

Remarks by Gistam Sakaeva
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My husband wanted me to stop working and stay home. But I love my job and refused to stay home. He started to beat me. I divorced him and I decided I would do everything I could to protect women from violence. I had seen many severe cases of women's suffering in my work with humanitarian organizations.

The war in Chechnya changed so many things. Women lost their sons, husbands, fathers, brothers. I am not exception. My brother was murdered by military forces. My children were safe with me until my brother was murdered. He was the head of my family and my protection. It was on the same day that my ex-husband took away my children. Under Chechen tradition children belong to husband's family. My mother, sisters and I we were in despair. Then one day I saw two double amputees and something drew me to speak with them. I learned that they are on their way to the rehabilitation center of Doveriye, which means "Reliance" in English and I joined them.

For the first time in a long time, I forgot about my problems. I felt my personal responsibility to improve the lives of people with disabilities and defend their rights. I started to come to the center every day and got involved in their activities. I found out that CARE Canada wanted to start a new program in Chechnya to address violence against women. In 2007 Care Canada closed their mission in North Caucasus and I am very happy that we could save our Women Programme thanks to Open Society institute.

I also realized that we needed to change the behavior of men. It is very difficult to involve Chechen men in the discussion about violence against women. But I had an idea. So many men are in jail for honor killings that I figured jail is a very good place to talk to them together and give them a chance to reconsider their behavior, and change their attitude to women. So I began working with men in jails.

Then I realized we needed to do something more for women. A few months ago a nice young women was taking computer courses at our center. I could see she was very sad. It seemed to me she was coming not because she was so interested in computers, but just to be away from serious problems she was having. I offered to help her in any way I could. She didn't answer me. And she didn't come the next day and we heard that she was abused by her family and shoot herself. She committed herself to suicide. I was thinking that if only we had a safe house available, maybe she would have come there and we could have saved her life. I dream about opening a safe house a few hours outside of Chechnya. I know what a difference a real safe house will make.

I know I have a long way to go. But I am now boosted by your confidence in me by awarding me with this Voices of Courage Award and I will continue to do my best to change things for the better. Tomorrow I'm going to Capitol Hill to talk about violence against women and I am very thankful to Women's Commission that they gave me this chance to speak on behalf of all Chechen women and share my feelings and experience with you. With steps like this, I know we can make progress and decrease the level of violence, and maybe even stop it forever.

Thank you.