

# CY, O'NER

comics as eyewitness

October 2020

Sri Lanka

Armenia

Iraq

Mauritania

Colombia

front line defenders



# Armenia

## Lara Aharonian

Lara Aharonian is a human rights defender who works on a variety of human rights issues in Armenia, an ally of virtually all movements and causes, and who has worked for women's rights, LGBTI rights and against corruption. But in October 2020, she started emergency response supporting civilians fleeing the conflict that erupted with Armenia's neighbor, Azerbaijan. She has given space in her own home to shelter some people, while turning her organization's office into an emergency humanitarian aid distribution center.

Armine Shahbazyan, also based in Armenia, has had family members called up to the front as the country entered a full mobilization phase, making it nearly impossible to work on this story.

The story here is unfinished, but will fully realized over the next month, even as the daily news brings reports more misery and suffering as a result of this conflict. As the final layout was being prepared, Lara sent this note: 'I fear that soon the shelling will reach us as well but still hoping it will stop soon, but have no idea how, since no external power was able to stop it yet. This week we also cleaned our underground shelters just in case.'

Artist: Armine Shahbazyan  
Illustrator and Graphic Designer based in Yerevan, Armenia.

[Behance](#)



LARA AHARONIAN



My name is Lara, I was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1972. I was only 3 when the war started.

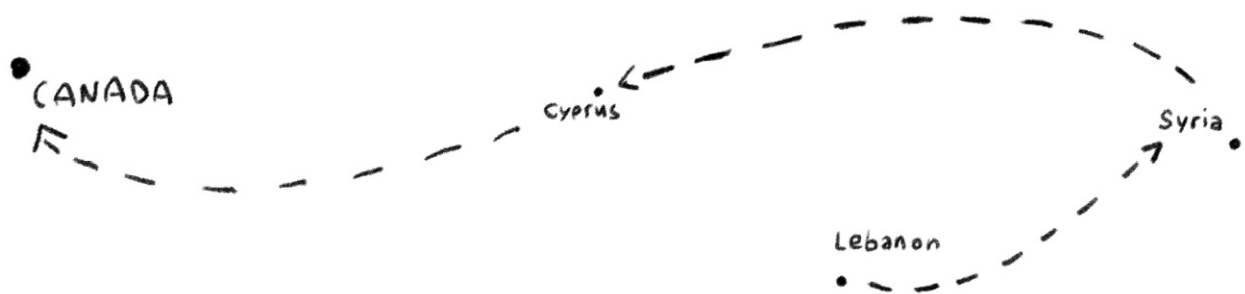


As a small child I was completely mesmerized on how women in my family were able to predict the future in the dried-up coffee at the bottom of the small coffee cups. But these were not just regular coffee sessions. They were a safe space created by women among them to raise issues that they found difficult to talk about. My grandmother was an expert on this and as a small child I would listen for hours to these magical sessions.

Years later, when I started defending women's rights, this ritual became an important tool of healing, solidarity and empowerment. Very feminist in their nature it gave me the opportunity to discuss uncomfortable issues like war trauma, health, sexuality or domestic violence in very traditional settings.



I grew up learning how to hide in bomb shelters, learn the sounds that different weapons make and read for hours everything I found under the candlelight since electricity was cut most of the time.



In the late 80s when the civil war became even more deadly and our house was bombed, After traveling across different towns looking for safety, finally my parents decided to take the risk of crossing at night the sea to Cyprus and from there migrate to Canada to a safe haven, leaving behind all the devastation and death.

Montreal was a healing place for our family. The trauma of war, losses and broken homes stayed in our souls longer, but living in a peaceful country gave us back the courage to live again.

I discovered there, green wide spaces, friendly people and libraries full of books.

My interests grew in social justice issues and more specifically in feminism and women's rights. I studied at the University, educational psychology then feminist literature, then volunteered with women's centers, advocating on local rights issues, writing feminist texts and protesting for social housing.



In 1999 I decided to travel to Armenia and volunteer for the summer in a small village called Karin Tag, in the unrecognized territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. While during the day I was helping the villagers in renovating a church, the afternoons I was visiting people's houses and drinking coffee with the women. Then the long coffee-cup reading sessions started and while getting at ease around me, women started telling me their stories, about their lives during war, how they gave birth in shelters, how they cared for the wounded, the deaths, the grief. We cried together then we laughed again and days passed while we became good friends.

In 2001, I returned for another summer, this time in Shushi, a beautiful city in Karabakh, Artsakh, devastated by the war. This time with my little girl who was 1 at that time, I volunteered to help with the Shushi hospital reconstruction of one ward. Once more, after the work day, I used to put my baby in a backpack on my back and we would together visit the homes and around coffee cup reading sessions listen to the most difficult issues; their lives, health, abuses they faced, violence in the house and economic hardships.





