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Killer Seat Belts, Feminine Drivers and Tinted Windows: Pitfalls on the Way of Enforcement of Seat Belt Rules in Armenia

By

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ABSTRACT
From August 2009, the Government of Armenia initiated enforcement of seat belt rules throughout the country without employing serious public education or consciousness raising measures. Despite the rate of usage of seat belt has significantly risen in the country, the article argues that there remain awareness-related and especially cultural obstacles which pose serious threats to the effective implementation of the policy. Therefore, the article suggests that interested parties should simultaneously address safety-related misperceptions existing among the motorists as well the negative perceptions around the practice of wearing seat belt that derive especially from in-group definitions of masculinity and masculine behavior.
Key words: seat belts, enforcement, unawareness, negative stereotypes, collectivism

INTRODUCTION

At the meeting of the Armenian Government on 13 August 2009, Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan expressed his concern regarding the high mortality rates on the roads of Armenia[1], described the practice of drivers not to buckle up as 'vainglory,' and ordered the Police to fully enforce the requirement of Armenia's traffic rules to wear seat belt. (Meloyan 2009) As part of the Action Plan within the National Strategy of Road Safety adopted on the same day, the Road Police embarked on penalizing the offenders of the seat belt rules, now not only on the highways outside of town (as it had been the case since approximately 2007-2008) but also in capital Yerevan and other urban areas of the country; the fine was defined in the amount of approximately $13. (Gevorgyan 2009)

Research data collected from different countries suggest that enforcement in the form of punishment usually proves efficient for changing driving related safety behaviors in combination with public information campaigns and other measures tailored toward building internal justifications for concerned people (Pasto&Baker 2001; Thyer & Geller 1990; Kumpfer & Pett 2001; Hagenzieker, Bijleveld, & Davidse, 1997; Petridou et al. 1999; Akhmadeeva et al. 2008). However, the policy of administrative enforcement in Armenia has not been preceded or accompanied by serious awareness building initiatives.

The fact the number of motorists wearing seat belt after the adoption of the Strategy has increased fundamentally especially in Yerevan (where approximately one third of Armenia's population is concentrated) and the fact that the Police vows to be consistent in enforcing the seat belt rules pose a question as to the necessity of intrinsic incentives at all. In other words, aren't measures of consistent administrative enforcement in the form monetary penalty sufficient to make the use of seat belt in Armenia irreversible?

I argue that despite the evident breakthrough, a more careful look into the situation reveals the flaws of the policy of enforcement which has failed to integrate into its frames an effective public information campaign. More specifically, I suggest that in order to ensure a substantial change and sustainability in seat belt use behavior in Armenia, state or/and concerned non-government organizations should simultaneously initiate measures toward creating internal incentives by a) addressing lack of knowledge and misperceptions of drivers in a number of specific safety-related issues and b) neutralizing negative perceptions around the practice of wearing seat belt that derive especially from cultural definitions of masculinity and masculine behavior. Otherwise, possible decrease in the control over compliance with the seat belt regulations is fraught with the risk of relapse of the practice of nonuse as it has already been registered in a number of cases.

Conclusions of the article are based on a survey conducted before the adoption of the Strategy, in April-July 2009, among 400 active drivers in capital Yerevan, in Vanadzor, administrative center

of Lori province in the north of Armenia, and in the urban-type community of Metzamor located west of Yerevan. The survey was supplemented by interviews (30), focus groups (3), as well as monitoring and observations of driver behavior on the roads both before and after the adoption of the Strategy.[2] Nonprobability sampling methods with purposive selection of as representative samples as possible were applied for the study.

THE FACTOR OF UNAWARENESS

As an old joke on seat belts goes, a man in Yerevan sees his friend belted up in the car and asks him with derision: 'Don't you have three rubles to give to the police officer and not to tie yourself up like a monkey?' (The words 'monkey' *kapik* and 'to tie up' *kapkpel* have similar pronunciation in Armenian which adds to the humor of the joke.)[3]

The general disregard toward the seat belt as a safety device implied in the joke once popular in Soviet Armenia has retained its relevance also to present days. I will try to show in this part of the article that measures of administrative punishment currently applied in Armenia should be combined with efficient awareness-raising efforts since results of the study indicate that more than half of the Armenian motorists unwilling to use seat belt before the Strategy could be characterized as being in the state of unawareness with respect to their own problem behavior.

