

**American University of Armenia**

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# **WOMEN SHELTERS IN ARMENIA**

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**A MASTER ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**By  
Arpine Hakhinyan**

**Supervisor  
Dr. Yevgenya Paturyan**

**Yerevan**

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## **Abstract**

Domestic violence is a challenging problem in many countries and women's shelter is one of the tools to change the life of abused women. Domestic violence shelters are relatively new phenomenon in Armenia and this is the reason why they are still in the process of adaptation to the peculiarities of the Armenian culture. This study examines women's shelters in the eyes of the victims of domestic violence emphasizing their experience both inside the shelter and after leaving it. Several success stories from one of two shelters operating in Armenia are selected to explore how the shelter experience influences women's ability to start a new and independent life. Through in-depth interviews with victims of domestic violence and members of shelter staff, it was revealed that women mostly have positive experience inside the shelter. It was also found that shelter does have positive influence in terms of women having complete and independent life far from their abusers. The example of these success stories should be taken as a lesson to further develop the efficiency of shelters operating in Armenia.

## **Introduction**

In 2002 when the first shelter was opened in Armenia, its further existence was threatened by both shortage of resources and public disapproval. That is why it was soon closed. However, the history of shelters in Armenia did not stop there. More shelters were opened in subsequent years, and currently, there are two women shelters operating in Armenia ready to provide accommodation to victims of domestic violence.

Shelters are a relatively new phenomenon in Armenia, and this the reason why they are still through the process of development. Obviously, the perfect model of a shelter taken from international experience can hardly work in a unique cultural context that Armenia has. As a result, the Armenian shelters often face different barriers that are the illustration of country's traditions and deeply-rooted stereotypes of the society. Besides, the lack of trust towards NGOs in general, and towards shelters, in particular, is another problem that shelters have to overcome during their everyday work.

While the issue of domestic violence has been widely covered in the literature, shelters and their functions are mostly neglected. The emphasis has been mainly put on the non-governmental organizations which run these shelters as a part of a bigger picture of the civil society of the country. The life inside the shelter in the eyes of the women who lived there also remains unexplored taking into consideration restricted access to such women. Also, as shelter agencies do not keep systematic data on the residents of the shelter and their life after leaving the shelter, it is hard to assess shelters' efficiency in Armenia. There is little, if any, data on how shelter influences the life of the women who lived there and how women change as a result of their shelter experience.

In the first part, the following study explores the general concept of a shelter. Then it presents the situation in Armenia discussing the current state of the shelters in the country. The

central part of the research explores the life inside the shelter in the eyes of the staff and women who lived there, as well as the life of the latter after leaving the shelter. Finally, recommendations are provided on how to improve the work of the shelter in Armenian context.

## **Literature Review**

Violence against women is a widespread issue all over the world that refers to both public health and human rights (Ellsberg et al. 2001). However, domestic violence has not been recognized as a serious social issue until the 1970s. Before it was considered to be a private issue and no one was willing to intervene in the problems of others' families (Murray 1988).

Tierney (1982) suggests that the interaction and cooperation between different groups and actors, who may have their interests on particular issues, is the best way to define social problems and to find solutions to them. The more the society is concerned with such problems, the higher is the demand for their solutions (Tierney 1982). However, despite being a well-known and recognized problem, this is only one side of the coin. The other aspect of the issue, which is more important, is that not all women experiencing domestic violence voice their problem. Women react to domestic violence differently depending on their capacities, as they all have different needs. Thus, women who have health problems, refugees, homeless women and others with specific problems should be treated differently. It is also assumed that women react to domestic violence based on their socio-economic status. Those, who have strong relations with relatives and friends ready to help, will more probably leave their assailants. Also, women, who have more financial independence and can sustain themselves, will more likely leave their abusers. Hence, the most vulnerable women are those who do not have access to social capital and are subject to domestic violence (Meth 2001). It means that domestic violence remains unreported in most cases, and this is the factor that receives less attention. In literature this side

of the problem is usually called “iceberg” of domestic violence, as only small part of cases becomes known, while the vast majority of cases are hidden. Domestic violence against women and girls, as well as its extreme level- homicide of women by a partner, is only the visible part of the iceberg (Gracia 2004).

The culture of a society also has its impact on the reaction to domestic violence. In patriarchal societies, where women’s role is largely underestimated, women find themselves in a helpless situation (Meth 2001). As the home is regarded to be a private place and everything happening inside closed doors- a matter of concern only to its residents, usually no one wants to get involved in the processes inside. The police are a good example, as they refused to take actions toward domestic violence for many years (Warrington 2001). However, according to feminists, the home where domestic violence happens should not be perceived as a private place where nobody can intervene. On the contrary, this is where the intervention is necessary (Dimond, Fiesler, and Bruckman 2011).

To reach the victims of domestic violence is as difficult as to calculate the number of all victims again because of the “iceberg”. The reasons why some women may decide to find a way out of domestic violence while others opt for doing nothing about it may be both personal and societal. Financial dependence, embarrassment, and fear of abuser can belong to the first group while gender stereotypes, unequal rights of men and women, the privacy of the family, as well as a subjective judgment by the society can belong to the second group (Gracia 2004). It may also be about the sensibility of the issue of violence as it is very hard to make abused women talk about their experience openly. It is also difficult to gain their trust and convince them to contribute to research (Ellsberg et al. 2001).



This is why it is also difficult to conduct research on this topic, as it is hard to get the “truth” because researchers have restricted access to abused women; also not every woman is willing to represent the full picture (Warrington 2001).

Nevertheless, concerning unreported cases, the level of invisibility of the domestic violence is also hard to detect, as the awareness of family members, relatives, close friends, colleagues, police, and health sector should also be taken into consideration. In the worst possible case, they might know about the case but still not report it (Gracia 2004). It should also be mentioned that men who abuse their partners or beat them to death usually get milder punishment than other criminals do (Warrington 2001). According to Gracia (2004), a well-designed campaign should be run to avoid such cases. The aim of this campaign should be to break the silence and raise the awareness, as well as the sense of responsibility of the society promoting collective struggle against domestic violence towards women and girls. All the actors interested in the issue, such as women’s organizations, governmental institutions, academics, and mass media should cooperate to get rid of the social tolerance towards violence. The role of police and especially health workers should be increased as they are ones who will identify and report most cases of domestic violence (Gracia 2004).

The campaigns aiming to increase public awareness should pay attention to the iceberg of domestic violence as a whole focusing on its invisible part. This is because the unreported cases are not always the result of victims’ silence, but rather a social tolerance towards such actions against women and girls. The campaigns will also increase social responsibility connected to the issue showing that domestic violence is not just a “private matter” far from others eyes, but rather an enormous social issue that can be solved only by joint effort. Also, researchers should try to concentrate on the societal factors of silence and the attitude towards domestic violence of the society. People should know how to react to domestic violence, whom to apply, what

procedures to follow. The more cases of domestic violence against women will become known, the more abused women will have the opportunity to get help and support (Gracia 2004).

