



RAPID ASSESSMENT

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Key observations, findings and recommendations

Anna Hovhannisyan

Domestic Violence Prevention Expert

Implemented by:



“Promotion and Protection of Human Rights” Project

This translation and the assessment were produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of its author Anna Hovhannisyan and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

The views expressed in this assessment are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA.

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Experience on response to domestic violence cases in different countries during the COVID-19 pandemic: situation analysis	6
Rapid assessment methodology	9
Analysis of rapid assessment findings	10
The main findings and issues revealed within the rapid assessment	18
Recommendations targeting the protection of persons subjected to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.....	20

Annex 1. List of experts

Annex 2. Questionnaire

INTRODUCTION

Due to the new coronavirus pandemic, many countries of the world have announced a regime of home lockdown for their residents. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the situation created as a result of the COVID-19 virus spread can be assessed as a pandemic¹. This situation requires governments to allocate additional resources not only for addressing public health issues, but also for the protection of various vulnerable groups whose rights are violated under the state of emergency and lockdown. The state should guarantee the right of women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities to be protected from domestic violence, and this should not be undermined in the state of emergency.

Domestic violence is one of the demonstrations of the human rights violation. Its rate has radically increased during the last two months in different countries, under the conditions of home lockdown, imposed by the state of emergency. COVID-19 has forced the majority of the world population to be self-isolated in homes, whereas home is not at all a safe place for survivors of domestic violence since they are forced to face the perpetrator in their homes. As a matter of fact, people locked down in their houses are constrained to exercise their right to free movement and can do so only for very few purposes. This is the reason that many people are unable to communicate with the outside world and seek support.

The closure of schools during the state of emergency has affected more than 1.5 billion children. Limitations of movement, the loss of income, self-isolation and the high level of stress and anxiety increase the threat of potential physical, psychological and sexual violence against children, particularly those children who already live in the conditions of domestic violence or in a non-favorable family environment². People with disabilities experience a double vulnerability too. Robust data on violence against these two groups during the state of emergency is not available yet, which makes it even more difficult to provide potential support to them.

Data published by different countries prove that violence against women exerted by their previous and current intimate partners during March and April, has increased by 30% on average³. Financial needs, uncertainty, unequal distribution of roles and the absence of support nets conditioned by the home lockdown exacerbates violence against women by their previous and current intimate partners. As a shadow pandemic, domestic violence affects households too.

¹ World Health Organisation, Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19. 11 March 2020. <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-COVID-19---11-march-2020>

² "Children at increased risk of harm online during global COVID-19 pandemic" <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-increased-risk-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic>

³ "Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic" <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

The situation in Armenia also causes concern. The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, the members of which are a number of civil society organizations (hereinafter CSO) providing services to women and their children subjected to domestic violence, makes alarming statements on the increase of domestic violence direct reports during the state of emergency by 30% in March and by 50% in April⁴.

Non-governmental organizations warn that by staying home women appear in an even more vulnerable condition: many women call helplines for consultation related to violence or for social assistance. Child rights and disability rights organizations also indicate about the hidden, but increasing violence cases against children and people with disabilities. This situation requires a complex and systemic response to domestic violence cases, a clearly designed action plan the implementation of which will ensure a timely and targeted assistance to persons subjected to domestic violence.

This study was conducted from April 15 to May 15, 2020, during which a state of emergency was declared in the Republic of Armenia.

⁴ «The number of domestic violence cases in the quarantine conditions has increased in Armenia», accessed on 20 April, 2020
<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30563169.html>

EXPERIENCE ON RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CASES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SITUATION ANALYSIS

The international human rights organizations ring the alarm that the number of domestic violence cases against women and children has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The publicly available statistical data show that this indicator has increased in different countries conditioned by home isolation and new social, economic and healthcare issues experienced by citizens. In France, for instance, since 17 March domestic violence cases against women have increased by around 30%, just when the country announced a strict lockdown regime⁵. Helplines operating in Cyprus and Singapore also recorded an approximately 30% increase in the domestic violence cases⁶. This number has grown by 25% in Argentina⁷. 40% of the healthcare workers in Australia have indicated that survivors of domestic violence applied to them during the lockdown to receive respective services⁸.

The increased demand for services provided to persons subjected to domestic violence has resulted in a situation that the healthcare system, police and social services system are unable to timely respond to cases conditioned by the fact that they all are very busy with neutralizing the consequences of the pandemic and socio-economic effects of the lockdown. The redesigned services⁹, which are rendered by organizations that support survivors of domestic violence, create serious issues related to accessibility of those services. For instance, in mid-March, the helpline of domestic violence recorded a decline in calls by 55% conditioned by the fact that women were unable to report the cases due to being physically in the same location with the perpetrator. A similar situation was observed in the north of France at the end of March¹⁰. In many countries women are unable to access the Internet and telecommunication services. In this kind of situation, any government should monitor the increase in the cases of domestic violence against women and children during crisis and allocate respective resources to resolve the arising issues. For example, the Prime Minister of Canada issued a decision according to which shelters hosting survivors of domestic violence must also operate during the state of emergency. Moreover, the Government of Canada allocated 40 million USD to assist in the state of emergency the shelters that provide services to survivors of

