents was crucial for us, which inevitably shaped our decisions about what to include in this report.

## Findings and Discussion

The process of conducting interviews with the women who experienced domestic violence was rather challenging since the rhetoric of shaming is still widespread in the country, particularly in rural areas. The women who agreed to participate in the interviews were mostly with children, only one woman did not have any offspring, and one woman was pregnant. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that women reported violence either to law enforcement or any relatives only after at least one to two years of repeated violence at home. Women who faced violence for the first time virtually never reported it. The most common reason to finally speak out about domestic abuse was either the women became disabled and/or their children were continuously physically abused, in many cases, it was both. It is of significant value to point out that domestic violence has been committed not just by husbands but also by parents-in-law and brothers. Based on the discourse of the interviews, it is most likely that only 10% of domestic violence cases are reported. Out of 15 women survivors, only two women reported the act of violence by calling 102, the rest were helped by hospitals, relatives, and/or neighbors; professional interviews revealed a similar tendency – that survivor women very rarely call 102. According to the interviews, the most common reason for putting up with the abuse is “mentality” or the stigma and shame associated with seeking help, and financial dependence on the perpetrator.

### (In) Effectiveness of the law

Both the survivors and the professionals in our research pointed to the ineffectiveness of the legislative system as a contributing factor to ongoing domestic violence. Our fieldwork findings show that the results outlined in the previously mentioned research on *Barriers to Help-Seeking for Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan* still stand very strong, it seems there have not been any improvements made for the past several years. As the 2022 research does not indicate the geographical scope, it is important to consider that if survivors in the capital and big cities experience such barriers, survivors in rural areas have arguably even more difficulties since rural areas have limited resources and infrastructure, e.g. not all villages have police stations, courtrooms, etc. The following patterns were underlined throughout our interviews. The inaction of law enforcement is widespread in rural areas and the majority of women stated that if the police did intervene, the interventions lasted only a couple of hours, after which the perpetrators came back home, in rare cases, perpetrators would be fined, no other strict punitive measures were usually taken. One survivor mentioned that she reported and wrote a police statement five times, however, her case never went to court, at the police station she was told to “*stop making problems and start living in peace with her husband*”. Another survivor was abused by her father-in-law,



and her husband worked at the police station, therefore, when she called 102, even though law enforcement came to the scene, they refused to accept a written statement. In addition, despite the introduction of the protection orders (охранный ордер), which are supposed to act as a preventive mechanism to protect a person from harm, the orders do not have any positive result in cases where a husband and wife live together, thus, virtually in all the cases. Another crucially important element that hinders adequate legal procedures to protect the victim from psychological and/or economic abuse and punish the perpetrator is the absence of forensic psychological examinations.

## Emerging contributing factors and causes for domestic violence

### *Concept of Marriage/Family*

Analysis of the interviews highly suggests that one of the reasons for rampant domestic violence in rural areas is the concept of marriage/family. Though marriage as a structure was not explicitly mentioned by the respondents, throughout interviews it was clear that the patriarchal concept of marriage is still prevalent among both survivors and certain professionals. Patriarchal marriage is based on a hierarchical structure in which women are subordinate to men and are restricted to household work only, where this work is not appreciated (Vithanage, 2015). Within such structure, victim blaming is a norm, and this norm leads to reinforcing the idea that domestic violence should not be outed since the victim is to blame anyway. A local deputy, and member of the committee, who works with women experiencing domestic abuse pointed out the following:

*“maybe she wouldn't have found herself in such a situation if she had shown patience and said about it at another time when her husband sobered up and then maybe her words would have reached him (-) ... that's how we are women (.) either we have a long tongue or we say a lot of unnecessary words, but it seems men get angry because of this (.) I think that's why they beat women more often (.) my husband is a boxer (.) it seems we need to know when and from which side they are going to strike and have time to turn away and possibly avoid beatings (.) women have lived with their husbands not for the first time and know each other very well, if you remain silent and mind your own business when your husband is angry, perhaps this will help avoid beatings and violence (.) otherwise, usually due to illiteracy and misunderstanding, we say whatever is random and then we sit and we receive blows, we suffer from beatings...”*