Despite the fact that it is difficult to detect as well as to quantify domestic violence in most cases, it is a widespread issue which has deep roots in the past. The issue has become a topic of research in the 1970s and been mainly concentrated in North America, Western Europe, New Zealand and Australia. This trend was connected with feminists' activities in these regions (Warrington 2001). There was also need to fight domestic violence against women on daily basis. As reported in research in the US, almost half of the female population of the country was subject to domestic violence, but at that time they had nowhere to go and no one to apply. This was when the need of shelters became extremely critical (Murray 1988).

In the 1970s, women started to voice their problems, and the movement of battered women started. This social movement made the issue of wife beating a subject of debate for a larger audience. These women began to fight for their rights on behalf of all women who experience domestic violence. The movement of battered women, which was mostly inspired by feminists' ideas and analysis, was able to succeed mainly due to a professional mobilization of resources, as well as the creation of a separate social problem. It was a great example how this kind of movements should be organized (Tierney 1982, Murray 1988).

As was mentioned above, the society was not interested in domestic violence at that time and in some cases even showed tolerance towards domestic violence. The media did not provide appropriate coverage as if there was no such problem as domestic violence. When the movement of battered women began, there was no research or data available to use in support of their ideas. Nevertheless, after the movement expanded in the 1970s, media started to cover cases of domestic violence more and more frequently (Tierney 1982).

The movement was quite flexible regarding its objectives and structure, yet Tierney (1982) argues that the movement of battered women was not as successful as it may seem from the first sight. Their main argument is that the movement has not succeeded to eliminate domestic violence, neither has it resulted in a comprehensive institutional response all over the world. There are still many women who suffer every day at the hands of their abusers and wait for help not even knowing about the movement. However, the short-term results achieved by the movement should not be underestimated. The problem that was invisible from the public's sight is now a topic of active public discussions. Abused women have become a separate group which has certain needs of many services (Tierney 1982).

The first shelter was established in England on the base of the organization of the Chiswick Women's Aid in 1971. It was initially created as an advice center for victims of domestic violence. As a result of certain demands, this center broadened the scope of its functions and soon became a large-scale international movement (Berk, Newton, and Berk 1986; Tierney 1982; Murray 1988). However, this movement was not supported by any scientific research on what the shelters should look like or what should be their impact (Berk, Newton, and Berk 1986).

In 1973, in the United States, the first shelter designed for women suffered from domestic violence were established in Minneapolis. Soon, the number of such shelters rapidly increased during subsequent years. They were to provide self-help environment for women which would be able to make women more responsible for their life. It would also teach abused women to make decisions on their own, and in this way to learn to live apart from their abusers. Moreover, women in this environment were anticipated to become able to live an independent life. This policy could not only solve problems of abused women in a short run but also enable them to live in better conditions in case they return to their homes (Murray 1988).

Nowadays, society is more responsive and supportive towards women who are victims of domestic violence. However, not every society can provide appropriate service that may satisfy the needs of such women. Most societies recognize the right of these women to have a shelter access which should be provided by the state (Madhuparna Das Joshi et al. 2012).

### ***Description of Shelters***

Shelters are useful and valuable tools in terms that they are one of few ways to intervene into “private issue” of some couples (Murray 1988).The aim of shelters is to provide relief and support, although temporary, to women who have experienced domestic violence and continuous abuse by their partners (Meth 2001).This section will discuss what the shelters of domestic violence are and how they function. According to WAVE (Women against Violence Europe), shelters designed for women and their children who are victims of domestic violence should provide safe housing for them where the abusers cannot reach them. Among the services of such refuges, safety precautions should be taken into consideration (Women Against Violence Europe 2013).

Shelter location should be classified, and the abuser should not know the place of the refuge, not to be able to reach his victims (Women Against Violence Europe 2013). The address of the shelter is another subject of confidentiality. The building of the shelter should provide adequate facilities both for residents and staff. This will require good funding which the shelter agency should try to obtain in order to have appropriate living space for residents and staff. Play areas for children should also be taken into account (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000).

There are other aspects that should be classified. The individual files that each resident should have from the moment of entering the shelter should be kept away from other residents,

and only those staff members who work with the certain individual should have access to that file. It is them who can review the information in that file or add something monitoring the changes in the situation of a woman (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000).

Information sharing is another aspect of shelter work. Women in shelters need certain information, education, and resources about their situation and domestic violence, rights, responsibilities, possibilities as well as legal implications of their current status. The help should start from the moment when the abused woman contacts a shelter service. She should know all the possible options for her situation Shelters are just one possible option out of other options (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000).

Children of residents should also have access to shelters where they should get appropriate treatment along with their mothers (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000). Women with child or children who apply for a shelter place should be ready to face the legal concerns this action can lead to. Many questions, such as with whom the child should live, may come up, and this kind of problems should be solved in accordance with law (Hughes 1982).

When a woman enters the shelter, the staff should gather demographic information and introduce the shelter rules and facilities. Individual files should be created for each resident, which should be kept in locked cabinets where no other resident has access. However, a resident can take notes in her own file (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000). Also, shelters' impact on abused women should be monitored both during and, preferably, after shelter exit (Women Against Violence Europe 2013).

Residents' cooperation with the staff is very important as through such cooperation they can formulate and set their goals and create an action plan with responsibilities and timelines. Depending on different background and status, women should get individual approach in

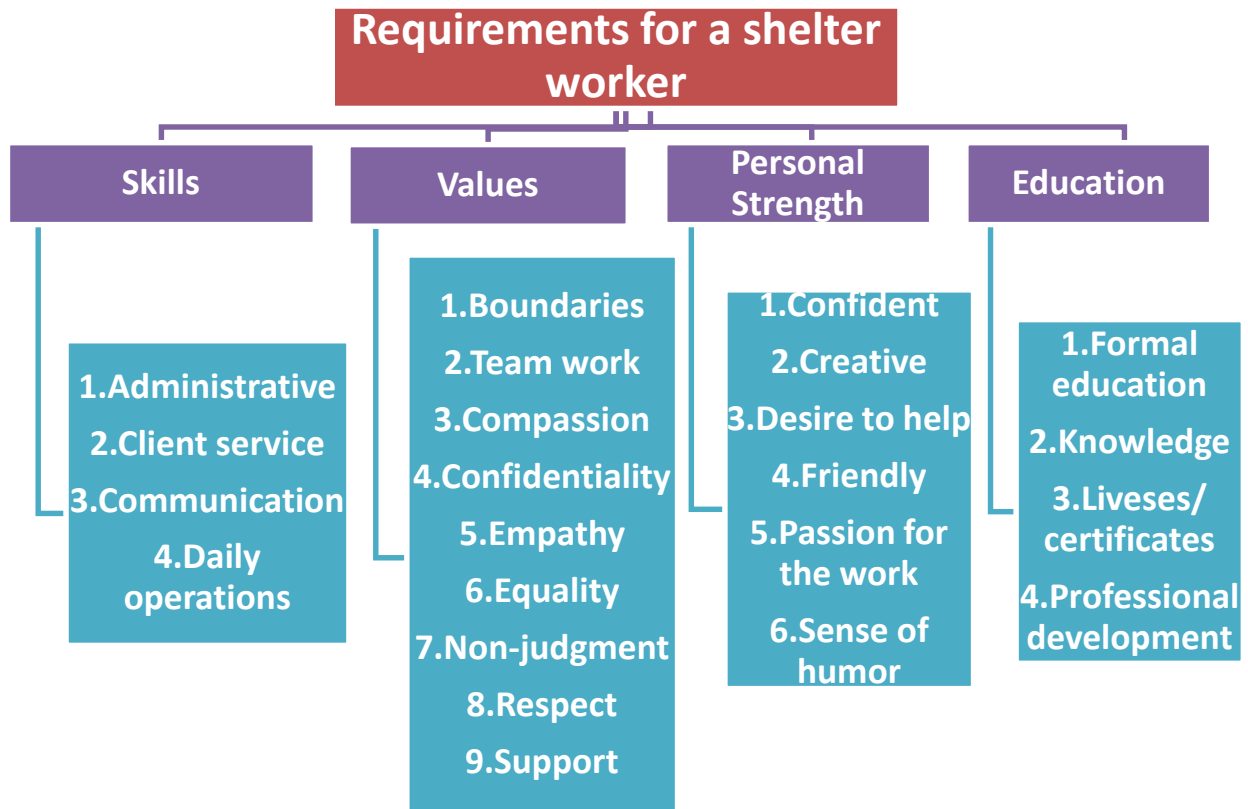
accordance with their needs. There should be certain rules, procedures and policies which all residents should follow. The aim of these rules is to create and keep the safe and healthy environment in the shelter (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000).

