



Mr. Serzh Sargsyan
President of the Republic of Armenia
Baghramian Avenue / 0010 Yerevan
E-mail: meri@president.am

Mr. Agvan G. Hovsepyan
Prosecutor General
Office of the Public Prosecutor of the Republic of Armenia
5, V. Sargsyan / 0010 Yerevan
E-mail: info@genproc.am

Mr. Hrair Tovmasyan
Minister of Justice
8 Khorhurdaranain St. / 375010 Yerevan
E-mail: info@moj.am

Mr. Vladimir Gasparyan
Chief of Republic of Armenia police
130 Nalbandyan / 0025 Yerevan
E-mail: press@police.am

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Armenia: Threats and attacks against organisations working on gender issues.

Members and partners of the Human Rights House Network and the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders condemn the ongoing smear campaigns and harassment against human rights organizations working on gender issues in Armenia and urge the authorities of the Republic of Armenia to ensure the protection of human rights defenders in their work.

On June 2013 the President of Armenia signed the “Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women”, adopted with a large majority by the National Assembly on 20 May 2013. The law defines the concept of “gender” as “acquired and socially prescribed behavior of people of different sex, social status of relations between a man and a woman, which is expressed in all spheres of public life.”

As a reaction to the new law, extremist groups started disseminating misleading information, associating “gender equality” with homosexuality propaganda and pedophilia and are now inciting to violent attacks against human rights non-governmental organizations, youth organizations, human rights defenders, activists, and researchers covering gender issues and working against gender based violence, gender inequality, and gender discrimination. Representatives of extremists groups are actively using media like TV and Internet, as well as distribution of flyers to spread misinformation and hate towards the targeted NGOs. Women’s rights defenders in Armenia are in this smear campaign called “traitors of the nation”, “destroyers of families” and a “threat to Armenian values” and promoters of sexual abuse towards children and minors. One of the members of the Human Rights House Network, the Women Resource Centre Armenia (WRCA), has been victim of concrete threats on several websites calling for violence, such as “blow up the Women’s Resource Center”, and “Burn the women’s human rights defenders” for raising gender issues and challenging gender stereotypes in the society.

Such public calls inciting to discrimination, hostility and violence are a particular concern having in mind the firebombing of the DIY bar in May 2012¹, which several representatives of the National Assembly, including Eduard Sharmazanov and Hovhannes Sahakyan from the ruling Republican Party, praised as justified action “in defense of the Armenian nation and values”.

The NGO Women Resource Centre Armenia filed complaints with evidence of such threats of violence against the Center to police, but no specific actions have been taken so far by the authorities neither to investigate those allegations nor to protect and support the women’s rights defenders and those working on gender equality. A member of the National Assembly from the ruling party, Mr. Babukhanyan, presented an official complaint against the Women’s Resource Center Armenia and its defenders to the Prosecutor’s General’s office requested to investigate the organization’s activities, accusing its members of promoting sexual deviation and homosexuality among under-aged girls. Although all these allegations are unfounded, they are creating black PR to the organization, increasing hate towards them in society and threatening their freedom of assembly and now risking attacks on individuals.

This is not the first time that the Women’s Resource Center Armenia has been targeted by Mr. Babukhanyan. On several occasions, during parliamentary hearings, Mr Babukhanyan, stated publicly “that organizations like the Women’s Resource Center are destroying Armenian families by working on domestic violence issues and they need to be shut down”. The Center has previously won a court case, where they sued the website www.zaruhi.com, belonging to Mr. Babukhanyan, for publishing incorrect information about the Women Resource Center.

Members and partners of the Human Rights House Network and the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders, are concerned about the repeated attacks against Human Rights Defenders and remind the Armenian authorities about the right of everyone, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international level, in line with article 1 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights Defenders.

Member of the Human Rights House Network urge the Armenian authorities to take immediate and appropriate steps to fulfil its obligations under international human rights law, and to guarantee a safe and enabling environment in which human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity, in the whole country and in all sectors of society, including by extending support to local human rights defenders, as stated by the United Nations Human Rights Council in its resolution on protecting human rights defenders adopted unanimously on 21 March 2013 as well as in line with the UN Declaration of Human Rights Defenders. Finally, we call upon the Armenian authorities “to publicly acknowledge the role and importance of human rights defenders” as recommended by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, after her visit to Armenia in June 2010².

Sincerely

The Human Rights House Yerevan, (Armenia)

- Armenian Helsinki Association
- Journalist Club Asparez
- Shahkhatun Women’s Democracy Promotion NGO

¹ <http://www.ianyanmag.com/2012/05/08/armenia-yerevan-bar-set-on-fire-in-attack>,
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR54/002/2013/en/6d6a852f-6494-4ef5-bc13-1373f154e0de/eur540022013en.pdf>
² <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G10/179/19/PDF/G1017919.pdf?OpenElement>

- Socioscope Societal Research and Consultancy Center
- Helsinki Citizen Assembly (HCA Vanadzor)
- “Real World, Real People” NGO
- Public Information and Need of Knowledge – PINK
- Democracy Today

Human Rights House Belarus in exile (Vilnius)

- Belarus Watch (ByWatch)
- Belarusian Association of Journalists
- Belarusian Helsinki Committee
- Human Rights Centre Viasna
- Public Association "Centar Supolnasc"

Russian Research Center for Human Rights (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Human Rights Network Group
- Independent Psychiatric Association of Russia
- Moscow Centre for Prison Reform
- Moscow Helsinki Group
- Mother's Right Foundation
- Non-violence International
- Right of the Child
- Right to Live and have Civil Dignity
- Social Partnership Foundation
- Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia

Human Rights House Voronezh (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Interregional Human Rights Group “Voronezh-Chernozemie”;
- Confederation of Free Labor
- Youth Human Rights Movement
- Youth Human Rights Group;
- Civic Initiatives Development Center

Human Rights House Sarajevo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association of Female Citizens "Renaissance"
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Serb Civic Council - Movement for Equality - The Council of the Sarajevo Canton
- Woman and Society Centre

Human Rights House Zagreb (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- APEO/UPIM Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- B.a.B.e.
- CMS - Centre for Peace Studies
- Documenta - Centre for Dealing with the Past
- GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
- Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health

Human Rights House Tbilisi (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- The Caucasian Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Studies (CAUCASIA)
- The Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims
- The Human Rights Centre Georgia (HRIDC)
- Union 'Saphari' – Family Without Violence

Human Rights House Oslo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Health and Human Rights Info
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Human Rights House Belgrade, (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

The Rafto Foundation for Human Right (Norway)

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Poland

Article 19, United Kingdom

The Anti-violence Network of Georgia (AVNG)

Copies have been sent to:

- The Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Geneva
- The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

- The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR), Warsaw
- The Delegation of the European Union in Armenia
- Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy
- The Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament, Brussels
- The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- The Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Norwegian Parliament
- The Norwegian delegation to OSCE
- The Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs

About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

The Human Rights House Network (HRHN) unites 90 human rights NGOs joining forces in independent Human Rights Houses in 13 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. HRHN's aim is to protect, empower and support human rights defenders and their organizations locally and unite them in an international network of Human Rights Houses.

The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF), based in Oslo (Norway) with an office in Geneva (Switzerland), is the secretariat of the HRHN. HRHF is international partner of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and the emerging Balkan Network of Human Rights Defenders.

HRHF has consultative status with the United Nations and HRHN has participatory status with the Council of Europe.

About the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders (www.caucasusnetwork.org)

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders is a network of 30 impartial and independent non-governmental organizations from the region of South Caucasus, aiming at supporting the human rights defenders in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.