

Biannual Newsletter

January-June 2019



Ընդդեմ կանանց սկստմամբ
բռնության կոալիցիա

Coalition to stop violence
against women

Introduction

Gender-based discrimination against women, the violations of women's rights continue to be widespread in Armenia. This is primarily because the negative stereotypes about women have not yet been overcome. On the other hand, the state has not pursued a unified state policy on overcoming the negative stereotypes, preventing all forms of gender-based discrimination against women, preventing the violations of women's rights and providing adequate protection. In the first semester of 2019, many politicians in their speeches marked the importance of increasing women's involvement and active participation in the political life and governance system of Armenia, however, one can hardly notice significant changes in practice.

To date, there exists a dearth of information on gender-based violence (GBV) and no state agency that collects comprehensive data on cases in Armenia. As a result of the Coalition's effort to raise awareness on domestic violence and its consequences, more cases have begun to surface and been given media attention. Still, cases of femicide are woefully underestimated due to poor reporting mechanisms and a conscious effort to conceal cases by authorities and perpetrators' families. Nowadays Armenia lacks complete information regarding the cases of femicide.

On the other hand, the number of extremist groups is increasing day by day, that in every way obstruct and discredit the activities of the state and non-governmental organizations in the sphere of women's rights protection, target and spread hatred towards women's rights NGOs as well as towards women human rights defenders.

The hostile attitudes backed by discriminatory narratives and hate speech was especially heightened when Mrs. Lara Aharonian (co-founder of "Women's Resource Center Armenia" NGO) made a speech about the rights of poor women, women with disabilities, single mothers, lesbian, trans and bisexual women, etc, on March 8, 2019, in the framework of the "Civil Society-Parliament cooperation platform for gender equality and equal opportunities on the rights of women from all groups", which made her a target for further online attacks and hate speech.

The manipulations around the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and the impediment to its ratification by various extremist groups and the inadequate response by the state make the work of protecting women's rights even more complex and challenging.

During the first semester of 2019, the "Coalition to Stop Violence against Women" has continued raising public awareness on the issues of domestic violence and its consequences, preventing all types of gender-based

discrimination, protecting the rights and interests of women subjected to domestic violence and gender-based violence, as well as advocating for laws and policies that will promote the human rights of women in all spheres of life.

During the first semester of 2019, the Coalition

- increased public awareness around the issue of DV through press conferences, public statements, talks, and media articles,
- organized a series of meetings with state officials and decision-makers around the DV law and state-level support services to DV survivors,
- continued the ongoing tracking of DV cases, participating in DV court trials, empowering DV survivors and raising public's awareness on the issue.

The report below indicates the main activities that have been undertaken by the Coalition from the period of January – June 2019 according to its strategic directions.



“We, women, should understand our problems, as well as realize our power, the strength of our collective mutual support. As everywhere, in Armenia too, women support each other, help like sisters. We can often admire how women of different generations and same age support each other, share their own experience, help in domestic work, how they share working difficulties in female collectives. However, these experiences of women’s friendship and mutual support often remain in the narrow family and community territories and don’t become a part of public life and experience. We have women’s consolidation environments, but we need and we shall expand them, we shall strengthen other women with our support.”

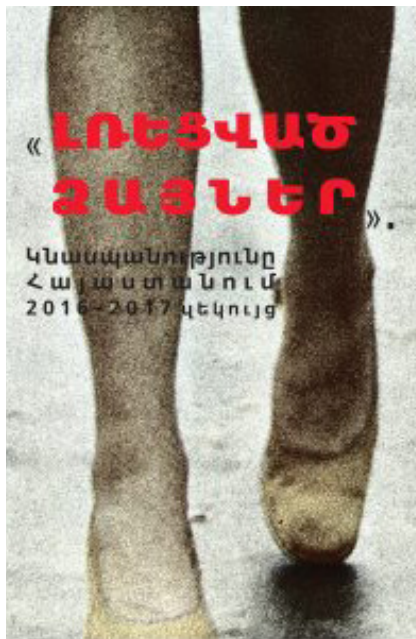
*Lena Nazaryan
Vice President of the National Assembly*

