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International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA)
Final Report

Introduction:

Through The Advocacy Project fellowship program and with the help of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation, I had the opportunity to work with a regional affiliate of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), the South Asia Partnership-Nepal (SAP-Nepal). From June 2009 to August 2009, I helped them to determine the scope and relevance of an international campaign to disarm domestic violence. This report provides summaries and reflections on my fellowship experiences.

Background:

The Advocacy Project (AP) is a D.C. based non-profit organization that partners with human rights groups around the world to produce social change and help marginalized communities claim their rights. Every year, graduate students are recruited to serve with community-based partners, for a minimum of three months in the field. From June 2009 to August 2009, I worked on the “Disarming Domestic Violence” campaign, IANSA’s international campaign to reduce gun violence in the home.

Nepal has a long history of armed conflict. In 2006, it ended a 10-year civil war that killed more than 13,000 people and displaced between 100,000 and 150,000 others. Women, in particular, are disproportionately affected by the aftermath of armed conflict. They are more likely to become breadwinners when relatives are killed, suffer from the damage caused to important social services during war, and to be displaced from their homes. In addition, the proliferation of small arms has contributed to an increase in armed domestic violence around the world—women are 12 times more likely to be killed during intimate partner violence when a firearm is present in the home. And out of nearly 900 million small arms in the world today, more than 75 percent are in the hands of private individuals—most of them men—putting women in these households at a significant risk.

Work:

This summer, IANSA launched the “Disarming Domestic Violence” campaign, the first international campaign of its kind. More than 85 partner organizations around the world, including SAP-Nepal, joined IANSA in making the connection between gun control and domestic violence. As a Peace Fellow, I helped SAP-Nepal to determine the scope and relevance of the campaign.

My tasks included assisting the organization with its campaign strategies and helping to develop an online presence. This included: profiling survivors and stakeholders, maintain a blog, conducting a series of case studies, and producing other types of new media that

can be used for advocacy and lobbying, such as short videos. The primary goal of the project is to help reduce the number of arms that get into the hands of actual or potential abusers by harmonizing gun control and domestic violence laws, eliminating a loophole that allows people with a history of domestic abuse to purchase firearms or maintain licenses for those that they already own.

Challenges:

While in Kathmandu, I conducted a series of case studies, interviewing survivors and stakeholders to get a better scope of the issue. This was the majority of my responsibilities because this information would be used to guide the campaign. In my research, however, none of the people I interviewed indicated that armed domestic violence is an issue.

This was a bit difficult to work around. Obviously, I came to Nepal to help develop a campaign with the assumption that it was already relevant. The logic was this: in post-conflict societies there is a proliferation of small arms and in countries like Nepal, with high rates of domestic violence and a proliferation of small arms, these weapons will be used in family violence. It appeared early on in my work, however, that this was simply not the case in Nepal.

Certainly, domestic violence is a huge problem. It is estimated by some that nearly 80 percent of Nepali women have been a victim of domestic violence in their lifetime. I can say that in my interviews and by just living in Nepal, I am not shocked by this number. Nepal has a strong patriarchal system and violence against women, particularly in the home, is very common. The most common weapons used in domestic violence are sticks and a traditional Nepali knife, the *kukri*.

Though Nepal is a post-conflict society, it also does not appear as if the proliferation of small arms is as big of a problem as suspected. The legal mechanisms are set in place for gun control. Obtaining a license for a gun is very difficult, due in part to the fact that guns are not manufactured domestically. Illegal guns, however, are prevalent in the Terai region bordering India and are sometimes found in more urban areas, although gun violence is often politically motivated. It is rare, if at all, for a gun to be used in family violence.

For this reason, instead of taking the assumption that this was already a problem in Nepal and developing an appropriate campaign, my responsibilities became determining the scope and relevance of the campaign. In the end, we determined that the “Disarming Domestic Violence” campaign, though important and needed in many other countries, was not particularly relevant in Nepal and resources should be devoted elsewhere.

Reflections:

Volunteering this past summer in Nepal was an unbelievable and amazing experience. I am truly indebted to the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for providing me with this incredible opportunity.

I have traveled abroad before, but always as part of an organized group or program. While I was exposed to a new culture in each of those instances, truly *living* abroad, volunteering my time, and becoming a part of the community provided me with a completely new and different experience. It introduced an entirely new element to community service. The context surrounding the issue of domestic violence, for example, can not be separated from the economic development of Nepal, the religious makeup, and the political instability of the country. Trying to dissect one social issue only led to more questions about another.

The issues in the community, as a result, became my issues. The culture and community became a part of me, and shaped the way I think about international development and human rights work abroad. This experience has helped me to redefine my future career plans and the type of international work that I would like to pursue. Instead of pursuing advocacy, I am now more interested in development—strengthening on the ground institutions in order to ensure a functioning democratic system is in place. I see this as something that is most needed in countries, like Nepal, who face a number of social problems. In addition, I now have a particular interest in the region of South Asia.

Though my experience was challenging, frustrating, and difficult at times, being able to bring it back home and share these stories with others has been extremely rewarding. I can't tell you how many times I have had people reference my blog since coming home, and express their newfound interest in Nepal or South Asia—even more, their desire to help.

None of this could have been possible without the support of the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation. I am very grateful to the individuals and organizations that made this experience—sometimes, a bit of an adventure—possible.