



Elimination of Violence through Research and Education: Promoting Women's Human Rights in Bulgaria

Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, and the Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation

Violence against women is a serious and pervasive problem in Bulgaria. Although domestic violence is reported to be the most common cause of injury to women, a woman's fundamental right to be free from violence is not protected at any phase of the country's legal process. Sexual harassment is also a serious problem: with the decline in the economy and the reduction of alternative employment opportunities, many women experience sexual blackmail, harassment, and humiliation in the workplace, as well as domestic violence.

This brief describes a research and advocacy project addressing these critical concerns, undertaken jointly from 1997-99 by three organizations—Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (“Minnesota Advocates”), the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF)¹ and the Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation (GBF). The project was based on research previously conducted by Minnesota Advocates and its partners on domestic violence as a human rights abuse in Bulgaria. Its report, *Domestic Violence in Bulgaria*, published in March 1996, was the first of its kind. It concluded that domestic violence was a serious human rights abuse to which the government was not responding appropriately.

The current follow-up project was designed at an auspicious time. In 1996, the Bulgarian Government had adopted a National Plan of Action for Women, which identified violence against women as an area of concern and specified research and education as measures necessary for the elimination of the problem. Because of this initiative, the government was expected to be supportive of the project's educational efforts and receptive to recommendations for legislative and policy changes resulting from the research.

Objectives

The project aimed to:

- ▶ Disseminate the results of previous research on domestic violence in Bulgaria;
- ▶ Conduct and disseminate research on sex discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace and on the response of the legal system to domestic violence;
- ▶ Mount a public education campaign on violence against women as a human rights abuse;
- ▶ Recommend future advocacy based on the results of the research.

¹The Bulgarian Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) was the original project partner. In 1998, the executive director responsible for implementing the project formed the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF). To maintain continuity, the project was transferred to the new organization. This brief refers to the BGRF with regard to the activities of either organization.

Methodology and Intervention

The project comprised the following activities:

Research

Minnesota Advocates researched the Bulgarian and international laws relevant to sex discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. The group also interviewed judges, lawyers, journalists, managers, individual women, and others who could provide information on the situation of women in the Bulgarian workplace. The Bulgarian partners reviewed more than 8,000 newspaper advertisements over a two-month period to assess job criteria established by employers and surveyed 600 Bulgarian men and women to determine their attitudes on issues related to workplace discrimination and sexual harassment.

In an effort to document the services available to female victims of violence in Bulgaria, BGRF developed and distributed a questionnaire and interviewed representatives of groups promoting women's rights in order to gather information about the nature of their work, their needs, and their cooperation with other similar groups. Collaborators also formed two research groups. The first coordinated research on court records to determine the nature and extent of violence handled through the court system. The second group

studied the media's coverage of violence against women.

Education

BGRF widely distributed translated copies of *Domestic Violence in Bulgaria* to prepare seminar participants for discussions on the problem. The Bulgarian partners also worked with teachers at two Sofia high schools to develop a curriculum using human rights documents and gender education manuals. Further, GPF developed brochures on domestic violence and sexual harassment issues, which were distributed at a variety of public events. Throughout the project, the collaborators issued press releases and held press confer-

ences about the project and the results of the research.

Advocacy

In June 1997, all three organizations conducted seminars on domestic violence in Sofia, Varna, and Plovdiv for activists, lawyers, judges, prosecutors, doctors, teachers, police officers, journalists, and government officials. Several months after the seminars, the Bulgarian foundations conducted roundtable discussions in the same three cities with government officials and women's organizations. At the conclusion of the project, a two-day final seminar was held, drawing participants from across the country.



Advocacy workshop in Plovdiv

Results

Research

The research indicated that sex discrimination and sexual harassment are persistent problems for Bulgarian women. Sections in the Bulgarian Constitution and Labor Code prohibiting discrimination have not been applied to protect women in the workplace, while

other laws that currently exist to protect women's rights are routinely ignored by employers and are not enforced by the government.

A review of classified advertising found that nearly 84 percent of the advertisements for "traditional female" jobs emphasized that only

female candidates should apply. Age restrictions were also pervasive, with 41 percent of the advertisements for secretarial work specifically requesting women under 35, presumably because many employers do not want to hire women who might become pregnant or who have young children. In 1994, women's

average pay was less than 75 percent that of men's pay; by 1997, the gap had widened considerably to 65-68 percent of men's pay.² While sexual harassment is forbidden under the Labor Code, almost 35 percent of women indicated that they felt discriminated against in the workplace because of their gender.³

The court research in Plovdiv and Sofia revealed that Bulgarian courts do not maintain records in a manner that allows for easy disaggregation of data relating to family violence. Since there is no legislation that addresses domestic violence directly, all of the cases reviewed for this study had been brought under separate criminal or family law statutes.⁴ The researchers concluded that there are many obstacles to prosecuting domestic assault, and that the number of cases does not accurately reflect the pervasiveness of the problem. In most large cities, some organizations address problems specific to women, particularly domestic violence against women and children, but have limited resources and are not able to fulfill many requests for their services.

