

Exciting journey to outlaw domestic violence in Uganda: CEDOVIP's experience

In 2009, the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) enjoyed a great victory when our efforts led to the passage of the Domestic Violence Bill into an Act of parliament in Uganda. This Act is the first-ever in Uganda that acknowledges domestic violence as a legal offence and provides options for the survivors. We applaud everyone who was involved in its writing and passage and we see it as a major step forward – but there is still a long way to go.

The path to passing the bill was not always easy, but we had very committed partners every step of the way. It all began in 2000, when CEDOVIP in partnership with Raising Voices launched an innovative approach to mobilizing local communities in Kampala, which brought about awareness regarding violence against women. We documented our successes and shared them with the advocacy community in Uganda. Our hard work paid off, when in 2006, the Uganda Law Reform Commission decided to do a study of domestic violence and requested our support. As a result of this collaboration, we were brought to the table to be part of the Domestic Violence Bill taskforce and were able to influence the drafting of the bill to ensure that it was sensitive to the gender dynamics of domestic violence.

In order to make the bill a true success, we knew we needed to involve advocacy groups with a variety of backgrounds and expertise. We formed a coalition of organizations who were promoting women's rights, and we banded together to advocate for the passage and implementation of the Domestic Violence Bill. This process was hard work, and required quarterly meetings to keep everyone on the same page and to define very definite actions for each of the levels in the policy making process. Aligning the advocacy groups proved to be a key strategy because we were able to engage diverse communities on a common petition. Having the strong presence of community members across various parts of the country represented significant public will for the bill. We encouraged the communities to present petitions in support of a law on domestic violence to their area members of parliament. We ensured that there was media publicity for such actions. This enabled the country to hear the public call for the law and members of parliament affirming their position to pass the bill.

Additionally, through the coalition work, we engaged religious leaders in advocating for solutions to violence against women. In particular, we cultivated the Catholic Archbishop to be a powerful spokesperson on behalf of the issues. He even launched a domestic violence campaign of his church in a supportive CEDOVIP SASA! community in Nakulabye parish. Due to this work, when the domestic violence bill was tabled in parliament, well-known Catholic leaders and the public, remained quiet, thus no formidable resistance to the bill.

In addition to our work with the ULRC, religious leaders, and advocacy groups, we also worked hard to develop leadership on this issue in the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, and among the Uganda Women Parliamentarians Association. Additionally, we did targeted outreach to the male parliamentarians during informal meetings at the parliamentary building and canteen in order to avoid misinformation or stigmas affecting the outcome of the bill.

Not only did we work with Parliament closely, we had to engage the Parliamentary Press Association (PPA) so that they would present the bill in a favorable light to the public. In the past, we found that the press tended to perpetuate stereotypes about bills that promoted women's rights within the private spheres. To preempt that from happening, we trained the PPA on the nuts and bolts of domestic violence issues, as well as engaged them in discussions about objective reporting. As a result, they published and aired favorable pieces when the bill was tabled, and we continue to have strong relationships with many of the journalists today.

Throughout the process, we focused on running a positive and solutions-oriented campaign for the Domestic Violence Bill. Instead of using tactics that had failed in the past, such as shaming and blaming the policy makers and government, we worked with all parties to see the inclusive benefits of overcoming violence against women in Uganda. For even the smallest of victories, we held press conferences affirming progress and applauding whichever ministry or individual had taken action. We believe that the overall success of the campaign directly resulted from our solutions-oriented approach.

In the end, we were rewarded for our efforts when in 2009 the Uganda Parliament voted to pass the Domestic Violence Bill into an Act and more importantly it was assented to by the President of Uganda in 2010. Moving forward, our work will focus on the Act's implementation in government policies and procedures, as well as educating local institutions and community members on how to use the law. Down the road, we also need to pass more bills that address gender-based violence, including the Marriage and Divorce Bill, and bills covering sex trafficking. For now, we are celebrating our successes, and pushing forward as boldly as ever.

Lessons learnt: advocacy for gender sensitive laws calls for commitment and consistence on the part of the lead civil society organization, strategic alliances with: policy makers, the media, religious institutions and communities. Present benefits of the law as opposed to making the law as punitive; use more of persuasive language as opposed to blaming and lamenting about the policy makers. Suggesting practical recommendations or alternatives for areas that seem weak while giving your rationale is beneficial avails the necessary information to the policy makers, the media and the public. Acknowledge and recognize any small but significant gains along the way to keep you motivated on the long tedious journey of protecting women's rights through national legislation.

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