

COVID-19 AND THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PANDEMIC IN CENTRAL ASIA:

*Assessing response measures of the state,
civil society, and international actors
in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan*

***Svetlana Dzardanova
Niginakhon Uralova***

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and International Actors in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan**

SVETLANA DZARDANOVA
NIGINAKHON URALOVA

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Executive Summary

This policy paper examines the efforts of state, civil society, and international actors in addressing violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. With COVID-19 related restrictions and imposed stay-at-home orders, thousands of women found themselves housebound with their abusers. Lack of state capacity, political will and ownership, gender-discriminatory legislation, lack of violence prevention systems, insufficient number of crisis centres and emergency care were identified among the many factors in the state's continuous failure to address violence against women. In Uzbekistan, although the government took measures to respond to the increasing number of gender-based violence cases, the reshuffling of responsible bodies and figures in the system resulted in uncoordinated action. Similar patterns could be observed in Kyrgyzstan, where the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with political turbulence and economic crisis severely impacted the effectiveness of the state's response. Local NGOs in both countries, although offering a more holistic approach to help the victims, suffered from a lack of available resources, staff, and competence in fundraising, as well as facing legislative barriers to operate broadly. Our analysis also shows that while pandemic revealed many blind and weak spots in states' gender strategies and GBV response they have not changed much in terms of approaches employed post-pandemic. Their actions do not match the rhetoric and haven't yet transformed into viable policy. The state, including law enforcement and justice systems, continue to view and treat GBV largely as cultural, traditional and private matter, which leads to poor programming as well as inadequate administrative and criminal sanctions.

Concepts and Definitions

Gender Based Violence (GBV) — According to the European commission, GBV “is violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately” (European Commission n.d.). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (adopted in 1994) defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Article 1). It could occur in the family, within the community or could be “perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs” (Article 2) (OHCHR, n.d.). For the purpose of this report, following the above definitions, GBV is any form of act that is directed against women because of their gender and that results in, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering of the woman.

Domestic Violence (DV) — As per the Council of Europe's (2011) Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, DV is “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim.” This report follows the above defined classification of the term.

Gender — “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men” (Council of Europe, 2011). In a patriarchal society, such as the ones found in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, women are seen as an extension of the husband or the father's property and are expected to nurture and take care of the family,

household, and keep the said family's "honour." Maintaining the family honour extends from not being sexually active until marriage, staying loyal to the husband, to not wearing revealing clothes, and not divorcing the husband irrespective of how abusive he might be. Men represent authority and are expected to be breadwinners and the solo decisionmaker of the family.

Shadow pandemic — the term coined by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former Executive Director of UN Women to cover the growing violence against women in her official statement on April 6, 2020.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) as defined among other key terms by the UN is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

GBV and VAWG — although GBV is an umbrella term, GBV and VAWG are used interchangeably in this report.

Women — in this report the term "women" also includes girls under 18.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected populations all over the globe, but its impact has been unequally harsh on women. In Central Asia and elsewhere, women have been losing their jobs more often than men. Due to closure of schools and day care facilities they had to spend more time on house chores, child and elder care, and other unpaid work. Women also have been the primary victims of upscaled gender-based and domestic violence. Central Asian governments have been copying, albeit at times slowly, international response measures, including mandatory social distancing, face masks, stay-at-home orders, and full-scale lockdowns, so thousands of women found themselves housebound with their abusers. Prior to the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan alike had relevant laws in place providing for the issuance of protection orders in cases of domestic violence, operating hotlines, and crisis centres. With the introduction of emergency rules, even the few operating crisis centres and shelters had to suspend the admission of victims and switch to providing assistance by phone or online. As cases of violence peaked, the state failed to make exceptions for women affected by domestic violence, but at least abstained from persecuting those of them who broke the curfew escaping from abusers. Local NGOs and country offices of international organisations stepped in either to complement state activities or even take over state obligations to address the pressing issues.

Building upon emerging research, analysis of relevant legislation, state statistics and alternative reports and interviews with activists, NGO workers and experts, we intend to assess the efforts of the state, local civil society, and international actors in addressing the issue of violence against women during and post the COVID-19 pandemic in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. We also discuss their views and perspectives on good practices, lessons learned, and obstacles they and/or other involved actors encountered that prevented them from responding more effectively. Adding to previous research, we extend our analysis to include other forms of violence and offer a threefold perspective on how response measures of the above-mentioned actors fit in the countering efforts overall. The following section provides a brief methodology and research limitations overview. We then proceed to discuss

the scope of the problem in pre-pandemic Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, gender-related legislative and institutional frameworks followed by analysis of COVID-19 response measures and their interplay with the shadow pandemic in both countries. In the concluding section of the paper, we provide recommendations for the state, civil society and international actors for more effective policies and interventions when addressing the issue of violence against women post-pandemic.

Methodology

In order to explore the relevant legal framework and institutional infrastructure as well as to outline and compare the strategies and measures taken by a) state agencies, b) civil society, and c) international organisations to tackle violence against women in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during the COVID-19 pandemic and the obstacles they faced, this study employed primary and secondary data analysis. Desk research was used to collect and analyse relevant articles, policy papers, documents, media pieces on gender-based violence in focus countries. Official state resources supplemented with shadow reports by the NGO sector have been examined to understand what and how data related to gender-based violence is collected in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to ensure comprehensive analysis of available statistics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local civil society activists and experts from international organisations to further deepen our understanding of their own perspectives on good practices, lessons learned, and obstacles they and/or other involved actors encountered that prevented them from responding more effectively and efficiently.

The team developed interview questions for each group of interest. The questionnaire included two sets of questions - general questions that were the same for all respondents and a set of group-specific questions.¹ A total number of 24 interviews were conducted between November 2021 and January 2022 with activists, gender experts, representatives of NGOs and international organisations (10 for Uzbekistan and 14 for Kyrgyzstan). Gender issues and specifically violence against women remain among sensitive topics in Central Asia, which coupled with the project's timeframe and researchers' temporary residence outside the region became one of the limitations of this study. Most interviews were conducted via recorded Zoom calls, and several respondents preferred to submit their responses in writing. Due to personal and security reasons several respondents from both countries asked to anonymize their data, although more respondents from Uzbekistan opted for anonymization than from Kyrgyzstan. Quotes and responses of anonymized respondents thus appear in this report under UZ# and KG# instead of names and affiliations. The team initially planned to conduct 15 semi-structured interviews with experts from each country. The snowball technique was used in both countries to sample the respondents. Of the three interest groups initially chosen for interviews, activists and representatives of local NGOs and crisis centres proved more responsive, followed by experts and representatives of international organisations. In Kyrgyzstan the team interviewed 7 gender activists and experts, 6 NGO representatives and one person affiliated both with the state and civil society. In Uzbekistan 8 respondents were representatives of civil society and 2 represented international organisations. It was comparatively easier to contact and interview respondents from Kyrgyzstan due to reasons mentioned above and the generally better internet coverage and app usage. In Kyrgyzstan the majority of respondents were reached via email and Facebook messenger. In Uzbekistan this is not a usual means of communication (the public still relies on personal contacts, phone calls or Telegram/WhatsApp messengers), which became an obstacle during the data collection phase.

1 Interview questions are available in Appendix 1 to this report.

How Big is the Problem of Violence Against Women? Pre-Pandemic Country Contexts

Violence against women and girls is a global issue. Statistics provide only a partial picture of how widespread gender-based violence is. Many types of violence, although prevalent, are more difficult to monitor and report on than others. According to the latest Lancet study, globally, more than one in four women (27% of women aged 15-49) have “experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime” (The Lancet, 2022). This is also true for Kyrgyzstan. An analysis of homicide statistics by Anna Kapushenko and Savia Khasanova revealed that “women in Kyrgyzstan are most often killed by their husbands or intimate partners and that femicide is a direct consequence of domestic violence”. In 38% of cases analysed in the study, women were killed by husbands or intimate partners, in 16% by an acquaintance or a friend and in only 11% of cases by complete strangers. They also found that women commit only about 10% of murders and in the majority of cases when women kill, they do so in self-defence (Kapushenko and Khasanova, 2021). On the other hand, statistics on sexual harassment or economic, psychological and reproductive violence may be scattered if at all available for many regions and contexts. Sexual harassment is widespread in workplaces and higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan, a study conducted in 2019 by the Kyrgyz Association of Women Judges found. In most cases, harassment occurred in government agencies (80%) and was committed by the “middle and senior management” (44%) (Ayzada Toma, 2019; Darya Podolskaya, 2021). Personal contacts in the police, victims’ fear of public stigmatization, shame and distrust make officials and politicians immune to remorse and punishment. A striking Twitter post by Elvira Surabaldieva further supports the study findings:

“In the elevator, an unfamiliar employee of the Zhogorku Kenesh wanted to hug me by force. When he learned I was a deputy and his action would be big with consequences, he said he thought I was an ordinary staff member of the White House. And his female colleagues tried to turn it into a joke. This is all you have to know about workplace harassment” (cited in Ayzada Toma, 2019).

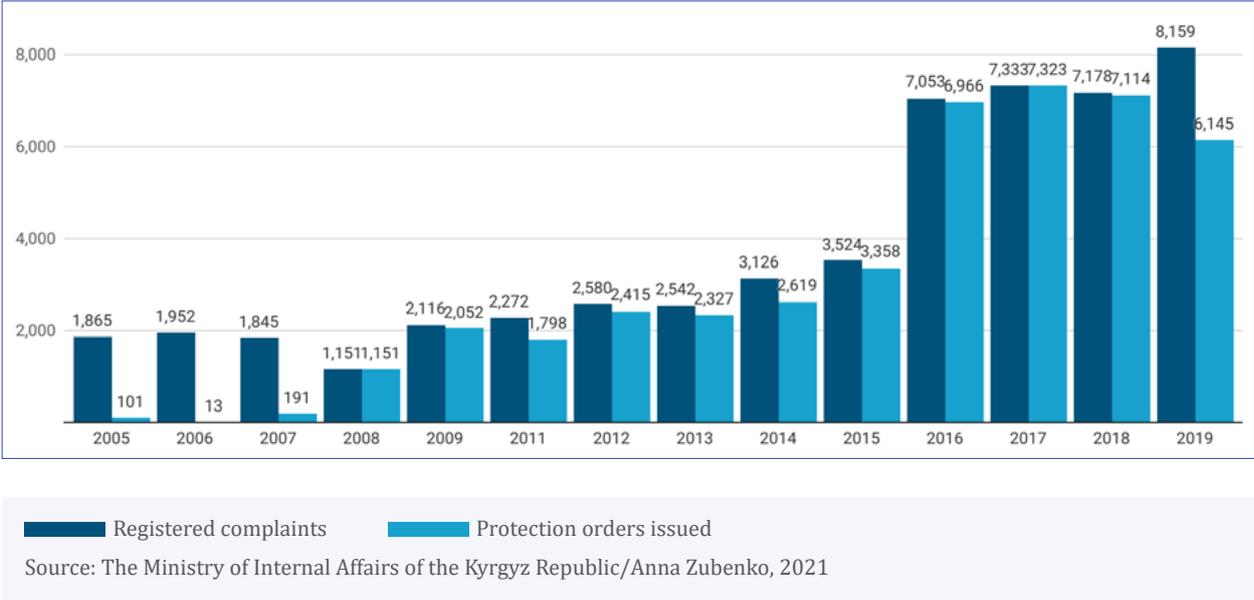
Street harassment is another disturbing daily reality for many women in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries.² There is no definition of either sexual harassment or street harassment in the new Codes effective since January 2022 and there are no criminal penalties even for severe forms of sexual harassment (except for proven rape, which can also fall under probation and result in no real prison time).

The number of crimes against women and girls in Kyrgyzstan has been persistently high. Among the common forms of GBV our respondents listed physical, sexual, reproductive abuse and coercion, early marriages, bride kidnapping, psychological and economic violence, with the latter being one of the most common forms, but difficult to monitor and respond to. Reproductive abuse takes different forms in

² See for example: Time’s Up for Tajik Sex Pests by Mirzonabi Kholiqzod and Farangis Najibullah at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/time-s-up-for-tajik-sex-pests/29491776.html>

Kyrgyzstan among which are selective abortions or women forced to get pregnant and give birth until a boy is born. Although rare and with no statistics available there are still cases when the first child is taken and raised by the husband’s parents as their own or where women are forced to either give away their children to fertility-challenged relatives or bear the child for them. This is a huge stress for the child and mother alike (Muhayokhon Abduraupova, 2022).

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA KR) data in 2018, there were a total of 10 756 crimes against women and girls registered in Kyrgyzstan. Of them, 874 fall under the category of serious and extremely serious crimes, including 213 rape cases. Over 800 cases each year are registered as petty hooliganism, which could potentially include cases of graver crimes. While between 2010 and 2018 there was a steady decrease in the number of women killed - it dropped from 123 in 2010³ to 75 in 2015 and 35 in 2018 - domestic violence has been on the rise (MIA KR, NSC).



