

Women's rights in Armenia

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Women's rights have been granted in Armenia since ancient times. With the advent of the modern Republic, they were re-consecrated and, during the Soviet Era, they were expanded. However, The transition to democracy and a free market has deteriorated the situation of Armenian women in society. Today they face discrimination in every aspect of life. The Government has not realized the full extent of the problem and the attempts to comply with international commitments are feeble and under-funded.

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Women's equal rights have a long history in Armenia: Armenian ancient codes and legal regulations provide indirect evidence of the fact that in ancient times women were treated as equal members of society in issues of heritage, property and so on. For instances the code of Shahapivan (443 B.C.), provides "women a right to possess a family property in case the husband deserted his wife without any reason. It was mentioned also that a wife had right to bring a new husband home". The Armenian famous public figure, writer and philosopher of 18th century Shahamir Shahamirian states:

"Each human individual, whether Armenian or of another ethnicity, whether male or female, born in Armenia or moved to Armenia from other countries, will live in equality and will be free in all their occupations. No one will have the right to lord

over another person, whereas their manual labor shall be remunerated according to any other work, as required by the Armenian Law" (*Pitfalls of glory*, Article 3).

It is important to mention, in this context, that the First Armenian Republic of 1918-1920 was one of the first to give women the right to vote and to be elected and 8 % of the members of its Parliament were women. It is also important to emphasize that the first female-ambassador in the world was Dr. Diana Abgar (Abgaryan) Ambassador of Armenia in Japan (While Alexandra Kollontai – generally recognized to be the first female ambassador – was appointed as Ambassador of Norway as late as 1923).

During the Soviet Era equal rights for men and women in work, educational, social and economic life were declared, the State guaranteed free and obligatory school education, free and accessible University Education, free and accessible medical services, paid 24 days' vacation, allowances, prenatal and post-natal vacation etc. In 1920 the right to abortion was legalized and medical care in this field guaranteed.

Despite this advances women in Soviet Armenia carried a double load and faced structural discrimination. Although the Armenian Constitution states that men and women are equal, strong mechanisms to bring this about in the daily life of Armenian society are non-existent.

According to the law of Independent Armenia, Armenian women and men enjoy equal rights in political life, in work and in family. Legislative norms in Armenia mostly correspond to the major international standards. While the Constitution does not directly refer to gender equity, the principle is ensured by numerous laws. Participation of citizens in the establishment of democracy and decision-making are the most fundamental human rights.

There is gender discrimination in every sphere

The transition to democracy and a free market caused deterioration of the status of Armenian women in society, as well as of their economic situation. Today there is no national policy addressing women's status. And there is a need for processes that deal

THE BODIES CREATED FOR ASSISTING WOMEN LACK EFFICIENCY AND FUNDING

The following bodies that tackle social, health-related issues and employment concerns for women were created in the past decade. Regrettably they are under-funded or lack the power to either develop or carry out an effective policy to overcome obstacles facing the status of women's and to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

- In 2000, the Women's Council, a voluntary consultative body, was created under the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia. However the new Prime Minister eliminated it.
- In October 2002 the Committee on Trafficking in Women was established. The representatives of all interested ministries and agencies as well as non-governmental organizations were represented in this committee. The Committee elaborated the Concept of Fight against Human Trafficking and a National Action Plan was devised for the period 2004-2006. The Second National Action Plan was adopted in December 2007, for 2007-2009. It covers all aspects of policy making related to human trafficking including mainstreaming legislation, investigating trafficking issues their scope, the adoption of preemptive measures, information dissemination as well assistance to victims of human trafficking.
- In June 2005 the National Police created a Department on the Fight against Human Trafficking.
- In 2006 the UNDP published a *Gender Equality Briefing Brochure* and a *Gender and Change e-Newsletter*. The Brochure aimed at providing general information on gender and gender equality issues, national and international frameworks and mechanisms protecting and promoting women's rights. It was intended for policy makers at central and local levels, civil society organizations, gender advocates, researchers, as well as for anyone seeking basic information on equal rights.
- The Gender and Change e-Newsletter was jointly prepared by UNDP "Gender and Politics in Southern Caucasus" programs in Armenia and Georgia. These two UNDP offices were the first to fulfill the innovative approach of preparing the newsletter on a rotational basis. This Newsletter is envisioned as a forum for all UNDP country offices in our region.
- In 2004 the Institute of the Ombudsman was created. ■

with gender inequities. The Government has made no attempts to change this situation as it considers gender equality an issue that was resolved during Soviet times. The lack of effective mechanisms to ensure the proper implementation of legislation leads to discrimination of women in all spheres, including political participation.