Preventing and Reducing Violence against Women

The Coalition during the first semester of 2019 continued raising public awareness on the issues of DV and GBV, thus changing the societal perceptions about these problems. During this period, the Coalition members participated in several TV programs and public talks, issued official statements, monitored DV court cases, published DV/GBV content in Coalition’s website and social media platforms. It can surely be said that the Coalition has a wide outreach and audience in social media and also tries to target people outside of social media platforms to increase their awareness on DV and GBV and help women survivors of violence. Since the beginning of the year, the Coalition was mostly focused on the cases of Taguhi Mansuryan and Siranush Galoyan. The court trials are still on-going.

“Silenced Voices: Femicide in Armenia” report discussion

On February 19, 2019, the Coalition organized “Gender-based Violence in Armenia: Problems and Legal Regulation” conference, during which the “Silenced Voices: Femicide in Armenia” report was discussed, Coalition’s online database of domestic violence cases was presented, as well as the mechanisms of the Law of RA on “Prevention of Violence within the Family, Protection of Victims of Violence within the Family and



Restoration of Peace in the Family” and the issues regarding its implementation were presented. The conference was attended by representatives of state institutions, international and non-governmental organizations.

The “Silenced Voices” report touches on the stories of women murdered from 2016 to 2017, presenting the court decisions related to their criminal cases and also identifying the legal gaps that exist in Armenia’s legislative and law enforcement systems. The report discusses the conceptual questions related to the phenomenon of femicide and inclusion criteria, the root causes and the types and various manifestations of femicide. Analyzing the femicide cases brings a voice to the stories of women who lost their lives due to unequal power and control, rooted in stereotypes and widespread indifference. The judicial system’s response to the crime is presented within the framework of each story. The report concludes with recommendations to help policy-makers and the larger public tackle the root causes of femicide through more targeted and concrete actions¹.

Online database of domestic violence cases

One of the member organizations of the Coalition, “Society Without Violence” NGO has created a database, which aimed at documenting and rapidly responding to the cases of domestic violence. With the support of the Coalition, the database has undergone some changes and now serves as a systematic tool for the members of the Coalition to jointly document the cases of domestic violence².

Training

The Coalition has organized two-stage training courses for the staff members of the state support centers for domestic violence victims during the first semester of 2019. The training-courses with the staff of support centers in the framework of the EU funded “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Armenia” project implemented by UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF in collaboration with the RA Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in partnership with the Coalition.

Around 70 professionals, social workers, psychologists, lawyers and methodists amongst them, from the support centers located both in Yerevan and the regions participated in a two-stage training course. These are the topics discussed during the workshops:

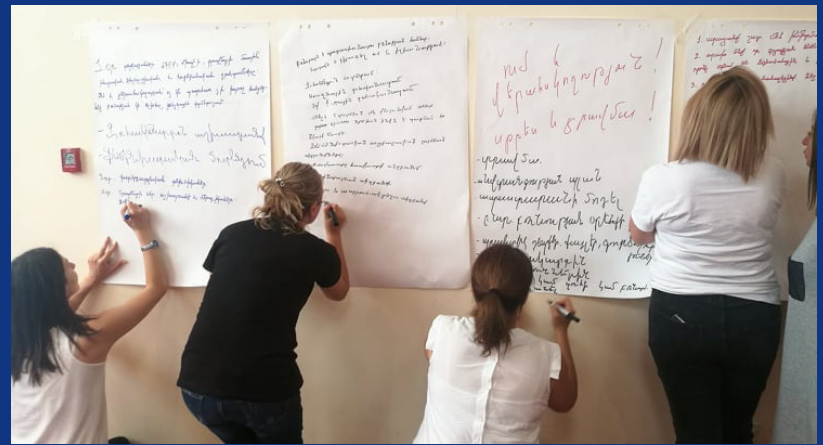
- Gender, gender equality, and gender discrimination;
- Gender-based violence, the gender aspects of sexual violence;
- Domestic violence, its types, and manifestations;
- Trauma and support;
- The manifestations of domestic violence towards people living with HIV;
- Domestic violence and people living with disabilities;
- How to respond to the cases of domestic violence from the legal perspective, when the victim is a representative of some vulnerable group;
- Domestic violence towards LGBT people: the features of response;
- Long-term support for victims of domestic violence;
- Managing domestic violence shelters and requirements;

