BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: THE HIDDEN STORY OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN RUSSIA
REPORT BRIEF
Background

In Russia, as in many parts of the world, sexual abuse is surrounded by silence, stigma, fear and fatalism. Those affected by sexual abuse rarely report it for fear of consequences and lack of confidence that action will be taken. Often there are few support services available, reducing the likelihood of care and the confidence that justice will be done. In the case of childhood sexual abuse, there may be laws against it, but the responsibility lies on the child to confide in someone and suffer the possible reprisals from family members and the judicial system. Too often it is easier to remain silent.

For women childhood sexual abuse can influence the likelihood of drug abuse, high-risk sexual practices and other harmful behaviours later in life. Interventions aiming to support and treat those dealing with drug abuse, are less successful when working with these women, unless they work to address the impact of this trauma in early life.

Objectives

In December 2011 Tearfund commissioned Duke University Center for Health Policy and Inequalities Research (CHPIR) to conduct an independent research evaluation of faith-based rehabilitation centres in the 4 regions of the Russian Federation: Samara, Perm, Sverdlovsk and Orenburg. The main research objectives were:

- To estimate the prevalence of sexual abuse among women with a history of drug abuse and women without such history;
- To demonstrate whether there is a link between sexual abuse and addiction in women;
- To investigate the impact of sexual abuse on women's physical and psychological wellbeing;
- To document existing services for women in these regions.

Methodology

In the total sample of 249 women, 161 were included from 15 drug rehabilitation centres and government substance abuse treatment clinics in the 4 regions. For comparison with the women in general population, a control group was drawn from churches, women’s groups, technical colleges, university dormitories and the like for a total of 88 people. Seven interviewers were trained in interviewing and survey techniques.

'I have lived with hurt, hatred, low confidence, pain, self-criticism and self-pity at the same time'.

Daria, 27

Evangelical faith-based communities in Russia have been providing services for drug users since the early 1990s, and since 2003 have been working in partnership with Tearfund to further professionalise and scale up the response to the presenting needs. Currently, it’s estimated that faith communities in Russia provide these services to around 10,000 people per year. Through long-standing work and relationships with drug users, faith-based organisations in Russia began to see trends in sexual abuse among this population. Questions arose as to whether these childhood experiences influenced their potential to remain in a recovery programme and the multiple relapses observed in this group. Rigorous research was lacking to clearly make this link, and as a result, organizations were not specifically working to address this issue. It was often difficult for women to discuss their experiences due to the sensitivity of the topic and the lack of professional training in this area among staff.

'I have lived my life like a hunted animal – always fearful, always vigilant'.

Maria, 38
Findings

This research demonstrates a very high prevalence of sexual abuse among women in these Russian regions, both among women who use drugs and in the general population. 37% of 249 participating women experienced sexual abuse either before or after the age 13. Childhood sexual abuse is a particularly strong determinant of later drug use: a woman who uses drugs is over 50% more likely to have been sexually abused before age 13 compared with a woman who does not use drugs. One out of every five women who use drugs has a history of childhood sexual abuse.

The physical and mental health consequences of a combination of childhood sexual abuse and substance abuse were severe. 48% of drug using women who were sexually abused as children had poor or fair health and 37% were HIV positive. 38% of women experienced clinically significant levels of depression.

Unfortunately, childhood sexual abuse is also correlated with other types of traumatic events, including those directed at one’s body and against closest people. Women with a history of sexual abuse reported experiencing, on average, 3 more traumatic events than women without such history. Additionally, a poor family environment when growing up puts women at higher risk of drug-related problems. 54% of women who use drugs had one or both alcoholic parents and further half of them (49%) report this parent died or was seriously injured due to alcoholism. A much lower 25% of women from the general population report having alcoholic parents. 48% of women who use drugs have frequently witnessed domestic violence in their childhood homes. This is in contrast to 24% of women from the general population.

The majority (82%) of women have not sought out any help or accessed any services after their experience. Only 2 women reported being raped to the police. There were no services provided for victims of sexual or physical violence in the 4 regions.

Why do you think women who have been sexually abused keep silent about it?

'They are afraid to be misunderstood, laughed at or blamed'. Maria, 38

'I think women are silent because they are hurt and ashamed'. Natalia, 29
Conclusions and recommendations

Research data shows that sexual violence, particularly in childhood is a common, underlying issue with serious consequences among Russian women who use drugs. Alarmingly, there are not enough services to help women through this trauma. Lack of action means the pain of sexual violence is unresolved, not just in this generation of women, but can propel the cycle of abuse into the next generation. Russia has signed and ratified the UN Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). But it is essential that these international obligations, in addition to existing national legislation, must be fully implemented in order to protect women from violence.

1. Collaboration between the Government, the police force, the health services and NGOs, including faith-based communities, is imperative in order to prevent and respond effectively and compassionately to sexual violence.

2. Broad awareness-raising is needed to reduce stigma surrounding sexual abuse. Informing communities about the prevalence of sexual abuse and the care needed by survivors will enable them to become supportive environments, where survivors are not blamed, but accepted. Women must be informed of their rights as well as the responsibilities of the authorities to protect them and ensure justice.

3. Substance abuse treatment must include specialized care and support for women who have suffered sexual abuse.

4. Successful low-cost interventions to care for survivors and prevent further sexual abuse can be implemented at community level, including peer-led support groups and child protection training.

5. There is very little data publicly available on the prevalence of sexual abuse in Russia. Further research and data collection is necessary to understand the problem and build a foundation for well-informed response.

What do you think can be done to stop the violence?

‘There needs to be information about the problem of sexual violence and its consequences among both men and women’. Natalia, 29

‘Men must understand how much pain they can cause, and women must stop being silent and afraid’. Maria, 38