

Poverty Imperatives: Adolescent Children Forced to Seek Work [2009/05/04 | 18:09] Armen Davtyan A father sells his daughter for 10,000 drams Four years ago, at the age of fourteen, Hasmik's parents forced the young girl to work. She was born in Yerevan and now resides in the #3 Special School in the town of Kapan. The school is attended by children with special needs. Hasmik is one such child. Years ago she lived with her parents on Pushkin Street in Yerevan. Hasmik started to work as a street sweeper to make some money. "We worked as street cleaners. Hasmik would help me. The two of us would sweep those wide streets early in the morning. But we were still strapped for cash. My husband would force us to hand over our wages," relates Hasmik's mother, Melanya. They never registered Hasmik as a laborer with the state. "The president of the property board says he can't be bothered. Let the tax officials come and investigate. I'll pay the fine. They register my daughter's earnings in my name. In other words they wrote two salaries. I handed over a portion to the board president," Melanya recounts. But the 14 year-old girl, merely by sweeping the streets, can't make the money needed by the parents. After sweeping the streets, she started to panhandle; at the insistence of the parents. But the money she collected by begging also wasn't enough to keep the family afloat. The family was in dire straits and the fact that the father had a taste for alcohol didn't help matters. Hasmik says that her father would return to the house drunk every day and beat his wife, but that "he never laid a finger on me". One day Hasmik's father "sold" her body to a neighbor for 10,000 drams "He was a 26 year-old boy named Tiko. I saw him a few times in the yard on my way to the store. The father grabbed my hand and took me to the house. The mother cried, 'Harout, don't do it.' He yelled back, 'Hey woman, shut your mouth. I know something.'" Hasmik remembers. She had difficulty going on with the story, but after making an effort she said, "He raped me and I was screaming." It was Hasmik's first sexual experience with a man. She returned to her home and her father took out one thousand drams and told her, "go and buy something for yourself". Fifteen days later, when the money had again run out and her drunken father needed an alcohol fix, he decided to hand Hasmik over to the next customer. "He was a man with long hair. He came to our house, handed the money over to my father and told me, 'let's go to the store and I'll buy you some nice things'. I answered, 'I don't want to'. Father was drunk and said, 'you will go. I need it'. My mother was crying. We went to the store and he bought some chocolate. We got in the car and he took me to a house. He told me to undress and I told him I didn't want to. I began to shriek but he also raped me. Later, while he was asleep, I opened the door and ran away. It was late in the night. I reached the Krdji Market and stayed there for two days," Hasmik recounts. The police take the girl they find on the street to the police station. From there, employees of the Armenian Relief Fund's Children's Reception and Orientation Center take Hasmik with them. Later on, they sent the girl to the #3 Special School in Kapan. Hasmik's case file is at the school but it doesn't contain any documents as to whether the father, or any other cohabiting adults with the child, was ever punished for their actions. Even the staff of the Children's Reception and Orientation Center doesn't know a thing about it. It was Hasmik's mother, Melanya, and her aunt, Armineh, that answered the question. "Who shall we tell our shame to? Should we have gone to the police and told that that the girl's father sold her off? We were afraid of the disgrace to follow," states Armineh. According to Article 335 of the RoA Criminal Code, subject to criminal liability are those individuals who don't reveal that a crime has been committed, except for the spouse of the person who has committed the crime; in this case the girl's mother. Hasmik's aunt was informed of the crime but didn't go to law enforcement with the news. Hasmik's mother, Mrs. Melanya, remembered however, that after the child was taken to the Children's Center her husband "was summoned by the police once or twice and afterwards it seemed that the case was closed." "God punished him, he became a drug addict. He lived on the streets and died," says Mrs. Melanya. Hasmik resides in the dormitory of the #3 Special School in Kapan where she has her own room. At the school she has learnt the skill of bread baking. School Principal Rita Davtyan says that Hasmik's father died one year ago but that the girl was never told. Hasmik says, "I can't say why it all turned out this way. I don't want to remember. But I want to grow up in a family," says Hasmik. Rita Davtyan decided to take the girl home in the summer to live with her mother. Before that her parents had visited the school once to take her home but the staff at the Children's Center didn't advise it. "My mother told me that she wouldn't take me home because she couldn't afford it. I pleaded with her several times to at least visit me here, but they don't come. They telephone now and then and say that they'll come and take me home. But I don't understand them. Where will they take me if they have no money? How will we live?" says 18-year-old Hasmik (not her real name). In the words of the school principal, the girl doesn't blame her father even though what he did has left her psychologically scarred. "I wouldn't say that I hate men. I don't know; I've become a certain way. But I'm not wicked. I have a sweetheart, Gokor. He studies here. We love each other and if all works out we'll get married. I want to have two kids," says Hasmik, blushing. She confessed that she hasn't told her boyfriend about her past experiences. "It's not the time, even though he loves me a lot and wouldn't leave me if I did," claims the 18 year-old girl. Mrs. Melanya now works as a cleaner in one of the barber shops. She's temporarily living with her brother and they somehow make ends meet. They tore down her house on Pushkin Street and still haven't allocated her a new place. "My brother is just able to get by as it is. I'll bring my girl here in the summer but there's no place for her to stay. Maybe I'll ask the school board to keep her there a bit longer, just until I get back on my feet," says Mrs. Melanya. Parents decide the household rules 14 year-old Artak Margaryan tends to livestock in the village of Tzghuk, the coldest and most windy community on the Yerevan-Meghri stretch of highway. "What else can I do? I have two younger brothers and my parents don't work. I have to help out," Artak says. At the age of nine he started taking out the village herds to pasture singlehandedly. Earlier, he would often tend to the livestock with his grandfather. At first it was hard. He

used to be afraid but as time went by he got used to the work. Naturally, he goes to school, but he doesn't consider it learning. Artak prefers to work and help his parents. His mother, Mrs. Sona, sees nothing wrong in her young son working. On the contrary, she is pleased that he is so industrious. "The boy must get a taste for work starting now, so that down the road he can support a family. Also, he's making money. What's wrong with that?" says Sona Margaryan. The boy and especially the parents couldn't care less about the RoA code or having a work contract. Mrs. Sona noted that "they are the ones who decide the rules in their household". Artak doesn't only work by tending livestock. Throughout the year, he helps the villagers in other types of work as well, like at harvest time. The boy seems a bit big for his age. He says, "I started to shave early to grow early." Artak's teacher Spartak Galstyan remembers that one day the boy came to class down in the dumps. The teacher noticed bruises on the boy's face. It turns out that one of the villagers hit him because the boy failed to return two of his cows from grazing. After the incident, the boy continued to tend to the village livestock. "The work disrupts school. On those days when I don't go to school, I take the books with me up to the grazing lands. But however much I read it doesn't sink in. I must be attentive and follow the cows," says Artak. Andranik is Artak's school mate. One Sunday he went with Artak to the pasture. "It's very hard work. He's always on edge, following the herd. He's running after a cow in this direction and after a calf in the opposite direction. The kids in the village decided to chip in and give Artak some money but he refused saying, 'I'm not a beggar. I'll work'", Andranik relates. "I can work. I don't need other people's money. I still have my hands and feet," says Artak proudly, adding that as of next year he will study hard so that he can become a veterinarian. "I'm a bit frightened of the wolves, but I have a rifle and know how to use it. If I have to, I'll shoot. One evening last summer a pack of wolves attacked the herd as we were returning to the village from grazing. It wasn't really a pack, just three or four. They were able to maul two cows. When I opened fire, they fled," Artak recounts.