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Violence against Children in Tajikistan

A situational analysis



Violence against children is a fast-emerging issue across the CEE/CIS Region. Children are harmed at home, at school and on the streets. Corporal punishment is common. A youth opinion poll found that about 60% of children in the region—56 million children—are exposed to violence at home. But, child maltreatment—violence, abuse and exploitation in their many forms—has not been perceived as a significant public issue, until recently. Social reform is underway in many CEE/CIS countries, including Tajikistan, and serious efforts are being made to meet international commitments on children and child rights. In 2005, for example, Tajikistan provided input for the UN Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children.

In order to address violence against children in Tajikistan, it is necessary to better understand the scope of the problem. Towards this end, a situational analysis was conducted by the Expert Group of the National Commission on Child Rights of the Government of Tajikistan, with technical assistance from UNICEF and the involvement of local NGOs. The results are summarized below.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. Documenting social perceptions about violence against children helps establish a crucial baseline for action. An assessment conducted by the IECD (Integrated Early Childhood Development) National Team found that two out of every three parents (65%) consider the use of physical violence to be a normal form of punishment; and one in four (25%) consider physical violence necessary in raising children. Similarly, a 2001 study by the NGO Open Asia found that only 39% of parents considered it unacceptable to use physical violence as a form of punishment.

2. Children also experience emotional and psychological violence. A survey conducted in the Rasht Valley with children and parents, as part of the 2002-2003 Small Arms and Light Weapons Awareness Project supported by UNICEF, revealed that 60% of children said that they had experienced physical abuse and emotional/psychological abuse from their parents in the prior six months. Parents said that they commonly use psychological/emotional abuse at home, e.g., 80% stated that they commonly shout at or curse their children’s names; 30% said that they felt such psychological abuse humiliated their children.

3 Girls and women face a unique situation concerning violence. The Open Asia study found that almost two out of three girls (64%) of girls surveyed believed that they are more exposed than boys to violence within the family. Girls face multiple forms of violence, from sexual to emotional abuse. Some girls face pressure from their parents to enter into an early marriage or unwanted marriage. Neglect is another form of maltreatment that mainly affects girls. This involves parental disregard for the healthy development of their children. For example, parents may keep girls from continuing past basic education.

METHODOLOGY

A review of existing research on violence in Tajikistan was conducted, covering studies by UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration, the Government of Tajikistan and local NGOs. A number of field visits were undertaken and included in-person interviews with key government officials working on violence against children, members of the National Commission on Child Rights, and representatives of inter-governmental organizations and NGOs. Key studies included: a 2001 survey by the Dushanbe-based NGO Open Asia; an assessment by the IECD (Integrated Early Childhood Development) National Team; and a survey of children and parents from five districts in the Rasht Valley as part of the 2002-2003 Small Arms and Light Weapons Awareness Project supported by UNICEF.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

In Tajikistan, the definition of violence against children and women rests upon four categories of maltreatment: physical abuse; emotional abuse; sexual abuse; and neglect. Physical abuse is any act that causes actual physical harm or has the potential to cause such harm. Emotional abuse is the failure of a caregiver to provide a child with a supportive environment, including actions that affect the emotional and social development of a child. Sexual abuse refers to any act by which a caregiver or other individual uses a child for sexual gratification through rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion or sexual molestation. Neglect is the failure of a parent or primary caregiver to ensure the healthy development of a child, by providing adequate and appropriate nutrition, shelter, safe living conditions, health care, education, and physical and emotional nourishment. It is important to distinguish neglect from poverty and lack of resources; however, even where resources are scarce, neglect can occur if some children in the families are nurtured less than others, e.g., girls or children with disabilities.

SIZING UP THE PROBLEM

Research shows that the number of children exposed to violence in Tajikistan is high. Yet, it is difficult to determine accurate rates of violence due to the lack of authoritative statistics, the low share of cases reported and cultural sensitivity to discussions concerning sex. Most cases reported are severe cases of violence or neglect that have been brought to the attention of the authorities. The problem is that until maltreatment of children is recognized as wrongdoing, in the community and in the family, incidents will continue to be under-reported. And responses that help the victims and promote prevention will go wanting.