US professors of psychology James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross, and Carlo C. Diclemente, authors of the acknowledged model of successful self-change in psychotherapy, call such people 'precontemplators' who before proceeding to the next stages of self-change (i.e. contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination) should be helped to become conscious of their problem behavior as well as the defenses they use to justify it (1994: 89-108). Otherwise, action, as the authors argue, will have a little lasting effect as it has been the case with numerous action-oriented techniques without awareness behind them. (Prochaska, Norcross, Diclemente 1994: 115)

Since the working hypotheses of this study held that unawareness was one of the factors determining nonuse of seat belt in Armenia, the survey was designed in view of the necessity of validating or disproving existence of this variable. More specifically, the first cluster of survey questions was aimed at establishing different aspects of awareness regarding the necessity of using seat belt: respondents were asked if they believed seat belt could save lives and prevent serious injuries, if seat belt could kill and cause injuries during accidents, if seat belt should be used inside or outside of cities, and if the drivers thought use of seat belt was a matter of personal choice or public necessity.

The first group of precontemplators included those motorists who a) thought that seat belts were not useful in protecting from injuries and fatalities and b) who thought that wearing seat belt imposed various threats to life of the driver.

Thus, 15.5 percent of respondents disagreed or partly disagreed with the statement 'In general, seat belt can reduce fatalities during car accidents by more than 50 percent.' The second subgroup of drivers had skeptical opinion toward the practice of wearing seat belt on the grounds that it carried dangers for drivers. When asked to express their agreement/disagreement regarding the statement 'Seat belt can increase likelihood of fatalities during car accidents,' 8.2 percent of respondents agreed and 14.7 percent partly agreed with it.

Prochaska et al. note that denial, justification and rationalization are the weapons of precontemplators by the medium of which they oppose the attempts directed at solving their problematic behavior. The motorists included in the first group of precontemplators seem to fit into the category of deniers and rationalizers, and the following answers obtained during interviews personify the ways they use the denial of necessity to wear seat belt and justification/rationalization of the choice not to do so:

I do not believe seat belt can help during a car crash. If a tragedy is to happen, it will happen anyways, and no seat belt can be of help. (male driver, Yerevan, above 60)

I am not sure seat belt can help me if my car hits any other object with a strong force. Let them show me a scientific material, proving that seat belt really saves lives; then I may be persuaded. (male driver, Yerevan, 18-25)

In the examples below seat belts are depicted as a cause of fatality during automobile accident:

Seat belts are dangerous. If my car flies down the precipice, I will have no time to unfasten myself and jump out. The same is true for the fire. If my car catches on fire in an accident, I may not be able to get off the car in time. (male driver, Yerevan, 46-60)

I do not use my seat belt because it is not safe; if my car, for a reason, falls into a river, and if I am fastened, I will drown with my car, not having enough time to leave it. (male driver, Vanadzor, 46-60)

It is interesting that a study of attitudes toward seat belt conducted in neighboring Georgia in October-November 2007, reveals a number of striking similarities between the answers of Armenian and Georgian respondents. One of such similarities refers to the ways of justification of nonuse of seat belt. The threats of drowning and driving down off the road have been mentioned

by some Georgian interviewees as reasons making seat belt look less reliable. (Safedrive.ge 2007: 15-16)

Unawareness along with the attitudes of denial and justification can also partly account for the fact that 7.2 % of the surveyed drivers in Armenia did not have seat belts in their cars at all – there are car service centers and car technicians in capital Yerevan and other regions of Armenia who are specialized in removing seat belts or silencing seat belt alarm signals in the cars by using different adjustments. The recount of a participant of one of the focus groups (female driver, Yerevan, 18-25) is a good example in this regard: 'When we bought our new car, I was surprised to hear my father say to me that there were several urgent modifications to be made on the car, and one of them was the removal of the seat belt as a redundant object.'

The second and largest group of precontemplators is comprised of motorists who accepted the necessity of using seat belt on the highways out of towns but not on the roads inside, despite the considerable number of car accidents and victims in capital Yerevan and other major towns of Armenia.[4]

Results of the survey provide an insight into the level of misperceptions of motorists right prior to the adoption of the Strategy and enforcement of seat belt regulations in urban areas of Armenia. When asked 'In which of the following cases have you used seat belt during the past 12 months?' 69.9 percent of respondents for whom practice of wearing seat belt was not permanent had used it only on the highways outside of cities. Additionally, when asked 'In which of the following cases (urban areas, highways outside of the cities) do you think there is a need to fasten seat belt to ensure the safety of the motorist?' 56.6 percent answered that seat belt was necessary only on the highways outside of cities.

