

Come here, I'll Beat You Up!

Sirarpi left her husband, who was constantly beating her up throughout her seven-year marriage. Now she is fighting for her parental rights in court. Against her are her ex-husband, the law enforcement system, child custody bodies.

Chapter I. First there were arguments

They got acquainted by chance, through social media. He said he fell in love with her kindness, and Sirarpi . . . no, she did not fall in love, neither then nor after. He was different from the people she knew with his nonconformist approaches and boldness.

Once he told her that he was twenty when he had arrived in Armenia from Syria to study, and he did not know that the shops were closed during the New Year holidays. He had to survive four days eating only dry bread, which he baked with flour he had managed to find somewhere. That day Sirarpi felt something like empathy and motherly tenderness towards him.

Then they started dating. Shortly after, they began living together. Sirarpi's relatives did not approve their civil marriage (they registered it only a year later), but they did not prevent it either.

'I knew that I didn't love him. But I was already over 30 and I was constantly feeling pressure from relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. I was so much tired of this never-ending "You are already 30 , your biological clock is ticking" that I just wanted everyone to shut up. Plus, he was handsome and he never gave up on me.'

He had been living in Armenia for eight years already, and was a programmer in a small company. Sirarpi was an accountant. They both were earning little and rented a small two-room apartment.

Then he left his job and started his own business, creating applications for Facebook. Sirarpi helped him by finding photos and preparing advertisements. The couple started earning more money.

Sirarpi said that being flexible and compliant, she admired her husband's ability to take risks and keep moving forward in life. It seemed to her she saw in him personality traits of her father, whom she had lost at the age of 18.

First arguments began half a year after their life together. Any trivial household detail could stir an argument. Sirarpi was frightened by his shouts and intense swearing. In her parental house, where three different generations lived, no one ever raised the voice, and they always looked for mutual concessions in each situation.

At first she talked back, then learnt to keep silent, but neither one nor the other helped. Each scandal lasted for several hours, and Sirarpi could not find a way to calm her husband down.

Then the beating began. Once, after working for hours on end, Sirarpi sat down and almost burst out crying from exhaustion. Her husband was forcing her to continue. In response to the wife's 'I can't anymore' he took off his slipper and started hitting her calves hard. Sirarpi started to cry out in pain and insult, but he said 'When I was a child, my mother also was hitting me with a slipper, so what? I love her anyway.'

For several days in the summer heat Sirarpi wore trousers to hide her bruises. Then she tried to do everything her husband wanted, never responded to his shouts, and tried not to irritate him. Gradually they began to buy the food he liked, go to the places he liked, communicate with the people he liked, Sirarpi began to wear the clothes he chose.

'He forced me to wear extremely open clothes, ripped my clothes and cut them short. Once while going to the supermarket, he made me wear cropped shorts and a top I had bought for the beach. It was awful, I was so ashamed, it seemed like everyone was staring at me, I wanted to disappear. But if I did not obey, he would have beaten me.

The more money her husband earned, the more nervous he became. He bought an apartment, added two more cars to the one he had. He opened an office and hired staff. 'All he knew was to work and eat' says Sirarpi. Communication, leisure, having strolls . . . did not interest him at all. He kept all the money he earned, although Sirarpi worked equally with him. When her husband moved to an office, Sirarpi took a refresher course and got a job as an accountant.

Chapter II. Then she started to leave and come back

Fuss and beatings continued. Sirarpi was earning less than her husband and he did not miss a chance of scolding her, besides, he made her spend all salary on the house. If Sirarpi tried to object, he would beat her. After another beating, when Sirarpi hinted at divorcing, her husband fell to the floor in his two-meter height, clutched his heart and started convulsing and choking.

'After that he often did so. Later I realised that he was faking. Before, I was scared, rushed to help. He was crying, apologising, saying that he would never do it again, and if I left him, he would be completely alone. His family is in Beirut.'

But even after she revealed the deceit, fear of her husband and public opinion hold her back from divorcing. The same public opinion that pushed her into a rushed marriage. Sirarpi was afraid that her relatives would not understand, and that public stigma would weigh on their shoulders as well.

