

From the Cinderella of Soviet Modernization to the Post- Soviet Return to “National Traditions”: Women’s Rights in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia

**Nona Shahnazaryan, Gunel Movlud, Edita
Badasyan**

This paper aims at providing a comparative discussion of women’s political participation in the countries of the South Caucasus, focusing both on differences and common trends of policies toward women in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The analysis of the Soviet heritage in the area of women’s emancipation allows to track the trajectory of post-Soviet transformations without fragmenting or decontextualizing the post-Soviet experiences. This approach allows to identify the contemporary processes that are rooted in the Soviet past and those that have new origins. Attention is focused on the changes in the system of spaces reserved for women and the discourses that are formed around this topic. The paper exposes patterns impeding and promoting female leadership and involvement in the public sphere. The paper also deciphers what verbal, non-verbal, and other strategies women use in politics and the public sphere in order to be accepted professionally.

Introduction

This paper aims at providing a comparative discussion of the issues of women’s political participation in the countries of the South Caucasus, focusing both on differences and common trends of policies toward women in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The main research questions have been: how have the Soviet and post-Soviet transformations and social cataclysms affected the political rights of women? How does (or doesn’t) women’s political participation influence social processes in the South Caucasus? What avenues lead women to politics?

The analysis of the data collected in these countries through different types of interviews and conversations, together with the analysis of secondary sources has allowed to outline key dynamics that can shed light on these questions. To this end, attention is focused on the changes in the system of spaces reserved for women (i.e. the quota system) and the discourses that are formed around this topic. The paper exposes patterns impeding female leadership, and, on the contrary, promoting women’s political participation and involvement in the public sphere. Since politics is conventionally “not a female thing”, the paper also deciphers what discursive or verbal, non-verbal, and other strategies women use in politics in order to be accepted professionally. An array of key questions of regional relevance has been touched upon in the paper. In particular, the paper looks at the effect on women’s empowerment of:

- the memory of the Soviet past;
- the conflicts in the region;
- the mass media;
- the activities of international organizations, civil societies, and activists;
- the system of traditional values.

According to the authors, the analysis of the Soviet heritage in the area of women’s emancipation allows to track the trajectory of post-Soviet transformations without fragmenting or decontextualizing the post-Soviet experiences. The diachronic approach allows to identify the contemporary processes that are rooted in the Soviet past and those that have fundamentally new origins.

The contribution of the three authors allows the identification of shared and specific elements in the area of women’s rights in the state entities of the South Caucasus that are still under transformation including the *de facto* Nagorno Karabakh Republic (*de facto* NKR), unrecognized by the international

community. The inclusion of the latter in this research (and the leaving out of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – similar entities on the *de jure* territory of Georgia) is conditioned by the fact that one of the authors has immediate knowledge through own research to the area of women’s political participation in Nagorno Karabakh.

Women’s political rights and representation in the Soviet era

State feminism and the “working mother contract”

Undoubtedly, the experience of women’s emancipation in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had a significant influence on post-Soviet state building. Raising the status of women and their political participation in the USSR had its specific stages and ambiguities. The Bolsheviks’ attempts at restructuring and reconstructing social relationships between men and women is particularly noteworthy¹. However, along with the adoption of decrees that fully and unconditionally equated men and women in their rights, the Soviet government banned all independent women’s groups. As in all other areas, the government monopolized the protection of women’s interests. The emancipation of Soviet women through a revolution on the cultural and everyday routine levels gave start to an entirely new phenomenon – *state feminism*. The years between 1925 and 1928 became the apogee of the *cultural revolution* with an emphasized gender component. Social programs targeting women were based on the fundamental studies of August Bebel who claimed that women were structurally the weakest and suppressed link throughout the entire human history, including the era of industrialization (Bebel 1959, 267-274).

Within the framework of this policy, the single-party government took under its protection *women’s departments* (*zhenotdel*) and later *women’s councils* (*zhensovet*) that were created by the party itself. In his address “To the Working Women” Vladimir Lenin stressed, “The proletariat cannot achieve complete freedom unless it achieves complete freedom for women.” (Lenin 1919). The

¹ The principal approaches to women’s issues adopted by the Bolsheviks were based on Friedrich Engels’s famous work “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State”, a concept which he developed together with Karl Marx.

prominent Bolshevik theorist Alexandra Kollontai contributed significantly to the articulation of the special state policy towards women² (Kollontai 1923, 199).