The spike of domestic violence cases registered since 2016 as presented above does not necessarily reflect the actual increase in violence but better registration and response to such cases.

Violence against women stems from and is usually justified by cultural, religious and historical traditions, discriminatory attitudes, and gender stereotypes in patriarchal societies. Mass media and public figures play a key role in forming and directing the general discourse and opinion. While independent outlets and activists in Kyrgyzstan aim to mainstream gender equality and zero tolerance to violence, state media often explicitly promotes “traditional” patriarchal norms. For instance, in 2017 a state-owned KTRK TV channel aired the “Kelin” (“Daughter-in-law”) reality show, where contestants had to win the heart and mind of a strict mother-in-law (copying the popular *The Bachelor* show) by performing various tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and milking a cow. Other examples include a 2018 TV series called Akshoola and numerous video ads appearing over the years by different businesses from shops to restaurants and taxi services all romanticizing bride kidnapping, polygamy, physical and psychological abuse of women (Globalvoices, 2017; OSCE, 2019). Thus, violence is viewed as an acceptable and often legitimized form of treatment/punishment of women - ‘a norm’ not only by individual perpetrators, but wider communities, women included. For instance, results

3 This could be explained by the Osh events in 2010 because neither before nor after this year the number was this high.

of the 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in the Kyrgyz Republic showed that 32.8% of female respondents aged 15-49 justified the husband's violence in cases when a wife would not take care of children (23.6%), demonstrated her autonomy by either going out without telling her husband (17.8%) or arguing with him (15.7%), refused to have sex (6.6%) or burned food (6.2%) (MICS, 2015). The result was only slightly different in the 2018 MICS report when 29.9% of women justified their husband's violence over the same reasons (MICS, 2019).

The blame and responsibility for the violence is often placed on victims by abusers, family members, health professionals, police and judges. Women get asked what they did to get beaten and are pressured into not filing complaints over a variety of reasons, from the future of children to public opinion and family finances. Gender stereotypes are shared by many in the law enforcement and criminal justice system, which remains largely male dominated. Although information on police is classified in Kyrgyzstan, the MIA's own available data suggest a considerable drop in the number of women among police officers over the years from 25% in 2011 to a mere 15% in 2017 (OSCE, 2011; Kojobaeva, 2017). This trend runs counter to the best practices of attracting women to ensure better gender-sensitivity among the law enforcement agencies and first responders working with GBV victims.

Women in Kyrgyzstan have lower employment rates than men, receive lower wages across all sectors of the economy, and are more dependent on social assistance and services from the state (UN Women, 2020). So, in many cases when suffering from violence, women simply have nowhere to go and no means to survive - they are financially vulnerable and dependent on their husbands and/or other relatives. This can also explain, at least partially, the reluctance of families to accept women back. Crisis centres provide legal advice free of charge, but further legal support is costly. Also, women need to pay for medical examinations and treatment. Crisis centres' employees mention that in some dire cases they crowdfund money or pay for procedures out of their own pockets. In cases when victims' families are supportive, women tend to press charges and get the needed legal support. But in many instances women are left alone and forced to return and stay with their abusive husbands. According to different sources there are only 14-17 crisis centres in Kyrgyzstan that provide psychological and legal support, and of which only a few also serve as shelters that can admit victims of violence. Before 2021 there was no single state shelter in the country (Roziyev, 2021). These numbers are striking when viewed in light of 3,330,985 women living in Kyrgyzstan (World Bank, 2020). The referral is hampered by the lack of available places, limited funding and resources as well as bureaucratic acrimony (in some cases filing complaints and admission to shelters can be slowed without identity documents and not many women have time or even think of taking them escaping from abusive partners). Individual activists complained that they have little success when referring women to shelters due to their insufficient number to cover the existing level of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and instead had to provide assistance using their own channels and crowdfunding (Altyn Kapalova, 2021).

Much like in Kyrgyzstan, VAWG is very common in the patriarchal Uzbek society, taking forms in physical, psychological, economic, verbal, digital and other types of abuse. "[A]ll types of violence is [sic.] mixed when it comes to domestic violence, which is [the] most common type of violence in the country" (UZ1, 2021). Women mostly suffer at the hands of their husbands. During the first nine months of 2020, 14,744 protection orders were issued to women and girls and 39,343 in 2021. Around 85% of the protection orders were issued against the husbands (82% in 2020 and 87% in 2021 respectively) (Daryo 2020b).

Other forms of abuse such as verbal abuse and street harassment of women and girls are part of everyday life. Numbers are hard to find, if not occasionally. Cabar.Asia's online survey conducted in all

Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, found that 81% of the respondents (95% women and 5% men) experienced harassment in taxis. 62% of them were 18 to 28 years old (Cabar Asia, n.d.).

... hate speech towards women in social networks can be another example. This also doesn't concern only [the] pandemic[s]. In recent years, I witness that more people spread hate, news pages' headlines accuse women in wrongdoing of men, comments discuss women's role in Islam etc. This is emotional abuse, and it is hard to control (UZ1, 2022).

There are no official statistics on VAWG in Uzbekistan (Bugun.uz 2022). Tashkent started addressing gender issues in 2016 following the change of government. The relevant legislation has been adopted from 2018 onwards (see the next chapter). The Ministry of Internal Affairs has been providing some statistics on the cases of VAWG that they register and on protection orders that they issue for women for the past couple of years, both of which can be evidence for the scope of the issue in the country. By December 2021, for example, 35,994 cases of violence towards women were registered. But this number is only the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of cases that are not reported by the victims of VAWG due to traditional (family) values, victim blaming, lack of trust in law-enforcement agencies, etc. A recent survey (Kun.uz, 2021a) among women shows that 42% of them do not report abuse due to the fear of not being able to feed their children alone, while 38% of them are afraid of public stigma. They have reasons for such a concern. The Gender Commission's small survey of 2021 found that in 99% of the cases, respondents' ex-husbands would not visit their children after the divorce. Most of them also try to avoid paying child-support (Zamin, 2021). To note, over 28,200 divorces were registered in the country in 2020 and 39,349 in 2021 (Uzstat, 2021a).

The public attitude towards VAWG, although changing in recent years along with the changes in legislation and growing public awareness campaigns, largely remains indifferent or even justifying. In a recent survey, well over 10% of the respondents maintained that violent behaviour by a husband is justified if a wife provokes him by her behaviour. The survey also shows how VAWG is perceived by the respondents whereupon most of them justify physical violence towards women with the reasons such as the use of alcohol and drugs (23.5%), lack of mutual understanding (22.1%), and financial difficulties (20.6%) (Podrobno.uz, 2021). This attitude mainly stems from the traditional values that are widely practiced in the country. While in Tashkent and other urban centres things have been taking a better shape, where the public is more open to embrace gender equality, in rural areas, especially in the far regions of Uzbekistan, traditions still rule over the law.

... there are some shades of the traditional concept that a woman should stay at home, she shouldn't study, she should get married earlier, [parents should] get rid of her [as] early as possible - get rid of a sense of marrying her off, ... so that she doesn't exist [in the family]. Yes, unfortunately, these traditional concepts still exist. ... We were in such regions of Uzbekistan where women were simply not allowed to go outside without the permission of a man. [Whether] she is sick, ... near death, [doesn't matter] until her husband decides to go with her to, say, the hospital, until he decides "oh, she's sick, yes, she's dying. Let's take her to this [hospital]." Until her husband decides, she has no right to go out of the room, get out or move at all. Even if you knock on their door, she will not answer, she will not come out, that is, her husband is not at home, you understand? (Erkin Eshbaev, 2021)

Disparity between urban and rural areas is due to women being more educated and financially independent in urban areas and with awareness of their rights. In rural areas, not only are women financially dependent on their husbands and have less access to information (including those of their rights, familiarity with channels of protection and help, etc.), but men in rural areas are also more likely to be unemployed, having less sources of income and available jobs, all of which is translated into violence in their behaviour.

Not only the public, but also police officers, judges, mahalla committee members, prosecutors, public university rectors, etc. constantly resort to victim blaming. In U-Report's (n.d.) survey among 8,900 people across the country, 28% percent of the respondents said violence against girls under the age of 18 happened because of the girls' fault, while another 24% reasoned it with girls' physical weakness. In most cases, locals justify violence against women with culture and religion, reinforcing the practice further. Domestic violence is labelled as a "family issue," which no one wants to interfere with.

Gender based discrimination is present in all workplaces. Gender preferences along with gender-based expectations are openly communicated by employees, especially in the private sector.

Women are forced to stay at work till late night, or they have less chances to be hired because of their family duties as a mother. I also experienced this. During the job interview, I was always asked if I can stay after 6 p.m. or am I planning to get married soon. If yes, then the employer gave preference to a man who has the same work experience as me (UZ1, 2022).

Another grey area of GBV that is overlooked is violence in polygamist families. Although prohibited by law, polygamy is practiced widely nationwide. As Islam allows having multiple wives, men establish second or third marriages where women remain legally unprotected, especially in cases of divorce. Upon divorce, second wives can claim nothing except for alimony if they have (a) child(ren). "We have no statistics, but I can judge by cases of increasing number of GBV in polygamist families and the overall discourse in social media about 'second wives'. I suppose this is one of the outcomes of fading social protection and personal insecurities among women," maintains Nazima Davletova, a gender consultant at the Public Foundation for Support and Development of Mass Media and a national consultant on gender and social issues for international organisations in Tashkent and abroad.

Both in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, violence against women is common. In many cases, it happens in families and homes, where women and girls are supposed to feel the safest. The most common types of VAWG include, but not limited to, physical, psychological, economic and sexual abuse and harassment (both in person and online), and gender-based discrimination. Practices such as early (forced) marriage, victim blaming, and justifying abusive behaviour through traditional values and religion further perpetuate GBV, leaving women unprotected.

Gender-related Legislative and Institutional Frameworks in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

For the purposes of this study, it is important to place the efforts and reflections of the main actors on VAWG response measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of existing legislative and institutional frameworks. Hence, this section provides an overview of the national legislation and international agreements of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan establishing the basis for gender equality guarantees and protection of women against violence, as well as a review of state and non-state agencies, institutions and organisations involved in VAWG response.

Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic has one of the most progressive and robust gender-related regulatory and institutional infrastructures in Central Asia. Its 2010 Constitution established that “men and women have equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities for their realization” (MoJ KR). Despite other novelties, these provisions stayed intact when the new Constitution was signed into law by president Japarov on May 5, 2021 (Eurasianet, 2021). The 2008 Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women further aims to achieve “parity status of women and men in all spheres of life of a society”, including political, social, economic, and other activities (MoJ KR). Article 17 of the law also deliberately prohibits wage discrimination for work of equal value on the grounds of gender. However, contrary to established guarantees, the country’s Labour Code still contains restrictive provisions (Articles 218 and 303) impeding the achievement of legal equality in employment for women. The Election Code of the Kyrgyz Republic was amended to introduce a special measure of 30% quota for women in 2007. Despite this provision women’s participation in the decision-making process remains low in the country. Not once has the quota been reached either in the parliament, the government or the local authorities. On the contrary, the number of women in decision-making bodies has been falling. Women make up only 21% of the Jogorku Kenesh currently (19 out of 90) and there is a single woman out of 19 members of the Cabinet of Ministers (Kloop, 2021).

The Kyrgyz Republic has ratified a number of key international conventions promoting gender equality and protection of women, including the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1994, 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. The National Strategy on Gender Equality adopted in 2012 demonstrated the commitments of the government of Kyrgyzstan to achieve equality and better and safer conditions for women and girls. Renewing its commitments in 2021, the government started to work on a new Gender Equality Strategy until 2030 and on its 2021-2023 national plan of action. Supported by the international community, the country has over the years taken action to specifically address the issue of violence against women and girls, creating a comprehensive legal framework. In 2016 the country’s Criminal Code was updated to include penalties, including imprisonment for 3-5 years, for those who “conduct or facilitate religious marriages of children” (Margolis, 2016).

A considerable breakthrough in terms of legal protection was achieved when the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Family Violence was adopted in 2017 replacing the heavily criticized 2003 Law on Social and Legal Protection against Domestic Violence. The law now requires police to register and

respond to every domestic violence report irrespective of whether the complaint was made by the victim or any other person. It also stipulates for issuance of protection orders, a compulsory correction programme for the aggressor (in cases when terms of the protection order were violated) as well as provision of “necessary legal, medical, and psychological assistance, social support, and counselling services to the victims” (Akisheva, 2020). The penal legislation was updated in 2019, including the Criminal Code and the Code of Misdemeanours⁴ had provisions criminalizing offences such as domestic violence, forced marriage and abduction for the purpose of marriage. While the Criminal Code provides for up to ten years imprisonment for organised abduction for the purpose of marriage the crime is placed not under the crimes against the person (like in the case of kidnapping) but under crimes against family relationships and the interests of children, which only reinforces traditional perceptions of women as having no own agency.

