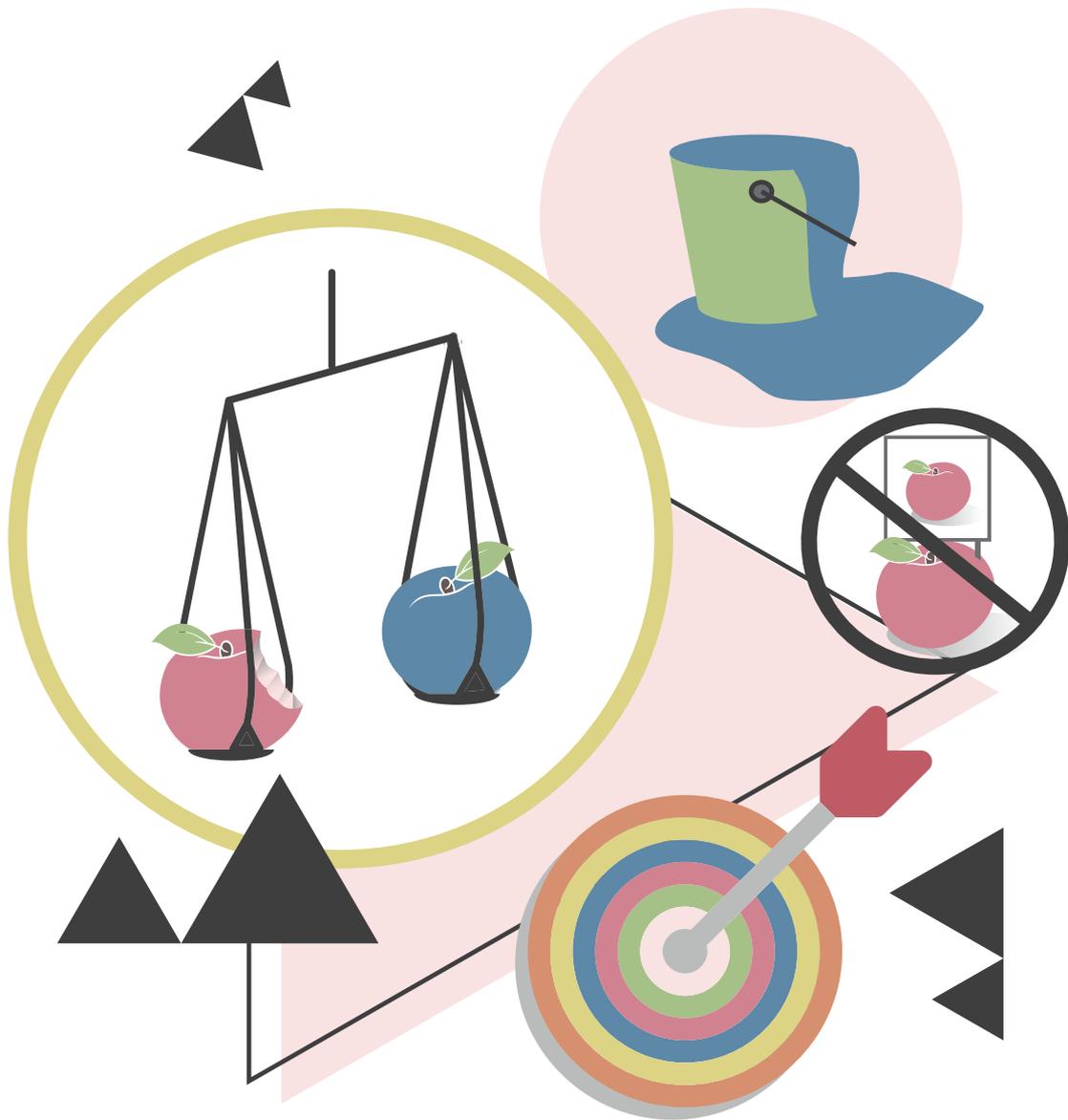


Gender Politics in Armenia

2017



By: Ani Jilozian

An Exploration of Legislation,
Anti-Gender Rhetoric,
and Community Strategies

By
Ani Jilozian

Chapter 1



The impact of anti-gender sentiments on legal and normative frameworks

Chapter 2



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Executive Summary

In today's semi-democratic Armenia, women's and LGBT rights have come under coordinated attacks by conservative, Russian-backed propaganda and propped up by local right-wing populists and ultra-nationalist extremists. Attacks on gender ideology – used as a political tool to generate distrust towards the West and deter public attention from corrupt practices – hinders the passage of progressive laws and the proper implementation of international treaties.

In recent years, Armenia has seen a considerable backsliding in several areas, as reflected by its gender equality indicators and lack of legal mechanisms to ensure rights and non-discrimination. Presently, Armenia has not adopted standalone laws on domestic violence and anti-discrimination, and new provisions to the abortion law risk a rise in unsafe and illegal abortions.

Where de jure equality is secured, de facto equality has yet to be achieved. A case in point is the largely unimplemented Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (formerly known as the Gender Equality Law). Around the time of the law's adoption, the meaning of the term "gender" was distorted by ultra-nationalist groups and used to galvanize the masses around the idea that those fighting for equality were destroying the fabric of Armenian society. This led authorities to remove the term from legal documents and culminated in what has come to be known as the "war on gender" or the anti-gender campaign.

As the ripple effect from the anti-gender campaign was still being felt, President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan announced that Armenia would be joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) alongside Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, instead of signing a partnership agreement

with the European Union (EU).¹ Since the 2013 anti-gender campaign in Armenia coincided with Armenia's sharp U-turn away from the EU and subsequent entrance into the EAEU, experts largely agree that gender issues were artificially raised on the agenda to arouse fear, align conservative masses, and distract public attention from political realities.²

The present study explores the manipulated discourses around gender issues used to mobilize the public and secure political power and examines the impact on policymaking and restrictions on women's and LGBT rights in Armenia. Linking the anti-gender campaign with new developments in Armenia, the study employs a multi-tiered approach to analyze the phenomenon in an effort to inform strategies and effectively respond to future attacks in Armenia.

The research methodology is comprised of a desk review of current normative frameworks on gender legislation as well as a qualitative component, wherein 22 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with chosen experts in the field. The key informants who took part in the study include women's and LGBT NGO representatives, individual activists, journalists, academics, and government officials. (See the annex on page 73 for the full list of interviewed experts.)

The report is organized into four major thematic categories: 1) the impact of the anti-gender campaign on policymaking and the restriction of rights; 2) exacerbating factors and main threats to progress; 3) an analysis of mobilization strategies, key actors, messaging, and funding mechanisms; and 4) recommendations based on the external research and key stakeholder interviews geared toward activists and donor organizations to offer solutions to the range of problems presented.

¹Gohar Abrahamyan, Struggle against gender or anti-European propaganda?, Hetq.am, August 17, 2015.

²Jemma Hasratyan, Lilith Zakarian, Gayane Armaganova,

Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. The Monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals

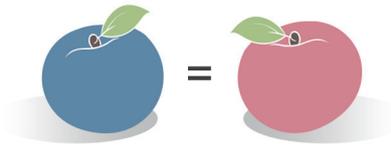
and the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, 2014.

Chapter 1

The impact of anti-gender sentiments on legal and normative frameworks



a. Gender Equality



◀ Gender inequality pervasive in Armenian society

The 2016 Global Gender Gap Report ranks Armenia at 102 out of 144 countries, having the worst performance among countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.³ There is widespread discrimination against women in the economic, political, social, and other spheres of Armenian society, as revealed by the 2015 Gender Barometer Survey.⁴ Deep-rooted beliefs about traditional family values drive gender stereotypes and enforce the notion that men should be dominant and women subservient and submissive.⁵ Justifications for inequality are frequently based on cultural and social norms that socialize men to be aggressive, powerful, unemotional, and controlling and women to be passive, nurturing, submissive, emotional, powerless, and dependent on men.⁶ The unequal power relationship between men and women is reinforced by a number of factors, including the Armenian schooling system and mass media.⁷

◀ Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

Armenia was an early adopter and signatory to international treaties and human rights norms dealing with gender.⁸ By the mid-2000s, there was already

much discourse on the need for a law on gender equality and increasing international pressure to tackle related issues.⁹ To show their support, the State put forth the 2011-2015 Republic of Armenia (RA) Gender Policy Strategic Action Plan and in 2013 adopted the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (formerly known as the Gender Equality Law). The law, which is firmly grounded in a number of United Nations, Council of Europe and European Union documents, aims to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men in politics, public administration, labor and employment, entrepreneurship, health care, and education, among other fields.¹⁰

Initially cooperative, the State accepted the recommendations submitted to them by civil society experts and were cordial toward them at the public hearing held in early 2013.¹¹ However, by the second public hearing in May 2013, amid conservative outcries and purposeful distortion, State officials, including members of the working group responsible for drafting the law,¹² called for the term “gender” to be excluded in legal documents and the name of the law changed, rather than work to raise awareness among the public about gender policies.¹³ Conservatives were especially outraged at the language used in Article 3 of the Law, which stated that gender is an “acquired, socially fixed behavior of different sexes”, believing that “acquired” was “code for homosexuality.”¹⁴

³WEF, The Global Gender Gap Report 2016, World Economic Forum, 2016.

⁴CGLS, Gender Barometer Survey: A Sociological Survey, Center for Gender and Leadership Studies, 2015.

⁵CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations’ Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Nona Shahnazaryan, Agyun Aslanova, and Edita Badasyan, Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus, Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation, 2016.

⁹Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017 and Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁰Jemma Hasratyan, Lilith Zakarian, Gayane Armaganova, Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. The Monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, 2014.

¹¹Anna Harutyunyan, Unearthing the Gender discourse in Armenia: from Hysteria to Constructive Dialogue, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017.

¹²Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹³Jemma Hasratyan, Lilith Zakarian, Gayane Armaganova, Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. The Monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, 2014.

¹⁴Marianna Grigoryan, Armenia: Fight against Gender-Equality Morphs into Fight Against EU, Eurasianet.org, October 11, 2013.

◀ Political developments surrounding the law

Civil society representatives largely agree that gender issues became highly politicized. For Gayane Abrahamyan of Article 3 Club, there was a clear link between the law and political developments. She notes, “It was during this time that earlier-established clubs created by Putin began to assert themselves and organize several conferences on the topic of Eurasian integration, targeting women’s rights NGOs and initiating a wave of distortion on the topic of European values.”¹⁵ Following the heightened rhetoric, conservative masses took to threatening activists and urging the public to “burn them and blow up their offices”.¹⁶

Experts who studied the phenomenon note that the law was used to “distract the public from more pressing problems (e.g. corruption), to offer an internal enemy from whom the authorities can claim that they protect the Armenian nation, and to distance people from the West and make the Eurasian Economic Union and association with Russia more desirable.”¹⁷ Arman Gharibyan of Human Rights Power adds, “The surreptitious undertones of the campaign were meant to soften government criticism, redirect the public’s anger and their discontent with life, and place the blame on the most vulnerable group in order to set State officials free from accountability.”¹⁸

◀ The impact of the anti-gender campaign on legal enforcement and the restriction of rights

The consequences of the anti-gender campaign are still being felt. Since 2014 the term “gender” has been unofficially banned and taken out of legal documents,¹⁹ and there is widespread agreement that the law has not been properly implemented. Though it defines several key terms and aims to prohibit gender discrimination while guaranteeing equality in several spheres,²⁰ the law does not create a mechanism for victims to assert their rights in the court room, thereby remaining largely declaratory in nature.

Gayane Abrahamyan of Article 3 Club, who investigated the anti-gender campaign as it unfolded, reflects: “On paper, we have a lot – more than our neighboring countries. But, in reality, there is absolutely no implementation.”²² She adds that the unofficial ban led to a lack of inclusivity, arguing that “‘equality between men and women’ and ‘gender equality’ don’t at all hold the same value.”²³ Given these developments, civil society has come to characterize the government’s engagement with gender issues as “formal, artificial, and non-constructive”²⁴ and “lacking in sincere discourse”.²⁵

Among the interviewed experts, most agreed that one of the main consequences of removing the term “gender” from the law and other legal documents was the negative impact it had on civil society. Roughly one third of the interviewees noted that the anti-gender backlash set up a domino-effect of outright hatred toward the LGBT community and those advocating for their rights, which further discredited them and threatened to manipulate their activism.

¹⁵Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, *The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia*, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

¹⁸Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁹Maria Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²⁰Jemma Hasratyan, Lillith Zakarian, Gayane

Armaganova, Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. *The Monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia*, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, 2014.

²¹Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria

Abrahamyan, *The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia*, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

²²Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017 and Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

²⁵Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

For Anna Harutyunyan of Open Society Foundations, the omission of the term paved the way for gender to “fall victim to conspiracy theories”.²⁶ To this day, the term “gender” is akin to a curse word and used to describe anything deemed sinful that undermines traditional Armenian values.²⁷ Professors have lobbied for the term to be kept out of curricula or posted on bulletins around State universities.²⁸ It has even been used in various contexts to downplay the importance of other, unrelated progressive issues brought to light by civil society.²⁹

The subsequent hysteria around the adoption of the law not only lent credence to the idea that using the term promoted sexual perversion and the destruction of traditional family values³⁰ but was also largely indicative of the many contradictions around gender policy, which the State had initially accepted without any controversy. The interviewed activists believe that the eruption over the terminology in the law showcased the authorities’ lack of awareness on the subject and trend of passing legislation to win political points and engaging in gender issues only when it offers a potential avenue to attract funds.

However, experts are divided on to what extent authorities were involved in direct manipulation. Some speculate that the State representatives themselves, along with the public at large, were manipulated when the wave of anti-gender rhetoric took hold,³¹ while others believe that the State was largely aware of the issues at hand and took purposeful steps to maintain their hold on power.³²

Civil society representatives largely agree that, if the state had chosen to educate the population on the term “gender” during the height of the 2013 anti-gender campaign – choosing a politics of moral engagement over a politics of avoidance – the backlash against human rights defenders and members of the LGBT community could have been stymied and the ripple effect on legislative reform largely prevented. In reflecting on the State’s lack of political will to change public perceptions around the term “gender”, Sevan Petrosyan of World Vision Armenia notes: “In one month, the government taught the public to wear seat belts – the same public that until this moment hasn’t learned to keep a queue. If they wanted to prevent this, they could have.”³³

²⁶Anna Harutyunyan, interview, 2017.

²⁷HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

²⁸Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁹Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

³⁰PINK, *Annual Review: Human Rights Situation of LGBT People in Armenia*, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO, 2013.

³¹Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017 and Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

³²Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017 and Sevan Petrosyan, interview, 2017.

³³Sevan Petrosyan, interview, 2017.

b. Anti-Discrimination



◀ Historical discrimination against the LGBT community

The LGBT community is among the most marginalized and least visible groups in Armenia, facing a high degree of intolerance and discrimination from the larger public. The 2011 Caucasus Barometer reveals that the vast majority of Armenians believe that homosexuality cannot be justified.³⁴ Another recent study found that 72.1% of respondents have negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals, with 18.6% surveyed reporting that a “non-traditional” sexual orientation is a disease, 27.4% using derogatory language to refer to them, and 12.7% believing that homosexuality is a result of the negative influence of Western countries.³⁵ The vast majority of queer people interviewed by Public Information and Need of Knowledge (PINK), a leading NGO working on the ground, reported having been victim or witness to hate crimes or hate-motivated incidents based on sexual orientation or gender identity.³⁶

Armenian legislation continues to thwart the rights of LGBT individuals. Armenia’s current non-discrimination laws do not work to combat gender discrimination and, as a result, rights violations continue to be commonplace.³⁷ According to the ILGA-Europe rating, legislation provides only 7.2% rights protection for LGBT individuals, ranking Armenia at 47 out of the 49 European countries examined.³⁸ Following the 2013

anti-gender campaign, hate speech against the LGBT community gained more ground and people began to be targeted on the streets in greater numbers.³⁹

◀ Need for a standalone law on discrimination

The RA Criminal Code does not provide a legislative ban on hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI); as such, acts committed against LGBT individuals for being LGBT are not regarded as circumstances aggravating crime and punishment.⁴⁰ In practice, this means that no effective remedies have been available to LGBT victims of battery, damage to property, or other crimes.⁴¹ According to experts, the fact that discrimination is not precisely defined and classified in domestic legislation leads to the low level rule of law and failure to protect individuals from discrimination.⁴² Moreover, the absence of a clear definition of discrimination, liability for discrimination, and burden of proof in cases of discrimination essentially works to “nullify the opportunity for legal protection against discrimination”.⁴³

With respect to hate speech, although Armenian law technically provides protection to minorities, a loophole in the legislation allows for sexual minorities to be left unprotected.⁴⁴ De facto, this works to promote hate

³⁴Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2011am/JUSHOMO/>, Caucasus Barometer, 2011.

³⁵PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016.

³⁶PINK, Hate Crimes and Other Hate Motivated Incidents against LGBT People in Armenia: From Theory to Reality, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO, 2016.

³⁷Alexandra Pittman, Exploring Women’s Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

³⁸IGLA Europe, Rainbow Country Ranking. European Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2017.

³⁹Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰PINK, Hate Crimes and Other Hate Motivated Incidents against LGBT People in Armenia: From Theory to Reality, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO, 2016.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ara Ghazaryan and Vahe Grigoryan, Is it expedient to adopt a separate ‘non-discrimination law’?, Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Government of the Netherlands, 2015.

⁴³PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016.

⁴⁴IWPR, IWPR Promotes Anti-Discrimination Debate in Armenia, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2015.

under the guise of freedom of speech. As a result of the existing gaps in Armenian legislation, LGBT individuals are not protected by law and continue to experience intimidation, threats, harassment, and rights violations as well as a lack of protection by public institutions, including law enforcement and the armed forces.⁴⁵ Interestingly, though unsurprisingly, the topic of same-sex marriage has been used as a tool to persuade officials that a standalone anti-discrimination law should not be passed, despite the fact that same-sex marriage is not on the policy agenda in Armenia.⁴⁶

The aforementioned issues exist despite the fact that the Armenian government has endorsed international treaties to outlaw discrimination on the basis of SOGI. In 1993 Armenia acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits State parties from discriminating against others based on a list of grounds that includes sex.⁴⁷ Later, in 2008, Armenia was the first country in the South Caucasus to endorse a United Nations statement outlawing discrimination on the basis of SOGI.⁴⁸ As a Council of Europe member, the State adopted a recommendation on combating discrimination that committed them to take concrete steps to fight hate crimes against the LGBT community that included investigating and documenting hate crimes against LGBT individuals and defining SOGI as an aggravating circumstance under the Republic of Armenia law, among other commitments.⁴⁹ In 2015 the state accepted the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations on the need for a standalone anti-discrimination law. Finally, it can be argued that Armenia is obligated to combat discrimination against

LGBT individuals as a signatory of the European Court of Human Rights.⁵⁰

Pressure from the international community to adopt a standalone anti-discrimination law stems primarily from the difficulty in proving indirect discrimination and other types of discrimination as well as the need to add substantive grounds for new rights and put into place new court and procedural rules.⁵¹ Though authorities believe that the present legislation is substantial enough to fight discrimination and that Armenia is not in a place to adopt a standalone law,⁵² the Ministry of Justice began drafting an anti-discrimination law in 2015, which they did to fulfill a precondition set by the EU for negotiating a visa-free regime.⁵³

Civil society representatives found that the process was not participatory and that the draft presented to them in early 2016 was flawed insofar as it did not provide appropriate mechanisms for preventing and combating discrimination and the establishment of an effective and independent national equality body.⁵⁴ The State has yet to officially publish this draft, and there is no foreseen timeline for the adoption of the law, despite the fact that it remains a condition for the EU Human Rights Budget Support Program. Such a law would, in effect, provide legal mechanisms to obtain a remedy for discrimination, given that the current anti-discrimination provisions in the various legislative codes are merely declaratory in nature and fail to provide a means for legal defense.⁵⁵

⁴⁵PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016.

⁴⁶Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁷Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

⁴⁸PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia.

Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016.

⁴⁹PINK, Hate Crimes and Other Hate Motivated Incidents against LGBT People in Armenia: From Theory to Reality, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO, 2016.

