



**Gender equality
policies and practices in Armenia.
The process and impact of combating gender-based violence
against women at the local level**

This policy document was prepared by the Women's Support Center NGO. This document is intended for state policy developers and lawmakers, human rights organizations and the general public. The basis for the development of the document was the meetings held on an inclusive basis, with the participation of public organizations dealing with women and youth issues from all regions of Armenia, employees and social workers of regional administrations, members of councils and active youth. The discussions developed around the issues related to gender equality and, in particular, gender-based violence, were raised by the participants. During the discussions participants also raised the issue concerning the process and impact of reforms implemented in the context of gender equality at the local level.

If you have any questions, you can contact the Women's Support Center.

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What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is a problem that is prevalent all over the world. Armenia is no exception: Domestic violence is an acute social problem in our country, which primarily affects women. According to a survey conducted by the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia in 2021¹, almost a third (31.8%) of women reported that they had experienced psychological violence by an intimate partner, one in seven (14.8%) reported that had experienced physical violence, one in fifteen (6.6%) reported that had experienced sexual violence, and almost a third (29.2%) reported that had experienced economic violence. At the same time, according to the same study, only 12% of women subjected to physical or sexual violence sought help from any responsible institution. This means that it is very difficult to talk about the real prevalence and impact of domestic violence, because there is still a reluctance to talk about the problem.

In 2017, the RA Law on “Prevention of Violence within the Family, Protection of Victims of Violence within the Family and Restoration of Peace in the Family”² was adopted in Armenia. Since 2018, within the framework of the law, the police have been providing protection to persons subjected to domestic violence. In particular, the application of protective measures (warning, decision on urgent intervention) by the police is increasing every year.

The police applied 831 warnings and 337 urgent intervention decisions in 2020, 528 warnings and 544 urgent intervention decisions in 2021, and 556 warnings and 619 urgent intervention decisions in 2022³.

¹“Survey on Domestic Violence against Women, Analytical Report 2021”,
https://armstat.am/file/article/gbv_report_eng.pdf

² <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a6b2e274.html>

³ “Examined cases in which RA police-issued warnings and emergency intervention orders were invalidated by the RA Administrative”, Pecearch 2023
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1moS8gPeOIZ7ojekqL9fRLcFaTlwWh4eW/view>

Although the numbers do not reflect the full picture, every year more cases of domestic and sexual violence are recorded in Armenia due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the 2020 44-day war. These realities and challenges creates urgency around combating gender-based violence and the targeted response of the state to the problem.

Why is it a problem?

Domestic violence differs from other forms of violence, because it takes place in an environment where a person should be surrounded by care, trust and support. Domestic violence is a manifestation of power, authority and control that affects all areas of a person's life. Domestic violence disproportionately affects women, causing physical and mental harm, creating dependency and limiting independence.

Every year in Armenia, at least 10 women are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands or partners⁴. Physical and sexual violence have severe consequences on women's physical and mental health, and long-term professional support is needed to overcome the psychological trauma.

Domestic violence affects all areas of life, both professional and personal, when family members forbid girls to choose a "masculine" profession like becoming a road builder or rescuer, to have "unfeminine" interests like playing football or playing the dhol, to participate in the public life of the community like becoming a member of a council or deputy, etc. This leads to isolation and eventual expulsion of women from public life.

This policy document summarizes the issues raised during discussions regarding gender equality and, more specifically, violence against women conducted inclusively in

⁴ "Neglected Violence: Femicide in Armenia", Report 2022

https://coalitionagainstviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/femicide- web_eng%E2%80%949423122022.pdf

all regions of Armenia, where individuals are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence.

The document is based on the representatives of local self-government bodies, regional governors, joint social services, non-governmental organizations, active youth groups, and religious communities from the Syunik, Kotayk, Gegharkunik, Shirak, Lori and Vayots Dzor marzes.

What problems were raised in regional discussions?