Another member of the committee mentioned this case:

*“in some cases, the girls themselves are to blame (.) because it is an insignificant thing (.) he said in the morning before going to work, feed the sheep and she overslept (.) did not put food for the sheep (.) then the husband comes home and she is sleeping (.) hey, you're still sleeping (.) I told you to feed the sheep (.) then the husband hit her as soon as she got up and broke her arm (.) then I said it turns out that you yourself are to blame ...”*

In both excerpts, the committee members are pointing toward the idea that in marriage the woman must endure everything, moreover, after being physically and mentally abused it is she who must make sure that the marriage does not fall apart. The interviews also showed that there is an encouragement to *“always save the family”*, divorce in such a structure is frowned upon. Furthermore, an intricate discourse of internalized contradiction has come to light throughout the interviews which resulted from such marriage structure. When women are socialized in a patriarchal normative society they tend to internalize the ideas that they must put up with everything to *“save the family”* and *“not to leave children as orphans, because children need both parents”* – this is the rhetoric that the survivors used when asked *“why don’t you leave your husband who physically abuses you?”*. The contradiction is that after uttering that internalized norm, the survivors went on describing how in their families the husbands physically abuse both her and their children, do not provide any financial support (e.g. do not buy any clothing, do not pay any medical expenses), is not interested in interacting with children, instead the husband spends money on alcohol and/or other women/lovers. What ‘family’ is there to save? It is also important to understand that in such a patriarchal structure men are discursively left out despite being the perpetrator:

*“Interviewer: since then (.) has there been any violence from your husband in the last two years*

*Survivor: no, from the mother-in-law’s side only”*

The survivor clearly answers that she was abused by her mother-in-law and then, however, continues describing how her husband was beating her. In addition, in such marriages, women are not allowed contraceptives yet they are blamed for having too many children. A medic, who works at a local hospital in a rural area pointed out that many women are cruelly abused by their husbands:

*“...basically they (husbands) complain to their wives that they give birth again and again and that they (husbands) are not satisfied and for this reason they rape in another organ {anus} after such an intimate relationship, a lot of women suffer (.)”*

### *Religion*

In his article for CABAR.asia Arsen Usenov states that “An unprecedented growth of the role of religion in the life of society is taking place in Kyrgyzstan, which requires the state to take new approaches to building relationships between the state and religion” (Usenov, 2022). Religion is a rather sensitive and extremely intricate concept. In rural Kyrgyzstan, religion seems to denote a conservative effect. According to a psychologist, who works with victims of domestic violence, one of the reasons for violence against women has to do something with religion:

*“in my opinion, due to the fact that there are a lot of religious fanatics there (.) due to lack of education (.) there are a lot of religious people when you go to #Suzak, it seems as if you are in #Arabia or #Iraq (.)*

*perhaps because this (.) for example, many people there marry off their daughters after the 9th or 11th grade (.) due to lack of education, women do not know about their rights and when they are already subjected to violence, they endure it for years and remain silent (.) I think because of such reasons”*

In addition, there is a tendency of victim blaming through religion, one of the local deputies said:

*“the victim was a good, beautiful girl (.) if she had been with a friend, she had not been alone, perhaps he [the perpetrator] would not have done this; this would not have happened to her (.) Sharia says you cannot go out without mahr without an accompanying person (.) it seems we should look at which person we sit next to (.) we shouldn’t be left alone at home (.) when you’re left alone anything can happen (.) after dusk it’s better not to go out”*

### *Financial problems and unemployment*

Financial challenges and unemployment were among the most frequently provided reasons for domestic violence in both professional interviews and interviews with survivors. Women in precarious financial states are particularly more vulnerable to domestic violence since poverty limits their choices and resources. However, it is crucial to point out that violence does not seem to discriminate based on income. Even though in our case study, the majority of those who agreed to have interviews were facing financial problems, this was most probably one of the motives for agreeing to the interview, domestic violence does take place in affluent families, women of such families just do not report it (Bellew, 2005). Poverty and unemployment in a family are deeply interconnected with problems related to patriarchal norms. For example, unemployment leads to a crisis of masculinity whereby a man, who is bound by sociocultural patriarchal norms to be the sole breadwinner in the family, cannot fulfill his purpose which leads to violence (Jewkes, 2002).