Also, the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Family Violence was amended in 2020 to include “provisions to hold relevant law enforcement officials to account for failure to implement or inadequately implementing the law” (HRW, 2021). Despite this progress, many suggest that the new law needs further alignment with practice and existing challenges. Human rights advocates, lawyers, and activists say that protection orders, while supposed to be issued in all cases of reported domestic violence, in reality are fought for by women and crisis centres’ employees:

...we should not demand [the issuance of protection order], the relevant authorities should issue it automatically, but in practice I must push it every time and tell women they should demand from police to give them the protection order and send a copy to the abuser. The protection order is initially issued for three days after which a victim should again file an application for a 30-day extension (Muhayokhon Abduraupova, 2022).

I had a case, when I accompanied my client, who was issued a protection order for three days. And when her partner kept stalking and threatening her, I called the police, and we were chasing the police officer together with my client for a week to extend the protection order. Even though the law, the provision on the protection order explicitly states that: the moment the police receive a message on the violation of protection order terms, a police officer should be sent immediately, fill out a report and extend a protection order as well as refer the perpetrator to a correction programme. In reality, women have to chase police officers to prove that they are in danger and feel unsafe. (Adinay Japaralieva, 2021)

Many refer to the good practice in Uzbekistan where protection orders are issued for 30 days at the time of the first application. Another concern was raised over the actual value and efficiency of protection orders and penalties paid by abusers. Our respondents say that protection orders, while not providing any actual protection, are used to refer abusers to correction programme, to evict the aggressor (court decision is required), and when filing an application for divorce. The provision stating that the abuser should immediately leave the house when receiving the copy of the protection order works the other way around as in many cases property belongs to the man in the family (who is the most common aggressor) so women are pushed to leave the home with children.

⁴ Repealed in accordance with the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic of October 28, 2021, No. 126.

Analysing the reform of the judicial system and the criminalization of domestic violence specifically, Anna Zubenko points among other issues to the fact that fines for committing domestic violence proved to be ineffective and in effect is a counter-productive measure as victims tend to drop the charges as soon as they find out about the amount to be paid. This, she argues, is due to joint family budgets and thus putting additional burden on victims. She further concludes that “de facto prosecution of perpetrators has become more difficult” (Zubenko, 2020). The majority of our practitioner respondents from Kyrgyzstan confirmed this. As chairwoman of Freedom for Eurasia NGO, and a member of Every Woman Treaty Working Group Leila Nazgül Seitbek put it, “[i]t is very difficult to achieve real punishment for the aggressor - most cases fall under administrative responsibility, where the perpetrator can get away with a fine or community service. Most cases don’t even reach the police or court. At the same time, the perpetrator, feeling his impunity, continues domestic violence” (2021).

In 2021 the Kyrgyz government once again amended the Criminal Code and the Code on Criminal Procedure. The Code of Misdemeanours was changed to the Code of Offences. Despite the new Criminal Code introducing a separate article for domestic violence (Article 177) under which offences can be sanctioned by “correctional labour for a term of two months to one year, or by community service of 40-100 hours, or by imprisonment for a term of up to five years,” cases of domestic violence still can be viewed under the Code of Offences with much milder consequences for the aggressor. The new codes also have been criticized by experts as many fear they empower law enforcement bodies, “curtail civil rights, reduce humanization and cause a high risk of corruption.” Under the new Criminal Code, a number of crimes, including rape, abduction with intent to marry, and sexual battery could be considered for parole supervision as an alternative to imprisonment. Additionally, the code considers such crimes as minor offences or misdemeanours and allows perpetrators to avoid criminal responsibility in case of conciliation of the parties (Abdullaeva, 2021). Conciliation of the parties is not a rare occasion in Kyrgyzstan, where women pressured by the perpetrators, their families, and wider communities.

The Law on Prevention and Protection Against Family Violence establishes a list of 17 bodies that constitute the institutional architecture of prevention and protection against family violence, including the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, an authorized state body for coordinating the activities of entities involved in prevention and protection from family violence, determined by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic,⁵ 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, court of aksakals, mass media and other organisations (referring here to many non-state and international organisations operating in the country) within their competence. The first crisis centres were established in Kyrgyzstan (and allegedly Central Asia) in 1997. They organised into an Association of Crisis Centres in 2001 and now include 13 centres according to its official website. The centres offer a variety of services, they operate hotlines, provide counselling services, legal support, consultations by doctors, gynaecologists, and social workers. Few also operate as shelters⁶ providing victims temporary housing and rehabilitation services (acckg.org). Although there are crisis centres that are not part of the Association, we could not find reliable information on how many exactly of them operate in Kyrgyzstan.⁷

5 Currently it is the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic.

6 We could locate 4 during this research, including one state and three private shelters.

7 Different sources name between 14-17 centres in total.

Uzbekistan

At the international level, Uzbekistan is committed to more than 60 treaties on human rights, including gender equality and the protection of women. On a particular note, Tashkent ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action both in 1995 (Akhmedova, 2021).

Domestic legislation ensures that the rights of women are protected, and equality of both genders are provided. However, activists maintain that further improvements are needed (IPHR, 2022). Article 46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan adopted in 1992 (amended in 2003) guarantees equal rights for men and women. Article 141 of the Criminal Code states that “direct or indirect violation or limitation of rights, or according direct or indirect privileges depending on sex” is punishable by law with a fine or correctional labour up to one year, but the same action with violence is punishable with correctional labour from two to three years or arrest up to six months, or imprisonment up to three years. The amendment of the Criminal Code of 2019 considers increased criminal liability for pushing women into suicide.

Family Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (amended in 1998) is also explicit on “equality of the spouses’ personal and property rights; resolution of family issues by mutual consent,” and as such (Family Code n.d.). Yet, Uzbekistan started working with gender-based violence on a national level just prior to the pandemic, especially with regard to domestic violence. In 2018, two presidential decrees were issued — “On measures to improve the system of social rehabilitation and adaptation, as well as the prevention of family-domestic violence” and “The Programme of Practical Measures for the Improvement of Social Rehabilitation and Adaptation, the System of Prevention of Domestic Violence” (Akhmedova, 2021). A year later, the government adopted two laws — “On guarantees of equal rights and opportunities for men and women” which included “the promotion of gender equality” and “On protection of women from harassment and violence” which legally defines sexual, physical, economic, and psychological violence.” (IPHR, 2022) The latter document also introduces protection orders for the victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and harassment.

Domestic legislation, however, has certain shortcomings and gaps. There is no direct definition of domestic violence. Similarly, marital rape (sexual violence in intimate partnership) is not criminalized. This is regardless if the couple is registered as husband and wife or live together (in most cases, following a simple, non-official religious ceremony). “Article 118, part 3b of the Criminal Code punishes the rape of a “close relative”, but it fails to define “close relative” and women who are in unregistered religious marriages are not included and protected” (IPHR, 2022). The 2019 Law on the Protection of Women from Oppression and Violence provides the basis for protection orders for victims of VAWG, but it is for 30 days only with the possibility to prolong it for another month. Gender specialists and activists interviewed within this research expressed their concern that the given period is not sufficient. The law also fails to consider punishing the perpetrator immediately - when the protection order is issued, the perpetrator is not charged with administrative or criminal punishment. In cases in which prescriptions of protection orders are violated, perpetrators can be arrested for 15 days, which is, as practice shows, hard to achieve.

Davletova and Kurolova (2021) note that victims of GBV are not entitled to free legal assistance due to which many women do not proceed with legal actions against the perpetrators. Women are, in many cases, financially dependent on their husbands and *pro bono* practice is not widespread among defence lawyers in the country.

Mechanisms of guaranteeing gender equality and protecting victims of VAWG have been changing along with the national legislation. The Women's Committee was abolished in 2020. It merged with the Institution of Mahalla to form the Ministry for Support of Family and Mahalla. There are 12,000 *mahalla* (neighbourhood) structures across the country that represent the ministry on a local level (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The issue of divorce and marriage is dealt with and by mahallas. To file for a divorce to a court, couples need a statement from a mahalla that confirms the "couple is indeed do not live together or [they] have no common grounds to continue being a family." When courts give a six month reconciliation period for the couple before divorce (this happens very often in practice), mahallas are in charge of supervising the process and issue a statement afterwards. (Davletova and Kurolova, 2021). In case of DV, again, specialists of these mahalla committees are first to respond. They are also responsible to "register vulnerable families and women at risk of violence in order to provide them regular support" (Akhmedova, 2021). According to our interviewees, both in cases of divorce and domestic violence, mahalla committee members try to save the family, sometimes even resorting to victim blaming as the ministry is "responsible for the moral image of the population and its national values" that includes traditional family values (Davletova and Kurolova, 2021).

In 2018, the Committee of Women (abolished in 2020) launched an 1146 hotline service for women subjected to violence. The hotline was supposed to provide psychological, legal and medical support. However, hotlines are hard to reach. In many cases, they are either "down or inaccessible" (Solod, 2019). The hotline was relaunched a couple of times in the following years. Davletova and Kurolova explain this with the fact that state supported hotlines are underfunded and rely on the funding from international organisations for short-term operation. Upon this, victims of DV rely instead on NGO hotlines (2021). A similar situation happened in regard to the mobile application "Najot" (salvation) that was promised to be introduced in 2020 as a response to the increasing number of VAWG in Uzbekistan. The application was reported to be designed as a joint project of the Ministry for the Support of Mahalla and Family and the United Nations Development Program with the support of the Swedish Government. The purpose of the application was to provide timely assistance to the victims of violence by calling for help, searching for rehabilitation and support centres, etc. The application was promised to be available to download soon, but no further news has been heard about it since then (Daryo, 2020b).

VAWG victims face the most difficulties with shelters. 'Nowhere to go' is the biggest reason why women do not leave their abusers. Traditionally, girls and women do not live alone - either with parents or with their husbands (and his family) after marriage. When they divorce, women go back to their parents' home, if the latter are alive and willing to accept their daughter back. But most women find it overwhelming as they and their children feel like a burden for the parents. Parents also encourage, sometimes even force, women to go back to their husbands however abusive the latter are. This is not only because of their additional burden to the parents, but also due to a widespread stigma *uyat* (shame) towards divorcees among the public for lacking *sabr* (patience). Women also do not want to go back to their parents' home because the house is already filled with other family members - according to Uzbek traditions, the youngest son, together with his wife and children, live with the parents. Tashkent established rehabilitation centres and by 2021 there were over 200 of them working across the country. The rehabilitation centres were designed to provide psychological, legal, and medical assistance, as well as shelters to those who are in crisis, on the verge of committing suicide, etc. In 2019, over 21,000 people approached those rehabilitation centres. Of these, 986 were men, 788 were children and 19,784 were women (Gazeta.uz, 2020a). The centres, however, were ineffective especially in terms of providing shelters. The interviewed gender specialists explained this with centres being underfunded and understaffed with professional specialists who could work with GBV victims. Thus,

the government reorganised those rehabilitation centres into 29 “centralized centres.” Davletova and Kurolova (2021) note that “the cooperation between the rehabilitation centres and state authorities is not well established or not effectively functioning, leaving the centres for the GBV-victims weak and almost dysfunctional.”

In Uzbekistan, despite the government initiatives and support, women who face VAWG struggle both within the legal framework and in the institutional mechanisms that are designed to implement those laws and regulations. The legal framework does not have a direct definition (hence criminalization) of domestic violence, does not criminalize spousal rape (sexual violence in partnership), does not guarantee the victims of GBV with free legal assistance, and does not provide immediate prosecution and/or punishment of the abuser. Hotlines and rehabilitation centres are underfunded and not adequately responsive. Law enforcement agencies and mahalla committee members prioritize traditional settings and family values over VAWG victims and their safety.

Covid-19 Response and the Shadow Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

Kyrgyzstan

The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020. The next day, Kyrgyz authorities banned all public events. Despite the immediate proximity to China, Kyrgyzstan reported the first cases only on March 18, 2020. As of February 10, 2022 Kyrgyzstan reported 199,821 confirmed cases with 2,917 deaths (WHO, 2022). Authorities took quick preventive measures to halt the spread of the disease, including the closure of land borders and suspension of all flights to and from China, where the first confirmed COVID-19 case could be traced back to November 2019. Following the lead of other countries, Kyrgyz authorities declared a countrywide state of emergency and imposed a complete lockdown and strict curfew during the night in three major cities of Bishkek, Osh and Jalal-Abad from 25 March to 10 May 2020. Country borders were closed, and international travel restricted.