⁵ "Domestic violence cases jump 30% during lockdown in France", accessed on April 20, 2020 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/28/domestic-violence-cases-jump-30-during-lockdown-in-france>

⁶ "Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence" accessed on April 20, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

⁷ "During quarantine, calls to 144 for gender violence increased by 25%", accessed on April 20, 2020 http://www.diario21.tv/notix2/movil2/?seccion=desarrollo_notia&id_notia=132124

⁸ "Domestic Violence Spikes During Coronavirus As Families Trapped At Home", accessed on April 20, 2020 <https://10daily.com.au/news/australia/a200326zyjkh/domestic-violence-spikes-during-coronavirus-as-families-trapped-at-home-20200327>

⁹ Those services are mainly rendered online, for example rendering psychological consultation online to women is a serious obstacle, as they are physically in the same location with the perpetrator.

¹⁰ "Women are using code words at pharmacies to escape domestic violence during lockdown", accessed on April 20, 2020 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/02/europe/domestic-violence-coronavirus-lockdown-intl/index.html>

domestic violence¹¹. In Italy, the General Prosecutor's Office has made a decision that during the state of emergency, the perpetrators have to leave the house, rather than women and children move to shelters. This decision is grounded on the fact that many shelters in the country have been transformed into venues where persons infected with coronavirus are isolated. In France, the Government has negotiated with hotels so that the latter provide shelter to survivors of domestic violence and their children. In addition to these countries, Australia and the Great Britain have allocated additional financial resources to the fight against domestic violence. Spain¹² has included the provision of protection and support services to survivors of gender-based violence into the list of those essential/life-saving activities, which are allowed to perform during the state of emergency.

A number of European countries such as Spain and France, for instance, have used telephone messaging services to raise awareness among the population on the following: persons subjected to domestic violence and deprived of opportunity to get due assistance can visit any pharmacy and ask to purchase "mask-19". This will be sufficient for the pharmacy staff to call the police¹³. In some provinces of Great Britain, instructions were given to food delivery staff and postal workers to be attentive and report should there be any suspicion of potential domestic violence. The Spanish Government has announced about the launch of an online chat service, which will deploy a function of locating the chat participants geographically, hence allowing the survivors to connect with the police, as well as receive psychological assistance while isolated in the online chat space¹⁴. The police in India's Uttar Pradesh state have launched a new domestic violence helpline and promised that a female police officer will handle each case¹⁵. In Ireland, the police launched a special service entitled "Operation Faoisimh" which aims to assist survivors of domestic abuse, saying officers will proactively contact every victim who has previously been in touch with the police. The police adopted the pro-arrest intervention policy as a preferred option¹⁶.

The judicial system has also been adjusted to the current situation. For instance, in many EU countries the court rulings, including those on domestic violence cases, are conducted online. In Argentina, for example, all current protection orders have been prolonged by the courts by at least 60 days.

¹¹ "Coronavirus: Trudeau announces \$40M for women's shelters, \$10M for Indigenous women and kids" accessed on April 20, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6778731/coronavirus-womens-indigenous-assault-centres/>

¹² Real Decreto-ley 10/2020, accessed on 30 April, 2020, <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-28/el-gobierno-amplia-el-confinamiento-los-trabajadores-de-actividades-no-esenciales-deberan-quedarse-en-casa.html>

¹³ "France responds to domestic abuse rise"; accessed on 20 April, 2020

<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/world/france-responds-domestic-abuse-rise>

¹⁴ "Europe braces for domestic abuse 'perfect storm' amid coronavirus lockdown"; accessed on 20 April, 2020; <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/europe-braces-for-domestic-abuse--perfect-storm--amid-coronavirus-lockdown/45646312>

¹⁵ "Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence" accessed on 20 April, 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

¹⁶ "Quick and robust' garda response to domestic violence reports promised"; accessed on 20 April, 2020

<https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/0401/1127724-gardai-domestic-violence-cases/>

In this period, a number of human rights organizations published statements calling on states to undertake additional measures to protect women and children from domestic violence in the time of lockdown. On March 27, Ms. Dubravka Šimonovic, the United Nations (hereinafter the UN) Special Rapporteur on violence against women, called on states to undertake concrete efforts to prevent domestic violence and support survivors of domestic violence. As her statement reads, the situation worsens when shelters are few and support services are inaccessible for women and children. Women with disabilities, refugee women without documents and women survivors of trafficking are even more vulnerable. Her statement calls on states to create new solutions that will help to protect women subjected to domestic violence in the time of COVID-19 pandemic¹⁷.

On April 3, the Council of Europe's (CoE) Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) made a public statement calling for compliance with European standards of preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, as defined by the CoE Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence¹⁸. On April 20, the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence published a declaration on the implementation of the Convention during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Declaration, states shall undertake coordinated and holistic responses to combating domestic violence during the pandemic. The Declaration proposes a complex policy model for states', adherence to which will help them to assist and protect women and minors subjected to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁹.

Hence, the study of practices in various countries and the set human rights international standards during the COVID-19 pandemic show that the increase in the domestic violence rate urges governments to undertake additional measures to protect persons subjected to domestic violence. In this process the needs and peculiarities of children, elderly people and people with disabilities subjected to domestic violence must be deemed a top priority and new strategies must be designed and enacted.

