

Gender equality: history must be honoured



The country's Constitution states that women and men are equal. However, no adequate mechanism has been put in place to turn these words into reality. This declared equality, inherited from the Soviet system, in fact perpetuated gender discrimination throughout the transition to democracy and the free market. Women's situation has worsened and today they suffer discrimination in all aspects of their lives. The Government has not grasped the magnitude of the problem, and any attempts to abide by its international commitments in this matter have been weak and insufficiently supported.

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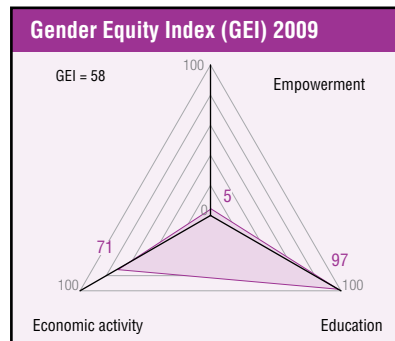
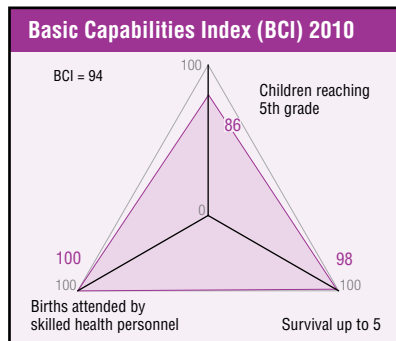
In Armenia, unlike in almost every other country, concern for gender equality is rooted in a long history, ancient as well as recent, and is reflected in legislation passed in different political contexts. Given these traditions, it would not seem too difficult to rectify existing inequalities, but in fact, the situation of women has deteriorated over the last 20 years. The reasons for this include lack of vision or strong commitment on the part of the State, a lack of coordination among the actors involved, and a low level of awareness among the population.

There can be no sustainable development for Armenia unless it is built on equal opportunities for women and men. Civil society organizations, with the support of some international institutions, are lobbying for a change in public policy that would restore women to the place in society that the country's history has granted to them.

A tradition of equality

Equal rights for women are rooted in Armenia's ancient history; the country's ancient codes testify that even before the Common Era women were treated as equal members of society in areas such as inheritance and property rights, among others. For example, it is written in the *Code of Shahapivan* of 443 BC that "women have the right to ownership of a family property if the husband has left his wife for no reason" and also that "a woman has the right to bring a new husband into her home."

Shahamir Shahamirian, the 18th century writer and philosopher and author of the first Armenian Constitution,² maintained, "Every human being, whether Armenian or of some other race, whether man or woman, born in Armenia or brought there from another country, shall live in equality and shall be free in all their occupations. Nobody shall have the right to enslave another person and workers should



be paid like in any other kind of job, as is laid down in Armenian legislation."³

The first Armenian Republic (1918-1920) was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote and to be elected to public office, and at that time some 8% of members of Parliament were women. In 1920 Dr. Diana Abgar was appointed ambassador to Japan, which makes her the first female ambassador in history (the Russian Alexandra Kollontai, who is generally thought to be the first, was named plenipotentiary to Norway only in 1923).

During the Soviet era the State provided free compulsory schooling, tertiary education, free and accessible medical services, 24 days of paid holidays per year, and pre- and post-natal leave among other benefits. In 1920 abortion was legalized and medical care in that area was guaranteed. However, it is worth mentioning that even abortion legislation was strongly related to the changing role of women in society since the main objective of the Soviet administration was to get women into the workforce.

Discrimination: theory and practice

In spite of this apparent progress, women in Soviet Armenia had to carry a double burden and suffered structural discrimination. Women worked outside and also inside the home, cooking and cleaning, doing the laundry and obtaining food on the way to or from work. This double burden was made heavier in the absence of infrastructure support and lack of technology, which ensured these daily tasks were more time-consuming than necessary.

During this time no women held a top position in the power hierarchy, in either the Government or Parliament. Moreover, although it was stated that women and men had to be paid equally, in fact women were employed in all the low-paid jobs. The notion that Soviet power used women as cheap labour was reflected in the refrain of a popular folk song of that time: "*Babi pashut babi jnut – mujiki uchet vedut*" (Women plough, women harvest – and men monitor and manage).

There were provisions to defend equality in the post-Soviet Constitution of 1995, which gave women equal rights in politics, work and family. In most cases these provisions were in line with international laws. However, they were not applied in day-to-day life. More recently the transition to democracy and the advent of free market have had a negative impact on the situation of Armenian women in many areas including their economic status. Today the country does not have a national policy for dealing with the inequalities women have to live with in their daily lives.

The Government has made little effort to remedy this situation; the authorities consider that the matter of gender inequality was resolved during the Soviet era. The appropriate legislation exists but there are no effective mechanisms to enforce it, which means that women are discriminated against in all aspects of life including participation in politics.

Women who are excluded from economic and political processes usually continue with their traditional roles in society. In Armenia they suffered more serious consequences when the country underwent its haphazard and confused transition from a totalitarian society with central planning and a rigid economy to a free market economy based on democracy.

There are no women's representative bodies, parliamentary women's groups or official gender ad-

¹ Main researcher and head of the research team at the Linguistics Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. A somewhat different version of this article appeared in Natalia Cardona, Elsa Duhagon and Amir Hamed, eds., *Occasional papers 06 Beijing and Beyond: Putting gender economics at the forefront*, Social Watch, March 2010. Available from: <www.socialwatch.org/node/11571>.