Once, when her husband's parents were visiting from Beirut, Sirarpi complained to her father-in-law that her husband was beating her. The latter advised to solve the family problems internally.

Now, remembering those times, Sirarpi confesses that she feels as if she is talking about another person. As if she had been hypnotised, deprived of her will.

The wish not to be beaten up by her husband and not to be cursed eventually turned into a wish not to be beaten up at least in the presence of others. Growing up with a strong conviction that dirty laundry should not be taken out of the house, Sirarpi suffered more from the fact that her husband often made scandals in public places, on the street, in a shop, or in a cafe.

One day she could not stand it anymore and ran away after another night of humiliation. She hastily threw some things into a bag and rushed to the bus terminal. For some reason, she thought that if she left Yerevan, her husband would not find her and everything would be fine.

‘I was wondering where to go when he called. I don’t understand how but he persuaded me to come back. I was sleepless and with weeping eyes when on the staircase I met my newly married neighbour. She said ‘We did not sleep all night because of your loud voices. I feel so sorry for you, and I want to help. Please do not argue again...’ The pity of this woman was like a slap in my face.

For a while, Sirarpi tried to “keep face.” Then once she could not stand it anymore. One day while her husband was at work, she went to her mother (their apartment was in a neighbouring building) and told her everything about the humiliation, the beating, and her intention to leave her husband. Her mother, who was shocked by the news, encouraged her daughter's decision. Together they went to Sirarpi's house to collect things. Sirarpi left the engagement ring on the table.

The same day, her husband came after her. He cried and swore that he would never touch her with a finger again if only she would return.

‘My inner voice was telling me not to go back. But . . . there was a “but”. I wanted to have a child very much. I started thinking that if I get divorced, much time will pass before I meet someone else, get married, and I am already over 30.’ The Armenian mentality was pressing on me in that issue as well. Having a child without a husband was off the table.

Then other ideas were striking me - but how can I have a child from him, he is so harsh, what would happen to me and my child?

Nevertheless, Sirarpi returned to her husband. Her husband really didn’t beat her, well, pulling her ear and pressing his hand on her forehead doesn’t count, right? But the swearing and endless scandals continued.

Sirarpi developed insomnia. A sense of desperateness and suicidal thoughts began to emerge. For some time, she seemed to live by inertia. Then she found out she was pregnant.

Her husband did not become very enthusiastic from the news. According to Sirarpi, he never really wanted a child, though his parents were eager to have a grandchild.

During Sirarpi's pregnancy, her husband once went to Tbilisi on business for two days. When after his return Sirarpi was sorting things out of his suitcase, she found a woman's shirt, also noted women hair in the car. The husband tried to justify himself that maybe someone had forgotten that shirt in the hotel locker.

'Of course, I did not believe it. He never used the lockers in the hotel. Did I feel pain? Absolutely not. It was not the first time. During our marriage, he would often bring his mistresses to our house, for example, for dinner. Frankly, I was happy to see every new mistress, hoping that he would leave with her. Since I was a coward, I shifted the responsibility for this decision to someone else.

But why go? For him it was very comfortable to live with me.

That girl tolerated him much longer than the others. I remember how, after learning about her existence, I came home every day to hear Led Zeppelin's "I'm gonna leave you, baby", I cried and prayed in my mind, let him go to her, let him leave me.

Chapter III. Then she devoted herself completely to motherhood

Sirarpi continued to work until the last day of her pregnancy. Shortly after the birth, she returned to work part-time. Their neighbour stayed with the child as a nanny.

She ran home after work. The simplest childcare activities - bathing, feeding, walking - were the ultimate joy. The husband was not even interested in the child, did not even hug him.

Although the spouses lived in the same house, they had almost no contact. Every morning at six o'clock Sirarpi woke up and took the sleeping baby to her mother's house so that the father would not wake up from the sound of crying. He demanded that the child be given medication so that he could sleep through the night and not be disturbed.

But the scandals continued even during the rare moments when they crossed paths with each other. The son was a year and half old when they left for Beirut to baptize the child.