During the interviews, drivers disagreeing with the need to fasten seat belt inside towns were bringing several main arguments to substantiate their position: low speed of road traffic, short-distance and short-term trips in the cities, as well as inconvenience of using seat belt in view of weather conditions in the summer:

Seat belts are needed on the highways where the speed is high; inside the cities their use is meaningless as the speed is too low. Even if a collision happens in the city, you can protect yourself from injury by simply holding firmly on to the wheel or resting against the dashboard. (male driver, Yerevan, 26-35)

A crash that happens to the cars moving at the speed of 30 km/h is not dangerous at all. Now, imagine I have to make multiple short distance trips in Yerevan; it will be very inconvenient to fasten the seat belt and undo it each time I get in and off the car… But I agree that seat belt should be used on the highways. (male driver, Yerevan, 36-45)

It is noteworthy that a great deal of surveyed respondents also demonstrated unawareness with respect to the operating seat belt regulations in the country. Only 28.8 percent of drivers agreed with the statement that the law envisaged warning and fine for not using seat belt in urban areas. This fact should be also attributed to the situation prior to the adoption of the Strategy when the Road Police had been enforcing seat belt regulations only on the highways outside of cities.

A confident assumption can be made that application of seat belt regulations to the urban areas can strongly impact the driver perception of the requirements of the law, however not necessarily bring about substantial change of perceptions regarding the necessity of using seat belt inside cities as a means of drivers' security. Media reports, observations, as well as a number of interviews conducted after the application of the law in the urban areas attest to this proposition. The patterns of unawareness-related answers that had been registered before the application would frequently recur also after it. As a taxi driver in Yerevan (26-35) mentioned during the interview, 'The government started enforcing this law without having an understanding what the seat belt is. The seat belt is intended to protect people from the inflating airbag; it can not save lives without the airbag. Besides this, a taxi driver can be easily robbed at night with the seat belt on. He can escape nowhere.'

Another female driver (36-45) referred to the argument of short-distance trips: 'I am not sure I need seat belt while driving in Yerevan. My work place is only 5 minutes away from my house by car. Can anything happen to me during those short and low-speed trips?'

Besides the two forms of precontemplation mentioned above, it became possible to spot one more expression of seatbelt-related unawareness. More specifically, the survey intended to establish the opinion of drivers on the issue of social responsibility, in other words, to reveal if drivers thought use/nonuse of seat belt could impact only an individual driver or the society in general.[5] Respondents were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with the following two statements: 'The state should enforce usage of seat belt as it is a matter of national significance' and 'Use or nonuse of seat belt is a matter of personal choice, and the state should not oblige drivers to wear it.' The answers showed that 32.4 percent of motorists thought that use of seat belt was not a matter of national significance (3.1 percent disagreed with the statement partly). Similarly, 37.8 percent of respondents agreed that use of seat belt should be left at the discretion of the driver, not the state (16.2 percent agreed with the second statement partly).

It should be also noted that cross-tabulation of data became only partly supportive of the assumption that unawareness could be conditioned by the age and education variables. For example 65.7 percent of the respondents who believed that seat belt increases fatality during accidents were below 35 years of age; however, 61.5 percent of them had higher education (this

might be explained by the factor of social desirability as in several cases respondents with secondary education were recognized to be presenting themselves as having higher education).

Juxtaposition of data also revealed the fact of high level of coincidence between different groups of precontemplators; for instance, the lowest percentage of coincidence was 79.2 in the case of the respondents who did not favor the idea of the state making drivers wear seat belt and who in the meantime thought that it was necessary to wear seat belt only on the highways outside of cities.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

I argue that the second major and more influential problem the government has to address along with enforcement of seat belt regulations is the set of negative cultural perceptions felt by the motorists with respect to the practice of wearing seat belt. Otherwise, the measures of administrative control, should they deteriorate, carry the risk of relapse of nonuse of seat belt under the impact of these perceptions.

The first reason for such proposition is the fact that before the adoption of the Strategy, a considerable portion of drivers, who had not worn seat belt at all or who had worn it occasionally (only on the highways), acknowledged the necessity of using seat belt. For example, 37.7 percent of such drivers were of the opinion that seat belt should be used both in town traffic and outside of towns; 53.8 percent agreed and 31.8 agreed partly with the suggestion that seat belt can reduce fatalities by more than 50 percent during accidents; 39 percent of respondents agreed and 22.2 percent agreed partly that the use of seat belt was an issue of state significance.

According to the self-change scale offered by Prochaska et al., these drivers most probably belong to the stage of 'contemplation,' which denotes acknowledgment of the problematic behavior by the person and still lack of determination to terminate it (1994: 41-42). At the beginning of the study, the working hypothesis suggested that apart from the unawareness factor, negative, especially masculinity-related, stereotypes were the second major determinant accounting for nonuse of seat belt among drivers who recognized the necessity of seat belt or might have intention to start wearing it.