Travel between cities was also limited. Checkpoints were established in each city to let in only residents with permits. Cafes, restaurants, street eateries, shopping and entertainment centres were closed temporarily. Other immediate response measures included the introduction of mandatory temperature checks, mask wearing, social distancing and quarantine requirements as well as moving work and education to remote format where it was possible. Preschools, schools, and higher education institutions were closed for quarantine. People were forbidden to leave their homes during curfew hours except for essentials, such as visiting medical facilities or purchasing medicines and food.

The World Bank data suggest that the Kyrgyz economy was hit the hardest in Central Asia, with the country’s real GDP dropping by 8.6% (2021). Hence, the government was caught between the need to suppress the growing number of infections and the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 related restrictions. Between March when the first cases were reported and June 2020, the daily number of COVID-19 incidents did not exceed 100 (AUCA COVID-19 Statistics). Quarantine measures helped control the spread of the virus and after June 1, 2020 the government decided to lift most of the

introduced restrictions. This had a dramatic effect on daily COVID-19 incidents. All business activities, including production, sales, entertainment, and tourism were resumed, meaning people rushed to spend time in highly crowded places and premises. July of 2020 was later called *dark July* because of the number of daily cases and deaths registered. The government was heavily criticized by the media and activists for ineffective support mechanisms for business and vulnerable populations, corruption in aid distribution, considerable shortage of hospital beds, personal protective equipment (PPE) and vital medications among other pressing issues.

Almost instantly after the onset of the health crisis the avalanche of reports revealed yet another pandemic - violence against women and girls. Between January and March 2020 alone, 2,319 cases of domestic violence were registered by law enforcement agencies - a 65% rise when compared to the same period of 2019. The majority of victims (95%) were women. Later the MIA reported a total of 8,577 domestic violence cases registered in 2020, of which 8,060 were female and 517 male victims. During the same period more than 9,600 people approached crisis centres, aksakal courts and other specialized institutions over family violence. Yet in 2021, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Interior registered 10,151 cases of domestic violence (24.kg, 2021, 2022).

Among the reasons for rocketing violence cases, our respondents named amplified socio-economic issues, including lost jobs and uncertainty, lack of interaction with relatives and friends, fast spreading anxiety and the fact that many victims found themselves locked in with their abusers with no possibility to escape. 32% of respondents of the Gender Rapid Assessment of COVID-19's impact in Kyrgyzstan by UN Women reported hearing of an increase in domestic violence or experiencing it themselves (UN Women, UNFPA, 2020). Our respondents confirm the results of the rapid assessment. One of them recalled women from Nookat (city in south-western Kyrgyzstan) sharing how during the lockdown they "would hear screams from neighbouring houses a lot more than before the pandemic because women had no opportunity or safe spaces to go to" (Altyn Kapalova, 2021).

Quarantine measures in other countries and specifically Russia pushed many migrants⁸ out of work and back home, where they could not find jobs even prior to the pandemic. This could be another driving factor of increased violence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people who were away for a long time and had to return to be shut in their houses and apartments took their frustration over lost jobs and quarantine measures out on their family members (Altyn Kapalova, 2021). Lockdown and tense family relations and hence domestic violence also took a toll on children. In the first ten days of lockdown seven teenagers aged 12 to 16 committed suicides. Social media was flooded with videos of parents shouting and beating children because of house chores and homework. Authorities responded with providing online psychological support for children and parents (Janybek kyzy, 2021). Besides already functioning hotlines, including 111 - a child helpline operable since 2015 and 112 - single emergency call number, additional hotlines were introduced along with other response measures. Call Centre 1227, 1312 hotline of the Bishkek commandant's office, 118 hotline of the Ministry of Health among others were created to accommodate the growing demand for aid and psychological support. The rapid assessment revealed that women would more often seek psychological support while men usually applied for aid (UN Women, 2020).

8 Although there is no robust data there were more than 700,000 Kyrgyz citizens in April 2019 in Russia (Eraliev, 2021).

Uzbekistan

The government of Uzbekistan applied strict measures to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and kept transparency on the related issues. While there were two major lockdowns across the country in 2020 (March 23 – June 1, 2020; July 10 – August 15, 2020), certain restrictions remained in force throughout the pandemic. As early as by January 20, 2020 Tashkent started a coordinated public information campaign, launching an official website about the COVID-19 pandemic and response measures. From March 1, Uzbekistan introduced international travel controls, obliging those who arrive in the country directly or indirectly from countries where there is a difficult epidemiological situation due to COVID-19 to quarantine for 14 days (Gazeta.uz, 2020c). The first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Uzbekistan on March 15 (Gazeta.uz, 2020d). The next day the country closed its borders for air and auto communications while all educational institutions switched to distance learning. All public events and mass gatherings were cancelled (Gazeta.uz, 2020b). A temporary ban on public transport in Tashkent was introduced on March 21 (Ria Novosti). By March 27 the government implemented lockdown measures in Tashkent, Samarkand, Namangan, and Andijan (GardaWorld, 2020b) and completely suspended transportation between the regions and cities. The public was only allowed to go out to buy food and medicine (this excluded state and public organisations employees performing duties) (IIV | Rasmiy kanal, 2020). The first lockdown was lifted in June only. By then, the country was divided into red, yellow and green zones depending on the level of severity of spread of the COVID-19. And while certain restrictions were lifted in green zones, the same measures were kept in red zones where there were higher rates of the infection (Xinhua, 2020). By the end of June 2020, as the officially confirmed cases increased over to 8,000 with 24 deaths, Tashkent imposed an overnight curfew in the “red” and “yellow” zones of the country, barring people from going out at night (Reuters, 2020). As the COVID-19 cases grew over 10,000, a second nationwide lockdown started on July 10 and was later extended from August 1 to August 15. By that time, the number of officially confirmed cases rose to almost 90,000 with 633 deaths (Putz, 2020; Gardaworld, 2020a).

By June 2020, around 3.8 million people were reported to have received some kind of aid/support from the government either directly or via vouchers. Urban citizens received comparatively more aid. In a survey of the same period, 53% of the respondents informed that they had to modify their expenses. Those who receive remittances from abroad saw 23% of decrease in those remittances (Daryo, 2020b).

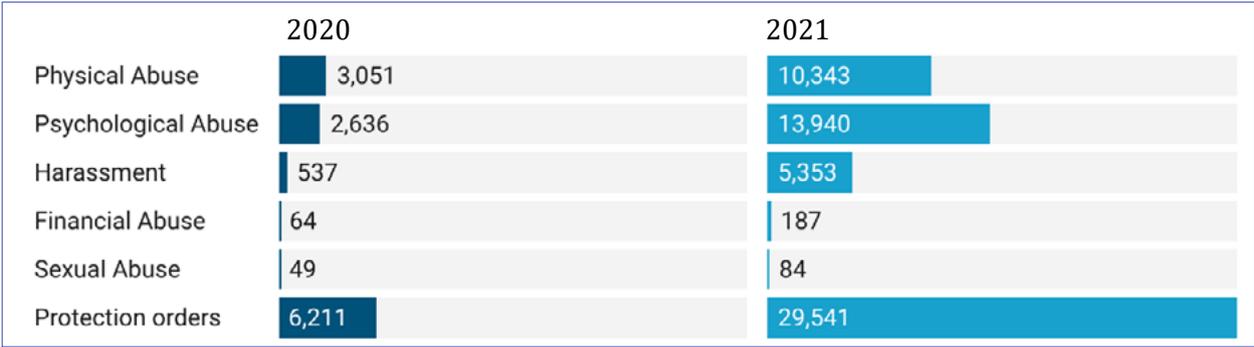
As the COVID-19 pandemic reached Uzbekistan, the country witnessed an increase in GBV, in particular, Domestic Violence (DV).

The pandemic first affected the material and mental well-being of all people. This, in turn, has led to an increase in violence. Family members who had not seen each other for some time before going to work were forced to stay under the same roof for days and months during quarantine. That, in turn, has led to an increase in violence (Feruza Shokirova, 2021).

This can be seen by the increased number of protection orders issued during the pandemic. In 2020, when the protection order was just introduced, 14,774 women and girls were granted thirty-day-protection against their perpetrators. Over 11,000 of them were protected from their husbands, which indicated the prevalence of DV. The most common type of violence was physical (6,836), psychological

(6,281), harassment (1,480), sexual (56), and financial (121) (Abduraimova, 2021). The numbers rose even higher in 2021 – 26,105 protection orders were issued during the first eight months. As per a local, voluntary project Nemolchi.uz (2021), 107 women faced various forms of violence every day in Uzbekistan at least, while nearly 90% of the incidents happened at home. Only 0.2% of the perpetrators faced criminal liability. A protection order is valid for 30 days only where the aggressor is prohibited to approach the victim. In cases of violation, the perpetrator is asked to pay a fine of USD 75 (as of September 2021) or is arrested for 15 days (ACCA, 2021).

**Cases of VAWG registered by MIA
January-September period in 2022 vs. 2021**



Legend: 2020 (dark blue), 2021 (light blue)
Source: Created with Datawrapper

**From whom protection orders were issued
January-September period in 2022 vs. 2021**



Legend: 2020 (dark blue), 2021 (light blue)
Source: Created with Datawrapper

There are two points to take into account while discussing these numbers. First, the numbers do not represent the whole picture – only registered cases. The cases of violence against women and girls where protection orders were not granted are not included. Second, not every victim of GBV knows about or can exercise her/his right to be protected. The big difference in the numbers of issued protection orders could also be explained by lack of public awareness. In 2020, not everyone was aware of it or was familiar with the process.

According to Shirin Rashidova (2021), chairperson of ‘NIHOL’ Initiative’s Development and Supporting Centre,

[t]he problem of domestic violence against women and children in Uzbekistan has become even more aggravated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive quarantine measures imposed by the state. In a situation where the whole family must self-isolate for a long time at home, when there is a significant income loss for many family members, decline of revenue from economic migrants working abroad, when a general atmosphere of concern and even fear is spreading caused by the spread of a new dangerous disease, the number and intensity of family conflicts inevitably leads to an increase in cases of gender-based violence.

As the violence against women increased, so did the number of suicides among them – in 2020 over 900 women killed themselves. The number was 600 just a year ago. The Ministry for Support of Family and Mahalla explains the cause for suicides among women as due to disagreement with their husbands and/or mothers-in-law (Anhor.uz 2021; Akhmedova, 2021).

Most women became financially dependent as they lost their jobs and/or could not get employed. The problem of employment and lack of sustainable income was already severe among women before the pandemic – female-headed households had 17% less income compared to male-headed families. Similarly, 17% of female-headed families reported that they struggle with provision of food for their households, while only 7% of male-headed families had the same problems (Taraqiyot Strategiyasi Markazi, 2021). With loss of jobs and income due to the pandemic, the situation got even worse. In a survey conducted in December 2020, 42% women-headed families.

A recent survey conducted by ACTED (2020) in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan found that around 50-70% of locals (in their survey focus group) are practically unemployed, especially women. In comparison, the official statistics reported 10% unemployment in the same region for 2020 (Uzstat 2021b). The difference is due to the perception where locals do not consider domestic farming as work since this type of work is not officially formalized and does not count towards pension funds. Locals would prefer work at a state enterprise with a permanent income rather than seasonal work at their small piece of land. Women's unemployment rate is found to be higher in the region – there are 40-60% more women unemployed than men. ACTED found that women do not work at private entities due to a very low payment. While one can earn UZS 70,000 – 80,000 (USD 7-8) at *mardikor* bazaar⁹ in a day, private entities offer no more than UZS 500,000 – 800,000 per month (45-80 US dollars). In rural areas, this figure is reported to be lower (ACTED, 2020). A local gender activist and academic, on condition of anonymity, stated that