Where are women most likely to experience violence?

Women living in regions are subjected to violence primarily in their families, which is mostly normalized. Family members often make decisions regarding the education and occupations of girls, and after marriage they forbid divorce and limit social ties. Parents forbid girl children to engage in traditionally "masculine" sports or arts, to choose a profession, etc.

And after marriage, women's educational and professional activities end: They cannot develop their professional skills or find their place in the labor market.

"I personally faced gender discrimination when I was still young. All the girls of my age in Sisian went to handicrafts and dancing, and I went to dhol, which was not acceptable in our community, it was a boy's activity. This was one of the most difficult times for me, when my parents also told me that it's not for girls." - Syunik Region

Gender stereotypes are especially acute in the regions, which prevent both girls and boys from having their favorite occupation, choosing a profession or a field of activity. According to the opinions expressed in regional discussions, stereotypes limit women's opportunities and do not allow them to achieve public activity, let alone active political participation. Women are left out of public life because of restrictions and prohibitions by family members.

Husbands and family members forbid women to participate in elections, as a member of the council of elders or community leaders.

"Relatives hinder and do not allow women to make progress, actively participate in politics. The highest place that women reach is a member of the council of elders." - Vayots Dzor Marz

Those who want to take an active part in community life are also targeted or silenced, relying on gender stereotypes and insisting that the public sphere is the domain of men, while women should do housework and child-rearing.

"Gender inequality and stereotypes are very strong in our community, which prevents women from actively participating in public life." - Gegharkunik Region

In fact, the participants of the regional discussions consider pressure and psychological violence from family members as the main obstacle to women's activity and involvement in decision-making, in the form of restrictions on the freedom to choose professions, occupations and work, as well as in terms of involvement in the public sphere and

decision-making level, which is the result of unequal relations, discrimination and stereotyped thinking.

Prevention

The prevention of violence against women is mainly done through the organization of education, information and targeted trainings, as well as the implementation of community programs that can have a positive effect on the promotion of gender equality and the prevention of violence. States often implement prevention measures to raise public awareness of gender-based violence. As the participants of the discussion documented, the level of awareness in the regions of Armenia is low, women are not sufficiently informed about their rights, and the state does not use its resources enough in that direction. Even in state institutions, there are no necessary materials or informative posters, which can help the victims of domestic violence to orient themselves and take appropriate steps.

"The level of awareness in our region is low. Information is disseminated only through NGOs. It would be good for state bodies to be more active in terms of prevention, information dissemination and competent guidance." - Syunik Region

Non-governmental organizations have a great role in raising the level of public awareness, but the resources of NGOs are extremely limited, especially in terms of media access, and all this is organized mainly through trainings, through the efforts of women's rights organizations. According to the participants of the regional discussions, campaigns or community events involving broad sections of society are not carried out, and social advertisements are not shown in media to wide audiences. Men's participation in such campaigns is also highlighted, which can have an impact that overcomes stereotypes and changes lifestyles.

"Of course, the trainings are very important, but after the training, the woman goes home enriched with knowledge, and if she is dependent on her husband her behavior does not change, then the trainings that have been conducted lose their value. In other words, it is worth working towards changing the stereotypical and violent behavior of men." - Lori region

The participants of the discussion were of the opinion that men should participate equally in public campaigns, which should offer the society models of relations based on equality and mutual respect, in contrast to toxic patriarchal approaches, which are spreading and strengthening unhindered in the Armenian media domain.

Education is also an important tool for changing public consciousness, through which the public's thinking and behavioral patterns can be changed. Moreover, in this context, education, as a tool of change, and especially general education, as mandatory and basic education provided by the state, is the most important.

"The important thing is the quality of general education, because when we leave a generation that is not informed and educated, and if we do not do it in the system of mandatory education by the state, we leave it to the individual's discretion in the other stages. General education should be the one that transmits values and rights." - Syunik Region

Regarding the quality of education and especially the content of textbooks, opinions have been voiced that even illustrated textbooks of elementary grades reproduce harmful gender stereotypes, and that content should be changed, as well as teacher training courses.