¹⁷ "States must combat domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns – UN rights expert"
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25749&LangID=E>

¹⁸ "COVID-19 and isolation at home may increase the risk of Domestic Violence"
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/pristina/-/covid-19-and-isolation-at-home-may-increase-the-risk-of-domestic-violence>

¹⁹ Declaration of the Committee of the Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) on the implementation of the Convention during the COVID-19 pandemic <https://rm.coe.int/declaration-committee-of-the-parties-to-ic-covid-/16809e33c6>

RAPID ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

This rapid assessment aims to assess the response of state and non-state institutions to domestic violence in Armenia during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the state of emergency declared as a result, as well as identify the needs of those institutions in providing an improved response to those cases.

In the current situation, it was important to understand:

- a) How organizations dealing with domestic violence cases organized their operations, which related to the cooperation between state and civil society organizations,
- b) What major needs the persons subjected to domestic violence had,
- c) What kind of response to domestic violence the decision-makers had.

This will support the design of a victim-centered and gender-sensitive policy by making assistance targeted both in the state of emergency and after it. It is worth noting that even after the state of emergency is lifted, the response to domestic violence has to fit the created situation since it is assumed that still for a long time services cannot be rendered in the same way, as before the pandemic.

A qualitative research was conducted in the frames of this assessment by applying the desk/document review method to perform a comparative analysis, as well as the in-depth key informant interview method. For data collection purposes, 28 in-depth key informant interviews were conducted online, including interviews with:

- ✓ Representatives of policy-making institutions,
- ✓ Service providers who work in the areas of rights protection for women, children and people with disabilities and deal with domestic violence issues on a daily basis,
- ✓ Representatives of police.

The list of experts (see Annex 1) was compiled taking into account the list of experts who are members of the Council of prevention of violence in the family, established by the Decree N1685-A of the RA Prime Minister²⁰. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of organizations actively operating in this sector. The key informant interviews were conducted in the period of 20 April – 07 May, using a pre-designed questionnaire (see Annex 2).

Analysis of data received from experts, as well as desk review data has served as a basis for designing the recommendations. In particular, publications of the UN, CoE, EU and other leading organizations related to response to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic were studied.

²⁰ Decree N 1685-A by the RA Prime Minister on approving the members of the Council of Prevention of Violence in the Family. <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docID=133418>

ANALYSIS OF RAPID ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

The response of law enforcement bodies

Statistical data provided by the police and current activities

According to the RA Police, no increase was recorded in the number of domestic violence cases during the legal state of emergency: within the 16 March to 20 April period, 180 reports of domestic violence cases were received (versus 170 reports received for the same period in 2019), of which 115 related to violence perpetrated by spouses or previous spouses against their wives, and 8 cases to violence against minors.²¹.

No changes have been observed in the operation of police conditioned with the state of emergency. Just as in the past, respective police department staff arrive at the scene after getting the case report, assess the situation and the risk posed by domestic violence. Protection orders applied by the police are the warning and the emergency intervention order. Within the period of 01 January – 28 April 2020, 251 decisions on applying the warning were taken (50 decisions in January, 67 in February, 86 in March, 48 in the period of 01-28 April) and 82 decisions on emergency intervention orders were applied (19 decisions in January, 23 in February, 24 in March, 16 in the period of 01-28 April).

Activities of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Armenia (RA IC)

According to the Decree N41-N dated 17.03.20, issued by the Chairman of the RA IC, servants in charge of conducting preliminary investigation shall if possible postpone the execution of investigative and other judicial actions, excluding emergency investigative and other judicial actions. The investigation of domestic violence cases is conducted in the same procedure during the pandemic, as in the past, in accordance with the special recommendation of the RA IC Chairman.

The representative of the RA IC did not present any statistical data because statistics on criminal cases is drawn on a six-month and annual basis.

All departments are equipped with personal anti-virus protection accessories and when needed, these accessories are provided to persons participating in the investigative actions, including the survivors.

Actions of the General Prosecutor's Office

In the state of emergency, considering the authorities of prosecutors and from the perspective of the response to domestic violence cases, the need to investigate private accusation cases in a public procedure should be considered. In such cases, a need arises to accept the survivor of domestic violence and discuss grounds for continuing the investigation of the private complaint in a public procedure. Although the criminal and judicial legislation does not anticipate such procedure, the prosecutor holds such authority and several prosecutors have fulfilled this authority during the pandemic in the frame of telephone communication, and not face-to-face meetings. It is however worth mentioning that some prosecutors have

²¹ "The increase in the number of domestic violence cases during the state of emergency" online press conference, 22.04.2020 available at <https://www.facebook.com/article3club/videos/538292706888772/>

met with survivors face to face and discussed the future proceeding of cases. For instance, after the state of emergency, in Ararat marz a need had arisen to continue the private prosecution of 40 domestic violence cases in a public procedure. For 13 of these cases the prosecutors organized a reception during which they undertook individual antivirus protection measures. On the whole, the promptness of response to domestic violence cases in the General Prosecutor's Office has not weakened during the pandemic; however these limitations have influenced its overall effectiveness since many survivors refused to discuss the case details with the prosecutor. These survivors also refused to participate in face to face meetings justifying it by the threat of pandemic, which resulted in the discontinuing of considering their cases as public prosecution cases. The General Prosecutor's Office did not present any statistics since no separate statistical data was drawn for domestic violence cases in the state of emergency.