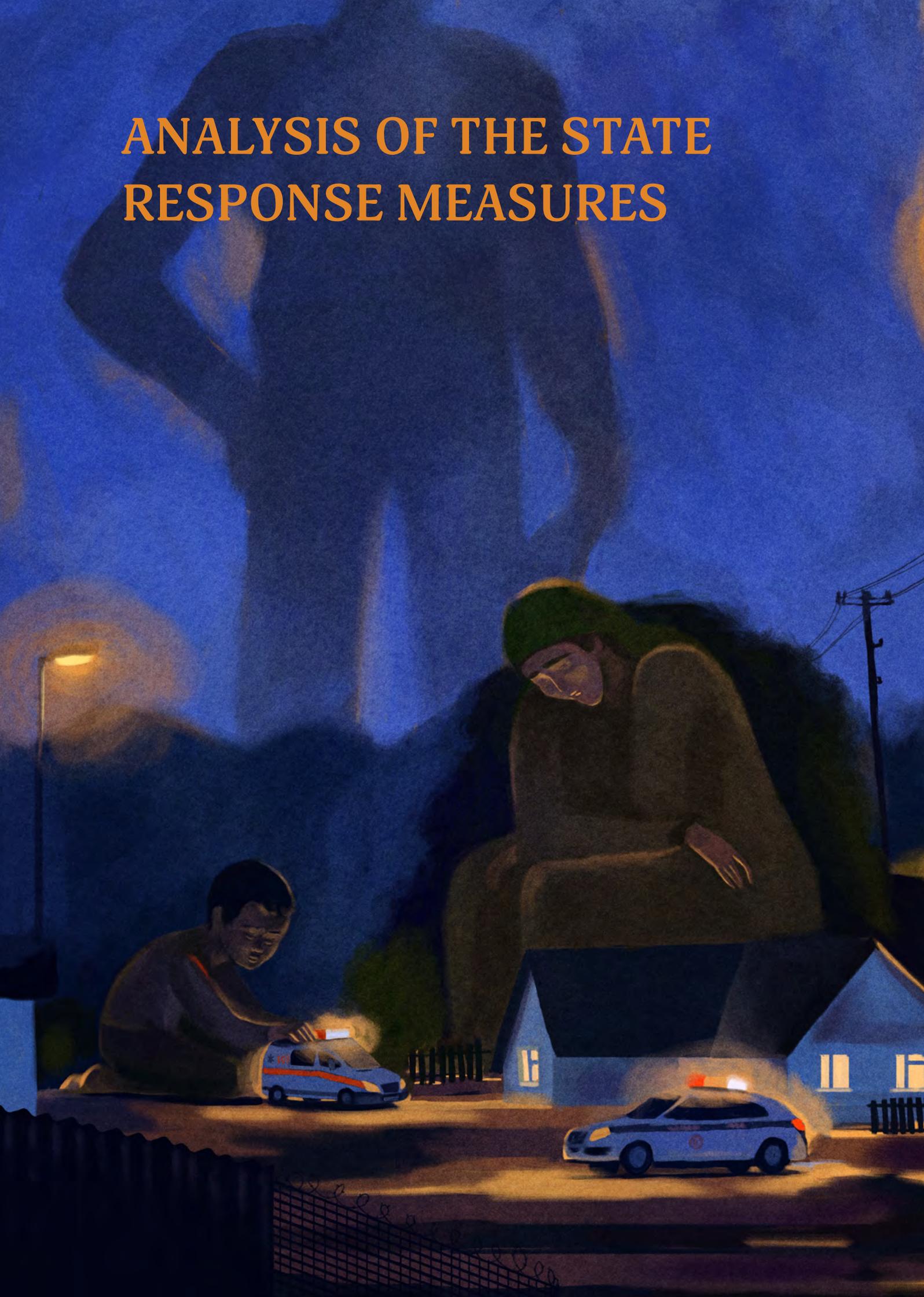
...in the beginning of the lockdown, private sector fired mostly women rather than men. This led to the shortage of family budget, which, in turn, led to pressure by their husbands. ... the private company I worked for fired all women in one day and said that they need only men who can work till late night and who have their own car (because transportation in the city was prohibited in the beginning of lockdown) (UZ1, 2022).

9 Mardikor - a day-laborer; mardikor bazar – a labor-market, where dozens of unemployed people gather to get hired for daily work such as cleaning, farming, building, etc. in other's private estates.

Besides, many women had to leave their jobs as kindergartens were closed due to the pandemic and children had to be taken care of (Dilfuza Kurolova, 2021). In a recent survey, *O'zbekiston fuqarolarini tinglash* (Listening to the citizens of Uzbekistan) found that 43% of women do not seek employment in order to take care of the household, while only 7% of unemployed men resorted to this reason (Taraqqiyot Strategiyasi Markazi 2021).

Although very common, VAWG, in particular DV, saw a significant increase throughout the pandemic in Uzbekistan. While gender stereotypes embedded in traditions played a huge role as usual, other factors such as financial difficulties that occurred as many lost jobs due to the pandemic, lockdown measures that made families stay where aggressors took their stress out on women and children, overall public anxiety over the pandemic, etc. contributed the most.

ANALYSIS OF THE STATE RESPONSE MEASURES



Kyrgyzstan

Amidst the political turbulence, economic and health crisis, Kyrgyzstan was recognized as the most unsafe country for women in Central Asia ranking 97 of 170 countries in the Women Peace and Security Index (WPS Index). Drawing on data from 170 countries, the report reveals the sobering reality of worsened inequalities and exacerbated threats to women's safety globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic (GIWPS, 2021). While confirming existing gender problems in the country, some experts believe such unflattering estimates could be explained by higher transparency and reliability of data when comparing Kyrgyzstan to its neighbouring countries (Valieva, 2021).

Access to the few services available to victims of domestic violence were further complicated by the unfolding health crisis in the country. Medical assistance was difficult to get as most facilities would only admit COVID-19 patients. In some instances, on the contrary, women refused to be examined due to fear of contracting the disease (UN Women, 2020). Police response was also affected due to travel restrictions. Activists and gender experts alike complained that in many instances throughout the pandemic, state agencies and specifically police were irresponsive to the growing number of violence cases. As travel between city sectors and between cities was restricted and crisis centres' employees could not accompany victims to the police stations, many of them faced difficulties filing complaints. Employees of the crisis centres and lawyers would need to call and demand services that should have been provided to victims. When women could not go to the police, they were advised to call police and those would ignore the calls again until approached by lawyers directly. At times this was not enough either, and other connections would need to be employed. Our respondent recalled the representative of a ministry calling on the police to accept the complaint of domestic violence (Muhayokhon Abduraupova, 2022).

One of the respondents shared a story of her colleague trying to escape from an abusive husband and stopped by the police:

[W]hen she was entering town, the traffic policemen asked her to leave her car, because she was on her way from the suburbs to her mother's house. She explained that her husband was an abuser, she could no longer stay in the same house with him, she was going to her mother's. They suggested to leave the car at the checkpoint and walk the rest of the way or be patient with her husband (KG1, 2021).

Such complaints were not rare. Muhayokhon Abduraupova, lawyer and director of the NGO working in the south of the country recalled a similar situation:

I could not go from Aravan to Osh even though I am a lawyer and have a lawyer's ID, which allowed me to pass through the checkpoints. Sometimes they allowed me to go but demanded to leave the car and walk. It is a 20 km walk - what a mockery. (Muhayokhon Abduraupova, 2022)

In Bishkek during the first month of declared emergency and curfew hours, 2,362 people violated the curfew (2,052 men and 310 women). 2,222 reports were drawn up for violations of public order and the state of emergency (AUCA COVID-19 Statistics). In response to a rise in domestic violence cases a member of the Jogorku Kenesh, Gulshat Asylbaeva, during a parliamentary session suggested issuing a decree allowing women exposed to domestic violence to leave their homes in case of danger. Her concern and suggestions were met with silence, and she had to push until getting a confirmation from the MIA representative Pamir Asanov that such a norm was possible (Kurmanbekova, 2020). Such reluctance to protect women is even more remarkable when analysed against the fact that by May 2020 Kyrgyz authorities introduced over 160 normative legal acts to provide a legal framework for the COVID-19 response measures (UN Women, 2020). The government was slow to react both to the considerable shortage of safe spaces for women or hospital beds in the country. While the construction of hospitals started after the peak in July, the first state crisis centre was opened only in February 2021 (Berdiqulov, Buriev, Marinin, 2021; Roziev, 2021).

The Republican Operational Headquarters for the Fight against Coronavirus was established already in January 2020. The government also defined six priority sectors for response measures, including early recovery, education, food security and logistics, health, protection, and the combined water, sanitation, hygiene and non-foods sector. To ensure that women and girls have access to information and services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, the Kyrgyz government partnered with the civil society and international actors under the protection priority sector (MoJ KR, 2020). The Committees on the Prevention of Domestic Violence (CPDV) and mobile groups along with increased number of hotlines were among the already existing good practices the government incorporated well into the COVID-19 and GBV response measures. The CPDV were first introduced in 2010 in the Chuy, Talas, and Issyk-Kul regions and since then proved effective across the country.¹⁰ Emergency GBV mobile groups were created with the support of UNFPA and also included police and crisis centres' employees. While some practitioners acknowledged well-coordinated joint effort of the state, NGOs and IOs in response to the increased violence against women, others were not that convinced:

I do not know. It seems to me that authorities did it under pressure from the NGOs and international organisations. There was some situational decision-making, yes, like with these blockposts for instance. But pandemic had no effect on systemic things (Altyn Kapalova, 2022).

Such resentment might well be valid since in the preceding years and throughout the pandemic the state has been sending mixed signals to civil society and specifically to those working on gender related issues. For instance, the first Feminnale of Contemporary Art exhibition hosted in 2019 by Kyrgyzstan's National Art Museum and centring around pressing gender issues resulted in the resignation of the museum's director, following the backlash and death threats from conservative activists. Contrary to expectations, the Kyrgyz Minister of Culture, Azamat Zhamankulov and members of parliament sided with opponents of the exhibition demanding censorship and investigation "into the more controversial pieces on display" (Mills and Margolis, 2019). In 2020, activists who gathered in Bishkek square to hold a march against gender-based violence on International Women's Day were first brutally attacked by masked men and then unduly detained by the police. Moreover, in June, a

¹⁰ CPDV are flexible informal associations that unite key actors working with victims and perpetrators of violence. CPDV might include local activists, representatives LSGB, DIA and education, courts of elders, health workers, social workers, clerics and representatives of NGO and crisis centres (USAID, 2012).

Bishkek court fined female activists over holding an “unauthorized spontaneous meeting” a decision overruled only by the Kyrgyzstan’s Supreme Court (Putz, 2020). A year later in 2021, authorities tried to interfere by banning all rallies in the centre of Bishkek, but the march took place despite that (24. kg, 2021). Hence, the Kyrgyz authorities continuously fail to protect women and act in line with the national legislation and international human rights standards.

The inconsistencies and lack of continuity in national strategies and action plans is also an issue to consider. The previous National Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic was adopted in 2012 and ended in 2020. While authorities reported the new National Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic until 2030 developed in November 2021, experts of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls visiting Kyrgyzstan in April 2022 reported it as yet being updated (ohchr.org). The official website of the Ministry of Justice also only provides the old strategy. A similar patchwork approach is relevant to funding gender-related programmes and measures. It is particularly difficult to find comprehensive data on how much the state spends on achieving gender equality and protection of women. Kyrgyzstan’s national-level review on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action of 2019 states for instance that apart from funds allocated from the national budget to ministries and agencies responsible for implementing the Law on Prevention and Protection Against Family Violence, an additional KGS 300,000-700,000 was allocated annually to 4 of existing 17 crisis centres, without providing any further detail (kyrgyzstan.un.org). However, our respondents stress that systematic and consistent work of crisis centres and shelters would require the state to allocate funds and space on a permanent basis to reduce external funding dependency (Munara Beknazarova, 2021). “This issue of domestic violence and violence against women and girls is under the focused attention of the Cabinet of Ministers. In 2022, we plan to triple state funding allocation to tackle domestic abuse: within the framework of the state social contracts (SSCs). KGS 25 million will be provided to conduct a broad awareness raising campaign and to support crisis centres” assured Mr. Edil Baisalov, Deputy Chair of the Cabinet of Ministers of the KR during a discussion of proposed amendments to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Prevention and Protection from Family Violence” (UNDP, 2021). Despite the generally affirming and encouraging state rhetoric and legislative efforts on gender issues, be it political participation, economic empowerment or violence against women, implementation still suffers from lack of consistency, political will and ownership in Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan

Despite recent positive actions taken by the state, Uzbekistan also had some shortcomings in addressing GBV, both within legal frameworks and in practice. COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions and temporary measures imposed across the country, such as lockdown and curfews, made those shortcomings even more observable.

Almost all experts and specialists of gender related issues in Uzbekistan interviewed within this project agree that the state has been taking very positive measures to respond to GBV, especially to DV. While state efforts are indeed in place, the positive feedback is also because a couple of years ago, before the change of government in 2016, GBV was not even openly discussed in public. The political will of the new government to address the issue of gender inequality and GBV made the topic popular among the public, activists, and public employees.

Yet, the conducted research suggests the state response to GBV during the pandemic had certain

shortcomings due to the lack of institutional coherence, legislative gaps, insufficient measures taken in implementation of regulations and under qualified specialists that work with victims.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has become more focused on gender issues ... Gender equality has become a national issue. A number of measures are being taken to ensure gender equality and women's rights. But ... [t]here is still a lack of immediate assistance to victims of violence, law enforcement agencies, delay criminal proceedings in such cases, [they] take action only when bloggers pick them up, and after the resonance these events are forgotten (Feruza Shokirova, 2021).

