



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING PROJECT**

I SEEK ADVICE!!!¹

We always need advice on how to behave correctly in this or that situation. Worldly wisdom of relatives or best friends is good in everyday life. But what can help in matters like daily violations of women's rights, personal violence?

Young Mary married right after school. Her grandfather and uncle's family, where she lived after her mother was deprived of parental rights and she lost track of her father who went to work in a distant country, wanted to arrange her life and find a good home for her. They found a 30-year-old hardworking guy with a two-room flat in Yerevan, a father and a mother. Mary didn't want to marry, but her husband-to-be seemed so grown up, and nobody was there to back her up so she resigned herself to her fate.

The first time she felt somewhat strange was when she was advised to avoid contacts with neighbors. Her mother-in-law's arguments seemed to make sense: some are flirts; others are promiscuous, some have young men in the family. Mary didn't especially grieve at first; she did her household duties with pleasure feeling herself to be a little landlady.

Soon she became pregnant, though this happy event was overshadowed by a refusal to register their marriage: "Why register the marriage, you can have the baby, register as single mother and get benefits. This will be your contribution to our budget, all the more so you are not registered here," argued her father-in-law. Her husband took his father's side.

To Mary's surprise, her grandpa and aunt also took her father-in-law's side. Her aunt announced that this is a common matter and she knew a lot of people who did so.

Unfortunately she was right. There are 11,700 single mothers registered in Armenia as of today and 11,000 of them get family benefits. Of them, 3563 live in Yerevan, 1379 in Lori Marz, 877 in Gegharkhunik Marz, etc.¹ Quoting social workers, at least 50% of them are not really single.

Mary gave birth to a first and then a second daughter, regularly bringing in modest but stable money. Unfortunately she didn't see any of the money at all. She had to ask for money for small purchases. She started to go out, walk about with the children. This caused brawls at home. For the first time her husband hit her when her mother-in-law reported that Mary had made friends with salesmen of the next door store. Psychological violence gradually became combined with physical. Neither Mary's grandfather, nor her aunt stood up for her, they were afraid to make things worse. However, Mary couldn't continue living in a household with the rights of a maid, without means and future...

She left home and started to live on her single-mother's benefit. Her grandpa and aunt didn't allow her to take the children with her because they were afraid that by doing so she would ruin the chance to return. They hoped that Mary and her husband would make up. Mary tried her best to find a job.

¹ www.armstat.am

² www.armstat.am

Meanwhile her husband took the matter to court forestalling her hope to claim housing and alimonies. In the eyes of the judges Mary was a mother who had cheated the authorities and abandoned her children.

After she was deprived of maternal rights, heavy-hearted Mary stood in front of the kindergarten for several days trying to see her children. Then she disappeared again. She left for Dubai to live with a relative, explained her aunt.

The social department employee, with whom we discussed this case, said sadly that she felt that something was wrong, but she kept silent. A social worker cannot talk to young women about the dangers of unregistered marriage or various forms of domestic violence Without being accused of undermining the institution of the family.

How many Mary's must have their lives ruined for us to understand that the institution of the social worker, delegated by authorities to help in tight situations, is imperative?

Anna Hovbannisyan, Consultant, USAID/ SPSS Project