



**Problems and Challenges Faced by Support Centers
Providing Services to Victims of Domestic Violence**

Research

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Abbreviations

SC	Support Center
DV	Domestic violence
DPRFWC	Division for Protection of Rights of Family, Women and Children
USS	Unified Social Services
GTB	Guardianship and Trusteeship Body
GTC	Guardianship and Trusteeship Commission
MESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport
CoE	Council of Europe
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
MLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
LSGB	Local self-government body
MM	Mass media

Main Concepts and Definitions

Violence against women

All acts of gender-based violence which lead or may lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm to women, as well as threats, coercion to commit violent actions in social or private life or the arbitrary deprivation of liberty.

Domestic violence

All acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that are committed within the family or familial unit or between former or current spouses and partners, regardless of whether the abuser lives or has lived with the victim in the same home or not.

Gender

Social roles, types of behavior, and types and characteristics of activities that a given society considers normal for women and men.

Gender-based (sex-based) violence against women

Violence that is directed at a woman because she is female or that is disproportionately directed at women.

Gender stereotypes

Preconceived notions that attribute characteristics or roles to men and women that are defined and limited by their sex. Gender stereotypes are established in childhood, are very stable, difficult to change, and adhered to even by the groups against which they were formed.

Patriarchy

A form of social organization wherein the man is the main bearer of political power and moral authority. Patriarchy is characterized by the institution of male power and male privileges, in which women are subordinated and given a subordinate status.

Istanbul Convention

Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The Convention was signed in 2011 in Istanbul, which is why it is called the Istanbul Convention.

Introduction

Domestic violence is one of the most serious challenges worldwide. It is exacerbated and more evident every year owing to frequently repetitive epidemics, wars and other crisis situations. In Armenia, as in the whole world, women are the overwhelming majority of those subjected to domestic violence. Studies indicate that women in Armenia are most often abused by their former and current husbands and partners; however, 43.3% of women who are physically or sexually abused by their partners remain silent about the violence. Only 12% of women subjected to physical or sexual violence by their partner turn to an institution for help. Women subjected to domestic violence turn to responsible agencies only when they can no longer tolerate the violence or they have already suffered serious injuries as a result of the violence¹.

In this context, the availability of high-quality support services for victims of violence as well as the accessibility of support structures to effectively prevent violence is very important.

The RA Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Harmony in the Family², which Armenia adopted in 2017, as well as the CoE Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence” (Istanbul Convention)³, which Armenia signed⁴ but has not yet ratified, ensure frameworks for services and protections that should be provided to victims of domestic violence.

- 1** “Survey on Domestic Violence Against Women, 2021”, <https://armstat.am/am/?nid=82&id=2487&fbclid=IwAR3kWMypZqF9yQIfPoXmIxeKk9COf5VTaENdxYbJpVsWzivFdj9IfdupTt4>
- 2** <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>
- 3** <https://rm.coe.int/168046246d>
- 4** <http://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=93292>

As indicated in Chapter 4 of the Istanbul Convention under protection and support, the state must implement a victim-centered policy, protect all victims of violence from any further acts of violence, and provide services aimed at overcoming violence. The services provided should be aimed at the elimination of secondary victimisation of victims of violence and the empowerment and economic independence of women subjected to domestic violence. They should take into account the special needs of vulnerable people, including children, and ensure that services are accessible to them. The provision of services should not be conditioned by the victim's willingness to assert her complaint or testify against the individual perpetrating violence.

Attaching importance to the work of support services for victims of domestic violence, in 2008 the Council of Europe published the manual "Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services"⁵, which presents what kind of services should be provided to victims of violence, by which specialists, and what minimum standards should apply to support services. Later, in 2015, the "Essential services package for women and girls subject to violence"⁶ was published in partnership with UN agencies.

These documents are guidelines for providing support and services in accordance with international human rights standards.

5 [https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF\(2007\)Study%20rev.en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF(2007)Study%20rev.en.pdf)

6 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/essential-services-package-for-women-and-girls-subject-to-violence>

Aim of the research

Since 2020, support centers⁷ for victims of domestic violence have been established in each of the 10 provinces of Armenia with the support of the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The Women's Support Center NGO, a member of the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women, regularly and consistently trains the specialists of these regional centers so that they have sufficient skills, knowledge and gender sensitivity to provide appropriate support to women survivors of domestic violence. These trainings are based on best international practices. All domestic violence support centers follow the same methodology and have uniform documentation forms that are approved by the MLSA.

Nevertheless, legislative and procedural gaps as well as the stereotypical approaches of law enforcement bodies lead to a number of problems and challenges that the support centers providing services face in their daily work.

For the purpose of improving the legal and procedural framework for combating domestic violence, it is important to identify the practical issues that the regional support centers deal with in their everyday work with survivors of domestic violence and state bodies.

For this purpose, the following issues were considered:

- the financial, professional, and logistical capabilities of the support centers;
- availability and recognisability of the support centers among residents of the given province;

7 https://www.mlsa.am/?page_id=19928

- cooperation of the support centers with state institutions, including law enforcement bodies;
- systemic, legislative, or procedural problems hindering or complicating the work of the support centers; and
- stereotypes hindering the work of the support centers.

During the research, the mentioned problems were raised, and recommendations were developed for policymakers as well as for state bodies in an effort to organise their work more effectively and change the stereotypical approaches to domestic violence in the public sphere.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research was employed to effectively highlight the research purpose and issues raised.

- In-depth interviews were conducted with staff members of support centers operating in all provinces;
- In-depth key informant interviews were conducted with specialists at the Women's Support Center NGO, involved in training the support centers;
- Legal documents and procedures related to the work of the support centers were examined.

The resulting main problems and challenges were identified and summarized. The analysis and recommendations deriving from the research will serve as an advocacy tool for the amendment and improvement of relevant legislative initiatives and policies.

The research showcases situations that require immediate solutions and typical of cases of domestic violence using specific examples.

Chapter 1

FINANCIAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND LOGISTICAL CAPABILITIES OF THE SUPPORT CENTERS

In accordance with the RA law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Harmony in the Family⁸, support for victims of violence is carried out by support centers, which make decisions around placing individuals subjected to domestic violence and those under their care in shelters upon their consent. Since 2020, support centers have been functioning in all the provinces of Armenia with the financial support of the state. Services to individuals subjected to domestic violence are provided by non-governmental organisations functioning in the region that have knowledge and experience in the field of protection of women's rights. Organisations in the provinces undergo a special selection procedure in order to take on the function of support centers and then receive funding from the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. However, it should be noted that the Women's Support Center NGO provides invaluable support to the regional NGOs by investing its professional, financial, and logistical resources to ensure the effective operation and establishment of the regional support centers. The Women's Support Center NGO also runs the two shelters for victims of domestic violence functioning in Armenia, with some support from the state.