Following the 1992-97 civil war, Tajikistan experienced a sharp rise in the numbers of vulnerable children; these children have become more visible and their numbers have continued to rise. 'Vulnerable children' are girls and boys who are homeless or placed in institutions because they lack a proper home environment. These children are at high risk of experiencing some form of violence or maltreatment in their lives.

Current statistics show the highest rate of violence occurring in Dushanbe. However, this is largely due to better reporting and monitoring in the capital city. The Sogd region also reports high rates of violence against children but, again, this likely points out a difference in reporting and data collection rather than actual incidence compared to other parts of the country.

Available data show that children experience violence and maltreatment in a number of different settings. Violence takes place at home, at the hand of parents or other family members, including siblings. Violence occurs at school, in institutions of all types, on the streets and in work situations. Violence, abuse and exploitation can be the act of someone the child knows, such as a relative or employer, or strangers such as those in neighbourhood criminal gangs or larger organized crime, especially in connection to drug-related crimes and commercial sexual exploitation.



VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Violence against and maltreatment of children is pervasive in all countries, including Tajikistan. While there are factors that increase the risks of child maltreatment, the reality is that violence and abuse of children crosses all socio-economic boundaries. This highlights the need for broad social change on this issue—at all levels and in all sectors of society.

BY FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

It is known that violence and abuse of children are not uncommon at the hands of parents, step-parents, siblings, other relatives and caregivers. The reality is that the people who are supposed to protect children often harm them. This maltreatment is under-recognized and under-reported because society widely accepts it as 'normal practice' or a 'private matter'.

A 2002 WHO study illustrates how physical harm, usually in the name of discipline or a way to teach obedience, is an accepted practice in Tajikistan. The study found that 20% to 60% of children experience regular physical abuse inflicted by parents or other family members. In parallel, 40% of parents said that they feel physical violence is an acceptable punishment for children. These admissions show how widely violence against children is tolerated, even by the children afflicted. Almost half (44%) of children said they would remain silent about domestic abuse because they believe their parents have the authority to use violence as a form of punishment. Further, 25% of parents said they had experienced violence themselves as children. Taken together these findings point out that physical violence is not only accepted by parents and children but that it is passed on from generation to generation.

Sexual abuse and assault involving children are particularly offensive forms of maltreatment and, therefore, lie even deeper behind the wall of silence. Determining the prevalence of sexual abuse in Tajikistan with any accuracy is difficult for several reasons: the lack of awareness and recognition of sexual abuse as wrongdoing that violates child rights and the Criminal Code of Tajikistan; existing definitions of sexual abuse; and the low incidence of reported cases. The Open Asia study found that 22% of parents—more than one in five—said that they believed sexual abuse of children was widespread in their communities.

Emotional and psychological abuse of children is another form of maltreatment that is at once common in Tajikistan and under-recognized as wrongdoing. Available research found that 37% to 58% of children in Tajikistan experience psychological abuse at home. Parents readily admit that they use emotional force as a way of disciplining their children: 80% say that they often shout at their children, and curse and call their children names; 41% said that they prohibit children from leaving the house; and 28% said that they prohibit children from playing.

Neglect is another common form of child maltreatment. Neglect involves the failure to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, medical assistance, supervision and upbringing. Neglect can also be emotional and psychological, e.g., inadequate emotional care and support, and even educational, e.g., allowing excessive truancy, discouraging school attendance—especially for girls—or ignoring special educational needs. The same principle applies to any legal caregiver and, ultimately, the State.

Given the very high rates of poverty in Tajikistan, child neglect seems to be widespread. One in three parents (75%) surveyed reported that they were very anxious about how they would

meet daily living requirements over the next year; average salaries are less than one third of the minimum living requirements; and half of parents say they lack the knowledge to parent properly. However, the concept of “neglect” requires that the parent or State, in the context of available resources, under-serve the child.