Urgent issues

According to NGO representatives, the patrolling police maintaining the legal regime in the state of emergency are not aware of contact details of organizations that provide support to survivors of domestic violence. In addition, in the time of terminated operation of marz and inter-city public transport, survivors of domestic violence who have escaped from the perpetrator and appeared in the focus of police, must be taken to support centers. However, the study of cases revealed that such practice was not established. Data provided by the police allows to conclude that the warning as a protection order continues to be the most frequently used measure during the state of emergency. NGOs mention that during the state of emergency they have never participated in investigative actions and court rulings through an online video call, urgent investigative actions have been implemented in a face-to-face mode, and court rulings have been postponed.

Work conducted by policy makers in the area of domestic violence and the problems faced due to the pandemic²²

Information received from the representatives of policy-making institutions shows that they do not have special programs or procedures that can be effective in the state of emergency for persons subjected to domestic violence.

Services provided to survivors of domestic violence by the state are not monitored, particularly the requirements and rules for isolation in shelters were defined by the given civil society organization. The rules for receiving survivors of violence in urgent cases and arranging specialized support are not clearly defined either for service provider organizations and the crisis toolkit for specialized intervention and additional resources were not provided. As of 14.05.2020, the procedure of applying for one-time cash assistance provided by the state to survivors of domestic violence does not function, particularly the multidisciplinary team, which selects the beneficiaries, is not formed yet.

²² Interviews were conducted with representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, and the Ministry of Health, as policy-making institutions.

As of 14.05.2020, no session of the Council on the Prevention of Violence in the Family has been organized, where issues related to domestic violence cases in the state of emergency would be discussed. Despite the fact that these institutions do not carry out separate programs in the state of emergency for persons subjected to domestic violence, these persons can benefit from other programs. For instance, such programs include the programs of the RA Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on neutralizing the economic consequences caused by the coronavirus, the joint project between the RA Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports and the Asian Development Bank and so on. The latter focuses on providing psychosocial support to students, teachers and parents who engage in distance education programs in the state of emergency, conditioned by the coronavirus. This support will help to identify those major problems students, teachers and parents experience in this situation, as well as design effective toolkits and methodology for provision of psychosocial support. This will ultimately result in rendering the needed support services. This program can also contribute to identifying children subjected to violence and respond to those cases.

In the state of emergency, no any particular policy, public awareness campaign²³ or preventive action was carried out on adequate response to cases of domestic violence as of 14.05.2020. The public television does not regularly raise awareness on helplines that organizations operate to receive reports and provide services to persons subjected to domestic violence. However, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice are planning to conduct awareness raising activities on the prevention of domestic violence.

It is worth noting that these institutions clearly understand issues that domestic violence can pose in the state of emergency, but other large scale programs they have initiated do not allow for due and timely response to this issue too.

The activities of the Human Rights Defender's Office related to domestic violence cases

Statistics

The Human Rights Defender's Office (HRDO) has recorded an increase in the number of domestic violence cases. Hence, within the period of 15 March – 20 April 15 reports of domestic violence (5 cases in March 2019) were recorded.

The reported cases and the response

Although there is no dedicated program for persons subjected to domestic violence, the HRDO carries out the response to cases just in the same way, as before. Moreover, a special taskforce was set up, which responds to cases of domestic violence in this situation. In addition, the HRDO has simplified the

²³ It should be noted that the HRDO carried out awareness raising activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the details of which will be reflected in the next section.

procedure of response to domestic violence cases given the pandemic, by providing response based on verbal complaint and report. The HRDO circulates an awareness ad on preventing domestic violence, possible support and the helpline.

In case of domestic violence, HRDO is mainly contacted for receiving consultation on rights. These days, the HRDO has contacted service provider NGOs and offered a closer collaboration around domestic violence cases. The Human Rights Defender also contacted the Commandant and the Chief of Police presenting a package of special recommendations. One of the recommendations, for example, is to make all necessary measures of rights protection and all support services (healthcare, social, psychological, etc.) accessible for the persons subjected to violence. Another recommendation states that all patrolling police should receive special guidance and instructions on support to be provided to people subjected to domestic violence and on referral mechanisms they can use.

The response of service provider NGOs to domestic violence

Statistics

Within the period of 16 March – 20 April, the members of the “Stop Violence Against Women” Coalition have recorded 803 direct reports of domestic violence cases, which is around 30% more than the total number of reports received in the same period of the last year. The “Women’s Support Center” NGO has received 79 direct reports on the helpline in April, which is 50% more than the total number of calls/reports received in the same period of the last year. However, it is important to note that around 50% of these calls were inquiries about opportunities of receiving social assistance by persons subjected to domestic violence. The 10 marz centers outsourced by the Government of Armenia to provide services to persons subjected to domestic violence have recorded in total of 160 reports of domestic violence cases for the months of February, March and April²⁴.