In shelters, women have an opportunity to communicate with other women of the same problem and experience. In these conditions, women understand that their experience is not unique and that they are not alone with their problem. This aspect of shelter life is very debatable as it is assumed that women should try to avoid talks about their experience and sharing their personal information with others (Warrington 2001).

Ideally, shelters should not limit the stay period of their residents. However, the appropriateness of this provision usually leads to heated debates, and it is rarely met in reality (Women Against Violence Europe 2013). The exit procedures should also be designed appropriately. Depending on the reason for the exit of the program, the procedures may be different. For example, a resident may have completed the program, the time of stay may be expired, she has decided to return home, or the departure is requested by the agency itself. Before the departure the staff should organize a meeting with the women which will help to plan further safety measures, to summarize the achievements of the program, and to assure the participant that shelter can provide certain services if there is a need in the future. The meeting can also be used to get follow-up contacts (Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2000).

The job of the shelter worker is very important to have a shelter functioning for its real purpose. Crystal Giesbrecht & Kim Fellner (2014) suggest four important sets of requirements for a shelter worker: skills, values, personal strengths, and education. Each of these sets of requirements encompasses various characteristics which are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Requirements for a shelter worker



What should be noted is that, besides being supportive and trying to achieve positive results through teamwork and collaboration, the shelter workers should yet set certain boundaries. It is very critical as shelter residents should not treat workers as their relatives or friends, but rather professionals who want to help them in the best possible way (Crystal Giesbrecht and Kim Fellner 2014).

It is not only about providing accommodations to abused women but rather ensuring a healthy environment for them helping to overcome their traumatic experience, to reestablish their confidence towards future, to learn to live an independent life. The main characteristics women's refuges should have are protection and safety, empowerment, ability to lead to social change,

precisely defined target groups, and accessibility for all women. Here is the place where women help other women with the same problem (Women Against Violence Europe 2013).

### *Situation in Armenia*

As in most of the world, domestic violence against women in Armenia is also a subject of serious concerns (Amnesty International 2008). However, there is no certain institution or governmental body that deals with the implementation of policies that can eliminate any gender bias in the country. In 2010, National Interagency Committee to Combat Gender Violence was established. However, it is hard to evaluate its impact on the society because of a short time of operation (Sabine Mandl 2011).

According to Armenian National Statistic Service, 25% of women in Armenia were subjected to psychological, almost 9% to physical, 3% to sexual, and 9.5% to both physical and sexual violence (Armenian Statistical Service of Republic of Armenia 2015). These numbers show that domestic violence against women in Armenia is a widespread issue, which has not been addressed adequately.

One of the most serious problems in Armenia connected with domestic violence is that there is no law regulating such processes. Moreover, Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia also says nothing about domestic violence, in particular, and in general, it is not sensitive toward gender-based issues. As a result, de jure, domestic violence is not conceptualized as a crime by law, which means that it cannot be criminalized (Sabine Mandl 2011).

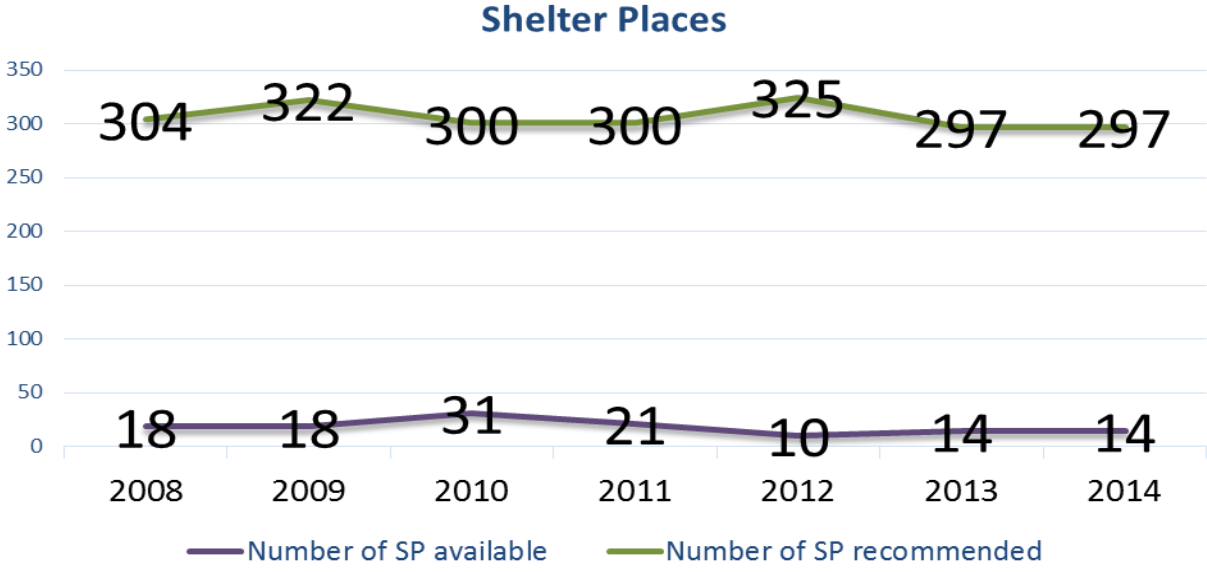
As it is mentioned in the 2010 report released by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Armenia should pay more attention to violence towards women and girls. It should criminalize such actions. Abusers should be punished by law while the victims of



violence should get the support of the state. There should be enough shelter places for women of different background and problems (rural women, refugees, minorities, women with disabilities, drug addicts, etc.) being able to satisfy their particular needs (Sabine Mandl 2011).

