

Georgian Murders Highlight Violence Against Women

Author: [Regina Jegorova-Askerova](#)

Rights activists accuse police of not taking domestic abuse seriously enough.

The Georgian government has promised urgent action to combat domestic violence after a number of women were murdered by their partners.

In the most high-profile case, Maka Tsivtsivadze, a lecturer at Tbilisi's Ilia State University, was shot and fatally wounded on October 17 by her ex-husband, who turned up while she was teaching a class. He then turned the gun on himself.

Only a day later, a 68-year-old woman was stabbed to death by her 73-year-old husband in Gurdjaani in eastern Georgia. Another recent case was the murder of a young woman at the hands of her ex-husband, a policeman, in the western town of Zestafoni.

The Georgian interior ministry says cases of serious domestic violence are on the rise. Twenty-three women have been murdered in domestic-related incidents so far this year. In many cases the victim's husband was responsible. Last year, 21 women were murdered, and six the year before.

"In today's Georgia we are seeing a near-epidemic of violence," Elena Rusetskaya, head of the Women's Information Centre, told IWPR. "Almost every day brings news of a family conflict."

Rusetskaya says that while the media are giving increased coverage to domestic violence, "it's only after it's happened and only as a crime story".

"Cases are rarely described in the context of the broader situation, and the public hears the outcome of this violence even more rarely – whether the attacker was convicted, what happened to the victim, whether she received help, and how it affected her children and others around her," Rusetskaya said.

She says gender-based violence is particularly acute outside the main towns, and also among ethnic minorities, because such communities may be less aware of the issues, victims have fewer opportunities to seek redress, and there is a persisting view that such matters should be kept within the family.

Instances of domestic violence have also increased in larger towns, but Rusetskaya said more victims were seeking help from police and other agencies.

In response to the wave of murders, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said that an interdepartmental group would be set up to work on domestic violence. The Georgian parliament reviewed current legislation on domestic violence with a view to imposing tougher penalties on offenders and providing better protection for victims.

"Given the current situation, we have decided to prepare a draft amendment to the Criminal Code envisaging imprisonment as a punishment for the perpetrators of domestic violence," Zviad Okropiridze, the deputy interior minister, said. "If the person is a first-time offender, he will be deprived of his liberty for one year. If he is a repeat offender, he could be jailed for one to three years."

Amendments to the domestic violence law, the Criminal Code and other legislation were passed in their first reading. If they get final approval at a later parliamentary session, they will give victims the right to seek compensation, free legal advice and emergency medical care.

In the case of cohabiting couples, the victim will be entitled to remain in the family home while the perpetrator has to leave, regardless of who owns it.

A dedicated hotline will also be set up for anyone affected by domestic violence.

The prime minister said an action plan on violence against women was needed, but he warned against pointing the finger at the police alone, calling this a "hysterical response".

However, others insist that the way complaints are handled is in fact central to the problem.

Ucha Nanuashvili, the state ombudsman or Public Defender, told reporters that he welcomed parliament's efforts to improve the legislative framework, but added that "in practice, the main problem is the way the legislation is implemented".

"Along with public indifference, the main challenge is the inadequate application of the available protection mechanisms," Nanuashvili said. "In most of the [domestic violence] cases examined by the Public

Defender's office, the response from law enforcement agencies was restricted to just issuing a warning letter.

Noting that such warnings were not part of current laws, the ombudsman said they were "totally ineffective".

"There have been cases where individuals received written warnings and the violence carried on," he said.

In the case of Maka Tsivtsivadze, there were two occasions when she informed police about threats made by her ex-husband. The police merely issued him with written warnings.

Rusetskaya agreed that making laws work properly was at least as important as changing them.

"Of course the laws need to be amended, but it's more important to ensure they are implemented. Hence the need to retrain staff in all the relevant agencies like the police," she said. "Prevention and public awareness of the problem and ways of resolving it are also very important."

Elena Fileyeva, chair of the human rights NGO Article 42, agreed on the need for a broad approach, starting with how police viewed the whole concept of domestic violence.

"Such cases are often ignored; there's a tendency not to pursue them or launch criminal investigations. So it's essential to change attitudes to the problem itself and the way it's dealt with," she said.

Fileyeva would also like to see more discussion of factors that may contribute to domestic violence, from mental health issues to economic hardship.

"The number of domestic violence cases is directly affected by the difficult social conditions in this country, such as unemployment and lack of money," she explained.

Activists say that Georgian women are becoming more aware of their rights and of the state's responsibility to protect them. Nonetheless, too many are still reluctant to expose problems within the household to outside scrutiny.

According to a 2009 study by the United Nations Population Fund, nine per cent of married women interviewed admitted to being a victim of physical violence. But a further 78 per cent of female respondents believed that domestic problems should be resolved at home, and 34 per cent thought that wife-beating was justified in some cases and should not be made illegal.

Domestic disputes are traditionally viewed as intensely private matters, and often no one outside the immediate family is aware there is a problem until the violence becomes particularly brutal.

"We all have loved ones, neighbours and relatives who are regularly exposed to aggression in the home, but we don't do anything about it," Rusetskaya said.

Rusetskaya said it was also up to victims and their families to take action. "First of all, people should respond to violent situations. They should not be afraid to ask for help, call the police or contact NGOs that can help them resolve matters," she said.

Regina Jegorova-Askerova is a freelance journalist in Georgia.

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