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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and war on gender issues

Summary analysis of the discussion

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Date and time of event: 23.12.2020 (12:00-13:45)

Venue: ZOOM

Number of participants: 15 (Total: 22)

Yerevan 2020

Brief information about the participants

The meeting was attended by gender experts, from organizations in different regions of Armenia and Yerevan, who work directly with female victims of domestic violence and provide psychological, social, legal and other types of assistance to women, men returning from the war, children, people with disabilities and the elderly. In order to make sure that the meeting served its purpose as far as possible, specialists from at least one organization from all the regions were invited. The meeting was also attended by individuals removed from NK/Artsakh, as well as representatives of partner organizations, who participated more passively.

Changes in operations due to the realities of COVID-19 and war

During the meeting, the participants mentioned that especially in the conditions of the COVID-19 **pandemic**, the work was mainly transferred to an **online platform**. Women's organizations that provide various services have organized and continue to conduct **assessments of women's situations and needs**, assessments that identify as much as possible the problems that women face in connection with the crisis. Out of the organizations, the representative of the Women's Resource Center NGO mentioned that they have continued to be engaged in the issues of women's **sexual health and exercise of their rights**. All the organizations mentioned that during lockdown there were many **violations of women's labor rights**. Representatives of Women's Support Center NGO and the Coalition Against Violence Against Women stated that during lockdown there was also a **sharp increase in domestic violence cases**.

A number of other similar problems have arisen due to the reality of **the war**. In general, for most of the organizations, **the areas of work have changed**; in addition to their main functions is the **work of organizing, collecting and providing humanitarian aid**. The organization of humanitarian aid *is an additional voluntary work* carried out by them. In some cases, organizations with psychological support capabilities provided services to **soldiers and mothers who have lost their sons** (for example, in the Shirak region). Some organizations, being human rights organizations, have also undertaken to provide assistance to beneficiaries in **completing and directing applications for state assistance** (for example, in the Lori region). It should be noted that only in the case of some organizations, specifically for the provision of humanitarian assistance (to displaced families, women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities) has there been *increased cooperation with government agencies and local governments* (which has elicited an ambiguous response among participants). However, other organizations mention the *impossibility of working with state bodies* due to overload, inaccessibility of necessary data, etc.

In general, **large amounts of humanitarian aid** - food, clothing, hygiene items, as well as, in some cases, direct financial support - have become the main function of the organizations

involved in the discussion, whereas *before the pandemic and war it was not in their activities* or occupied an insignificant place among their main activities.

Are there any activities that were normal for you before the pandemic and war, but you cannot do now (because of the pandemic and war)

Culture of violence and justification of violence

In this part of the discussion, the more widespread *culture of violence and the justification of violence by men* was clearly identified. According to the participants in the discussion, violence [against women] is justified and forced to be tolerated *not only by women* and their relatives (neighbors and acquaintances), but especially by representatives of *state bodies* such as the police and the courts. Women themselves do not 'run the risk' of referring to the police, as they admit that it is not worthwhile. In general, **men** (especially in the post-war reality) **are perceived as "defenders of the homeland", "heroes", "people who sacrifice their life"**, as a result of which their status in society increases, thus leading to the *justification of violence* in response to their willingness to sacrifice their lives. In this regard, **the classic version of the chain of violence** was presented: the hierarchy of violence from strong to weak:

War's violence against men – Men's violence against women – Continuous chain violence

In this context, *the economic dependence of women is deepening*, which had already deepened due to the direct and indirect effects/consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *The expression of empathy* towards the abused woman by *the representatives of state structures is gradually decreasing* (thoughts from Yerevan and Tavush). It is predicted that *cases of sexual violence* may increase due to the *presence of peacekeepers* (based on the experience of other countries, as well as the overlooking of sexual violence).

Activities that could not be undertaken in crisis situations

The participants of the meeting mentioned some functions that could not be performed due to the crisis situation (in some cases it still remains impossible)

1. *Applications to the police* - On the one hand, it was not possible to apply for cases concerning violence during the war, because **the police themselves were at war**. On the other hand, as a result of justifying violence, *the accusation against a woman or a supporting non-governmental organization* for filing a complaint against a man from war is multifaceted. In this respect, it is predicted that *hatred and enmity towards women's organizations* – which is already increasing – *will deepen*. One of the participants mentioned a case of domestic violence, where the court allowed the abuser to visit the child only on the grounds that the latter was a participant in the war, without taking into account the main circumstances.

2. **Public Awareness Measures** - Some of the participants mentioned that due to both the pandemic and the war it was not possible and is still impossible to carry out **public awareness campaigns, events** and public speeches about women and a number of gender issues. Not only are they outdated, but they have lost and continue to lose their "priority" or importance, as all women's organizations are engaged in organizing humanitarian assistance.
3. **Promoting Women's Leadership** - As a result of such crises, it becomes impossible to undertake activities on women's leadership, especially political leadership and activism.
4. **Delay in Legislative Amendments** - In this sense, for example, the criminalization of domestic violence law and the work to adopt the Istanbul Convention have been delayed. In some respects it is impossible to advance that agenda at this moment.