Information about organisations providing services to individuals subjected to domestic violence, that is SCs and shelters, is posted

8 <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

on the website of the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs⁹; however, it is problematic that this data is not updated and, in fact, some of the mentioned regional organisations no longer function as support centers. Therefore, it is currently not possible to obtain accurate information about the support centers from the website, which must be remedied.

Below is the list of organisations (support centers and shelters) providing services to individuals subjected to domestic violence and their hotlines numbers.

⁹ https://www.mlsa.am/?page_id=19928

	Province/City	Hotline
1	Shirak/Gyumri Women's Rights House NGO	077 570-870
2	Kotayk/Hrazdan Resource Center for Women's Empowerment NGO	077 380-053
3	Vayots Dzor/Yeghegnadzor You Are Not Alone women's support NGO	098 886-077
4	Ararat/Artashat You Are Not Alone women's support NGO	098-88-60-77
5	Armavir/Armavir Youth Avangard NGO	093 574-657
6	Aragatsotn/Talin Talin-Huys NGO	091 482-035
7	Lori/Vanadzor Family Without Violence NGO	098-09-20-94
8	Tavush/Ijevan Young Tavush NGO	094 788-770
9	Gegharkunik/Martuni, Gavar Women's Rights Center NGO	094 876-505
10	Syunik/Goris Sose Women's Issues NGO	098 848-453
11	Yerevan Women's Support Center NGO	099-88-78-08

1.1. Financial capabilities of the support centers

The support centers functioning in Armenia's provinces each provide services to more than 100 beneficiaries per year, receiving AMD 5-5.5 million from the state. According to the representatives of the support centers, this amount is only enough to partially cover salaries. They must implement other programmes to cover fees for rent and utility payments, transportation expenses, property acquisition, and other expenses.

There are problems with the office property. We have a problem covering expenses for transportation. There are no funds allocated for transportation expenses.

Lori Marz Support Center

In actuality, since the grant provided by the state is only partially sufficient for salaries, the non-governmental organisations must attract other financial resources by implementing other programmes that enable the support center to continue operating and providing high-quality services.

The amount of money provided to the center is limited; it is only enough for salaries, and that is on a part-time basis. If the NGO did not have other programmes, we would not be able to survive, let alone provide high-quality services.

Shirak Marz Support Center

In addition, the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, which finances the support centers, has changed its payment policy this year and funds the support centers on an incremental basis. This

means that the support centers do not receive the due amount each month, and the main financial transfer is made at the end of the year, during the autumn. The state is not concerned with how the support centers should generate money.

They tell us to borrow money in the form of a loan from other programmes or NGOs, that it is up to us to figure that out. How am I supposed to not work full-time all year round, not pay salaries, and request 2 million at the end of the year? How can I transfer money envisaged for another programme to this one? How shall I explain to the donor of another programme that I am using the money for another programme? It's illogical to receive 2 million drams at the end of the year and not have proper financing throughout the year.

Tavush Marz Support Center

In fact, not only are the financial resources provided by the state limited, they are also not transferred regularly, such that the support center has difficulty paying salaries. This approach causes additional concern for the non-governmental organisations, which have serious challenges in attracting other financial resources. And if the NGO is still new, difficulties arise in generating funds from other donors to implement programmes.

The more established you are as an NGO, the more your resources provide opportunities to implement programmes, which contribute to the high-quality work of the center.

Armavir Marz Support Center

The financial instability also causes problems for the beneficiaries of the support centers, as they incur transportation expenses to visit the center, and for specialists who must make trips to various bodies.

When a need arises to transport the beneficiary from one marz to another one or to a shelter, the Women's Support Center helps us. When we need it, we cover transportation expenses using other organisational programmes.

Vayots Dzor Support Center

There are also problems traveling within a community, as the means of transport from remote villages to regional centers runs twice a week at inconvenient times, thus making it difficult for beneficiaries to get to the support center. In this way, the beneficiary cannot access the support center to receive consultation and other services in order to prevent the cycle of violence.

The NGO gives money to the social worker in order to solve the transportation problem in the most affordable way possible, but the issue of transportation from the villages to the marz center is awful and hard to solve. Often, they use taxis to get from place to place at the expense of other organisational programmes.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

Thus, the limited financial resources provided by the state, the instability and disproportionality of the provision of funds, the lack of funds envisaged for transportation, and office and other expenses are an additional burden for non-governmental organisations, which often find other donors or turn to the Women's Support Center NGO to operate continuously and effectively.

1.2. Professional capabilities of the support centers

All the centers providing support to individuals subjected to domestic violence have social workers and psychologists, mostly working part-time. The specialists have been trained by the Women's Support Center NGO and receive ongoing counselling for individual cases. However, according to the specialists, they work much longer than the part-time fixed working arrangement.

Having part-time employees is not enough for the support center to be fully functional. We do our best to provide full services as much as possible. We have that dedication and will.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

As the representatives of the support centers stated during the interviews, it is very difficult to find specialists in the provinces, particularly lawyers willing to work for such low salaries.

Funds for legal services are very tight. Even if we find a high-quality specialist in the marz, we're not able to attract them with that fee.

Gegharkunik Marz Support Center

The support centers often provide legal counselling only, and if a lawyer is needed, they send beneficiaries to the Public Defender's Office or the Women's Support Center NGO.

The lawyer provides counselling. We refer them to the Public Defender's Office or the Women's Support Center for legal services.

Shirak Marz Support Center

The support centers also have difficulties in attracting social workers, because social workers dealing with cases of violence against women are very different from social workers in other fields. They have to undergo specialised training and have a gender-sensitive approach and knowledge in the field of women's rights. It is also very difficult to provide support to individuals subjected to domestic violence in a society with patriarchal approaches, as social workers are treated completely differently.

I worked with a charity organisation and carried out social work. When you enter a family, assess the support you should provide, you are seen as a saint, you are a benefactor, you are a good person. But in our case, when you protect a woman's right, you are considered a family destroyer. Abusers and their relatives point fingers at you.

Tavush Marz Support Center

All the support centers have psychologists who provide psychological support to women and children, but here too there are certain issues related to conflict of interest, as the same psychologist often works with both the mother and child. Some support centers refer

the children to other institutions.

We have one psychologist. We do not have a child psychologist, which is not appropriate. Sometimes we refer the children to another agency, or children participate in group therapy, but individual work is not carried out with a psychologist to avoid any conflict of interest.

Shirak Marz Support Center

Thus, the support centers also have problems recruiting specialists, both due to financial opportunities and the lack of specialists in the provinces.

1.3. Logistic feasibility of the support centers

The majority of the support centers providing services to individuals subjected to domestic violence rent their office premises, with exception of a few NGOs that have their own offices to ease the financial burden of the support center. Having their own premises also ensures the stability of the support center and reduces the risk of having to change premises. The representatives of support centers leasing offices spaces state that, although they try their best to adjust the premises to the requirements of the SC, it is difficult to fundamentally change the premises, since it is not theirs, as well as to ensure accessibility for individuals with mobility issues. Some support centers operate in administrative buildings which do not have wheelchair ramps and elevators.