Not excluding the possibility of existence of other variables for nonuse of seat belt either, the survey asked the respondents questions with the purpose to reveal dominant societal attitudes toward the practice of wearing seat belt. More specifically, one of the questions asked the respondents to mention maximum three factors (in the list of eight) which, according to their opinion, were the most significant obstacles for drivers in Armenia for using seat belt. As it was expected, 'Derisive attitude of the society toward the users of seat belt' became the most frequently mentioned factor (53.1 percent) followed by 'Confidence of motorists that no accident will happen to them' (48 percent), 'Inconvenience of using seat belt' (45.4 percent),

‘Level of knowledge of motorists on the benefits of using seat belt’ (42 percent), ‘Ineffective work of the road police’ (37.1 percent), ‘Fear of looking different in the eyes of the public’ (30.8 percent), ‘Absence of seat belts in the cars’ (25.1 percent), and ‘Low amount of penalty’ (18.3 percent).

Cross-tabulation of variables, however, revealed the fact that difference between the number of contemplators and precontemplators who were aware of and therefore could be exposed to existing negative societal perceptions was not big: for example, 51.9 percent of respondents, who did not use seat belt but thought that state should enforce seat belt regulations, mentioned ‘derisive attitude of society’ as a significant factor hindering use of seat belt; similarly, 40.4 percent of the respondents, who did not use seat belt and opposed the idea of state enforcing seat belt regulations, thought that negative societal perceptions were a significant obstacle for wearing seat belt.

Further, in order to specify the nature of the felt negative societal attitudes, drivers were asked ‘What may people most probably think about the motorist who uses seat belt in the city?’ and given the option to choose maximum three answers in the list of ten. Choices made by respondents were classified into three qualitative categories: positive (‘Motorist is a disciplined person’ – 46.9 percent; ‘Motorist realizes the importance of seat belt’ – 31 percent; ‘Motorist feels responsible for his/her family’ – 12.7 percent), neutral (‘Motorist is probably a foreigner’ – 64.1 percent; ‘Motorist is afraid of being fined’ – 40.6 percent; ‘Motorist probably works at an international organization’ – 31.2 percent), and negative (‘Motorist is not experienced’ – 31.1 percent, ‘Motorist is trying to give the impression that he/she respects the law’ – 20.4 percent; ‘Motorist is obedient by his nature’ – 13.1 percent; ‘Motorist is not courageous’ – 10.3 percent).

I suggest that the negative characteristics of inexperience, obedience, and lack of courage are interrelated, and their origin and meaning should be understood in the context of a masculine society in which, according to the definition of anthropologists Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, ‘emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life’ (2005: 120).

Inexperience, obedience, and lack of courage are synonymous as each of them may also denote fear, lack of confidence, or lack of independence, features that are incompatible with the culturally prescribed roles and images of the male gender in a predominantly masculine

society like Armenia. Inexperience, obedience, and lack of courage may also denote lack of competitiveness, another masculine characteristic according to the definition of Richard Dyer[6] (1997: 264). In the meantime, it should be noted that these negative perceptions become possible in a situation when use of seat belt is not clearly perceived as a legal requirement as was the case in capital Yerevan and urban areas of Armenia before the Strategy. It is exactly in absence of such requirement that use of seat belt is most likely to be associated with someone's inexperience, hence, fear of getting injured, killed, or even excessive submissiveness.

As one of the respondents (male driver, Yerevan, 26-35) said during the interview:

If you wear seat belt in the city, people may think that you are a beginner; this may be an indicator of lack of your abilities. The driver may be understood as being afraid for his life. There is an important moment in the mentality of the Armenian man: even if he is afraid of something, he should not make it known to other people. Fear is not a becoming feature to a man.

Another interviewee, (male driver, Vanadzor, 26-35), who explained own nonuse of seat belt by his forgetfulness, also admitted to the existence of similar negative perceptions:

A really cool guy should be risky; he must show he is proficient. He says 'I am not that coward to use seat belt… why should I obey?' Besides this, if a passenger next to him makes an attempt to belt up, he will view it as a demonstration of mistrust toward him. Personally, I have a positive attitude toward users of seat belt; I just always forget to put it on.

Though the response 'Motorist is afraid of being fined' was originally put in the category of neutral evaluations, it could be assumed that within the context of masculinity-based behavior expectations, this perception also may acquire a negative tinge of meaning due to the fear factor implied in it.

That the use or nonuse of seat belt in Armenia may have the function of affirmation of one's identity as normal can be argued also on the basis of interviews and observations conducted with female drivers. According to results of the monitoring of Yerevan automobile traffic

before the Strategy, 29 percent of female drivers (who constituted only 3.8 percent of total population of Yerevan drivers) were using seat belt against only 1.1 percent of the remaining male drivers. This observation was supplemented by the focus group conducted among female motorists. Its participants, both seat belt users and non-users, did not attach importance to the mentioned masculinity-related stereotypes in determining their own behavior. Rather, they attributed nonuse of seat belt in Armenia to reasons such as 'lack of awareness,' 'low level of education of drivers,' 'absence of a tradition to wear seat belt,' 'corruption' and 'absence of efficient control on the part of the state.'