His parents are Arabs, only one of the grandmothers is Armenian. They didn't know Armenian; we communicated only in English and a little bit in Arabic as much as I managed to learn. We could all sit in the living room of his parents' house, and then he would say in a calm voice. "Let's go to the hotel, so I can beat you up well." I was so scared, I even found out how to order a taxi or call the police if he tried to do something.

He once, in the presence of his parents, hit Sirarpi in the face so hard that Sirarpi fell down. His parents only mildly reprimanded him, and when Sirarpi complained to his mother that she had a very difficult life, the old lady said 'So what? On the other hand he bought a house, a car, takes you to the seaside.'

When they returned home, Sirarpi went to see a psychologist.

'The psychologist was asking questions, I was answering, and I had a feeling that I was understanding many things for the first time. As if my subconsciousness protected me from complete craziness, I pretended to forget the bad, when in fact it was just cramming into the dark corners, and now I was pulling all this out. I realised that during seven years of marriage I had lost my ego, moreover, I had lost the ability to think, to make decisions. Every time there was a squabble, I just wanted it to end. And in-between, I seemed to live by inertia.

Chapter IV. Finally, they divorced

Money became the reason for squabble that night. Sirarpi does not remember the details, but she will remember for ever that her husband kept on shouting for a few hours on end, and the child clung to his mother and was trembling with fear. Towards the morning, her husband got exhausted and went to bed, and Sirarpi made a decision that she had endured for seven years, and maybe could endure more seven years, but the child should be protected from such life.

At six in the morning, she wrapped the child in a blanket and left the house. She only took the car keys. The plan was to go to her mother's house first, and the next day would go to a village to visit her aunt.

'I pressed the elevator button, the elevator is coming upstairs and that very moment I hear my husband unlocking the door. I realised that if he opened the door and saw me in the staircase then I'm done. I closed the kid's mouth with my palm and ran down the stairs. I reached my mother's house. I felt like I was released from prison.

A few hours later he arrived and demanded the car keys from his wife, telling her not to come back home again.

Several days later, he told her brother that he had agreed to divorce and that he would find a lawyer. Sirarpi did not understand why he needed a lawyer if both agreed to divorce. At first she thought of leaving all the property to her husband, but her relatives talked her out insisting that she had worked equally and her own share in the property they had. As a result, she also hired a lawyer. Now, Sirarpi thinks that maybe she did not have to follow her relatives' advice and anger her husband, who loves money more than anything else in the world.

Ignoring the lawyer's advice, Sirarpi decided not to interfere with the father-child contact. And she was very surprised when she received a notice from the Court of Cassation that her husband's lawyer had filed a lawsuit banning to take the child out of the country. At that time, she insisted that her lawyer prepare a similar paper about her husband.

They divorced through the court, the child remained with the mother, the court set meeting days for the father and obliged him to pay alimony.

‘My son was very attached to me. He often did not want to go to his father. Whenever he came back from these meetings, it was obvious that the father and the grandmother had tormented the child with their remarks and restrictions. With me he was growing up free. Even if I forbade anything, I would definitely explain why.’

But Sirarpi persuaded her son to keep seeing his father. She was afraid that otherwise the conflict would resume. Besides, she did not want to turn the child against her ex-husband - regardless of their problems, he is the father of the child.

They soon developed a relationship they had never had before even during their life together. The ex-husband politely warned her of his visits time, asked to dress the child nicely, if they were going to visit someone, and they would adjust to each other's schedules.

‘One day, when he brought the child, I cooked borscht, I offered him, and he asked if he could take it with him. Next time, he called and said that he would bring some of the burgers he had made ‘I know you like them.’ It was unbelievable. I was wondering if we could break up like the heroes of my favourite French movies when the former spouses and their current ones are gathering together at the same party with their common children.

A couple of years later he married again. Sirarpi got to know his new wife who sometimes came alone to pick up the child, and her good attitude towards the boy made her happy.

Chapter V. Then the nightmare began

When kindergartens in Armenia closed because of COVID pandemic quarantine, the question arose as to who would take care of the child when Sirarpi and her mother were at work. The father refused the idea to hire a babysitter and expressed his willingness to look after the child every second day. A few months later, Sirarpi started to work remotely, and informed her husband that there was no need to look after the child “overtime.”

