



Domestic Violence Issue in Armenia in light of COVID-19 Pandemia

Meeting of the National Assembly – CSO Cooperation Platform

COMMUNIQUE

On April 4, 2020 the National Assembly-CSO Cooperation Platform held its first online meeting devoted to *Domestic Violence Issue in Armenia in light of COVID-19 Pandemia*.

The meeting participants discussed domestic violence issues in Armenia, presented recommendations towards rapid response and effective mechanisms of DV prevention in the light of COVID-19.

Meeting participants were RA MPs, representatives of the RA Human Rights Defender's Office, civil society representatives, experts and international organizations.

The meeting was initiated within the framework of *Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia¹ Project*.

¹“Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia” project is implemented by UNDP in partnership with the OxYGen Foundation, International Center for Human Development, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The project is funded by the UK Good Governance Fund and the Government of Sweden.

During the meeting, statistics accumulated within the period of pandemia on domestic violence and response steps were presented, as well as a number of new and already existing problems were highlighted and discussed during the meeting, and recommendations were proposed for solving the problems.

I. Statistical data on domestic violence and response steps to domestic violence cases:

- The RA Human Rights Defender's Office has recorded a 28-29% increase in alerts related to domestic violence.
- According to the data by Women's Support Center, during the months of March and April a 50% spike in domestic violence was recorded as compared to the previous year.
- According to the data of the RA Police, since March 16 they have received 180 alerts related to domestic violence; in the previous year the number was 170 for the same period.
- The statistical data demonstrate that domestic violence victims prefer to seek support from non-governmental organizations rather than from law-enforcement bodies. According to the Human Rights Defender, there have been cases when after consultations victims did not wish to see their alerts followed up by the police.
- For the purpose of coordinating the cases and providing a proper response, the Human Rights Defender's Office has created a special working group, which is specialized in domestic violence issues and will be reviewing both written and oral complaints, as well as carrying out general monitoring (publications, work of state bodies, etc.).
- Human Rights Defender has submitted special suggestions to the Commandant and Chief of Police:
 - In the conditions of a state of emergency, persons subjected to violence should have access to opportunities necessary for their rights protection and to all support services (healthcare, social, psychological, etc.).
 - All policemen/women on duty should be specifically instructed on provision of support to persons subjected to domestic violence and on relevant referral mechanisms for them.

II. Discussed issues

- The emergency has exacerbated the existing issues associated with provision of a rapid and specialized response to domestic violence, including imperfection of referral mechanisms, absence of a centralized registry for cases and legislative gaps, which do not allow to provide an effective protection to persons subjected to violence, full disclosure of cases and prevention of possible future cases.

- The police and investigative bodies are not sensitive to domestic violence issues and are unable to effectively respond to the problem, which demonstrates that specialization in domestic violence issues that they have undergone under different programs cannot be considered satisfactory.
- The situation is especially concerning in the marzes; observations reveal that the law-enforcement bodies have serious shortcomings in their work related to prevention of domestic violence cases and proper referral of victims.
- During the state of emergency period, part of the shelter-providing NGOs are temporarily not working and this creates a problematic situation for beneficiaries.
- There are problems with broad-based and accessible awareness raising activities on assistance to be provided to domestic violence victims.
- In the today's situation of availability of different hotlines, persons subjected to domestic violence are confused about which hotline to contact with their problems.
- Marzes are confronted with the problem of non-full operation of social services, which are an important link for detection and prevention of violence.

III. Recommendations to respond the issues

- To initiate yet another, significantly expanded discussion on domestic violence through involvement of all stakeholders, including the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the RA Police
- To develop a unified referral mechanism for persons suffered from domestic violence,
- To create one centralized national hotline for support of persons subjected to domestic violence, to staff it with personnel with relevant training and to provide it with necessary technical equipment.
- To raise public awareness of available support for persons subjected to domestic violence by periodically airing on TV video-clips of social advertisements on existing hotlines (preferably one centralized hotline)
- To make use of other possibilities for raising public awareness of support for persons subjected to domestic violence, including through posting up the necessary information in public places
- To implement intensive and continuous specialization programs for the largest possible number of police staff with the purpose of eliminating the shortcomings in providing a rapid and professional response to cases of violence
- To reinforce and expand the cooperation between NGOs and state structures dealing with domestic violence issues for the purpose of experience and information sharing and provision of more coordinated and targeted assistance to domestic violence victims,

- To consider the possibility of remote conduct of preliminary investigation activities of domestic violence cases in the conditions of the emergency situation (the suggestion was brought to the attention of relevant structures, but was rejected)
- To submit to the National Assembly the package of legislative suggestions on domestic violence developed by NGOs
- To discuss the package of legislative reforms prepared by NGOs dealing with domestic violence issues at the NA Standing Committee on Human Rights Protection and Public Affairs and in follow-up to initiate a remote discussion in an expanded format
- To convene, if necessary, parliamentary hearings on the topic of legislative reforms on domestic violence
- To organize as soon as possible a centralized registry of domestic violence cases, which is envisioned by the October 10th, 2019 Decree #1381-N of the Government of the Republic of Armenia².

² After the meeting, it was clarified that in order to launch the system, there is a need to make a legislative change, and the legislative document is currently being developed by the Government.