That being said, several SCs function in spaces belonging to the NGO, and this significantly increases the efficiency of their work and provides possibilities to make the space accessible.

We bought the premises via fund-raising, renovated it according to our requirements and plans, freed ourselves from rental expenses and having to move from one place to another.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

Support centers also have issues with property; although they try with their limited resources to acquire safe, lockable cabinets for documents and to act in accordance with the principle of personal data protection and confidentiality, it is not always possible.

We don't have a safe, a special lockable cabinet or property. We cannot acquire it yet, and we have problems with the property. The office does not have a wheelchair ramp. We rent in the center of the city, but the building does not have facilities for people with disabilities.

Lori Marz Support Center

Given concerns about beneficiaries being targeted, the support centers try to conceal the nature of their activities in every possible way, because society still blames individuals subjected to domestic violence. Therefore, the SCs operate in protected areas as much as possible and carry out diverse activities.

We rented our office in a building where there are child development centers, an office for cosmetics, etc. A woman can enter that building for various other reasons, and there is intentionally nothing written on the entrance of our center so that people do not know where the woman is coming and cannot target her.

Lori Marz Support Center

The support centers also try to implement a diverse array of projects so that the SC is not perceived and labelled as a DV center and thus the beneficiary can enter there unnoticed.

We do not have signboards on our offices, so that the person entering is not targeted. We started our organisation's activities with other projects—economic support, puppet making and other skills building—and women and children from various groups always came to us. At the moment, we also have projects around employment and providing leisure for elderly and children, which conceals our activities that could be a grounds for targeting. Now we have created a women's club, in which women from different social groups participate.

Vayots Dzor Support Center

In addition to providing support and counselling, the support centers also implement programmes aimed at women's empowerment. There are two types of empowerment: personal empowerment to increase the victim's legal awareness and self-esteem and economic empowerment to enable women subjected to violence to gain economic independence and stability.

The most vulnerable thing is that we would have almost no results if we only provided services. The woman would be forced to return to the abuser again. Our work would yield 50% less results if we did not implement other programmes aimed at women's economic empowerment and development and if the Women's Support Center didn't help us. Programmes aimed at economic empowerment must be implemented to completely liberate women from violence.

Gegharkunik Marz Support Center

The question of guaranteeing the security of SCs is also problematic. Only certain centers are equipped with cameras. Security alarm systems that directly connect to law enforcement bodies, a paid service, are set up only at the Women's Support Center NGO in Yerevan. Although the police departments are closer to the SCs in the regions, the work of human rights organisations dealing with domestic violence is quite risky; sometimes the abusers try to break into offices and disrupt the activities of the organizations.

The abuser followed his wife into the office, shouting, "What are you doing?" There is no protection, and we always face that risk.

Tavush Marz Support Center

Thus, the support centers have many problems related to their premises and office property, which they try to get around via various programs, given that the funds provided by the state do not cover these costs in any way. Apart from issues related to their premises and property, SCs also have security problems. Very few of the centers have security systems and cameras.

Chapter 2

AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND RECOGNISABILITY OF THE SUPPORT CENTERS

In accordance with the CoE minimum standards for support services¹⁰, the centers providing support to victims of domestic violence must adhere to the following principles:

- confidentiality;
- safety and security as well as respect for beneficiaries;
- accessibility for all, including vulnerable groups;
- availability, with access to a 24/7 hotline;
- services free-of-charge;
- centralised services, with multidisciplinary staff.

The main goal of the support centers is to reinstate women's self-sufficiency that was unlawfully taken away from them, in other words to provide services in such a way that a woman having survived violence can make independent decisions, ensure her and her children's well-being, and live free from violence.

For the purpose of achieving that goal, the SCs must be recognisable, accessible and available in their provinces.

10 [https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF\(2007\)Study%20rev.en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF(2007)Study%20rev.en.pdf)

2.1. Availability and recognisability of the support centers

Support centers functioning in all marzes of Armenia have hotline services, which are operated by social workers. These hotlines are available 24 hours a day, including weekends.

As enshrined in Article 24 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence:

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helplines free of charge to provide advice to callers, confidentially or with due regard for their anonymity, in relation to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention¹¹.

The support centers ensure this approach in accordance with international standards, but the project implemented by the state jointly with the SCs dictates that the hotline service be available only on working days within working hours.

According to the programme of the Ministry, the hotline service is available until 18:00 and not including weekends. But we work 24/7 thanks to other programmes. We receive 15-20 primary calls per month, and our registered beneficiaries are always in touch with us and call us. All of our beneficiaries continue to keep in touch with the center.

Syunik Marz Support Center

The support centers try to make the hotline numbers available to the public through business cards and the Facebook pages of their non-governmental organisations. The hotline number has also been

11 <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046246d>

provided to all structures in the provinces, including the police, Ministry of Emergency Situations, Regional Administrations, Unified Social Services, and others.

Although the hotline service is meant to be offered until 18:00, we do not turn it off because we must always be available. It happened that a call was received at 1:30 a.m. by the police, and an alert was received by MES at 1:00 a.m. about an emergency. The husband came, beat her, took the child from her, and the woman went to jump off a bridge in a state of despair. We responded quickly, and the Women's Support Center NGO from Yerevan also helped. The child was returned to the mother, and that woman was so grateful that she even called and said that now she understands the situation of women who are being subjected to violence and the importance of the support we provide.

Aragatsotn Marz Support Center

Although the support centers provide a round-the-clock hotline service by attracting additional funds, they note that these phone numbers are not so widespread, and women in the most remote settlements are not informed. The phone numbers of hotlines are not shown at various community structures, and work with the media is complicated and requires large financial resources.

Within the framework of other programmes, we prepare informative courses and radio programmes, during which time we also make our hotline phone number public so that women are informed, can call and contact us. At present, we are trying to apply for programmes in order to carry out public awareness-raising on regional television.

Shirak Marz Support Center

Thus, the hotline numbers function around-the-clock only thanks to the funds allocated from the NGOs' other programmes. The phone numbers are also publicised through courses, events and campaigns carried out within the framework of other programmes. They are not placed in visible places at state structures and are not always provided to those alerting relevant bodies.

Chapter 3

COOPERATION OF THE SUPPORT CENTERS WITH STATE INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING LAW ENFORCEMENT BODIES

Domestic violence is a widespread violation of human rights, and especially of women's rights, which is impossible to overcome without stable and effective cooperation between state and public institutions dealing with the problem.

No single body or service is able to perform all functions effectively without undergoing appropriate trainings and being willing to cooperate with each other. That is why it is important to observe the quality of cooperation between support centers and authorised bodies implementing prevention of and protection from domestic violence.

As enshrined in the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Harmony in the Family¹²:

The prevention of domestic violence and the protection of victims of violence are carried out by the republic's authorised executive body in the field of social affairs, the RA Police, the republic's authorised executive body in the field of education, the republic's authorised executive body in the field of health care, the guardianship and trusteeship authorities, special institutions providing support to victims of domestic violence, namely the support centers and

12 <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

shelters, as well as state and local self-government bodies, within the framework of their functions.

