

SUBMISSION

**TO THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL
RAPPORTEUR ON VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN ON COVID-19 AND THE INCREASE
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Coalition to Stop Violence against Women

Website: <https://coalitionagainstviolence.org/>

Email: info@coalitionagainstviolence.org



Ընդդեմ կանանց նկատմամբ
բռնության կոալիցիա

Coalition to stop violence
against women

ABOUT COALITION TO STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:

On October 1, 2010, 20-years-old Zaruhi Petrosyan died as a result of severe beatings. After the incident, the organizations concerned with that issue founded the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women (CSVW), which demanded a just investigation and prevention of such incidents. Since 2010, the CSVW acts as a platform for joint advocacy of several local non-governmental organizations in their fight against violence against women in Armenia. Throughout these years, we united our efforts to push for legislative amendments, policy changes, nation-wide awareness raising and campaigning. Elimination of violence and discrimination against women is the responsibility of the State and of the Government of Armenia. This is, unfortunately, an issue with deep roots and a wide scope and unless it is addressed and solved, dignity, human rights and democracy cannot be upheld in Armenia. Our team calls all the stakeholders to join the efforts in combatting violence against women. The “New Armenia”, which we are all trying to build, must be the state where every woman is confident that her rights to be free from violence and discrimination are protected and realized fully.

CSVW MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS:



[Women's Support Center](#) (WSC) is working on preventing and responding to domestic violence. It offers confidential comprehensive support to victims of domestic violence and their children also free socio-psychological support, legal and court representation. WSC has 2 safe houses for women and their children.



[Women's Rights Center](#) (WRC) is dealing with the problems of domestic violence against women and providing women survivors and their children with psychological and legal assistance and counseling, and protection in the court.



[Women's Resource Center](#) (WRC) is a feminist human rights organization with a vision to establish equality and self-determination of women in Armenian society and to eradicate limitations and pressures of all kind women are subjected to within the existing patriarchal societal order.



[Sexual Assault Crisis Center](#) (SACC) is working with women who were sexually abused and provides psychological and legal counseling.



[Society without Violence](#) (SWV) provides gender education to various social and age groups throughout non-formal education; workshops and training sessions and advocates for the establishment of gender-sensitive educational system in formal education.



“[Pink](#)” (Pink Armenia) is a human rights defender non-governmental organization founded in 2007. Vision of Pink Armenia is to have a society, where human rights of all are protected and everybody is accepted regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity and/or gender expression. Organization aims to create a safe space for LGBT people by promoting well-being and protection in all spheres of life.



“[Agate](#)” [Rights Defense Center for Women](#) with Disabilities advocates the development, adoption and enforcement of inclusive, gender sensitive and human rights-based legislation and policies in Armenia. It is empowering women with disabilities, developing leadership skills and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities to education, independent living, employment and political participation.



[Real World. Real People](#) (RWRP) provides care and support services to people living with HIV and their family members as well as social-psychological support, legal counseling , peer-to-peer counseling.



[Spitak Helsinki Group](#) provides free legal consultation to all citizens as well as free psychological consultation and support to women and children.

1. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.

As a result of the pandemic, a state of emergency was declared in a number of countries as well as in Armenia¹. In the face of the state of emergency, violence against women remains a global public health problem worldwide.

In the state of emergency, the number of phone calls received by member organizations of CSVW on the hotline reached 803 calls in March, 172 of which were about domestic violence (DV), 750 calls in April, 250 of which were about DV, and 915 calls were registered in May, 256 of which were related to DV. Comparing and analyzing the data of the CSVW, we can clearly see that the number of phone calls to DV hotlines has increased. If in March there was a 30% increase compared to February, in April it was 40%, and in May 50%. Moreover, women call for both violence counseling and social assistance questions. It should be noted that this data is gathered from various groups of women, such as women living with disability, women living with HIV, LBTQ women, women living in rural areas, etc.