The media research found that in the cases reported in the media, women were victims of violence twice as often as men. Murder is the most commonly reported crime, while sexual, psychological, and economic types of violence are seldom reported. When cases of domestic violence are reported, jealousy,

As part of the project's advocacy effort, a woman lawyer appeared on a radio call-in show to discuss the characteristics of domestic violence. The station received such positive feedback that the lawyer was invited back; after the second show, almost a dozen women were waiting for her outside the studio to discuss their experiences with domestic violence. Based on an assessment of the often lethal consequences of domestic violence that had been discussed at a training seminar, the lawyer knew that several of these women were in danger of serious injury or death. She first formed a support group with them to discuss and develop safety plans and then convinced the owner of a local hotel to dedicate a portion of it for use as a temporary shelter.

deceit, possessiveness, and the influence of alcohol and drugs are most often cited as the causes.

Education

Approximately 500 copies of *Domestic Violence in Bulgaria* were distributed prior to the first series of seminars on domestic violence. Reactions to the report gave rise to discussions about weaknesses in the Bulgarian legal system that create barriers for female victims of violence. Participants in the seminars concluded that major legislative changes were necessary if they were to work effectively with such women within the criminal justice system.

Teachers using the curriculum concluded that it was very effective, since it provided a good basis for the introduction of a regular course on human rights and gender education, as part of mandatory civic education in Bulgaria. Although surveys confirmed that gender stereotypes and prejudices shift very slowly, many students changed their overall views on sexual violence during the course of the class.⁵

Advocacy

The seminars and roundtable discussions on domestic violence and on specific interventions to assist groups providing services to battered women received a great deal of media coverage. The final seminar, which was attended by more than 60 people from throughout Bulgaria, provided a forum to discuss strategies and future work on behalf of battered women. Heightened public awareness served as a catalyst for recently formed groups to more clearly define their missions and programs, as well as for the formation of new groups.

Conclusions

The research from this project helped to dispel the myths and negative gender stereotypes about women and violence. It also sparked public discussion—an important first step to legislative and social change. Additionally, the international collaboration on the issues of violence against women highlighted the universal nature of and drew media attention to the problem.

² Data from Bulgarian trade unions.

³ Thirty-five percent reported that they were subjected to pornography in the workplace. Almost 15 percent of female respondents reported that they had experienced unwelcome sexual contact from their coworkers, supervisors, or both. Nearly a third of respondents reported suffering negative consequences if they refused the sexual advances.

⁴ For instance, in Plovdiv, of the 383 cases resolved in the courts in 1996, violence was alleged in 30 percent. The violence included cruel or systematic battering, stabbing, breaking bones, beating during pregnancy, and pelting with heavy objects. Most of the cases were initiated without assistance from the state prosecutor and were abandoned or settled out of court. Guilty verdicts are extremely rare and the penalties assessed are largely symbolic.

⁵ For example, the number of students who disagreed with the statement that "women provoke rape with their clothes" rose from 40 percent to 90 percent. Although the number of boys who felt that the state could resolve the problem of domestic violence increased from 33 percent to 50 percent, the number of girls who believed this decreased from 78 percent to 60 percent.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Following are recommendations that emerged from the project:

► **Lobby for legal reform and tracking of cases.** Advocates should lobby to have an amendment on domestic violence added to legislation in order to allow for state prosecution of all levels of assault committed within the family. Specifically, the Criminal Code should contain a specific definition of domestic violence, procedures for dealing with it, and provisions for protecting victims. Further, police, prosecutors, and the courts should develop specialized data collection procedures to allow for easy disaggregation of statistics on domestic violence.

► **Promote discussion on employment discrimination.** Advocates should lobby to have the provision that guarantees a woman's right to "equal pay for equal work" reinstated in the Labor Code (it was repealed in 1992). The government should enforce existing laws to ensure that women are not discriminated against in employment. It should also promote programs and policies that encourage and support women's education and skill devel-

opment in order to ensure that they have the opportunity to pursue meaningful professions.

► **Broaden network activities.** Additional activities should be planned to build cooperation among groups providing services to battered women. Further, a legal task force should be formed to develop and lobby for appropriate legislative changes and the media should be continuously targeted to maintain public dialogue on these issues.

► **Expand gender education programs.** Gender education should be expanded to involve more teachers in developing a broad curriculum on women's human rights and gender that could become standard in Bulgarian schools. Special training for police officers addressing human rights and gender issues should also be pursued.

► **Train lawyers and activists.** Exchange programs should be developed to allow Bulgarian lawyers and activists to share experiences and knowledge with their counterparts in other countries. In-depth training for staff and volunteers of Bulgarian NGOS

providing support to victims of violence should be developed. *Pro bono* legal support organizations should be instituted as well to provide assistance to women victims of violence.

The following lessons have implications for future work in the area of domestic violence:

► **Diverse participation is beneficial.** Successful advocacy efforts include a broad range of actors from different sectors of society in awareness building and problem solving seminars. It is essential to engage NGO representatives, government officials, police officers, doctors, teachers, and social workers in joint dialogue about domestic violence.

► **International collaboration is critical.** Because of the universal nature of the problem of domestic violence, international collaboration on the implementation of research, education, and advocacy projects on the problem of domestic violence is necessary. It provides organizations with a broader base of expertise and facilitates the exchange of methodologies and comparative research findings from other countries.

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