The activities of law enforcement bodies and courts

As NGOs state, law enforcement bodies and judicial system have not amended any procedures they employ. It is the solicitors employed by NGOs who usually solicit for postponing the interrogation or confrontation in non-urgent cases, whereas in urgent cases all procedures are usually maintained, including the conducting of forensic expertise, interrogations and confrontation with the suspect. In the state of emergency, courts continue applying protection orders as a protection measure for persons subjected to domestic violence. Due to pandemic, court rulings on children’s residence venue, alimonies, divorce and cases of violence are mainly postponed.

NGOs attach big importance to introduction of online interrogation and confrontation options, as well as opportunities to conduct online court rulings. NGO representatives note that certain departments of the

²⁴ These centers have been operating since February 2020, therefore it is not possible to provide a comparative analysis of statistical data.

RA IC do not apply the online interrogation method for non-urgent cases justifying it with lack of legal grounds to do so.

The collected information demonstrates that court rulings on domestic violence cases are mainly postponed during the state of emergency due to COVID-19, but on May 5, the “Women’s Support Center” NGO recorded a case when the court annulled the protection order applied against the perpetrator. Some courts conduct online court rulings; however no such precedent of domestic violence case has been known by 14.05.2020.

The activities of NGOs with persons subjected to domestic violence

During the lockdown many organizations started to work in distance and online modes by providing telephone consultations, but for urgent cases the NGO staff break the lockdown regime and meet with persons subjected to domestic violence in the NGO offices. The situation worsened also because of the termination of marz/ inter-city public transport operation, because many organizations do not own vehicles and cannot meet women to provide urgent consultation and assistance.

When several helplines supporting domestic violence survivors operate, it becomes difficult for these people to decide on which helpline is better to call for support. These helplines usually charge a fee for each minute of the call, but specialists almost always call back when the person lacks resources to make the call. In this regard, one unified and nationally operated helpline during the state of emergency can serve as an important support mechanism for persons subjected to domestic violence.

Many organizations and especially newly-opened marz centers lack procedures for providing support to beneficiaries, as well as safety rules to be protected from the virus.

NGOs monitor the cases of their past and present beneficiaries with special focus on those women and children who are locked down in the same house with perpetrators.

The needs of persons subjected to domestic violence

Organizations who have a long and extensive experience of working with persons subjected to domestic violence receive calls from those beneficiaries who live separately from the perpetrators now. These women beneficiaries mainly face unstable socio-economic conditions and expect support from humanitarian organizations.

Women subjected to domestic violence are unable to access state assistance programs because they lack computer skills or access to Internet. Many women and children still lack Internet connection and computer equipment which results in their inability to receive specialized services online.

Significant problems are experienced by those women subjected to domestic violence who have separated from the perpetrators and raise their children alone, but are deprived of opportunity to access state assistance programs because the perpetrators are legally employed.

The “Women’s Support Center” NGO was able to provide financial support to 30 women subjected to domestic violence residing in Yerevan and marzes which can be sufficient to address their primary needs. Many NGOs provide assistance not only to persons subjected to domestic violence but also other groups of population by enrolling them in online state assistance programs.

The shelters

The two shelters operating in Armenia, also co-funded by the state, continue their operations in the state of emergency and receive new women and children. In March, 9 women and 18 children were received, and 10 women and 9 children in April. It should be mentioned that the shelters do not have special conditions to ensure a 14-day quarantine isolation for the newcomers. Right after the state of emergency was declared, the “Women’s Support Center” NGO applied to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs with the request of additional financial support in renting a separate apartment, however the Ministry proposed to organize the isolation with existing resources.

The staff of shelter has allocated one room in the shelter’s building, where the newcomers should spend 14 days, however if the number of newcomers increases and the room is busy, the situation will pose danger to other women.

It should also be noted that the organization tries to raise additional financial means to rent a separate house for the newcomers’ isolation purpose.

Awareness raising

During the pandemic, information about the helplines of NGOs is primarily disseminated through social media networks. One of the marz NGOs has made an arrangement with the marz branch of the Red Cross to include the information about the NGO’s helpline and support services in the food packages distributed to socially vulnerable families. This effort can be replicated by other humanitarian organizations who can in this way promote the spread of relevant and important information. Some organizations plan to hang posters on the walls of food stores and pharmacies. They have applied to the Commandant for permission, but have not received any response as of 14.05.2020.

The needs of organizations

The newly opened 10 marz centers provide services to persons subjected to domestic violence by also getting a subsidy from the state. As service provider organizations, they have appeared in the forefront of combating domestic violence in the state of emergency due to COVID-19 pandemic. 9 out of 10 centers are NGOs and lack means of protection from the virus (masks, gloves, alcogels and thermometers).

The lack of transportation is also a significant problem for the newly established centers as their specialists are unable to travel even to the office. Marz centers also have an insufficient quantity of telephones and computers required for distance work with beneficiaries and new cases. During these days the provision of humanitarian support to persons subjected to domestic violence and the monitoring of cases has become

even more topical. The representatives of marz centers say that they also lack human resources in their support to different groups of population to get enrolled in state assistance programs.

The response to domestic violence cases by 6 state centers combating domestic violence

Statistics

During the state of emergency 6 state centers received reports of domestic violence cases, 8 of which were about violence against a child by a family member. The reports are usually referred by the police through the means of official letters.