In your opinion, which of the gender issues are the most important in Armenia today (in terms of response) in the conditions of the pandemic and war?

During the discussion we tried to understand which issues can be considered a higher priority in the current situation. Below are some of the ones that were mentioned during the discussion:

- **Regression of human rights** – both the pandemic and the war ignore the importance of exercising human rights for objective and subjective reasons. In this respect, gender discrimination will deepen.
- **Working with men [who have seen violence]** - in this context, it is important to engage in widespread work with men who have been in the war, as a result of which they need serious psychological and psychological intervention. At the same time, the introduction of the practice of working with the abuser is emphasized.
- **Proper provision of information** - In this regard, it is noted that proper information should be provided to the public during the war concerning the direct and indirect (frontline and backend) participation and contribution of women. Also, to some extent, emphasis should be placed on the fact that there has been an unprecedented increase in the mobilization of women in the war.
- **Working with perceptions of women leadership** - According to the participants in the discussion, the more passive behaviour of women in power will not go unnoticed, especially during the war. People spoke of the "Shamiram effect", according to which, even when women are sufficiently represented in the National Assembly (**it seems** that there is a women's faction), there has still been little reference to women's rights.
- **Ongoing work with primary response bodies** - As government agencies have begun to respond even more poorly to gender issues, the participants in the discussion believe that more intensive work should continue to be done to sensitize the work of government agencies: police, community services, courts, etc. *In some respects, sensitivity can also be relayed by experienced CSOs in the field.*

What capacities do CSOs need to be developed in connection with the pandemic and post-war crisis?

The discussion on this issue was based on capacity building issues in the context of the pandemic and war. Thus, the participants mentioned the *following needs* that need to be responded to at the time of the discussion.

- Providing and developing professional skills to work with the families of the injured, people with disabilities and their families,
- Development of dialogue skills with state agencies, especially to protect women's interests in difficult situations,
- Professional recovery and rehabilitation work for professionals - professional interventions for employees of organizations who have suffered losses due to the pandemic or war,
- Providing the capacity to respond to domestic violence and other cases in a crisis situation, exchange of experience,
- Coordination of experience of working in a crisis situation.

How much has the work with state and local government bodies changed?

The discussion on this issue focused not so much on the issue of change in the work with state bodies, but rather on pointing out the shortcomings in the work of the latter. In fact, the organizations had *different experiences* of working with state structures and local governments, especially during the war. The readiness of some government agencies to cooperate with CSOs was emphasized as a *positive aspect*. Disappointment towards the state bodies was mentioned as a *negative aspect*. It's important to note that, despite the difficulties, CSOs continued to cooperate.

- There are also *clearer omissions*, which are presented based on the words of the discussion participants:
- In general deficient work, *lack of awareness of one's responsibilities* and obligations,
- Comprehensive *shortcomings in the assessment process* of beneficiaries' needs,
- *Problems filling out documents* related to new types of state support (beneficiaries re-apply to CSOs);
- *Bureaucracy, slow response to urgent issues* (e.g. housing, financial support, etc.), continuous practice of "dumping the problem on someone else",
- *Lack of public relations*, which is again supplemented by CSOs, and this is not considered appropriate,
- *Negative attitude towards important legislative changes* related to women's and gender issues, based on giving in to manipulations, various fears and reactionary personal positions,
- *Political uncertainty*, difficulties in planning further steps,

During the discussion on this issue, it was mentioned that the commitment and work of the *Human Rights Defender* had a great and positive response, and it seems that no gaps were observed. It was also important to *observe the attempt of the local self-governments to self-govern*, in which the latter, not having much support from the upper echelons, self-organized and worked independently. Here, too, the active participation of women in local self-government is emphasised.

What state policies do you feel there is a need to change or develop in connection with the crisis situation? What contribution can you or your organization make to these processes?

At the end of the meeting it was possible to discuss several directions of state policies, in which the participants proposed making changes.

- *Improving public emergency response services*, including social services, health services and relevant municipal functions.
- *Improving the work of the police* - despite a lot of work in previous years, police officers have stereotypical approaches that go deeper and are justified, especially because of the war.
- *Development of mechanisms for access to information on beneficiaries* - In the existing conditions, the provision of humanitarian assistance by CSOs became double the work, including the identification of beneficiaries. Of course, it is understandable and acceptable that the disclosure of confidential information about people is restricted, but it is proposed to develop a clear mechanism by which emergency assistance can be provided by CSOs also.
- *Provision of in-depth knowledge on needs assessment* - there may be a need to develop new benchmarks that will take a more comprehensive look at the situation of beneficiaries and their issues.
- *Development of clear policies for working in crisis situations*, which address and emphasize gender issues in particular.

In respect of the proposals mentioned above, the organizations indicate their readiness to participate in the implementation of actions, especially in the processes of increasing the sensitivity of the work of state structures.