In the meantime, it should be noted that in a society where masculinity values are predominant, masculine behavior may tend to be reproduced by females as well. This can take place under pressure or in imitation of masculinity values. For example, a 24 year-old female motorist put straightly during an interview that she was not using seat belt because she was not a coward. Another interviewee, 38 year-old female driver, told that it was the social pressure that kept her from using seat belt:

Once I had to drive my family to the village. At the outset of our trip, I said that I wanted to wear the seat belt as I had had a bad dream the night before. At that, my uncle said that I could become subject of derision as people might think I could not drive well. I know it is wrong, but I had to listen to him.[7]

Finally, the link between a masculine society and feminizing power of the seat belt can be seen in the mentioned survey conducted in neighboring Georgia. According to its participants, apart from positive perceptions, there were three negative characteristics attributed to the driver who regularly used seat belt in Georgia – inexperience, cowardice, and excessive decency (Safedrive.ge 2007: 3-5).

Apart from the masculinity stereotypes, the Armenian survey also demonstrated that the driver regularly using seat belt may be perceived as someone trying to give the impression of decency. This was reflected in the answer 'Driver is trying to give the impression that he/she respects the law.' As one of the interviewed respondents (male driver, Yerevan, 26-35) noted: 'A person, who drives in Yerevan with the seat belt on, may be wrongfully taken for someone

who has just come back from Europe or America and who wants to stand out from other 'backward' drivers as a more advanced and more knowledgeable person.'

It is interesting that in the space given to the respondents to fill in their own versions, some of them mentioned that drivers using seat belt regularly can be characterized by the public as overly decent. This opinion - again coinciding with the results of the Georgian survey – was reflected in the following answers: 'driver is pedantic,' 'driver is overly intelligent,' 'driver is overly law-abiding.'[8]

In order to better understand how the mentioned negative stereotypes may impact the behavior of motorists, it is also necessary to bear in mind that they should obviously acquire greater functionality in a collectivist society where 'the bonds that link people to one other and to institutions are rigid, the individual's freedom of choice is limited' (Yankelovich 1994: 20) or where, according to another definition, 'people from birth onward are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty' (Hofstede 2005: 76).

Results of the study demonstrate that majority of respondent motorists can be characterized as members of a large in-group whose behavior is in conformity with the dominant norms shared by its members.

One of the indicators of inter-dependedness of motorists is the fact that in the opinion of 64.1 percent of respondents, a driver using seat belt in the town could be taken for a foreigner. This implies by itself that the practice of wearing seat belt is not accepted as an in-group norm, and the local motorist attempting to wear seat belt runs the risk of assuming the role of out-group member and being alienated from the in-group. This assumption may be supported by 30.8 percent of respondents thinking that 'Fear of looking different in the eyes of the public' is a significant obstacle for wearing seat belt in Armenia.

Secondly, when asked 'Which of the following changes will make you start or increase using seat belt?' motorists for whom usage of seat belt was not regular distributed their choices (again maximum 3) as follows: (1) 'If the Road Police officers started wearing seat belt themselves' (63.4 percent); (2) 'If control of the Road Police increased' (53 percent), (3) 'If people around me started using seat belt' (43.4 percent), (4) 'If the amount of penalty increased' (42.1 percent), (5) 'If use of seat belt was not perceived negatively in the society' (38.1 percent), (6) 'If benefits of using seat belt were advertised' (25.2 percent).

Despite it is only answers 3 and 5 that directly validate the assumption of inter-dependedness of drivers behavior, I would like to suggest that 2 and 3 pertaining to external enforcement factor may support this idea as well, though indirectly. Based on the interviews conducted after the adoption of the Strategy, it became evident that by making use of seat belt in the urban areas a legal requirement, the state – perhaps without even suspecting it – lent a 'saving hand' to the drivers in contemplation or preparation stage. According to the Prochaska scheme, these were the drivers who acknowledged the importance of seat belt or were even contemplating to start using it but could not do so (or step further into action, maintenance and termination stages) because of existing negative perceptions. Therefore, application of seat belt regulation to the urban areas has created an 'excuse' for such drivers to justify their behavior. The following passage from the interview conducted with a 27-year-old male motorist in Yerevan is a good example demonstrating how the conflict between the collective pressure and individual desire is given a resolution:

I live in a tiny neighborhood where for the overwhelming majority of people wearing seat belt would be viewed as something wild and unmanly. Hence before the recent changes, use of seat belt by me would be unimaginable; I could not afford to go against the accepted norms.... Now I have a good defense: I do not want to be fined. And people seem to understand it.

