

Features of assistance to domestic violence victims in countries in transitional period

Armenia is one of the former USSR republics, which gained independence after its collapse in 1991. It is situated in the South Caucasus, between the Black and Caspian seas, it borders with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Iran. Population is 3 052 000 (according to population census of 2004), women make 54.4% of it; literacy level among female population is 97.6%, unemployment rate -13.1%, average life interval of women is 75.6%.

The concept of domestic violence is relatively new for countries of former USSR, where such definition or even the phrase “domestic violence against women” was unknown. Soviet ideology never acknowledged the existence of such things like sex, drug addiction, etc, as well as domestic violence. Only after the collapse of USSR it became possible to speak about this phenomenon of domestic violence against women, which is a universal problem, and search ways to spread information about it.

Our organization was founded in 1990. The starting point for both our organization and me personally was participation in 4th World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995, then in the conference in Brighton (UK), where women of the world spoke about the situation in their countries. That’s when I felt the necessity to learn about the situation in Armenia. In 1997 we started the first Hot Line and unexpectedly, to our joy, first phone calls followed immediately. This was the beginning. In 1998 first Women’s Support and Counseling Center and in 2002 – first Shelter were opened.

As you see, we’ve been working in this field for 10 years. Successively and persistently, step by step we move towards our goals. Our strategy is to make the DV problem “visible”, to achieve acknowledgement of existence of the problem and put it in the center of public and state attention, to bring it out of the limits of exceptionally family issue, to «lift up the roof, to pull the walls apart and to see what is happening behind closed doors»; to make it a national problem, because a state can not be democratic and healthy if it is build of destructed and weak families. We are firmly convinced that all this shall lead to concrete steps of the state, because this problem can not be resolved only on the NGO level.

Prior opening the first Shelter we studied the experience of European countries and the USA, procedures executed from the first moment till a woman leaves shelter, participation in the woman's fate, and, last but not the least – the paperwork, because we realize, that at any moment any of our cases may become the subject of legal proceeding. This experience and documentation were adapted for Armenian reality.

I would like to mention, that everything I am speaking of is relevant not only for Armenia, but also for other countries of former Soviet Union, because we all have common past and at this stage of transition period our problems are very similar. I can say this basing upon our experience and exchange of information.

So, what are the peculiarities of our activity? What are the conditions of our work and obstacles we face? How do we achieve success?

Mentality is the first problem; absence of civil society, firm stereotypes regarding the role of women in family and society, hypocritical attitude of society towards the DV problem and

denial of existence of such problem, which in its turn leads to denial on all levels. Our activity often causes accusations of destruction of national traditions, discrimination of the model of traditional family as well as of imposing western, particularly, American culture to Armenian society.

How do we overcome these problems?

- by intense informative work carried out by all possible means: seminars, press conferences, announcements, publications, roundtables, radio- and TV programs, interviews and articles in newspapers.

- by persistent work of our services for DV victims, which in its turn gives us an opportunity to reveal multiple cases of domestic violence and to constantly spread information about it.

2-nd peculiarity – we work in the condition of absence of separate DV Law and other normative-legislative acts, trained police divisions (especially – female police officers), family courts (often victims have to wait for a long time for their turn, as provided by the established order, and during that time the cycle of domestic violence repeats over and over again in a more cruel form). Currently we are working in accordance with existing codes, which limit our possibilities to help the victims of domestic violence.

However, Women's Rights Center has initiated the elaboration of the Draft Law on Domestic violence. The draft Law was worked out based upon international experience, legislative acts of foreign countries and data, provided by WRC's National Hot Line service and Women's Support and Drop-In Center. After the draft law was completed, it needed to be reviewed and analyzed by specialists. With this end in view in 2007 a working group of professionals, dealing with domestic violence in their everyday work was created. It consists of high ranked representatives of the RA Police, Ministry of Labor and Social Issues, Ministry of Health, etc. The working group brought the draft law to the final form, which is waiting for its turn to be presented with accompanying documentation for the consideration of relevant state structures in order to be lobbied further to the Parliament. We are hoping to have the law for the first reading at the Parliament this fall. This initiative was implemented with the support of OSCE/ODIHR and Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation Armenia.

As for our work with the Police – in our everyday work, we try, on regular basis, to organize special trainings on domestic violence.

Further, another problem we face in our activity is lack of constant financial sources and support of the state. Combat against domestic violence requires consistent and continuous work. For this purpose, we are forced to always search for donors, which work in our region and have the DV problem in their mandate.

We are also experiencing serious human resource deficit; low salaries promote personnel hemorrhage, and do not allow to hire prepared specialists and/or retrain existing staff into DV specialists. There is no infrastructure and mechanisms to prepare specialized professionals, educational institutions do not have faculties to prepare domestic violence specialists, there are even no special courses or trainings. Thus, we are forced to organize trainings ourselves using materials, which we obtain on different conferences and seminars and adapt to our reality and work with volunteers.

Not the least important is absence of state social programs to support women, who leave shelter. As a rule, they have no jobs, accommodation, and cannot return home. We try to train their skills, send them to courses (sometimes we even pay for the course), provide them with

accommodation in the shelter while they finish courses and find jobs for them. Within that time they save their money, our social worker finds them a cheap accommodation outside the shelter, which they are able to pay for. Further, women and their children are transferred to the new housing, but we do not lose the connection with them; our psychologists, lawyers and social workers continue working with these women.

A couple of words about documentation: our work is being thoroughly registered: first call, visits, support group work, family day, parenting day, etc, there are primary records, separate files for every woman and child, an electronic database, monthly and annual reports.

And finally, to end on an optimistic note: RA Government adopted an edict about shelters in 2009. Even though they only plan to purchase services and not to have their own venue, it is an achievement.