ON THE STREETS

Children who are working or living on the streets face an especially high risk of violence and abuse. Instead of having the confidence, life skills, social experience and education to succeed legitimately, they most often cannot find work and may be reduced to begging or foraging for food in garbage bins, and are very vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Separate research conducted by the Association of Women Scientists of Tajikistan and the NGO Open Asia found that between 12% and 32% of adolescents on the street have experienced and/or witnessed physical harm inflicted by acquaintances or strangers.

IN SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS

Physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children occurs in schools and institutions of all forms—from residential care to detention centres and prisons. However, there are relatively few national data on these incidents and there are no proper processes and mechanisms or awareness in place to gather such statistics. Some recent research, conducted by local NGOs, found that 23% to 50% of adolescents have experienced some form of violence in schools and institutions.

Violence at school can occur in the school building or on school property. Corporal punishment is legally prohibited in schools but in practice, it is used regularly. If corporal punishment does result in a fatality or physical injury that requires medical intervention, the incident is recognized and reported, but these events only capture extreme occurrences. At the other end of the spectrum, abuse like bullying is relatively common but often under-recognized and under-reported. Bullying—as defined in Tajikistan—is the repeated exposure of a student to negative actions by one or more students that may include verbal or sexual harassment, or serious physical harm.



VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS

Girls and women in Tajikistan are at particular risk of violence and maltreatment, but the reported prevalence and incidence of such abuse in Tajikistan remains fragmentary. Some studies have indicated that women are more vulnerable today than in the past; laws are weak and women are not fully aware of their rights. In addition, the revival of traditional Tajik culture and social values has influenced gender relations in the family and in the public sphere so that girls and women are at a social disadvantage and, therefore, more vulnerable.

The WHO study found that the rate of physical abuse reported by women and girls is, indeed, high. The survey revealed that 35% of women reported experiencing physical violence; 45% reported experiencing psychological abuse from family members during childhood; and fully half of females aged 15 and older reported that they had been victims of some form of violence—physical, emotional or sexual—inflicted by a family member.

The WHO study also confirmed that domestic violence was the most common form of violence: almost half of women (47%) reported that they had been forced to have sex with their husbands against their will. Many women and girls said they had been exposed to different forms of violence. Women who live in rural areas appear to be at a higher risk of violence from both family members and strangers. Data show that violence against women was almost double in rural areas.

At the same time, two out of three (64%) young girls said that they feel more susceptible to violence in the home compared to boys. Many girls also face pressure from parents to go along with arranged marriages—which have various aspects but, for one, mean parents no longer have to carry the costs of providing for a daughter.

EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN

Another serious form of maltreatment is the exploitation and trafficking of children outside and inside of Tajikistan. Girls in particular are lured to other countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Pakistan and Russia, with the hope and promise of finding jobs but end up being pushed into sexual exploitation and prostitution. According to the International Organization for Migration, some 300 girls and women from Tajikistan were trafficked to UAE in 2000 alone.





STEPS FORWARD

There is a need to increase the State's capacity to protect children who face violence and, at the same time, to increase advocacy and training activities related to violence against children. In the first instance this means developing more comprehensive and authoritative statistics; that means developing and implementing valid and reliable instruments to measure the incidence and prevalence of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children in all settings. Establishing authoritative baseline data will promote an informed understanding of the issue and lead to the development of education, outreach and prevention programmes that can reduce and prevent violence against children.

So far, there are few policies in Tajikistan that directly address child maltreatment. The Government can build its capacity in this area by developing training modules for government officials and using communications technologies such as the Internet to spread awareness of violence against children and to gather and analyse information about child welfare and maltreatment.

Steps also need to be taken to develop community-based initiatives that aim to prevent and respond to child maltreatment of all types. These can include, for example, parenting assistance,

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