The mentioned bodies also participate in public awareness about domestic violence and the implementation of the measures aimed at providing social and material assistance to individuals subjected to violence in the family.

In fact, the effectiveness of the fight against domestic violence depends on the cooperation of all these institutions, which is the subject of consideration within the scope of this research.

3.1. Cooperation with the RA Police

Within the framework of the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Harmony in the Family, the prevention of domestic violence and protection of individuals subjected to violence is meant to be carried out through specialised sub-division. Employees must undergo regular training as required by law, as they are the primary responders to incidents of domestic violence. They are required to outline rights to individuals subjected to domestic violence who report to the police, describe the available support services and, where necessary, refer them to support centers. Under the law, they are also required to make decisions around placing individuals subjected to domestic violence and those under their care in shelters¹³.

According to the representatives of the SCs functioning in the provinces, individuals subjected to domestic violence who report to the police are not always directed to proper support services. This service must be timely and dignified, otherwise it loses its effectiveness.

13 Law of the Republic of Armenia “On prevention of domestic violence, protection of persons subjected to domestic violence and restoration of solidarity in family”, Article 15. Powers of the Police in the sphere of prevention of violence in the family and protection of persons having been subjected to violence in the family <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

We don't closely cooperate with the police. The beneficiaries find us through other means. The police turn to us when a psychologist or a social worker is needed, that is, the police decide when and in which cases a beneficiary should be sent to support centers. But the center should be informed about all cases so that we can call the beneficiaries and understand whether they want to receive support or not. That is not a matter to be decided by the police.

Armavir Marz Support Center

There are police departments that do not refer cases to us, even though the law requires them to. They refer to the USS and not to SCs functioning in that area. When we ask for the reason, we are told that they are not the kind of people we should be working with.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

In actuality, the police do not always fulfil the requirements of the law and make arbitrary decisions around not referring all women and children subjected to violence to support centers. Different police sub-divisions carry out referrals differently. The SCs receive letters about certain cases, which take a very long time to be received and lack relevant data. There are also cases that are forwarded to the USS or the Regional Administration. That is to say, there is not a stable mechanism for case referrals. Additionally, police often refer those carrying out abuse to the SC, because they are very concerned about where the abuser should go if an emergency barring order is issued. This is a serious danger for the SC employees, including women visiting the centers.

I have said numerous times that we do not work with abusers, though the law says that we must work with the abuser. To this day, this issue has not been resolved, so we do not know where the abuser should go for rehabilitation. But the police often justify the abuser by saying, "He wouldn't beat for no reason". It's as if they justify the violence and are much more concerned about the abuser.

Syunik Marz Support Center

While the function of the police is to protect individuals subjected to violence, according to the SCs, the police often try to reconcile the husband and wife, even though this function is not assigned to them. Among those subjected to domestic violence who sought support from the SC, there are many women who were invited to the police station shortly after filing a claim of violence who were offered reconciliation.

They go to the police and, like everywhere else, the police officer covers the situation up. Sometimes the police officer turns to be their aunt's son, a neighbor, a former police officer, and tells them to reconcile and be done with it. They do not want to proceed with it.

Aragatsotn Marz Support Center

The representatives of the support centers state that police officers often attach more importance to the preservation of the family than to the right of a person to life and health, stating that they “save the family”. This demonstrates that the police still do not understand the specificities around domestic violence and do not realise that the violence is cyclical and repetitive in nature.

The woman turned to the police with fractures, with a bruised eye, but the person carrying out abuse was a distant relative of the police officer handling the family's case. That entire day that police officer called the woman subjected to violence and told her to come and take her claim back, otherwise her husband would be arrested, and she'll regret it, that he is the father of her child.

Tavush Marz Support Center

According to the SC representatives, the police do not respond to cases of psychological violence, especially when it is of a continuous nature.

The husband walks around the house completely naked in front of minor children and breaks things in the house under the influence of alcohol. There is hostility and noise in the house, but this is not accompanied by physical violence. The police respond to the alarm by

saying, “What are you calling all the time? You don’t have a bruise or a scratch. Don’t call us next time.”

Armavir Marz Support Center

The quality of communication with individuals subjected to violence is also insufficient. In particular, when describing the legal consequences for giving a “false testimony” within the framework of their functions, they note the relevant article of the RA Criminal Code at the Police Department with sarcasm, ridicule, and unacceptable expressions that cause fear.

Our beneficiary was told at the police station, “You know, don’t you, if you misspell one word or one letter here, they will shave your head, take you to the women’s colony, and the detainees there will eat you alive.” The woman came to the center and recounted the story in tears.

Armavir Marz Support Center

There are many cases when the women having reported violence are accused and labelled by the police. They are asked personal questions aimed at exonerating the abuser. In other words, the police do not demonstrate a victim-centered approach.

“If you didn’t have a big mouth, he wouldn’t beat you.”

Armavir Marz Support Center

“Is it possible that you have someone else and want to get rid of your husband, and that’s why you’re saying things like this?”

Vayots Dzor Support Center

According to SCs, there are cases when, the abuser alerts the police that a woman subjected to violence is a child abuser.

We had a case when the husband reported to the police to accuse the wife, but in reality they were divorced on the basis of violence, and the abuser-husband tried to put pressure on the woman by saying that she had hit the child. And the police registered the child’s mother based solely off of the abuser’s alert.

Shirak Marz Support Center

Thus, there are many issues around the SCs' cooperation with the police. The police still do not make proper referrals, and cases that are forwarded to the support center are selected arbitrarily. Sometimes the police register a woman previously abused by her husband as a child abuser, based solely on an alert by the abuser. The police often perform functions not assigned to them by law. They carry out reconciliation, demonstrate discriminatory attitudes towards victims of violence, and exonerate abusers.

That being said, the representatives of the support centers also stated that there have been positive changes in the last two years. Whereas there used to be police departments in the provinces that did not want to cooperate with SCs at all, now, thanks to the consistent and professional work of the support centers, this is no longer an issue.

3.2. Cooperation with other state institutions

The cooperation of support centers with state institutions is important because, depending on the quality of this cooperation, the lives and well-being of individuals subjected to domestic violence can be fundamentally changed. Cooperation can lead a woman subjected to domestic violence to readily receive financial support and recover her health. Issues around the permanent residence of children that is free from violence can be solved fairly, and the educational rights of children subjected to violence can avoid being violated, among other issues. Within the scope of this research, the systemic cooperation practices of the support centers with the Regional Administration Division for the Protection of Rights of Family, Women and Children (DPRFWC), Unified Social Services (USS), educational institutions, Guardianship and Trusteeship Bodies (GTB), and Local Self-Government Bodies (LSGB) were investigated.