Lack of accommodation for women who face violence remained one of the key issues throughout the pandemic. By then, there were around 165 rehabilitation centres working nationwide under the Women's Committee (Akhmedova, 2021). The centres were designed to provide medical, psychological, social, pedagogical, legal and other assistance, a temporary shelter, and material support such as food, medicine, and clothing to those in difficult situations, including to the victims of DV. By January 2021, 184 centres were reported to be operating, with 60 women and 62 children sheltered across the country (Kun.uz, 2021b). According to Dilfuza Kurolova (2021), many of those rehabilitation centres were closed during the pandemic because they could not accommodate the victims of violence properly due to the lack of funding and qualified specialists. Akhmedova (2021) reports that only ten rehabilitation centres operated during the pandemic.

Taking legal actions against abusers remained challenging for GBV survivors. For one, it was due to traditional family values that are systematically prioritized. When victims reach out to the police, some law enforcement officers, together with representatives of mahalla committees, urge for reconciliation, rather than looking for legal ways to address the issue. If a woman is courageous enough, they insist on legal actions, if not, they keep living with a perpetrator while abuse continues. They might commit suicide or end up being killed (Dilfuza Kurolova, 2021). The same happens when women want to divorce, especially if they have children. When the court does not divorce the couple and gives them a six-month reconciliation period, the "mahalla becomes in charge of supervising this conciliation process." This again leaves women in a vulnerable and economically dependent position with nowhere to go as no property was divided (Davletova and Kurolova, 2021).

The protection order has also been proven to be ineffectively designed and implemented. As mentioned above, the protection order was introduced in 2020. Victims of violence get only 30 days of protection. Activists and specialists maintain that one month is not enough for victims of GBV to take any further action to recover or to start a new life. Women return to their abusers as they have nowhere to go. The rehabilitation centres might shelter them for up to a month or two only. After a month, they go back and the violence takes even more brutal forms as aggressors might decide to take revenge for voicing "the family matter" out (Gulnara Ishankhanova, 2021; Shirin Rashidova, 2021).

The biggest problem with the protection order is that it does not consider charging the perpetrator with administrative or criminal punishment or carrying out correctional programmes with them immediately. Perpetrators, who do not follow the protection order, can be arrested for 15 days, but there are very few who succeed with the arrest. In order to be categorized as a victim of a "heavy" abuse and get the perpetrator arrested, the victim has to have severe injuries that result in them being hospitalized at least for two weeks (Dilfuza Kurolova, 2021). In 2021, during the first eight months, in

482 cases the protection order was prolonged from 30 days to 60, while in 730 cases the order was reissued again (No to violence, 2021). The correctional programme, on the other hand, is carried out only if the aggressor continues the abuse, with or without the protection order being prolonged or reissued. “Most of them [perpetrators] do not understand that everything they do is a criminal offense,” says Shirin Rashidova (2021). The correctional programme is carried out either by mahalla, or by the university if he studies, or at his workplace, if he works. But not all these places have specialists who can work with abusers. “[I]t turns out that formally a correctional programme is being carried out, but in reality – zero effect. ... [W]e need to make sure that, if we have discovered a fact [of violence], we must immediately help the victim, [and] we must work with the aggressor” (Gulnara Ishankhanova, 2021).

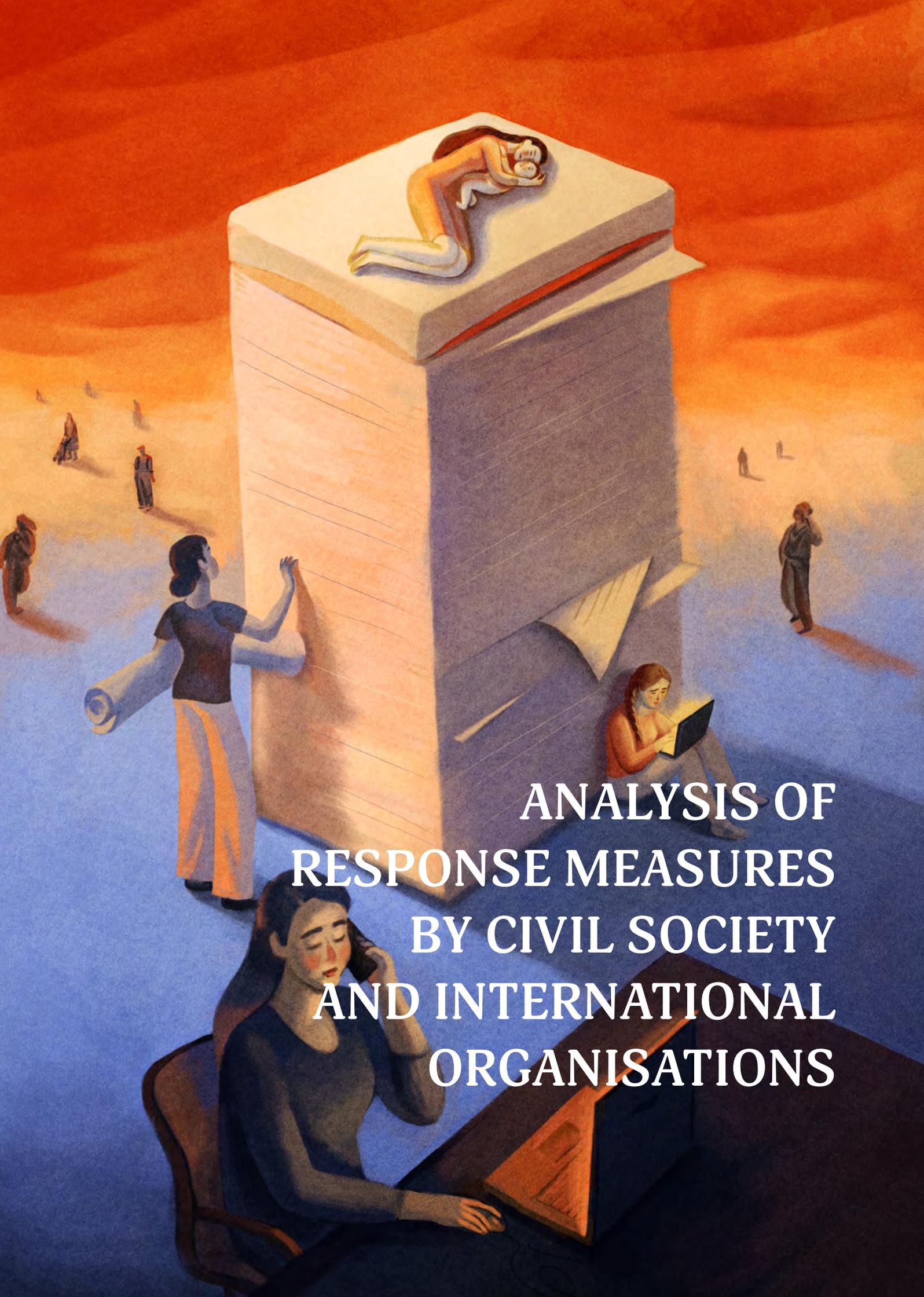
Most women also do not proceed with legal actions against their aggressors simply because it is costly. Victims of violence are not entitled to free legal assistance, as Dilfuza Kurolova explains (2021). Lawyers, while they might provide free legal consultancy, rarely take pro bono cases as there is no incentive for them.

Another failure of the state in protecting GBV victims during the pandemic was due to the underqualified or non-qualified specialists working with GBV related issues. Not all employees at government structures who work with GBV show competence or responsibility in their jobs. “In my opinion, not all state structures involved in the problem of GBV demonstrate a responsible approach for their duties and do not respond to cases of GBV in a timely manner. You have to constantly remind and push them. This is based on our practice,” says Shirin Rashidova (2021), a board chairperson of ‘NIHOL’ Initiative’s Development and Support Centre. Some employees who work at state agencies maintain gender stereotypes. Victim-blaming is as common as attempts to conceal “family matters.” “Among them [state employees], were women, for example, who would say to a victim ‘reconcile with your husband, it is not America here to exercise your rights. It is your fault.’ That is, as we say, inability to work with a victim” (Gulnara Ishankhanova, 2021).

Despite all the discussions above, sexual violence against women and girls has become a source of concern among the public and experts alike. A few years ago, sexual abuse in a family was a taboo topic. As discussed above, the fact that marital rape is not criminalized makes the victims more vulnerable and unprotected. One explanation of commonness of the issue is the purity culture, where men, who worked in Russia and other countries being exposed to more liberal sexual life, marry young, virgin girls and make them engage in what is called non-traditional sexual practices. These practices are perceived demeaning by girls who grew up in a society where sex was a taboo topic and harm them both physically and psychologically. “Even when a wife files a complaint saying her husband systematically rapes her, it is labelled as a private matter and is not examined [by law enforcement officers] as a crime. (...) But if there is a physical injury, if he beats, chokes, cuts or ties her up [against her consent] during a sexual intercourse, then it might be considered [as a crime],” explains Dildora Amirkulova. Often, women do not reveal those details due to the existing cultural gender norms. At the same time, it is hard to prove those cases. Forensic medical examination is conducted only upon the referral from police. If a woman is being sexually abused by her husband, she needs to address the Ministry of Internal Affairs or prophylactic inspectors to get a referral. “Currently we are advocating for medical personnel having a right to issue a referral for a forensic medical examination,” says Dildora Amirkulova. “Medical personnel’s opinion [testimony] should be enough.”

Despite many efforts taken by the government, as VAWG increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, Uzbekistan failed to provide full support and protection to the victims of it. The institutional structure of GBV response was (and still is) incoherent, while the legislation needs amendments. Domestic

violence still is not directly criminalized, and marital rape does not even have a legal definition. Many who work at government institutions such as mahalla, rehabilitation centres, call centres, etc. do not know how to work with victims – they maintain gender stereotypes and need to receive specialized trainings to carry out their responsibility properly. Abusers did not face administrative or criminal liability in most cases (in 2021, for example, only 0.2% of abusers against whom protection orders were issued were charged (Nemolchi.uz, 2021)), which led to repeated cases of VAWG. The state did not have the capacity to provide shelter to those in need either.



ANALYSIS OF
RESPONSE MEASURES
BY CIVIL SOCIETY
AND INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS

Kyrgyzstan

The country's vibrant civil society, caught between heavy donor dependency and an increasingly authoritative government, was also put to test by the COVID-19 and GBV pandemic. The scale of both the health and governance crisis left no choice for different organisations and active citizenry but to mobilize, taking "some key public functions upon themselves." While medical students volunteered to work in the 'red zones', NGOs, active citizens, celebrity and public figures organised to attract attention, and crowdfund money to buy and distribute PPEs, disinfectants, food packages and medical supplies across the country. Financial support was attracted through crowdfunding from citizenry and entrepreneurs, business associations and diaspora residing outside Kyrgyzstan. Various social media platforms and messengers were effectively used to coordinate the efforts and raise awareness. Volunteers also contacted authorities to join forces and assist the government in implementing response measures (Berdiqulov, Buriev, Marinin, 2021). The public support and trust proved to be overwhelmingly high:

The role of grassroots activists, volunteers and NGOs was essential at this point, who simply accumulated this aid and then distributed it. It also became clear that the credibility of NGOs, no matter how much they are scolded, is very high. In other words, people transferred money without a second thought, either through Elsom11 or activists and volunteer groups, and the aid certainly reached those in need (Altyn Kapalova, 2022).

There was, however, an imbalance in aid and support provided geographically and across different groups. The pandemic prevented many organisations and activists from access to GBV victims and survivors. Bishkek did not only report more cases of domestic violence, it also attracted most of the aid due to better volunteers and activists networking and organisation as well as location of crisis centres and offices of international organisations. In some instances, help did not reach the regions where it was most needed because of limited access to information and resources (Altyn Kapalova, 2022).

Due to the emergency rules, crisis centres could not admit victims of violence and switched to providing assistance online and via phone. A month into the emergency rule, the UNiTE movement, which consists of more than 300 organisations, NGOs and individual human rights defenders and experts, sent an appeal to the government and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, accusing the state of inaction and demanding urgent measures to protect GBV victims. They stressed the police and victims alike were not aware of emergency protocols and women had limited options to escape abusive environment, while protection orders would not work when victim and aggressor shared the same space (Akylbekova, 2020). It took the state almost a month to react and update the Code on Criminal Procedure to include a provision under which law enforcement could detain domestic abusers for up to 48 hours (Munara Beknazarova, 2021).

Although, in the long run, moving to an online space helped many NGOs to increase their outreach to the audience (including victims) and to participate in many competence- and network-building events, the immediate pandemic-related restrictions limited their capacity to assist GBV victims in a more

11 Elsom is a mobile wallet and the most popular e-payment system in the Kyrgyz Republic, widely used by activists to crowdfund money.

meaningful way, at least temporarily. At the same time, women on the frontline of both the COVID-19 and VAWG response, including medical personnel, NGO and crisis centres employees, volunteers and activists, suffered from exhaustion and burnout. Crisis centres employees and activists shared that the COVID-19 pandemic and the round-the-clock operations brought to the surface the long present issue of inadequate infrastructure and workforce making professional burnout a high probability. Many mentioned the lack of opportunities and programmes to address the issue.