‘Suddenly, he got angry and started shouting that he is not a nanny for me, whom I can call whenever needed. We fought, but I tried to smooth things over. Several days later, I was taking the child to the father, on the way to him he got naughty, I got angry and he started crying. My ex-husband opened the door and, seeing the crying eyes of the child, uttered “This won’t be forgiven.” At that moment I did not pay attention, I thought, well, he saw the child like that, got upset, and unconsciously said something like that.

However, slowly Sirarpi noticed that her always cheerful, sociable child was gradually becoming more irritated, and had seizures of aggressiveness. The boy, who could previously play various games with his mother for hours, on end, now refused to play even the most attractive games on his mother's phone.

Sirarpi thought that the reason for such behaviour of the child was the forced isolation (he was already going to school, but the schools were also on remote study regime because of quarantine). She even contacted her son's friend's mother to arrange a meeting for the children, at least via Skype. She also applied to a child psychologist. She weighed various possible reasons, tried to understand why she no longer felt warmth from the child. However, it did not even occur to her to relate such a behaviour of her child to his visits to father's house.

The more or less normal relationship with her ex-husband, a life away from humiliation and beatings made Sirarpi so happy that she did not notice the first alarming signs, for example, the father's demand that when talking to him on the phone, the child either speaks with a headset or locks his room (they are a father and a son, let them have secrets, that's normal). Then once, this alarming influence of the father could not be overlooked.

'My boy made me angry and I lightly slapped him on the butt (first time ever, I had never touched him before), he was upset and told about it when speaking with his father. The next morning, father took the child, and the moment they left, the police knocked on my door. The man who had been beating me for years had complained to the police that I was beating the child. My arguments were of no interest to anyone. I was informed that the Board of Trustees for Children's Affairs had registered me.

A few days later, on his regular visit day, the father took the child again, and immediately after the same policemen appeared, claiming that Sirarpi had beaten the child again.

'I went to their chief to explain that nothing had happened, and I had not touched my son. She told me that the child himself had shown exactly where I had allegedly hit. I said "My son's skin is so white that if you press it lightly, a red spot will remain. Where is the forensic report?"

And she answered: "The father said that there is no need for a forensic examination" (since when does the child's father make such a decision?)

And she informed me that I was deprived of the right to see the child for ten days.

Sirarpi returned home in despair. With the help of her relatives, she found a new lawyer, with whom they applied to the court the very next day, with a request to hear the case urgently. Two days later, the court annulled the decision to deprive Sirarpi of the right to see the child due to the lack of evidence of physical violence to the boy.

Chapter VI. The nightmare and the trial continued

The father, however, did not bring the boy back, and in his turn applied to court, demanding to keep the child with him. The trial has been going on for more than a year. The boy lives with his father.

Sirarpi can visit the child three days a week, for six hours, until there is a court decision.

The meetings initially took place in the children's room of Court of Cassation. Sirarpi says the floor of the room was dirty and the toys smelled bad, but that was the only place she could be alone with the boy.

During the meetings, the husband constantly called the child's cell phone and instructed what and how to talk to the mother.

Then the ex-husband refused to bring the child, demanding that the meetings take place in his house. But when Sirarpi went to his house, he did not let her in, and only allowed to say a few words on the threshold. Couple of times he took the child out into the yard, not taking a single step away from him.

Eventually, the Investigative Committee initiated a criminal case against him for obstructing mother and child meetings. However, this case has been going on for almost a year and a half. Sirarpi has been identified as a victim, but her ex-husband has not yet been identified as a defendant to the domestic violence case. Then, it is not even clear from whom the victim suffered.

The same bailiff who witnessed the father manipulating the six-year-old child, however, testified that it was not the father who was interfering, but the child simply did not want to see the mother.

'When this case had just started a year and a half ago, the judge called my five-year-old child to testify, although under our law it is not allowed before the age of 10; the judge was asking leading questions. My ex-husband presented a video in court in which my child is sitting in a hot apartment with a coat and a hat and "tells" how I was beating him and left him hungry. For example, the father says: "Tell me how she pulled your arm, she did that like this, right?", and the frightened child nods.

