

Susan Bazilli

By Todd Prince

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As she packed her bags last week to return home to Canada after a six-month volunteer position in Russia, Susan Bazilli was visibly exhausted. The human rights legal expert had decided to fit in another conference with NGO leaders and government representatives before her departure, this time in Nizhny Novgorod, giving her little time to organize her trip.

The conference represented yet another chance to consult those combating one of Russia's biggest social problems - domestic violence. Russia has one of the highest rates in the world, with an astonishing 14,000 domestic violence-related deaths per year, according to Russian government statistics.

Bazilli, a Toronto native, had spent most of her days in Russia shuttling between Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara and Syktyvkar, assisting NGOs and government organizations, such as local police officers and judges, in fighting domestic violence against women in a coordinated fashion. The job was not easy.

"These various groups aren't used to speaking with each other," she said. "There is little coordination."

Most NGOs in Russia are only a few years old and carry little weight with authorities. Some, particularly human rights and environmental groups, have been harassed and even closed down. Financing is practically nonexistent, which hampers their efforts.

"It takes intensive work and substantial resources to help these small NGOs," she said. "You have to measure victories in small doses."

In some ways, the short stint in Russia exemplifies Bazilli's career. Since 1985, she has been crisscrossing the globe working to address human and gender rights in some of the toughest areas and making a name for herself in the field. Russia has only been the latest of 22 countries, mainly in Africa and Eastern Europe, where she has fought for women's equality.

And while the majority of her work of late has involved implementing her homegrown ideas abroad, Bazilli has not stopped using those tools to advance human rights in Canada. She sees a troubling trend in which the West pushes human rights abroad while retreating from it at home, something that complicates the work of activists.

"Canada appears of late to choose to support participation in UN conferences and international work rather than to respond to its own civil society groups seeking to change existing Canadian policies that abuse human rights," she wrote in a piece titled "Reflections of a Global Women's Activist" published in the journal of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs.

After receiving her law degree in 1985 from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Bazilli set out for apartheid-era South Africa. Working with Lawyers for Human Rights, an NGO watchdog that fought oppression, Bazilli convened "Putting Women on the Agenda," the first conference on women and the constitution in South Africa following the end of apartheid in 1990.

Following her five years in South Africa, Bazilli returned to Canada, where she became legal director for the Metropolitan [Toronto] Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children in 1991. She also founded the first Internet network in Canada dedicated to women's rights in 1995. Called the Ontario Women's Justice Network, it aims to help women and children by offering legal resources online on such issues as sexual assault and partner abuse.

In 1997, Bazilli began a two-year stint at the California Alliance Against Domestic Violence in Sacramento. Upon returning to Canada, she became director of Networked Intelligence for Development. As part of her work with NID, Bazilli organized and ran a weeklong training seminar in Lithuania for women entrepreneurs on IT, e-enterprise and e-commerce. That followed up on a similar seminar in Africa that brought together more than 100 women from around the continent to exhibit their products and undergo training in e-commerce.

Propagation of information and communication technologies among women organizations goes hand in hand with her human rights work to end violence and trafficking of women.

"Why are women and girls falling for these ads promising jobs in the West? Why don't women leave their partners who abuse them? Because there are no jobs out there for them," she said. "Domestic violence and trafficking are clearly linked to the lack of economic opportunities available for women."

Bazilli first came to Russia in 1995 to take part in the first workshop to assist Russian centers fighting domestic violence. She also worked with Russian women lawyers during her visit and maintained those contacts over the ensuing years. That, along with work on women's issues in neighboring Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, made her the prime candidate to fill the gender issues legal specialist opening in Moscow for the American Bar Association's Central and Eastern Europe Initiative, or CEELI.

"Susan spent significant time in Russia working on women's issues and knew the main players in the women's rights community in Russia" CEELI deputy director Michael Maya said. "She hit the ground running."

In addition to consulting local organizations in St. Petersburg, Samara and Syktyvkar on curbing domestic violence, Bazilli helped CEELI develop recommendations for trafficking legislation. Russia was listed as one of 19 Tier Three countries by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe this June. The rating signifies that Russia is doing nothing to prevent trafficking.

Only late last month, the Interior Ministry announced it would begin developing trafficking legislation this fall. While government recognition of the problem is a positive sign, Bazilli said the government should not try to deal with the problem alone.

"The NGOs are the experts on trafficking," she said. "They have been talking about it and fighting it long before anyone else here. They have an important role to play and need to be included in the legislation process."

Bazilli cited Canada's experience with its rape law as an example of how Russia can deal with creating sound trafficking legislation. In the 1990s, Canadian NGO officials and academics met over the course of three days to discuss and draw up recommendations for a new rape law. The

draft was then presented to the Justice Ministry and a volley ensued as both sides made adjustments.

She said many believe it to be one of the best pieces of legislation in Canada, a result that highlights the advantage of a cooperative, holistic approach. If Russia does the same with trafficking legislation, the results could be impressive, she said.

"If the NGOs and academics can get involved on the drafting process and if it can be carried out in a transparent way, Russia can create trafficking legislation that is better than others."