⁵⁰Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

⁵¹Ara Ghazaryan and Vahe Grigoryan, Is it expedient to adopt a separate 'non-discrimination law'?, Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Government of the Netherlands, 2015.

⁵²Gayane Hovakimyan, Arshak Gasparyan, and Marina Galstyan, Perceptions of Discrimination in Armenia from Experts' Perspectives, Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Government of the Netherlands, 2015.

⁵³Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

⁵⁴Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

⁵⁵Ara Ghazaryan and Vahe Grigoryan, Is it expedient to adopt a separate 'non-discrimination law'?, Eurasia Partnership Foundation and the Government of the Netherlands, 2015.

◀ The impact of regional political developments on legislation

In nearby Russia, a notable development occurred in 2013 as the standalone anti-discrimination law was being drafted, namely authorities passed a bill aimed at protecting minors against “homosexual propaganda”.⁵⁶ Following Russia’s lead, Armenian authorities briefly introduced a law aimed at fining individuals for promoting “non-traditional sexual relationships”, which they removed following international pressure. That same year, Armenia was in the process of drafting an anti-discrimination law, which initially included but later excluded discrimination based on SOGI from the definition of discrimination. Russia’s homophobic policymaking had ripple effects throughout the larger region. Similar attempts to pass discriminatory legislation were carried out in several post-Soviet countries, including Armenia.⁵⁷ In August 2013, the RA Police Department drafted amendments to the Code of Administrative Infringements that would impinge the rights of those found to be responsible for “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” and called for fines against anyone found to violate the code;⁵⁸ however, it did not define what was meant by non-traditional sexual relations or propaganda.⁵⁹ Though it did not pass, the draft addenda to the law has merely been postponed, and the issue may be raised on the agenda again in the future.⁶⁰

Importantly, the Russian “propaganda laws” not only set the stage for Armenia to crack down on LGBT rights but also legitimized violence against the community and arguably impacted the drafting of anti-discrimination legislation in the country. In its first iteration, prior to the anti-gay propaganda bill being introduced, the draft anti-discrimination law included SOGI within the

definition of discrimination; however, shortly thereafter, the later draft that was circulated excluded this language.⁶¹ It is unclear to what extent Russian influence played a role in this process, as evidence is lacking;⁶² however, it is likely that the two political developments are connected with one another, given Armenia’s tendency to follow Russia’s lead.⁶³

Despite the Anti-Discrimination Coalition’s resoluteness about the importance of such a clause,⁶⁴ the State took SOGI out of the definition in 2013, which civil society representatives speculate had to do with the State’s initial poor understanding of the term and later politicization of gender issues.⁶⁵ Roughly a fifth of the interviewed experts expressed their belief that, irregardless of the Russian legislation, the definition will ultimately not be inclusive of the LGBT community due to the highly homophobic stance of the government and the intolerance displayed by the public at large.

◀ Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity not recognized

In a private meeting with NGO representatives in early 2017, Deputy Minister of Justice Vigen Kocharyan openly asserted that the law would not include SOGI within the definition of discrimination, reasoning that the public and authorities were not willing to use the term “gender” nor ready to introduce such legislation.⁶⁶ For civil society representatives, this type of language shows that the State does not wish to engage meaningfully with the public or work to raise awareness on gender issues.⁶⁷

⁵⁶ Steve Rosenberg, Russian Duma passes law banning ‘gay propaganda’, BBC, June 11, 2013.

⁵⁷ Weronika Grzebalska, Why the war on “gender ideology” matters – and not just to feminists: Anti-Genderism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Democracy, Visegrad Insight, March 7, 2016.

⁵⁸ RFE/RL’s Armenian Service, Armenian Police Propose Gay ‘Propaganda’ Ban, Radio Free Europe/

Radio Liberty, August 7, 2013.

⁵⁹ Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

⁶³ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017 and Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

⁶⁴ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

⁶⁵ Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017 and Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017 and Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

Arman Sahakyan of New Generation finds problematic the fact that SOGI was not included as a minimum requirement within the package of recommendations given to the Ministry of Justice and that the EU does not have the authority to push for inclusion of SOGI.⁶⁸

The political manipulation of LGBT issues continues to this day. Notably, during the 2015 constitutional referendum, which proposed amendments to the constitution that would transform the country's semi-presidential system into a parliamentary republic, President Serzh Sargsyan's administration pushed for changes to the clause on marriage, defining a unity between a man and woman in an effort to prevent any legal recognition of same-sex couples and explicitly ban same-sex marriage.⁶⁹ Prior to that, the existing constitution did not have such a clause and, thus, may have given room for same-sex marriages to

be recognized in the future.⁷⁰ Irrespective of the existing legislation, there are a number of barriers that legislation, or the lack thereof, doesn't address, which continue to reinforce the discrimination that the LGBT community faces. Importantly, LGBT individuals are reluctant to file a complaint with law enforcement officials after being victim to a crime or discrimination, due to the lack of gender sensitivity of authorities as well as the fear of having their sexual orientation or gender identity revealed to family members as a method of coercion.⁷¹ Moreover, not only have police on a number of occasions delayed the processing of reports, they have also outwardly avoided finding legal solutions due to their own prejudices.⁷²

c. Domestic Violence



◀ Domestic violence recognized as a widespread societal issue

Domestic violence (DV) is a critical issue facing women in Armenia. A recent nationwide survey found that 22.4% and 45.9% of ever-partnered women report having been subjected to physical and psychological violence by a male intimate partner, respectively; 19.5% of everpartnered women report having been prohibited by an intimate partner from getting a job or earning money; and an alarming 7.6% of male respondents report having forced a women or girl to have sex with them.⁷³

The same survey reveals a cultural acceptance of violence against women, with over a third of respondents stating that women should tolerate violence in order to keep their families together, and nearly three quarters reporting their belief that intimate partner violence can be justified.⁷⁴ Disturbingly, there were 30 documented cases of femicide from 2010-2015,⁷⁵ and the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women members have noted at least 14 additional cases to date.

⁶⁸Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

⁶⁹Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹PINK, Hate Crimes and Other Hate Motivated Incidents against LGBT People in Armenia: From

Theory to Reality, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO, 2016.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Vladimir Osipov and Jina Sargizova, Men and Gender Equality in Armenia: Report on Sociological Survey

Findings, United Nations Population Fund, 2016.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ani Jilozian, Femicide in Armenia: A Silent Epidemic, Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, 2016.

Despite certain measures that have been taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice to combat DV, Armenia is falling short of its international obligations,⁷⁶ including those under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).⁷⁷ Since 2002 the Committee has been forthright about the need for a comprehensive approach to tackling DV and an effective national referral mechanism for survivors.⁷⁸ Despite international pressure, there has been little political will demonstrated at the highest policy-making level and few financial resources allocated for combating DV.⁷⁹

◀ Lack of legislation and policies to tackle domestic violence

At present, Armenia does not have a standalone law that would call special attention to and treatment of DV as a crime; the Republic of Armenia (RA) Criminal Code only criminalizes assault, failing to expressly recognize DV as criminal conduct. The existing criminal and administrative laws that prohibit intentional injury do not work in favor of victims of DV, who often withdraw their complaints when the abuser may be punished with a monetary fine that comes out of the family budget or imprisoned and unable to financially support the family.⁸⁰

The 2013 amendments to articles 138–142 of the RA Criminal Code have improved the regulation of sexual violence by constituting sexual violations as serious crimes, especially in the case of crimes perpetrated against minors, and have made subsequent punishment for perpetrators more stringent; however there is no explicit criminalization of marital rape and no protections for those in non-marital intimate

relationships.⁸¹ As such, cases of sexual violence are investigated as all other criminal cases, with no accent on gender sensitivity or the dynamics of DV, thus perpetuating historical gender discrimination.⁸² Victims are also commonly blamed for the assault or convicted of falsely reporting a crime.⁸³ As a result, victims do not report assaults out of fear of being criminally prosecuted themselves.

State programs and policies aimed at tackling violence continually exclude marginalized women, including women with disabilities, ethnic and sexual minorities, rural women, elderly women, sex workers, and others. The draft law on the prevention of DV excludes lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, sending the signal that they don't exist and don't require protection.⁸⁴

Additionally, there have not been any policies introduced to crack down on early and forced marriages of Yezidi girls, which is common and widespread.⁸⁵ There is no state policy to comprehensively address the violence sex workers experience in Armenia, and sex work remains punishable under the RA Administrative code.⁸⁶

Women with disabilities are not specified in policymaking, despite their increased risk of all forms of violence and barriers to receiving assistance from authorities.⁸⁷

In the 2011–2015 Strategic Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence, all marginalized groups are taken together, despite the fact that each have unique points of vulnerability that the State should take into consideration.⁸⁸

In addition to the lack of legislation and policies, there is poor implementation of action plans put forth by the State. An assessment of the 2011–2015 Gender Policy Strategic Action Plan and the Strategic Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence found that both plans

⁷⁶Arman Gharibyan, Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence in Armenia: National and International Legal Frameworks, Master's thesis, 2016.

⁷⁷CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations' Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

⁷⁸Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

⁷⁹Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

⁸⁰Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

⁸¹CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations' Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Anna Nikoghosyan, Disguised power in silence, norms, and domestic violence between women, Analyticon, February 2017.

⁸⁵CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non

Government Organizations' Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Zara Batoyan, interview, 2017.

⁸⁸CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations' Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

set goals that were too ambitious and unattainable given the institutional capacity.⁸⁹ Moreover, not only was there no dedicated funding to carry out the initiatives set forth in the action plan, there were also no given measurable indicators, precise timeframes, nor any delineation of the departments responsible for implementing activities, rendering it ineffective.⁹⁰ At present, the State is preparing the 2017–2021 Action Plan on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men of the RoA. Notably, now well into 2017, the new action plan, which will exclude the term “gender”, is still in the deliberation process and has yet to enter into effect.

The lack of institutional capacity to address DV continues to be a considerable barrier for women seeking safety and protection. Each year, thousands of women report being subjected to DV, and thousands more hide behind the shroud of stigma and shame or lack the ability to seek help. At present, there are no State-funded shelters for victims of DV and very few spaces available at NGO-run shelters.⁹¹ Specialized service providers working in the field, including social workers and medical personnel, are not trained on DV service provision.⁹² Many women turn to the police and the criminal justice system for safety, assistance, and justice but discover that these systems fail to protect them – or worse, re-victimize them.⁹³

◀ Gender stereotyping as legitimizing violence

Further reinforcing the systemic problems outlined above is gender stereotyping, which trickles down from the State to the public and fosters discriminatory approaches toward women. The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and DV (referred to as the Istanbul Convention) calls not

only for adequate legislative and regulatory frameworks to combat DV but also efforts to ensure prevention through public campaigns, advocacy, and educational initiatives.⁹⁴ Moreover, the 2011–2015 action plans called for awareness raising campaigns, though little in this regard has been carried out to date beyond small-scale educational workshops.⁹⁵ Civil society representatives believe that, given State representatives’ strong ties to the media and ability to create and broadcast campaigns with few resources, awareness raising on existing support services could have easily been carried out if there was political will.⁹⁶

On the contrary, insidious remarks and actions by government officials and public officials are widely covered by the media and seep into the mentality of the public, reinforcing gender stereotypes and violence and encouraging women to be subservient to men. An unfortunate reality, many authority figures are either not cognizant of or are strongly opposed to improving women’s rights. This lack of political will hampered by those in government encourages institutionalized sexism and an atmosphere of impunity and indifference. For instance, when former governor of the Syunik Region Surik Khachatryan slapped female entrepreneur Silva Hambardzumyan across the face during a public dispute at the Marriott Hotel in Yerevan, the RA Special Investigative Service concluded that his actions did not constitute battery and was not a criminally punishable offense, sending a signal that violence – even at the highest levels of power – are tolerable.⁹⁷

⁸⁹Jina Sargsova, Diana Ghazaryan, Lilit Zakaryan, Nvard Manasian, and Vladimir Osipov, Report on the Implementation of the 2011–2015 Gender Policy Strategic Program and the Strategic Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence, UNDP, UNFPA, United Nations Children’s Fund, 2015.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations’ Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

⁹⁴Vladimir Osipov and Jina Sargizova, Men and Gender Equality in Armenia: Report on Sociological Survey Findings, United Nations Population Fund, 2016.

⁹⁵Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017 and Anna Harutyunyan, interview, 2017.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷CEDAW Task Force Armenia, Armenia Non Government Organizations’ Shadow Report to CEDAW, 2016.

◀ New developments around domestic violence legislation

Since the early 2000s, a few NGOs, with support from transnational partners, have worked to raise awareness on DV, establish services for victims, and introduce legislation. A DV bill drafted by NGOs was rejected twice in 2009 and 2013. In January 2013 it was rejected on the grounds that it was found to be inappropriate and required that provisions be included in other legal acts. The Minister of Justice reported that protection orders went against a person's right to his own property.⁹⁸

In recent years, the EU announced that its 11-million euro Human Rights Budget Support Program would be contingent on passing DV legislation.⁹⁹ Though the State was originally supposed to pass the law by 2016 after signing the aforementioned Istanbul Convention, the adoption of the law was pushed back to 2018, and it remains unclear if and when the Convention will be signed.¹⁰⁰ Some experts believe that the Convention will continue to be put off for years to come.¹⁰¹

Civil society representatives remain critical of the European Union's approach on the matter and note their dissatisfaction with the seemingly hands-off policy.¹⁰² Hasmik Gevorgyan of the Women's Support Center rhetorically asks, "If the European Union didn't pressure the government to pass the Istanbul Convention before passing the law, how can we be sure that they will pressure them to pass the law?"¹⁰³

After an outcry from the same conservative masses that opposed the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the Ministry of Justice withdrew the DV bill and took it out of circulation, while promising to organize public hearings

to receive feedback from civil society.¹⁰⁴

Given the recent move to a parliamentary system, some experts believe that the law will not be adopted by the 2018 deadline.¹⁰⁵ Arman Gharibyan of Human Rights Power notes that "expensive laws are always postponed," since the State is more reluctant to stick to a timeline when they must expend a significant amount of human and financial resources, as will be the case with the DV law.¹⁰⁶

◀ The impact of anti-gender rhetoric on the adoption of domestic violence legislation

In similar fashion to the outcry around the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the same anti-gender actors attacked the DV draft law, suggesting that it would set the stage for same-sex marriage and allow children to be unlawfully taken from their homes.¹⁰⁷ Activists believe that similar rhetoric is used to stir up emotions about the DV draft law, not because people don't see DV as a societal issue, but rather because they see the EU backing the law as evidence that it is a foreign-born intrusion; thus, the law serves as yet another avenue to manipulate society during politically opportune times.¹⁰⁸ For Zaruhi Hovhannisyan of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, it was easy to manipulate the discourse, because "children are seen as the property of parents, not as citizens, so it is as if their property is being snatched away."¹⁰⁹ According to MP Karine Achemian, discussions about the DV law in parliament have taken on a similar tone to the discussions surrounding the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, insofar as it has "turned into a struggle between pro-Russian and pro-European forces."¹¹⁰

⁹⁸ Anna Barseghyan, Successful propaganda against the domestic violence law, *Analyticon*, February 2017.

⁹⁹ Armine Sahakyan, EU Is Giving Armenia its Best Chance Yet to Enact a Domestic-Abuse Law, *Huffington Post*, April 10, 2016

¹⁰⁰ Gayane Hovakimyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰² Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Gayane Abrahamyan, Armenia: Is Concern About Domestic Violence a Liberal Value?, *Eurasianet*, February 9, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017 and Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Nikoghosyan, Disguised power in silence, norms, and domestic violence between women, *Analyticon*, February 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017 and Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Gayane Abrahamyan, Armenia: Is Concern About Domestic Violence a Liberal Value?, *Eurasianet*, February 9, 2017.

Experts have tied this political development to the same actors waging an anti-gender war, noting: “The same Kremlin-sponsored groups started to actively campaign against the domestic violence prevention legislation, which directly impacted the law-making process, first by circulating fear and phobias within the domain of public discussions and then by postponing the adoption of the law for an indefinite time period.”¹¹¹ At the same time, certain State representatives have set out to debunk myths about the DV law perpetuated by conservative groups, disputing claims that the law would take children away from families,¹¹² something that was by and large missing in 2013 around the adoption of the gender equality law.¹¹³

◀ A rollback of victims’ rights in Russia and potential impacts on Armenia

Alarmingly, the Russian Parliament voted to pass amendments to the DV law that decriminalizes violence that does not cause serious medical harm, defined as requiring hospital treatment, and requires those filing a complaint to collect medical reports and evidence themselves.¹¹⁴ Though clearly a rollback of victims’ rights, the new amendments have been lauded as protecting the State from interfering in family affairs, where corporal punishment is viewed as a basic parental right.¹¹⁵ Interestingly, the rhetoric surrounding this decision is much like the rhetoric used by conservative parties in Armenia, who have blatantly projected misinformation that a DV law would equip the state to unlawfully remove children from their homes.

The new developments in Russia, in similar fashion to the gender equality and anti-discrimination laws, may have an impact on DV reform in Armenia, though experts have differing views on this subject. While

all the interviewed experts agree that the political developments are highly unpredictable, they are divided on whether the law will be impacted by anti-gender rhetoric; some believe that it will be adopted and by and large not impacted by smear campaigns, while others have expressed concern that hysteria will be incited that will compromise its adoption and implementation, potentially by further elongating the process or through the addition of new provisions that would offer fewer mechanisms and make the law declaratory in nature.

Independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan finds it challenging to predict what impact the Russian developments may have, as Armenia finds itself “in a balancing act between two powers”, though she believes the DV law will be adopted without much pushback unless there is a major political shift.¹¹⁶ Most agree that there will be considerably less backlash, owing to the fact that the EU budget support and conditionality is incentive enough to pass legislation and DV now carries less stigma as civil society has spent over a decade actively raising awareness about domestic abuse.

◀ Issues with the current domestic violence draft law

Several of the civil society representatives interviewed share concerns about the absence of meaningful civil society participation in the drafting process and the law failing to properly safeguard victims’ rights. Regarding the draft law itself, of great concern is the decision not to criminalize DV,¹¹⁷ which fails to send a strong signal to the public that violence will not be tolerated.¹¹⁸ Several civil society representatives interviewed voiced their concerns about the lack of acknowledgement of certain individuals at risk of being exposed to DV and a regulation included under protective orders, whereby the protective decision can be revoked by the Court

¹¹¹Zaruhi Hovhannisyanyan, Gender-based violence as an expression of the culture of violence and a manifestation of structural violence, Analyticon, February 2017. Note: the translation of the quote is the author’s.

¹¹²Gayane Abrahamyan, ‘Very Dangerous’: A New Law in

Armenia Aimed to Prevent Domestic Violence Is Scrapped For Being Too ‘European’, Codastory, February 12, 2017.

¹¹³Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

¹¹⁴Shaun Walker, Fury at Russian move to soften domestic violence law, Guardian, January 19, 2017.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

¹¹⁷Gayane Hovakimyan, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

¹¹⁸Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.



Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women members march against gender-based violence in Yerevan. (Photo taken from Asbarez.)

if the perpetrator and victim reconcile. The latter is especially alarming, since by definition DV victims are manipulated and controlled by their abusers, thereby leaving open the possibility that they will continue to be subjected to abuse under this provision. Taking the aforementioned into consideration, concerns are abound that the law will be largely declaratory. Hasmik Gevorgyan of the Women’s Support Center points out that the government may choose not to sign onto certain provisions of the Istanbul Convention – a move that is legal under international law.¹¹⁹ For Arman Gharibyan of Human Rights Power, it makes little difference if the law is victim-centered since little effort has been put forth to prevent DV and legal

actors are “not motivated by compassion or sincerity, nor have the appropriate knowledge or capacity to fulfill their commitments.”¹²⁰ Katalin Fábián of Lafayette College discusses this issue in an article published on the politics surrounding DV in post-Soviet Eurasia, noting: “Without substantial state financial support for crisis centers and law enforcement, and without a professional bureaucracy free of nepotism, ‘old boys’ networks,’ and other forms of corruption, laws against domestic violence, and the rights of women more generally, will remain mere pieces of paper in the international showroom of democracy and human rights.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

¹²⁰ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹²¹ Katalin Fábián, *Domestic Violence in Postcommunist States: Local Activism, National Policies, and Global Forces*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

d. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights



◀ The state of sexual education and related issues

In 2008 Armenia introduced the Healthy Lifestyles course in public schools for 8th–11th grade students. The course, which covers topics in general health and sexual education, largely focuses on HIV prevention.¹²² There are numerous issues with the course and the way it is taught: 1) topics in sexual and reproductive health and rights are taken together with other subjects, such as nutrition and exercise, all of which are covered in a 14-hour period, thus not allowing sufficient time for students to learn about sexual education; 2) there is no textbook or material given out to educate students and research has found that teachers do not follow the curriculum; 3) the course is not graded and students are not incentivized to take it seriously; 4) there is no monitoring and evaluation to measure how much students have gained from the course; and 5) physical education teachers mandated to teach the course lack the appropriate knowledge, exhibit harmful prejudices, and show little incentive to teach given that it is seen as additional unpaid work.¹²³

Given the lack of proper oversight, it is left to individual teachers to use the facilitator’s guide and teach the course as they see fit and, in many cases, the class is not taught whatsoever if the school administrator does not understand its importance.¹²⁴ This reflects a larger societal concern about speaking openly about topics like sexual education that are considered taboo.¹²⁵

The Ministry of Education recently commissioned a revision of the facilitator’s guide; however, they continue to dismiss the core issue regarding the lack of preparedness and sensitivity of teachers.¹²⁶

It is unsurprising, then, that long-held myths about sexual health and rights continue to be perpetuated. In a recent survey, the overwhelming majority (85.9%) of respondents agreed that a woman must remain a virgin until marriage, effectively denying women the right to control their bodies and sexuality.¹²⁷ In the same survey, nearly half of all male respondents reported not using condoms at all, while a little over a quarter used them occasionally in the twelve month preceding the survey, which is concerning considering that 30% of respondents reported having their latest sexual encounter with someone other than their partners, including a casual sex partner and commercial sex workers.¹²⁸

◀ Abortion and contraception dynamics

In a recent survey of ever-partnered women, nearly the same percentage of respondents (46.6%) reported that they had terminated a pregnancy at some point in their lives as those who reported having never terminated a pregnancy (45.8%).¹²⁹ Armenia has a liberal abortion law that it inherited from the Soviet Union, including abortion on request up to 12 weeks and 22 weeks of gestation under certain circumstances.

¹²²ASTRA, Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹²³Anush Poghosyan, Nina Harutyunyan, Lilit Grigoryan, Ani Jilozian, Shushan Kurkchyan, and Gohar Panajyan, An evaluation of the sexual education curriculum in

schools in the Republic of Armenia, 2013.

¹²⁴Anush Aleksanyan, interview, 2017.

¹²⁵Anush Poghosyan, interview, 2017.

¹²⁶Anush Aleksanyan, interview, 2017.

¹²⁷Vladimir Osipov and Jina Sargizova, Men and

Gender Equality in Armenia: Report on Sociological Survey Findings, United Nations Population Fund, 2016.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Ibid.

Under the Soviet Union, pro-natalist propaganda was used to instill fear in women concerning abortion.¹³⁰ However, abortion continued to be used, given that it was widely affordable, accessible, and available, whereas modern contraception was not readily available and there was widespread mistrust about certain contraceptives.¹³¹

Since independence, abortion remains the most widely used form of family planning due to its ease of access, affordability, low awareness on effective modern contraceptive methods, and social acceptance; in contrast, modern contraceptives are accessible but often not affordable, and the public adheres to widespread myths.¹³² This explains the lower than 20% contraceptive usage rate in the country, which contributes to the poor sexual and reproductive health of women, as rates of abortion remain high.¹³³ Moreover, marginalized women, such as women with disabilities, experience a double burden in obtaining sexual and reproductive health services, due to issues related to availability, accessibility, affordability, as well as discriminatory approaches that translate to poor treatment at medical centers.¹³⁴

The data on abortion is likely underestimated given the absence of good methodological data collection by the State and the difficulty in tracking out-of-hospital procedures, including medication abortion, which are known to be widespread.¹³⁵ The off-label use of misoprostol has been documented in countries where abortion is carried out clandestinely and the drug is available at pharmacies, often without a prescription.¹³⁶

Experts believe that the significant decline in reported abortions in Armenia over the last decade is due in part to the wide availability of misoprostol.¹³⁷ In August 2014 the over-the-counter sale of misoprostol was banned, though anecdotal evidence suggests that it is continuing to be sold without a prescription.¹³⁸ Given the absence of monitoring and evaluation, it is unclear to what extent the ban has curbed the practice and whether it constitutes a greater reduction of women's reproductive choices. Physicians are known to profit off of surgical abortion and, as such, are less incentivized to promote the use of medication abortion. Moreover, the absence of modern medical equipment in certain regions of Armenia may make surgical abortion a less safe option.¹³⁹ It is also important to note that, while combination medication abortion regimens are more effective than misoprostol alone, women in Armenia tend not to use such regimens, as they are significantly more costly, and anecdotal evidence suggests that women often seek surgical abortions due to medication abortion failure.

Currently, Armenia ranks as having the third highest level of birth masculinity observed in the world, with the Gegharkunik region in particular having the highest known rates as roughly 124 males are born per 100 females.¹⁴⁰ Sex-selective abortion (SSA) is perceived as normal in Armenian society and many view the phenomenon as preserving tradition.¹⁴¹ Numerous studies have provided evidence that women possess low decision-making power in this regard and are pressured by their husbands and mothers-in-law to abort female fetuses, which is linked to wider social norms that seek to control women's personal decisions about their bodies and sexuality and a prescribed higher relative value of male children.¹⁴²

¹³⁰Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

¹³¹Ani Jilozian and Victor Agadjanian, 2016, *Is Induced Abortion Really Declining in Armenia?*, *Studies in Family Planning*, 42(2):163-178.

¹³²*Ibid.*

¹³³ASTRA, *Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹³⁴Zara Batoyan, interview, 2017.

¹³⁵ASTRA, *Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹³⁶Susheela Singh, Lisa Remez, and Alyssa Tartaglione, 2010, *Methodologies for Estimating Abortion Incidence and Abortion-Related Morbidity: A Review*, New York: Guttmacher Institute; and Paris: International Union for the Scientific Study of Population.

¹³⁷Inna Sacci, Zaruhi Mkrtychyan, Nune Dolyan, Amy Armistad, 2008, *Availability and Affordability of Contraceptive Commodities in Pharmacies and Primary Healthcare Facilities in Armenia: Descriptive Study Report*, Project NOVA, United States Agency for International Development.

¹³⁸Marianna Grigoryan, *Armenia: At-Home Abortion Pills Readily Available, Despite Ban*, Eurasianet, September 4, 2014.

¹³⁹ASTRA, *Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹⁴⁰Christophe Guilmoto, *Sex Imbalances at Birth in Armenia: Demographic Evidence and Analysis*, United Nations Population Fund, 2013.

¹⁴¹Ani Jilozian and Victor Agadjanian, 2016, *Is Induced Abortion Really Declining in Armenia?*, *Studies in Family Planning*, 42(2):163-178.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*

◀ Increasing barriers to abortion access

The State, with support from the United Nations Population Fund, issued new provisions to the Law on Human Reproductive Health and Rights in August 2016, which civil society representatives believe was simply an easy way to prove to the international community and Armenian public that they were tackling an issue that has grave demographic consequences without engaging in widespread awareness raising – a much more resource-intensive action.¹⁴³ The new provisions explicitly prohibit SSA, without criminalization, impose a three-day waiting period on women seeking abortion and mandatory counseling, and increase administrative obligations on doctors, including imposing penalties for conducting SSA. Originally, there was talk of more extreme restrictive measures, including total abortion bans and a ban on ultrasounds until the 22nd gestational week; however, such plans were shut down after discussions with key decision-makers.¹⁴⁴

Civil society representatives are largely against the new legal restrictions, believing that while the law's stated purpose was to reduce the prevalence of SSA, its effect is primarily to restrict women's reproductive choices. Independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan finds problematic the "fine line between discussions on sex-selective abortion and the criticism on abortions in general."¹⁴⁵ Anush Poghosyan of Women's Resource Center believes that this was a move to clamp down on abortion more generally, as there is little logic behind adding a sentence that outwardly bans SSA when the law by default already outlaws abortions after the 12th week when the sex of the fetus can be visualized.¹⁴⁶

From education expert Nvard Manasian's perspective, the new provisions, which don't stem from a human

rights and feminist perspective, place extra burden on mothers and medical staff and fail to acknowledge that the phenomenon is "tied to the value of women and girls".¹⁴⁷ She adds that the State "played it safe" by not engaging in a pro-life versus pro-choice discussion and including civil society in dialogue around the new provisions.¹⁴⁸

According to the new provisions, abortion providers are required "to relay all the negative consequences of abortion" to the patient before allowing her to undergo the procedure.¹⁴⁹ It is notable that anti-abortion rhetoric has increased in recent years, as reflected in articles published in widely read media outlets.¹⁵⁰ Given the widespread anti-abortion rhetoric in recent years coming from top decision-makers and trickling down to the public, one could argue that de facto these depictions of abortion promote a certain view of how mandatory counseling by abortion providers should be carried out, despite the lack of direction and specificity in this regard. Moreover, several of the civil society representatives interviewed voiced their opinion that women who are intent on carrying out the procedure or are pressured by their intimate partners or family members will likely not be deterred by the three-day waiting period, given the entrenched mindset that sons are inherently more valuable than daughters. Thus, many have conjectured that the three-day waiting period and potentially biased counseling will work to manipulate women and exacerbate abortion stigma.

In recent months, the UNFPA noted a 1% reduction in SSA in the period of 2013–2016, from 114 to 112 males born for every 100 females, though the data has not yet been made available.¹⁵¹ Some civil society actors doubt the validity of the statistics,¹⁵² and others assert that the period was too short to establish whether the lower rates represent a significant reduction.¹⁵³

¹⁴³Anonymous, interview, 2017.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁴⁶Anush Poghosyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁴⁷Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹See the abortion law: <http://parliament.am/>

drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=38184. Note: the statement was translated into English by the author.

¹⁵⁰Marc Michael, Lawrence King, Liang Guo, Martin McKee, Erica Richardson, and David Stuckler, 2013, *The Mystery of Missing Female Children in the Caucasus: An Analysis of Sex Ratios by Birth Order*, *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 39(2):97–102.

¹⁵¹UNFPA Armenia, Press conference on new developments regarding prenatal sex selection in Armenia, United Nations Population Fund, February 23, 2017.

¹⁵²Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁵³Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

On the other hand, women's rights advocates believe that, though the provisions don't specifically target SSA directly, the overall abortion rate may decrease due to greater issues of accessibility that women will face.¹⁵⁴

Civil society representatives speculate that women from marginalized and impoverished communities will suffer the most dire consequences given their increased vulnerability, potentially setting up barriers to attaining safe abortion.¹⁵⁵

Given its fairly new adoption as well as the absence of proper monitoring, the consequences of the new provisions have yet to be documented. However, women's rights advocates agree that, rather than addressing the root causes of son preference, the approach heightens the risk of corruption and unsafe abortion, as it fails to tackle the root cause of SSA, namely harmful gender stereotypes and norms.¹⁵⁶

The introduction of barriers to access abortion is not surprising. Though largely not politicized until recent years, authorities have played on demographic concerns to drive anti-abortion rhetoric,¹⁵⁷ and there is growing abortion stigma¹⁵⁸ as well as "strong, vocal, and powerful" religious institutions pushing for abortion bans.¹⁵⁹

This lends further credence to the argument that physicians will choose an anti-abortion stance during counseling sessions mandated by the new provisions,¹⁶⁰ despite the fact that many physicians profit off of providing abortions. Regarding the fine on physicians, experts see this measure as declaratory in nature.

Given the lack of transparency in the Armenian context, activists largely believe that physicians can easily circumvent the issue and are unlikely to be found carrying out the procedure.

Experts see the new provisions as a slippery slope that is tied to transnational trends. The ASTRA Network documented restricted access to abortion in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, noting that "the general climate around the demographic crisis tends to feed the anti-choice agenda of many governments."¹⁶¹ Education expert Nvard Manasian asserts: "If there is no alternative discourse and no women's movement, and if we do not raise a new generation of women who are aware of their right to make decisions about their bodies, we are going to end up with no abortion rights."¹⁶²

Recent efforts in Russia to restrict abortion has been gaining ground, starting in 2011 with legislative restrictions requiring abortion providers to describe abortion as dangerous to a women's health¹⁶³ and later in 2015 with drafting a bill that introduced administrative fines for performing abortions outside state clinics and restrictions on health insurance coverage of abortions as well as proposed a ban on over-the-counter sales of emergency contraception and mandated forced ultrasounds before undergoing abortion.¹⁶⁴ It is unclear to what extent Russian policy has had a trickle-down effect, but given the trend of Russia exerting its influence to enact anti-gender legislation, it is probable that this may have impacted Armenia's push for legislative action to crack down on abortion.

¹⁵⁴Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁵⁵Nina Teggarty, How Armenia Is Trying to Stop Sex-Selective Abortions, News Deeply, April 7, 2017.

¹⁵⁶See the statement: <https://www.facebook.com/inMarmin/>. "The staff at the Women's Resource Center is concerned about the changes to the law, because we understand that the changes made to the law will make it more difficult to obtain an abortion and is an attempt to control abortion. Let us remember that in all counties where abortion is prohibited or there are obstacles regarding the law, the birth rate shows little growth and there is an increase in maternal

deaths as well as reproductive health conditions, since women begin to use illegal abortion services that have negative consequences... it is important to understand that laws prohibiting abortion cannot bring any changes until the society changes its view that men should dominate women, until they realize that women should have equal rights and opportunities to men in every field." Note that the statement was translated into English by the author.

¹⁵⁷ASTRA, Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹⁵⁸Ani Jilozian and Victor Agadjanian, 2016, Is Induced

Abortion Really Declining in Armenia?, Studies in Family Planning, 42(2):163-178.

¹⁵⁹Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁶⁰Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁶¹ASTRA, Status of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Central and Eastern Europe, ASTRA Network, 2014.

¹⁶²Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁶³Sophia Kishkovsky, Russia Enacts Law Opposing Abortion, New York Times, July 15, 2011.

¹⁶⁴Maria Fedorishina, Russian lawmakers move to tighten law on abortions, restrict morning-after pills, Russia Insider, June 5, 2015.

Chapter 2

Exacerbating factors and main threats to progress



It has been said that gender is a “symbolic glue” that unites conservatives who hold anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-communist, and anti-LGBT attitudes,¹⁶⁵ though experts disagree about the root causes of the phenomenon, attributing it to everything from political maneuvering to the ability “to unify around a seemingly simple ‘matter of the heart’” to growing dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies.¹⁶⁶ All across Europe, mass demonstrations have surfaced that have hindered the adoption of progressive laws and policies and set back human rights.¹⁶⁷ In the Armenian context, as elsewhere, the anti-gender campaign was highly politicized and provoked by ultra-conservative factions pushing their

own agendas for political gain. However, it would be simplistic to explain the sudden rise of anti-gender rhetoric as merely a political tool and scapegoat, as such sentiments are “framed by particular histories and social, political, economic and religious contexts”¹⁶⁸ and steeped in concerns about preserving national unity and sustaining the Armenian nation. The following analysis, based on a desk review and information provided by experts, is an attempt to cast a wider net to better understand the exacerbating factors that have contributed to this phenomenon and strategize ways in which to counter the growing anti-gender sentiment.



a. Lack of political will

As mentioned previously, State officials do little to engage and educate the public about gender equality and non-discrimination and, on the contrary, frequently deny the existence of gender issues, thus marginalizing those working to ensure women’s and LGBT rights. This hands-off State policy has lent itself to easy manipulation of the public when anti-gender discourse is brought to the forefront, especially when State representatives themselves benefit from the politicization of such discourse and use it to distract the public from ongoing political developments and realities.

¹⁶⁵Eszter Kováts and Maari Põim, Gender as symbolic glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

¹⁶⁶HBF, Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise?

Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

¹⁶⁷Weronika Grzebalsky, Why the war on “gender ideology” matters – and not just to feminists: Anti-Genderism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Democracy,

Visegrad Insight, March 7, 2016.

¹⁶⁸Catherine Baker, Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

b. Historical legacies



The fall of state socialism met with the Karabakh conflict, the “dark years”, and economic strife.¹⁶⁹ The shift to nation-building processes had a specific dynamic to it that would go on to structure the ways in which issues were politicized. Gender policies and the stubborn emphasis on traditional structures in many ways harks back to Armenia’s historical social structures under Soviet rule, when gender roles were defined by the State’s requirement that women be responsible for both productive and reproductive labor.¹⁷⁰ As academics Jo Laycock and Jeremy Johnson note:

‘Traditional’ gender structures endured for a variety of reasons, including local resistance to Soviet reforms, a lack of local knowledge, influence and resources on the part of local and central Soviets and the interventions of international organizations. In later years, evolving Soviet gender policies and a renewed emphasis on motherhood and the traditional family would articulate a different version of ‘traditional’, patriarchal social structures.¹⁷¹

The concept of feminism was opposed, as well, since it was connected to “a bourgeois and counter-revolutionary ideology.”¹⁷² Discussions about women’s issues were silenced and the emphasis placed instead on production, displacing a larger discourse on women’s liberation and equality.¹⁷³

The socialist state, in effect, did little to challenge existing gender norms; instead, the Soviet state cast itself as a dominating father figure¹⁷⁴ while seeking to dismantle family loyalties, which ultimately had the opposite effect of strengthening family ties.¹⁷⁵ Later, in the independence years, as men came to dominate the newly-available positions of authority in politics and business and privatized the country, “gendered aspects of rights and duties also came to be redefined;”¹⁷⁶ a nativist strategy took hold that constructed maternalist-focused roles for women.¹⁷⁷ According to Gayane Hovakimyan of the Ministry of Justice, the older generation still does not accept that Armenian society faces gender issues, because such discourse was by and large absent during the 70-year Soviet rule, when “equality was de jure but not de facto”.¹⁷⁸

In regards to LGBT issues, the Soviets idealized the heterosexual family model, which had the effect of further marginalizing sexual minorities. The public was told that “homosexuality was a product of the degradation of capitalistic society,”¹⁷⁹ fostering intolerance toward the LGBT community. The criminalization of male homosexuality drove LGBT individuals to hide their identities and legitimized hate speech against them.¹⁸⁰

¹⁶⁹Vrej Haroutounian, *Armenia: The Dark Years of Independence*, Hetq, September 1, 2015.

¹⁷⁰Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

¹⁷¹Ibid.

¹⁷²Armine Ishkanian, *En-Gendering Civil Society and Democracy-Building: The Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in Armenia*. *Social Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 4, 2007.

¹⁷³Armine Ishkanian, *Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, *Perspectives on Global*

Development and Technology, Vol 2, issue 3-4, 2003.

¹⁷⁴HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise?*

Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

¹⁷⁵Armine Ishkanian, *Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, Vol 2, issue 3-4, 2003.

¹⁷⁶Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

¹⁷⁷Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

¹⁷⁸Gayane Hovakimyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁷⁹PINK and CRRC-Armenia, *From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia*, Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016.

¹⁸⁰Nona Shahnazaryan, Ayygun Aslanova, and Edita Badasyan, *Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus*, Caucasus Edition - Journal of Conflict Transformation, 2016.