² <https://rru.swv.am/>

- The feminist approach in social work. features and principles, social worker's code of conduct and mediation,
- The consequences of domestic violence on children, the features of psychological trauma;
- Interdisciplinary cooperation and the sharing of responsibilities in domestic violence case management.

During the training course special professional discussions were organized for specialists from different fields, such as:

- Legal knowledge on domestic violence and skills for lawyers;
- Practical skills and knowledge on domestic violence for social workers;
- Practical skills and knowledge on domestic violence for social workers.



Ensuring Effective Protection and Support Mechanisms for Women Subjected to Violence

During the first semester of 2019, the Coalition has continued its work to promote the prevention of gender-based violence and address these issues at the legislative level, as well as support the persons subjected to gender-based violence and provide assistance. Moreover, the Coalition continued its cooperation with the decision-makers, particularly with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, other representatives of state institutions, with the members of parliament, participated in advocacy campaigns and events.

Need assessment of Family and Child Support Centers

The Coalition, in the framework of the EU funded “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Armenia” project implemented by UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF have organized need assessment in 6 family and child support centers.

In September 2018, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Armenia has made a verbal decision that hereinafter day-care centers, operating in Armenia, will serve as domestic violence support centers. This need assessment was conducted aiming at evaluating the quality of services provided to victims of domestic violence in support centers and for increasing their efficiency. According to the data gathered in the framework of the research, we can conclude that there are certain gaps in the sphere, and concrete steps should, therefore, be taken to eliminate those gaps, in particular:

1. Amendments to the law on domestic violence and its mechanisms (including for the law enforcement bodies) should be carried out aiming at developing and presenting clearer and more detailed procedures.
2. Development and provision of appropriate training and supervision system for field professionals.
3. Large-scale public awareness-raising activities should be implemented about the domestic violence support centers and provided services.

“National Assembly-CSO cooperation platform of cooperation for equal rights and equal opportunities of women and men”

On March 8, 2019, at the Golden Hall of the National Assembly, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the RA National Assembly and CSOs thus establishing a bilateral open cooperation platform to ensure actual equality of women’s and men’s rights and opportunities that was initiated by the National Assembly and Oxygen Foundation.

Members of the Coalition were also participating in the discussion and addressed women’s issues in their speeches. The co-founder of “Women’s Resource Center” NGO, Lara Aharonian drew the attention of the participants to the issue that women are diverse: “When we are talking about women, we often see only one type of woman - mother, sister sometimes and that’s it!. But I want to remind us that we are also single mothers, we are mothers, who have lost their children in the military, we are women, that do not want to become mothers, we are elder people, we are trans women, we are lesbians and bisexuals, that want or do not want to adopt a child, we are women living in the borderline villages, we are poor, we are Yezidi women, we are women with disabilities and when laws are being drafted, we all must be careful that women of one image should not benefit from those laws. You should have in your mind the image of all these women that I have mentioned including women living with HIV, sex worker women, and many others. “



The representative of the Coalition Zaruhi Hohannisyan also referred to the manifestations of sexism and noted that women parliamentarians are often becoming a target of unfair public criticism. “The society is ruthless towards women and often deputies are not protected from being targeted and exposed to sexism as well. Therefore, we, the women’s rights activists, will always be your supporters and defenders”. At the end

of the event, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding was preceded by an extensive discussion about women’s political participation, NA and CSOs cooperation mechanisms to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men³.

