

# Working with families to prevent violence against women and girls in Tajikistan

EVIDENCE BRIEF

## Summary

**Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is widespread in Tajikistan, with significant impacts on women, their families and the wider society. Zindagii Shoista ('Living with Dignity') is the first combined social and economic intervention tailored to the Tajik context developed to combat VAWG. It is innovative in that it addresses the overlapping issues of poverty, patriarchy and violence through a family focus.**

Our results show that the intervention successfully reduced the number of young women experiencing violence from both their husbands and in-laws by 50%. The mental health, livelihoods and food security of participating families also significantly improved.

This brief summarises the key elements and findings of the intervention and accompanying research, ultimately demonstrating that prevention of VAWG is possible in Tajikistan. This intervention can be tailored to suit other similar contexts.

## Background

National level data show that half of all women in Tajikistan have experienced violence from their husbands or in-laws. Baseline research conducted in 2016 to inform the Zindagii Shoista intervention revealed that around 60% of women had experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse in the 12 months prior to data collection. Additionally, high rates of depression and suicidality among women and men were reported.

The research found that the group most affected by various forms of gender-based violence was young women aged 18–24, who all reported having experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the research being conducted. Young married women are particularly vulnerable both to intimate partner violence (IPV) and violence from in-laws.



Woman making national Tajik dress, an example of an income generating activity. Photo: Aziz Sattori

## Key messages

1. VAWG in Tajikistan is pervasive and driven by multiple factors including patriarchal social norms, poverty and alcohol abuse.
2. Despite this, VAWG in Tajikistan is preventable – by combining social norm change and economic empowerment, Zindagii Shoista has led to a 50% reduction in the number of women experiencing violence.
3. The proven effectiveness of the Zindagii Shoista family-centred model makes it suitable for use within Tajikistan and its neighbouring states characterised by strong extended families, if appropriately tailored to local settings.
4. Addressing VAWG requires collaboration among and between practitioners, researchers, government representatives and donors.
5. The success of this model in the poor, rural Tajik context suggests that to prevent VAWG patriarchy must be tackled alongside poverty.



# The intervention

In response to high levels of domestic violence in Tajikistan, International Alert and its partners Action, Development and Prosperity (ATO), Cesvi, Farodis and Women of the Orient worked with the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) to develop a comprehensive approach to prevent VAWG. The approach sought to address the reality of young women marrying into strong extended families and facing violence from their husbands and/or in-laws.

To develop an integrated behaviour change and economic empowerment approach with a family-level focus, the South African version of Alice Wellbourn's 'Stepping Stones' intervention, which is a gender transformative behaviour change programme, was adapted. Combining this with the innovative livelihoods intervention 'Creating Futures', the final intervention was customised to the local setting based on baseline research findings.



## *How?*

First, social empowerment sessions were conducted with the aims of encouraging reflection on values and attitudes towards gender and relationships within the family, building knowledge on health issues, sharpening communication skills and raising awareness of VAWG. These were run over the course of 10 weeks on a session-per-week basis, comprising seven sessions involving separate gender and age groups (young men, young women, older men and older women) and three meetings with all peer groups.

Following this, economic empowerment activities were conducted to build an understanding of women's contribution to household economics; strengthen financial management skills in households through a better understanding of budgeting, spending and saving; and boost household economies by assisting families in developing their own income generating activities (IGAs), such as cattle breeding and beekeeping. These 3-hour sessions were conducted over the course of another 10 weeks and were divided into two parts: four sessions on gender, work and livelihood strengthening, followed by six sessions on business development and IGAs. These latter sessions targeted the young married woman and another member of the family who would help run the IGA, with this focus on the attendance of young married women essential for ensuring the economic empowerment of women.



## *Where?*

Zindagii Shoista was implemented in four rural villages in Tajikistan: two in the northern district of Penjikent and two in the southern district of Jomi.



## *Who?*

The intervention targeted 80 families with a total of around 270 members, comprising 60% of women and 40% of men. The intervention and its accompanying research were conducted over 18 months with each person interviewed three times.



## *What?*

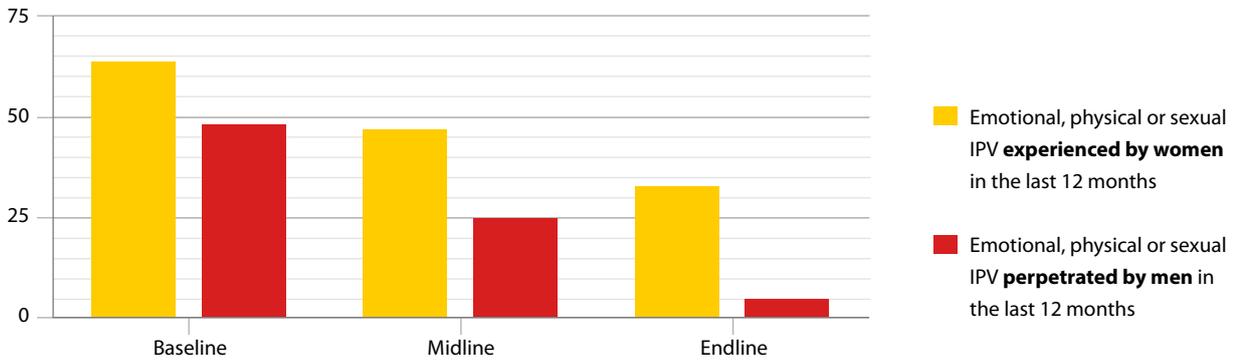
The following outcomes were measured:

