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Armenia: Domestic Violence or Just Family Problems?

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All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

They are endowed with dignity and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

United Nations Charter, 1945

For much of the past century, the necessity for protecting human rights has gained increasing prominence. The significance of human rights has also fostered a flurry of activity, with a diverse and expanding set of international bodies and courts empowered to address the issue. This effort has not been limited to international law or to multilateral campaigns, however. Rather, there is a more recent national element to this fight to protect human rights. Many countries have established their own independent National Human Rights Commissions.

Generally speaking, it has been the shared nature of human rights as a key issue that has driven this enhanced attention. More specifically, this shared concern is rooted in the very definition of human rights as being held by all persons equally, universally, and forever. These are also the basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. And when these rights are violated, the victim is de-humanized. Thus, it is the universal aim of human rights protection that stems from the demand that the human dignity of all people must be respected. In claiming these rights, there is a binding acceptance of the responsibility to not violate or infringe on the rights of others. Human rights, in essence, refer to the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, irrespective of individual caste or gender, color or creed, race or nationality.

In light of this broader definition and universal context, one of the more glaring and abusive challenges today is domestic violence, and the related gender-centric violation of rights. Domestic violence is an act of abusive behavior or in a domestic setting which takes place in both heterosexual and same-sex family relationships and that imposes serious mental and physical damage to women, children and other victims. As a global phenomenon, domestic violence does not recognize economic, religious, geographic or cultural borders.

Domestic Violence in Armenia

More broadly, domestic violence occurs in all cultures, and Armenia is no exception. People of all races, ethnicities, religions, and classes can be both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. It is generally perpetrated by both men and women, and occurs in same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Although domestic violence can include the abuse of parents, children, siblings and other relatives, it mainly involves violence against sexual partners, with women being the most common victims and men most often the aggressors.

Presently, domestic violence against women is one of the most prevalent, pervasive and serious human rights violations in Armenia. In the past few years, domestic violence in Armenia has been at the forefront for many concerned civil society organizations and NGOs, as well as among society as a whole. This was also demonstrated by a civil society-initiated advocacy campaign to lobby the Armenian government to adopt laws on the prevention of domestic violence, and to enact greater legal protection and assistance for victims.

In contrast to the public and international demands for the adoption of laws against domestic violence, which will serve as an important deterrence, the Armenian government rejected the request with the explanation that “there is no domestic violence in Armenia,” instead arguing that domestic violence is “a family conflict and misunderstanding between the partners” not requiring criminalization.

Statistical Evidence

Unfortunately, the reality is quite different from that, especially according to the results of research conducted by the Proactive Society in 2011, which found that more than 59.6 percent of respondents have been subject to domestic violence.

Moreover, based on the records of Armenian women’s rights organizations, the number of domestic violence incidents in Armenia has increased, with more than 2,000 documented cases each year, and more than 5,171 hotline calls received in the 2013-2015 period. And according to police data, the number of officially registered cases of domestic violence in Armenia for the first half of 2015 reached 447.

Based on the official statistical record, therefore, there is a clear and well-established pattern of domestic violence in Armenia. One of the more high-profile cases was the death of 20-year-old Zaruhi Petrosyan in the city of Masis. This young mother died on 1 October 2010 as a result of years of abuse by her husband and mother-in-law. She was a young mother of a two-year-old infant girl when her life came to an end, after an alleged fall down of stairs.

At the time, her husband claimed that the death had been an accident. However, her bruised and battered body attested to assaults and physical beatings that extended over a long period of time. This was more than sufficient evidence to bring her unfortunate death to the public’s attention.

Another instance was that of Mariam Gevorkian, who was abused by her husband and mother-in-law. According to the medical evidence, her mother-in-law burned her body with a cigarette lighter and iron, continuously beat her and locked her indoors. In contrast to Zaruhi Petrosyan, Mariam managed to escape and later won vindication in the courts.

