



The Role of Armenian Women in Contemporary American Society

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The Evolution of the Socio-Political Function of Women in the Armenian Community - Conflicts and Problems

When I mentioned to a friend that I would be giving this presentation today, she said, "Oh, that seminar on Armenian feminism?" Well, this is a misconception predominant in our community. Just because the theme of the seminar is the Armenian woman and the participants are all women, the topic in question does not necessarily relate to Armenian Feminism. Likewise, this does not imply that the basis for discussion, the theories, and the methodology applied should be those in the Feminist discipline. Of course, there is nothing derogatory about Feminism, but such a label gives justification to the absence of men here today. Feminism, and particularly Armenian Feminism, is still a strange and untamed animal for some.

I want to discuss my topic in a broader context which encompasses the Armenian diaspora and the struggle therein for the solution of the Armenian question and not in the context of gender problems. With this premise, I will shift my focus from the Armenian woman's personal dilemma, victimized emotions, exigencies, and sexual freedom, to the function of Armenian women in the society. That is, the role she can play or she ought to play in the social/political infrastructure of Armenian communities in America, and to discuss to what extent this role is in conflict with the role of women as a transmitter of tradition.

First of all, what is tradition? Are there fixed, unwritten rules, customs and views to build what we call the unchanging concept of tradition? I challenge this. I challenge the understanding of tradition in its fixed, closed network of meanings. What is considered a traditional custom, a definite traditional trait for an Armenian with a certain background may not hold true with another Armenian with a different background. For instance, let's take a grandmother, a survivor of genocide, born and brought up in a village in Western Armenia, and after the genocide she's here, she's thrown to this end of the world, and she insists that her granddaughter dresses "decently" or not stay out late at night, even if she has meetings, or she should not raise her voice in a gathering where there are men around. This doesn't mean that it is "tradition" per se that is dictating her behavior. Another grandmother raised in another type of society like the Russian-Armenian communities in Tiflis or Yerevan would not share the same conviction. What I want to infer without going into details is that tradition is a matter of interpretation, and the concept of tradition has incorporated very new, that is, foreign elements and influences in it that we need to recognize and segregate.

I said tradition is a matter of interpretation, and interpretation is never innocent, but as Edward Zahir, a literary critic, says, "...a product of a-priori knowledge and cultural traits." Having established that, I'd like to go on one step further and prove that

interpretation or the perception of tradition is also changing. Let us take the Armenian family structure in America. An Armenian woman's function in the family is changing rapidly as it has already been discussed in the prior presentation. Among many factors involved is the influence of American culture which becomes more and more effective as the Armenian communities come out of isolation and open up to the mainstream culture of America. There is also the economic factor, which forces the Armenian woman to go out, seek employment outside the house, sometimes against the wishes of her husband or against her own wishes. These factors and many more prescribe a rearrangement and redistribution of duties and responsibilities. The new lifestyle along with a change of mindset and world view of Armenian men and women as particles of the great tapestry of American society forces a conscious (that is expedient) or subconscious reinterpretation of national traditions.

In my opinion, the changes within the family structure in Armenian communities are occurring more rapidly than in the social, political, or cultural collective life. The reason is because Armenian women are more willing and even more aggressive in pursuit of their rights and roles they want to undertake in the family than in regards to their roles in the social/political life. I have my doubts whether they themselves believe in that role or not.

Let me give you my interpretation of the historic role and function of Armenian women in society. Even the most conservative clerical historians of ancient times have recorded and praised the exploits of women and their participation in the military and political leadership in Armenia. Erato, during the reign of Tigranis IV, Zabel, during the reign of Hetoom, Ashkhen, during the reign of Tiridates, Parantsem, taking over the rule of Armenia after King Arshak II, Zarmantoukht, after King Bab, Marioun, after Constantine III, and these are only members of the royal family from whose point of view usually the history is recorded. The unknown heroines like unknown soldiers of ordinary classes only helped to weave the rich tapestry of Armenian history. What is obvious is that Armenian women, before and after the Christian era have played significant roles as equals to their men in their duties within the family as well as in the society.

The Arab rule in Armenia at the end of the 7th century, then the domination of Seljuks, Mongols, and consequently the Ottomans over Armenia not only brought repression and slavery, but influenced the mentalities, the Armenian customs, world views, and what is important, the making of the tradition. Submerged in ignorance and backwardness for centuries, Armenians lived side by side with Turks, adopting their outlook to life. Women were confined to their limited function inside the house. They had to wear veils to cover their faces before strangers. Take the ancient and midieval Armenian folklore which reflects the everyday life of common people; their love, their weddings, their labor. There is no such thing as women being subordinate and timid creatures.