### *Alcohol*

Alcohol abuse is the most widespread cause provided by the survivors, 13 out of 15 women described how violence takes place while men are drunk, and things are usually alright when men are sober. The problem of alcohol is a complex one, it includes various social and economic intersections - financial problems and unemployment and the aforementioned crisis of the sole “breadwinner” role creates stress that leads to alcohol abuse and violence (Maralbaeva and Pierobon, 2023). In the majority of cases, the survivor women specified that their husbands would start drinking after losing their jobs. It is important to point out that this research aims to address rural areas, where resources are limited and unemployment with alcoholism is a widespread issue.

### *Pornography*

A medic in one of the rural polyclinics, touched upon a salient point – that is of watching porn, which led to intimate partner violence.

*“... usually men see this in pornography and force their wives (.) and women are not ready for such conditions (.) they have not seen this (.) and men watch (.) women do not watch, they have not seen (.) if a woman has no desire, you mustn't rape”*

Anecdotal evidence suggests that watching porn is a widespread practice among young men in Central Asia. It is worth mentioning that Kyrgyzstan does not block any porn websites, as, for example, in Uzbekistan, where access to any pornography-related websites is restricted. Academic literature claims that pornography may be one of the factors contributing to violence against women, both at the level of the individual perpetrator and within wider society (Tarzia and Tyler, 2021). This is based on an understanding that pornography frequently contains objectifying and dehumanizing portrayals of women, as well as regularly including aggression, abuse, and violence against women. It is worth noting that there has not been any research done in this field to address the issue in Kyrgyzstan.

#### *Awareness of women who have experienced domestic violence about services and initiatives*

As was pointed out in previous sections, donor development aid is the primary financial source of the majority of initiatives to address violence against women and girls in the country. Based on the interviews with professionals, if it were not for NGOs and donor aid some of them would not have been involved in the work directed against GBV. For example, within the framework of international projects against GBV, lawyers conducted seminars in distant rural areas, met with residents, carried out explanatory work, and *“if these projects were not possible [did not finance all trips], I would not have gone there at all, ... we even went to places 300 km away”* pointed out one of the lawyers. It was also mentioned that certain foreign organizations independently came to village councils, carried out explanatory work with local women's committees and heads of village departments, and active members of villages. In addition, various events were organized in schools, such as round table discussions on early marriages and their consequences. Many professionals referred to the 16 Days of Activism and its popularity. Local women committees' members mentioned how international organizations organized trainings, and distributed brochures with information on social protection etc. It has become clear, however, that the survivors were not aware of any such initiatives and/or activities. None of the survivors has ever heard about the 16 Days of Activism, which is quite popular in Bishkek, or any other projects related to the protection of women against domestic violence. Moreover, there was a certain confusion among some of the survivors when they were asked *“what the government should do in order to address the issue of domestic violence?”*, the responses were somewhat not related to the question as if the survivors did not think that the government must take responsibility and address the issue, and that women must have equal rights and opportunities. The interviews with women survivors also demonstrated that while there is certain awareness raising of GBV against girls, wives and domestic violence are almost invisible and/or ignored as one of the survivors voiced the following:

*“no, as such, to be honest, I’ve never seen such information on TV programs (.) I haven’t seen a brochure either (.) but the only thing I can say is that last year I probably saw it on public transport (.) how to say an advertisement is not even an advertisement but posters, yes (.) but of course they are not really about violence against women (.) and there they are probably more about harassment by men towards girls (.) schoolgirls”*