Currently, there are two women’s shelters in Armenia with 14 shelter places available. However, this number of shelter places is not enough to satisfy the real demand of accommodations, as 95% of women’s shelter places are in fact missing (Blank, Lesur, and Logar 2015). This means that, as a result of lack of the spaces as well as rooms and beds, shelters are packed most of the time and are not able to accept more women. Taking into consideration the population size of the country, as well as the number of cases of domestic violence, it is estimated that Armenia ideally needs 297shelter places (Kelly Blank, Marion Lesur, and Rosa Logar 2015). Given these numbers, it can be inferred that there is an enormous gap between demand and supply of women’s shelters in Armenia which is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Number of shelter places recommended and available\*



\*The numbers are taken from WAVE Country Reports (2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2015).

## **Purpose of the study**

Gender discrimination in Armenia has very deep cultural roots, and maybe this is the reason why there are slow changes in the attitude of Armenian society towards domestic violence. Since there have not been any policy changes, the main burden of this issue still falls on NGOs that try to voice the problems of women and protect them from domestic violence. However, their activity is highly dependent on foreign investments and grants. That is why shelters in Armenia also operate under the protection of NGOs using their resources. Many battered women find it hard to voice their problem as it is mainly the matter of concern of NGOs alone (Police-Public Partnership 2011; Amnesty International 2008).

At first, the attitude towards NGOs dealing with the issues of protection of women's rights in general and towards shelters, in particular, was very skeptical as the Armenian society used to think of them as "importers" of foreign values which contradict our traditions. Because of such perceptions, the efforts of NGOs were not efficient, and this resulted in closing of several shelters or concealing their true purpose. Lack of transparency in the field was another factor leading to society's distrust; many people could not understand how the third party can intervene in the private life of one's family (Ishkanian 2008).

However, the attitude towards domestic violence, as well as one of the tools of fighting against it- women's shelters, is changing over time with NGOs' revised and more efficient policies. This study adds to our knowledge about the shelters operating in Armenia from the perspective of women living there and staff members. It explores the current attitude towards shelters and its functions, the role of shelters in helping women to overcome their situation, the main tools they use to achieve their goals, as well as the areas that can be improved.

Thus, the study tries to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: What are the experiences of women who opted for life in a shelter?*

*RQ2: Can shelter experience have a positive impact on women who opted for life in a shelter?*

The first question refers to the life of a battered woman inside shelter while the second one refers to the life after leaving the shelter. To answer the research questions stated above, the following hypotheses were tested:

H<sub>1</sub>: Women had positive experience connected with their shelter life.

H<sub>2</sub>: Shelter experience can have a positive impact on women who opted for life in a shelter.

## **Methodology**

The study uses a qualitative method of analysis employing in-depth interviews with women with shelter experience and shelter's staff members. The reason why the qualitative method was preferred over quantitative one is that the issues related to domestic violence are hard to explore via the latter. Moreover, the qualitative method helps to reveal more details on such sensitive topic, probing women to speak about their experience which most of them are not willing to elaborate at all.

The following study uses in-depth interviews with women with shelter experience and shelter's staff as a tool for qualitative analysis. Also, the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewees were properly kept. Questions which might have evoked negative memories in interviewees making them remember their life at abusers house were avoided to maintain appropriate mental conditions of women.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

The data collection for the following study has taken place in the office of Women's Support Center NGO in Yerevan, Republic of Armenia. In-depth interviews were conducted from February to April 2016. The interviews were recorded after getting the permission from the interviewee and then analyzed. The draft interview guide was first shown to WCS agency, which approved the questionnaire after some minor changes of formulations and probe examples. The interview questionnaire was adapted both for women in shelters and staff members. The interviewees were asked to answer seven open-ended questions with possible probe examples. Also, women were asked to fill a questionnaire on demographic data. After the first visit to the agency, the questionnaire was revised, some questions were reformulated, and some were added to increase clarity and to get the information needed.

## **Study population and sampling strategy**

Two groups of participants were involved in the following research: victims of domestic violence and staff members of shelter. Purposive sampling strategy was used for the recruitment of the study population. Only women who used to live in shelter or currently live there were chosen for the interview. Permanent members of the staff were chosen to answer the questionnaire. A worker of WCS agency contacted women who met the requirement and asked if they would like to be a part of a study and participate in an interview. Those who answered positively were asked to come to the agency where all meetings were organized. All the information about these women was kept in secret, and the investigator did not obtain any personal information of participants. The purpose of the study was carefully explained to these women, and the confidentiality was assured in order to get their trust and to disperse the tense

atmosphere. Overall, 12 interviews were conducted- eight women with shelter experience and four shelter workers. The average duration of interviews with women was 30 minutes (ranging from 15 minutes to an hour), and with shelter workers- 35 minutes (ranging from 30 minutes to an hour).

### **Data analysis**

To analyze the data and to test the hypotheses, several themes for each research question were developed as the analytical unit. For the first question (*What are the experiences of women who opted for life in a shelter?*) the following themes were created:

- Women's security
- Shelter facilities
- Shelter staff
- Shelter residents and their relations
- Relations between shelter residents and workers

In order to answer the second question (*Can shelter experience have a positive impact on women who opted for life in a shelter?*) the following themes were developed:

- Help provided by the shelter
- Opportunities for starting a new life
- Collaboration with other institutions

### **Limitations of the study**

There are several limitations of the study which should also be taken into consideration. First of all, all eight women interviewed were from the same shelter, as the second agency

operating a shelter refused to share any information both about their agency and shelter justifying their refusal by the security concerns of their clients.

The other limitation of the study was connected with the venue of the interviews. As they all were conducted in the WSC agency, women who resided or currently reside in the shelter were more prone to highlight only the positive aspects of their experience holding back important details.

According to Country Report 2014 of Women against Violence Europe (WAVE), shelter agencies in Armenia do not keep systematic data on shelter residents and their life after leaving the shelter. As a consequence, the portion of women who return to their abusers and that of women who achieve successful life alone after shelter exit are not known (Kelly Blank, Marion Lesur, and Rosa Logar 2015). That is the reason why it was decided to take cases with positive outcomes- women who did not return to their abusers and started a new successful life. The information is useful nonetheless, as it helps explain the positive outcomes. Even if those are exceptions, rather than the rule, it is important to consider them, to better understand the recipe for success, to be able to learn from the positive experience and strive to multiply such cases.

# Results

## Descriptive statistics

All eight women participants of the interviews were asked to fill a questionnaire on socio-demographic data which contains the following categories:

- Age group of the interviewee
- Place of residence before entering shelter (Yerevan/regions)
- Number of children
- Duration of shelter stay
- Year of shelter entry

**Age groups of Interview participants (women)**

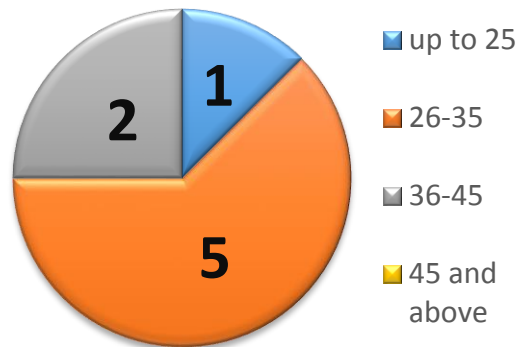
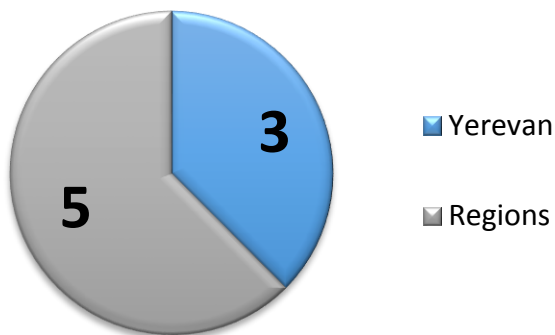


Figure 3 shows the age groups of interviewed women with shelter experience. *Figure 3 Age groups of interview participants (women)*

The dominant age group is 26-35 with five women being of this group, while there was no woman at the age 45 and above.