From the centuries of Moslem influence over Armenians emerged the new image of Armenian woman, humble, timid, bereft of her rights as an equal human being. The Armenian woman's traditional, stereotypical image had changed in response to the atmospheric determinants. The Moslem influence had spread such deep roots that even the 19th century renaissance ideologies, enlightenment, social equality, freedom, as inviting and as agreeable as they may sound, found little reception among Armenian women, and even that was limited to the upper classes, like more

opulent societies in Constantinople or Tiflis, whose women had the opportunity to acquire education. The 19th century Armenian women's rights movements were a direct result of the impact of renaissance thoughts and ideologies, but this movement was peripheral compared to the widespread campaign of Armenians' struggle for emancipation. In this larger context, Armenian women had two mountains to climb, two obstacles to overcome. She had to struggle for her equal rights within the Armenian society, for her access to the leadership. Then, liberated from the constraints of medieval mentalities, so called "traditional" ideas -- both from the point of view of Armenian men's perception of the woman's role within and without the home, as well as the woman's own self-inflicted image -- the Armenian woman had to enter the thorny and difficult path toward national emancipation. Incidentally this same picture, I believe, still exists today with, of course, a lesser degree of intensity.

The history of the 19th century Armenian struggle for emancipation and enlightenment is studded with the memory of women whose devotion to the Armenian cause and whose brave deeds can really inspire pride in the Armenian woman today. Significantly, the first venture of Armenian women into the society in the Renaissance era was in the field of education. We come across the names of great educators of the early 19th century, like Mariam Elias Avdalian in Calcutta, Elizabeth Sarkissian in Calcutta again. Movses Taghiadian, a renowned Renaissance writer, in a booklet dedicated to the new school that was being founded there, writes about Elizabeth Sarkissian, "the matriarch of national progress." Then the ripples of the Feminist movement in Europe reached the Armenian communities in Constantinople and Smyrna. Educated women, writers and poets like Srpouhi Dusab, Zabel Assadour, and Zabel Essayan later on and others too spearheaded organizations of women, but mostly for the purpose of self-education, charity, church or school support. Compared to the women's lot in Western Armenia, these kinds of activities, too, were noteworthy and progressive. They were the first phase in Armenian women's participation in the national struggle, and indeed, it is with pride and reverence that we encounter the actual freedom fighters that came later on as the second phase. Sosse of Daron, Anna Mairig, the revolutionist of Ahronk, Khmpabedouhi Rbeh of Sassoun, Vartanoush, Perouz, Gulzadeh, of Urfa, Shoushan, Manoushag, Zagher, in Mousa Dag, Zarouhi, Satenig, Hamaspiour in the heroic defense of Van. The list can go on and on.

In those years of horrors, persecution, and massacre, Armenian women too were slowly awakening to assume their role in the Armenian emancipation movement. Mothers were encouraging their sons to take arms against the enemy, sending them off to join the revolutionary bands. The freedom fighter's wife blessed her husband's journey to death saying, "May your pilgrimage be worthwhile. Don't sell your life cheaply. First, kill a few Turks, and then..." Western Armenian women fought in the battlefields, transported arms, carried food and water to the fighters, travelled back and forth carrying commands and messages. In the ranks of leadership of political groups and parties however, participation was modest, limited to emancipated young women with European education.

The picture was somewhat different in Eastern Armenia. In a more progressive environment under the influence of Russian culture and civilization and particularly under the influence of anti-Tsarist movements, political parties like Narodnaya Volia or the Socialists or the Marxists, young Armenian women, university students, were

carried away with international ideologies. In the 1880's, the worsening situation in Western Armenia, and the terrible news of unending persecution and suffering that was pouring in the Caucasus sensitized Eastern Armenian women activists, brought them down to the reality of the Armenian cause. The participation of Eastern Armenian women in the rank and file of political parties as well as in the leadership of the socio-political life in Transcaucasia is remarkable. Again, a few names: Tamara Adamian, a founding member of the first Eastern Armenian revolutionary group; Natalia Amirkhanian, an Armenian Revolutionary Federation member since 1890; (She was executed in the Yerevan prison just before the February uprising of 1921.); Ardsvig Apovian; Sato Hagopian; Natalia Matinian; Rubina Areshian (Ohanjanian); and many other political activists who travelled to the remote towns and villages in the Caucasus and in the heart of Persia to organize Armenian women, to recruit them in the political campaign for the solution of the Armenian question. Let us not forget also Maro Vartanian, one of the founders of the Hunchag Party, to whose charisma and devotion the party owes its brilliant activities of the first ten years.