Armenia’s move to decriminalize homosexuality in 2003 – carried out in an effort to support Armenia’s membership into the Council of Europe¹⁸¹ – opened a floodgate, as what was once forbidden by law became legal and, thus, seen as a threat to society.¹⁸² Moreover, the entire legal framework of Armenia reflects that of Russia; long after Armenia gained independence, it was still using the Soviet criminal code.¹⁸³ Education expert Nvard Manasian sees the dialogue around LGBT issues as “introducing a major shock” to a society that, until recently, never had a vocabulary for sexual activity and looked at sex largely in terms of reproduction.¹⁸⁴

A byproduct of historical intolerance and discrimination, recent hate crimes against the LGBT community – exacerbated by the lack of accountability of public officials – has pushed the discourse into the public arena more than ever before. In 2012, for instance, the gay-friendly DIY Rock Pub in downtown Yerevan was firebombed by two brothers, who were detained for only a few hours before they were set free.¹⁸⁵ The fact that the bar owner was active in the LGBT community and participated in a Gay Pride Parade in Turkey set off a media frenzy, and hate speech was directed against LGBT individuals and human rights defenders alike.¹⁸⁶ A similar reaction followed the Eurovision contest¹⁸⁷ and diversity march organized by Women’s Resource Center and PINK Armenia that same year.¹⁸⁸

c. Perceived State interference into “family matters”



For decades prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, Armenians did not have the social, cultural, or legal lexicon to define certain phenomena like domestic violence. It was during the first years of independence that Armenia – a newly established republic fraught with economic impoverishment, war, and a devastating earthquake – began to face the issue. The larger narrative coming from the West, that what took place within the privacy of the home was in fact a State issue, was a largely foreign concept and was rejected

by conservatives who felt that institutions should not dictate to families how they should behave in their own homes.¹⁸⁹

At the same time, the harsh socio-economic conditions worked to further strengthen family ties. Maro Matosian of the Women’s Support Center describes how the family came to be perceived as “the last stronghold of a very violent, changed, and uprooted society.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸¹Ibid.

¹⁸²Vahan Bournazian, Mariam Osipyan, and Maria Abrahamyan, *The Human Rights Situation of LGBT Individuals in Armenia*, Society Without Violence NGO, 2016.

¹⁸³Gayane Hovakimyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁸⁴Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁸⁵Attacks on DIY: Situation around Yerevan rock bar

stirs debate over LGBT ‘rights and wrongs’, Armenia Now, May 16, 2012.

¹⁸⁶Weekly staff, *Hate Crime Targets Gay Friendly Bar in Yerevan, MPs Bail out Assaulters*, Armenian Weekly, May 15, 2012.

¹⁸⁷Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

¹⁸⁸Nareg Seferian, *A Good Day for Homophobia in*

Yerevan, Armenian Weekly, May 22, 2012.

¹⁸⁹HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

¹⁹⁰Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

For many, it was their only form of social protection¹⁹¹ and was seen as the basic unit for viability and self-preservation, assisting the nation to survive.¹⁹² Thus, Armenians perceive European involvement as infringing on “family matters”, and the feminist slogan “the personal is political” sounds alarms bells, because it suggests that women should give up their devotion to the family, which is seen as being “safe and constant in a changing and highly politicized and volatile world.”¹⁹³

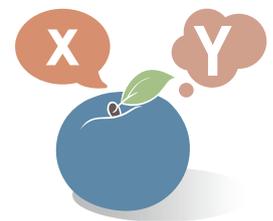
d. Semantic confusion

As mentioned previously, the poor understanding of the term “gender” and semantic confusion lent itself to easy manipulation in a conservative society largely unaware of what the terminology meant.¹⁹⁴ Interviewed experts agree that the State took issue with the term “gender” in legislation and later called for the removal of sexual orientation and gender identity in the draft anti-discrimination law, largely owing to their poor understanding of the terminology prior to drafting the bills.

Arman Gharibyan of Human Rights Power reflects on how the societal perception and understanding around the term “gender” and gender issues more broadly must have been foundationally weak, given how quickly the public took to the counter-campaign.¹⁹⁵

From the perspective of Vladimir Osipov of the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law, the concept of gender is “an epistemological trap with blurred boundaries”, since legal documents refer exclusively to the social roles of men and women and don’t use the more inclusive conceptualization.¹⁹⁶ The issue of gender being ambiguously defined is still something that is problematic in Armenian society. As Anna Harutyunyan of Open Society Foundations notes:

There is no common understanding of ‘gender’ and related terms and, what is more, there is overuse and at the same time misunderstanding of those, what leads to deflected discourse on gender equality and (re-)produces misinterpretations and further stereotypes.¹⁹⁷



¹⁹¹Armine Ishkanian, *Is the Personal Political? The Development of Armenia’s NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2003.

¹⁹²Armine Ishkanian, *En-Gendering Civil Society and Democracy-Building: The Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in Armenia*. *Social Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 4, pp. 488-525, 2007.

¹⁹³Armine Ishkanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia*, London, New York, Routledge, 2008.

¹⁹⁴Nona Shahnazaryan, Aygyun Aslanova, and Edita Badasyan, *Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus*, Caucasus Edition – *Journal of Conflict Transformation*, 2016.

¹⁹⁵Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

¹⁹⁶Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

¹⁹⁷Anna Harutyunyan, *Unearthing the Gender discourse in Armenia: from Hysteria to Constructive Dialogue*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017.

e. Growing discontent with “European values”



As Europeanization became synonymous with LGBT rights,¹⁹⁸ the EU became increasingly seen as a sort of cultural colonizer working to corrupt and suppress Armenian traditions and culture.¹⁹⁹ Armenian civil society’s alignment with international organizations and human rights frameworks became perceived as a misguided external influence and an attack on the Armenian family,²⁰⁰ which has had a distancing effect and led to the idea that activists are “disloyal enemies of the State,”²⁰¹ because their attitudes and perceptions on gender issues are in line with such values and diametrically opposed to the majority views and conservative-nationalist values held by Armenian society and the ruling Republican Party of Armenia.

At the same time, Armenia has had to demonstrate its alliance with the democratic principles being set by Europe, though many in government continue not to take the discourse about gender seriously and only enact legal reform when they are required to take effective measures.²⁰² This is a reflection of Armenia’s foreign policy, which entails securing positive relations with all regional actors while not necessarily sharing the same mentality or interests with them.²⁰³ Importantly,

Armenians’ increasingly vocal moral conservatism, which is used to disassociate themselves from “European values”, is also a reflection of the desire to show their uniqueness and distinction from the West and its path to liberalization. Russia has capitalized on this soft spot by showcasing itself as an alternative to Europe that has preserved Christian values, as something more compatible with Armenian identity.²⁰⁴

Maro Matosian of the Women’s Support Center, in reflecting on how this rhetoric has been used for political purposes, notes, “Every aspect of reapproachment with the European Union leads to a backlash on human rights issues, including gender issues.”²⁰⁵ Education expert Nvard Manasian asserts that the Russian-inspired discourse around gender issues would not have taken hold had Armenia not been under the influence of big politics and had “a strong European value-based, uncompromising presence”. This, taken together with the discomfort that European values are akin to various sexualities and same-sex unions – considered “anathema to our beliefs”²⁰⁶ – added fuel to the fire.²⁰⁷

¹⁹⁸Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*, 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

¹⁹⁹Ibid.

²⁰⁰Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

²⁰¹Richard Mole, *LGBT in CEE – A New Acceptance is Being*

Born from Migration, *Emerging Europe*, August 1, 2016.

²⁰²Vladimir Osipov, 2011, *Gender Equality in Armenia: A Perceived Need or Imposed Conditionality?*, *Haigazian Armenological Review*, 32, 209-227.

²⁰³Nelli Babayan and Natalia Shapovalova, Armenia: the Eastern Partnership’s unrequited suitor, FRIDE

Policy Brief, September 2011.

²⁰⁴Marlene Laruelle, *Russia as an anti-liberal European civilisation*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

²⁰⁵Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

f. Lack of a women's movement



In the Armenian context, a strong autonomous feminist movement has not yet fully emerged, although the seeds for such a movement have been sown.²⁰⁸

Civil society lacks the advocacy channels necessary to impact policymaking, whereas anti-gender groups have found more success in influencing gender legislation and policies due to their stronger connections with key decision makers and greater resources. The absence of political will to meet the needs of women and LGBT individuals, taken together with the aforementioned realities, creates a situation whereby advocates are spread thin trying to fulfill dual roles of providing services and pushing advocacy while working on a shoe-string budget.²⁰⁹

For Maro Matosian of the Women's Support Center, changes in societal perceptions must come from the bottom-up and become part of popular culture, together with top-down legislation; otherwise, legislation "imposes on a society that is not ready for it".²¹⁰ Vladimir Osipov of the Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Law believes that reducing civil society to NGOs stymies pro-bono citizen participation and that a women's movement can only be built when there is a presence of highly coordinated grassroots organizations.²¹¹ However, as it stands, there is not a critical mass of feminists willing to speak up and activists tend to be centralized in the capital.²¹²

As researcher Alexandra Pittman explains:

In the absence of feminism, women's rights work lacks a comprehensive political identity, or organizing principle, that effectively challenges

existing power structures and forms, those that limit and oppress women in diverse ways.

The civil society field, and women's rights specifically, is somewhat constrained by thin democratic conditions, a lack of radical claims, and a high concentration of power among a small number of groups with homogeneity in the actors representing women's rights positions. Over time, moderate voices have eclipsed the more radical claims being made.²¹³

The lack of basic protections leaves the burden of responsibility on NGOs offering services and safe spaces for women.²¹⁴ It can be argued that feminist NGOs taking on public services that are the duty of the State are weakening their advocacy efforts in pushing for the State to assume responsibility for those services.²¹⁵ Adding to the issue is the marginalization of women's and LGBT organizations and their often narrow focus. As more NGOs began providing services to their beneficiaries and becoming more professionalized, the discourse became more mainstreamed, as researcher Adriana Zaharijevi reflects:

Thus, while civil society had once been perceived as a rare space for enacting the alternative politics of solidarity and mobility, and as a relatively autonomous space for expressing feminist politics, by the mid-2010s it had become the channel for declaring what the adequate problems, approved topics and appropriate organizations were. This structuring of needs, but also knowledge, skills and available (legitimate and recommendable)

²⁰⁸Ibid.

²⁰⁹Alexandra Pittman, *Exploring Women's Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future*, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

²¹⁰Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²¹¹Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

²¹²Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴Alexandra Pittman, *Exploring Women's Rights and Feminist*

Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

²¹⁵Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.



Feminists participating in a demonstration for greater gender equality in Yerevan. (Photo by Svetlana Antonyan)

discourses through which those needs would become mainstreamed into governmental actions or public languages restrained the visibility of certain forms of political activism. Even more importantly, it removed the dimension of collectivity and wiped out the broadness of a movement.²¹⁶

Many also believe that the lack of a strong grassroots movement set the stage for opponents to attack initiatives as being foreign-funded and foreign-directed. For instance, efforts to combat violence against women were largely non-existent before the independence era.²¹⁷

Thus, Armenian civil society still has to reconcile the fact that the political and social agendas they have pursued are reflected in the types of projects donors are willing to support, and this has and will continue to lead to societal distrust. The absence of a grassroots movement pushing for recognition of the problem taken together with Western donors' proposed solutions to address the issue through State intervention and largely foreign concepts, such as hotlines and shelters, strengthened the notion that transnational actors "artificially imported and imposed" their own views.²¹⁸

²¹⁶Ibid.

²¹⁷Catalan Fábán, Naming Rights: Nation, Family, and Women's Rights in the Debates on Domestic Violence

in Contemporary Hungary, *Hungarian Studies Review*, Vol: XLI, Nos.1-2, 2014.

²¹⁸Armine Ishkanian, En-Gendering Civil Society and

Democracy-Building: The Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in Armenia. *Social Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 4, 2007.

g. Nationalistic ideology



The dominance of nationalistic ideology – largely based off of a tradition of patriarchy and intertwined with religious zeal and a collectivist mentality – is impeding the development of an alternative discourse around gender issues in Armenia. Gender and nationalism are largely intertwined and both are manifestations of power struggles. As lecturer Catherine Baker aptly puts it: “If narratives of national and ethnic identity determine who belongs to the nation, gender regimes intersect with these to determine how a person categorized as male or female is supposed to belong.”²¹⁹

The public discourse produced by the media, right-wing politicians, and Church officials represents Armenians as one homogenous group that supports the same value systems, whereas in reality there are a range of differing political and religious viewpoints. In Armenia, nationalism and religious zeal are intertwined to the extent that ethnic and religious belonging are considered to be equivalent; thus, those who diverge from the prescribed religious belief – despite the general lack of religiosity among the public – are thought to be betraying national identity and threatening national security.²²⁰

A tactic used globally by the conservative religious right and locally by the Armenian Apostolic Church, the discourse centers around maintaining control over sexuality and gender, linking women’s empowerment with the unraveling of the fabric of traditional Armenian families.²²¹ Moreover, there is the move to “construct those who are fighting for women’s rights or LGBT rights as anti-national and anti-family.”²²² Given the ethnic homogeneity of the Armenian population, women’s and minority rights are at the forefront of identity battles and, thus, easily manipulated to produce identity divisions.

Fear of demographic decline are often at the center of debates around nationalism and gender. LGBT individuals are blamed for the decreased birth rate and a “genocide of the Armenian nation.”²²³ In the early 2000s, a USAID-sponsored family planning program was misconstrued as a move to promote fewer births and framed as “a new type of genocide”.²²⁴ The focus on the country’s demographic state harks back to Soviet ideals of motherhood as an obligation for State sustainability and takes attention away from the real culprits for the low birth rate: high rates of poverty and emigration.

²¹⁹Catherine Baker, *Gender in twentieth-century eastern Europe and the USSR*. 1st ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

²²⁰Lusine Karamyan and Hovhannes Hovhannisyán, *Tolerance in Armenia Today: The Perspectives of Religious Tolerance*, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2012.

²²¹Alexandra Pittman, *Exploring Women’s Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future*, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

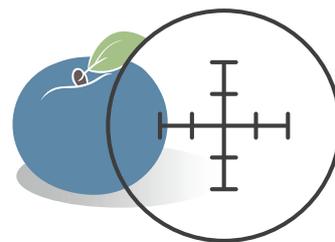
²²²Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

²²³Nona Shahnazaryan, Agyun Aslanova, and

Edita Badasyan, *Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus*, Caucasus Edition – *Journal of Conflict Transformation*, 2016.

²²⁴Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

h. Nation-Army concept



Armenia is considered one of the most heavily militarized countries in the world.²²⁵ During the 2016 April conflict, as during other times of conflict, the public largely steered away from sharing anti-war viewpoints at the expense of disrupting national security.²²⁶ In an article on the subject, Gayane Abrahamyan of Article 3 Club expresses her weariness about the “nation-army concept” promoted by Armenia’s Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan, which she believes “appears to potentially allow for the total mobilization of society in the service of national security.”²²⁷ Gohar Shahnazaryan of the Yerevan State University and Women’s Resource Center likens this to a “social-psychological experiment” whereby pro-Russian and pro-militarization narratives are pitted against pro-European rhetoric: Society members are fed the narrative that Armenia relies on Russia as its saving grace to prevent another outbreak of war, while also being told that imported European values are tearing the fabric of Armenia’s traditional values.²²⁸

Undoubtedly, the “gendered nature of the transition”²²⁹ has been exacerbated by unresolved conflict and survivalist ideology, as many extremists use the Karabakh struggle to stoke nationalism and assert that it is unpatriotic to jeopardize national unity given that the threat of an outbreak of war is always around.²³⁰ Gender issues, like many other social issues, are cast aside, while sweeping notions of preserving the nationhood have been catapulted into the limelight. On this subject, independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan writes:

The ‘nation-army’ rhetoric enshrines a union between a woman and man and implies the existence of marriage and children, of which boys are desired who will serve in the military, be sent to the frontline, and fill the pockets of government leaders like a meat grinder. But gay, bisexual, and queer women don’t fit into this militaristic strategy. They are not regarded as ‘soldier bearers for the nation’, as reproductive machinery. Therefore, their lives become unimportant, their experiences ignored, and the violence they endure silenced.²³¹

²²⁵Gayane Abrahamyan, Armenia: Nation-Army Plan Raises Concerns About Society’s Militarization, Eurasianet, June 14, 2017.

²²⁶Anna Zhamakochyan, Armenia in the trap of ‘national unity’, Open Democracy, February 7, 2017.

²²⁷Gayane Abrahamyan, Armenia: Nation-Army

Plan Raises Concerns About Society’s Militarization, Eurasianet, June 14, 2017.

²²⁸Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

²²⁹Armine Ishkanian, Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Perspectives on Global

Development and Technology, Vol 2, issue 3-4, 2003.

²³⁰Maria Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²³¹Anna Nikoghosyan, Disguised power in silence, norms, and domestic violence between women, Analyticon, February 2017. The translation is the author’s.

i. The backdrop of neoliberalism



The post-Soviet period has seen a declining role of the State as the general provider for its citizens and the rise of the liberal economic market that has generated significant social instability and increased unemployment. Political and economic problems, including high unemployment, poverty, emigration, corruption, and demographic declines, have persisted and exacerbated nationalistic sentiments and the survivalist mentality. The increasingly forthright nationalist trends in Armenia inhibit the inclusion of international human rights and gender issues in policy deliberations. For Anna Harutyunyan of Open Society Foundations, at the core of the issue lies “established masculine power”, which has lent itself to corruption;²³² she sees anti-gender rhetoric as reflective of larger anti-human rights, anti-democracy, and anti-truth discourse. In such a harsh environment, fights for reproductive justice, violence against women, and LGBT rights get pushed aside.

Women bear the brunt of the burden that neoliberal policies carry, as they are largely the ones caring for children, the disabled, and elderly in the absence of state safety nets.²³³ Women make up the majority of the formally unemployed, and as such are left out of the public sphere and have less of a political voice, thereby exacerbating the gender asymmetry and inequalities.²³⁴ The market system reinforces the dominant masculine culture that intensifies the discrimination LGBT individuals face, including poor health treatment and being subjected to violence. Although the anti-gender campaign in Armenia may not have had visible links to State-promoted neoliberalism, disillusionment with such policies may have been a contributing factor that allowed for anti-gender rhetoric to resonate with the public.²³⁵

²³²Anna Harutyunyan, interview, 2017.

²³³Armine Ishkanian, En-Gendering Civil Society and Democracy-Building: The Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in

Armenia. *Social Politics*, Vol. 14, Issue 4, pp. 488-525, 2007.

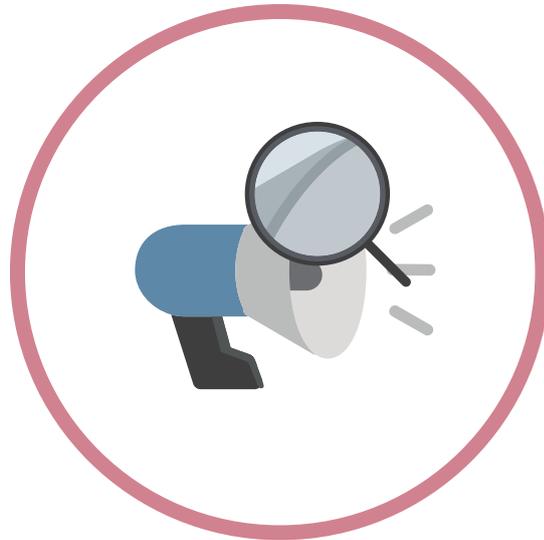
²³⁴Armine Ishkanian, Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in

Central Asia and the Caucasus, *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, Vol 2, issue 3-4, 2003.