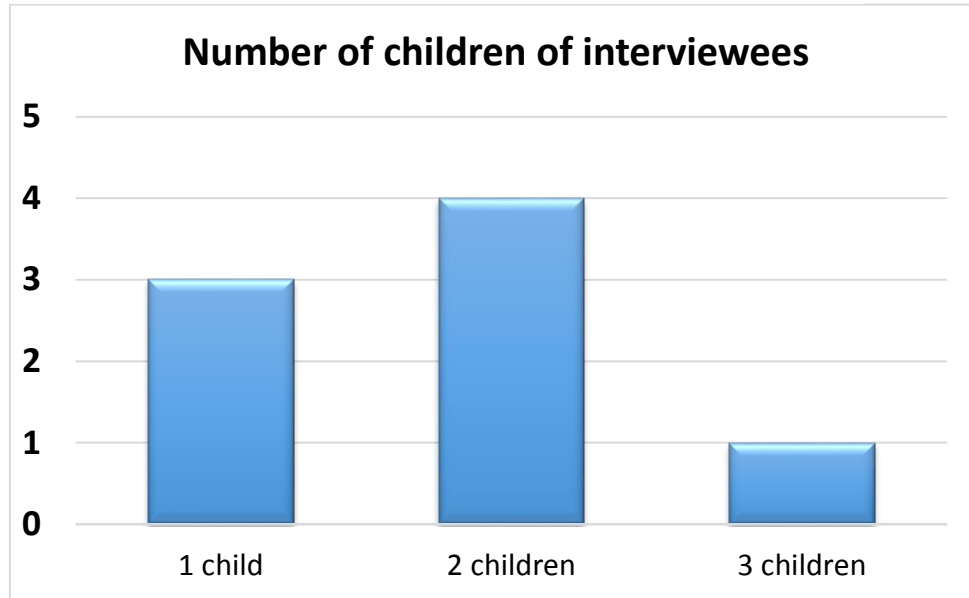
**Place of residence before entering shelter**



As both shelters in Armenia are situated in Yerevan, it was also important to know where the battered women lived before entering the shelter. Figure 4 depicts that five respondents were from different regions of Armenia while three of them lived in Yerevan before applying for a shelter place.

*Figure 4 Place of residence before entering shelter*

Figure 5 Number of children of interviewees



All interviewees entered the shelter with their children. Figure 5 shows that most of the women (four) have two children. Three participants have one child while only one woman has three children. However, the moment of entering the shelter one women had to leave her son with the husband, and could only take the daughter with her. Also, one of the interviewed women entered the shelter being pregnant and with her three children. The fourth child was born after leaving the shelter.

Three of the interviewed women lived in the shelter in the year of 2013, four of them- in 2014, while only one interviewee entered the shelter in 2016 and currently lives there (see Figure 6).

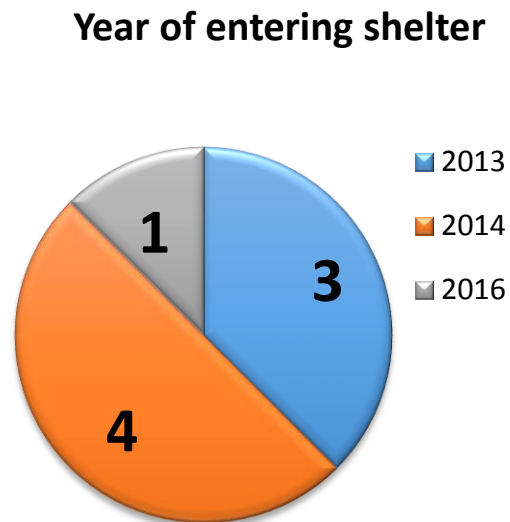
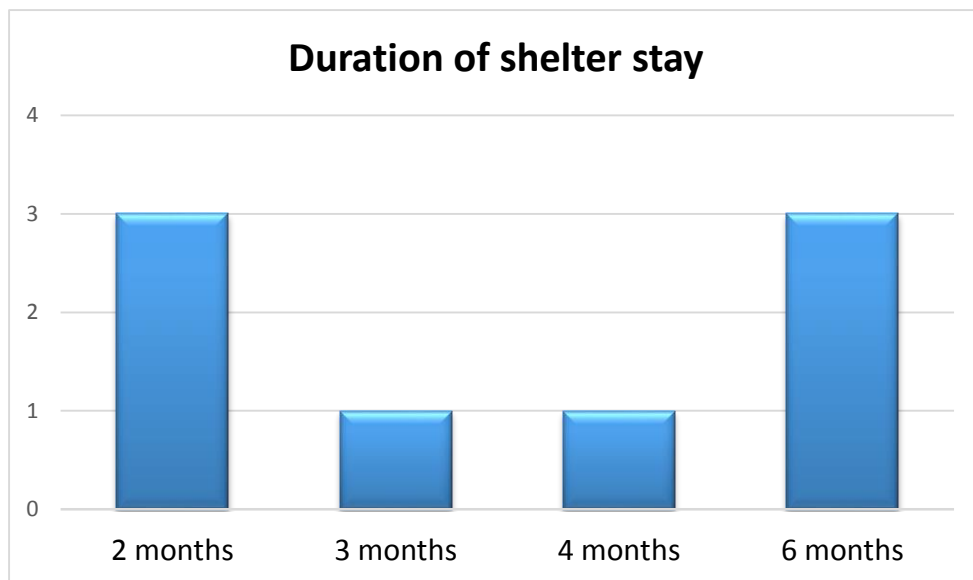


Figure 6 Year of entering shelter





*Figure 7 Duration of shelter stay*

Although the shelter is limited to two months, five out of eight women interviewed stayed at the shelter more than two months. Two of the women lived in the shelter for three and four months respectively. Finally, three participants stayed at the shelter for six months. The results are shown in Figure 7.

## **Main Findings: Life inside the shelter**

### ***Women's security***

As the literature review suggests, security is one of the most important conditions that shelter should provide to women who applied for a shelter place. The data shows that the residents of the shelter are very satisfied with the level of provided security. Security issues are taken into consideration at each level of woman's stay in the shelter. The interviewees reported that they started to feel secure both for themselves and their children even from the moment of their transportation to the house.

Security measures are also taken when different events are organized outside the shelter, such as visits to museums, theater, or trainings that take place in the office of the agency. They are always accompanied with one of the shelter members, and they use a taxi for transportation. Problems may arise only when women take their children to school. However, in this case too, shelter agency arranges everything to guarantee their security.