Again, it is important to note that juxtaposition of different variables of the survey demonstrated that both contemplators and precontemplators can be exposed to the impact of the collectivist norms. For example, 31.1 percent of respondents, who did not use seat belt but thought that state should enforce seat belt regulations, said that change in the behavior of other people would make them start or increase wearing seat belt; similarly, 27.9 percent of respondents who did not use seat belt and opposed the idea of state enforcing seat belt regulations expressed their readiness to change their behavior under the same condition.

Finally, there were two notions in the survey which at first glance might lead to the conclusion of presence of determining variables other than unawareness and negative stereotypes. One of them refers to the stated readiness of motorists to start wearing seat belt or use it more frequently if the Road Police officers themselves started using it, the other – to

the overconfidence of motorists (that no accident would happen to them) mentioned by respondents as one of the most significant factors hindering use of seat belt in Armenia. I suggest that both answers are typical of the contemplation stage. The former clearly indicates that motorists do not view the practice of wearing seat belt in terms of its life saving benefits; rather, they perceive it as another legal requirement imposed from above; the second answer allows us to form an opinion about the level of fatalism that may exist among the motorists (preconditioned by lack of comprehensive information on a subject, fatalism denotes a lack of effort or action because of the belief that all events are predetermined).

PREMATURE ENFORCEMENT

Can coercive environmental alteration such as tightening of measures of administrative punishment for nonuse of seat belt bring about a change of behavior among the motorists who have not developed internal belief in the necessity of using seat belt or who still feel the pressure of in-group values? Observations carried out on several highways outside of urban areas before the adoption of the Strategy and in capital Yerevan and the town of Vanadzor after the adoption, provide us with interesting material to argue that use of seat belt by such motorists is likely to be temporary and stop once the possibility of being noticed and fined by the Road Police decreases or disappears. Moreover, various forms of behavior might be developed by them to resist the requirement of wearing seat belt even when this possibility is around.

More specifically, two weeks after the application of the law in Yerevan, a simple count on various streets during daytime in Yerevan demonstrated that the number of non-users on secondary and tertiary streets – where the control of the Road Police is much weaker – is higher than that on primary streets. Observations conducted late in the evening, at a time when control of the Road Police weakens and the darkness considerably decreases the likelihood of being seen from outside, the number of users drops further. For example, the count carried out on several primary and secondary streets in Yerevan three weeks after adoption of the Strategy demonstrated that the rate of usage during daytime, 91.7 percent, dropped to 69.5 after ten o'clock p.m.[9]

The fact that use of seat belt not supported by internal conviction and social liberation from negative stereotypes is likely to stop in absence of external control is corroborated by another interesting reality. Monitoring carried out on weekends has revealed the fact that in most of observed cases, drivers of the cars in wedding motorcades did not use seat belt. The likelihood of a car from a wedding procession to be stopped by the Road Police is extremely low, if impossible.

Apart from the passive forms of disobedience connected with the perception of diminished control, the drivers in Armenia might also engage in more active forms of resistance to seat belt

regulations. Prochaska et al. argue that 'Precontempaltion indicates in many cases an active resistance to change' (1994: 75). In the case under consideration, it can be assumed that the motorists in contemplation stage too may resort to active forms of resistance under the in-group pressure.

Cars with tinted windows that make observation of the driver and the passengers from outside impossible are one good example of it. According to the results of monitoring conducted in Yerevan at the beginning of July (before the adoption of the Strategy), 15.4 percent of cars in capital Yerevan had tinted windows that made the observation of inside of the car impossible. Though the original purpose of tinting the car windows may be different – such as protecting inside of the car from sun rays, ensuring privacy of people inside, enhancing the appearance of the car, emphasizing a social status, etc. – some of the interviewed owners of tinted cars mentioned that they felt comfortable on highways where the Road Police could not control them.

Monitoring carried out on Yerevan-Vanadzor highway and in the town of Vanadzor further indicated that tinted windows have already become essentially functional in terms of defying seat belt regulations. First, the number of tinted cars on the highway was more than twice as many as that in Yerevan. Second, the number of tinted cars in the town of Vanadzor reached 42.4 %. This considerable difference can be explained by the fact that Vanadzor drivers travel to Yerevan more often than Yerevan drivers to Vanadzor, in other words, they more often become subject to complying with seat belt regulations. Interviews and observations indicate that after adoption of the Strategy the tinted windows have received functionality also for capital Yerevan and other urban areas.