The interventions of the centers with the persons subjected to domestic violence

The centers operate online. The specialists continue maintaining contacts with all beneficiaries and support families to get enrolled in state social assistance programs. When new cases are reported, the specialists contact the survivors by phone. So far, all contacted survivors refused to receive support services.

In March and April, the “Zatik” Yerevan Child Assistance Center SNCO hosted 6 children, 3 of whom had been subjected to violence. At present, Zatik Center is the only one receiving children living in difficult circumstances of life, because the “Children’s Support Center” Foundation of the Fund for Armenian Relief does not currently host new children due to no quarantine conditions.

During the pandemic, the 6 centers have re-allocated the daycare food supplies to beneficiary families.

The peculiarities of domestic violence against children and persons with disabilities and the response to it

The absence of statistical data and context analysis on children and people with disabilities has resulted in the fact that violence against them during the state of emergency is even more latent / hidden. If in the past, specialized NGOs received reports from people with disabilities, among others, nowadays no such reports are received by them. No such data was presented by the HRDO representative either. One disability NGO conducts monitoring of domestic violence cases among their beneficiaries, however the organization may not receive trustworthy information from the beneficiary’s family in case the beneficiary has mental health issues.

It must be noted that no separate helpline exists for receiving reports of domestic violence cases against people with disabilities. Helplines dealing with women and child rights can provide a general information on how to be protected from violence and respond to it, but telephone consultations may not be accessible for people with hearing impairments. In terms of accessibility, the currently disseminated information about helplines, which is not adapted to the needs of persons with hearing and eyesight impairments, is an obstacle to consider.

When considering children, we observe a lot of uncertainties too because the current situation contributes to an increased rate of violence against children. And again, the lack of official statistical data creates a situation where specialists have to talk about violence against children in the context of assumed data.

The Child Protection Network, the UN Children's Fund and other child-rights organizations created an online platform of meetings to be used in the state of emergency. This platform hosts different meetings on a weekly basis where various child-related topics are discussed, including the response to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This child-rights platform also launched a unified helpline aimed at identifying and responding to child rights violation cases. The information about this helpline is mainly circulated in social media networks.

These organizations conduct a mapping of different vulnerable groups. The World Vision compiled and shared with the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports a list of children who are out of education. The compilation of this list can also help to reveal children subjected to violence. Children with disabilities who have reunited with their families are in the risk group in terms of potential violence. One NGO working with LGBT people has made known the increase of cases of violence parents exert on their LGBT children these days. The NGO notes that children are minors and in fact cannot leave the family. They also refuse to apply to law enforcement bodies.

Child rights organizations offer online courses of positive parenting to parents. The course touches base on measures to prevent violence. The organizations also carry out awareness raising activities and disseminate information on helplines, as well as continue maintaining close contact with their previous and current beneficiaries.

THE MAIN FINDINGS AND ISSUES REVEALED WITHIN THE RAPID ASSESSMENT

- According to police data, the number of domestic violence cases in the state of emergency has not increased, while NGOs state that direct reports have increased by around 30-50%.
- The law enforcement and judicial bodies continue working with survivors and suspects through previously employed procedures: interrogations and confrontations are mainly held in the face-to-face mode. In non-urgent cases, these processes and court rulings may be postponed by the solicitation of parties.
- NGOs find it very important that the investigators introduce the practices of online interrogation and confrontation, as well as consider opportunities to conduct online court rulings. During this assessment, the service providers have not ever observed such practices. NGOs also note that certain departments of the RA Investigative Committee do not employ the online interrogation method in non-urgent cases by justifying the lack of legal grounds to do so.
- The analysis of data provided by the police proves that the application of the *warning* as a protection order continues to be a more frequently used measure during the state of emergency.
- In the state of emergency, courts continue applying protection orders as a key measure for the protection of persons subjected to domestic violence.
- NGOs are alarmed that patrolling police, who ensure the legal regime during the state of emergency, are not aware of contact details of those centers/organizations that provide support to persons subjected to domestic violence.
- Policy makers do not have special programs or procedures that can be effective in the state of emergency for persons subjected to domestic violence. Additional resources are not allocated either.
- No any state policy/program, continuing awareness raising campaign or preventive activity is carried out as an appropriate response to domestic violence cases in the state of emergency. The HRDO has been the only institution to implement certain awareness raising activities.
- Until today, the procedure for providing a one-time cash support to persons subjected to domestic violence has not operated. In particular, the multidisciplinary group that has to select beneficiaries, was not set up yet.
- The Human Rights Defender monitors potential domestic violence cases in the state of emergency. The staff of HRDO now includes a taskforce that works on issues of violence in the family. A social ad on preventing domestic violence was published and disseminated.
- Many organizations have started to work online in the time of lockdown but in all urgent cases their representatives break the lockdown regime and met persons subjected to domestic violence in the office.

