**Strengthening the implementation of domestic violence laws and policies**

**Portfolio Review Outcomes Summary**

**February 13, 2015**

Participants: Chris Stone, Emily Martinez, Katherine Acey (discussant), Michael Heflin (moderator), Yervand Shirinyan, Cynthia Eyakuze, Herta Toth (presenter), Mariana Berbec-Rostas, Andrea Simonits, Daphne Panayotatos, Giselle Kasim.

***Theory of change*** *- Was our theory of change overly focused on one particular strategy? Was there sufficient flexibility in our grant-making to adapt to contextual changes and lessons learnt during the eight years covered?*

Although there was general consensus that the progress achieved in the implementation of domestic violence laws in Eastern Europe was impressive, a substantial part of the discussion focused on analyzing the assumptions behind our theory of change. HRI funded key women’s rights groups in Eastern Europe to undertake monitoring, litigation and advocacy work in order to put pressure on states to implement the domestic violence laws they had adopted in the mid-2000s. Our theory of change was that using the momentum created by strong international and European standards on violence against women as well as the favorable environment to promote women’s rights in Eastern Europe created by European integration, key women’s rights groups would be able to put substantial pressure on their governments to implement domestic violence laws even in the absence of strong women’s rights movements. Katherine Acey asked whether this theory of change was realistic given the major leap this required women’s rights groups to take from service provision to undertaking litigation and advocacy work. She expressed concern as to whether these groups were able to retain the essential service provision work for victims of violence while also taking up new roles that required different skills. An additional question raised by both Katherine Acey and Chris Stone was whether relying on the advocacy of women’s rights groups’ alone to strengthen implementation was realistic and ultimately as effective as we hoped. Katherine Acey asked whether our program’s strategy was flexible enough to allow for the development of alternative theories of change. In particular, Katherine was wondering whether once we recognized that women’s rights groups did not prioritize movement-building, there was sufficient reflection and flexibility within our strategy to encourage and fund the development of movement-building efforts as a conscious strategy to increase public pressure and strengthen the sustainability of implementation efforts.

Through the portfolio review discussion we were able to clarify that the women’s rights groups we worked with were able to retain their service provision work while at the same time make significant progress in developing their capacity to undertake monitoring, litigation and advocacy focused on the implementation of domestic violence laws . On the other hand, there was consensus that we failed to recognize some opportunities for strengthening the limited movement-building work being undertaken by the women’s rights groups we supported. Staff argued that although there are social and cultural reasons behind the relatively small size and fragility of women’s movements in Eastern Europe, these groups could have done more to develop leaders and build stronger movements. One tactic that they could have used in this respect would have been to give greater attention to elevating the voices of survivors within the movement including more proactive encouragement of survivors to become activists and agents of change. This would have helped develop a new group of leaders with a strong commitment to the issue who could also talk about the issue in personally compelling ways to other women and the broader public. Upon reflection, we could have challenged the generally overly protective approach to victims taken by the women’s rights groups we funded, and we could have encouraged the inclusion of victims as activists into the movement.

***Geographic focus –*** *Was it wise to invest in a relatively large number of countries with a low number of grants in each or would we have had greater impact if we had taken a more layered approach providing greater resources in fewer countries? Could we have anticipated some of the challenges faced in particular difficult countries like Russia, and would that have impacted our criteria for country selection?*

Although there was measurable progress in the capacity of our grantees to undertake legal advocacy in most of the countries we invested in as well as actual improvements in implementation of domestic violence laws, there were significant differences in terms of the level of impact achieved. For instance, in Bulgaria strong progress was achieved in the implementation of the domestic violence law and regional leaders emerged among the women’s rights groups supported by HRI. On the other hand, Russia still has yet to even adopt a domestic violence law. Despite a remarkable increase in the capacity of Russian women’s rights groups to undertake monitoring and legal advocacy, overall their ability to achieve change has remained limited. This is partly due to the backlash against gender equality and the deteriorating political environment for human rights overall, however, we wonder whether there was more we could have done to improve impact there? For instance, would it have made a difference to invest in groups outside Moscow and St. Petersburg to build broader public and politic support across the country? Should we have worked harder to engage our Russian human rights grantees in domestic violence instead of giving up on their involvement following a few unsuccessful conversations with them? Chris Stone asked whether more could have been achieved if the program had concentrated in two or three countries with greater investment in these countries? He challenged the usefulness of investing in only one group in a country, and he was wondering whether a narrower country focus would have allowed for more in-depth relationship-building with the grantees.