An assumption can be made that the number of tinted cars in the capital and throughout the Republic will increase unless the state takes appropriate measures to curb the process.[10] However, if the growth of number of cars with darkened windows can be regulated by application of administrative measures, prevention of another form of active resistance, namely, imitation of wearing seat belt, does not seem as likely without raising awareness. Closer observations on the streets of Yerevan and several highways revealed the fact that quite often motorists create an appearance of wearing seat belt for an outside viewer. In particular, this is done either by pulling the belt across the shoulder (but not across the stomach) and further down under the hand or pulling it across the stomach but not pressing the tongue of the belt into the locking part. In the second case, the belt tongue is simply laid either on the lap of the driver or next to the driver's seat; in some cases the drivers were observed to hang the tongue end of the belt on the hand brake. According to an informant, some of the drivers in Yerevan who had removed seat belts from their cars before the Strategy, started adjusting black ribbons to seat belt anchors in the cars to give the appearance of being belted-in by simply pulling and laying them over their chests.

It is interesting that current imitation on the roads of Armenia echoes the stories from the Soviet times. More specifically, it was believed that special suits, shirts, and T-shirts with ribbons making semblance of worn seat belts were sewed in Georgia and Armenia in the 1970-80s.[11] Similar stories of using fake seat belts were told several years ago about some local drivers of international organizations in Armenia whose internal regulations obliged all the employees to be belted up.

Finally, signaling each other by headlight beams can be considered as another form of active defiance to seat belt regulations on the highways outside of urban areas. This warning method, by which the drivers coming from opposite directions let each other know about a Road Police car nearby, according to drivers themselves, had been forgotten in Armenia long time ago and resurfaced with the authorities tightening administrative measures toward wearing seat belt on the highways since 2007-2008. According to the results of the interviews and monitoring, this type of driver behavior at present can be observed on almost all major non-urban highways of Armenia. Besides, this type of active defiance is perhaps the strongest evidence of how collectivist principles are reflected in the behavior of individuals.

THE STAGE OF TERMINATION

In the end of the article, I would like to support the points made so far by referring to the example of those motorists who before adoption of the Strategy were at the stage of termination on the self-change scale or who, in other words, had been using seat belt regularly. In the survey, such respondents constituted 4.4% of the total population of drivers. Before adoption of the Strategy a focus group had been conducted in Yerevan with male motorists for whom use of seat belt was a regular practice.

As it had been assumed from the start of the survey, drivers in the termination category demonstrated almost 100% conformity with what had been considered by the survey as criteria of awareness; the overwhelming majority of them opined that the most significant factors hindering use of seat belt in Armenia was unawareness and derisive attitude of the society.

However, it was the focus group which gave a clearer picture of how these motorists had reached the termination stage. They unanimously accepted that before using seat belt they had gained awareness of the necessity to do it; thereafter they had to overcome own feelings of fear and discomfort with respect to what surrounding people might think about their behavior. All of the drivers agreed that no external impact such as administrative punishment applied at that time on the highways outside of towns had played a significant role in their choice to use seat belt. As a 27 year-old participant of the focus group in Yerevan mentioned,

I became aware of the importance of the seat belt two years ago after watching a couple of social ads on YouTube. I was shocked and made up my mind to fasten my seat belt in all cases, in the town and outside of it. Besides this, I make the passenger sitting behind me fasten the seat belt, otherwise in case of a frontal collision I myself become very vulnerable even though I am belted in... I know that there are some backward opinions about people wearing seat belt, but I do not care.

The statement of another participant, a 32 year-old driver, again demonstrates how the processes of consciousness raising and liberation from social pressure precede the stage of termination of nonuse of seat belt:

Every more or less educated person should know that seat belt can save life and protect from injuries. I traveled abroad frequently and saw people in other countries wear seat belt not only on the highways but also in the urban areas… At first, it was quite difficult to drive in Yerevan with the understanding that people watching you might think that you were a beginner or cowardly. However this feeling is passing away with time. Moreover, you obtain the feeling of a more responsible person.

It is interesting that the mentioned departure from the accepted in-group male norms in the case of permanent users can be again explained within the frameworks of the collectivism theories. More specifically, the positive correlation between economic growth on the one hand and change of societal and personal values on the other was described by sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf according to whom people feeling affluent have the power to slacken collective bonds by their enhanced individualism and personal freedom. (1980) Following the affluence theory, it could be argued that the participants of the focus group were retaining higher degrees of independence from the in-group values also due to the following characteristics of economic nature: they could be considered as established professionals in their fields of work with considerably high-paying jobs compared with general standards in Armenia; they were all below 35 years of age with higher education; most of them had experience of traveling abroad.

Similar results were obtained from the survey data: 81 percent of permanent users of seat belt drove expensive or very expensive cars (the respondents were asked to mention the type of the car they drove); 78.5 percent were below 35 years of age, 78.8 percent had higher education.

Conclusion

I tried to argue that in order to achieve substantial results in the seatbelt-related public policy implemented by the state, current administrative measures applied by the Road Police throughout the country have to be accompanied by initiatives toward creating internal incentives for drivers.