- The termination of the inter-city public transport has caused significant problems too, as many organizations do not have vehicles and cannot meet women for provision of urgent consultation and assistance.
- NGOs monitor the situation of their previous and present beneficiaries, keeping in focus those women and children who live in the same house with perpetrators.
- Women subjected to domestic violence do not benefit from state assistance programs as they neither have computer skills, nor access to Internet. NGOs ring the alarm for the increasing number of previous and present beneficiaries of domestic violence cases who ask for social assistance.
- The 2 shelters operating in Armenia, also co-funded by the state, continue functioning in the state of emergency and receive new women and children. In March, the shelters hosted 9 women and 18 children, and in April – 10 women and 9 children.
- The shelters do not have special conditions and additional resources for newcomers to ensure a 14-day quarantine isolation.
- During the pandemic the information about helplines is primarily disseminated via social media networks.
- During the pandemic the provision of humanitarian support to persons subjected to domestic violence and the monitoring of cases have become particularly topical.
- The absence of statistical data and context analysis on children and people with disabilities has resulted in the fact that violence against them during the state of emergency is even more latent / hidden.
- Organizations may not receive trustworthy information from the beneficiary's family in case the beneficiary has mental health issues.
- The Child Protection Network, the UN Children's Fund and other child-rights organizations created an online platform of meetings to be used in the state of emergency. This platform hosts different meetings on a weekly basis where various child-related topics are discussed, including the response to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This child-rights platform also launched a unified helpline aimed at identifying and responding to child rights violation cases. The information about this helpline is mainly circulated in social media networks.
- During the pandemic, many NGOs support not only persons subjected to domestic violence, but also different population groups by enrolling them in state assistance programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS TARGETING THE PROTECTION OF PERSONS SUBJECTED TO VIOLENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Recommendations addressed to respective duty-bearers Ministries

- Recognize the institutions protecting persons subjected to domestic violence and providing support services as essential services or essential types of operations/activity.
- Organize regular (once every two weeks is desirable) meetings of the Council of Prevention of Violence in the Family both during the state of emergency and after it, where issues of domestic violence during the COVID-19 and response actions will be discussed.
- Design an action plan of response to domestic violence for the COVID-19 pandemic period by using the experience of response practices applied during the lockdown in other countries.
- Allocate additional financial and other types of resources to address the needs of persons subjected to domestic violence both during the pandemic and after it. Many NGOs lack human resources because in these days, the latter provides support to different groups of population to get enrolled in state assistance programs.
- Allocate anti-virus protection means to organizations subsidized by the state, (masks, gloves, alcohols, thermometers) which will ensure the continuity of services and timely response to cases.
- Involve institutions working in the area of domestic violence in decision making processes.
- Provide additional financial and methodological support to institutions that provide services to persons subjected to domestic violence, based on preliminary assessment of their needs. Design safety rules for shelters and cover the additional needs related to hosting newcomers, including the needs of children and people with disabilities.
- Ensure an immediate provision of the one-time cash assistance (AMD 150,000) to persons subjected to domestic violence.
- Implement a gender disaggregated data collection and analysis of domestic violence cases, including data of concerned children and people with disabilities.
- Raise awareness among teachers, healthcare workers, social workers and other specialists working with different population groups and introduce domestic violence response mechanisms.

Recommendations addressed to law enforcement bodies

- Undertaking of special protection measures by the police for cases of domestic violence, as well as designing and introducing a mechanism to monitor the situation of previous and present beneficiaries.
- Elaboration of a special risk assessment toolkit by the police: fit for the created situation.
- Instruct all patrolling police on support and referral mechanisms for persons subjected to domestic violence.
- Create legal and practical opportunities of conducting investigative and judicial actions in distance and online modes by investigators, interrogators, prosecutors and judges.

- Carrying out of a comprehensive assessment of domestic violence cases by the law enforcement and judicial systems considering risks that arise as a result of perpetrators and survivors being situated in the same location. In any situation the safety of the person subjected to domestic violence shall be deemed a priority.
- Study cases of court decisions on protection orders, prolongation of terms for these decisions based on needs.

Recommendations addressed to service providing organizations

- Elaboration and application of safety rules by organizations, to be protected from the virus, for cases when face-to-face meetings are organized with persons subjected to domestic violence.
- Design and application of special procedures to allow for effective response to cases of domestic violence during the pandemic.
- Monitoring of cases of previous and present beneficiaries.
- Collection of gender-disaggregated data within the overall statistical data collection and analysis of domestic violence cases, including data on children and people with disabilities.

Recommendations on awareness raising and application of alternative means to provide support to persons subjected to domestic violence, addressed to state and non-state institutions

- Undertake awareness raising initiatives in the state of emergency on helplines operated by domestic violence service provider organizations on TV, particularly TV stations with marz coverage.
- Air awareness raising social ads and programmes on preventing domestic violence by the public TV station. The information in these ads and programmes must be in a child-friendly language and accessible for people with disabilities.
- Raise awareness on ways of support, protection and services provided to survivors of domestic violence using the social media channels operated by state institutions.
- Set up one unified free of charge helpline on domestic violence support which will provide a 24/7 psychosocial support to persons subjected to domestic violence. Anticipate the option of providing support via text messages too.
- Raise awareness on helplines supporting persons subjected to domestic violence via text messages disseminated by all mobile operators.
- Disseminate leaflets containing information on contacts of organizations supporting survivors of domestic violence to organizations engaged in humanitarian support. The leaflets can be included in the distributed food packages.
- Hang posters raising awareness on domestic violence in food stores and pharmacies.
- Study the experience of other countries and design alternative and safe means through which persons subjected to domestic violence can receive support, by adapting those for children and people with disabilities.