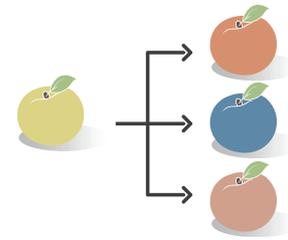
²³⁵Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

Chapter 3

An in-depth look at the anti-gender campaign



a. Mobilization strategies



Several of the main actors involved in spreading misinformation have direct ties with one another as well as government officials both in Armenia and Russia, and there are striking similarities among the anti-gender groups in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and other countries.²³⁶ Given that many actors have been found meeting one another at organized conferences, it is reasonable to assume that they have cooperated, shared knowledge and resources, and drawn heavily on each others' agendas.²³⁷ Whereas some tactics were adapted to local contexts when deemed necessary, the use of similar names for the parental committees and identical social media messages shows that many strategies were co-opted and brazenly copy-pasted. Given the local, national, and transnational ties, Elbieta Korolczuk of the Södertörn University offers, "We need to analyse and discuss the war on gender as a long-lasting transnational phenomenon, rather than as a recent and local one."²³⁸

A main feature of the 2013 anti-gender campaign in Armenia was the use of civic activism to galvanize the larger public to speak out against gender legislation and policies by "playing on the fear of losing the traditional family".²³⁹ Ordinary citizens, many of whom had been politically passive, took to the streets with protest signs and actively posted on the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, Stop-Gender Initiative, and Mek Azg Facebook pages, among others, and shared posts on social media.²⁴⁰ The right wing extremists did not merely share their own opinions but also targeted and threatened

independent activists via fabricated virtual accounts.²⁴¹ When gender issues are on the policy agenda and it is deemed politically opportune, these same actors reactivate their anti-gender mobilizations and post call-to-action messages to thwart policymaking. A recent example of this was the propaganda around the domestic violence draft law.²⁴²

Several civil society representatives believe that the campaign must be well mapped out and resourced, since the anti-gender actors hold positions of influence and connections with the State, which afford them wide accessibility in media and allow them to spread fear and misinformation. It is for this reason that Maro Matosian of the Women's Support Center describes the campaign as a "well-prepared propaganda machine", pointing out that the countries that were under attack in 2013, including Armenia, were striving to make greater alliances with the West.²⁴³ For Arman Sahakyan of New Generation, organizations that may not have direct links with one another still show solidarity through sharing each other's messages and projecting the same discourse, in effect mobilizing people and pushing forward their shared value systems.²⁴⁴ Perhaps, then, the concept of mobilization should be re-evaluated in the internet age, whereby ideologues can hinge on mass communication and messages can spiral out to wide audiences.

²³⁶Gohar Abrahamyan, Struggle against gender or anti-European propaganda?, Hetq.am, August 17, 2015.

²³⁷Eszter Kováts and Maari Pöim, Gender as symbolic glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

²³⁸HBF, Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern

Europe, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

²³⁹Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

²⁴⁰Anna Harutyunyan, Unearthing the Gender discourse in Armenia: from Hysteria to Constructive Dialogue, (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017).

²⁴¹PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia. (Public Information and Need of

Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016).

²⁴²Maro Matosian, Finally a domestic violence law will be introduced in Armenia's parliament, Asbarez, 2017.

²⁴³Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁴⁴Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence believes that it is highly likely that many actors were involved in creating and disseminating materials, since various media outlets were tapped simultaneously to create a large ripple effect.²⁴⁵ However, to what extent these actors worked together and how many people were involved remains largely unknown.

As such, it may be a stretch to constitute the anti-gender campaign as a movement, though it is worth noting the growing professionalism of the anti-gender groups, which range from small grassroots organizations to national and international NGOs and established political parties that have mobilized members of the Armenian church and journalists, among others.²⁴⁶

b. Key actors



A surveillance of the individuals responsible for orchestrating the anti-gender campaign reveals that several high-level right-wing populists and ultra-nationalist extremists had ties to Russian authorities, and members of the Armenian government, church, media, and ordinary citizens were galvanized and involved in spreading hateful messages.²⁴⁷ A common thread shared by the anti-gender actors is that they are well educated, hold jobs at institutions with a high standing, have strong reputations, and are propped up by the State.²⁴⁸ Several of the known institutions and actors are mentioned below. However, it is important to keep in mind that the list is not exhaustive, as much is kept hidden from the public. This has led some civil society representatives to believe that the known actors represent only the tip of the iceberg.²⁴⁹

◀ Russian authorities

Armenia finds itself in a tug-of-war with the East and West, as both the EU and Russia enforce their economic and geopolitical interests on the country. While relying on the EU as an economic trade partner, Armenia is also dependent on Russia for its financial well-being, conflict management, and security.²⁵⁰ In studying the phenomenon of transnational anti-gender movements and specifically those in the Eastern and Central European region, it is clear that Russian authorities were largely orchestrating the anti-gender campaign using political schemes to “shift attention from real social problems to fictional ones.”²⁵¹

Kremlin’s strategic interests in Armenia go beyond the political and economic spheres; in many ways domestic policy in Russia directly trickles down to Armenia.²⁵²

²⁴⁵Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

²⁴⁶HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

²⁴⁷Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017 and Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

²⁴⁸Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

²⁴⁹Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017 and Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

²⁵⁰Carlotta Weber, *Europe, Let’s Speak Out for LGBTI Rights in South Caucasus*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016.

²⁵¹Nona Shahnazaryan, Agyun Aslanova, and Edita Badasyan, *Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus*, Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation, 2016.

²⁵²Nikita Lobanov, *European Union Strategic Narrative Towards the Eastern Partnership Countries and the Russian Federation’s Escalation: Stop, Slow or Go?*, Centre for European Studies, 2016.

A case in point is the 2012 legislative amendments in Russia that stipulated that NGOs financed by the West be registered as “foreign agents”.²⁵³ Whereas Armenia did not follow suit, Russian Ambassador to Armenia Ivan Volinkin called for shutting down NGOs that “drive a wedge in Armenian-Russian relations”, which led extremists to launch a heinous smear campaign directed at NGOs, specifically targeting and threatening those supporting LGBT rights.²⁵⁴

Civil society representatives believe the Russian orchestration of the anti-gender campaign is clear-cut. When the hysteria was at its height, so-called experts from Russia gave a number of interviews to the Armenian media on the topic, and the campaign messaging was largely a direct copy-paste of Russian propaganda. In an article published by Hetq entitled “Struggle against gender or anti-European campaign?”, the author writes, “NGO representatives are of the opinion that the seemingly ideological debate has deeper roots that are tied to Russia and carried out by Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose plan it is to reinstate the former Soviet Union by presenting and distorting Western democratic values as perverse and targeting the family in particular to make an impact.”²⁵⁵ Maro Matosian of the Women’s Support Center asserts, “Though unable to categorically forbid human rights as in Soviet times, Russia has shrewdly found a more subtle and effective method in shaking the liberal democratic order by spreading alternative news, lies and fear.”²⁵⁶

◀ Anti-gender grassroots initiatives

In the spring of 2013, conservative parental committees modeled off the All-Russian Parental Resistance began to spring up in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia

that used similar names, slogans, and logos while advocating for family values and ideals.²⁵⁷ The Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, like the others, tactically exploits moral panic and wins public attention, while emphasizing the role of parents in restoring authorities and traditional values.²⁵⁸ Interestingly, there is no effort to cover up the fact that it is Russian propaganda. Much of what the Committee shares is taken directly from the All-Russian Parental Resistance and kept in the Russian language or translated into Armenian with Russian subtitles. Moreover, they continue to hold events. For instance, in December 2014, they organized a conference entitled “Threats to spiritual-national values and tools for resistance” with the stated mission to “assess the challenges and threats to the Armenian family and spiritual traditional values.”²⁵⁹

Along with the Pan-Armenian Parental Union, there are a number of other grassroots initiatives led by the same actors that spread anti-gender and anti-West propaganda.²⁶⁰ These include Stop G7, For Restoration and Sovereignty, Stop Gender Initiative, Mek Azg (One Nation), Yerevan Geopolitical Club, Luys Information and Analytical Center, and What? Where? When? Club, all of which have similar profiles. At least a few of the anti-gender actors involved with these grassroots initiatives have attended the American University of Armenia and/or worked for Western agencies, thus having a good handle on English and understanding NGO-speak, making them all the more knowledgeable and threatening.²⁶¹

Head of the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee Arman Boshyan worked as a journalist for Russian State officials for a number of years, became the spokesperson for the Yerevan Geopolitical Club, and is also active with the Luys Informational and Analytical Center.²⁶²

²⁵³Nona Shahnazaryan, Aygyun Aslanova, and Edita Badasyan, *Under the Rainbow Flags: LGBTI Rights in the South Caucasus*, Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation, 2016.

²⁵⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵⁵Gohar Abrahamyan, *Struggle against gender or anti-European propaganda?*, Hetq.am, August 17, 2015. The translation is the author’s.

²⁵⁶Maro Matosian, *Russia’s Dirty Play*, Asbarez, February 24, 2017.

²⁵⁷Gohar Abrahamyan, *Struggle against gender or anti-European propaganda?*, Hetq.am, August 17, 2015.

²⁵⁸See the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee’s website for examples: <http://hanun.am>.

²⁵⁹See: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1570863506478731/>. The translation is the author’s.

²⁶⁰Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report, Epress, December 24, 2016.

²⁶¹Sevan Petrosyan, interview, 2017.

²⁶²Anna Nikoghosyan, *In Armenia, gender is geopolitical*, Open Democracy, April 19, 2016.

He has taken part in press conferences for the All-Russian Parents' Resistance²⁶³ and has also lectured at the Russian government-funded Russian Scientific and Educational Center in Yerevan.²⁶⁴ Boshyan has stated to the Armenian press that it was simply a coincidence that the Committee was established at the height of the heated debates around gender, but an examination of his past and present activities show that he has clear political motivations.²⁶⁵ He has published several political articles with a pro-Russian slant, and he also reports news from Yerevan to Russia in the Russian language.²⁶⁶

Characterized as "Putin's right-hand man"²⁶⁷, Sergey Kurginyan is an ethnic Armenian living in Russia and founder of the communist patriotic movement Essence of Time, whose stated mission is to reinstate the USSR.²⁶⁸ Interestingly, Essence of Time plays a key supportive role for the All-Russian Parents' Resistance. Kurginyan visited Armenia in May 2013 during the height of the anti-gender campaign, giving interviews to Armenian media and announcing on air that Europe promotes same-sex marriage and incest.²⁶⁹ Interestingly, he was invited as an honorary speaker alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin at the first All Russian Parents' Resistance summit in 2013.²⁷⁰ Kurginyan's wife and chairperson of the All-Russian Parents' Resistance, Maria Mamikonyants, is also active and has been instrumental in advocating for the decriminalization of certain provisions to the Russian domestic violence law. She was quoted as saying that it was ridiculous to criminalize "ordinary educational slaps, which almost all families use to let children know their limits."²⁷¹

Aside from Boshyan and Kurginyan, a few other known anti-gender actors have also been largely involved in the campaign. Blogger Tigran Kocharyan, also known as Pigh (Elephant), is head of the What? Where? When? Club²⁷² and has over 12,500 followers on Facebook. He has used his star power to promote intolerance towards the LGBT community and advocate against the gender equality, anti-discrimination, and domestic violence laws.²⁷³ Hayk Nahapetyan leads the For Restoration and Sovereignty Initiative to promote the Eurasian Economic Union and the Kremlin.²⁷⁴ It is also believed that he is active in Stop G7, the Yerevan Geopolitical Club, and the Luys Information and Analytical Center.²⁷⁵ He has been outspoken against the domestic violence draft law and has presented the West as Armenia's military enemy, spreading misinformation about the use of biological weapons in Armenia by the US.²⁷⁶ Some believe that he has taken over as head of the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee.²⁷⁷ Khachik Stamboltsyan, the head of Christians Against People's Numeration NGO and the Mkhitarich Foundation, is active in the campaign and has been characterized as "a religious fanatic".²⁷⁸ He and others called for the removal of the term "gender" from legislation.²⁷⁹ In 2014, he disrupted a roundtable discussion on gender education held by Society Without Violence.²⁸⁰

◀ State authorities

Certain government officials, though likely not responsible for orchestrating the anti-gender campaign, have direct links with the anti-gender actors and support their campaigns.²⁸¹ Informal conversations between State and civil society representatives suggest that the State knew

²⁶³Ibid.

²⁶⁴Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²⁶⁵Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

²⁶⁶Ibid.

²⁶⁷Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

²⁶⁸See the Essence of Time Manifesto: http://eot.su/sites/default/files/manifest_eot_eng.pdf.

²⁶⁹Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

²⁷⁰Ibid.

²⁷¹Shaun Walker, Fury at Russian move to soften

domestic violence law, Guardian, January 19, 2017.

²⁷²Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report, Epress, December 24, 2016.

²⁷³Anna Muradyan, Storm Over "Gender" Word in Armenia, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, August 23, 2013.

²⁷⁴Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report, Epress, December 24, 2016.

²⁷⁵Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁷⁶Ibid.

²⁷⁷Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.8

²⁷⁸Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁷⁹Ibid.

²⁸⁰See Society Without Violence's official statement on the event: <http://www.swv.am/index.php/en/what-we-do/most-recent/2-uncategorised/810-official-statement-from-society-without-violence-ngo>.

²⁸¹Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²⁸²Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

the campaign was on its way as early as 2012.²⁸² Some experts speculate that the State must have been aware of the funds being funneled in by Russia to prop up the campaign.²⁸³ From civil society's perspective, it was clear that the anti-gender actors have close ties with government officials²⁸⁴ and use this "powerful positioning" to gain allies.²⁸⁵ For instance, head of the For Social Justice (HASAK) political party Arman Ghukasyan and members of his political party promote pro-Russian positions and have joined in on the anti-gender propaganda.²⁸⁶ A few high level officials have also been directly involved in spreading misinformation. Republic of Armenia Defense Minister Vigen Sargsyan was not only quoted as saying that gender merely came down to semantics and was a useless term, but it was found that individuals working under him were affiliated with the campaign.²⁸⁷

◀ Armenian Apostolic Church representatives

When the anti-gender campaign took full force, the interests of the anti-gender actors and the Armenian Apostolic Church coincided, as the Church had its own nationalistic agenda to uphold. Thus, it was an opportune time for certain church representatives to present their views on the importance of preserving families and Armenian traditions.²⁸⁸ During the campaign, several high-profile Church representatives gave interviews and published articles that criticized the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men as well as carried out protests, spreading propaganda and fear through their messaging.²⁸⁹

Civil society is fairly divided on the stance and potential

strength of the Church. Some have argued that its power is increasing, given the hegemonic culture and coordinated agendas of the State and the Church in recent years,²⁹⁰ whereas others insist that the Church will not see a renaissance anytime soon, owing to the fact that it lacks strong communication channels in order to mobilize support.²⁹¹ There are also those who insist that the vocalized support of top-level officials by default speaks on behalf of the Church as a whole,²⁹² whereas others believe that the opinions of a few vocal church representatives is not reflective of the institution as a whole.²⁹³

To what extent the Church's involvement in the anti-gender campaign is effective remains unclear; however, what is clear is that the message of a few influential priests has been coopted by the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee and others and used to further manipulate the public.²⁹⁴ Church officials have appeared at roundtable discussions with known extremists behind the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, who have leveraged the Church's message about the infringement on Armenian family values. They have published articles with hyperbolic statements such as, "No to the gender law! No to national decay! For the sake of Armenian family! For the sake of Armenian children! For the sake of our children!"²⁹⁵ Prior to the 2013 anti-gender campaign, the Church was involved in promoting hate speech and violence towards the LGBT community.²⁹⁶ For instance, several priests protested at the diversity march organized in 2012.²⁹⁷ The Church's activities in this regard are ongoing. Last February, an event was held in Etchmiadzin, the religious capital of Armenia, where influential actors came together to speak about the dangers of same-sex marriage, among other topics.²⁹⁸

²⁸³ Anonymous, interview, 2017.

²⁸⁴ Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²⁸⁵ Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁸⁶ Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report, Epress, December 24, 2016.

²⁸⁷ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

²⁸⁸ Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

²⁸⁹ Maro Matosian, Russia's Dirty Play, Asbarez, February 24, 2017.

²⁹⁰ Maro Matosian, interview, 2017 and Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

²⁹¹ Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

²⁹² Anonymous, interview, 2017.

²⁹³ Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

²⁹⁴ Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

²⁹⁵ Anna Harutyunyan, Unearthing the Gender

discourse in Armenia: from Hysteria to Constructive

Dialogue, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017.

²⁹⁶ PINK and CRRC-Armenia, From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia. (Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016).

²⁹⁷ Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

²⁹⁸ Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

◀ Media

Control of the media has proven to be an effective way for the State to promote patriarchal stereotypes and suppress women's and LGBT rights.²⁹⁹ At the height of the anti-gender campaign, several conservative news agencies invited the main players behind the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, Church representatives, and others to share their views on gender issues. When activists were invited to take part in the discussion, their voices were often quelled.³⁰⁰ Further elucidating ties to political processes, the rise of new political developments was met with a sudden activation by anti-gender groups taking to television, radio, and social media.³⁰¹

The representatives of Iravunk, a newspaper owned by an MP from Armenia's ruling Republican Party, which serves as a platform for the For Social Justice (HASAK) Party and Russian propagandists, perpetuated gender hysteria when the Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was adopted³⁰² and have published articles about the dangers of passing standalone laws on anti-discrimination and domestic violence.³⁰³ Arman Sahakyan of New Generation refers to Iravunk as "politicized media" and asserts that the newspaper purposefully distorted and conflated women's and LGBT issues for their political gain.³⁰⁴ In May 2014, Iravunk published an article titled "They serve the interests of international homosexual lobbying", which criticized gender policy and called for a blacklist of 60 known activists who have supported the LGBT cause.³⁰⁵ The article included a call-to-action, encouraging citizens not to communicate with the activists and for State officials not to hire them for public service jobs or fire them if they currently hold positions.³⁰⁶ Several of the activists reported the article as a hate crime, as it included their personal

information, but the Court rejected their claims.³⁰⁷ The same year, President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan awarded the Chairperson of Iravunk and Republic Party MP Hayk Babukhanyan with a medal of honor.³⁰⁸

Though journalists at Iravunk were among the most outspoken, other newspapers such as tert.am, news.am, and certain print media and radio were also involved in perpetuating misinformation.³⁰⁹ For instance, representatives of the Armenian branch of the Russian Sputnik radio station invited several of the aforementioned actors to give interviews on gender issues and speak out against the domestic violence draft law.³¹⁰

◀ Western pro-family organizations

A few civil society representatives suspect that Western pro-family organizations may have been involved in the anti-gender campaign.³¹¹ Nvard Margaryan of PINK points out that similar pro-family organizations to the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee have popped up in various contexts, such as France, Luxemburg, Lithuania, Estonia, Chechnia, Poland, and the United States, many of which don't have a strong connection to Russia.³¹² Though the propaganda in Armenia is most likely by and large Russian-influenced, it is also possible that grassroots organizations have links to groups such as the World Congress of Families, a United States-based coalition consisting of several international right wing groups that are vehemently opposed to reproductive, immigrant, and gay rights. In 2016 the World Congress of Families World Conference, dubbed "the world's biggest anti-gay symposium",³¹³ took place in Tbilisi, and participants outwardly supported Russian anti-LGBT propaganda and policies enacted in the region.³¹⁴

²⁹⁹ Charlotte Tapani, *Is Inclusion the Solution? A Power Analysis of Women's Organizations and Individual Women Activist's Political Participation in Yerevan, Armenia*, Master's thesis, 2016.

³⁰⁰ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² *Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report*, Epress, December 24, 2016.

³⁰³ See an example: <http://www.iravunk.com/news/18058>.

³⁰⁴ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³⁰⁵ Giorgi Lomsadze, *Armenia: Court Rules Tabloid Can Publish Gay Blacklist*, Eurasianet, October 31, 2014.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Anna Nikoghosyan, *In Armenia, gender is geopolitical*, Open Democracy, April 19, 2016.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³¹⁰ *Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report*, Epress, December 24, 2016.