“Human Rights National Agenda. Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations” public discussion in the Parliament

On April 5, the Standing Committee on Human Rights and Public Affairs of the National Assembly organized a parliamentary discussion on Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations initiated by the ombudsman Arman Tatoyan and United Nations’ Armenia office.

The Chair of the Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs of the National Assembly of Armenia, Ms. Naira Zohrabyan, in her welcoming speech remarked that the event is the first of its kind to be held in Armenia, hosted a public discussion devoted to the role of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism in light of its safeguards and guarantees for human rights and was organized in preparation for Armenia’s 3rd cycle of Review in 2020. In her speech, she highlighted that the event also aims at promoting the cooperation between all branches of the state, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and diplomatic missions. The Chair of the Standing Committee also focused on the crucial role that key public institutions, including the Parliament, play in implementing international commitments into national policies and laws, as well as oversight functions.

The Coalition, member organizations of the Coalition also participated in the hearing. In her speech, Zaruhi Hovhannisyan from the Coalition noted the importance of alternative reports to Universal Periodic Review and highlighted that the state should take all appropriate measures to protect human rights. She also raised the importance of cooperation with non-governmental organizations.

The Coalition, member organizations of the Coalition also participated in the hearing. In her speech, Zaruhi Hovhannisyan from the Coalition noted the importance of alternative reports to Universal Periodic Review and highlighted that the state should take all appropriate measures to protect human rights. She also raised the importance of cooperation with non-governmental organizations.



“We have to speak up and discuss the problems openly about the vulnerable groups without discrimination and find solutions for them with joint efforts”.



“Domestic Violence Prevention in Armenia: Challenges and Opportunities” National Conference

“Domestic Violence Prevention in Armenia: Challenges and Opportunities” conference took place on May 27, 2019, in Yerevan, Armenia. Over 130 participants from the Republic of Armenia came together to discuss the national legal framework on combating domestic violence, concurrent challenges concerning the law “On Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Solidarity in Family”, the existing gaps in its implementation, and the possibilities for the amendments to the law. The Conference’s delegates and speakers - who included the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs of Armenia, deputy ministers, Members of Parliament, other representatives of the government and local governance, especially the representatives of territorial agencies for social support of regional administrations, the head of the EU Delegation to Armenia, representatives of international and non-governmental organizations, etc. - during the conference once again emphasized the need for large-scale work on prevention of domestic violence, the need for support to victims of violence and solving the problems and highlighted the importance of the cooperation of all partners in this area.

During the Conference the general phenomena of domestic violence, national legal framework on combating domestic violence, the existing challenges and gaps for the full implementation of the law “On Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Solidarity in Family” were discussed, as well as the need for amendments of the law and the package of recommendations were presented.





“It is of crucial importance, that discussions around the problem of domestic violence remain human-centered so that not to lose the person between the numbers and legal acts. The State has not yet adequately responded to these cases. The issues of domestic violence should be discussed in a sincere environment.”

*Zhanna Andreyan
RA Deputy Minister of
Labour and Social Affairs*



The National Conference was organized in the framework of the EU funded “Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Armenia” project implemented by UNDP, UNFPA, and UNICEF. The event was co-organized by the RA Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in partnership with the Coalition.

Old and New Challenges

Organizations and human rights defenders working in the field of women's rights, especially those who are working in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights are extremely vulnerable in the public sector as well, as they are harassed both by state institutions and by reactionary groups promoting discriminatory culture. Women human rights defenders are more at risk of suffering certain types of violence and prejudice, particularly because women defenders are often perceived as challenging accepted socio-cultural norms, traditions, and stereotypes about femininity, sexual orientation, and the role and status of women in society. In Armenia, women human rights defenders are often subjected to these forms of violence and constantly work under the threat of both physical and verbal attacks organized and/or triggered by anti-human rights extremist groups. The state is lacking its obligation to ensure a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and guarantee proper protection to human rights defenders, as a part of its responsibility to protect and promote human rights as stipulated by numerous international treaties, ratified by Armenia.