There are cameras everywhere in his house, even in the child's room. And that person applied to court and claimed that I should be psychologically examined because I was mentally ill!

An examination, however, was ordered last year. To both. They are still waiting for it.

While the trials are delayed, the examination is awaited, the child is with the father. Mother manages to see him for a few seconds at the school gate, on the doorstep of her ex-husband's house, in the yard. The child is increasingly detaching from the mother, and the case of the former spouses has received new ridiculous offshoots.

One morning Sirarpi woke up and saw that she had missed a call from the child. She called him back and her ex-husband too, but no one answered. She hurried to her husband's house in her home clothes and slippers, picturing in her thoughts all possible horrors that might happen to the child. In the meantime, she called the police to ask for help.

'In their yard I saw the child and my ex-husband's wife playing with a dog. I ran to the child, hugged him, happy that everything was fine. And that woman grabbed the boy and started screaming. My ex-husband hearing the screams went down, made a scandal that made people gather, broke down my car door and took the kid.

The police never came. Instead, a new case was opened against Sirarpi ... for biting her ex-husband's wife. Sirarpi was trying to explain that the child had bitten her when the woman was holding him by force, and that clearly it was a trace of the child's teeth, not that of an adult. But in vain.

A few days later, the ex-husband phoned Sirarpi and called her home to see the boy. He opened the door, the child wanted to meet his mother, but the father held his hand and started insulting and cursing Sirarpi.

Sirarpi's husband (she started a new relationship shortly before) was waiting by the elevator at the end of a long corridor. Sirarpi says he approached and asked in a calm tone not to swear.

'He (her ex-husband) went in, came back, covered the baby's face with his hand and blew pepper spray on us. It was as if I had some acid on my face that was burning my skin. My husband got more. We didn't see anything. Helping each other, we went downstairs and knocked on doors, but none of them opened. We found the elevator by touch, went downstairs, called an ambulance and the police.'

It turned out that Sirarpi's ex-husband had called the police earlier and claimed that Sirarpi's companion had attacked him with a knife in his hand and that he had to defend himself with a pepper spray.

No case was filed because no evidence of knife use was found, but Sirarpi's counterclaim was also rejected. Immediate neighbours, who came out to find out what was going on, testified that there was something in the air that made them and the child that was taking the elevator at that moment sick. However, the police judged that pepper spray is not a weapon, so it cannot be life-threatening.

Chapter VII. She turned for help

After that incident, Sirarpi decided to write to all NGOs supporting abused women.

'Before that I was trying to hide my story, I felt embarrassed and did not want to be talked about. Now I want as many women as possible to talk about themselves, so that the ex-spouses who share the child understand that it only harms the child.'

Answers and offers of help came from almost all organisations. The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly provided a criminal lawyer.

Lawyer Ara Karagyozyan and human rights activist Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, a representative of the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women, organised an online press conference, which was also attended by Sirarpi, where they raised the issue of inactivity of the police and the judiciary.

Ara Karagyozyan thinks that the police and the prosecutor's office are explicitly backing up the abuser (who is not yet recognised as such), even despite the psychologist's conclusions about the negative influence of the father on the child and subjecting him to various manipulations. Karagyozyan promised

that if he did not get justice here, he would apply to the European Court of Human Rights and the international organisations that finance the reforms of the police system, which in reality did not take place.

When they had just divorced and the court ordered her husband to pay alimony, he left the courthouse and knocked on the door of the ex-wife's car while she was sitting in the car, so fiercely that if she had not managed to pull her leg out, it could have broken. Sirarpi went to the police. The young man on duty sitting there listened and said "Oh, such a thing would never have happened to my sister."

Sirarpi constantly hears from law enforcement officers and the judiciary "If you had found a normal husband, such a thing would not have happened" or "You should have thought ahead when you were getting married." It is also worth noting that Sirarpi's well-groomed looks pushes the law enforcement officers into numbness, since in their perception a victim of violence should be poor, beaten and inaccurate.

'I want such a blaming and stereotyped attitude towards women in our country, especially in those institutions, to change. People should understand that this can happen to anyone. And many women are silent because they know they will be blamed anyway. Then, not receiving protection from the state, they try to solve their problems on their own.