After the realization of the Armenian dream, free and independent Armenia, the most favorable atmosphere was provided for the participation and progress of Armenian women in socio-political life. Berjouhi Parseghian, Varvareh Sahagian, Gadoushia Manougian and others were members of the Parliament. There were also other high ranking officials of the government like Diana Apkhar, ambassador to Japan. This is the tradition that we Armenian women here in America have inherited. We should be proud of it and continue in that direction. We should break the belief, reject the self-imposed idea that politics is a man's job. That is never true. If Elizabeth Sarkissian's or Mariam Avdalian's venture seeking a teacher's career in the 1840's was a bold and extraordinary undertaking, if forming charity organizations, gathering orphans, educating young girls, propagating emancipation ideas was a daring adventure in the 1880's, today these activities are basic and cater to the conception that women are naturally conditioned to be conservative and attracted to activities conservative and apolitical in nature. I strongly believe that Armenian women are socially conditioned to be conservative. I also believe that the formulation of Armenian culture being a patriarchal one, with predefined roles for men and women is somewhat misinterpreted and it also dictates the modus operandi of the Armenian society here.

There are two fundamental problems that I could identify that encumber the smooth evolution towards a community life and leadership based on equal rights. One is that the Armenian community leadership is male dominated. The access of rank and file women to the leadership of political parties, even cultural organizations, is very limited. The election of women to the church boards or prelacy or diocese boards is rare. There is a definite pattern of marginalizing women's participation in the leadership. Of course the picture is not the same as it was in the 1940's and 50's when liberated and emancipated, well-educated Armenian women in America had to seek opportunities to devote their talent and knowledge outside the Armenian communities. Nowadays there is a little bit more to do for educated women than relief work or fundraisers in the Armenian communities. Antiquated attitudes are changing in response to the change of women's status in the world, but not enough to keep pace with the mainstream.

The second problem is that Armenian women themselves lack the motivation to get

out there in the world, adopt a cause, become involved. They tend to give up everything and make a whole life out of family and marriage. That is the result of their upbringing and family pressure. How is it possible to spur the motivation? One solution lies in the larger context of Armenian women as members of American society. In this context one can assert that more and more women struggle to be viewed as persons, rather than as appendages to their husbands. I'm sure you remember the trend of addressing women by their husband's name like Mrs. Edward Smith, Mrs. Frank Johnson. There are still conservative communities in America in which this pattern persists.

In terms of social identity, for a long time women were identified or classified by their husband's occupation. Nowadays, many Armenian women join the workforce and acquire a social identity of their own. Besides, there is an increasing tendency of non-work, unpaid activities to become important sources for social identity. In this new scale of stratification, Feminists struggle to establish housewifery or home economics as an occupation, but I don't think this will rank very high in the social ladder. If women want to be somebody in the community, they should get out of their house, volunteer for something worthwhile. Armenian women are no exception in this larger context of American society.

The second solution can be sought within the Armenian social/political life and is conditioned by the process of politicization of Armenian women. It is a long process, but to start the continuum, just get them interested by encouragement, persuasion and even propaganda on a single issue campaign, out of this process can come the recruitment for a political party, education within the party, stretching on to the leadership positions, and hence in the community. In this process, emancipated, educated women and men too have a very important role to play. But Armenian men also need to go through this process of politicization. The only difference is that women are discouraged both by men and by their own gender. Those who persistently follow the path of social/political involvement meet with the suspicion and resentment of their male coworkers and collaborators and criticism of their families. This is what needs to be changed. After all, as a 19th century Socialist activist once said, "Without women, a movement lacks half of its vitality." We Armenians need all the vitality we can muster if we believe in the goals and in the aspirations of our nation.

...continue to be like that. Armenian women in Soviet Armenia are welcome in the scientific circles. They compete with men in medicine, in different branches of the sciences, in mathematics, computer science and education. In education there is a statistic that 75% of the staff of teachers and professors are women. Even in the factories, women are competing with men. But when it comes to leadership and particularly political leadership, they're almost absent. Of the deputies that run the country, there are only a dozen or so women.

Women's activities have increased since the Karabagh movement. Now you can hear women taking the podium and spearheading movements that are very important. I think just like everything else that has gotten out of the control of the government, the women's movement has also taken the same course. So, I'm hoping that this new "blast" or this new "restructuring" of everything will also influence women in Soviet Armenia.

2. American literature of the 19th century involves the issue of religion