

UPR Pre-Session Statement on Domestic and Sexual Violence in Armenia Women's Support Center

I represent the Women's Support Center, Armenia's leading organization providing comprehensive services to survivors of domestic violence. The Armenian government conducted two consultation sessions in preparation for its national report; however, the Women's Support Center was not invited to participate. Today, I will present an overview of Armenia's progress and the critical gaps that remain in addressing domestic and sexual violence.

Armenia has made some progress in implementing the 13 UPR recommendations related to domestic and sexual violence. It has fully implemented three, including aligning domestic violence legislation with the Istanbul Convention and allocating state resources for rehabilitative services for survivors. Four recommendations have been partially implemented, including steps to address trafficking, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace. However, six recommendations remain unimplemented, including the failure to:

- Ratify the Istanbul Convention
- Criminalize domestic violence as a standalone offense
- Address violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity
- Conduct credible investigations into torture and sexual violence
- Launch awareness campaigns on reporting mechanisms for domestic violence

Since the 3rd cycle of the UPR, Armenia has made legislative advancements:

- In 2020, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs began subsidizing domestic violence support centers across all regions.
- Amendments to the Criminal Code in 2022 introduced aggravating circumstances for crimes committed by close relatives and criminalized psychological and physical coercion, stalking, and crimes against sexual freedom.
- In 2024, amendments to the domestic violence prevention law and related laws strengthened domestic violence victim protections and increased penalties for perpetrators.

However, serious legal and systemic gaps persist:

- Domestic violence remains uncriminalized.
- The legal framework lacks recognition of power and control dynamics in domestic violence. The term "domestic violence" has been replaced with the vague term "domestic and household violence". This misclassification leads to cases being treated as family disputes rather than recognizing the inherent power dynamics and results in inadequate protection for victims, with some cases treated inappropriately, such as when victims using self-defense

are considered perpetrators. Furthermore, this terminology is inconsistent with the Istanbul Convention, which clearly defines domestic violence.

- The government has expressed reservations about the Istanbul Convention's provision on survivor compensation, which would undermine its full implementation.
- Law enforcement and judicial actors prioritize perpetrators' rights over survivor safety. While police are registering cases and administering emergency protective orders in greater numbers, enforcement of orders remains rare, and violations are often ignored. Arrests of perpetrators are infrequent, and the specialized police unit to address domestic violence was dismantled in 2023, hindering progress as 1,800 community police officers now require domestic violence-specific training. Victim-blaming remains prevalent among judges, investigators, prosecutors, and forensic experts. Forensic exams often re-traumatize victims, and in sexual violence cases, virginity tests may still be conducted. Courts frequently overturn protective orders and dismiss cases due to a supposed lack of evidence, re-traumatizing survivors in the process.
- Marginalized groups, including displaced women, women with disabilities, LBT women, and ethnic minorities, face additional barriers in accessing support.
- Existing legal protections for children in domestic violence situations remain insufficient and inconsistently enforced.
- Armenia lacks a coordinated community response to domestic and sexual violence, leading to fragmented services, delays, and inconsistent support for survivors.
- Finally, the Armenian government plans to launch a perpetrator rehabilitation program this year; however, the initial model circulated is not firmly rooted in international best practices and raises several concerns.

Recommendations:

To address these issues, we call on the Armenian government to:

- Ratify the Istanbul Convention without reservations, particularly the provision on survivor compensation, ensuring comprehensive protections and alignment with international standards (SDG 5.2 and 16.3).
- Criminalize domestic violence and recognize coercive control in Armenian law to ensure comprehensive legal protection (SDG 5.2).
- Preserve the use of the term "domestic violence" in legal frameworks to align with international standards and prevent misinterpretations (SDG 16.3).
- Implement trauma-informed forensic exams by increasing the number of forensic experts (especially female experts) and allowing victims to self-refer (SDG 3.7).
- Strengthen enforcement of protective orders and introduce penalties for violations to enhance victim safety (SDG 16.1).

- Reduce procedural barriers and improve access to justice by eliminating court fees for victims and reducing delays in forensic examinations, preliminary investigations, and court proceedings to prevent prolonged exposure to abuse and re-victimization (SDG 16.3).
- Increase the use of alternative measures for perpetrators, such as house arrest or administrative control, to prevent recidivism (SDG 16.1).
- Ensure strict enforcement of protective orders and hold perpetrators accountable for violations (SDG 16.1).
- Establish clear protocols for the swift arrest of perpetrators and the protection of survivors (SDG 16.3).
- Introduce mandatory training for judges, investigators, prosecutors, and forensic experts to eliminate victim-blaming and ensure a survivor-centered approach (SDG 5.1).
- Expand and improve services for marginalized groups, including displaced women, women with disabilities, LBT women, and ethnic minorities (SDG 10.2).
- Strengthen protections for children in violent situations, ensuring court decisions prioritize children's safety and restrict abusers' access when necessary (SDG 16.2).
- Establish an integrated, multi-agency response system with trained professionals, centralized referral pathways, and local coordination centers to ensure timely and comprehensive support for survivors (SDG 16.1, 5.2, 3.7).
- Ensure the planned perpetrator rehabilitation program aligns with international best practices by integrating a structured, evidence-based approach, accountability mechanisms, mandatory participation, and effective monitoring from the outset to maximize its impact (SDG 5.2, 16.3).