Guardianship and Trusteeship Bodies

According to DV prevention legislation, guardianship and trusteeship authorities have the authority to prevent domestic violence and protect individuals subjected to domestic violence by applying to the court for a protection order, reporting to law-enforcement bodies about violence or a real threat of violence in the family committed against minors or persons recognized by the court as having no or limited legal capacity, and organize the care of children and incapacitated persons left without care as a result of violence in the family¹⁴.

According to the representatives of the SCs, the GTBs do not cooperate so well with them on cases of domestic violence. The GTBs are aware of the situation in families in their community, but they often avoid referring them to support centers.

It is good only in Sisian; it's very bad in Goris. The guardianship body in Goris does not work in its field; it does not support children in difficult situations. They say not to enter other people's families. They put their heads in the sand and ignore them.

Syunik Marz Support Center

The GTBs also prioritize the preservation of the family over the right of a person to live free from violence, acting as a mediator in carrying out reconciliation.

The work of guardianship commissions is limited only to reconciliation; they do not carry out other work. The overall system is flawed; sometimes they undertake SC functions, and sometimes they carry out reconciliation, which is not their business at all. They don't refer to us and cooperate with us.

Koyayk Marz Support Center

14 Law of the Republic of Armenia “On prevention of domestic violence, protection of persons subjected to domestic violence and restoration of solidarity in family”, Article 18. Powers of guardianship and custody authorities in the sphere of prevention of violence in the family and protection of persons having been subjected to violence in the family <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

The GTBs demonstrate discriminatory attitudes towards women, and this situation only changes when the support center intervenes.

They make conclusions around whether to give the child to the beneficiary or not by looking at her appearance. This attitude does not change unless our lawyer intervenes. Once a visit had to be organized for a mother to see her child, and they refused to do it. The situation is not corrected until the support center intervenes.

Shirak Marz Support Center

According to the SCs, the GTBs do not realize the seriousness of domestic and sexual violence. They often discuss issues related to children subjected to violence in inappropriate ways.

We had a case of sexual violence against a minor child, and this case was discussed by the GTC. Before presenting the case, we were told that the issue we were going to present was an 18+ movie. For me, this was terrible, unacceptable, and shocking. To this day, I am still in shock. Sexual violence occurred against an underage child who was living in difficult social conditions. The child's parents were constantly in the mountains and someone took advantage of the child's defencelessness. Instead of feeling guilty that the community didn't perform its functions, that it turned a blind eye when the parents were not there for the child out of need, the guardianship commission makes a derogatory remark about this important issue.

Vayots Dzor Support Center

In fact, the work of the GTB relates to difficult situations — issues surrounding improving the quality of life of people subjected to domestic and sexual violence, especially women and children — which, according to the representatives of the support centers, are neglected. This is also evidenced by research on guardianship and trusteeship bodies as well as the ad hoc report published by the Human Rights Defender¹⁵ in 2017, and the research entitled

15 <https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/615b7bff7bdaac165eeb767625c6adf1.pdf>

“Institutional Reforms to Increase the Effectiveness of the Work of Guardianship and Trusteeship bodies”¹⁶ published by the Human Rights Power NGO in 2020.

Thus, the representatives of the GTB/GTC do not have the minimum knowledge and understanding of domestic violence and its impact on women and children. They commit ethics violations and are not at all ready to cooperate with SCs.

Educational Institutions

According to the DV prevention legislation, the republic’s authorised executive body in the field of education must regularly conduct trainings with teachers and educators on their role in preventing violence in the family and on the procedure for reporting cases of violence in the family to the competent authorities in an effort to prevent domestic violence¹⁷. However, according to the representatives of SCs, schools are very cautious and NGOs encounter obstacles even when they try to carry out awareness-raising campaigns.

The topic is very sensitive; it is very difficult to talk about the problem of DV at schools. Schools are still closed to that topic. Our lawyer spoke about domestic violence during a meeting at one of the school, and was perceived very badly. They asked if there are actually people who reach out for support saying, “But isn’t that shameful?” They are shocked. It is difficult, and they change rather slowly.

Syunik Marz Support Centre

16 https://hrp.am/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Research_On_Custody_and_Guardianship_Authorities_HRP-1.pdf

17 Law of the Republic of Armenia “On prevention of domestic violence, protection of persons subjected to domestic violence and restoration of solidarity in family”, Article 16. Powers of the authorised republican executive body of the field of education in the sphere of prevention of violence in the family, <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

Schools are weak both in identifying cases of domestic violence and reporting them to the competent authorities. Children spend most of their day at school, and early detection and appropriate reporting of cases of violence can have a major impact on providing effective support to children. The Coalition of Domestic Violence Support Centers applied to the Ministry of Education with a letter, so that, in accordance with a relevant order, the school staff could receive information about domestic violence from a SC specialist. The response letter stated that the schools were aware of gender equality. Yet, this is not sufficient, as schools never refer any cases to the support centers.

In one of the schools, the school principal noticed a child who was not appropriately coming to school but did not take any initiative until we called and asked about that child's condition. The school principal said that they had noticed a change in the child's behavior a long time ago but did not alert anyone about it. In contrast with schools, we have positive experiences working with preschools: The head of the municipality's education department called and reported that the child came to preschool beaten.

Armavir Marz Support Centre

The SCs also face problems in realizing children's right to education when they move from one region to another with their mother due to domestic violence. This is because principals do not ensure confidentiality, avoid admitting the child to school, and label the woman subjected to violence. According to the SC representatives, this problem has been raised many times during public meetings and meetings with relevant bodies but has not been properly solved to date.

We had a problem with the child's school while transferring him from Tavush to our marz. The principal saw domestic violence differently, and this prevented them from admitting the child to the school. They said it was risky for them, immediately contacted the school principal in Tavush and said the mother had abducted the child, and that he had no right not to inform her husband about it.

Vayots Dzor Support Center

Thus, schools, which are designated by the law as institutions playing an important role in preventing domestic violence, are not ready yet to cooperate with the SCs. School principals and teachers do not have sufficient knowledge to identify and report cases of domestic violence. They do not properly ensure children's right to education when they are transferred from another marz as a result of violence. They are also dismissive when it comes to domestic violence.

Chapter 4

SYSTEMIC, LEGISLATIVE AND PROCEDURAL PROBLEMS HINDERING OR COMPLICATING THE WORK OF THE SUPPORT CENTERS

The main domestic legal document for the prevention and fight against domestic violence is the RA Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, Protection of Persons Subjected to Domestic Violence and Restoration of Harmony in the Family, adopted in 2017. Since then, many problems have already been revealed in law enforcement practice.¹⁸ The SC specialists state that the law does not provide sufficient and necessary provisions for the prevention of domestic violence and the protection of victims of violence. Issuing warnings for protection orders has no effect, and the emergency barring order is only temporarily effective.

The warning has no effect. The emergency barring order is also temporary; later, the violence continues. Even when divorced, a husband goes and kills his wife. We have had two such cases this year. That is to say the law does not provide enough protection for women.