Meanwhile, according to the RA Police, no increase was recorded in the number of DV cases during the legal state of emergency: within the 16 March to 20 April period, 180 reports of DV cases were received (versus 170 reports received for the same period in 2019), of which 115 related to violence perpetrated by spouses or previous spouses against their wives, and 8 cases to violence against minors.² No changes have been observed in the operation of police conditioned with the state of emergency. Just as in the past, respective police department staff arrive at the scene after getting the case report, assess the situation and the risk posed by DV. Protection orders applied by the police are the warning and the emergency intervention order. Within the period of 01 January – 28 April 2020, 251 decisions on applying the warning were taken (50 decisions in January, 67 in February, 86 in March, 48 in the period of 01-28 April) and 82 decisions on emergency intervention orders were applied (19 decisions in January, 23 in February, 24 in March, 16 in the period of 01-28 April).³

2. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Republic of Armenia does not have a national DV hotline service. Victims' choices are to call the general police number to report an incident and ask for protection or to call hotlines run by

¹ See: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=142456>

² See: “The Increase in the Number of Domestic Violence Cases During the State of Emergency” online press conference, 22.04.2020 available at <https://www.facebook.com/article3club/videos/538292706888772/>

³ See: “Rapid Assessment of Government Response to Domestic Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic”, <https://armenia.unfpa.org/en/publications/rapid-assessment-government-response-domestic-violence-during-covid-19-pandemic>

NGOs that address gender-based violence. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Human Rights Defender's Office also have hotlines, but we do not have clear data regarding the number of DV calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Comparing and analyzing the data of the CSVW, we can clearly see that the number of phone calls to DV hotlines has increased. If in March there was a 30% increase compared to February, in April it was 40%, and in May 50%. Moreover, women call for both violence counseling and social assistance questions. It should be noted that these data is gathered from various groups of women, such as women living with disability, women living with HIV, LBTQ women, women living in rural areas, etc.

3. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?

All victims of DV can ask for protection and/or shelter services if they want to leave the abusive relationships.

However, the protection and/or shelter services continued to be not fully accessible and inclusive for LBTQ women, especially for minors. Pink Armenia documented at least two cases where police refused to take reports from the victims or sent them back home limiting their intervention with a warning to the parents and siblings who continued the circles of violence. One lesbian woman, who reported to the law enforcement bodies, was also refused to be taken by the shelter too.

4. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?

Shelters have been opened during the lockdown and have accepted women and children at the shelters during this period and continues to do so.

Shelter services continue to be non-accessible for LBTQ women, especially for trans women, as they also have fears to stay with other women who can be hostile towards their expression. However, Pink Armenia and LGBT shelter initiative provided accommodation for the victims of DV which is an alternative solution, but not ensuring the full protection of the victims.

5. Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Emergency protective orders issued by the police are available and have been issued.

6. What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?

During the lockdown the courts were not working.

7. What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.

Due to the COVID-19, it has become more difficult to provide medical care to people living with HIV as under Armenian law the multi-profile hospitals that can provide medical services to people living with HIV, have been re-profiled to provide services to people infected with the Coronavirus, so in the current situation, it has become more difficult for people living with HIV to receive medical care and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly and indirectly affected many girls and women with disabilities: many are not able to go to a polyclinic or hospital to get their medication and are deprived of rehabilitation services and much-needed medical care.

8. Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

According to the CSVW member organizations, as a consequence of the COVID-19 and state emergency situation, among other things, the social and economic situation of people of different groups has deteriorated. Apart from economic challenges and increasing poverty, there have been other challenges registered such as the problems regarding the response of law enforcement bodies/state bodies, problem of access to communication, transportation system, the lack of sensitivity of police officers.

➤ Problems regarding the response of law enforcement bodies/state bodies:

During the state of emergency, the victims of DV were not interrogated online, as the representatives of the law enforcement body stated that there were no sufficient grounds for that. It is also problematic that during this time the police have issued a warning, which is very risky for a woman who has been abused if she is locked up with an abuser.

It is also important to emphasize that at the state level no notification has been made for women who are locked in a home with a perpetrator.

In the state of emergency, no particular policy, public awareness campaign or preventive action was carried out on adequate response to cases of DV.

➤ Deterioration of socio-economic conditions:

According to the WSC, due to the effects of the COVID-19, women are now in a more vulnerable position. Many of them are daily wage earners and unregistered workers who lost their jobs and are unemployed today and have no income. Although women who have experienced DV have gone through many hardships, they have gone through a period of psychological recovery and often, having no work experience or skills, have tried to find their place in the labor market. However, women living on daily wages jobs are now in a very difficult situation. In order to alleviate the situation, the WSC provided first aid to its beneficiaries, but there is misgiving that if

the restrictions are extended, they will not be able to provide them with full social assistance and women will find themselves in a more vulnerable situation.