Women are often left out of economic and political processes, resume traditional roles in society, and experience the disproportionate effects of a hazardous and thoughtless transition from a totalitarian society (with a centrally planned and rigid economy) to a free market economy-based on democracy. And today there are no women's representative bodies, parliamentary groups, or official gender advisors in Armenia. An exception was the appointment of a female Deputy Minister, in 2002, to the Ministry of Social Security she was charged with coordinate activities aimed at addressing women's issues. Nevertheless, she was dismissed soon after and another woman was appointed who in turn was removed. At present, women's issues are dealt with by the Department for Women's and Children's Issues created within the Republic of Armenia Social Security Ministry in 1997, as well as the Mother and Child Health Protection Division of the Republic of Armenia Ministry of Health.

This lack of effective gender entities surfaces in how the country reports to its international commitments. Armenia was one of the 191 countries to sign the Millennium Declaration. Respect for and commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women is recognized as one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Goal 3 of the MDGs to promote gender equality and empower women and eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary schooling, preferably by 2005 and no later than 2015. In 2005, Armenia published a first progress report on meeting the MDGs. The progress report had a notably strong degree of adaptation to the national situation, setting out broader goals than the global targets. Nevertheless, achievement of all of these goals is assessed as only 'possible' or 'likely'.

Achievements and setbacks

- In the framework of the Beijing Action Plan implementation in 1997, the Prime Minister issued a decree on creating a Committee to carry out the 1998-2000 Gender Policy Development Program. This was a three-year program designed to improve the status of women, which was never implemented due to the lack of financing.
- The most important achievement was the approval of the "2004-2010 Republic of Armenia National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Society". (Decree number N 645 - N dated 8 of April 2004 Of the Government of the Republic of Armenia). The Action Plan defines the principles, priorities, and key targets of the public policy that is pursued to address women's issues in the Republic of Armenia. It is based on the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia and is targeted at the fulfillment of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women, the recommendations of the Fourth Beijing Conference (1995), the documents of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Equality between Women and Men, the UN Millennium Declaration requirements, and commitments of the Republic of Armenia under other international instruments.

The Action Plan comprises 8 sections:

- Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in decision-making and in the social and political spheres;
- Improving the Social and Economic Condition of Women;
- Education Sector;
- Improving the Health Condition of Women;
- Eliminating Violence against Women;
- Role of the Mass Media and Cultural Institutions in Reporting on Women's Issues and Building a Female Portray Model; and
- Institutional Reforms.

Some points, like advancing research and recommendations on violence against women and the gathering of statistical data – contained within this sections – were implemented the program as a whole remained unaccomplished.

Some entities were created over the past decade to tackle social, health related issues, and employment concerns. Regrettably they are under-funded or lack the power to either develop or carry out effective policy to overcome gender inequities and to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men. The reasons for this failure were lack of funding, the lack of coordination between the different agencies involved and the absence of mechanisms of accountability for implementation. Ultimately the low level of awareness among the population was a huge obstacle to their success.

Women and civil society

It is worth noting that, after the Beijing Conference, the women's organizations became more active, new ones were founded and several international organization including UNDP, USAID, OSCE initiated research on the topic. These organizations, as well as other international donors, awarded numerous grants to women's NGOs. This contributed to the promotion of women's NGOs particularly and of civil society in general. Empowering women has been one of the main objectives of women's organizations. It serves as a unifying idea for all these organizations, regardless of the diversity of their fields of activity. In the beginning women's organizations were launched to promote women's civil rights or to address social problems affecting women. These organizations have been conducting a great work on women's rights, advocacy, leadership and confronting gendered-based violence and trafficking of women. ■