While a substantial portion of the international assistance centred around food security and medical and vaccine supply, there were some targeted interventions addressing the shadow pandemic of violence against women. To better navigate the response measures, a rapid assessment of the COVID-19 impact on women and vulnerable groups in the Kyrgyz Republic was conducted by UN Women and partner organisations. The OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek provided PPEs to its state partners but largely focused on technical assistance organizing train-the-trainers seminars on a variety of topics from information technologies, basics of psychological support for GBV victims and workshops on “strengthening capacity of government agencies in COVID-19 response by promoting women’s participation” (osce.org). The joint EU-UN Spotlight Initiative allocated USD 200,000 to help the Kyrgyz government and civil society address rocketing cases of GBV. Funds were spent to ensure temporary safe spaces for women in line with COVID-19 prevention and protection measures, create and support mobile emergency GBV groups and hotlines. The initiative also supported awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns led by local activists and organisations (UN, 2020). Creating temporary safe spaces for women was particularly important given the limited number of crisis centres and shelters operating in the country. Our respondents emphasized the efforts and effectiveness of mobile groups in addressing domestic violence during strict quarantine. They also reported different levels of engagement and cooperation between NGOs, state agencies and IOs. Unsurprisingly so, NGOs, grassroots activists and volunteers were faster, more open to cooperate and effective than various government actors due to bureaucracy and rigid structures of the latter. Non-state actors also proved to be more flexible and adjusted either their budgets or services to a new fast-evolving reality. Hence, the state heavily relied on donor funding and local civil society capacity and expertise to plan and implement the COVID-19 and GBV response measures.

Despite this, the state’s approach to civil society and international organisations has been a mixture of opportunism and pressure. When civil society organisations go beyond providing the needed support and demand better accountability with regards to the state’s will to guarantee freedoms and human rights and its capacity to deliver, they are viewed as a threat and treated accordingly. The amended Law on Non-Commercial Organisations and the Law on State Registration of Legal Entities signed by president Japarov in 2021 clearly demonstrates this by adding to existing reporting obligations for civil society organisations. The penalties for failure to comply with the new burdensome rules are high up to forced closure. The new law is also discriminatory in nature as it does not apply to state-affiliated NGOs, “other non-profit organisations, such as religious associations or political parties, or to commercial organisations” (IPHR, 2021). While the bill’s sponsor, Deputy Baktybek Raiymkulov, explains the motives behind it as protecting the “Kyrgyz statehood from interference from other countries, preserve the traditions and culture of the people” opposition politician Klara Sooronkulova adds another. She claims authorities feel threatened by strong and active civil society and try to limit its operations (IWPR, 2021). The major concern of human rights watchdogs and analysts is that the law could be misused to deliberately target open opponents and critics of the state. Just like when parliamentarians approved the law on Manipulating Information, aiming to criminalise “false news” dissemination in 2020, but instead used to persecute medical workers, activists and journalists speaking up about corruption in aid distribution or lack of medical supplies (RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 2021).

Operations of local civil society organisations, including crisis centres and shelters, depend as much on local legislative frameworks as they do on foreign funding. The COVID-19 pandemic has attracted substantial funds to the VAWG issue. However, the change of the country's political environment might lead to decreasing funding options in the mid- and long-term. Our respondents shared their concerns over lack of funding options and complicated application procedures (for small, underfunded organisations). Also, operating on a project-to-project basis means they cannot ensure sustainable provision of services. So, to sustain their operations they are forced to apply for funding in spheres beyond their immediate expertise or focus. While during the pandemic some organisations were overwhelmed with aid to distribute, in other times they struggle to get support and attention of donors, especially those smaller and new projects and organisations working in the regions of the country. Some of our respondents were sceptical about projects implemented by or in cooperation with lead agencies working on gender issues in Kyrgyzstan because they felt their interventions and programmes might benefit from better contextualisation, targeting and sensitivity.

While the criticism towards IOs in general or certain programmatic limitations is legitimate and important to acknowledge and act upon, it should be kept in mind that they have also been operating in a gradually shrinking space. One vivid example to illustrate the shift would be the government-initiated mandate change and presence cuts of the OSCE in Kyrgyzstan under the pretext of "considerable progress of the Kyrgyz Republic on the path of democratic reforms" in 2017 (OSCE Permanent Council Decision No. 1250, 2017). So, when analysing the COVID-19 or GBV response, we come to an implicit division of competencies and labour, where the state provides the necessary infrastructure and enables collective action, international organisations come with budgets, strategy and broader expertise and civil society organisations, activists and volunteers bring in local knowledge and take the burden of action. Such an arrangement, however functional, can be especially fragile in authoritarian countries like Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, to ensure assistance and protection to GBV victims, international organisations and local civil society alike have been forced to navigate their operations carefully in an increasingly hostile environment.

Uzbekistan

Civil society and NGOs were on the frontline to help victims of VAWG, to provide shelter, legal, psychological, medical and financial support. This study suggests that although women NGOs in Uzbekistan benefited from the pandemic related restrictions as they were able to participate in more meetings and trainings organised for civil society representatives and they could reach out to more beneficiaries via different internet platforms, their direct support and assistance to the victims of VAWG was limited.

The only two non-governmental shelters for women in Uzbekistan – "Rahmdillik (translation: Compassion)" in Samarkand and "Oydin Nur (translation: Moonlight)" in Bukhara were not able to accept new victims due to the lockdown measures. Shelters did not have facilities to provide two-week mandatory self-isolation for newcomers (Akhmedova, 2021). "We struggled a lot," says Bibisora Oripova (2021), director of Rahmdillik shelter. "We had to find a new place to quarantine new women who applied [for our shelter]."

Many NGOs started providing legal, psychological, medical and sometimes financial support to women via phone or online platforms. This allowed not only for receiving more requests for help, but local NGOs could also work with victims of VAWG in other districts. Akhmedova's research (2021, 74)

concluded that many NGOs found “consultations provided by phone ineffective as women could not be reached face to face, [victims] could not access shelter or could not be provided with financial help when they needed it.” Nevertheless, it was the only option given the COVID-19 related restrictions. The Initiative’s Development and Support Centre ‘NIHOL’ showed an exceptional commitment. Founded in 2003, the centre provides comprehensive support for citizen initiatives, especially of youth, women and the disabled, in particular the rural population. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, NIHOL together with the Nationwide Movement Yuksalish, initiated a telegram bot and a telegram group “Volunteer Psychologists (during quarantine)” in which expert psychologists provide psychological online consultation to people, especially women who experience GBV and who are in a crisis. “This innovative method of providing psychological assistance to victims of domestic violence (DV) during the pandemic was noted by US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on his Twitter page,” mentions Shirin Rasihdova, a board chairperson of ‘NIHOL’ Initiative’s Development and Support Centre. The centre also developed two temporary projects with the support of the Canadian Foundation for Local Initiatives and the United Nations Population Fund in Uzbekistan. The projects aim to organise a bot and a hotline that provide psychological and legal assistance to women in rural areas of the Tashkent region that experience DV. So far, the bot has received more than 4,000 requests for assistance that deals with DV, personal issues, COVID-19 related anxiety, family problems – problems in communication with children, relationship problems with in-laws, and similar issues.

All representatives of civil society and NGOs interviewed for this research maintained positive feedback on their cooperation with government structures for the past 3-4 years. Shirin Rashidova reflects that their NIHOL centre “actively cooperates with the Tashkent regional hokimiyat, the Department of Internal Affairs of the Tashkent region, and, accordingly, with the district divisions. Since February 2021, the Centre has been a member of the Public Council for Combating Domestic Violence and Supporting Women Survivors of Domestic Violence under the General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Where all members of the Public Council promptly respond to cases of domestic violence. This helps us a lot to provide comprehensive support to women who have experienced domestic violence or who are suicidal.” The Centre became a member of the Women’s NGO Club under the Women’s Committee of Uzbekistan (currently the Ministry for the Support of Mahalla and Family of the Republic of Uzbekistan). With the centre’s initiative and with the support of other NGOs that work with gender related issues, an NGO group was created under the Commission on Gender Equality of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The centre, NIHOL, also stepped up a partnership with the National Commission and the Committee on Women and Gender Equality under the Senate (Shirin Rashidova, 2021).

However, the lack of trust between government agencies and NGOs still exists and this hinders more efficient and sustainable cooperation. “One big problem here is the rotation of people in ministries as it leads to losing social memory. But I think the establishment of the Gender Commission is the start of institutionalization [of it],” says Farzona Khashimova (2022).

Despite this positive cooperation between state agencies and local women NGOs, certain civil initiatives were limited in their activities. In Tashkent, when the pandemic started, businesspeople, religious communities, and volunteers together started delivering food packages to families in need. Soon, the volunteers were not allowed to continue their work. Instead, the government organised a special distribution centre and asked volunteers to bring food packages to the centre to be further delivered. This created additional steps in delivery. People now had to call the centre to express their need for food. “And that’s why many families in need of support ... were cut from that support. They had to call (...) not hours, but days in order to reach [out to the centre]” (Dilfuza Kurolova, 2021).

One of the biggest issues for local NGOs was and still is funding. Local NGOs are underfunded and understaffed. While there are many (international) donors to support their activities, there is room for local NGOs to learn and improve how to apply for funding, how to report on their activities to benefit from further funding, etc. As funding is one of the main challenges, NGOs sometimes neglect their professional specialization and apply for fundings that are designed for causes that fall beyond their capacity and narrow specialization. “They should work on their own specialization. And in order to work on their specialization and strategically expand their capabilities, they must make their own assessment [of their activities], make some kind of action plans, set goals for themselves, and monitor their actions, control their actions, and so on and so forth,” says Farzona Khashimova (2022). These small NGOs and shelters are also not connected to each other. They appeared naturally, as a response to pressuring gender issues in their local communities. They lack coordination and cooperation with each other (Dilfuza Kurolova, 2021).

Similar to local NGOs, IOs have a more positive relationship with government agencies compared to a few years ago. IOs, however, “usually cannot work with separate independent NGOs. At least there should be one government affiliated or one government related NGO organisation,” explains Dilfuza Kurolova (2021). During the pandemic, IOs kept working with local partners – they conducted research analysis, funded projects that aim to educate locals and employees at state agencies on gender issues, worked together with local NGOs to provide legal, psychological, and material support to victims of VAWG, and much more. They also had to adapt to the pandemic-related restrictions (Farzona Khashimova, 2022; Erkin Eshbaev, 2021).

For many local NGOs, COVID-19 related restrictions gave an opportunity to reach out to more victims of VAWG as they adopted providing legal, psychological, and medical support mechanisms via phone or online messengers. Regional NGOs had a chance to attend more meetings and training programmes, especially when those were organised in the capital (earlier it was not always possible due to geographical and/or financial barriers to travel). However, the restrictions negatively affected their activities as they could not directly help the victims. Shelters could not accept newcomers. Yet, there was significant cooperation between local NGOs and government agencies in addressing VAWG nationwide.

Conclusions

“Violence against women and girls is the most widespread human rights violation on earth. By far. Yet, it is not recognized as such and is still being largely shrugged off by many, as something sad but unavoidable” (Leila Nazgül Seiitbek, 2021). This quote adequately sums up the relevance of this research. Although violence against women is not a new issue, the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing GBV patterns. Our analysis shows that while pandemic revealed many blind and weak spots in states’ gender strategies and GBV response they have not changed much in terms of approaches employed post-pandemic. Their actions do not match the rhetoric and haven’t yet transformed into viable policy. The state, including law enforcement and justice systems, continue to view and treat GBV largely as cultural, traditional and private matter, which leads to poor programming as well as inadequate administrative and criminal sanctions.

Building on pre-pandemic approaches, both governments in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan tried to manage the outbreak of violence against women by adapting response measures on the go. However, algorithms poorly functioning during peace and quiet had little chance of working at times of a full-fledged public health crisis. Uzbekistan, as it had only started addressing violence against women and girls since very recently, had many ups and downs in framing the law and regulations as well as setting up implementation mechanisms. Lack of coordinated and centralized work, gaps in the national legislation, poorly funded and facilitated projects (hotlines and shelters), employment of under-qualified specialists, along with gender stereotypes, traditional and religious values widely shared among public officials, prevented the state from fulfilling its obligation to protect women and girls from violence in all respects.

The patchwork of initiatives and lack of consistency in addressing violence against women in Kyrgyzstan impacted the effectiveness of state measures in the early months of the pandemic. The state’s failure to protect victims due to the lack of political will or capacity of state institutions, no or little funding, and traditionalist socio-cultural practices that were only exacerbated during the pandemic left no choice for different organisations but to take the matter into their own hands within their capacity to shelter and aid women and girls in need. The legislative chaos, agency reshuffle and lack of continuity hinders the progress in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan alike. Despite these limitations, the pandemic attracted increased attention to the issue of violence against women and girls and created a momentum for collective action of the government, international organisations and civil society. While COVID-19 is receding into the distance, gender-based violence is not, so actors should translate the experience of emergency response into enhanced legal framework and implementation.