² This was the first known blueprint for a constitutional democracy.

³ Shahamir Shahamirian, *Vorogayt parats (Snare of Glory)*, Madras, India, 1773, republished in Tiflis in 1919, Article 3.

visers. In one exceptional instance in 2002, a woman was appointed vice-minister at the Ministry of Social Security to coordinate action on women's rights. She did not stay long, and when another woman was appointed to the job she was soon dismissed. Actually, women's issues are dealt with by the Department of Women and Infancy, which was set up in 1997 by the Ministry of Social Security in collaboration with the Ministry of Health's department to protect maternal and infant health.

This lack of gender-sensitive institutions is only too evident in the way the country reports about its international commitments. For example, Armenia was among the 191 countries that pledged to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, including MDG3, to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. In 2005, the country issued its first intermediate progress report. Although this report was a combined effort by the Government, civil society organizations, international organizations and UN partners in Armenia, it was clear that the policies were closely tailored to the country's situation and the targets agreed upon were more elastic than those that were internationally accepted.

The role of civil society organizations

After the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Armenia's already existing women's organizations became more active and new ones were created. In addition, various international organizations – including UNDP, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – initiated research on gender equity. These bodies, along with other international donors, have provided numerous grants for women's NGOs and this has helped them to grow and consolidate.

One of the main objectives of these women's NGOs is to promote the empowerment of women and this operates as a unifying idea that transcends the various and diverse fields of activity in which they are involved. From the beginning, these organizations promoted civil rights for women and lobbied for action on social problems that affect women. They have done good work to defend and foster women's rights and leadership, to improve the way women are treated and to combat gender violence.

Achievements and failures

The Government has made plans and set up bodies to promote gender equality. However, these have not had the expected results due to the lack of financial resources, which has led to inadequate implementation. At the same time there is a lack of awareness about the issue among the population as a whole.

As part of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Prime Minister issued a decree in 1997 setting up a committee to put into practice the

1998-2000 Gender Policies Development Program. However, this scheme to improve the situation of women was never implemented due to the lack of financial resources. A voluntary consultative body called the Women's Council was subsequently set up in 2000 under the mandate of the Prime Minister, but his successor later abolished this body.

The Government's greatest achievement in this area has been to obtain parliamentary approval for the "Republic of Armenia 2004-2010 National Action Plan to improve the situation of women and strengthen their role in society." This plan defined the key principles, priorities and aims of public policy to tackle issues relating to women's rights and gender equality. Based on the relevant provisions in the country's Constitution it is geared towards implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action. Its mandate also covers documents from the Council of Europe's committee on gender equality, the MDGs and the relevant sections of other international instruments to which the Republic of Armenia is committed.

The action plan consists of seven sections that deal with the following goals:

- Guarantee equal rights and opportunities among women and men in decision-making and in the social and political sphere.
- Improve women's social and economic situation.
- Improve the education sector.
- Improve women's health.
- Eliminate violence against women.
- Examine the role of the mass media and cultural institutions in the presentation of reports about women's issues and the construction of a model for women.
- Introduce institutional reforms.

Several informational pamphlets have been published to clarify some of these points. One such pamphlet contained the findings and recommendations of a research initiative on gender violence including statistical data disaggregated by sex. In the last decade various bodies were set up to deal with social concerns and matters of health and employment, including the Institute of Ombudsman in 2004. However, they have lacked adequate financing and had no power to develop or maintain effective policies to overcome gender inequality and establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Other obstacles have been created by the failure to put in place mechanisms for coordination among the different bodies involved and for implementation. The low level of public awareness about the issues also needs to be addressed.

In 2006 the UNDP published a Summary Pamphlet about Gender Equality and an Electronic Bulletin about gender and change. The pamphlet provided general information about gender, national and international frameworks, and mechanisms to protect and promote women's rights. It was aimed at policy makers in central and local Government, civil society organizations, defenders of women's rights, researchers and anyone seeking basic information on human rights.

Trafficking in women

Women and girls are trafficked from Armenia to the United Arab Emirates and Turkey for commercial sexual exploitation and both women and men are trafficked to Russia for the purpose of forced labour.⁴

A Committee on Trafficking of Women was set up in 2002 with representatives from all interested government ministries and bodies as well as from NGOs. It developed the concept of the fight against human trafficking and two national action plans for the periods 2004-2006 and 2007-2009. These plans covered all aspects of human trafficking including the improvement of pertinent legislation, research into the nature and scope of the problem, preventive measures, information dissemination and providing assistance for those affected. However, like the other bodies mentioned, the Committee lacked money and power to implement these policies effectively. The country's police force also established a department to combat human trafficking in 2005.

Conclusion

The use of women's liberation as a propaganda tool during the communist era was so effective it is still generally considered that gender equality was achieved in Armenia a long time ago. It is only through educating women about the essence of democracy that they have begun to understand the importance of activism to tackle "hidden discrimination" and the lack of mechanisms to implement legislation. Feminist scholars and women advocates should take joint action to address the situation of Armenian women and establishing real gender equality. ■

⁴ See for example, U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Washington, DC, 2009. Also according to official figures in the course of 2009 the number of persons officially identified as trafficking victims was 60, almost doubling the previous year.