"It is also necessary to carry out training courses for teachers in order to increase the sensitivity of schools in terms of identifying and reporting cases of domestic violence. Also, let the school become a provider of knowledge about rights." - Syunik Marz.

In fact, the importance of the role of education and the lack of information regarding the prevention of gender-based violence, the transfer of values of equality and the change of behavioral models were raised in the regional discussions. The participants of the discussion emphasize the involvement of men and working with them, emphasizing that gender equality is not only the problem of women but of mutual respect and redistribution of power between the sexes. Work towards the change of stereotypes and behavioral patterns rooted in men will also contribute to increasing the public activity and role of women.

"We also have the problem of raising men's legal awareness. It is important to have meetings between husband and wife so that they change proportionally, because the woman has an increase in legal awareness, and the man remains in the same place, I consider it necessary to work together with couples so that the gender issue is not considered only a women's issue." - Kotayk Marz

Thus, the issues raised as a result of the regional discussions mainly refer to the change in the content of education, which should be aimed at the elimination of gender stereotypes as well as the equality of women and men. In that context, the issue of changing the legal awareness of boys and men was highlighted, which implies targeted work with male representatives in order to achieve behavioral change.

Here we also consider it necessary to draw attention to the importance of the changed content and delivery of the "Healthy Lifestyle" subject taught in the upper grades of the public school, as a means of overcoming gender stereotypes and conveying the principles of equality. Also, to take steps in the direction of revision of the content and teaching methodology of the social sciences.

Disclosure and protection

According to participants in the regions, violence is often normalized. Rural women in particular do not speak out about the violence and do not notify the relevant authorities. According to the current legislation, persons subjected to domestic violence can alert the police and receive protection, as well as receive social, legal and psychological support by applying to support center operating in all regions of Armenia. However, as the participants of the discussions stated, especially the women living in the regions avoid speaking about violence.

"Women often do not speak out about violence, they do not alert the police. It is very unfortunate that our women do not report violence and do not try to resolve it legally." - Kotayk Marz

According to the participants of the regional discussion, the police show an insensitive approach towards women who have been subjected to domestic violence, and the police also are involved in reconciliation, that is, they try to convince the victim of violence not to file a complaint against her husband and to reconcile with him instead. Community social workers and representatives of other state institutions also show the same approach.

"A lot of work needs to be done with community social workers and the police, because in small communities the social worker is the first to work with the family, and the women who turn to them are silenced. Also, police silence women, saying that it is their husbands, don't speak up. It is important to have knowledge of how to deal with cases of violence and where to refer in order to receive competent support." - Syunik Marz

According to the participants of the discussions, the social workers of the Unified Social Service (USS) are closest to the families, but they are almost never active in terms of raising and reporting cases. As a matter of fact, the USS are the closest to communities and families and can react and report violence at earlier stages, as well as make competent referrals to support centers.

During the discussions, problems were also raised regarding the activities of the Guardianship and Trusteeship Bodies (GTB) and unprofessional approaches of the commissions. According to the participants, the cooperation with the NGOs in particular is very difficult, as they do not have adequate knowledge about women's and children's rights. The GTBs also do not have social guarantees in order not to be subject to pressure and violence as a result of their decisions.

"Often, abusers scare or terrorize them, influencing decisions." - Syunik region

Issues related to the judicial system were also raised. The rights of the victims of domestic violence are also violated in the Courts, particularly because the judicial system is not sensitive to the rights of women, the best interests of children are also ignored. Often, ignoring the fact of violence, the judge sets the child's permanent place of residence. And the child becomes a tool, being manipulated by the abusive parent to turn against the mother.