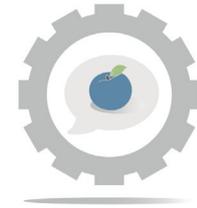
³¹¹ Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

³¹² Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

³¹³ Hatewatch Staff, *World Congress of Families gathering in Tbilisi showcases anti-LGBT rhetoric and conspiracy theories*, Southern Poverty Law Center, June 1, 2016.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

c. Messaging strategies



Several strategies have been employed to ensure successful messaging of the anti-gender campaign and reach a vast number of people. Highly educated and convincing orators like Boshyan use quasi-scientific and hyperbolic rhetoric to play on people's emotions.³¹⁵ Similar to anti-gender campaigns in the larger region, these actors elevate emotions over rational discourse and equate gender equality with pathologies and deviations in a successful effort to arouse fear.³¹⁶

Importantly, the messaging is clearly directed at certain segments of Armenian society. Maro Matosian of Women's Support Center reflects, "The campaign created tremendous fear that struck two important contingents of the population: one was the conservative, pro-religious group and its advocates, and the other were regular citizens who valued the so-called traditional Armenian family."³¹⁷ Emphasizing family values, leaders of the anti-gender campaign promote the idea that adopting laws on gender equality and domestic violence will lead to the destruction of national values and the traditional Armenian family.³¹⁸ There were even public statements put out calling for draft laws on gender equality, anti-discrimination, and domestic violence to be scrapped altogether.³¹⁹

Social media campaigns use fear-mongering tactics, featuring images of cross-dressing men and transgender couples and videos and articles that claim that European-inspired legislation would allow for incest

and pedophilia to be brought to Armenia.³²⁰ Moreover, they lead the public to believe that the adoption of a domestic violence law would lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage as well as allow officials to remove minors from their homes and place them in shelters, where they may be sexually exploited and adopted by same-sex couples.³²¹ Those driving the campaign play on citizens' fears of an encroaching West, choosing to isolate out "foreign agents and grant eaters" in an effort to discredit the work of activists on the ground.³²² In an article on the widespread use of a moralizing lexicon in the region, Cai Wilkinson of Deakin University notes:

Moral panics and the wider moral politics of which they are part are a stark reminder that the personal is political and the political is – or can rapidly become – intensely personal. As has already been demonstrated in the US and other countries in relation to debates over reproductive rights and sexual violence, as well as by events in Russia in relation to LGBT rights, the practices of moral politics are inherently divisive and dehumanising, costing people their lives and livelihoods and blaming them for their own victimisation.³²³

³¹⁵Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³¹⁶Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³¹⁷Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

³¹⁸Weronika Grzebalska, "Why the war on 'gender ideology' matters – and not just to feminists: Anti-Genderism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Democracy," *Visegrad Insight*, March 7, 2016.

³¹⁹Jemma Hasratyan, Lilith Zakarian, Gayane Armaganova, Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. "The Monitoring of the implementation of the

recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia," *Armenian Association of Women with University Education*, 2014.

³²⁰Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

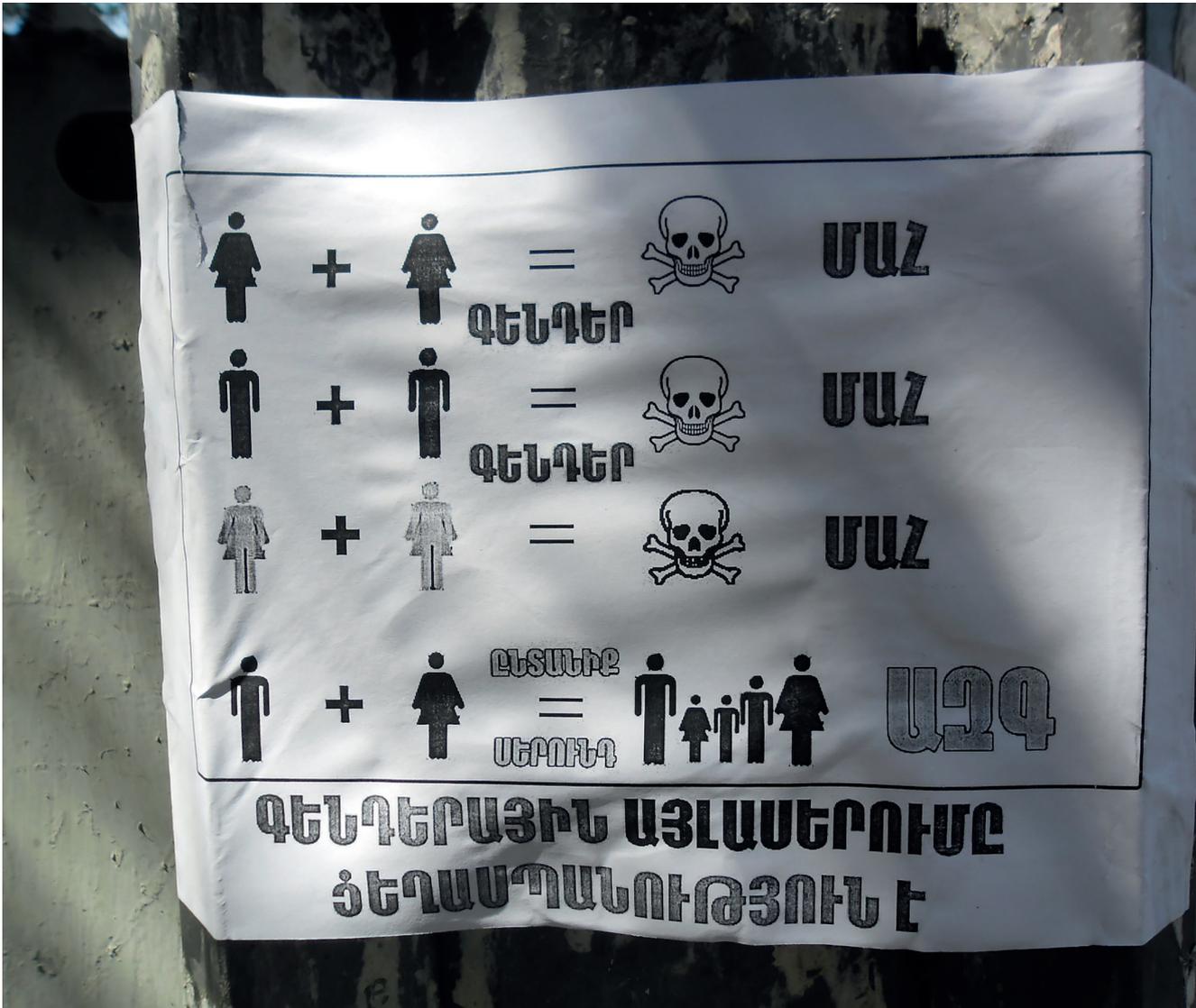
³²¹Marianna Grigoryan, "Armenia: Fight against Gender-Equality Morphs into Fight Against EU," *Eurasianet.org*, October 11, 2013.

³²²See a statement on the Pan-Armenian

Parental Committee Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/CnogakanKomite/posts/362424873945112?pnref=story>

NHC, Armenia: Between hope and distrust, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2014.

³²³Russia's Anti-Gay Laws: The Politics and Consequences of a Moral Panic, *The Disorder of Things*, June 23, 2013.



A sign posted in Yerevan by anti-gender actors that reads: "Gender = Death, Family = Nation, Gender pathology is genocide"

d. Funding mechanisms



The Pan-Armenian Parental Committee leaders have publicly stated that they engage in self-fundraising and don't rely on outside support.³²⁴ Whereas that may be true to an extent, there is evidence to suggest that they and others engaging in anti-gender campaign activities receive funding from Russian sources. An internal investigation by New Generation Humanitarian NGO uncovered evidence that civic activists received funding by the Kremlin to attend trainings abroad on combating European values.³²⁵ Given that these individuals also head organizations like the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, civil society representatives are convinced that the organizations are also funded by the Russian government.³²⁶ Noteworthy as well is the fact that the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee uses expensive advertising to boost their Facebook posts in an effort to reach thousands of more people³²⁷ and their representatives arrive at panel discussions with expensive audio and video equipment³²⁸ – both of which are testaments to how well-resourced the campaign is.

Most compellingly, the Union of Informed Citizens, a pro-Western think tank based in Yerevan, published an investigative report in late 2016, which uncovered that those involved in spreading misinformation about the domestic violence bill were receiving support from the Russian Embassy in Yerevan, Russian state Rosstrudnichestvo Fund, Russkiy Mir Fund, and the Gorchakov Fund tied to Russia's Ministry of Financial Affairs and were "heavily dependent on Russian money".³²⁹ Those receiving support included the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, Stop G7, Yerevan Geopolitical Club, HASAK Political Party, Luys Information and Analytical Center, For Restoration of Sovereignty, Iravunk newspaper, and Sputnik Armenia.³³⁰ On this matter, head of the Union of Informed Citizens Daniel Ioanisian stated, "This merely serves as a convenient pretext to boost anti-European sentiments within the wider public, as it is known that family and children remain the sensitive points of our society."³³¹

³²⁴Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

³²⁵Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³²⁶Ibid.

³²⁷Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³²⁸Gayane Abrahamyan, interview, 2017.

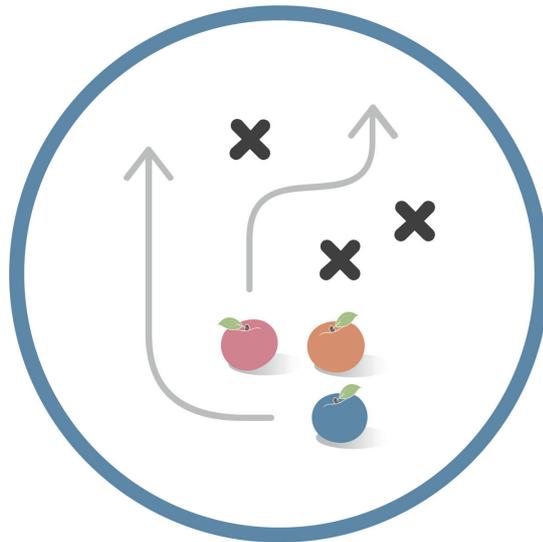
³²⁹Adoption of Domestic Violence Law in Armenia Opposed by Pro-Russian Groups: Report, Epress, December 24, 2016.

³³⁰Ibid.

³³¹Gayane Abrahamyan, 'Very Dangerous': A New Law in Armenia Aimed to Prevent Domestic Violence Is Scrapped For Being Too 'European', Coda Story, February 12, 2017.

Chapter 4

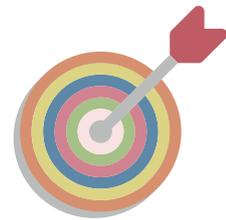
Lessons learned: What strategies can we harness to tackle anti-genderism in Armenia?



The following recommendations, based on desk analysis and expert interviews, are meant to offer a range of solutions to the issues stemming from local realities and conditions. Given that continued lobbying to push for greater top-down change is necessary in tandem with more grassroots efforts, the recommendations for women’s and LGBT organizations include both initiatives that can be undertaken and specific points of lobbying. Civil society has registered several victories over the last few years, overriding unfavorable government decisions and voicing mounting concerns.

As such, where appropriate, recommendations build off of successful initiatives carried out on the ground in an effort to multiply these positive experiences. The paper ends with recommendations for donor organizations to better support women’s and LGBT NGOs. Whereas the paper offers a road map, a more exhaustive list of recommendations would require feedback from a greater number of relevant actors and larger-scale data collection, which is beyond the scope of the present study.

a. Targeting specific segments of the population



◀ Parents

The anti-gender campaign successfully mobilized support from thousands of concerned parents via the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee. The turnout of parents in such large numbers at events and rallies and their presence on social media on a mass scale should inspire civil society to focus more on building strategic alliances with parents and promoting egalitarian family structures that mainstream nonviolent behavior and promote gender equality. Several civil society representatives believe that parents remain a fairly untapped resource and that they are often overburdened, as they must contend with a number of issues that they are ill-equipped to handle, owing to

having little assistance from the State and their local communities.³³² One example of a grassroots initiative that invites parents to take a formative role in the discussion on rights is the Women’s Resource Center program on sexual education entitled “Parents for Happy Children”. Within the context of this program, civil society representatives developed the first sexual education website in the Armenian language and conducted workshops with parents to educate them on sexual health and encourage them to speak openly and in a non-judgmental fashion with their children, emphasizing a positive approach to sexuality and sexual education.³³³

³³²Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017 and Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

³³³Anush Poghosyan, interview, 2017.

◀ Journalists

In the modern day, it has become crucial to employ more citizen journalism and explore creative ways of addressing gender issues by informing and mobilizing the general public around key issues.³³⁴ One of the primary reasons the anti-gender campaign took hold and became mainstream was the strong linkages that existed among anti-gender actors and those controlling the media. Leveraging mainstream media to spread anti-violence and pro-equality messaging would help to sensitize the general public and build a stronger base of advocates. Though resource-intensive, civil society must be able to secure greater air-time and employ social media more professionally to counter attacks as they occur in real time. They must also be able to make their criticisms heard more broadly. It is especially important to support independent media networks in a context where the majority of agencies have a conservative slant and are cautious about speaking out about controversial issues. One successful example to build on is the establishment of Article 3, an independent media network that offers space to civil society free-of-charge to organize press conferences and discussions on key issues that affect the public, including gender issues.

◀ Men

Targeted interventions to promote and consolidate gender equitable attitudes and behavior would help to build a network of male advocates for gender equality, something crucial in a predominantly masculine-driven, patriarchal society like Armenia. Moreover, greater inclusion of male advocates in efforts would offer more avenues to break down harmful gender norms and stereotypes, “dramatically improving the support base to tap into greater potential – intellectual, advocacy, social, and civic activism.”³³⁵ A successful example of an approach that is inclusive of men is the Coalition to

Stop Violence Against Women’s collaboration in 2016 with the Swedish Embassy to bring the documentary theatre performance *Seven on Tour* to Armenia, which featured high-profile men and women reading the narratives of seven powerful women who had experienced discrimination and violence.

◀ Youth

Given that anti-gender rhetoric is steeped in misunderstanding, several civil society representatives note the importance of developing critical mindedness among Armenia’s youth in order to encourage them to challenge the status quo and think critically about the news they are consuming.³³⁶ Anahit Simonyan of Women’s Resource Center believes that we have yet to work on a large-scale with youth, which is something conservatives have been able to do with greater success, and that more work should be carried out to enhance young women’s leadership through mentorship, both through non-formal and formal engagement.³³⁷ Successful examples to build off of include Society Without Violence’s model of developing educational programs for youth in Armenia’s regions and the development of Yerevan State University’s Gender and Leadership Program.

◀ The Church

A few of the interviewed civil society representatives shared their belief that it would be useful to work more with the Church to dispel myths around gender issues, specifically with regards to the issue of violence against women. Though recognizing the patriarchal structure of the Church, education expert Nvard Manasian believes that the potential exists to use the institution of marriage as an entry point for dialogue with couples to encourage non-violent behavior.³³⁸ She

³³⁴Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

³³⁵Ibid.

³³⁶Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

³³⁷Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

³³⁸Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

advocates taking an approach that would “complement the Church’s vocabulary and place the language of human rights on top of that”, adding that activists “do not have the luxury of letting the Church go loose.”³³⁹ Vahan Bournazian of the Center for European Studies at Yerevan State University offers, “Instead of rejecting the religious framework, engage in it. Inclusion of all individuals is Christian, and exclusion of any individual is anti-Christian.”³⁴⁰

◀ State officials

Following the anti-gender campaign, some civil society representatives have recognized the need to educate and engage State officials on various gender issues, especially given the upcoming expansion of the gender quota system, though they find it challenging to isolate out those who may support their cause.³⁴¹ Armine Ishkanian of the London School of Economics expresses the importance of finding allies in the government, asserting:

[State officials] are incredibly risk-averse and afraid of going out on a limb. You have to give them a safe platform, which they will feel more comfortable joining. And that is possible to do... but it takes consistent pressure over the years. Maybe it’s not going to be the minister, maybe it’s going to be a lower-level person, but it’s about getting them on board and finding a way of communicating with them.³⁴²

To some extent, activists have worked with politicians, but alliances are few and far between. For instance, over the last few years, New Generation has conducted workshops with State representatives on discrimination, torture, and gender identity, among other topics,³⁴³ and the Women’s Support Center recently carried out comprehensive domestic violence trainings with a few

hundred service providers, many of whom represent State bodies.³⁴⁴ Potential opportunities exist to reach out to more politicians following the recent move to a parliamentary system, now that two new political parties have emerged that are more progressive in their approach.

◀ Human rights community

Civil society representatives note that the broader human rights community has not shown interest in standing in solidarity with them on issues concerning women’s and LGBT rights,³⁴⁵ one reason being the inclusive use of the term “gender,”³⁴⁶ and that they have even on occasion made homophobic remarks during protests.³⁴⁷ Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence believes that activists should reach out more to children’s rights, social work, and disability organizations, noting, “I can’t say they’re open-minded, but just because they are not joining us today does not mean they never will.”³⁴⁸ Zaruhi Hovhannisyan of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women adds, “We refuse to work with them on the basis that they’re not gender sensitive, but how are they ever going to become gender sensitive if we don’t work with them?”³⁴⁹

◀ Unlikely advocates

Much of the opposition trickles down from the top-down, but the anti-gender campaign showed the importance of bottom-up, grassroots efforts to engage a wide variety of stakeholders. Civil society representatives believe that they need to do a better job of reaching out to communities where outreach has not been carried out and inspiring them to engage in the burgeoning feminist movement.³⁵⁰

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Vahan Bournazian, interview, 2017.

³⁴¹ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³⁴² Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

³⁴³ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³⁴⁴ Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

³⁴⁵ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

³⁴⁶ Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

³⁴⁷ Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

³⁴⁸ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

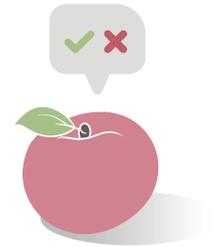
³⁴⁹ Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁰ Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

In an effort to combat anti-gender rhetoric, some activists suggest more engagement with those active in the anti-gender efforts. Hasmik Gevorgyan of the Women’s Support Center opines: “As a part of a greater strategy, we could have reached out to specific

individuals from the Pan-Armenian Parental Committee – not the main actors, but maybe the Church representatives who spoke out against the gender equality law – and had an open discussion with them, but we didn’t do this.”³⁵¹

b. Choosing the right message



◀ Balancing human rights and family values rhetoric

Civil society representatives are largely aware that human rights is too abstract a concept for many to comprehend and that there is a serious gap in how the general public, including representatives in all branches of government, understands national and international legal instruments for women’s and LGBT rights and the concept of discrimination.³⁵² As Arman Gharibyan of Human Rights Power aptly notes, “We say things like ‘in Geneva the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention...’, but people don’t listen to the continuation of what you have to say, because you’ve just used three unfamiliar words.”³⁵³

Some civil society representatives, though they understand that the human rights rhetoric often falls on deaf ears, still hold strongly to the belief that it is necessary to speak in such terms.³⁵⁴ For some, this belief stems from the fact that society at large is not ready to emotionally connect to such values as the acceptance of same-sex unions.³⁵⁵

Thus, to them, it would be more effective to emphasize violations of human rights to which people can more easily relate in a language they can relate to.³⁵⁶ According to Vahan Bournazian of the Center for European Studies at Yerevan State University, “People lose faith in human rights when they see that it is politicized and often used in this political tug-of-war game between states.”³⁵⁷ He warns that civil society is at greater risk of marginalization when it doesn’t go beyond engaging in recording human rights abuses, given its lack of control over the media.³⁵⁸

In some instances, speaking about human rights in contexts where those rights are outwardly violated may even have the opposite effect. Independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan warns that the discourse may backfire if context is not given to those unfamiliar with the language of human rights, noting: “If you don’t explain what being transgender is, how gender binaries are formed, if you don’t reflect or question things but

³⁵¹ Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵² Jemma Hasratyan, Liliith Zakarian, Gayane Armaganova, Tamara Hovnatanyan, and Gayane Meroyan. The Monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals and the UN Convention

on the Political Rights of Women in the Republic of Armenia, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, 2014.

³⁵³ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁴ Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017 and Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁵ Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁶ Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017 and Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁷ Vahan Bournazian, interview, 2017.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

instead talk about human rights – that transgender individuals are victims of violence and have equal rights – it translates into people hating them more, because if it's not understood, people question why they should have equal rights to them.”³⁵⁹ Zaruhi Hovhannisyan of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women goes a step further to challenge:

We talk about human rights, but we have an illegitimate government. We are told to fight for our rights in court, but we see how our system and politicians work, how they sign international agreements but don't carry out their obligations. Our society doesn't believe in it. We're taking the experience of other countries and attempting to use it here, but it doesn't work that way.

Taking the aforementioned into consideration, it can be argued that improving society's understanding of human rights and demanding legal protections alone is insufficient in creating greater equality for marginalized communities, as the Armenian public doesn't attribute importance to human rights as it does to other values.³⁶⁰ Perhaps, given the importance of family values in Armenian society, it may be pertinent to consider reclaiming the concept of family in progressive terms.

