Women’s rights in Armenia

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.

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 instance 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
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 en-
sure the proper implementation of legislation leads
to discrimination of women in all spheres, including
political participation.

Women are often left out of economic and po-
titical processes, resume traditional roles in society,
and experience the disproportionate effects of a haz-
ardous 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. Nev-
ertheless, 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 cre-
ated 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 commit-
ments. Armenia was one of the 191 countries to sign
the Millennium Declaration. Respect for and com-
munication 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 second-
ary schooling, preferably by 2005 and no later than
2015. In 2005, Armenia published a first progress re-
port 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 im-
plementation in 1997, the Prime Minister is-
sued a decree on creating a Committee to carry
out the 1998-2000 Gender Policy Development
Program. This was a three-year program de-
signed to improve the status of women, which
was never implemented due to the lack of fi-
nancing.

• The most important achievement was the ap-
proval 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 pur-
sued 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 Con-
vention on the Elimination of All Forms of Vio-
ence against Women, the recommendations of
the Fourth Beijing Conference (1995), the docu-
ments of the Council of Europe Steering Commit-
tee 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 recom-
endations on violence against women and the
shadowing 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 employ-
ment concerns. Regrettably they are under-funded or
deadly 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 account-
ability for implementation. Ultimately the low level of
awareness among the population was a huge obsta-
cle 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, ad-
vocacy, leadership and confronting gendered-based
violence and trafficking of women.