LIST OF INTERVIEWED SPECIALISTS IN THE FIELD

1. Nelli Duryan, Head of the Department for the Protection of Minors Rights and Combating Domestic Violence of the General Department of Criminal Investigation of the Police
2. A. Gasparyan, Head of the Legal and Statistics Department of the RA Investigative Committee
3. Sh. Israyelyan, Deputy Head of Department of Supervision over Legality of Pre-trial Proceedings in the RA SIS
4. S. Bostanjyan, Senior Specialist of the Human Trafficking and Women's Issues Section in the Equal Opportunities Department by the RA Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
5. A. Muradyan, Senior Specialist of the Department for General Education, RA Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports
G. Avagyan, Head of the Division of Maternal and Reproductive Health Protection of the Department of Maternal and Child Health Protection, RA Ministry of Health
6. N. Pirumyan, Head of the Research and Education Center of the HRDO
7. V. Ohanyan, UN Children's Fund
8. N. Manasyan, UN Children's Fund
9. A. Muradyan, Child Protection Network
10. H. Gevorgyan, "Women's Support Center" NGO
11. G. Babayan, "Women's Rights Center"
12. T. Aghabekyan, "Sexual Assault Crisis Center" NGO
13. G. Grigoryan, "Agat" NGO
14. L. Vardanyan, "Pink" NGO
15. A. Gevorgyan, "Martuni Women's Community Council" NGO
16. S. Matinyan, "Youth Avangard" NGO
17. L. Sahakyan, "Sose Women's Issues" NGO
18. M. Maralchyan, "Young Tavoush" NGO
19. S. Yeghiazaryan, "Arevamanuk" NGO
20. A. Babayan, "Spitak Helsinki Group" NGO
21. N. Harutyunyan, "You are not alone" NGO
22. E. Santrosyan, Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of the Republic of Armenia "Yerevan Child Support Centre "ZATIK"" State Non-Commercial Organization
23. M. Ghalachyan, "Gyumri Children's Social Care Center" SNCO
24. A. Karapetyan, "Yerevan Achapnyak District's Children's Social Care Center" SNCO
25. M. Aperyanyan, "Lori Children's and Family Support Center" SNCO
26. M. Davtyan, "Syunik Children's and Family Support Center" SNCO
27. A. Duryan, "Children's and Family Support Center" SNCO

RAPID ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

This assessment is conducted by the UN Population Fund and aims to assess the response of state and non-state institutions to domestic violence in Armenia during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the state of emergency declared as a result, as well as identify the needs of those institutions in providing an improved response to those cases.

I. General questions

1. How do you assess the response to domestic violence cases in the state of emergency?
2. How do you assess your organization's work in dealing with domestic violence cases during the state of emergency?

II. Statistics

3. How many cases of domestic violence were reported to the organization during the months of February, March and April?
4. If possible, can you present statistical data segregated by various vulnerable groups and marz/city?

Read the question when interviewing the Police and Investigative Committee:

5. How many cases of violence were perpetrated by the intimate partner/husband/son against the woman, and particularly how many cases of murder were recorded during the months of February, March and April? Did the overall number of those cases increase?

Read the question when interviewing the Police and NGOs:

6. How many decisions on applying warnings and immediate intervention orders were made during the months of February, March and April?

Read the questions when interviewing NGOs:

7. For how many cases requiring protection orders did you file a suit to the court during the months of February, March and April?
8. What procedure did you use during the last month to apply for protection orders? What obstacles have you faced in that process, conditioned by the state of emergency?
9. How many women subjected to domestic violence have been received in the shelter during the months of February, March and April?

III. The main needs and the response

Read the question when interviewing MLSA, MoH, MESCS, HRDO and NGOs:

10. What type of assistance do persons subjected to domestic violence expect when calling your organizations and are you able to meet their expectations?
11. What kind of assistance/protection programs and services for persons subjected to domestic violence do you operate in the state of emergency?
12. What particular steps were undertaken to ensure the accessibility of services for people with disabilities?

Read the questions when interviewing the NGOs:

13. How do persons subjected to domestic violence get informed about services during the state of emergency? Do you have any referrals from the police and other state institutions?

Read the question when interviewing NGOs, the Police and the General Prosecutor's Office:

14. How do you deal with persons subjected to domestic violence during the state of emergency? What obstacles do you face?

Read the question when interviewing the Investigative Committee and NGOs:

15. During the investigation of domestic violence cases in the state of emergency, what procedure is used, including for participation in forensic expertise, interrogation, confrontation and other investigative actions?
16. What obstacles do you encounter in the state of emergency when organizing investigative actions?

IV. Awareness

17. Do you take special measures during the pandemic to enhance awareness on the prevention of domestic violence? Are these measures accessible for people with disabilities?

V. Potential assistance

18. What additional resources do you need to support survivors of domestic violence and to enhance access to services for people with disabilities? What kind of support measures do specialists dealing with domestic violence cases need in general, and for enhancing access to services for people with disabilities in particular?