Results of the survey, interviews, and observations have demonstrated that one of the major obstacles which had kept drivers from using seat belt before adoption of the Strategy and which still has the potential to hinder its application after the adoption pertains to the factor of unawareness. Hence, one of the main conclusions of the article is that immediate efforts should be taken by state or/and interested non-government organizations to raise awareness of motorists on several safety-related issues. More specifically, necessity of using seat belt in the urban areas along with the highways outside of cities, consequences of nonuse of seat belt for both individual drivers and society in general should be effectively propagandized to the public.

Second major problem that the policy makers will have to tackle refers to the felt negative perceptions regarding the practice of wearing seat belt. Majority of the negative stereotypes, as it could be judged from the answers of respondents, derived from in-group perceptions of masculinity and masculine behavior and depicted the driver regularly using seat belt as inexperienced, obedient and coward. Such drivers could also be associated with persons who were pretending to respect the law or who were overly decent.

Though it was demonstrated that the recent adoption of the Strategy was a good ‘excuse’ for the drivers acknowledging necessity of seat belt to start using it, the results of the study also suggested that both unawareness and negative stereotypes will tend to resurface and make impact under the pressure of in-group values once the external control over the observance of regulations diminished. Cases of nonuse of seat belt and active methods of defiance to the requirement to wear seat belt both in Yerevan and non-urban roads were presented to validate the assumption. Finally, an attempt was made to argue – on the example of drivers who had started using seat belt regularly before the adoption of the Strategy – that most substantial termination of the practice not to use seat belt can be achieved by efforts directed at raising awareness and neutralizing negative stereotypes.

NOTES

[1] According to the data provided by the Road Police of Armenia, 407 people died and 3125 received injuries as a result of automobile accidents in Armenia during 2008. This means that mortality rate in the country per 100 000 population is 13.5, while according to the WHO's baseline data, mortality rate of the low-income European regions is 12.2 (WHO 2009: 13).

[2] According to the information of the RA Road Police, the number of motor transport in Armenia is approaximately 400 000.

[3] I owe this joke to my colleague's father Hamlet Karamyan.

[4] According to the data provided by the Road Police of the Republic of Armenia, in 2008 the number of car accidents only in Yerevan comprised 41.7 percent of all car accidents in the country; the number of deaths from accidents in Yerevan comprised 21.3 percent and the number of injured persons 35.5 percent of the total number of deaths and injuries in Armenia.

[5] During the Government meeting on 13 August, Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan also spoke about the negative consequences of automobile accidents for the gross domestic product of the RA.

[6] In his deconstruction of the concept of heterosexuality, cinema analyst Richard Dyer provides similar definition of masculinity and femininity: 'Heterosexuality is posited on the gender difference femininity:masculinity. This is widely conceptualized in terms of opposites: male aggression, strength, hardness, roughness, and competitiveness as the opposite of female nurture, weakness, softness, smoothness and co-operativeness.' (Dyer 1997: 264)

[7] An article on seat belts in a 2007 issue of one of the Armenian electronic periodicals told about a young Armenian lady, Siranush, who after having lived for two years in the United States started using seat belt in Armenia by the force of habit. 'However, my friends and passers-by would laugh at me, and I stopped using it,' complained Siranush to the reporter (Armtown.com 2007).

[8] In one of the chapters of his book 'Other Colors,' Orhan Pamuk provides insight into some specifics of the road traffic in Turkey in 1950-80s which is indicative of universality of negative perceptions about overly decent drivers. More specifically, the author writes that those drivers

who were minutely observing all traffic rules in Turkey were thought of as being short of skills, keenness of wit, will, and imagination. (Pamuk 2008: 264-269)

[9] According to my observations, the same phenomenon was taking place in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan in July 2009. I learnt that several months before my visit, a law had been adopted in the country requiring use of seat belt in urban areas and on highways outside of cities; however no serious awareness-raising initiatives had been taken before it. Very much like the behavior pattern in Yerevan, after the nightfall, the number of users of seat belt in capital Bishkek would drop significantly.

[10] During a talk show on one of the Armenian TV channels, a Road Police official mentioned that tinted cars had become a painful issue, and that the Police would take measures to punish those drivers the tint of whose cars exceeded the allowed percentage (Urvagitz 2009).

[11] This story was told by a respondent in the study on attitudes toward seat belts in Georgia. (Research on the attitude of active passengers and drivers 2007: 14-15) I owe the information concerning Armenia again to Hamlet Karamyan according to whom stories about shirts with ribbons allegedly sewed in Armenia were circulating in Russia in the 1970s, at the time when the usage of seat belt became a legal requirement in the USSR once high-speed FIAT cars started to be produced in the country.

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