

Voices of Armenian Women

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The Role of Armenian Women in the Struggle to Maintain Ethnic Identity

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In the past few decades, due to a wide range of activities—from the most radical feminist movements to modest struggles for equality—women's issues have come to the fore as important questions to be addressed. Research, surveys, seminars, publications, special departments in governments, in the universities, and elsewhere are all intended to deal not only with the particular needs of women but more importantly with the problems arising from women's quest to find their proper place in modern society. We Armenians have not embarked on this campaign, not because we Armenian women do not have these problems, but because either we are not ready to face them or our upbringing and our tradition dictate that we not speak out, that we put a cover on problems and endure them as our fate. The society we live in encourages us to do just that and not to speak out.

I represent the generation that has suffered by living in the transitional stage from traditional to modern society, trying to establish a successful social existence in that society and to maintain an independent identity that is more than an appendage to a husband. I did not have the advantage of fighting my battle alongside an army of comrades-in-arms. If that had been the case, we would have paved the way for the younger generation to experience less pain today. In any event, it is not too late to raise the problems and plan strategies to tackle them.

Within the context of questions and problems concerning Armenian women in the diaspora, one of the major issues is that of maintaining the Armenian identity. This is an extra burden that we Armenian woman have to carry if we are concerned about the perpetuation of our race, tradition, language, and our religious and cultural heritage.

In various societies the gauge to measure the success of a woman as an independent social being has three dimensions: family, education, and career. We, the diasporan-Armenian women, no matter how successful we become according to this gauge, are measured against a fourth criterion, our social status. And by social status I do not refer to class differences or to financial means but to the role we assume in the societal structures geared toward the preservation of Armenianness in the diaspora.

Here I will not address the first three dimensions: women's rights in the context of home and family, equal opportunities in education, and the array of problems in the workplace. I will only acknowledge the fact that, in today's society, the number of successful Armenian women in these areas is remarkable and ever-increasing. Many young Armenian women have willingly and consciously made the decision to break the so-called "traditional" barriers and to struggle for an independent social identity by obtaining a higher education, managing a happy family, raising healthy and well-adjusted children, and at the same time pursuing respectable careers. And this is no surprise. Sociologists agree that 1) women working outside the home are better organized and manage their time more efficiently; 2) the best adjusted and successful children come from families in which the mother works, but only if she loves her career and wants to work. Second to these children are those from families in which the mother does not work by her own choice, choosing to stay home and raise her children. Third come the children of families in which the mother has to work for financial and other reasons but wishes she could stay home

and look after her children full-time. The worst are the children of families in which under certain pressures—traditional constraints, husband's interdiction, or other reasons—the woman has quit her job or withdrawn from her outside responsibilities in order to stay home and raise the children.

Let us close this long parenthesis and go back to that fourth dimension in Armenian woman's life, her role in diasporan-Armenian ethnic structures. Does an Armenian woman have equal opportunities, equal rights? Does she want to have equal rights? And what should she do with these rights and opportunities if she had them?

Here I do not have the time to go into the depths of history to establish the real meaning, the denotation—not the connotation or the misinterpretation—of Armenian tradition and unwritten rules of a patriarchal society. I do not need to do that. Everyone will agree that diasporan-Armenian societies still live by the old traditional ways (or they are on the road to modernization at best) and that the Armenian community leadership is male dominated. Only in rare cases is a woman accepted within the circles of community leadership. Beyond leadership roles in educational, cultural, athletic (to some extent), and relief organizations or auxiliary groups there exists a barrier, a glass ceiling, for women. On rare occasions, a woman is elected to the highest executive bodies; in those cases she has to be far more capable than her fellow members in that body to obtain equal opportunity and treatment. Here I speak of my personal experiences and observations.

To break this myth called tradition, we need first to make an effort to move ahead, to elevate ourselves, to develop our capabilities and our horizons—no matter what our age, what our socio-economic status—and to break the barrier consciously and collectively by helping each other, lending hands to elevate one another and not demean or slur each other. The opportunities and the choices offered by mainstream societies in the Western world will

facilitate our struggle; the worldwide international organizations under UNESCO or UNICEF, such as the World Summit for Social Development, Building-Up Partnership, Street Children, the International Assembly of Women, Domestic Violence and Children's Health, and many other international organizations, will guide us, broaden our knowledge and world-view, and offer us examples to follow. Second, we have to target the existing leadership, and particularly those men within that circle who are more in touch with the progressive and modern trends of the civilized world, and make an effort to rally them to our campaign, make them help women to be accepted as equal partners in the policy-making process within the leadership of the community. Third, we have to prepare fertile soil for our struggle to bear fruit; we have to prepare the ground, starting from the very beginning, by bringing up our sons, not as future male chauvinists but as tolerant and understanding proponents of equality between genders, by bringing up our daughters not as future modest, hard working, obedient wives and passive members of the community but as equal partners in their future families, fighters for our cause, and free-spirited leaders of our future societies. And, as mothers, we are capable of doing that.

