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Child Abuse in southern Kyrgyzstan

*- a study on causes, tendencies and
solutions.*



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This study on child abuse in Kyrgyzstan took place in summer 2015 and lasted for three weeks. The researchers were Viktor Romanov and Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy. The goal of the study was to learn more about the problem of child abuse in Kyrgyzstan. The main focus of the study was to find possible solutions to the problem, formulate the future project goal and to find possible partners in Southern Kyrgyzstan with an experience of working in the field of children's rights and child protection. To gain a comprehensive knowledge of child abuse in Kyrgyzstan, my colleague and I met with representatives of six leading non-governmental organizations in Bishkek that have been working with children since their foundation. Later, we went down to Osh, the most populous city in the South of Kyrgyzstan, to meet with teachers of elementary schools and three local non-governmental organizations that work in the field of child abuse.

Meeting with leading non-governmental organizations in Bishkek gave us a clear picture of what has been happening in the country regarding child abuse. Each interviewee was asked a set of questions about their work and organizational structure of NGO, their definition of child abuse and how it differs from international definition, what are the problems that classify as child abuse in Kyrgyzstan and their root causes, possible solutions and the role of teachers as intermediaries between families and institutions responsible for the protection of children. The last two questions are of special importance for our future project. The flowing sections will address each question separately.

Almost all organizations that we met in Bishkek and Osh are part of an association called "Association of NGOs for Promotion of Child's Interests in Kyrgyz Republic." The mission of the association is to improve situation of children in Kyrgyzstan by promoting their rights and interests through increasing the responsibility of the state and civil society in Kyrgyzstan. Association has a substantial impact on decision-making processes relating to children's rights. Also, association enhances cooperation with government agencies, business community, donors, international NGOs and other networks.

Although each organization has a unique approach to the problem of child abuse, they share similar principles and values in their work. Six NGOs that we met in Bishkek mainly work on:

- provision of free legal aid to children;
 - protection of children in residential institutions such as orphanages;
 - protection of children, who are in difficult situation;
 - provision of assistance to working and street children;
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- protection of children from cruel treatment;
- promotion of children's right and their access to education;
- provision of social and economic protection to children, who are in a difficult life situation, including children who are abused and come from poor families;

Majority of NGOs in Bishkek use the same international definition of child abuse in their work, which has five subtypes - physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and negligent treatment, emotional abuse, and exploitation. Some organizations also use criminal and administrative codes to complement their working definition of child abuse. Unfortunately, child abuse is not defined in administrative and criminal codes of the Kyrgyz Republic. An expert from legal clinic "Adilet" mentioned that laws are well written in Kyrgyzstan, but the implementation of these laws is poor. Moreover, it would be hard to give a definition to child abuse in administrative and criminal codes since corporal punishment for children is widely perceived as a norm, or to quote an expert from legal clinic Adilet "people think it is ok to slightly punish children", but the problem is that nobody knows what is "slightly". Criminal law only mentions "slight danger to health" and "substantial danger to health". It does not give any specificities. Moreover, state structures that are responsible for the protection of children, such as guardianship and custody bodies and inspectorates for minors' affaires are in constant conflict with each other due to their overlapping responsibilities and their biggest problem is lack of human resources and extreme workload per person. Despite evident inconsistencies in law implementation processes, non-governmental organizations managed to consolidate their efforts to combat child abuse in Kyrgyzstan, cooperate with policy-maker and influence their decision-making processes.

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Cases of sexual abuse of children in 2014 caused massive public outrage. The atrocity of these cases activated civil society sector, state and public to take preventive measures to stop child abuse in Kyrgyzstan, where physical, physiological, and sexual abuses are the most common. There is no exact statistical data on child abuse in Kyrgyzstan, but each structure has its own statistics. Ministry of Interior has published statistics on child abuse from 2014 and it turned out that only 916 cases were opened against abusers, while UNICEF states that more than half of children are abused in some way. Emotional abuse and neglect is never considered to be "real" abuse in Kyrgyzstan, but these types of child abuse have long-lasting and traumatic consequences on children's lives.