◀ Personalizing messages to speak to emotions

Activists believe that more work should be carried out to present gender equality, feminism, and LGBT issues through a personalized lens. For instance, given that survey data shows a small proportion of the population noted having encountered LGBT individuals and that those with personal connections are “incomparably more tolerant than those who have never had contact with LGBT persons,”³⁶¹ it is worthwhile to consider carrying out more initiatives that humanize experiences and build tolerance. The Anti-Discrimination Coalition

members are working to change the narrative with personal storytelling.³⁶² For instance, PINK Armenia's 2016 documentary film “Listen to me” showcased the narratives of ten LGBT individuals living in Armenia and their experiences with family, friends, and society at large. A moving tribute, it was shown at several venues in Armenia as well as in the Diaspora. Another positive example was the way in which the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women mobilized several thousand citizens in 2013 to sign a petition to pass a domestic violence law using simple, personal narratives to captivate people's attention.³⁶³

◀ Hybrid approaches: finding a middle ground

The interviewed experts emphasized the importance of having a spectrum of actors, from strongly radical to moderate in approach, to create different spaces and narratives. Among the interviewees, even those who hold strongly to the belief that the feminist discourse should not be compromised, accept that such discourse is too far away from mainstream discourse to be acceptable. Some advocate moving away from feminist discourses at strategic times to engage the wider public, but also express some level of discomfort with using messaging that appeals to the masses. For instance, among civil society representatives who work on the issue of violence, there is some level of disagreement on how to speak about violence more broadly and inclusively. Several civil society representatives express their belief that activists need to move beyond speaking only about intimate partner violence and focus as well on child abuse, parental abuse by children, and elderly abuse, among other forms of violence.³⁶⁴ Others insist that, whereas it's important to speak about secondary victims and others impacted by violence, it takes away from the feminist perspective and diminishes the understanding of the woman as a victim if one speaks too broadly about the issue.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁹ Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

³⁶⁰ PINK and CRRCA-Armenia, *From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia*. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus

Research Resource Center – Armenia Foundation, 2016.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

³⁶³ Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

³⁶⁴ Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017 and Maria Abrahamyan, interview, 2017

³⁶⁵ Maro Matosian, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

Civil society representatives vary in their strategic approaches. Much like what has been termed “grey emancipation”,³⁶⁶ some have called for an approach that challenges societal norms through more moderate language. While advocating for strategic approaches that would vacillate between human rights and family values rhetoric, Gohar Shahnazaryan of the Yerevan State University and Women’s Resource Center warns against the use of “dogmatic approaches” and asserts that civil society’s messaging to date has been counterproductive at times.³⁶⁷ Maro Matosian of the Women’s Support Center agrees, expressing her belief that radical discourse has “created damaging backlash in a society that is not ready.”³⁶⁸ Contrastingly, Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence promotes a “results-based, target-sensitive, and holistic approach”, insisting that, while compromises should be made depending on the context, radical discourse still has its place.³⁶⁹

An approach that builds support for gender issues by connecting issues to widely embedded social problems that impact everyday citizens can be helpful in reaching a larger audience.³⁷⁰ Women’s mobilizations around the world have often employed this hybrid approach, for instance, choosing a gender neutral language and child-centered focus when speaking about domestic violence.³⁷¹ Education expert Nvard Manasian calls for “embracing, not shunning” women from a various walks of life with differing opinions and not disregarding dialogue around motherhood as a rallying point to include women into the movement. Elbieta Korolczuk of Södertörn University adds: “There is a need for some new form of political maternalism as part of future feminist strategies, and also for a community-based approach to promoting gender-equality education and LGBT rights.”³⁷² At the same time, Charlotte Tapani

of Lund University argues that civil society must be strategic about such a move:

By reframing the issue of maternity leave to an issue of demographic decline, the larger agenda which the issue is rooted in; the rights, liberation and emancipation of women, which is ultimately what the women’s organizations and individual women activists are working for, is lost. However, if the topic is too controversial, there is a risk of violence and imprisonment which is an effective way to silence political demands.³⁷³

◀ Tackling semantics

Language and the construction of norms and belief systems are largely intertwined. Taking into account that the term “gender” is largely misunderstood and misused, there are two avenues that perhaps should be taken into consideration: 1) more awareness raising among the public to counter wrongful claims and relate gender to specific issues that matter to the public, and 2) countering the political challenge posed by the concept of gender as a technical category by choosing to use a new language that is more digestible for the larger public.³⁷⁴

Activists must continue to debunk the perpetuated myths around gender as well as educate State representatives and lobby for certain key actors to take an active stance. However, given the tendency in the public discourse to resist everything that concerns gender and the hands-off position of the State on this matter, the former tactic alone may be insufficient.³⁷⁵ Hybrid approaches that use the term “gender” as well as more moderate counter-language in different public awareness initiatives to educate the mainstream public

³⁶⁶HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

³⁶⁷Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

³⁶⁸Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

³⁶⁹Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

³⁷⁰Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

³⁷¹Catalan Fábán, *Naming Rights: Nation, Family, and*

Women’s Rights in the Debates on Domestic Violence in Contemporary Hungary, *Hungarian Studies Review*, Vol: XLI, Nos.1-2, 2014.

³⁷²HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

³⁷³Charlotte Tapani, *Is Inclusion the Solution? A Power Analysis of Women’s Organizations and Individual*

Women Activist’s Political Participation in Yerevan, Armenia, Master’s thesis, 2016.

³⁷⁴Eszter Kováts and Maari Põim, *Gender as symbolic glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

³⁷⁵Vahan Bournazian, interview, 2017.

will likely be more successful than taking only one of those messaging strategies alone. On this issue, Vahan Bournazian of the Center for European Studies at Yerevan State University expresses:

We don't talk to people; we talk at them. We're not being understood, because we're cutting and pasting instead of talking from an Armenian perspective, which makes it easier for others to say that we're using foreign ideas... How are we going to achieve something concrete for this woman in this village? Do I need to use the term "gender"?... Is the war about the term or is the war about what we're supposed to achieve with the term?"³⁷⁶

Civil society messaging about gender issues tends to isolate culture as a barrier to democratization, which according to Armine Ishkanian of the London School of Economics is "a flawed and myopic strategy that ignores the broader political, social and economic factors" and depicts culture as unaffected by local and global realities.³⁷⁷ Education expert Nvard Manasian laments that activists have had trouble dispelling myths, because when they speak about violence as not being part of the family structure, it "creates a barricade".³⁷⁸ She believes it would be a good starting point for discussions to "decode and verbally explain what is meant by the Armenian traditional family", offering that the challenge is to "translate our dry, charged language and professional jargon – accessible only to a very narrow community of professionals – into examples that would show how these two [viewpoints of activists and traditionalists] don't negate one another."³⁷⁹

Simplistic, reductionist, and essentialist messaging may work to further alienate potential supporters rather than invite them to the movement. Ishkanian argues that we should "try our best not to identify culture

as an impediment or obstacle to development, social change, and modernization but rather try to see what parts of the culture we can highlight that can best serve our mission."³⁸⁰ She adds, "if you were to localize violence and link it very closely to Armenian culture, you would immediately get shut down, in part because of the nationalist narratives."³⁸¹ Creative messaging on mainstream media that moves away from labeling Armenia as one where a culture of violence is pervasive and highlights positive aspects of the culture may work to create wider support for civil society initiatives. One example could be developing a media project that celebrates strong, progressive role models and features non-violent partner and family relationships.

Responding to society's concerns in civil society circles, there is the acceptance that activists often work in isolation and continue to engage like-minded, progressive individuals.³⁸² Anna Harutyunyan of Open Society Foundations asserts that "a circle of NGOs have created an 'elite' space for discussions, which is not possible to be mainstreamed and made accessible to the other NGOs."³⁸³ Education expert Nvard Manasian sees some forms of activism as being exclusionary and out-of-touch with everyday issues that society members are facing.³⁸⁴ It is for this reason that many civil society representatives believe that more effort should be given to educating society on the importance of equality through concrete, everyday examples in a language that can be better understood.

In the Armenian context, tying gender issues with larger socio-political realities may be optimal. Using the example of how war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are more likely to be violent in their households, Zaruhi Hovhannisyanyan of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women considers that "one

³⁷⁶Ibid.

³⁷⁷Armine Ishkanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia*, London, New York, Routledge, 2008.

³⁷⁸Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

³⁷⁹Ibid.

³⁸⁰Armine Ishkanian, *Is the Personal Political? The Development of Armenia's NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2003.

³⁸¹Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

³⁸²Anna Harutyunyan, interview, 2017 and Maro Matosian,

interview, 2017.

³⁸³Anna Harutyunyan, *Unearthing the Gender discourse in Armenia: from Hysteria to Constructive Dialogue* Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2017.

³⁸⁴Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

cannot separate social issues from gender issues” and that messaging should ideally come up with solid and appealing responses to socio-economic challenges, poverty, unemployment, the lack of democracy, the poor healthcare and education systems, and systemic inequality in Armenian society.³⁸⁵ Activists in the field can also speak about their concerns within the context of corruption, a major issue facing Armenia that impacts all social, political, and economic spheres, and lobby as well for the strengthening of rule of law, democratic election processes, governance and institution building, and cracking down on impunity.³⁸⁶

Gohar Shahnazaryan of the Yerevan State University and Women’s Resource Center calls for an open, honest conversation and for organizations and activists to contend with the fact that they will continue to receive backlash as long as they project Western ideologies in their messaging strategies.³⁸⁷ She believes that activists must re-evaluate their approaches to better reach the public, using the example of educating women from the villages about their sexuality, expressing: “What importance does sexuality have, if the person doesn’t have money?... If her basic needs aren’t met, she’s not going to think about whether or not she’s sexually satisfied.”³⁸⁸



**do not love me as if I were a flower!
I want to live a worthy life -
as an atom in a mass of troubles
as a child of the street mobs!**

Shushanik Kurghinian

A stanza taken from a poem written by Shushanik Kurghinian, considered one of the first Armenian feminist authors.

³⁸⁵Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

³⁸⁶Vahan Bournazian, interview, 2017.

³⁸⁷Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

³⁸⁸*ibid.*

◀ Tying historical narratives to present-day movements

In many ways, women's and LGBT rights have become largely equated with "European values", which some civil society representatives believe does a disservice to citizens who align with those values but are uncomfortable with what they feel to be an encroaching Western value system.³⁸⁹ For Vahan Bournazian of the Center for European Studies at Yerevan State University, human rights has lost its reputation globally due to being "used by power structures with ulterior motives" and manipulated by states.³⁹⁰ Citing the environmental movement in Armenia during the late-Soviet era, Bournazian asserts that countering the anti-human rights discourse requires that we "re-interpret how human rights has been a fundamental part of our social fabric".³⁹¹ Thus, public awareness about how human rights is in fact in line with the value systems that many hold dear rather than something imported by the West can be done through a better dissection of historical and present-day initiatives that seek to support and protect citizens.

An underutilized strategic direction that is starting to gain ground in Armenia is analyzing the work of Armenian feminists and giving voice to the historical narrative that Armenia has cultivated throughout its Ottoman and Soviet histories. Given that much of the pushback against gender issues is the claim that it is Western-manufactured and disconnected from Armenian tradition, highlighting historical figures' messages about advancing and promoting women's rights could help to bridge this disconnect.³⁹²

A welcoming initiative of the sort is currently being carried out by academic Lerna Ekmekcioglu, who is working on a book and online platform that shares the work of several little-known Ottoman Armenian feminist writers. Such initiatives that are disseminated to the public in a language understood by the masses would help drive the feminist discourse.

◀ Initiating peace-building dialogue

Activists may leverage the momentum in national discussions by taking the opportunity to publicize the feminist perspective on a given topic, seeking to create new norms of justice, equality, and respect and promotion of women's and human rights. For instance, given that marginalized populations bear the brunt of neoliberal policies, more initiatives could be carried out to shed light on this phenomenon, which impacts people's lives directly. Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence shares her belief about the importance of including discourse about militarization. For her, this is a problem that trickles down to every fact of life in Armenia but is also a topic that few know how to tackle.³⁹³ However, not all activists agree with the approach of including discourse about militarization for a variety of reasons, including societal unpreparedness and the lack of a proper conceptualization of anti-militarization efforts within feminist circles.³⁹⁴

Though in a nascent stage, the grassroots initiative Women in Black is a good example of building the feminist discourse around peace-building and conflict management, which presents an opening for women to enter a masculine space.³⁹⁵

³⁸⁹Vahan Bournazian, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁰Ibid.

³⁹¹Ibid.

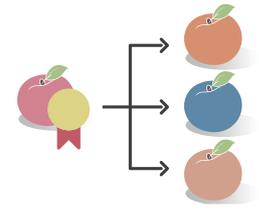
³⁹²Zaruhi Hovhannisyán, interview, 2017.

³⁹³Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017 and Zaruhi Hovhannisyán, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁴Zaruhi Hovhannisyán, interview, 2017 and Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁵Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017

c. Evidence-based and innovative mobilization strategies



◀ Pre-assessment, monitoring and evaluation

In order to create a strong campaign to change public perception on gender issues, it is imperative to carefully map existing attitudes. In speaking with various civil society representatives about awareness-raising efforts, several cited the well-preparedness of anti-gender actors³⁹⁶ and juxtaposed that with civil society's lack of pre-assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of public mobilizations as well as the lack of informed messaging.³⁹⁷ Anahit Simonyan of the Women's Resource Center reflects on the importance of measuring given community resources and tracking to what extent messages have become internalized, something she believes women's organizations to some extent have failed to do.³⁹⁸ Women's and LGBT organizations can better utilize data collection and transparency for information sharing, focusing more on collecting shared baseline data and supporting one another's initiatives to gather and analyze data to track changes over time.

◀ Taking a pro-active stance

Civil society representatives largely agreed that their response to the anti-gender campaign was mainly reactionary and lacking a strategic direction and follow-up action. As independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan puts it, "We were not thinking like a chess game, several steps in advance."³⁹⁹ Anahit Simonyan of the Women's

Resource Center highlights the importance of learning from international experience while countering the anti-gender campaign using local knowledge, instead of simply choosing to carry out what has been carried out in other contexts.⁴⁰⁰ Some experts are weary altogether of retaliating against anti-gender rhetoric and advocate instead that civil society push its own agenda forward.⁴⁰¹ Sevan Petrosyan of World Vision Armenia aptly notes, "If someone is creating the rules of the game and you attempt to counter him, you're going to lose no matter what."⁴⁰²

◀ Wider use of creative multi-media campaigns

Support for more comprehensive and accurate public awareness-raising campaigns for women's and LGBT organizations, with an emphasis on digital activism, may help to overcome social prejudice and acceptance of violence, encourage women to speak out, and combat gender stereotypes and myths prevalent in society. Hasmik Gevorgyan of the Women's Support Center is critical of the approaches women's organizations have taken to date, noting that the funding allocated for public actions would be more useful if directed toward multi-media campaigns.⁴⁰³

For example, hotline calls to the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women member organizations increased significantly after the 2014 public service

³⁹⁶Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁷Zaruhi Hovhannisyanyan, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁸Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

³⁹⁹Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰⁰Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰¹Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰²Sevan Petrosyan, interview, 2017.

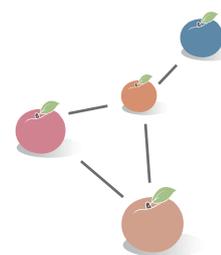
⁴⁰³Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

announcement “Speak Out” (*Khosir*) sponsored by the United States Ambassador to Armenia aired on television. While it is expensive and burdensome for NGOs that run on a tight annual budget, the importance of such campaigns on public awareness and as a tool for lobbying and advocacy cannot be downplayed.

Activists shared their beliefs that more emphasis be placed on “alternative forms of education” to challenge the status quo being taught in the classroom⁴⁰⁴ as well as explore gender issues through artistic platforms like storytelling.⁴⁰⁵ For instance, civil society representatives can take inspiration from examples of creative and successful grassroots campaigns in

the Armenian context like the 2016 hashtag campaign “Selfie with my daughter”, which called on Armenian fathers to “celebrate daughters in Armenian families by promoting the love parents have for them through sharing photos on social media” in an effort to cut down on sex-selective abortion. Though not outwardly promoting a women’s rights perspective, the hashtag campaign was carefully crafted, visually appealing, and shared a message that touched people all across the country. Importantly, the campaign didn’t reproduce stereotypes of what role women should play in society; instead, it shifted underlying norms of inequality and discrimination and spread a message of love.

d. Strategic alliances & lobbying



◀ Building greater in-group cohesion

Activists largely agree that, during the anti-gender campaign, there was some amount of outward solidarity and support but that there lacked a full-fledged strategy to counter attacks and protect themselves from future smear campaigns. Importantly, they note that some representatives of women’s and LGBT organizations chose not to engage in the discussions, especially those who were not directly attacked.⁴⁰⁶ The absence of a united front and the lack of a strategic action plan was enough to fully silence civil society.⁴⁰⁷

Several women’s and LGBT advocates accept that they need to widen the space for public discussion and note that organizations working on the ground do not collaborate enough with one another, facilitating creating weak linkages and poor cohesiveness. Civil society representatives have been vocal about how competitiveness creates this tendency toward fragmentation as opposed to solidarity and NGO-ization (i.e. the narrowing of civil society to professional NGOs working on advocacy and service delivery) instead of shared movement building, which can often be reinforced by donor policies and practices.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰⁵Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017 and Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰⁶Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Lida

Minasyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰⁷Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

⁴⁰⁸Alexandra Pittman, *Exploring Women’s Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from*

the Past and Strategizing for the Future, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

Further complicating matters and hindering progress is the fact that some organizations are led by “pseudo-gender specialists” and their practices do not align with feminist principles and value systems.⁴⁰⁹ The perspectives of activists vary to such a degree that, in the eyes of some civil society representatives, it hinders progress. Hasmik Gevorgyan of the Women’s Support Center expresses, “We have not come to an agreement on our stance, let alone work together to push our agenda forward; in order to engage other activists, we need to understand how to approach each individual group, what our strategy is, how we’re pushing the issue forward, and how we can begin working with them.”⁴¹⁰ Taking these criticisms into consideration, a main area of focus in combating anti-gender rhetoric in Armenia may be to first and foremost work to articulate shared values through open communication channels and identify and prioritize partnership with certain groups and individuals to build a stronger front, reduce fragmentation, and enhance fruitful cooperation.

◀ A focus on intersectionality

Building on areas of shared collective action will help to promote gender equality and human rights more generally. As alluded to previously, violence against women is a symptom of more fundamental problems in Armenian society, including unemployment, poverty, and migration and thus should not be addressed in isolation.⁴¹¹ Armine Ishkanian of the London School of Economics urges for more anthropological work to understand the interplays of race, class, and socio-economics in order to bring more nuance into arguments on issues like violence.⁴¹² Bringing in advocates from various social movements, be it environmental, disability, child, or labor rights, who are willing to lend their support, will encourage a critical mass to demand for reform.

We have seen more efforts toward intersectionality in recent years, with the formation of coalitions, including the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women and Anti-Discrimination Coalition, as well as the opening of the Human Rights House.⁴¹³ Tactics have included conducting trainings with Coalition representatives on women with disabilities in Armenia⁴¹⁴ and talking with State officials about broader issues like HIV/AIDS within a larger framework while including topics such as LGBT rights.⁴¹⁵ Such knowledge sharing on a non-formal and formal basis has led to more inclusivity in programmatic efforts. For instance, the inclusion of disability rights organizations into the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women has created more momentum for making domestic violence hotline and shelter services more inclusive.⁴¹⁶

Not all efforts to achieve greater intersectionality, however, may be beneficial in the short-term. In contexts like Armenia where LGBT issues are contested and there is a high level of homophobia in society, combining women’s and LGBT issues unfortunately has the effect of detracting from women’s issues rather than putting both women’s and LGBT rights on the political agenda.⁴¹⁷

◀ Collaboration with in-country networks

In order to dramatically increase the reach of anti-violence and anti-discrimination messaging, it is important to encourage in-country groups to develop horizontally, that is to broaden the definition of civil society and team up with more independent activists, loose associations of individuals, media organizations, religious groups, self-help groups, trade unions, non-state business associations, and others that have a good understanding of the socio-political context. Isolating out important institutions that shape

⁴⁰⁹Anna Harutyunyan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁰Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹¹Armine Ishkanian, *Is the Personal Political? The Development of Armenia’s NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and

Post-Soviet Studies, 2003.

