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Breaking the silence on sexual harassment in Kyrgyzstan's medical institutions

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Compassion and respect should be cornerstones of the healthcare sector, but there's an insidious problem that often remains shrouded in silence: sexual harassment. For years, female students and health workers in Kyrgyzstan's medical institutions have endured this injustice quietly, fearing the consequences of speaking out.

Head of the Independent Medical Trade Union of Kyrgyzstan, Bermet Baryktabasova, wanted to change that. An expert on evidence-based medicine, she used a Spotlight Initiative-supported grant through UN Women Kyrgyzstan in partnership with Public Foundation "Future of the Country" to research and raise awareness on sexual harassment in the medical field.

Mapping the issue

Ms. Baryktabasova envisioned a project that not only highlighted the issue of harassment in the healthcare sector but also provided a platform for victims and survivors to share their experiences.

When Ms. Baryktabasova and her team, including the Reproductive Health Alliance in Kyrgyzstan, set out to collect data via a questionnaire, they were initially met with fear and reluctance. Many women were afraid to share their stories. In spite of this, they received more than 1,100 responses and it quickly became clear that this was a widespread problem that needed to be addressed.

Turning data into action

"Armed with the research findings, our team jointly developed a comprehensive strategy [to address the problem]," says Ms. Baryktabasova. "Educational training on harassment, gender-based violence and recognizing hate speech through a gender lens was conducted for 200 healthcare workers and female employees. The aim was to ensure that personal space and human rights for all, especially women, were respected within the workplace," she says.

They also put the issue on the national agenda through a media plan and communications strategy. Social media posts on sexual harassment in the medical field generated feedback and support, and major media outlets in Kyrgyzstan wrote about Ms. Baryktabasova and her research. Medical workers from other institutions began to raise their voices, emboldened by the momentum generated by Ms. Baryktabasova's efforts. They joined her, recognizing that change was not only possible but imperative.

"Our ultimate goal is to present the research results to the Ministry of Health and advocate for the approval of [our] developed documents," says Ms. Baryktabasova. "This, I truly believe, will be the crowning achievement of our collective labour, ensuring that the efforts to eliminate harassment in medical institutions remain an ongoing commitment."

Ms. Baryktabasova continues to advocate for a safe and supportive working environment for all healthcare workers in Kyrgyzstan. By shedding light on an often hidden issue, she has given survivors a platform and sparked a transformative movement in Kyrgyzstan to end sexual harassment in the medical field once and for all.

The global [Spotlight Initiative](#) to eliminate violence against women and girls is a joint European Union and United Nations initiative being implemented in Kyrgyzstan since 2020. Spotlight Initiative enables women and girls to realize their right to a life free from discrimination, stigma, and all forms of violence. This article was first published [here](#).

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