The fieldwork also revealed that the prevailing majority of interviewed survivors were not aware of the existence of crisis centers and shelters, and they did not know who to go to and/or consult when they were physically abused. Considering the distrust in the legal system and the distance and isolation of the rural areas, the women had to put up with the abuses for many years. It is important to point out that those women who managed to get to the crisis centers did so in most cases with the help of the members of the Committees for the Prevention of Domestic Violence.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the past three decades, both local civil society and the international community have been dedicated to addressing violence against women and girls in Kyrgyzstan, employing various approaches and engaging with diverse communities and audiences. We acknowledge the hard work that has been done to address violence against women and girls, which includes fostering changes in social norms and attitudes; improving local laws;<sup>2</sup> and raising awareness. Despite these commitments, however, women are still physically and mentally abused in their own homes. Based on the analysis of the interviews, we once and again would like to underline that the problem of domestic violence is multidimensional, involving sociocultural norms, legal system, economic insecurity, religion, and others. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that much more needs to be done to ensure improvements in rural areas, which are often isolated and resource-limited. Overall, the following specific areas for improvement and recommendations for donor agencies, the state, and civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan emerged from our preliminary pilot study.

### Active engagement/work with men

Involving men is critical for addressing, reducing, and preventing violence against women, in particular domestic violence. Even though projects and initiatives engaging men are growing<sup>3</sup> men are still left out in the mainstream

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<sup>2</sup> During the process of finalizing our research a new important amendment was made into the Kyrgyz legislation, which states that criminal cases of sexual violence are now prohibited from being closed due to reconciliation of the parties. The main change is that from now on in Kyrgyzstan, criminal cases at the stage of pre-trial proceedings for serious crimes will not be terminated due to the reconciliation of the parties.

<https://kloop.kg/blog/2024/01/23/ugolovnye-dela-ob-iznasilovaniyah-zapretili-zakryvat-iz-za-primireniya-storony-prezident-podpisal-zakon/>

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2019, Kyrgyzstan launched a correctional program to change violent behavior for people who have committed domestic violence. The state program is designed to teach domestic tyrants how to manage anger, prevent violence and save the family. The Ministry of Social Labor should have implemented it. However, crisis centers and

work. Firstly, in a societal structure where men consider women as subordinates, women talking about their own rights will make very little sense since men will most likely listen to men only. As a committee member pointed out:

*“... but in fact, strong people who use violence are men (.) we must work with these men (.) for this we must work with the court of elders with imams of mosques with big people [with authority] with those men who will be listened to (.) therefore, we must attract more men to the composition of the Committees for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (.) when we women say among ourselves that we have rights, we are like this, we are that, we will not allow ourselves to be offended, then men develop a different concept, they see it differently(.)”*

Secondly, while it is generally important to talk about freedoms and rights, it is no less important to remind about limits and punishments. One of the local deputies specified that during various forums for women, they always appeal to have forums for men where men would be informed about the notions of domestic violence and related laws and subsequent punishments. Such forums for men have never taken place in rural areas, according to the deputy. Furthermore, it is important to address the issue of alcoholism. Even though survivors, professionals, and academic literature unanimously agree that alcohol abuse contributes to domestic violence, neither research recommendations nor projects combating GBV seem to tackle the issue. Lastly, very little has been done to understand and analyze men’s perspectives on domestic violence and GBV in general in the country, more research based on interviews and surveys with men is needed to deeper reflect on the issue.

### **Involvement of Local Rural Stakeholders/Community members**

While important strides have been undertaken in raising awareness and addressing the issue of domestic violence by engaging diverse audiences, there is still rather limited data on how things operate in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. In areas with very scarce resources in general, there is also a lack of institutions such as police stations, hospitals, or NGOs, yet, every village seems to have a court of Aksakals and religious leaders<sup>4</sup>. Both survivors and professional interviews emphasized that while there is widespread distrust in

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non-governmental organizations still had to do this.  
[https://24.kg/obschestvo/265767\\_upravlenie\\_gnevom\\_ili\\_kak\\_vkirygizstane\\_perevospityvayu\\_t\\_domashnih\\_tiranov/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/265767_upravlenie_gnevom_ili_kak_vkirygizstane_perevospityvayu_t_domashnih_tiranov/)

<sup>4</sup> Tatyktuu Zhashoo - Living with dignity: ensuring key messages on preventing violence against women and girls reach religious communities (2022-2025), Funded by British Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, UK Agency for International Development. This project stands out among the few that extend their focus beyond conventional target groups, actively involving religious leaders and communities in tackling GBV. However, the project documentation did not provide specific details on the methodology used to test the messages, the size of the target audience, or the criteria for participant selection. Given that the project is still ongoing, it is anticipated that these details will be included and shared upon completion in the final project evaluation.

the effectiveness of the legal system, people generally listen to informal hierarchical structures.

