



# Domestic Violence, Poverty, Gender Norms, and the Post-Soviet Landscape in Armenia

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Domestic violence is a social epidemic in Armenia exacerbated by poverty and traditional attitudes that preclude acknowledgement of the issue. Also known as intimate partner violence, domestic violence comprises the physical force or psychological abuse inflicted onto a person by an intimate partner or other member of a household intended to cause humiliation and intimidation.<sup>1</sup> It is a gender-based crime that principally involves the perpetration of harm against women, though, as scholars note, domestic violence has profound consequences not only for women who are victims, but also for children who witness the violence and indeed for the whole of society, which “suffers practically and morally by failing to stop or minimize domestic violence, thus allowing the perpetuation of a subculture that devalues women.”<sup>2</sup>

Statistics on the prevalence of domestic violence in Armenia vary due to the secretive nature of the issue that leads to severe underreporting of the crime. However, even underreported statistics reflect the pervasiveness of domestic violence in Armenian society and indicate extreme cause for concern. Armenia’s Women’s Support Center reported in 2017 that at least 1 in 4 Armenian women are victims of intimate partner violence;<sup>3</sup> in 2002, the World Health Organization estimated this number to be as high as 69%.<sup>4</sup> According to an interview with Armenia’s Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women in 2018, one-third of murders in Armenia are domestic violence cases.<sup>5</sup> The very frequency of the violence against women in Armenia contributes to the inability of society to comprehend its seriousness.<sup>6</sup> Intimate partner violence is

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Elise Johnson, “Domestic Violence Politics in Post-Soviet States,” <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1022.5299&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, 381.

<sup>2</sup> Ilze Slabbert, “Domestic Violence and Poverty: Some Women’s Experiences,” [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306002724\\_Domestic\\_Violence\\_and\\_Poverty\\_Some\\_Womens\\_Experiences](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306002724_Domestic_Violence_and_Poverty_Some_Womens_Experiences), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Armine Ishkanian, “Heated Debates Around Domestic Violence in Armenia,” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/heated-debates-around-domestic-violence-in-armenia/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sanan Shirinian, “Domestic Violence Against Women in Armenia,” <https://wunrn.com/2011/03/armenia-domestic-violence-poverty-women/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gohar Abrahamyan, “Domestic Violence: An Imperfect Law and Enduring Stereotypes,” [https://www.evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/domestic-violence-an-imperfect-law-and-enduring-stereotypes\\_](https://www.evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/domestic-violence-an-imperfect-law-and-enduring-stereotypes_).

<sup>6</sup> Gohar Abrahamyan, “Domestic Violence: An Imperfect Law and Enduring Stereotypes.”



so normalized in Armenian culture, and has been for so long, that it is inscribed into tradition and language. One may recall the Armenian proverb “a woman is like wool, the more you beat her, the softer she becomes.”

Poverty is a stressor that triggers domestic violence and exacerbates existing violence. In Armenia, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of Armenia’s centrally planned economy, coupled with the financial stress of the war with Azerbaijan and resulting trade blockades, the country experienced a sharp increase in its national poverty level. From 1988 to 1996, the proportion of Armenians beneath the poverty line increased from 20% to approximately 55%.<sup>7</sup> Since then, with the exception of the impact of the 2008 world economic crisis, Armenia has been regaining financial stability, with poverty levels declining to 25.7% in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Even with this improvement, to have one quarter of the population under the poverty line is significant; the proportion of the population under the poverty line in the United States, for example, is more than 10% lower than in Armenia.<sup>9</sup> The proportion of Armenians under the poverty line, of course, also does not account for the proportion of families that are struggling financially but are not strictly considered low-income. Notably, as of 2016, there was little difference in poverty rates between rural and urban areas in Armenia, amounting to 30.4% and 28.8%, respectively; between Yerevan and the rest of Armenia, however, the disparity was more pronounced, comprising a 24.9% poverty rate compared to 33.2%, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while there have been improvements in poverty indices in recent years, the collapse of the Soviet Union threw Armenia into disarray and, without proper economic structures and institutions in place, it has taken years to rebuild and stabilize Armenia’s economy.