Gegharkunik Marz Support Center

Organizations dealing with protection of women's rights have repeatedly spoken out about the need to enshrine punitive measures for domestic violence and mentioned this in their publications¹⁹, as this can also prevent the continuation of cases of domestic violence. However, Armenian legislation does not criminalise domestic

18 <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docID=118672>

19 https://coalitionagainstviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DOMESTIC-VIOLENCE_ARM_30_06.2020-1.pdf

violence. The new RA Criminal Code, entered into force on July 1, 2022²⁰, again bypasses the criminalisation of domestic violence, but the support centers believe that the inclusion of DV as a criminal offence should be included in the RA Criminal Code.

An environment of impunity is created. The abuser is not prosecuted unless he kills his wife. It is a great tragedy when the police officer stands up and says that they cannot apply any other measures, that all the measures have been exhausted. Our law does not protect women.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

Very recently, we faced a case where the abuser repeatedly violated all protective orders, and the police had no leverage to bring the person to justice. In the end, he carried out an attempted murder with a weapon and was arrested. After he is released, there will be no protection for that woman. If a person violates an order this many times, there should be other types of punishments in place for such cases. Domestic violence should be criminalised.

Syunik Marz Support Center

SCs also often report enforcement problems, especially in rural areas where women live with their husbands' parents and several generations live in the same house.

Let's imagine a rural area, where the police have issued an emergency barring order so that the husband cannot live in that house for 20 days. Will the mother-in-law tolerate her son not being in that house and her daughter-in-law continuing to live there?

Gegharkunik Marz Support Center

Although the legislation on the prevention of DV has given police the authority to enter families and protect victims of violence, according to the SC representatives, this authority is not enough,

20 <https://www.arlis.am/documentView.aspx?docid=153080>

especially from the point of view of protecting children. In particular, there are many cases when women hurriedly escape from the abuser's apartment due to their lives and health being endangered, but the children remain with the abusive father. In such cases, the police do not intervene in any way, yet the children remain in an abusive environment and the mother's right to communicate with her children is violated.

The police do not pay serious attention. If the child is with the father, there is nothing left to discuss. They don't even take into account that the father is an alcoholic, a drug user, or has mental health problems. The police say that, in any case, they are unable to take the children, that they have no authority to take the children and give them to their mother, and that we should apply to court. And the court hearings are delayed, there is no urgency, and they are not concerned that not just the mother's rights but also the children's rights are violated.

Lori Marz Support Center

The DV prevention legislation does not consider a child who has directly witnessed the use of violence and suffered the negative consequences of that violence as a victim of violence. Children, due to their age, are very vulnerable and in a psychologically difficult state when they witness physical or sexual violence and are directly affected by psychological coercion. However, children, as victims of violence, do not receive legal protection and, in practice, often remain under the direct influence of the abuser. In such conditions, it is equally necessary to ensure the legal protection of children having witnessed violent relations or otherwise suffered the effects of violence as it is for those persons directly subjected to violence by providing the same guarantees prescribed by the law.

In our country, children are not protected at all. I have never seen so many children with neurological problems, bed wetting, and complex speech disturbances. We manage to save women, but the issue of children remains unresolved.

Tavush Marz Support Center

The police are not attentive to children living in violent environments, yet perpetrators of violence are the focus of attention. According to the DV prevention legislation, a rehabilitation programme should be offered when protective orders are issued. In accordance with the law, the rehabilitation of the abusers should be carried out by support centers. Moreover, there is even the RA Minister of Labour and Social Affairs order No 119²¹ on approving the rehabilitation programme and organisation procedure for individuals having committed domestic violence, which stipulates that the support center shall notify the domestic violence perpetrator about the need to enrol in a rehabilitation programme within maximum five working days after receiving copies of the decisions on issuing protective orders.

The law stipulates that cases of violence are referred to the support center, so that the center can work with both the abuser and the victim, but we signed a contract with the Social Ministry within the scope of providing services to victims of violence. For some reason, this function is assigned to the support center by law, which does not meet international standards and, although it has not even been implemented, the law has not been changed so far.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

Within the scope of the DV law, the SCs are also meant to offer reconciliation for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Pursuant to Order No 120²² on approving the procedure for organisation of reconciliation between individuals subjected to domestic violence and perpetrators of domestic violence, the reconciliation between individuals subjected to domestic violence and perpetrators of domestic violence is carried out upon request of the person having committed domestic violence or person having been subjected to domestic violence, which is submitted to the support center as prescribed by the law.

21 <https://www.mlsa.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/hraman-r.pdf>

22 <https://www.mlsa.am/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/hraman-h.pdf>

Unlike the rehabilitation of perpetrators of domestic violence, the provision on reconciliation is stipulated in the agreement between the RA Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the support centers. However, the SC representatives state that they do not carry out reconciliation because they are sure, both in international law and in their own experience, that the definition of the procedure for reconciliation in the law hinders victims of violence in practice from achieving effective legal protection and restoring their violated rights. Any intervention by the state to offer reconciliation should be eliminated, as it contradicts the established guidelines around high-risk cases of domestic violence, criminal prosecution regardless of any claim submitted by the victim, and the request for proportionate and equitable benchmarks for intervention. Only the person having been subjected to violence can decide whether they want to reconcile with the abuser or not, and no state or non-state institution has the right to intervene. In cases of domestic violence, the state policy should be aimed at preventing cases of domestic violence, ensuring that the violence does not continue, and providing support to victims of violence in an effort to put a stop to unequal relations that are accompanied by women's rights violations, not for the sake of the preservation of the family institution.

In our contract, they kept the point regarding reconciliation. I objected when signing the contract, but they didn't remove that point. We had heated arguments with the Ministry, but the legal regulations in this regard remain flawed. In any case, when we draft reports for the Ministry, we note that we did not conduct reconciliations. However, we faced a case where the prosecutor sent a request to the police asking why the support center did not carry out reconciliation. But we cannot do this, even though that function is incumbent on us by law and our contract.

Kotayk Marz Support Center

In addition to the problems and existing gaps in the DV prevention legislation, the SCs face serious obstacles as a result of the supplements and the amendments made to the state tax law²³ that entered into force on October 29, 2021, which significantly

23 <https://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=154161>

increased the minimum threshold of the state tax from AMD 1,500 to AMD 6,000 and the state tax for lawsuits with non-monetary claims from AMD 4,000 to AMD 20,000 as well as the state tax for court applications and appellate and cassation appeals against court judicial acts. State tax rates are also envisaged for making copies of original photographs, audio recordings, video recording and electronic media.

In the ad hoc report “Concerns around the constitutional right to judicial protection with the up to 10-fold increase in state tax fees for court applications”, the RA Human Rights Defender noted that the new rates were concerning, as they create legal obstacles to apply to the court for the purpose of restoring violated rights, and will lead to unreasonable restrictions on access to courts²⁴.