Other security measures are taken too. For example, to avoid the cases of husbands tracking their wives through a mobile phone, shelter staff takes mobile phones of the residents. Women can use their phones only at the time for telephone call set by shelter rules or, in certain cases, after getting permission. Some residents do not like this policy, yet they all realize the purpose of such limitations.

*"Limitations were set to strengthen our security and not to restrict our freedom."*

(Interviewee 5)

Women have to stay inside the shelter all day long because of security considerations, and they can only get out on special occasions. This is done because it is almost impossible to guarantee women's security outside of the shelter staff control. Furthermore, relatives or friends

of women cannot visit them during shelter stay. This is also done in order to keep the address of the shelter confident. Otherwise, if the place where the shelter is situated is identified, need to find a new place and new accommodation arises which will lead to many other problems for the shelter agency. However, the interviewees never complain of such restrictions.

*“Even the fact that I had to live in a closed territory isolated from the world, it seemed to be a heaven compared with my abuser’s home.” (Interviewee 1)*

The idea that woman and her child are in safety is enough to put up with the life inside the shelter.

Finally, women completely trust shelter workers regarding their personal information being in the hands of workers. The staff never shares women’s information with anyone else. Moreover, they keep encouraging women not to share their personal data with other residents, as no one can control its further flow. The relations between shelter residents and workers are more deeply discussed in next subchapters.

To sum up, the overall experience of the interviewees concerning their security during the shelter stay is very positive. All women were very satisfied with the security measures even at the expense of their freedoms.

### ***Shelter facilities***

Shelter is an ordinary private house. Each woman has her room where she lived with her child (children). The house has a common dining room, living room, and kitchen. Women keep the household together following the rules set by the shelter. There is also a playroom with different kinds of toys for children. The house also has a yard where shelter residents like to spend their time, especially during summertime. Children also play in the yard.

Women expressed their content with the shelter facilities. Most of them could not even imagine that the house can be equipped with all necessary utilities. During the shelter stay, they

never felt a need for anything as they were supplied with everything that a woman can need in a household. The house gives the residents the opportunity to live a normal life.

*“You feel as if you are in your own home and even better. Some women find things here that they have dreamed of having during their whole life. We are given everything we might need.”* (Interviewee 7)

However, the house cannot host women with disabilities because of lack of appropriate facilities. This becomes a reason why women with disabilities might be rejected to enter the shelter. One of the shelter workers expressed her concern on this issue stating that they need additional equipment, as well as appropriately trained staff, to be able to accept such women.

The facilities of the shelter house are on an adequate level. All the interviewees considered the house to be like their own home to which they are attached now.

### ***Shelter staff***

The staff of the shelter is selected according to very strict requirements. The educational degree is especially important in case of lawyer, psychologist or social worker. However, knowledge in a certain field is not enough. Shelter work requires many skills that are developed during the work itself. Besides, the staff led by the director of the NGO takes part in different trainings every year.

The staff members carry out very arduous work every day. They give each woman and child individual treatment, carefully examine each case progress of each woman during her shelter stay, and try to find an appropriate solution for her. When the stay limit is expired, the staff assesses woman's progress, and if she is ready to live on her own, she leaves the shelter. Otherwise, the stay period is extended until women are ready to leave.

Particular attention is paid to the practice of violence inside the shelter, more precisely, the exclusion of any violence both towards other residents and towards their children. Even if some

conflicts emerge, they try to solve the conflict but not through the direct involvement. They try to make women understand their mistakes and come up with solutions by themselves. Workers also encourage the residents to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinion on different issues.

The women interviewed stated that the shelter workers always treated them very well. They expressed only positive words to describe the shelter staff- both working inside the house and in the agency in general.

*“You can never imagine what tremendous work they do. I know that sometimes they do not even sleep guarding us and our peace. Whenever I felt bad, they were there for me with their immediate help” (Interviewee 2).*

### ***Relations between shelter residents***

In the shelter, women are mostly engaged with household and their children. But different women with different backgrounds, problems and characteristics come to shelter and they have to share the shelter life together. Some women may find it difficult to put up with shelter life and staff members and establish trust, especially if she is depressed or scared. In such situations conflicts become inevitable.

Conflicts often arise between women who overstay their stay limit and newcomers. The former, living in the shelter for a long time, start to think that the territory of the shelter belongs to them, they have more rights than the newcomers and that they can impose their rules on them.

Another problem connected with the residents is that the moment some women enter the shelter, they start to put forward unreasonable demands. Over time, they start to complain about everything starting from food to the items they get from the shelter.

*“Not everything depends on the staff. Women themselves should understand where they are and that whatever is done is done for their sake. But they start to demand more and more*

*other time. "Do you know how much money they (the agency) receive from grants for us?" - a woman told me when I first enter the shelter.*" (Interviewee 1)

Although some interviewees did not report any conflict between them and other residents, all of them confirmed that there are many ungrateful women who sometimes forget why they come to shelter. One of the women, however, stated that if a woman in the shelter has negative habits, everyone should help her to give them up and not to get along with these habits.

Nevertheless, the close relations between residents can also lead to certain problems. Women in the shelter also make friends with other residents. However, they are not supposed to talk about their experience with each other. But this is difficult to implement in the reality. This can also be understood as they do not have any other topics to talk about. Besides, they feel relief when they hear another story which is worse than theirs. But in this case, they undergo through their experience over and over again, and they get into depression which cannot improve their situation.

One of the shelter workers indicated that if there are such problems inside the shelter, first of all, the staff is in charge. This also means that they still have room to improve their work.

### ***Relations between shelter residents and workers***

When speaking about the relations between them and the workers, women expressed their gratitude towards the staff. The interviewees were speaking about shelter workers with the sense of respect and great thankfulness. The members of the shelter staff not only treat each woman individually and equally, but they also try to help them whenever the residents face any difficulty.

According to most of the interviewed women, in the beginning, it is hard to trust people inside the shelter. It is difficult for them to understand the reasons why strangers help them. But then they start to trust workers more than anyone else.

*“How not to trust them? When there was no one who could help me, they (shelter staff) saved me. Your family or relatives can turn their back on you, but these people will never do”* (Interviewee 6).

Most of the women interviewed reported that they perceive shelter workers as the members of their family.

*“My mother died several years ago, and I grew up without her help and advice. But the members of the staff have become mothers and sisters for me.”* (Interviewee 8)

The interviewed women emphasized the aid and advice they always got from shelter workers. However, such help is never provided in a forceful manner. Shelter workers try to minimize their presence in the decision-making process of the residents. Women should become more independent and self-confident; thus shelter workers should contribute to this goal and not to make women more dependent on their advice.

Overall the relations between shelter residents and workers are warm, and women’s attitude towards staff members is very positive.