Sirarpi says that after the press conference, the investigators who ignored her and her lawyer's applications before that, started at least answering the calls.

Lawyer Ara Karagyozyan appealed the investigator's refusal to initiate a criminal case to the prosecutor's office, and after the prosecutor left the investigator's decision unchanged, he appealed to the court. At the time of publication of the article, the lawsuit was still ongoing.

Chapter VIII. Then she got support

Sirarpi says that before, she wanted the child to be returned to her, and her husband to be tried. But now she wants to find common ground with him, realising that the endless squabbles of the parents only cause harm to the child.

It took her a while to reach this state of mind.

'I once went to my son's school to see him at least from distance. One of the mothers saw me and dropped me a message through Instagram that she really wants to help, and invited me to "their group". I thought it was a sect, but I felt so bad that it did not matter where to go.

It turned out that the "sect" was a self-help group. There she met other women who found themselves in a similar situation; she found understanding and no reproach. Sirarpi says that she could not cry during

the whole court nightmare, even when she was on edge or alone at home. But when attending the group she sat on the chair and burst out crying.

For several months now, Sirarpi has been attending the meetings of the self-help group. She has a peer adviser (*a person who experienced similar problems in the past who has overcome trauma and is helping others for free*) - a woman from Russia who also fought for her parental rights. Sirarpi communicates with her by Skype within the framework of a special programme.

The programme has several stages and homework assignments.

'For example, we had an assignment to write down the names of all those who hurt you or offended so much that you cannot forget. My list included the school. A girl from my school told me something unpleasant, I was offended and carried that burden with me for years, even after a long time, I found her on Facebook and blocked her.

I told my peer adviser about everyone whose names I had written down, we discussed each case, understood the reasons, and finally let them go.

Another assignment required writing about what was most offensive in the relationship with the ex-spouse. Sirarpi wrote nine pages. Here are some of her notes:

'He argued with my girlfriend and her husband while they were at our place and forbade me to communicate with both of them. I hated myself for not being able to defend myself. After the divorce, I reconciled with my friend, but her husband did not forgive me.'

'He poured beer on me on the veranda because I refused to call his mother as I was tired.'

'One day he called me to his office, beat me and broke my favourite umbrella. The reason was that I wanted to start a business with my friend. He did not like the fact that I did not ask for his opinion beforehand.'

'When I sorted out my inner world, voiced the insults about my ex-husband, I realised a lot. I don't forget anything and don't justify my ex-husband, but the more I sue him, the more I will hurt my son and myself. He did a lot of harm to me, but in his perception, I also treated him badly, offended him.

Sirarpi says that before, she was determined to normalise the relations, but the moment she saw her ex-husband, the pain and sense of injustice was rising with a new force, and she was losing her temper again.

After several months of the group treatment, Sirarpi went to his house again. He again made a row, shouting and demanding that it's Sirarpi who must pay alimony now, she did not even raise her voice. She felt peace inside.

However, Sirarpi's proposals to calmly discuss everything and come to an agreement are every time turned down by her ex-husband. If before Sirarpi explained his anger with too strong love for money now there was no reason for that either.

According to the court decision, the apartment and the two cars were left to the husband, the third, Sirarpi's car, was recognised as joint property. Moreover, Sirarpi was ordered to pay the court costs incurred by her husband and to reimburse the x-husband's lawyer's fee.

She remembers how he demanded an oath from her brother that his sister would never marry again. 'Maybe he is angry that I have my own personal life, there is a man next to me,' Sirarpi suggests.

Epilogue

When we talk about domestic violence, people (of both sexes, but women more frequently) say: 'Everything is not so clear-cut. The other side must be heard as well.' We "heard" the other side, that is, the ex-husband in the two recordings that Sirarpi provided to Kalemon.

The first audio recording was made in 2012, in the third year of life together. Sirarpi came home very tired, she put the pizza made by her husband in the oven, but carelessly she burned the dough. Her husband made a scandal and beat her up. At some point, Sirarpi managed to turn on the phone recorder. She tells that at that time she was already afraid of him, was considering running away, and instinctively turned on the recorder, without delving on when it can serve as evidence of a crime and protect her.