Article 22 of the RA law on state taxes defines the grounds for exemption from the state tax payment at RA courts. According to this, plaintiffs who are subjected to domestic violence shall be exempt from state tax payments for claims regarding protective orders provided by the DV prevention legislation as well as alimony. At the same time, however, plaintiffs who are subjected to domestic violence are not exempt from paying the state tax for claims regarding divorce, determinations around where children will reside, procedures outlining child visitation and communication, and requests to return children to their parent. Moreover, as a result of the recent legislative changes in criminal claims, plaintiffs who are subjected to domestic violence are obliged to pay AMD 20,000 in state taxes for each of the mentioned claims. According to the SC representatives, this creates a huge obstacle, because their beneficiaries are not financially sound, and the SCs are unable to pay the state taxes with grant funds. Sometimes they appeal to the Women’s Support Center NGO to transfer funds to pay the state taxes. In some cases, the money is transferred, but since there are not enough funds, the women give up on applying to court. As

24 <https://ombuds.am/am/site/ViewNews/2087>

a result, the opportunity to protect their rights is violated, which leads to restrictions to their access to court.

Many of our beneficiaries have faced such a problem. Some of them have pledged their gold — their only property – to apply to court, and some have given up on the idea of going to court. For instance, a woman residing in an urban community who works, has children, and wants to apply to the court to file for divorce and alimony cannot apply to the court so far because of financial problems. As a result, the husband regularly exercises control over her, insisting that she is his property until they are divorced.

Shirak Marz Support Center

Individuals subjected to domestic violence should have the opportunity to apply to court to get divorced, determine child visitation and the child's permanent residence. I have appealed to the Women's Support Center several times, and they paid the AMD 20,000 in state taxes. But why should it be like that? The NGO does not have that much money.

Tavush Marz Support Center

Thus, there are many systemic, legislative and procedural problems hindering or complicating the work of the SCs, starting from the flawed DV prevention legislation, which does not provide sufficient protection to individuals subjected to domestic violence and also contains provisions that contradict international law and the international standards for working with individuals subjected to violence. The rights of children living in a violent environment are also ignored within the scope of the DV law, as they do not receive support envisaged for victims of violence. Additionally, when initiating legislative changes, the obstacles to the realization of the rights of victims of violence due to their special status are not taken into account. In particular, as a result of supplements and amendments made to the RA law on state taxes, plaintiffs who are victims of domestic violence are not exempted from paying the state tax, and access to justice for persons subjected to domestic violence is also prohibited.

Chapter 5

STEREOTYPES HINDERING THE WORK OF THE SUPPORT CENTERS

Discriminatory notions about equality between women and men still exist in our society. Stereotypes justify gender inequality and contribute to its rootedness and strengthening, while at the same time complicate the work of structures that aim to eliminate inequality and injustice. The work of the SCs are aimed at restoring the rights of victims of violence caused by the unequal distribution of power in the family. Often, this important work is hindered by the stereotypical attitude of society towards domestic violence. As the SC representatives note, they often encounter extremely rejectionist and harsh attitudes and labeled as “family destroyers”, “women mollycoddlers” and “making women talk back”.

Initially, everyone accused us of destroying families and protecting only women, but when they saw the nature and quality of the work we do, that attitude changed. However, this stereotypical approach is observed during meetings with various structures.

Ararat Marz Support Center

It is noteworthy that many of the SCs encounter stereotypical approaches and expressions at Regional Administrations when they participate in meetings with the employees of the Division for Protection of Rights of Family, Women and Children.

We were having a meeting with the Head of the Division for Protection of Rights of Family, Women and Children at the Marzpetaran, when I asked: “We do so much work. Why don’t you talk about us? Why don’t you cooperate with us?” The Head of the Division answered: “Let me

tell you a secret. Community Council employees think you are family destroyers and do not want to cooperate closely with you.”

Syunik Marz Support Center

In all provinces of Armenia, Regional Administrations have divisions for the protection of rights of family, women and children, which must — upon the Joint Order of the RA Ministers of Territorial Administration and Labor and Social Affairs²⁵ —develop and implement projects aimed at the protection of families, women and children; study the problems relating to equal rights and equal opportunities of women and men and develop projects aimed at resolving them; as well as take necessary measures to protect children’s rights and interests. From that point of view, the scope of work of the Regional Administration DPRFWCs and the work of the support centers as it relates to individuals subjected to DV intersect. The closer the cooperation between them, the more effective the fight against domestic violence will be. However, according to the support centers, the relevant divisions of the Regional Administrations not only do not fully cooperate with them but are also guided by stereotypes.

We talked about equality during the meeting with the Marzpetaran committee dealing with gender issues. One of the women, who is also a member of the guardianship committee, opposed combating domestic violence, stating: “I am against those cases of domestic violence. It is true that you present your projects very well, you say you are also implementing economic empowerment projects, but I remain of the opinion that our culture dictates that we always be meek and mild, and men be the decision-makers. I like when my husband gives his final word and strikes his fist on the table. I’ve learnt about such cases many times, but I say that it’s normal, it’s your husband; he may sometimes hit you, but you shouldn’t go to the police for that.” I looked at the data coming from their community. We haven’t had any cases from there.

Vayots Dzor Support Center

25 <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=102686>

The representatives of the United Social Services are also guided by stereotypes. According to the SCs, they have a wide range of contacts in the communities: The service has 38 social support agencies under the Regional Administration and 17 social support divisions under the community council that make decisions around and provide social security pensions, allowances and other monetary payments as well as assess the social needs of people in difficult life situations and meet these needs. USS employees are aware of all the problematic families and can refer them to the support centers, but they avoid doing so. Additionally, during USS sessions, they discuss the women's private lives, judge them by their appearance, or advise beneficiaries to get back together with their abusive husbands.

They discuss women's private lives. They say that she has a lover, she does not need benefits, but in fact the woman is in need. They are merely guided by rumors, or they say she does not look like a woman subjected to violence, even when she is definitely being subjected to it. If the woman looks put together, nobody thinks that she is being subjected to violence. In one case, the USS boasted about telling a girl: "Hey girl, why don't you get back with your husband?" I said: "You are wrong. It is for the woman to decide. If they take your advice and get back together, and there is violence again and her life and health are endangered, won't you feel guilty?"

Tavush Marz Support Center

Stereotyped approaches also exist in the judicial system. According to the support centers, their representatives also face obvious discriminatory and stereotyped attitudes by judges, most of whom still do not have sufficient knowledge about domestic violence.

Once I went to the court with our beneficiary for divorce, and the judge asked me who I was. I answered that I was a representative of the support center. When hearing the words "support center", the judge become agitated and said, "It's because of you that spouses divorce." The woman had attempted suicide, but the judge was sure we persuaded her to get divorced.

Tavush Marz Support Center

Thus, the harmful impact of gender stereotypes is still present not only in various facets of society but also in state structures, such as the Regional Administration DPRFWCs, which are authorized to fight for equality among women and men. The USSs are also guided by stereotypes and do not refer cases of domestic violence to support centers, nor do they want to provide support to women having suffered from DV if their appearance does not match the image of a woman being subjected to domestic violence as they imagine it. Courts also have a stereotyped approach toward the work of support centers. Some judges don't conceal their attitudes and accuse SCs of promoting divorce.