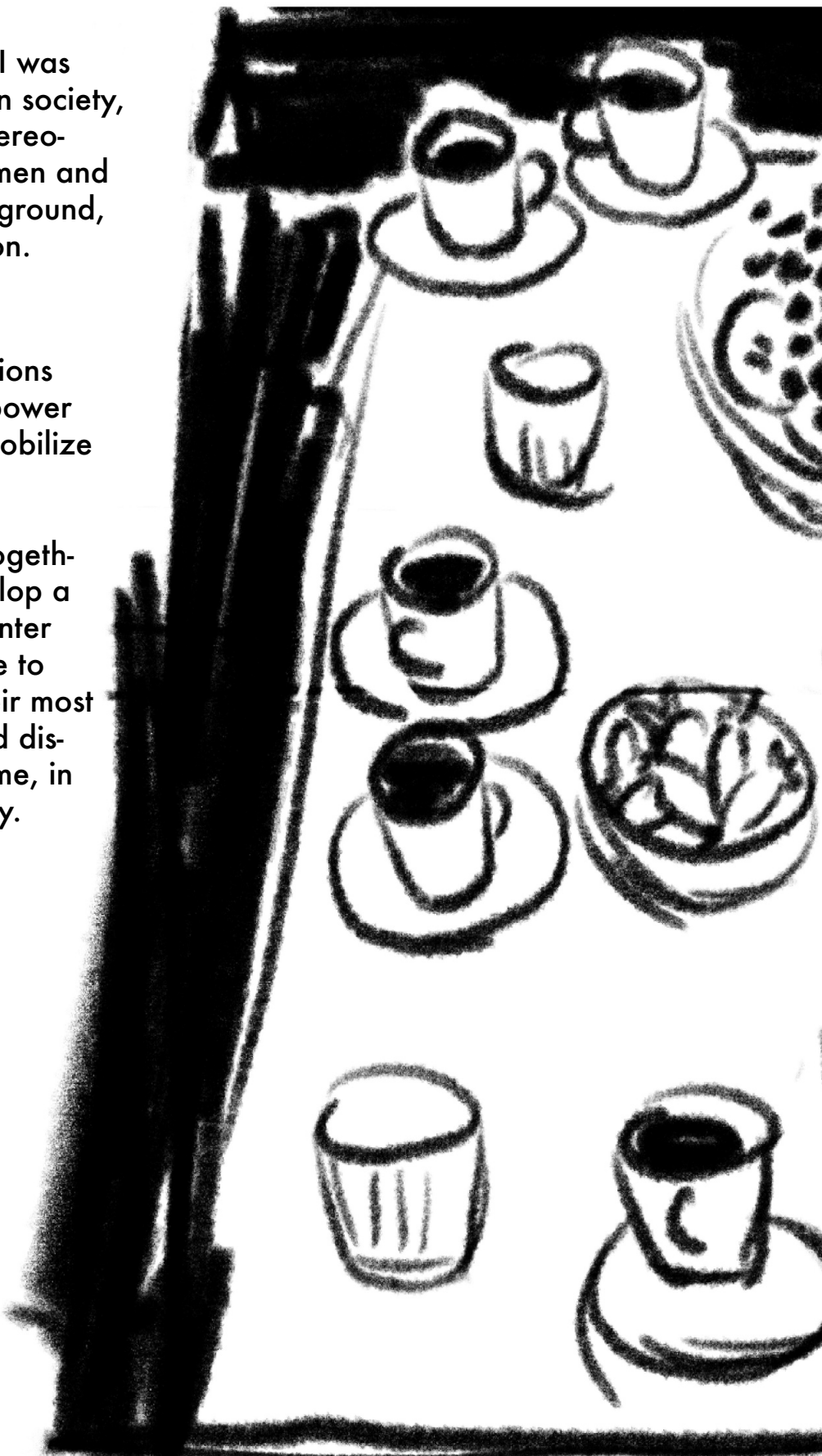
From 2003 I moved to Armenia and started the Women's Resource Center and a hotline to help women experiencing sexual abuse, harassment and domestic violence.

Together with other women, I was denouncing the inequalities in society, the patriarchal values and stereotypes, advocating for all women and girls regardless of their background, beliefs and social orientation.

From these important discussions and safe sessions came the power to raise consciousness and mobilize ourselves for social change.

Over the years, I was able together with other women to develop a drop-in women's resource center where women and girls came to find a safe space, discuss their most difficult issues, prejudices and discrimination they faced at home, in school, at work and in society.

Together we were able to advocate for the law on domestic violence as well as amending the criminal law on sexual abuse and throughout the year raised many sensitive and difficult issue related to gender equality, justice and women's rights in Armenia.



I also received a lot of threats, hate speech... smear campaigns.

"My husband has been wounded in the war in the 90s, when he came back home, he was another man completely, it was not easy, war took a lot from us..."



"There was this family friend, I remember when he used to come to our house, I was just a child, he would bring gifts and wanted always to kiss and hug me, I always felt uncomfortable around him and his touch... but we never talked about these stuff in our society, it was shameful"

"I always wanted to travel the world, work and study, but my parents decided that the best thing would have been to marry our neighbor's son. I did not love him, but my dreams were not realistic and women should marry and have children, that's how it is. He became very violent over the years, he threatened to kill me and the kids. I tried to go back to my father's home, they told me I should go back, stay with my husband and keep the family together, I felt alone and had to deal with the abuse for the sake of my children..."



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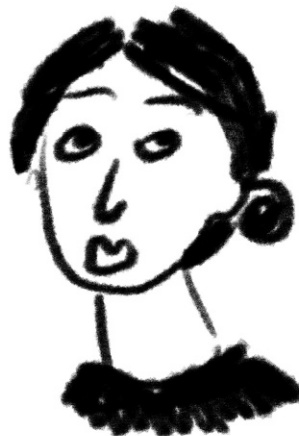
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Then hate started to  
escalate even more..

"Many times when we talk about a woman, we see a woman, a mother, many times a sister and that's all, but I want to remind you that we are also single mothers, we are also mothers who have lost their children in the army, we are also unwilling to become mothers, we are also elderly, we are transgender and we are lesbian and bisexual women, or we do not want to adopt or have children, we are women living in border villages, we are poor, we are Yezidi women, women with disabilities, and when laws are being drafted we have to be careful that every type of women can benefit from it."

BURN  
HER!

TRAITOR!

YOU  
are the destroyer of  
families and  
Armenian values!

KILL HER!

You are  
PROPAGATING  
homosexuality!

Rape  
HER!





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