With regard to domestic violence, poverty plays a cyclical role. Families in poverty are more likely to suffer from domestic abuse<sup>11</sup> since financial difficulty creates stressful conditions that fuel violence. Studies have concluded that men with lower incomes are more likely to batter their partners than men with higher incomes,<sup>12</sup> and that women living in poverty are more likely to suffer domestic abuse than women not in poverty,<sup>13</sup> underscoring the implications of the relationship between financial instability and intimate partner violence in Armenia, particularly in areas outside of Yerevan. Domestic violence can also lead to economic instability, as perpetrators of abuse may sabotage their victims’ employment or schooling through harassment in those spaces, by preventing them from leaving home to attend their obligations, or by destroying work product. The trauma and mental anguish that women suffering from abuse undergo, too, can prompt

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<sup>7</sup> John Odling-Smee, “The Economic Transition in Armenia – Speech by John Odling-Smee,” <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp073101>.

<sup>8</sup> “Poverty in Armenia – Asian Development Bank,” Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/countries/armenia/poverty>.

<sup>9</sup> Center for Poverty Research, University of California, Davis, “What is the Current Poverty Rate in the United States?,” <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-current-poverty-rate-united-states>.

<sup>10</sup> “Poverty Reduction – Armenia,” United Nations Development Programme, <https://www.am.undp.org/content/armenia/en/home/sustainable-development.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ilze Slabbert, “Domestic Violence and Poverty: Some Women’s Experiences,” 2.

<sup>12</sup> Slabbert, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Sanan Shirinian, “Domestic Violence Against Women in Armenia.”



depression, absence from work or school, and lack of focus and productivity with assignments that can themselves lead to loss of employment or failing out of school. These conditions can either lead to or intensify a situation in which women are dependent on their abusers for money, shelter, and fulfillment of basic needs, such that it is even more difficult for women to escape the violence: to leave the abuser can result in loss of essential income and housing. This “symbiotic relationship between poverty and abuse,” Ilze Slabbert notes, “means that women have to negotiate better ways in which to survive financially, physically, and emotionally”<sup>14</sup>—and therefore to balance the merit of managing abuse against the possibility of homelessness and increased poverty, particularly for low-income women with children or with little education and resulting low job prospects.

Intimate partner violence is also inextricably tied to conceptions of gender norms and gender roles. In the Soviet Union, the centrally planned economic system necessitated that Armenian women work outside of the home; upon the drafting of Armenian men into the army during World War II, too, women began working traditionally male jobs, such as in factories. As a result, Armenian society was forced to accept, however superficially, an expanded notion of gender norms that included women contributing financially at a level equal to men.<sup>15</sup> Though women were relegated to lower paying jobs and were still expected to handle most of the household’s domestic work after a full workday,<sup>16</sup> these econo-ideological shifts did “help” women in that they introduced and began to normalize some degree of professional equality for women. This Soviet philosophy relatedly fostered a resistance to feminism and denigration of feminism as bourgeois, particularly when espoused by organizations connected to Western support; such skepticism of feminism and women’s organizations, and thus of issues of violence against women, has continued in contemporary Armenia as part of its Soviet-socialist legacy<sup>17</sup> and has made grassroots attempts at combating domestic violence expressly difficult.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, traditional gender roles in Armenia and surrounding regions reappeared and intensified.<sup>18</sup> Harsh post-Soviet economic conditions and unprecedented unemployment resulted in an environment in which women were especially vulnerable to violence.<sup>19</sup> As such, the new Armenian state was faced with a combination of increased poverty and a heightening of patriarchal customs that promoted domestic violence. The familialism typical of traditional Armenian culture now fused with national politics. Janet Elise Johnson notes of Armenian society:

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<sup>14</sup> Slabbert, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Böll Stiftung, “Transformation of Gender Roles in Armenian Society,” <https://ge.boell.org/en/2012/11/06/transformation-gender-roles-armenian-society>.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Elise Johnson, “Domestic Violence Politics in Post-Soviet States,” 396.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, 395-396.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Slay, “Poverty, Inequality, and Social Policy Reform in the Former Soviet Union,” <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/Poverty-inequality-and-social-policy-reform-in-the-former-Soviet-Union.pdf>, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Shirinian.