- Prevalence of and attitudes towards VAWG
- Experiences and perpetration of violence
- Gender attitudes and family dynamics, including relations between couples and in-laws
- Physical and mental health
- Financial situations of target families

# Findings

This integrated approach proved to be effective in reducing domestic violence and IPV in rural Tajikistan. The percentage of women who reported experiencing violence reduced from 64% to 33%, and the percentage of men who reported perpetrating violence decreased from 48% to 5%.

**Figure 1: Reduction in the perpetration and experience of IPV (%)**



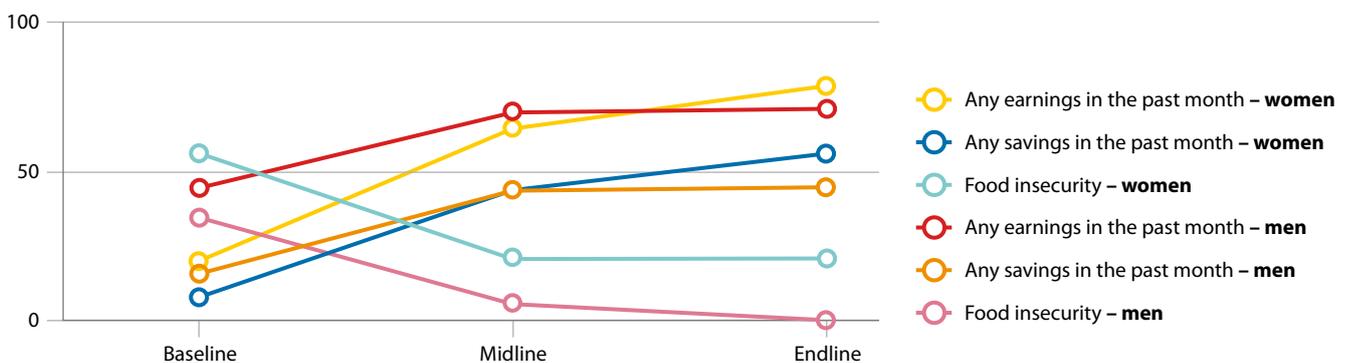
There was also a significant decrease in depression rates among participants, which nearly halved in women and more than halved in men. Furthermore, suicidality was significantly reduced (from 20% to 9% of women and from 10% to 0% of men). Women’s and men’s gender attitudes also became more equitable, and perceived social norms on gender and violence in the community improved.

*“I wish this programme existed when I used to live with my mother-in-law. Maybe then my husband and I would not have divorced.”*

**Woman participant, 33 years old**

The findings also pointed to positive changes in the economic situation of the target families. Significant increases were seen in the past month’s earnings and savings, and overall savings, both among men and women. Women’s earnings increased 4-fold and there was a 10-fold increase in the proportion of women with any savings. In addition, levels of food insecurity decreased. Specifically, the proportion of women with severe food insecurity reduced from 56% to 19%, and the proportion of men from 33% to 0%.

**Figure 2: Earnings, savings and food security (%)**



## Conclusion

VAWG remains a widespread and critical concern in Tajikistan with long-term damaging consequences for individuals and the wider Tajik society. The results of the Zindagii Shoista intervention are optimistic, and have laid the groundwork for increasing VAWG prevention efforts in Tajikistan and the broader Central Asia region.

### *Implications*

The findings support global evidence<sup>1</sup> that gender transformative social change interventions combined with economic empowerment interventions can have a significant impact on reducing VAWG. Such an approach can also have positive impacts on people's emotional wellbeing, family dynamics and economic security.

Escalating prevention efforts requires investment from and collaboration between government, donors and civil society. The Zindagii Shoista intervention inspires confidence that with investment of resources and appropriate partnerships, VAWG and related social problems in Tajikistan can be solved.

### *Recommendations*

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the intervention is rolled out to more families in the districts targeted in this research, to other areas of Tajikistan and to other Central Asian countries.

Further research to continue to build knowledge on the intervention and its effects would also be invaluable.

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## Programme team

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1. R. Jewkes et al., Stepping Stones and Creating Futures intervention: Shortened interrupted time series evaluation of a behavioural and structural health promotion and violence prevention intervention for young people in informal settlements in Durban, South Africa, *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 2014, p.1325