Conclusion

Interviews with representatives of centers providing support to individuals subjected to domestic violence and an examination of legal documents and procedures related to the field reveal many diverse problems in the field that are in urgent need of regulation. In particular, although the SCs operate under the supervision of the state, that is the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, they receive limited financial resources from the state to partially cover specialists' salaries. The instability and asymmetry in the provision of insufficient financial resources and the lack of funds envisaged for transportation, office and other expenses are an additional burden for non-governmental organisations, which often attract additional grant funds or turn to the Women's Support Center NGO to continue carrying out their work effectively. Very often, due to low wages, professionals – especially social workers – leave their positions, and here we have a loss of resources, because professional experience is not only acquired through trainings but also through years of work experience.

The SCs have problems with professional resources both related to the limited financial opportunities and the lack of professional potential in the provinces. Although the support center specialists regularly undergo training by the Women's Support Center NGO specialists as well as receive consultation to conduct case management, they still need to replenish their professional resources.

The support centers also have many problems related to their premises and office property, which they try to work out via various programs, because the funds provided by the state do not cover these costs in any way. In addition to the territorial and property problems, SCs also have security problems. Very few of the centers have security systems and cameras and are not equipped with rapid alert systems in the event of danger.

The hotline service is available to the regional residents and operate around the clock, but this is only thanks to funds allocated from other projects of the NGOs. The phone numbers are also publicised through workshops, events and campaigns carried out within the framework of other projects. Information on support centers available on the website of the RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is out of date, and this needs to be corrected quickly. Other state institutions do not always provide hotline numbers to beneficiaries.

There are many problems relating to the support centers' cooperation with the primary structure for responding to domestic violence — the police. The police do not perform proper referrals. They arbitrarily select cases to be sent to the SCs, relying on alerts sent by abusers. They register women subjected to violence as child abusers. The police often perform functions not assigned to them by law, including reconciliation, demonstrate discriminatory attitudes towards victims of violence, and justify the actions of perpetrators of violence.

As for the cooperation with other state structures, in particular, the GTB/GTC representatives do not have minimum knowledge and understanding of domestic violence and its negative impact on women and children. They commit ethics violations and are not at all ready to cooperate with SCs.

Problems were also revealed in the cooperation with educational institutions, particularly with schools. Schools, which are designated by the law as institutions playing an important role in preventing domestic violence, are not ready yet to cooperate with the SCs. School principals and teachers do not have sufficient knowledge to identify and report cases of domestic violence. They do not properly ensure the right to education of children transferred to them from another province as a result of violence. There is a rejectionist and stereotypical approach to domestic violence.

There are also many systemic, legislative and procedural problems hindering and complicating the work of the support centers. DV has not yet been criminalised and, as a result, a certain atmosphere

of impunity has formed among perpetrators of violence. The flawed DV prevention legislation does not provide sufficient protection to individuals subjected to domestic violence. In addition, it contains provisions that contradict international law and international standards for working with individuals subjected to violence. The rights of children living in violent environments are also ignored within the scope of the law on domestic violence, as they often continue to live in violence and do not receive support intended for victims of violence. Additionally, when initiating legislative changes, the obstacles to the realization of the rights of victims of violence due to their special status are not taken into account. In particular, as a result of supplements and amendments made to the RA law on state taxes, plaintiffs who are subjected to domestic violence are not exempt from paying state taxes for claims relating to divorce, determining the residence of children, establishing procedures for child visitations and communication, and returning children to their parent, which create obstacles to apply to the court for the purpose of restoring violated rights and leads to unreasonable restrictions on the accessibility of courts.

In addition, it is clear that the harmful impact of gender stereotypes is still present not only in various facets of society but also in state structures, such as the Regional Administration DPRFWCs, which are authorized to ensure the equality of women and men. The USSs are also guided by stereotypes and do not refer cases of domestic violence to the SCs, nor do they want to provide support to women having suffered from DV. Courts also have a stereotypical approach toward the work of support centers; some judges don't conceal their attitudes and accuse SCs of promoting divorces.

Under these conditions, it is certainly very hard to carry out such a psychologically difficult and physically dangerous job as providing support to individuals subjected to domestic violence. We believe that the state should take additional measures to provide financial, logistic, and transportation resources to the SCs, as well as run a unified policy aimed at effective cooperation of state bodies and support centers working in the sector.

Recommendations

1. Review the list of support centers on the MLSA website and update this information.
2. Post the hotline numbers within a visible part of the MLSA website, so that it is possible to find support centers operating in a given province through the website and make a call using the hotline.
3. Provide support centers with stable and reasonable funding and change the fact that financial transfers are made incrementally.
4. Conduct special projects and mass media campaigns to distribute hotline numbers.
5. Post hotline numbers of support centers functioning in a given province in visible places at all state institutions working in the sector, so that they are accessible to all social groups living in the province.
6. Make the support centers premises as accessible as possible for people with mobility problems.
7. Provide the support centers with security systems to avoid security problems.
8. Conduct periodic trainings with the police aimed at improving knowledge about domestic violence and working with individuals subjected to domestic violence.
9. Strictly prohibit police officers from carrying out reconciliation and urging or forcing individuals subjected to DV to withdraw their complaints.
10. Conduct training programmes on domestic violence and the impact of DV on children among GTBs and equip the GTCs with specialists.

11. Train school principals and teachers on the right to education of children subjected to domestic violence and living in an abusive environment as well as on prompt reporting of domestic violence cases.
12. Make domestic violence a criminal offence in the RA Criminal Code or, put more simply, criminalise domestic violence.
13. Take active steps aimed at changing the DV prevention legislation and review protective orders that have low effectiveness.
14. Eliminate reconciliation from the DV prevention legislation, as it hinders the legal protection of survivors of violence and the restoration of their violated rights.
15. Remove reconciliation as an obligation in contracts with the support centers, which is a fixed provision in the contract with the RA MLSA but which support centers do not implement.
16. Remove the rehabilitation of individuals who have committed violence in the family as an obligation of the support centers from the DV prevention legislation.
17. Consider children in the DV prevention legislation who have witnessed violence in the family as victims of violence, as they suffer the negative consequences of violence but do not receive any support and remain under the direct influence of abusers.
18. Amend the RA law on state taxes to exempt individuals subjected to domestic violence from having to pay state tax for claims regarding divorce, determining the residence of children, establishing procedures for child visitation and communication, and returning children to their parent.
19. Conduct trainings for the employees of the Regional Administration Division for Protection of Rights of Family,

Women and Children and keep people who adhere to gender stereotypes away from the sphere of protection of rights of family, women and children.

20. Conduct trainings with USS employees on the mechanisms around determining and referring DV cases.
21. Develop a unified policy and effective cooperation mechanisms between all state structures to combat DV.