But as I posed the question at the beginning, do we want to get ahead? Do we want to occupy the place we deserve in society, or are we happy where we are, in the coziness of our small circles?

The future of the community, the shaping and reshaping of the diasporan-Armenian psyche which often postulates between assimilation and ghettoism, the effectiveness of community structures, the identity policy, the relationship between the mainstream and the ethnic culture, the process of developing a sense of livable and admissible ethnicity within the host country—all of these are issues that need careful strategy planning. Furthermore, the definition of diaspora should be revisited.

We know that the Armenian diaspora has existed for centuries,

but it changed meaning once after the genocide and again after Armenia gained independence in 1991. During the communist domination in Armenia, we were caught away from our homeland; we had to fight our battle alone. Today diaspora has found a new meaning, and its relationship with Armenia should follow a logical plan. What should be the role of the diaspora in the socioeconomic development of Armenia, and what role can Armenia play in the diaspora to inspire a sense of belonging, to help preserve the language, in short to nourish the Armenian identity? We are aware of the deplorable situation of women in Armenia. The last few years of socioeconomic upheaval have caused havoc, and women suffer more than any other social group. The escalation of inequality between men and women in all spheres of life, unemployment, lack of proper financial resources to live a decent life, the downfall of health care and education standards, the fading of moral values are all problems that need our utmost concern and attention. We have to help solve these problems; otherwise, what is the use of our struggling in the diaspora when we are losing ground in Armenia?

There are so many issues and problems that cannot be left to chance, otherwise we will lose greatly both in Armenia and in the diaspora. Do we want to share the burden of making tough decisions and dealing with the serious problems facing the nation? Or it's okay, it is not my cup of tea, that's a man's job, let the men take care of it? Is this permissible? As diasporan-Armenian women we have to condemn such a way of thinking. We have to participate.

More than half of the Armenian nation lives in exile called the diaspora. And in order for it to progress in the real sense of today's world civilization, it needs healthy societies and logical structures, structures to fit the infrastructure of the host country—a sort of sub-infrastructure—to maintain contact with the mother base and to pursue the struggle for identity. Without the equal contribution of both men and women that goal cannot be achieved.

What role shall we as women undertake?

The fact that mainstream societies in the host countries of the diaspora have changed to become more tolerant toward minorities, more accepting and pluralistic, and the fact that the concept of multiculturalism has begun to prevail in many societies make our job both easier and more difficult. Easier, because ethnic characteristics, cultures, languages, religions, and traditions are not scorned; therefore, it is more comfortable for ethnic groups to maintain these traits. More difficult, because with the factor of the rejection of ethnic minorities gone, mainstream society becomes more open, more inviting, assimilation becomes natural, and maintaining ethnic identity and clinging to ethnic heritage require resolution and a conscious, sometimes strenuous, effort.

Fighting against assimilation, the imperative of maintaining that Armenian spirit or “Armenianness” and transmitting it to the coming generations, is not at issue. What can we women do about it? Here I want to backtrack a bit and make it clear that I do not mean for this struggle to be a burden on women alone; it is, and should be, the main objective in diasporan organizations’ strategy planning. What I want to stress here is that women have to participate not only alongside the men in this high-level strategy planning, but also they have to contribute their special talent at home and in society. Yes, women have that natural talent, that ease and facility to transmit values. And what is important, women have a natural attachment and fidelity to their ethnic characteristics—food, religion, family values, family ties, respect for elders, other customs and mores, language, etc. We Armenian women have to use that talent consciously and effectively in order for our struggle to bear fruit.

We Armenians have an ancient culture and civilization worthy of pride. We have a cause: a colossal injustice done to our nation still awaits redress. Our nation, like any other nation in the world, has the right to live and to prosper. We have a battle to wage in Armenia and in the diaspora. And in that battle we need to mobilize

all our potential. I have quoted a few times in the past, and I will quote again: "Without women, a movement lacks half of its vitality." We need all the vitality we can muster if we believe in the aspirations of our nation.