Another case of domestic violence involved a tragic case involving the suicide of the victim, Maro Guloyan, a mother of a four-month old infant daughter. The police claimed that her suicide was

“genetic,” citing the suicides of her two brothers. However, both Maro’s parents and the Yerevan-based Women’s Resource Center disagree with the police finding, citing a record of consistent physical abuse and noting that she had sought to leave her husband prior to her death.

Causes of Domestic Violence

There are different factors that both cause and perpetuate domestic violence, often depending on the specific country- or cultural-context. In the case of Armenia, the causes are predominantly economic and cultural in nature.

The economic factors are rooted in the difficult situation facing the country, most notably from unemployment, which has tended to prevent men from becoming financial providers for their families and in many cases, causing them to leave the country to seek work abroad, mainly in Russian urban centers. This has also fostered a sense of frustration and humiliation for many men, tragically manifested through increased alcoholism and gambling, and also directly related to a pattern of violence directed toward their wives.

Against that backdrop, the cultural context is also an important cause that is exacerbated by Armenian culture rather traditional assignment of rigid roles for both men and women. This is also clearly seen in cases of gender-specific socialization, cultural definitions of appropriate sex roles, belief in the inherent superiority of males, values that give men proprietary rights over women and girls, notion of the family as under male control, customs of marriage, an acceptability of violence as a means to resolve conflict, and so on.

Moreover, traditionally Armenia is a traditionally patriarchal society which allows custom to dictate norms and practices, even in the 21st century. Armenian women are ideally meant to be chaste and passive. Tradition also dictates that men are seen as the main providers of the family, while women are limited to a less role as child bearers and care givers.

Although in some families and cities of Armenia these customs and rules are no longer as important or are very often ignored, in more rural villages and remote regions, these cultural-specific behaviors remain entrenched. Sadly, this is also reinforced by an insulting Armenian folk tale, which says “a woman is like wool, the more you beat her, the softer she will be.”

Furthermore, Armenian culture is already intolerant of any discussion of issues pertaining to sexual rights of women, divorce or domestic violence.

This lack of tolerance only contributes to a general ignorance of the issue and results in the fact that the crime is seriously under-reported and rarely prosecuted. This cultural trend has also fostered an atmosphere where countless women have been victimized by abusive husbands and their extended families, while also being neglected and ignored by the police and even their neighbors in many cases.

Thus, while analyzing these and other cases we can conclude that in Armenia, women are subjected to violence for a number of grounds. Another major reason is the way they treat themselves. Most Armenian women think that they are inferior to men, and that they should be tolerant to acts of violence and abuse.

Another reason is that they are not provided with sufficient knowledge concerning their rights and family life and their poor knowledge is another reason of being abused. Women are unaware of the meanings of domestic violence and are uneducated about their rights for protection from abuse. Most of them, for example, believe that domestic violence consists only of physical abuse, rather than understanding that it also includes psychological and economic mistreatment.

Another important reason as to why violence against women continues to prevail in Armenia is because of the fact that many prefer to remain silent and are afraid to be condemned by society. But more crucially, the pattern of domestic violence still exists in Armenia because Armenia is one of the few countries in the world without legislation criminalizing domestic violence.

Thus, although domestic violence remains a global problem and despite international campaigns against domestic violence, the key to eliminating domestic violence in Armenia is to first recognize and admit the very existence of the problem. There is a need to educate women about their rights, to encourage them to speak up and to never tolerate abuse and violence which have such a destructive effect not only on them but also on their children and future generations. Moreover, fundamental human rights and dignity must be priorities in all social relations.

And in Armenia, the concept of sacrificing freedom, safety and justice for the preservation of family and ego must no longer be the norm. Respect for women should become just as much a part of the culture as deep family values.

In addition, police must adopt a more subjective and understanding attitude about women reporting their husbands, to be more reliable in such cases and to sympathize and support the victims, not the abusers. And as an urgent pressing need, the Armenian government must enact and enforce criminal laws against domestic violence.

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