On March 8, 2019, in the framework of the Civil Society-Parliament cooperation platform for gender equality and equal opportunities on the rights of women from all groups, Mrs. Aharonian made a speech about the rights of poor women, women with disabilities, single mothers, lesbian, trans and bisexual women, etc, which made her a target for further online attacks and hate speech.

On March 11, 2019, Mrs. Lara Aharonian reported the attacks and insults, hate speech to the Police of RA with a demand to investigate and punish those responsible for the attacks against her. However, the previous experiences of human rights defenders becoming a target for hate speech and reporting it to the Police, and the continuing attacks against those working in the field of human rights in Armenia show the urgency of taking decisive steps to ensure defenders' safety. Regrettably, none of the hate speech cases reported to the Police by human rights defenders were legally identified as such and nobody took responsibility for spreading hatred, and inaction by the Police and other responsible state institutions only worsens this climate, because it gives the impression that violence against defenders will be tolerated and go unpunished.

On April 5, the Standing Committee on Human Rights and Public Affairs of the National Assembly initiated a discussion on Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations, in which representatives of the Government, the National Assembly, as well as representatives of international organizations and local civil society participated. However, during the speeches, the chairperson of the NGO "Right Side", trans woman Lilit Martirosyan,



Chairperson of the NA Standing Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Public Affairs Naira Zohrabyan spoke out loudly about the speech, noting that the issues of transgender individuals were not on the agenda; talking about that topic is disrespectful to her and the parliament. Several organizations, the Coalition as well, considered Ms. Zohrabyan's response to Lilit Martirosyan's speech as discriminatory and degrading. The hate speech towards Lilit Martirosyan continued online, even she received death threats, however, until today, nobody took responsibility.

On May 4, one of the members of the Coalition, "Sexual Assault Crisis Center" NGO, which is the only human rights defending NGO in Armenia that provides specialized services to the victims of sexual violence, has organized a discussion about the "My Body is Personal" book at Bookinist café. 25 people broke into the café and made a disturbance because of which the event could not continue. There were individuals amongst them, who have been spreading misinformation, threats, and hatred towards women's rights organizations and human rights defenders since 2013. Some men threw eggs at the participants at the entrance to the Bookinist café. To date, however, no one has been held responsible.

Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) has been in the spot of nationwide debate and manipulation in Armenia during the spring and summer of 2019. Those individuals and groups of people, who were fighting against the adoption of the law on domestic violence, against the gender equality law, as well as are spreading manipulation information both about the domestic violence and international conventions and covenants, are now fighting against the ratification of Istanbul Convention (Armenia signed the Convention in January 2018). The Armenian Apostolic Church, other political and public actors have joined the criticism of the Convention. Chairman of the Chamber of Advocates Ara Zohrabyan, one of the most vocal critics of the Convention, has been rallying support for his campaign to "stop the Istanbul Convention" through a website. He has organized a petition against the ratification of the Convention on the change.org platform, which was later removed by change.org.

Armenia has signed and ratified several international conventions and documents, and the Istanbul Convention is just one of them.

Without ratification, it cannot function fully: becoming a party to the Convention and working towards preventing, combating and eliminating violence against women and domestic violence would benefit all members of Armenian society.

For the second half of this year, the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women will continue its activities within its strategic directions.



Coalition Supporters

Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

Open Society Foundations – Armenia

UNFPA



Report prepared by Nvard Margaryan

This report is prepared with the financial support of Open Society Foundations - Armenia

© 2019, Coalition to Stop Violence against Women

The image features a dark gray background with decorative elements consisting of a grid of colored squares. In the top right corner, there is a cluster of squares in shades of red, orange, and yellow. In the bottom left corner, there is a smaller cluster of squares in shades of orange and red. The central text is a website URL in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

www.coalitionagainstviolence.org