In addition, throughout the interviews, it became evident that a lot of work, both preventive and punitive, is relegated to district police officers (участковые). However, in many cases, there is only one officer for the whole village, sometimes one for several villages, and it is physically virtually impossible to address all cases of violence. Therefore, comprehensive research is desirable to see how the structural framework of district police officers works and what needs to be improved.

Work must be done with Committees for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (КПНС). The committee is an informal, voluntary association of key people in the local community. The composition of the committee is formed and varies based on local conditions and the willingness of the parties to participate in the activities related to domestic violence. Based on the survivors' interviews, the committees proved to be helpful in on-the-spot addressing cases of domestic violence in villages since the members live in the same neighborhoods, and unlike most law enforcement and district officers, the members of such committees are women. The members of the committees are well-informed about crisis centers and various programs on GBV and domestic violence. And in general, it is important to remember that women feel more comfortable talking to women about domestic violence. However, as was demonstrated in the analysis section, committee members' idea of marriage is quite problematic and most of the victim-blaming comes from them. This paper does not claim that every member of every committee tends to have such ideas about marriages, nonetheless, this is the pattern traced throughout our fieldwork.

We are aware of and acknowledge that working with local stakeholders can be a double-edged sword since they represent the sociocultural structure which more than often reinforces sociocultural norms harmful to women, nonetheless, considering the rural context it is crucial to concede local stakeholders' importance and influence.

### **Support Crisis Centers and Shelters**

The findings of our preliminary pilot fieldwork made it clear that shelters and crisis centers have been doing extraordinary work at providing essential services to survivors of domestic violence: women receive psychological help, legal consultations, and take various courses such as bakery and sewing, and they generally are treated with respect. There has been a stark contrast in responses about future plans between the survivors who were staying in shelters and those who did not receive any specialized help. While the survivors at the shelters were expressing hopes of finding a job, divorcing, applying for alimony, and living independently, women who have never been in shelters expressed the following:

*"Interviewer: when you leave, are you thinking about getting a divorce, terminating the registry office, forcing him to pay alimony, or are you thinking about not reporting your whereabouts?"*

*Survivor: I'm thinking of disappearing into obscurity (.) I don't need alimony (.) as long as he doesn't see me (.) I want to leave and disappear"*

Multiple studies and monitoring reports suggest that the level of state commitment to address the issue and allocate funds is inadequate for the level of gender-based violence in the country. Civil society and community crisis centers remain heavily dependent on the funds and priorities of international donor agencies. It makes the entire sector vulnerable to even minor changes in donors' commitments, agendas, or funding opportunities. The 2019 National-level Review states that beyond allocating funds within the national budget to relevant ministries and agencies, it only allocated between KGS 300,000-700,000 annually to four of the existing 18 crisis centers under the Social Service Procurement Contract Programme, which is inadequate for their needs (Beijing +25, 2019).

### **Monitoring and Mapping**

There have been very few attempts made to systematically map and analyze projects specifically targeting GBV, and domestic violence specifically, in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas. This step could prove crucial for future programming. Mapping such initiatives and projects could serve multiple purposes. Firstly, it could help identify gaps in coverage and areas where interventions might be lacking. Additionally, it could uncover overlaps or duplications in efforts, ensuring the efficient use of resources. It would provide insights into the specific regions, communities, or demographic groups that require more attention in terms of GBV interventions. Another motivation for undertaking such research would be to identify best practices and lessons learned to inform new projects and provide evidence-based data to support policy recommendations and reforms. Mapping and analyzing projects addressing gender-based violence in Kyrgyzstan is a crucial step to ensure that future initiatives are well-informed, strategically planned, and responsive to the unique needs of the communities affected by violence against women and girls.



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