

# INTRODUCING THE 'ZANGAKATUN' WOMEN'S SUPPORT CENTER

*Sponsored by USAID, the Tufenkian Foundation, and the Armenian International Woman's Association (AIWA)*

## INTRODUCTION



During the past 10 years, **Zangakatun** Social Services NGO has worked with over 900 Armenian families, helping them overcome extreme poverty and return to functional and productive lives. With partnership support from USAID, AIWA, and the Tufenkian Foundation, the program has now expanded to assist victims of domestic violence in Yerevan's Shengavit district.<sup>1</sup>

According to a recent survey, 27% of Armenia's women have experienced some form of domestic abuse, usually at the hands of their husbands.<sup>2</sup> These include physical as well as psychological trauma, e.g. imprisonment at home by their husbands, not being allowed to have social contact with friends or family members, etc. One such woman has stated, "Happiness for me means not being beaten and blood not gushing from my nose."<sup>3</sup> Last year, among Zangakatun's 209 beneficiary families, 122 disclosed some kind of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse. These cases reveal suffering and dysfunction among all members of the family, and in most cases, the violence is also reflected in the behavior of their offspring.

## PROGRAM

The new pilot program works with the entire family: The abused wife, the abusive husband, and the children affected by this violence. In treating and preventing domestic violence, the program establishes support services for victimized women in three ways: 1) organizing women's self-help groups that build self-esteem and empowerment; 2) establishing peer groups to stimulate women to overcome stigmas and stereotypes found in Armenian society; 3) targeting the abusive husbands by helping them change their violent attitudes towards women and educating them on women's rights.

At the community level, a network of local NGOs has been formed to work against gender-based violence. The NGOs will utilize and involve municipal social workers, police departments, and medical groups, also coordinating activities with educational and employment centers.

The overall goal is to develop community activism so that citizens are informed of their rights and options. In particular, the program promotes telephone 'hotlines' where women can call anonymously to report



<sup>1</sup> Encouraged by this program, the French-Armenian Development Fund has also lent its support to the effort.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International Publications 2008

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous woman from 'Armenia's silent victims' publication

abuse or seek counseling. Through training and roundtable discussions, we seek to change the prevailing mentalities towards domestic violence in Armenian society. Such mentalities often include the following:

- Rape victims are often seen as the guilty party
- Women must consent to sexual relations with her husband at his bidding
- Public discussion of domestic violence is frowned upon and considered to be an effort to destroy the family
- Rape and sexual violence remain taboos
- Marital rape is not explicitly defined as a crime under Armenian law or legislation
- 45% of men disagree that a wife may justifiably refuse sexual relations with her husband – in case of tiredness, sexually transmitted disease by husband, etc.
- 64% of women are subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>4</sup>

## TRUE STORIES FROM OUR CENTER



*Irina*<sup>5</sup> – 36 years old, 7 children

Irina's husband – unemployed, alcoholic – wants her to bear more children so the government pays them additional benefits (the main form of income for the family). During the initial visit by our social workers, the children were seen hiding under the bed, terrorized by the violence they had witnessed. We were told that the children once saved their mother from being stabbed by their father. Irina, through our program, has been placed in an abused women's shelter and is kept hidden from her husband. The children are in temporary foster care. Irina is proceeding with a divorce while we look to move her and the children to an undisclosed location.

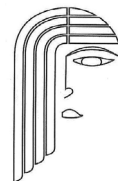
*Lusine* – 33 years old, 3 children

Lusine and her children are systematically abused by their violent husband/father who is suffering from unfounded jealousy. The children constantly live in fear and are extremely traumatized. We were told that at night, the children tie their legs to their mother to make sure that she will not leave them alone with their father. Lusine is seeing the center's psychologist and social worker. We are also trying to work with Lusine's husband; however, he has shown resistance to counseling.

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International Publications 2008

<sup>5</sup> For purposes of confidentiality, we do not reveal the true names of subjects.