At the eight-minute recording, first rumbling sounds are heard, then the sounds of blows to the face and body and Sirarpi's crying. Also, her ex-husband's voice is heard with a slight accent. He makes the woman eat the burnt pizza. Sirarpi cries, says she can't, asks to pity her (exactly in these words). The man, who at first shouted and cursed, now speaks calmly and dully, somewhat monotonously and slowly. Seemingly he enjoys humiliating the person crying in front of him, his strength but also the weakness of the other person.

The following dialogue takes place:

He: 'Were you going to throw it (pizza) from the balcony? No, you wouldn't do it, because you knew that if you threw it, I could have kicked you to death here.'

Sirarpi (crying): "But that's what you are doing now!"

He: 'I haven't really kicked you, yet. Eat now. Have tea if you want.'

Sirarpi: 'Do not torture me. What have I done wrong to you that you are torturing me?'

He (calmly). 'Have it. I added water so that it's not so strong.'

'I decide in this house, you are the weak link', — in the next episode his voice becomes soft, almost velvety. It's like he's explaining a simple math problem to a dumb student. He goes on saying that Sirarpi is always

wrong, noting with pleasure several times that he is the decision-maker in the family, and that “you wouldn’t get it, if you didn’t make me angry” (sounds of blows could be heard).

The recording, which seems to be an invaluable find for psychologists, including those who will conduct the examination, was not accepted by the police because “the limitation period has expired”.

The second (video) was made in December 2021. She made it in order to present in court as evidence, although she is afraid that it will also be rejected under any pretext.

The video shows Sirarpi approaching the door of her ex-husband's apartment, knocking, gently calling her son, asking him to open the door. The door does not open for a long time, then the sound of the key is heard, the child appears on the threshold and shouts ‘go away!’, then he slams the door. Sirarpi calls from behind the closed door, pleads him to come back and asks why his cheeks are red. The door opens again, the child's father is standing on the threshold.

He says that everyone has the flu, Sirarpi should leave, and he is going to take the child to see a doctor. Sirarpi asks to tell the address of the hospital so that she can go too. ‘You won’t come and don’t make a video recording on your phone!’ the man shouts. He demands that Sirarpi leaves and that she does not come without a bailiff.

‘I have come to see my child’ insists Sirarpi,

‘Oh my ... You want to see her..?’ the man asks, turning to the child standing inside the corridor.

‘No, go!’, the child shouts hysterically. ‘Leave me alone.’

‘I am not “her”. I am his mother.’

‘Yes, you are “her” ... She wants me to wallop kick her,” he addresses his current wife standing behind him.

‘She provokes you, and you give in,’ the woman reassures her husband. "Leave her and let’s have breakfast.’ ‘Bye’, this is for Sirarpi.

‘Sweetheart, I love you so much. What happened?’ Sirarpi asks the boy.

‘Go! I hate you!’ now child is screaming hysterically.

‘The kid is sick and you made him scream!’, shouts the ex-husband. ‘Go away!’

‘Today, we are taking him to the doctor’ says his wife, who is also shooting Sirarpi with the phone camera.

‘We will text you when we find out what is up with him.’

The door closes.

A few seconds later, the husband opens the door again, goes out and shouts ‘Get out of here and don't show up here again!’ Sirarpi goes back to the elevator, then he takes a big box and throws it at Sirarpi. Then he approaches, takes the box and says ‘An empty box.’ Apparently, for those who will watch the video later. Returning to their door, where the wife is waiting for him, he shouts again ‘Only with the bailiff, did you understand? Only with him, do not appear here anymore, you psycho!’

The sound of the elevator doors closing can be heard.

‘Weren't you afraid to go alone?’, I asked Sirarpi after watching the video, recalling the pepper spray. ‘Why didn't your husband come with you?’

‘Because the police officers and my lawyer said that it would be better for him not to come with me, it makes my ex-husband nervous and creates tension. It is normal for him to have a wife, but I should not have a personal life.’