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The reasons of frequent occurrence of child abuse cases in recent years are:

- social and economic instability of families;
- mentality and culture of people;
- uninformed citizens;
- migration;
- inability of the government to support children from disadvantaged families;

Thus, children are abused by their family members (close and distant) in most of the cases.

It turned out that majority of our interviews believe that it is vital to conduct awareness-raising activities and inform the public about child abuse, its forms and consequences. NGOs have organized awareness activities such as creation and distribution of materials - brochures, books and posters, creation of short films and their broadcast on national TV channels, radio and TV talks etc. The association actively participated in the development of legal order that was issued by the state to combat child abuse. Unfortunately, the government was not able to implement all points of the order. The "uninformed citizens" cause turned to be true when we met with teachers in Osh.

The reason why we focused on teachers is that we believe that teachers can play a crucial role in combating child abuse. It is important to bear in mind that there is almost a universal agreement that child abuse cases are families' business and nobody has the right to interfere in families. In exceptional cases, cases of sexual and physical abuse are reported to relevant state structures, but many of these cases never make to courts, because of the pressure put on reporters by other family members.

... parents should to beat up their kids if they want to "wake up" good qualities and suppress bad qualities in their

Any kind of child abuse leaves traces on child's behavior. Ideally, schools are obliged to have an effective working mechanism that is able to identify children, who are abused, and provide necessary services to children.

All experts from NGOs nodded in agreement when we asked whether a teacher can play the role of an "intermediary" between families and official institutions that are responsible for the well-being of children. Children spend a lot of time at schools, their "second home". Eventually, a child, who is abused at home, will show signs, and it is vital that a teacher is able to identify these signs and take immediate actions. Unfortunately, this is not the case in practice.

When we met with teachers for the first time to talk about child

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abuse, we confronted with their perception of us, people, who work in non-governmental organizations (and in Sweden), as spies. The problem was quickly solved and we proceeded to interview questions that aimed to understand how teachers perceive the problem of child abuse, what problems are identified as child abuse in Kyrgyzstan and their root causes. Later we asked a set of questions to evaluate teachers' experience of handling child abuse cases, and how well they know state structures that are responsible for the well-being of children. In the end, we asked our interviewees what they have heard about recently adopted laws and legal orders that aim to combat child abuse in Kyrgyzstan.

The prevailing number of teachers is aware of definition of physical abuse only, only some interviewees knew about emotional abuse. Other three subtypes of abuse were never mentioned. Most of the teachers agree that there is nothing wrong in physically punishing children as far as children start to behave well. The justification of corporal punishment is lies in the claim that children are not the same as they used to be in the past. They are uncontrollable, arrogant, and disrespectful now. A teacher from an Uzbek school was firm in her views that parents should *beat up their kids if they want to "wake up" good qualities and suppress bad qualities in their children*. At the same time teachers say that they cannot physically punish their students because they all have cell phones with cameras and they all know that they can complain on teachers to their parents and later to school administration. In such cases, teachers tend to ignore "children-complainants" and do only what is necessary to give them knowledge. Nevertheless, teachers themselves, sometimes unintentionally, abuse school children in several ways, be it psychological and physical abuse, or neglect.

Reflecting on their experience of working in schools, many teachers claim that they never faced cases of child abuse. Several interviewees said they had children in their classes, who showed signs of abuse such as psychological retardation, bruises and unexplained hatred towards other kids. There have been cases of suicide and attempts of suicide. Also, another case was mentioned about a child, who was stabbed by her aunt, while child's parents were in Russia. Several teachers mentioned that cases of child abuse are not discussed. Instead, they are hidden and are usually hushed down by the society.

Migration was mentioned many times as one of the reasons why children are abused in their families. According to our interviewees in Osh, economic and social problems are the main causes of child abuse. Teachers have a slight understanding of the consequences of child abuse. To illustrate:

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"Children are our future and we have to take a good care of them. Abused children will grow up and will not be able to demand their rights. Abused children will become cruel grown-ups. Sometimes abused children become gay."