### ***Life inside the shelter: Conclusion***

The results show that the interviewed women have positive experience regarding four out of five descriptors connected to the life inside the shelter. The level of security, facilities, staff, as well as relations between shelter residents, and workers are very satisfactory. Some of the women have had bad experience only connected with relations with other residents of the shelter. Although this concerns only some women, as there are also residents who have had very good relations with others, the overall picture cannot be regarded as fully positive. Each descriptor is assessed taking into consideration the information received from interviewees, which is represented in **Error! Reference source not found..**

*Table 1 Women's experience regarding the life inside the shelter*

<b>Descriptors</b>	<b>Experience</b>
Women's security	Positive
Shelter facilities	Positive
Shelter staff	Positive
Shelter residents and their relations	Mixed
Relations between shelter residents and workers	Positive

The information illustrated in **Error! Reference source not found.** supports the first hypothesis of the research, which is:

H<sub>1</sub>: Women had positive experience connected with their shelter life.

Thus, the H<sub>1</sub> is accepted.

## **Life outside the shelter**

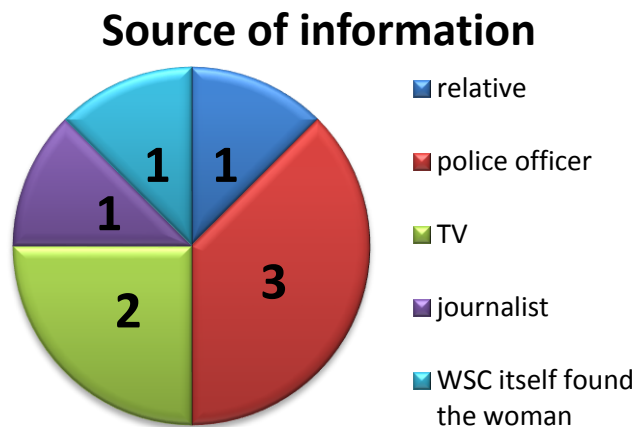
### ***Collaboration with other institutions***

When first shelters were opened, they could hardly enjoy the trust, let alone the support of not only the society but also of different institutions (police, NGOs, government, etc.). This fact impeded the mission of the shelter as it was not able to provide appropriate help to abused women.

Nevertheless, all the shelter workers reported about positive change in this pattern. The changes are particularly tangible in the relations with other NGOs dealing with human rights



issues, and police. More and more women are now directed to shelters by police officers or other NGOs. Also, different advertisements broadcasted on social media raise the awareness of women about their rights, as well as the possible help they might get. Such collaboration, according to a shelter worker, is very important as it gives the opportunity to provide a woman with help in a more organized and operative way. Although the shelters in Armenia are highly dependent on foreign funding and lack state support, one of the members of the shelter staff stated that the government also is going to implement some projects which are currently discussed and different NGOs are also involved in these discussions.



*Figure 8 Source of information*

The fact that such collaboration has positive effects can be easily detected if the sources of information about shelter are taken into account. Figure 8 shows that three out of eight women interviewed have learned about the option of shelter stay from a police officer. Two women learned about shelters through TV advertisement. Two more women were directed to the shelter by other NGOs. Finally, a woman wrote an article in a newspaper about her experience of domestic violence and the shelter agency itself contacted her and offered to move to shelter.

Collaboration with other institutions is indeed very important, and although there is still much work to do, it does have a positive effect both on women and shelters.

### ***Help provided by the shelter***

The shelter provides women with the help from the moment they first enter the house. As mentioned above, the shelter is not just a place where women can temporarily find refuge. It also provides psychological help. There are special sessions for women which include private meetings with the psychologist.

*“Now it sounds ridiculous, but before coming here, I did not even know the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist, and I was scared of the upcoming meeting with our psychologist. However, right after the first conversation with her, I could feel the difference” (Interviewee 3).*

Such sessions help women to overcome their problems, and especially psychological barriers and deeply-rooted stereotypes related to their status. This is very important taking into consideration how the Armenian society perceives domestic violence, divorced women and their stay in a shelter. Women also start to change their attitude towards many things. They become stronger and more self-confident. Such sessions also help women to realize that they are able to start a new life without any help. This understanding is often suppressed by abusers.

*“He (the husband) used to say: “Who you are without me? You are nothing! You will die from hunger.” And at a certain point, I start to believe it” (Interviewee 1).*

All the interviewees reported about changing attitude towards their personality and life in general.

*“Now that I compare myself with women of my village I can clearly see the difference. If I returned to my husband, I would probably be like them- depressed and tired of everything. But I am different” (Interviewee 1).*

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of the time that they were given to think about their life and plans.

*“I felt calm there. I had the opportunity to sit down and think. What do I want now? What am I going to do next? How am I going to build my life? And I have never had any doubts that I am able to carry out my all plans” (Interviewee 8).*

The shelter also provides financial help so that after leaving it they will be able to rent an apartment and cover other expenses during the primary stages of the new life. Moreover, women can get legal support and advice by the lawyer of the agency. This is important if a woman wants to sue her abuser, or when she wants her children to stay with her.

No woman is placed under pressure during shelter stay as the main goal is to make women make decisions on their own, take the responsibility for their actions, to find the best solution without help. Women, who still lack such characteristics when their stay limit expires, are given additional time to stay in the shelter unless they are ready to leave. One of the shelter workers stated that sometimes they have very difficult cases when two months are not enough. Sometimes they continue to help former residents in terms of money or legal consultations.

The interviewed former residents of the shelter currently keep their connection with the agency, and they are getting involved in different projects organized by the agency.

To sum up, women are provided with a financial, psychological, and legal support which empowers women to start a new life after shelter exit.

### ***Opportunities for starting a new life***

In order to start a new life women need to be ready psychologically, have accommodation, and source of income. The psychological support is already discussed above. However, besides such help, women get different trainings during their shelter stay which aim to develop practical skills. Women learn how to use their skills in the best way and generate money from that. They also learn how to find a job, how to start and run a small business. During the shelter stay, women usually share their knowledge and get some other skills from other women.

Also, the shelter agency always checks women’s condition after their exit and, if there is a need, provides additional help. Moreover, it usually engages former shelter residents in different activities, workshops, and trainings organized by the agency.

The effectiveness of such opportunities that women receive during their shelter stay is assessed taking into consideration women’s ability to rent an accommodation and their employment status, which is represented in Table 2.

*Table 2 Life after shelter*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>In/out of shelter</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
<b>1</b>	2	out	employed	renting
<b>2</b>	2	out	employed	renting with the help of the agency
<b>3</b>	2	out	employed	renting
<b>4</b>	2	out	employed	renting
<b>5</b>	4	out	employed	renting with the help of the agency
<b>6</b>	1	in	-	-
<b>7</b>	1	out	employed	renting
<b>8</b>	1	out	employed	renting

Table 2 shows that all women interviewed who have already left the shelter are currently employed, most of them are renting accommodations while the agency helps only two of them in paying their rents.

*“I could never imagine that I might be able to live in Yerevan on my own, to rent an apartment and to sustain my two children who are students now”* (Interviewee 3).

The overall picture is very positive, however, it should be noted that these are only the results of women who did not return to their abusers. As there is no systematic data on what

percent of shelter residents return to their families after they leave the shelter, it is difficult to understand what portion these success stories make up. Nevertheless, the fact that the shelter stay has a positive influence on women cannot be denied as well.