In resistance to Russia, their former colonizer, and Turkey and Azerbaijan, the current opponents, the nation itself is portrayed as [a] large, political family, a mirror for the real family that “represents the center of affective life and, no less importantly, the means by which they resisted cultural assimilation and physical destruction as a people through centuries of onslaught by Arabs, Mongols, Turks and other ethnically or religiously alien peoples”... Under this extended familialism, men are cast as patriarch, and “a woman, specifically a mother, is considered to be the hearth (*odjakh*), pillar (*syun*), and the light (*jrak*) of her family”...<sup>20</sup>

“Under this view,” Johnson continues, “contesting domestic violence (and patriarchal power) is treasonous.”<sup>21</sup>

Custom, in this case, defines norms: Armenian women are expected to be passive, submissive child bearers, and men the heads of the family and the providers. Such tightknit interdependency is an essential characteristic of what is deemed “the traditional Armenian family” and results in intimate partner violence being regarded as a private “family matter,”<sup>22</sup> wherefore to discuss domestic violence publically is perceived as an unacceptable attempt to destroy the family. Moreover, to the extent that domestic violence is discussed publically, it is considered the inevitable result of an action a wife did to upset her husband. This viewpoint in part explains why domestic violence cases are met largely by inaction from lawmakers and police, allowing perpetrators to inflict harm with essential impunity. As Sanan Shirinian aptly summarizes, “Behind public support for the family unit lays an institutionalized culture of preserving silence on the violence that occurs within the family, and denying justice to its victims.”<sup>23</sup> Even in the journalism sphere, domestic violence issues are neglected; Armenian nonprofits struggle obtain basic coverage on television or in newspapers.<sup>24</sup> In the legal sphere, while some strides have been made in enacting legislation addressing domestic violence, the law has still fallen short of explicitly taking a stand against such violence as many courts and politicians still consider legislation an invasion of the sacredness and privacy of the domestic realm.

Such abuse has become normalized to the degree that many Armenian women believe that violence is an expected, inescapable part of marriage, and even to the extent that some women perpetuate violence against “subordinate” women in the household. Indeed, Amnesty International reported in 2008 that in cases of domestic violence in Armenia, husbands were the perpetrators 85% of the time, and mothers-in-law the perpetrators 10% of the time.<sup>25</sup> Some mothers-in-law thus participate in violence against their younger daughters-in-law and enforce patriarchal systems of violence and hierarchy.

Interestingly, within the post-Soviet context, Russian activists have been successful in combatting domestic violence by invoking gender stereotypes and shifting them to include protectionism, or the protection of women from violence within the home. As such, activists have

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, 395.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>22</sup> Shirinian.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, 386.

<sup>25</sup> Shirinian.



strategically advocated for women's human rights in a framework that resonates with dominant traditional social values.<sup>26</sup> Such a subversive reframing of arguments against domestic violence to fit within societal norms is a relevant and instructive case study for Armenia.

To outlaw domestic violence for the sake of outlawing domestic violence, without drawing on gender stereotypes or protectionism, is certainly preferable; it would be better, theoretically, if intimate partner violence could be halted and norms could be changed in Armenia by simply citing the importance of human rights. However, in reality, with women's lives at stake, arguments against domestic violence in Armenia must prioritize whatever would work best within the social-cultural framework of the nation. That is, it is best to forcefully implement arguments against domestic violence however will be most convincing to the community in question, given that violence against women is not an abstract concept but an issue of utmost urgency that deals with life and death.

To wit, in the vein of reframing domestic violence arguments within existing cultural values such as protectionism, because the Armenian family is considered sacred, and indeed is politicized as the lifeblood of the Armenian nation, women must be protected in their homes. Violence against women threatens the sanctity of the Armenian family and the conception of the Armenian home as an ideal haven; to commit violence against women, then, is shameful, *amot*, and threatens the honor of the Armenian family and nation at large. These normative shifts, in conjunction with continued legislative change, are critical in shifting national attitudes around violence and reconfiguring cultural values that prioritize the safety of women.

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, 393.



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