The restrictions of performance had a huge influence on the employment status of LBT women and same-sex couples as those who worked and earned their income on daily bases lost their work and had financial difficulties. It is worth to mention that the majority of those LBT women didn't have any support from their family members and used to live separately due the previous experience of DV or non-acceptance based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Meanwhile, the same people usually rent houses, and do not have financial support from their families or the government, as the government has not developed separate community support programs or protection laws. These factors put LBT women at risk to stay homeless, without any means of survival and medical care. Especially vulnerable became trans* people who used to receive a hormonal therapy as preparation for sex reassignment surgery (SRS)/gender reassignment surgery (GRS), but due to this situation, they cannot effort to continue their treatments as they are not able to pay for it. About 40 LBT women applied to Pink Armenia with these needs. Taking into consideration the situation, Pink Armenia has provided social support to the latter to overcome the situation.

➤ Problem of accessibility of means of communication:

Women are having a hard time using the phone these days, because as a result of the COVID-19, women who are being abused are in the same area with the abuser all day.

Our observations on the issue show that the telephone numbers of women victims of DV are mostly registered in the name of their husbands and are strictly controlled by them. Now that everyone is at home, the control has increased and women are often unable to even call from home for help.

➤ Problems of transport system:

As a result of transport system problems, when women try to report about DV, they are unable to reach the local police station or the nearest support center.

In one of the last cases registered by WSC, the woman, who had been abused by her husband for 25 years, just left the house on foot because of the lack of transportation and approached the first policeman she met with the expectation of support. The latter offered the woman to apply to the precinct police station, and when asked how she could get there, he answered that it was not his job. The woman approached the accidental taxi driver excitedly and asked him to help her. Eventually, with the support of compassionate people, the woman found herself in a WSC shelter.

➤ Lack of sensitivity of police officers:

This case once again proves that such situations can be repeated, so the police officers in public places must be sensitive to the issues of DV and be informed about referral mechanisms, as well as have access to the hotline numbers of non-governmental organizations and, if necessary, call or refer the person who has been subjected to violence to relevant support circles.

9. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.

Those governments with a robust DV response system have immediately understood the danger posed to DV victims by the pandemic. They have arranged for hotel rooms where women can take refuge without endangering contamination of beneficiaries in shelters. Also various phone apps became very helpful for victims to communicate to support centers. However, women in Armenia who mostly don't have smartphones this was not possible.

10. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.

WSC provided uninterrupted services to DV victims as well as the DV support centers that were established this year in the regions. Constant contact with police to improve sensitivity and services has also improved somewhat service protection to victims.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs based on calls from citizens and reports from WSC understood that state benefits were completely ignored to women who were undeclared laborers or hourly workers. Also the application forms were not user friendly, in a language difficult to understand by many to apply for state aid during the pandemic. Many survivors of DV did not have the proper documents to apply for benefits and that was also a handicap for them to receive much needed aid. These issues were raised with the ministry.

The availability of urgent financial aid to DV survivors was of utmost importance as many women could have lost their rental apartment or not be able to provide food for family. In this regard, NGOs relied on international donor organizations of which only OSF has been the most agile. From the rest the members of the CSVW are still waiting for allocation of "urgent" funds.

With the help of Open Society Foundations - Armenia also an awareness campaign was implemented throughout Armenia by placing posters with hot line numbers at food stores and pharmacies.

NGOs also helped women with application forms for the state aid package.

Regarding the NHRIs or equality bodies, it should be noted that the Human Rights Defender's Office (HRDO) circulates an awareness raising ad on preventing DV, possible support and the helpline.⁴

⁴ See: See: "Rapid Assessment of Government Response to Domestic Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic", <https://armenia.unfpa.org/en/publications/rapid-assessment-government-response-domestic-violence-during-covid-19-pandemic>

11. Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.

WSC has asked ministries over 2 months to provide COVID-19 testing for women who need to enter shelter and also provide 2-3 hotel rooms for quarantine until getting test results. To this day we did not receive any answer.

Keeping shelters Coronavirus free is a daily challenge for the WSC staff. To this end we appreciate the aid of UNFPA of protective gear, and disinfectant for the shelters which helped us enormously during the dangerous situation of the initial weeks of the lockdown.

Recommendations:

- Set up one unified free of charge helpline on DV support which will provide a 24/7 support to persons subjected to DV.
- Conduct concrete actions to make DV legislation and its implementation mechanisms applicable to LGBT people, especially for minors, as well as ensure the protection of the victims by law enforcement bodies.
- Collect gender-disaggregated data within the overall statistical data collection and analysis of DV cases, including data on children and people with disabilities.
- Provide additional financial and methodological support to institutions that provide services to persons subjected to DV, based on preliminary assessment of their needs.
- Raise awareness on ways of support, protection and services provided to survivors of DV and undertake awareness raising initiatives using the social media channels, as well as the public TV station.