### ***Life after the shelter: Conclusion***

The analysis shows that all the women interviewed who have already left the shelter got appropriate financial, psychological, and legal help, as well as practical skills to start a full and independent life. They are able to sustain their families alone, mostly without external help. This means that shelter experience has a positive influence on the life of its former residents. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned aspects of the life outside the shelter, the second hypothesis of the study (H<sub>2</sub>: Shelter experience CAN have positive impact on women who opted for life in a shelter) is also accepted.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Summary of findings and discussion***

The aim of the study has been to explore the life inside and outside the shelter in the eyes of women who opted for a shelter stay as a result of domestic violence. Many studies have been conducted on the issue of domestic violence, and some of them have referred to women residing in shelters. Their primary focus has been on such topics as domestic violence in general, its specific characteristics in Armenian context, the major factors leading to such acts of violence, their health impacts, the reasons why women continue to live in abusive relations, as well as the response of NGO sector to this problem. Nevertheless, the shelters in Armenia and their characteristics, especially their image in the eyes of residents, have not received appropriate attention of researchers. The following research tried to fill this gap exploring one of two domestic violence shelters operating in Armenia. Its main goal was to provide insight into the shelter life of the victims of domestic violence, as well as to explore success stories about life after women leaving the shelter.

The data collected during in-depth interviews with both women with shelter experience and shelter workers generated the following findings. The security of residents is the top priority for the shelter and all measures are taken so that women feel secure from outside threat despite certain restrictions that they face in their everyday life. The shelter also provides all the necessary conditions for women and their children to feel comfortable and live a normal life.

The staff of the shelter is selected very carefully taking into consideration the specific character of their work. Besides formal education which is required, they receive training on an annual basis. They carry out a very difficult work eliminating of violence and helping women to achieve their goals.

The relations between shelter residents, however, are usually strained, and conflicts are difficult to avoid. This happens because of the differences in backgrounds, characteristics, and problems. Besides, over time, women start to demand more and more from the shelter and this also creates a tense environment inside the shelter. The relations with shelter workers, on the other hand, are very friendly and sometimes even more than they should have been. Women perceive the shelter staff as their close relatives, and it raises the issue of boundaries needed to be set between residents and workers. However, the overall picture shows that women have positive experience concerning their life in the shelter.

The cooperation between different institutions and agency is very important taking into consideration that shelters do not get support from the government. The attitude towards shelters has been recently changed, and though only slightly, its influence on the shelter work is now very tangible. It helps shelters to organize their service in a more efficient way. Currently, the shelter does provide not only an accommodation to abused women, but also financial, psychological, and legal support which facilitate women's life after leaving the shelter. Furthermore, different trainings are organized to teach women to use their skills efficiently, to find a job, earn money, etc. All the cases examined during the interviews have had positive outcomes, and all women have been able to sustain themselves and their children on their own after leaving the shelter. This means that shelters do have a positive impact on women with shelter experience. Although there are profound distrust and skepticism towards shelters, and shelters are able to help only a few women, shelters help to make a change.

To sum up, the aforementioned findings lead to the conclusion that both hypotheses of the research are accepted.

## ***Implications of the study and suggestions for future research***

Shelters are a relatively new phenomenon in Armenia, and that is the reason why they are not perfect institutions, and there is still much to do. Some drawbacks are unavoidable, and the improvements in shelters' work come as a result of an experience and adaptation to the Armenian reality. Taking into account the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to improve the current situation of shelters in Armenia:

1. In-depth interviews with women with shelter experience were very useful and unique source of information. However, the lack of trust towards the researcher (as in most cases the researcher and the interviewee met for the first time during the interview) often hindered the women to open up and speak more sincerely. The data collection phase showed that before the interview, when women often saw the researcher in the agency or interacting with their children while being there, they were more prone to trust the researcher and have an informative talk. It would be more useful if the researcher meets potential interviewees before the interview date, has an initial talk with them and tries to establish trust.

2. The shelter agency should keep a systematic data on its residents tracking their life after shelter as well. This will reveal the proportion of successful cases and cases when women return to their abusers. It will also help to understand the reasons why women decide to go back and explore the main factors contributing to women's successful life after shelter.

3. It would be interesting to look at more and diverse cases of women with shelter experience, as the following study mainly concentrates on the success stories. If possible, some cases of staying with abusers should also be examined.

4. Women's behavior is one of the most serious concerns of the shelter. Stricter rules should be developed to avoid any conflicts inside the shelter. Also, new mechanisms should



be created to prevent women becoming dependent on shelter resources, as well as demanding more and more.

5. Shelter residents treat the staff as their family members. As specified in the literature, members of the staff should set a clear line between themselves and residents. The staff should not be perceived as mothers or sisters of shelter residents, but rather as professionals who are there to help and guide women to a new life.

6. As the research has been conducted only in one shelter operating in Armenia, it would be useful to examine the other shelter too and to compare the experience of women from two shelters.

7. In Armenia, the issue of shelters is mostly addressed by non-governmental organizations targeting women, and it is these organizations that try to find solutions for abused women. However, policies offered and run by states would be more efficient and able to meet all the requirements. Women who continuously experience domestic violence require immediate help, and this should be the primary goal of any policy related to domestic violence towards women.

As shelters are not just a temporary accommodation for victims of domestic violence, many aspects should be taken into consideration. The Armenian unique context also influences the work of shelters. Although shelters have a long way of improvement to go through, they can have a positive effect on abused women and this is what should be stressed and further developed.

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## **Appendix A. English version of an in-depth interview guide for women**

1. Who directed you to shelters? How did you learn about such option?
2. Please, tell me about the overall conditions of the shelter. Could you speak about your experience in the shelter (taking part in different activities organized not only in shelter but also in the center)?
3. (For women with children) Please, tell me about the life of your child (children) in the shelter. Were there appropriate facilities (play room, play yard, etc.)?
4. Let us talk about the shelter staff. How would you assess their work? Their attitude towards you (your child) and towards other women (their children)?
5. What did you need that was not provided by shelter? What would you change?
6. How did the stay in the shelter influence your future? Can you give an example?

## **Appendix B. English version of an in-depth interview guide for shelter staff**

1. Please, tell me about the services your shelter provides. How do you help women?
2. What is the procedure for entering the shelter in your agency? What is the most difficult part? What can be a reason for rejecting an application?
3. How is the entering procedure of children held in your agency? What are the main legal norms regulating the process?
4. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of your shelter? What are the specific things that you need the most? What should be changed?
5. How is the staff of your shelter formed? Are there any specific requirements for the employees? Do they need certain trainings?
6. Does the government have any role in helping abused women? If yes, please, specify. [Should the government help the agencies like yours? How?] If no, why not? Who has a role?
7. What are the main ways you help women? Could you share some success stories? What else would you like to do?

## **Appendix C. English version of demographic questionnaires for women and shelter staff**

### *Demographic data of women with shelter experience*

1. How old are you?
  - a. Up to 25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46 and more
2. Where were you living before moving to the shelter? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Did you enter the shelter with your child/children?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. If yes, please, indicate how many children you have. \_\_\_\_\_
5. When did you enter the shelter (year)? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How long did you stay in the shelter? \_\_\_\_\_

### *Demographic data of the shelter staff*

1. How old are you?
  - a. Up to 25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46 and more
2. What is your highest educational level? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How long have you been working in the shelter? \_\_\_\_\_