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EU is giving Armenia its best chance yet to enact a domestic-abuse law

The World Post (10.04.2016) - <http://huff.to/1Sam1di> - Women's-rights groups have been campaigning for a decade for a domestic-violence law in Armenia.

So far all their efforts have failed. Depending on the session of parliament, lawmakers have either refused to take up the legislation or voted it down.

This year, Armenia may finally see a law that protects women from partner violence.

If it happens, it's likely to be because of a European Union financial inducement rather than any sudden Armenian government and lawmaker enlightenment on domestic abuse.

The EU is making an 11-million-euro grant that it calls the Human Rights Budget Support Program contingent on Armenia adopting a domestic-violence law. The financing covers the years 2016 to 2018.

The European incentive comes on top of the United Nations prodding Armenia a year ago about its lack of a domestic-abuse law. The criticism came in the UN's Second Universal Periodic Review of Armenia.

As in all former Soviet states that lack domestic-violence legislation — and that's most of them — Armenia needs a law to protect women from repeat battering.

With rare exceptions, police bring charges against an abuser only when it's too late — that is, when the victim has been murdered or crippled.

Current Armenian law allows police to file charges against anyone who commits an assault, whether the injuries are mild, medium or severe.

If a man who batters a woman is not her partner, however — if he's an acquaintance or stranger, say — police are likely to bring an assault case against him even if the injuries are mild.

If the attacker is a partner, though, police consider the assault a family matter, and lean on the partners to work things out.

It's hard for police to get their heads around the idea of domestic abuse when Armenian society has long had the axiom that: "A woman is like wool: The more you beat her, the softer she will be."

In the few instances where a victim insists on police filing charges, if she has suffered only mild or medium injury, they usually refuse.

This means the victim continues to be trapped in the cycle of battering. Since domestic violence often becomes more frequent and more severe over time, she risks debilitating injury or death if she stays in the relationship.

One way out would be to flee the abusive environment, of course — but the odds against a victim doing so are slim.

Most Armenian women give up careers when they marry, or never have them in the first place, and men tightly control the family's purse strings. This means that the vast majority of wives and live-in girlfriends have no money to start a life of their own.

In addition, Armenia has only a handful of battered-women's shelters, and the time that a victim can stay in one is limited.

You might think a sensible option would be a battered woman moving in with her parents. But in Armenia, where divorce is frowned on, many parents would condemn their daughter for not doing enough to save the marriage — and refuse to take her in.

The domestic-abuse legislation that women's-rights groups have been pushing would almost certainly prevent some battered-women deaths and maimings.

That's because, for the first time, it would give judges the power to issue restraining orders to keep batterers away from victims.

Attackers would think twice against violating such an order because it would lead to jail time.

Those who support an Armenian domestic-abuse law offer some sobering statistics to make their case.

One is that a quarter of all married women have suffered domestic violence at one time or another, according to the National Statistical Service.

Another telling statistic is that a quarter of the 1,759 cases of violence against women that the National Police recorded in the first nine months of 2014 involved domestic abuse.

An even starker statistic is that 30 Armenian women have been killed by their partners since 2010 — a sizable number for a country of 3 million.

Many of the government leaders who oppose a domestic-violence law have offered as a justification the fact that the legislation would impose additional financial costs on the state.

One provision, for example, would require the government to increase the number of battered-women's shelters across the country, and pay for their operations.

At the moment, not even one kopek of taxpayer money goes to shelters. The few that are available are funded by non-governmental organizations.

But the main justification that opponents of the legislation use is that a domestic-abuse law is unnecessary because current law covers assault and battery, including domestic violence.

But given the police's reluctance to file charges in all but the most horrific domestic-battering cases, and the current law's lack of a restraining-order provision to protect

women from continued battering, the argument that a specific domestic-abuse law is unnecessary fails to pass muster.

Studies in a number of countries have shown a direct correlation between enactment of a domestic-abuse law and a decline in partner violence against women.

The European Union's current financial inducement for Armenia to pass a domestic-violence law does not guarantee it will happen, of course.

But it is the best chance its proponents have ever had to help reduce partner battering.