Further potential research might include a special survey to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on increasing occupational burnout among NGO and crisis centre employees as well as taking a closer look at the perspectives of government agencies representatives to better understand their efforts and barriers when addressing gender related issues and specifically gender-based violence. Another topic which goes beyond the present analysis and requires a special attention is the impacts of COVID-19 and gender-based violence on women with disabilities.

Recommendations

To the Governments

- Governments in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan should demonstrate a stronger commitment to ending violence against women and girls, first and foremost, by updating its legislative frameworks and existing protection infrastructure to comply with international human rights standards and best practices. Without states' commitment and enabling environment, local civil society and international organisations interventions are limited in scope and effect;
- Both in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, traditional gender norms and stereotypes which directly infringe women's rights are rife. Governments should elevate public awareness campaigns on GBV, effectively using mass media, involving celebrities and public figures, creating special school curricula, etc. Positive actions should be taken to shift the public discourse and perception of the role of women and girls in society and also gender motivated crimes;
- Evidence-based interventions and awareness raising at government and civil society level require reliable data and statistics. Data is collected and made available by national statistical committees. However, different agencies provide incomplete and scattered data, which negatively affects the impact of planned and implemented programmes and interventions. States should promote unified methodology for collecting and codifying GBV-related data across agencies and ensure that reliable and consistent data and statistics are available to professionals and the wider public via better organised user-friendly platforms;
- Funding gender-related programmes and measures remains insufficient. It is particularly difficult to find comprehensive data on how much the state spends on achieving gender equality and protection of women. Governments should allocate sufficient funds and make budgets available for public scrutiny;
- Both in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, women stay in abusive households because they are poorly informed of the available services and support mechanisms. Governments should raise public awareness on how to seek help from the state and non-state agencies in crisis and emergency situations;
- Many employees working on GBV issues are poorly motivated, unqualified, or underqualified. The state should organise more training for state employees working on GBV issues. They should be educated against gender stereotypes they maintain and should be trained to use gender and trauma-sensitive approaches when working with victims;
- Awareness raising might have little effect while there is a lack of safe spaces to accommodate the victims of GBV. More crisis centres and shelters should be opened specifically in remote areas to provide victims with all necessary services, including medical and psychological support, and legal assistance. Shelters should be properly funded and equipped. VAWG survivors should be able to stay there longer term, determined on case-by-case basis;
- While the work of call centres has been instrumental during the pandemic, they are usually underfunded and understaffed, thus do not operate to their full potential. Governments should invest in call-centres – increase the number of and improve the training of the staff to provide proper assistance to victims;

- Spousal sexual violence is not recognized as a crime unless it involves tangible bodily harm. Not only does it cause physical and psychological harm to women, but it is also a cause for many divorces. The state should criminalize sexual violence in intimate partnership - both in registered and unregistered marriages;
- Tashkent should directly criminalize domestic violence and provide clear legal definitions. The current legislation is lacking, causing ambiguity and limiting victims in their efforts to press legal charges against their abusers;
- In Uzbekistan, victims have to address the law enforcement agencies in cases of GBV to get a referral for a forensic examination. This complicates legal procedures against perpetrators, especially in cases of DV and marital rape. The state should allow medical personnel to issue a referral for a forensic examination;
- However, protection orders, a useful instrument, it should be further backed by administrative and legal penalties. Based on international best practices and experience, legislative changes should be made to prolong the protection order period sufficient for a victim to recover;
- Most aggressors do not face immediate criminal or administrative liability when a protection order is issued against them. There should be correctional work and criminal/administrative liability for the aggressors;
- Both in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, prosecution of abuse is proceeded upon the statement of a victim and the process ceases upon the victim's request. Law enforcement agencies should prosecute perpetrators in cases of DV or any forms of VAWG when there is enough evidence of violence, even when victims drop charges (administrative punishment, such as fines bring additional burden on victims as there is usually a unified family budget);
- The NGO sector has more experience in promoting gender equality among the public, to provide assistance to the victims of VAWG. The state should support and cooperate more with local NGOs and branches of IOs;
- In Uzbekistan, victims of VAWG (especially DV) are not entitled to free legal assistance. Many victims do not proceed with legal actions against their perpetrators due to lack of funding and awareness. The state should entitle victims of VAWG to a free legal consultation and legal aid;
- VAWG victims are oftentimes forced to stay with their abusive partners because divorce procedures are complicated and time consuming. This perpetuates domestic abuse further. The state should establish an easy divorce procedure, especially if a divorce is due to VAWG. Women should not be pressured by different state agency members or by reconciliation periods to stay in an abusive relationship where they and their children might be harmed.

To Civil Society and International Organisations

- There is a tacit competition among local NGOs as they are mostly funded by international organisations. This results in uncoordinated work among them. Local NGOs should establish coordinated work with other NGOs instead of each NGO working separately and seeing others as competitors;
- Due to limited funding options and high competition, NGOs are forced to apply for funding (state and international donors) sometimes beyond their specialisation to sustain their operation. Local NGOs should operate within their specific area of commitment;
- Rural and remote areas should become a special focus for awareness-raising campaigns, police training, technical and financial support provision;
- In the future, more attention should also be paid to diverse needs and interests of women, specifically those who represent ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups when planning and implementing VAWG response and prevention measures;
- Many local NGOs suffer from lack of funding and underqualified employees. Local NGOs and grassroots activists should be provided training on budgeting, funding application, crowdfunding and report writing to help them sustain their operations;
- Access to foreign funding options can be difficult for different reasons in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the funds allocated from the state budget cannot cover the financial needs of organisations working on GBV, also some organisations prefer not to depend on government funding. To make civil society organisations and their operations more sustainable, efficient and accountable to public IOs and NGOs building on COVID-19 experience and lessons learned, these organisations need to focus more on attracting funds from the public via crowdfunding using available platforms and channels of communications;
- Women on the frontline of both the COVID-19 and VAWG response, including medical personnel, NGO and employees of crisis centres, volunteers and activists suffered from burnout. The lessons learned from international experience would be for IOs operating in Central Asia to offer programmes and grants specifically addressing this problem. These might include retreats with elements of learning that employees of crisis centres or individual activists could apply to take a respite from their daily struggle to help victims of VAWG and to recover from stress and exhaustion.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

General:

1. How would you describe the general environment in the country in terms of gender-based violence (legal framework, work of relevant ministries, structures, law enforcement agencies, statistics)?
2. What are the most common forms of GBV in the country?
3. Was the situation in any way different before and during the pandemic?
4. What are, in your opinion, the reasons for the rampant increase of GBV in the country during the pandemic?
5. Along with domestic violence can you think of any other forms of GBV amplified by the pandemic? If yes, what are they?

Group-specific: NGOs

1. Please tell us more about your organisation, its mission and achievements so far? (or kindly refer us to the website/page, where we could get this information)
2. How would you evaluate your organisation's efforts to combat the GBV and assist its victims?
3. What is your usual algorithm?
4. How would you evaluate your organisation's efforts to assist victims of GBV during the pandemic? What was the algorithm? Did you do anything differently?
5. What obstacles, barriers you face in your work?
6. How did the pandemic affect your work? Have you experienced more difficulties than usually?
7. How would you evaluate cooperation with state representatives, ministries, law enforcement, etc?
8. How would you evaluate cooperation with international organisations?
9. What structures are the easiest to work with? Where do you see the areas for improvement?
10. Do you have any statistics on GBV in the country and where do you obtain it from?
11. Do you cooperate with any of the state agencies on that?
12. How do you assess accessibility and reliability of GBV statistics and data?
13. How would you evaluate the state response to the GBV before and during the pandemic? Any specific measures during the COVID-19 pandemic?

14. What are the barriers for the state to perform better in terms of protecting the GBV victims and preventing the GBV in the first place?
15. What steps could be taken to improve it?

-
- Activists/Experts**
1. How would you evaluate the efforts of the state, NGOs and IOs to combat the GBV and assist its victims assist victims of GBV before and during the pandemic?
 2. Do you think they could do anything differently?
 3. What obstacles, barriers do you think NGOs, IOs or state structures face in their work?
 4. How did the pandemic affect their work?
 5. How would you evaluate cooperation between the state (ministries, law enforcement, etc.) and NGOs, IOs?
 6. Where do you see the areas for improvement?
 7. How do you assess accessibility and reliability of GBV statistics and data in KG/UZ?

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- International Organizations**
1. Please tell us more about your organisation, its mission and achievements so far. (or kindly refer us to the website/page, where we could get this information)
 2. How would you evaluate your organisation's efforts to combat the GBV and assist its victims?
 3. What is your usual algorithm?
 4. How would you evaluate your organisation's efforts to assist victims of GBV during the pandemic?
 5. What was the algorithm? Did you do anything differently?
 6. What barriers did you face in your work?
 7. How did the pandemic affect your work? Have you experienced more difficulties than usual?
 8. How would you evaluate cooperation with state representatives, ministries, law enforcement, etc?
 9. What structures are the easiest to work with? Where do you see the areas for improvement?
 10. How would you evaluate cooperation with local NGOs, initiatives? Where do you see the areas for improvement?
 11. Do you have any statistics on GBV in the country and where do you obtain it from?
 12. Which state agencies/NGOs do you cooperate with on statistics?
 13. How do you assess accessibility and reliability of GBV statistics and data?
 14. How would you evaluate the state response to GBV before and during the pandemic?
 15. What are the barriers for the state and NGOs to better perform in terms of protecting GBV victims and preventing GBV in the first place?
 16. What steps can be taken to improve it?

Appendix 2

List of Respondents

Kyrgyzstan

1. Adinay Japaralieva, Psychologist, Chance Crisis Centre, Crisis Centres Association.
2. Altyn Kapalova, Researcher, Writer, Activist.
3. Anna Kapushenko, Chief Editor at Kloop.
4. Asel Azi Tegin, Conflict Analyst.
5. Gulbarchyn Jumabaeva, Gender expert.
6. KG1, Activist.
7. Leila Nazgül Seiitbek, Chairwoman of Freedom for Eurasia NGO, member of Every Woman Treaty Working Group.
8. Muhayokhon Abduraupova, Lawyer, Director of the PF Positive Dialogue.
9. Munara Beknazarova, Gender expert, Director of PF Open line.
10. Nadejda Sharonova, Head of Osh-based Podruga NGO.
11. Rimma Sultanova, Gender expert.
12. Savia Hasanova, Editor at Central Asian Analytical Network.
13. Tatyana Zelenskaya, Political artist, activist.
14. KG2, Anonymous interviewee, Head of NGO and local self-government.

Uzbekistan

1. Bibisora Oripova, Director at Rahmdillik shelter.
2. Dildora Amirkulova, Director of the Centre for Support and Development of Initiative “Umid.”
3. Dilfuza Kurolova, Human Rights lawyer, Global Shapers Tashkent Hub founding curator, Adjunct Professor.
4. Erkin Eshbaev, Project Monitoring and Evaluation officer and Project assistant at DVV International Uzbekistan / Volunteering researcher at UN Women COVID-19 Gender Response tracker.
5. Farzona Khashimova, National Gender Equality Coordinator, ACTED.
6. Feruza Shokirova, Activist, Lecturer at Antalya Bilim University.
7. Gulnara Ishankhanova, Head of legal team, ‘Я – юрист’.
8. Nazima Davletova, Gender consultant at the Public Foundation for Support and Development of Mass Media and a national consultant on gender and social issues for international organisations in Tashkent and abroad.
9. Shirin Rashidova, Board Chairperson, Initiative’s Development and Supporting Centre “NIHOL.”
10. UZ1, Anonymous interviewee, Gender rights expert and a professional in academia.

About the Authors



Svetlana Dzardanova

Svetlana Dzardanova is an Associate at the Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies. Previously, she worked as Programme Manager of the MA Programme in Politics and Security and earlier as Research and Training Coordinator at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. She has written on a broad spectrum of intersecting and regionally focused topics of peace and security, resources, cooperation and international involvement in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Svetlana's current research interests center around gender and gender-related policy design and implementation.



Niginakhon Uralova

Niginakhon Uralova is an adjunct professor at Webster University in Tashkent and teaches political science and sociology related classes. She is a graduate of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, where she studied Politics and Security (Central Asia) and is currently also a master's student at the University of Glasgow in Eurasian studies. Her research interests focus on gender, Islam, and politics in Central Asia. Nigina has a degree in European Studies: Human Rights and Democratization in the Caucasus from Yerevan State University as well.

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Institut fuer Europaeische Politik e. V.
Bundesallee 23
10717 Berlin
info@iep-berlin.de
www.iep-berlin.de

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