Why does the law enforcement system often implicitly back the abuser, support “keeping the family” (no matter what kind of family), while the protection of the victim of violence and the interests of the child are not a priority?

Human rights activist Zaruhi Hovhannisyan points out several factors explaining such an attitude of the system.

Internal and gender solidarity plays a big role: police officers are predominantly male, many of whom do not see anything wrong in the violence of husbands over their wives (they do the same at home from time to time). On the contrary, a woman is accused of bringing an exclusively intra-family issue to the public discussion, even when the family as such no longer exists.

It could have seemed that guardianship and trusteeship bodies, where most of the staff are women, should take the wife's side, and not support the husband. Zaruhi believes that the bias of the employees of that service can be explained by the factor of corruption, when the man either bribes the officials or has acquaintances in the higher instances, as well as a fear that the offender may harm them in any way.

According to Zaruhi, the gaps in the 2017 law on domestic violence play an equally important role here. Initially, the law was drafted in the National Assembly based on the draft proposal prepared by the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women and numerous consultations with representatives of the civil society.

However, the final version of the law was greatly influenced by pro-nationalist organisations and individuals, as well as MPs sharing their views, who were concerned that the law “could challenge the family values.”

Subsequently, before final adoption of the law, the focus of the law on the prevention of domestic violence was shifted from the protection of human rights to the protection of the institution of the family. The law is called *Law on Prevention of Violence Within the Family, Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence and Restoration of Peace in the Family*. The human rights activist notes that the last wording contradicts all legal and international standards. It calls for reconciliation of two persons, the abuser and the victim, who are *a priori* in an unequal situation, which means maintaining that unequal relationship and increasing the risk of repeated violence.

The whole system calls for reconciliation, starting with the police, who visit homes in response to the victim's application to warn the perpetrator. During that visit, the male abuser and the abused woman are called to “forget everything, reconcile, resolve family issues between themselves.”

In addition, the text of the law mentions protection of the ‘traditional family’ as another concession to pro-nationalist organisations, which were monitoring that the law did not accidentally include people with same-sex relationships. Thus, the term “partner” was not included in the law, and domestic violence can be recognised as such only if a man and a woman have a legal marriage.

Human rights organisations have more than once conducted trainings for police officers. However, Zaruhi mentions that short courses can change something only at the level of individuals, not the system. For major changes, it is necessary for the state to really get involved in the process, and for the reforms to apply to the whole educational system, starting from school.

In this regard, Zaruhi emphasises the importance of the work of the mass media. Domestic violence is often covered by our media when there is an informational occasion, especially a flagrant one, for example, the murder of a wife by a husband, news can be presented in a shocking scandalous perspective.

Media workers are often not sensitive to victims of violence. For example, one of the most frequently asked questions to a woman is ‘Why did he beat you? What did you do?’ which seems to seek justification for violence and causes double victimisation, and does not rely on the idea “violence is a crime, it does not matter why, it matters that he beats her up”.

And as long as all the structures described above are not impartial and sensitive, stories like Sirarpi's case will remain in the courts for years or will not reach any instance at all.

The article was written with the financial support of the Council of Europe.

Domestic violence is, first of all, a gross violation of human rights. In this sense, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women aims at preventing violence, protecting victims of violence and punishing those who commit violence. It guarantees a multi-professional response, support mechanisms. See the details [here](#).

See the four pillars of the Convention [here](#).

In this regard, the legislation on combating domestic violence and gender-based violence in the Republic of Armenia still needs to be improved to meet international standards. See details of domestic violence cases and rulings of the European Court of Human Rights <https://rm.coe.int/fs-domestic-violence-arm-web/16808e9a2c> and <https://rm.coe.int/fs-violence-woman-arm-web/16808e9a31>

While the media plays an important role in promoting human rights, reporting violence, disseminating international standards and information on legal changes, providing discriminatory information about victims of violence by representatives of the media, victim blaming in articles, and often disclosing personal information, including that of children, further harms victims and spreads misinformation about the origins and causes of violence in Armenia.

To this end, the Council of Europe has developed a special guide for journalists and the media on gender equality and violence against women. The guide enhances the coverage of violence in a professional and non-sensational way. See details [here](#).