Emily Martinez and Herta Toth explained that at the time the strategy was drafted, the general approach of the program had been to work in as many countries in the region as feasible, in this case only excluding those countries where there was not a strong women’s rights organization that could be supported to develop the capacity to undertake legal advocacy or where there was significant investment from other donors. In most countries the women’s rights groups that we funded were able to achieve change, and even in Russia, where progress was limited, the program contributed to building the skills of activists, and for the first time, to the development of a draft law on domestic violence. At the same time, in hindsight, it was agreed that working in fewer countries could have allowed for more significant operational and resource support to grantees and potentially more impact in the selected countries. Nevertheless, in light of the progress achieved in the majority of countries HRI invested in, the discussion did not reach a final conclusion as to whether or not a narrower country focus would have been preferable. Nevertheless it was acknowledged that deeper questioning the approach of working in such a large number of countries would have been useful during the planning and implementation of the strategy.

Additionally, it was agreed that in countries where we experienced serious backlash such as in Russia, we should have applied additional strategies. An example of what could have been done would have been to involve the generally stronger mainstream human rights movement in women’s rights work. Although our strategy envisioned this and we started conversations with several mainstream human rights groups about whether and how they could engage in promoting women’s rights, once we experienced resistance in conversations with human rights groups, we did not pursue this further. The discussion concluded that donors who fund both movements, are in a good position to bring together actors and to facilitate a dialogue, and that this can be done in creative and sensitive ways, without being entirely donor driven.

*Next Steps and Follow-up*

Due to the development of HRI into a global grant-making program with a new strategy, including a new strategy for our women’s rights work, this particular portfolio was closed in 2014 and we will not be continuing work in this area. Therefore the outcomes of the portfolio review will not be used to adjust an ongoing strategy in area of implementation of domestic violence laws. However, the important lessons learned from our work on this portfolio will inform the development of future HRI work in the area of women’s rights as well as other rights areas. Going forward HRI is going to be focusing on violence against women who face multiple forms of discrimination. The following specific outcomes are already being incorporated into the development of HRI’s new women’s rights strategy, as discussed with our advisory board in March:

A. Even a rights focused portfolio with a strong emphasis on promoting law and policy change or implementation should support approaches to advocacy that incorporate movement-building strategies. Supporting stronger rights movements can be challenging on issues or in places where no mass movements have yet emerged and small rights groups are essentially the only ones raising rights concerns, nevertheless even in such contexts there are opportunities to use advocacy to build leadership and engage a broader cross-section of society. For instance, it became clear with the portfolio reviewed that there was a missed opportunity to bring survivors of violence into more visible leaders roles in the women’s movement, and that their involvement could have inspired others to become active and even impacted public awareness and attitudes. In the future, HRI will be more conscious to integrate strong movement-building components into its women’s rights work from the outset.

B. Given that HRI is particularly well-positioned to encourage cross-movement work – whether between the mainstream human rights movement and the women’s movement or among various equality movements – we will focus on bringing movements together in creative and sensitive ways to address human rights violations where their cooperation is important to making and sustaining progress. Violence against women who face multiple forms of discrimination is a field that inherently requires joint work by the women’s movement and other equality movements, thus in designing and implementing our work in this area HRI will work closely with rights groups from different equality movements to strengthen collaboration and a sense of shared ownership.

C. Improving the implementation of domestic violence laws by supporting women’s rights groups and their allies is possible; however, meaningful impact requires considerable time and resources. Supporting groups who work with survivors of violence and with women who are members of some of the most marginalized groups will be very challenging and require operational involvement from staff as well as flexibility in adjusting methodologies and strategies. Given the complexity and challenges in supporting work on behalf of women who face multiple forms of discrimination, while maintaining a commitment to a global strategy, we will also limit our work to a small number of countries in each region to ensure we are not stretched too thin and can strongly engage in the selected locations.

*Summary statement*

The portfolio review reinforced the strategic value of supporting women’s rights groups to strengthen the implementation of domestic violence laws and policies even if this particular portfolio is discontinued due to HRI’s new global strategy. Our future work will focus on violence against women who face multiple forms of discrimination. We will place a strong and consistent emphasis on movement-building and cross-movement collaboration while maintaining a commitment to support projects that achieve law and policy-level change or more effective implementation of laws in ways that benefit women who face multiple forms of discrimination.