⁴¹²Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

⁴¹³Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁴Zara Batoyan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁵Arman Sahakyan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁶Zara Batoyan, interview, 2017 and Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁷Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017 and Gohar Shahnazaryan, interview, 2017.

communities' perspectives, whether this be the church, human rights organizations, educators, journalists, or politicians, would help to find and cultivate allyships with institutions that are willing to stand up for women's and LGBT rights. Gender experts believe that Armenian civil society has not formed coalitions and built action plans, agendas, and strategic goals to enough of an extent to promote the cause more substantially, in order to drive the development of a true women's movement.⁴¹⁸

Though the anti-gender campaign was largely politicized, it is noteworthy that the general public did not interpret anti-gender mobilization as a transnational phenomenon imported by Russia but rather as a locally grown one. Civil society could do a better job of pointing out these links and improving their awareness raising efforts by collaborating with think tanks, journalists, and others to investigate developments in real time. In one study, for instance, it was found that Armenian citizens prefer hearing about LGBT issues from specialists and journalists, more so than LGBT individuals or organization representatives.⁴¹⁹ Thus, bringing in think tanks, academicians, policy analysts, and the like may be a good strategy to garnering people's attention and changing negative perceptions about LGBT rights. It is imperative to have tools in the civil society toolbox, so to speak, to be able to call on a critical mass on people to mobilize and counter harmful anti-gender attacks in real time.

In terms of building strategic collaborations, Armenian civil society may look to other cultural contexts for inspiration. The Hungarian Women's Lobby used their ties with politicians, think tanks, academics, and the media to engage organizations in watchdog efforts, specifically in carrying out academic research and writing shadow and alternative reports to CEDAW Committee, the European Commission, and others;

becoming involved in policymaking and lobbying for reform using an intersectional approach; and putting forth large-scale informational campaigns and participating in global campaigns.⁴²⁰ Following anti-gender rhetoric, Poland's civil society published a number of gender studies, policies, and statements and engaged in academic conferences to pressure the State to support the Istanbul Convention, and they carried out a number of civil initiatives, using petitions, protests, and official complaints to initiate dialogue and change public opinion.⁴²¹

◀ Collaboration with outside networks

Active lobbying to hold the Armenian government accountable to its national, regional, and international commitments has been shown to be strengthened when international partners engage in lobbying efforts. Activists who see value in expanding civil society's collaborations with international organizations note that it can be used to continue to leverage State support and advance the status on women in Armenian society. Civil society representatives believe that they should pursue building greater support through outreach to specific actors, like the ombudsman and embassy representatives who show sensitivity to gender issues,⁴²² and lobby for more international representation, such as having a UN Women representative in Armenia.⁴²³ Some activists note that the potential exists to forge greater ties with the Armenian Diaspora,⁴²⁴ while others are more cynical in this regard, believing that Armenian society has stopped paying attention to the Diaspora's calls.⁴²⁵ A good example of fruitful exchanges with outside networks is women's organizations' collaboration with Global Rights for Women, the Women Against Violence in Europe network and, more recently, the International Women's

⁴¹⁸Vladimir Osipov, interview, 2017.

⁴¹⁹PINK and CRRC-Armenia, *From Prejudice to Equality: Study of Societal Attitudes Towards LGBTI People in Armenia*. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO and Caucasus Research Resource Center - Armenia Foundation, 2016

⁴²⁰HBF, *Anti-Gender Movements on the Rise? Strategies for Gender Equality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2015.

⁴²¹*Ibid.*

⁴²²Maro Matosian, interview, 2017.

⁴²³Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017 and Maro

Matosian, interview, 2017.

⁴²⁴Nvard Manasian, interview, 2017.

⁴²⁵Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017 and Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, interview, 2017.

Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific, whose representatives trained civil society on developing strong shadow and alternative reports for CEDAW and lobbying the UN Committee in Geneva.

◀ Strategic lobbying

In recent years, women's and LGBT organizations have put more emphasis on using UN treaty bodies, special procedures, and the Universal Periodic Review to articulate their concerns about the State's failure to comply with its international obligations, which they believe is a positive trend.⁴²⁶ However, civil society can more consistently and effectively conduct regular monitoring of government action plans, lobby for gender budgeting of policies and programs as well as the establishment of a national machinery for gender equality, and better use international and regional human rights law to their advantage. For instance, despite the fact that Armenia is a signatory on a number of conventions related to gender discrimination and violence, few have sent complaints to CEDAW and the European Court of Human Rights on behalf of beneficiaries seeking redress for the infringement of their rights.⁴²⁷ Armenian civil society can also engage the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women to make a country visit to Armenia and publish statements on specific cases, which would send a strong signal to the government.⁴²⁸ These are powerful tools that have not been widely used that would push authorities to address flagrant breaches of human rights and adhere to signed conventions for the protection of victims of abuse. In conjunction with in-country and transnational collaborations, a strong effort by civil society to be strategic about lobbying would help continue pushing for gender equality and counter anti-gender hysteria when it unfolds.

Finding windows of opportunity to push for policy reform and raise societal awareness is key in such a volatile political environment.⁴²⁹ Civil society organizations must continually assess new developments and choose a particular strategy that would be more effective for their lobbying efforts. If their interests are unlikely to be integrated into State protocol but rather would result in a co-opted agenda, they may prefer to distance themselves and leverage the momentum in national discussions by using it as an opportunity to mainstream the feminist perspective.⁴³⁰ Charlotte Tapani of Lund University uses the example of lobbying for a domestic violence law to make a case for exclusion:

Since 2007, women's organizations have been cooperating with ministries in the making of a draft law on domestic violence but it is yet to be adopted... Women's organizations in this case were included in the state but without any actual influence or power sharing, as the state claims that there is a lack of resources for implementation of a domestic violence law... By being included in the state, women's organizations in Yerevan risk having their agenda co-opted and becoming a part of the system that is in fact oppressing them... this is a democratic loss because through the inclusion in the state, civil society become less independent and partly loses its oppositional position.⁴³¹

When deemed appropriate, NGOs must cooperate with State institutions if they wish to transform policies and programs around gender issues. Some civil society representatives make the case for more emphasis on local activism, given that the anti-gender campaign itself is in part a reflection of societal distrust with Western politics and too little is carried out at the grassroots level.⁴³² Taking a pro-active yet non-confrontational and collaborative stance, some NGOs have succeeded in forging relationships with key

⁴²⁶Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

⁴²⁷Arman Gharibyan, Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence in Armenia: National and International Legal Frameworks, Master's thesis, 2016.

⁴²⁸Arman Gharibyan, interview, 2017.

⁴²⁹Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

⁴³⁰Charlotte Tapani, Is Inclusion the Solution? A Power Analysis of Women's Organizations and Individual Women Activist's

Political Participation in Yerevan, Armenia, Master's thesis, 2016.

⁴³¹Ibid.

⁴³²Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

politicians, decision-makers and prominent individuals to push institutional reform.

Civil society representatives, when asked to give positive examples of NGO-State partnerships, offered the following examples: 1) the work conducted by the Sexual Assault Crisis Center to leverage their expertise and assist authorities in making amendments to articles in the criminal that punish sexual violence;⁴³³ 2) the Women's Support Center's long-term collaboration with the 3rd Unit of the Main Criminal Investigation Department of the RA Police, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and several regional offices to train hundreds of general and specialized service providers on domestic violence;⁴³⁴ and 3) Society Without Violence's collaboration with the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education to develop a gender education training manual and curriculum for Armenian public schools.⁴³⁵ Such initiatives can be an entry point for greater discussions on how the State can work with civil society to push reform.

To some extent, activists have compromised on language when they deemed it appropriate for the outcome they were seeking. For instance, Society Without Violence has on occasion purposefully left out the term "gender" when inviting government officials to trainings related to gender equality and non-discrimination but has used the opportunity to insist that the State follow through on its international human rights obligations.⁴³⁶ Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence reflects on how informal networking, continual negotiation, and close follow-up helped propel the initiative and keep State representatives accountable, noting: "When it comes to the international commitments, if the State sees that civil society is willing to assist them in tackling certain requirements, like gender education, they work with civil society."⁴³⁷ It would be worthwhile to take these examples as case studies in order to better understand what elements should be in place to partner more effectively with State agencies.

e. Reframing the donor agenda



◀ Funding priorities

There is limited external funding to tackle gender issues in Armenia, posing a problem for both donors and women's and LGBT organizations in the country. International donors are phasing out from Armenia

because it is a middle-income country, and in comparison to other neighboring countries, the Armenian context does not appear so severe.⁴³⁸ The tendency of donors to shift funding priorities

⁴³³Ibid.

⁴³⁴Hasmik Gevorgyan, interview, 2017.

⁴³⁵Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

⁴³⁶Ibid.

⁴³⁷Ibid.

⁴³⁸Alexandra Pittman, Exploring Women's Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future, Open Society Foundations, 2013.

requires women’s and LGBT organizations to meet the changing landscape and hinders them from implementing long-term programs that may better serve their local communities.⁴³⁹ From independent feminist Anna Nikoghosyan’s perspective, there is a need for longer, sustainable funding that works to change harmful perceptions and a shift toward greater grant making that supports harder-to-measure initiatives.⁴⁴⁰ Several civil society representatives express feeling compelled to change course and focus on specific programmatic activities rather than big picture projects. Therefore, from a funding point of view, it would be helpful for NGOs to be able to focus on continued assistance, long-term projects, and evidence-based advocacy as opposed to always having to come up with new, innovative practices.

◀ Supporting the burgeoning grassroots

As previously mentioned, professionalized women’s and LGBT organizations have contributed to the shrinking of civil society as a whole. Investing more into the development of a genuinely vibrant civil society is among the strongest strategies to counter the growing phenomenon of anti-genderism. Donors can foster and invest in less established groups by offering them greater opportunities for capacity building and building a shared understanding of gender equality, feminism and women’s rights concepts.

More effort can go into strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, and proposal writing workshops, and making resources like internet resources and online training programs available to a broad base of women’s and LGBT organizations in their local language. A more concerted effort to scope out

and support non-formal initiatives and groups taking on innovative and more explicitly political feminist work, while also continuing to build on their support for well-established organizations, will help to strengthen the larger mission and may work to stymie anti-gender campaigns. Andrea Peto of Central European University argues:

By now it is clear that the anti-gender movement is a new phenomenon in European politics which requires new methods and frameworks of thinking for meaningful reactions by the progressive forces. If progressive politics forgets its value and innovative grassroots origins, then only using the already invented gender equality policy measures will not prevent this new anti-genderism phenomenon to prevail in the long run. The bravery and the originality of those historical political actors who dared to question previously unquestionable dogmas of society and political life should be applied.⁴⁴¹

Donors’ primary focus on professionalized organizations not only weakens the potential for movement building but discourages potential impactful “more risky, experimental change interventions.”⁴⁴² Spreading out grants among smaller grassroots associations ensures that many voices are heard and reduces suspicions around financial assistance only going to the same few organizations.⁴⁴³ Moreover, given that many women’s and LGBT organizations are disconnected from rural communities, grassroots activists may be more useful in shedding light on emerging community needs outside of the capital. Arguably, more emphasis has been placed to date on passing legislation and less on awareness raising of the public.⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁹Armine Ishkanian, *Is the Personal Political? The Development of Armenia’s NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period*, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2003.

⁴⁴⁰Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁴¹Eszter Kováts and Maari Pöim, *Gender as symbolic*

glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

⁴⁴²Alexandra Pittman, *Exploring Women’s Rights and Feminist Movement Building in Armenia: Learning from the Past and Strategizing for the Future*,

Open Society Foundations, 2013.

⁴⁴³Sarah Mendelson and John Glenn, *Democracy Assistance and NGO Strategies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000.

⁴⁴⁴Nvard Margaryan, interview, 2017.

By spreading out small grants, donors can effectively reach more community members with practical services.⁴⁴⁵ According to Lida Minasyan of Society Without Violence, one of the reasons their gender education program was successful was that they took into consideration grassroots perspectives and made a point to travel to remote regions of the country and organize roundtable sessions with village mayors and school administrators.⁴⁴⁶

◀ Better donor-recipient communication

Donors must regularly be in contact with recipient organizations, such that their agendas do not steer the direction of projects being funded but rather assist organizations to address the problems in their contexts by gauging their opinions on frameworks, discourses, and domestically generated ideas and methods to solve problems.⁴⁴⁷ Continually reflecting on the power inequalities inherent in the donor-recipient relationship that “affect the definition of the concepts, the production of knowledge, the circulation of information, decision making and, subsequently, the outcomes of projects and campaigns” will also help to ensure better outcomes.⁴⁴⁸ It is notable that, more than ever before, organizations that have long-standing relationships with donors have begun to challenge what is prescribed to them and are able to stand their ground vis-a-vis methodologies and practices that they believe will work best in their context.⁴⁴⁹

◀ Supporting in-country cohesion and better communication

As the analysis revealed, the weak linkages and diversity of approaches among women’s and LGBT organizations in many ways laid the foundation for the anti-gender campaign to be as successful as it was. Taking this into consideration, donors may wish to place more emphasis on supporting in-country cohesion by funding strategic planning sessions, knowledge exchange seminars, and movement building strategy sessions, where organizations and associations can build solidarity and foster cross-pollination across groups.⁴⁵⁰ They can also work to take more of a mediating role and ensure that activists are meaningfully included in policymaking, which can in turn work to improve the response to anti-gender campaigning when women’s and LGBT issues are politically manipulated.

◀ Empowering the most marginalized

Women and LGBT survivors of domestic violence, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, rural inhabitants and those living under the poverty line are largely left out of the discourse. Making matters worse, the feminization of poverty and high rate of gender-based violence is linked to the low economic activity of women. Recommendations must not only center on gender policy specifically but the effects of labor policy on the most marginalized in an effort to combat gender inequality and violence, such that survivors are economically empowered in order to speak out as advocates. Programs like the Near East Foundation’s business and entrepreneurship program for survivors of domestic violence should be expanded on to include more women and a special emphasis placed on the most marginalized populations.

⁴⁴⁵Sarah Mendelson and John Glenn, *Democracy Assistance and NGO Strategies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000.

⁴⁴⁶Lida Minasyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁴⁷Armine Ishkanian, *Is the Personal Political?* The

Development of Armenia’s NGO Sector During the Post-Soviet Period, Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, 2003.

⁴⁴⁸Armine Ishkanian, *Democracy Building and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Armenia*, London,

New York, Routledge, 2008.

⁴⁴⁹Armine Ishkanian, interview, 2017.

⁴⁵⁰Anna Nikoghosyan, interview, 2017.

Donor initiated programs aimed directly at strengthening the capacity of marginalized individuals who have experienced discrimination and/or violence and who are willing to speak out as spokespersons would not only be empowering but would also send a powerful signal to the public.⁴⁵¹ A positive example that can be built off of is the Women's Support Center's approach to empower survivors of domestic violence and assist them in creating a platform for their messages through high-profile court cases and other means. Another positive example to build off of is the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women 2016 protest that brought attention to the Ministry of Justice Compulsory Enforcement Service's mismanagement of child custody cases, during which time survivors themselves who were fighting for custody of their children were invited to lead the protests, which to date has resulted in three survivors reuniting with their children.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹Anahit Simonyan, interview, 2017.

⁴⁵²Women complain of the activities of Service for Compulsory Enforcement of Judicial Acts, Panorama, November 3, 2016.

Conclusion

The 2013 anti-gender campaign clearly left strong footprints. Women and LGBT individuals are still targeted, as manifestations of gender inequality continue to curtail their social, economic, and political rights. The campaign was unforeseen by activists, several of whom were personally threatened and concerned for their safety, struggled to counter the virulent messages, and were largely silenced.

Potentially grave consequences for women's and LGBT rights lie ahead if conservative and far right parties continue to fuel anti-gender sentiment and increasingly take up more space in public discourse. As long as society holds onto traditional, rigid, and misogynistic attitudes that are backed by a nationalist-conservative value system and right-leaning government, Armenia will continue to encounter obstacles that impacts its most marginalized citizens. It is my hope that the recommendations informed by the study can offer solutions to the range of realities that hinder progress toward achieving gender equality in Armenia.

Civil society representatives believe that there is a great need for mapping of and better outreach to local stakeholders, from policymakers to ordinary citizens, who are committed to fighting for equal rights, as well as greater outreach to actors from a variety of backgrounds in an effort to create an open line of communication. Activists believe that they should work more to develop strategies to engage those who may have a neutral stance regarding women's and LGBT rights but with whom civil society can develop a strong working relationship and engage in gender discourse over time.

The current gender discourse exists at two poles, with advocates and conservatives taking diametrically opposed positions and leaving no space for a larger, nuanced discussion. As a result, messages are packed into sound bites that pit "traditional" Armenians against

women's and LGBT activists, diluting and discrediting their messages. To date, representatives of women's and LGBT organizations agree that they have not employed a targeted strategy and that they lack specialized knowledge in developing discourses that change attitudes.

A foundational aspect of why the anti-gender campaign was successful can be attributed to how heavily resourced it was and its broad use of social media, television, and creative means of reaching audiences as a strategic tool. Thus, it is imperative that civil society organizations focus more emphasis on creative strategies and use of multi-media platforms. Using evidence-based practice to design informational campaigns with precise, pre-assessed messaging and carrying out an impact assessment following the campaign to assess rights-based goals and impacts would help to promulgate real perception change.

Research has shown that both vertical alliances with like-minded organizations and individuals as well as horizontal alliances with larger out-of-country networks can work in tandem to push key issues on the policy agenda. Civil society representatives share a range of viewpoints, as they struggle with how to adhere to their principles while seeking out partnerships with local activists and the broader international community.

With the aforementioned barriers and threats to progress in mind, activists believe that donors must consider that changing deeply entrenched, discriminatory social norms takes time, and increase sustainable core support or flexible funding in comparison to project funding. The strengthening of political and feminist advocacy initiatives and NGOs will help to move away from the project-to-project approach and promote collective action needed for movement building through both conventional and unconventional political participation.

Annex:

Key informants involved in the research study

Anahit Simonyan, Advocacy and Policy Development Officer at the Women's Resource Center, CEO and Founder of the Human Rights Education Centre

Anna Harutyunyan, Education Program Coordinator at Open Society Foundations Armenia, PhD Candidate at the Free University of Berlin

Anna Nikoghosyan, Co-Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, independent feminist

Anush Aleksanyan, Educational Psychologist at the National Institute of Education, Executive Director of the Yerkusov Specialized Psychological Center

Anush Poghosyan, Sexual Health Educator at the Women's Resource Center

Arman Gharibyan, Co-Founder of Human Rights Power NGO

Arman Sahakyan, Office Director of New Generation Humanitarian NGO

Armine Ishkanian, Associate Professor and Programme Director of the MSc in Social Policy and Development at the London School of Economics Department of Social Policy

Gayane Abrahamyan, Founder and Director of Article 3 Club, TV Host/Reporter at Erkir Media, Correspondent at EurasiaNet

Gayane Hovakimyan, Director of the Ministry of Justice Rehabilitation Center

Gohar Shahnazaryan, Director of the Yerevan State University Center for Gender and Leadership Studies, Co-Director of Women's Resource Center NGO

Hasmik Gevorgyan, Project Coordinator at the Women's Support Center NGO

Lida Minasyan, Chief Executive Officer of Society Without Violence NGO

Maria Abrahamyan, Human Rights Project Coordinator at Article 3 Club, Human Rights Project Coordinator at Equal Rights NGO

Maro Matosian, Executive Director of the Women's Support Center NGO

Nvard Manasian, Scholarship Board Member of the Armenian Education Foundation, Board Member of Transparency International Armenia

Nvard Margaryan, President of Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO

Sevan Petrosyan, Manager of World Vision Armenia's Gender Project

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Zaruhi Hovhannisyan, Co-Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, independent feminist, human rights defender, publicist