In fact, in regional discussions, problems were raised in terms of reporting cases of violence and protection of victims of violence, related to the lack of trust in the police among the public. In particular, it was mentioned that the police often offer reconciliation to women, which is not the function of the police. Employees of the Unified Social Service also show a similar approach, which calls into question the effectiveness of reporting and protection. Issues have been raised regarding Guardianship and Trusteeship Bodies, where important decisions regarding the rights of the family and especially the child are made. Despite the great powers of the GTBs, they lack sufficient

knowledge and skills, as well as sufficient social and legal guarantees and protection. The same can be said about the courts, which sometimes do not consider the best interest of the child when making decisions.

Support and empowerment

In overcoming gender violence and especially domestic violence, it is important to provide support to women through a competent, specialized structure and to empower women economically. During regional discussions, the quality of providing support to persons subjected to domestic violence and the existence of economic empowerment programs were highlighted. In order to provide support to persons subjected to domestic violence, support centers are operating in all regions of Armenia to provide social, legal and psychological support and 24-hour hotline services. However, according to the participants, the awareness about support centers in regions is low. There are also few economic empowerment programs, and if a woman is not economically independent, she is unlikely to overcome violence. It is also necessary to create jobs so that a woman can find her place in the labor market and be economically independent.

As for the social policy of the state, women need support services. Especially in rural communities, there are no kindergartens, which are not only necessary to ensure children's primary education, but are also a necessary precondition for realizing women's right to work.

"It is not enough for a woman to work to be economically independent and work. If there are no kindergartens in marzes and especially in rural communities, or kindergartens do not work until 6, then obstacles arise. It is necessary for the state to think in this direction." - Aragatsotn region

Thus, during the regional discussions, the participants emphasized the activity of multidisciplinary centers for the support of women subjected to domestic violence but

also highlighted the effectiveness of economic empowerment programs in terms of overcoming dependence on the abuser. Along with realizing the right to work and creating opportunities, the state should think about creating a necessary social system to support women, providing communities with pre-schools and children's centers so that women have the opportunity to work.

Recommendations

RA National Assembly and Government

- Take the necessary measures to change the behavior of women and men at the social and cultural level, to effectively fight against gender stereotypes.
- Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- Develop policies aimed at increasing the effectiveness of combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- To implement public awareness activities related to the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence, using public television, radio and other resources, in order to make the problem accessible to a wide audience.
- Through public information campaigns, make available the telephone numbers of the hotlines of the centers providing support to the victims of domestic violence operating in each region, as well as the range of services.
- Necessary steps should be taken in the direction of changing the content of education, based on changing the ideas of the inferiority of women or the stereotypical roles of women and men.

- Carry out teacher trainings in public schools to impart knowledge on gender equality and domestic violence, as well as on the detection and competent referral of cases of violence.
- In the field of general education, pay special attention to the teaching methodology of the modified content of the "Healthy Lifestyle" subject, and implement monitoring to ensure effectiveness.
- To pay special attention to the content and teaching of the social sciences, as a discipline that forms knowledge and understanding of the equal rights of women and men, as well as offering healthy behavioral models.
- Carry out measures aimed at changing stereotypes and behavioral models, especially among men, in order to ensure a proportional change in the legal awareness of women and men.
- Carry out training activities aimed at gender-based violence and gender-sensitive approaches among police officers.
- Carry out training courses for employees of the Unified Social Service on raising cases of domestic violence and referral to support centers.
- Review the approaches and practices of formation and operation of Guardianship and Trusteeship Bodies, include persons with professional knowledge and conduct training courses related to women's and children's rights.
- Provide guarantees of social and legal protection to the members of Guardianship and Trusteeship committees in order to avoid corruption risks and unnecessary pressures.
- To increase the sensitivity of the judicial system of RA from the point of view of realizing the best interest of persons subjected to domestic violence and the child.
- Introduce women's economic empowerment programs and provide jobs, especially for women living in rural communities.

- All communities in Armenia should be provided with pre-schools as well as the education and socialization of children at an early age so that young women have the opportunity to work.