

Learning the lessons from implementing Popular Opinion Leader

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham, external evaluator

Our Bulgarian partner, Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), was our specialist in adapting the Popular Opinion Leader (POL) model to enable peer prevention of gender-based violence at the community level. The approach within the context of yMIND saw participants identified as ‘popular’ in their social group, invited to training, and then coached as they conducted conversations about the issue in their social circles¹. This case study considers lessons learned by trainers as they implemented the approach over two iterations in the Bulgarian Roma community in Filipovtsi.

Lesson one: allow time to develop confidence, skills and mindset

The primary lesson from all yMIND interventions is that changing mindsets is a challenging undertaking, that requires time and perseverance on the part of facilitators. Within the POL programme in Filipovtsi, this was particularly the case. In effect, trainers were looking to change thinking on deeply embedded cultural norms and behaviour.

Facilitators may have been disheartened by the fact that participants: were disruptive or did not engage, especially in early sessions; promoted a pro-violence message in sessions; did not speak between sessions with those people they planned to:

I think it is in the order of things a man can slap his wife, especially if she embarrasses him in front of other people (Filipovtsi male POL)

It is important a woman should be who she wants to be – not a robot (Filipovtsi male POL)

Nevertheless, green shoots of discourse and behaviour indicated change was happening: as training progressed, participants engaged increasingly in the process; pro-violent messages were countered by other participants, beginning an analysis of behaviour based on reason; and participants did discuss topics with family members outside of sessions, possibly as a prelude to speaking with friends.

In response, trainers learned to adjust their expectations of the rate of change, and not be discouraged by uncooperative or disruptive behaviour, but to focus on where changes and positive behaviour were apparent.

¹ A synopsis of the approach and methods hand out are available at: <http://www.youth-mind.eu/index.php/products>

Lesson two: the popular opinion leader as upholder of cultural norms of aggression

In the first round of training in Filipovtsi it became clear that there was a potential conflict in selecting POLs based on their standing in the community where that standing was based precisely on the fact that they behaved in aggressive ways. Here the challenge for facilitators was two-fold: encouraging an individual to risk their social standing by changing their behaviour and attitudes, and, if successful, risk having a POL who loses popularity because they challenge social norms within the group. We see here the defining difference between POL methodology to change behaviour around sexual risks and prevention, as it was applied in the United States, and POL methodology to change the cultural norms of a group which challenges fundamental concepts of identity. There is no easy solution to this conundrum, but facilitators in Filipovtsi suggested selecting POLs in future based on their dynamism and willingness to engage, and not to include those who have a track record of anti-social behaviour.

*Youngsters accept aggression and dominance of men as something normal and it is difficult to adopt messages about changing behaviour
(Filipovtsi trainer)*

Lesson three: changing group composition to improve dynamics

In the second series of training, therefore, facilitators thought carefully about the composition of the group. This time, there was a radical shift in gender balance, from the original all-male group, to a mixed group of females and males. In



addition, five participants brought with them existing experience of working in groups. As a result, sessions ran a lot more smoothly, with the group engaging in the difficult issues in greater depth and at an earlier stage. Participants from the second training made far greater efforts to engage friends outside of training sessions, with several instances of success in changing opinions, but also a chance to analyse in depth where conversations had not gone well.

In contrast to the taboo topics in the community, the group has managed to build a confidential environment in which to talk about violence, share personal experiences and rethink behaviours. (Filipovtsi trainer)

For more information on POL and the yMIND project, visit our website at: <http://www.youth-mind.eu/>

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