It is a well-known fact that people do not report child abuse cases simply due to their careless attitude. In many cases people do not pay any attention on what is happening outside of their houses. Only when a child is brutally abused, one might call the police. It depends on the situation, "if the kid is beaten up for good purposes (making him study), then it should not be reported." At the same time, many teachers that we interviewed agree that something needs to be done if a child is abused. When asked about their actions in case they detect that child is abused, most teachers replied that they would try to talk to a child and her or his parents. Some teachers reflected on their own experience of handling cases of abuse and it turned out that each case was handled individually by teachers, without any referral to guidelines, internal rules and state laws. Some teachers would not advise to talk to a frightened child in the first place, since she or he would probably not tell the truth. Instead, some teachers believe that it is necessary to report cases of child abuse to social pedagogue. In most of the cases, when teachers encounter vivid cases of child abuse, they tend to handle it by themselves, without approaching relevant authorities within and outside of the school system.

... if the kid is beaten up for good purposes (making him study), then it should not be reported

The prevailing number of interviewees found it difficult to answer what state structure is responsible for handing child abuse cases. Social pedagogue and police officer (uchastkoyi) was mentioned several times. Teachers are unaware of any kind of state structure or an NGO that works with children. To quote several teachers "we don't know where to call." More than half of interviewees said they would call an NGO, rather than a state structure, that works with child abuse cases, simply because they trust the former. It is also worth to mention that social pedagogue is a newly introduced unit at schools in Kyrgyzstan. Their main responsibility is to identify cases of child abuse in families and take necessary measures to protect children from violence. They also have to be intermediaries between children, parents and state structures that are responsible for the well-being of children. In theory social pedagogues have to be highly-qualified to fulfill their daily responsibilities. Unfortunately, this is not the case in practice. Responsibilities of social pedagogues are given to teachers, who do not have an understanding of their new responsibilities. Plus, they are given additional workload. Child abuse handling mechanism is poorly developed and sometimes does not exist in school due to several reasons:

... we don't know where to call

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- lack of awareness of teachers about the problem of child abuse;
- lack of motivation to report child abuse cases;
- lack of information about relevant state structures and step by step guidance;
- social pedagogues lack necessary qualifications;

Teachers were unaware of any kind of laws and legal orders that were adopted to combat child abuse.

The reason why we met with non-governmental organizations and teachers to talk about child abuse is to understand how the problem is seen from different perspectives. The difference is stark. Non-governmental organizations are fully aware of the problem, its tendencies, and the consequences it has for the society. On the other hand, teachers are not fully aware of the problem of child abuse. Moreover, teachers are completely unaware of child abuse handling mechanism and relevant state agencies and structures.

We also visited three non-governmental organizations in Osh that are part of the association. All organizations are well established in their sphere. Our choice for collaboration fell on "Family to Every Child" organization. It was founded by former local members of an international organization called "Every Child" that terminated its work in Kyrgyzstan in 2008. The mission of the organization is to protect and promote children's rights. What is also important in the context of southern Kyrgyzstan, "Family to Every Child" has close cooperation with state structures. They have conducted various trainings on the topic of children's rights and child protection for members of local state structures. They also started working with social pedagogues and territorial councils. Since 2009 "Family to Every Child" managed to open eleven centers - mainly centers for children with disabilities, rehabilitation centers and centers for children, who were abused, all over the Southern Kyrgyzstan.

To conclude, the feasibility study on child abuse in Kyrgyzstan was carried out in a productive manner. We managed to investigate the problem from different perspectives and got a clear picture of what has been done and what needs to be done in Kyrgyzstan to combat child abuse. The majority of activities that aim to combat child abuse are carried out in Northern part of the country, while Southern Kyrgyzstan remains largely neglected. To establish collaboration with local organizations and work on public awareness raising activities is the first step to combat child abuse in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

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Central Asia Solidary Groups
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