The public policy of solving women’s issues from 1920 to 1930 was based on the theoretical principles of Marxism arguing that participation in production is crucial in determining the social status of women. The idea that women may not work in the line of production was completely eliminated from the Soviet social consciousness. The second half of the 1920s was the era of industrialization, collectivization, and the “great construction projects of socialism” (Rogachev 2014). The state was therefore in a desperate need of cheap labor, and women were a perfect fit for that role. In this regard, gender relations in the Soviet era are referred to as the “working mother contract”. In a climate of inadequate social infrastructure and the old household routine, this meant a double load (Ayvazova 2002) (Zdravomyslova and Tyomkina 2002). This was an example of explicit state intervention into the construction of gender codes particularly a new type of hegemonic femininity which marginalized the traditionally feminine characters of passivity and invisibility in favor of a role model of a woman who manages to combine her public role with the tasks of everyday routine.

Orientalism – socialism – gender

The *women’s departments* that were created as part of the central and local government bodies existed up until 1929. In the 1920s and 1930s, women’s delegate meetings organized at the workplaces or in residential areas in the case of housewives, emerged as the main forms of women’s movement. A particular emphasis was put on the emancipation of women in the Muslim republics and autonomies, deploying a strongly orientalist rhetoric. In December 1924, the Central Committee of the All-Soviet Communist Party of the Bolsheviks adopted a decree “On the immediate objectives in the sphere of labor of female employees, peasants, and workers of the East” where the primary objective was the integration of women into the workforce (Kirilina 2000, 48).

Within the framework of different Soviet institutions, centers for the elimination of illiteracy or the so-called “*Vseobuches*” (universal learning) were opened everywhere. These centers were maintained by the most active and educated citizens of both sexes. The women of the Soviet republics were taking

² Alexandra Kollontai was People’s Commissar for social welfare in first Soviet government in 1917-1918 and she was the first woman-minister in history (Condit n.d.).

expedited literacy courses and soon themselves were becoming trainers at *Vseobuches*.

Special measures were taken to increase not only the cultural but also the agrarian education level of the women from the “East”, creating a special role of “promoted” or “nominated” women-peasants from the “East” – “*vydvizhenka*”. On April 22 in 1929, the collegium of the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) issued the protocol N21 signed by deputy People’s Commissar of Agriculture Alexander Muralov ordering the organization of courses to train administrative agricultural staff from the “promoted women-peasants from the East”. The first article of the decree was deeming it “necessary in the current year to organize special four-month training programs at the Agriculture Academy named after Timiryazev (Ulasevich 1930).

The delegates of the British trade unions, who visited the Soviet republics, described their impressions about the new soviet gender policy in the “East” as follows: “In Baku... native Eastern women showed us around the Central Model Club for Eastern women, which has a membership of 2,000 working women. Attached to the club is a crèche, dispensary, and workshops for the teaching of all kinds of handicrafts, including bookbinding, sewing, embroidery, shoemaking, etc. In addition, there are educational courses which prepare women for the Worker’s Faculties, the Teachers’ Training Collages and Soviet Party Schools. There are also musical and drama circles. Special clubs for women are the exception. They are only organized for the women of the East and of the backward [original language such as “native women”, “backward” are kept as they were used in the original quotation] nationalities, because it was impossible to attract women into the clubs where men were present” (Otchet zhenskoy delegatsii britanskikh tred-yunionov 1935, 39). The orientalist language was characteristic not only to the Soviet discourse but also to the outside observers of the *state feminism* in the Soviet Union.

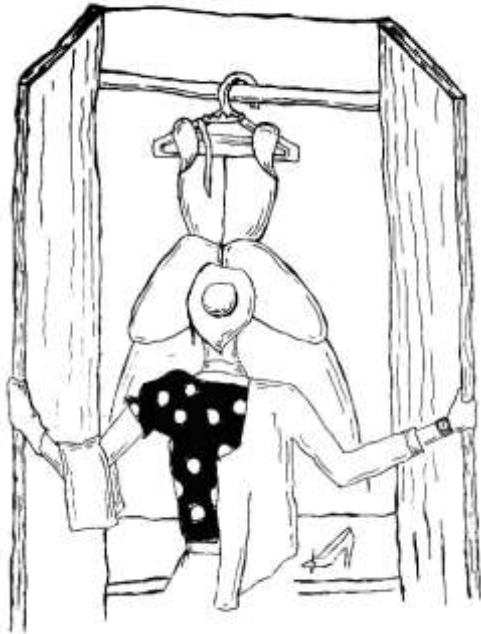
Cinderellas for the Soviet Industrial Revolution

By the 1930s, the excitement around women’s issues in the USSR peaked and there were significant advancements toward the “solution”. “Later, when industrialization was set as a course, the demand for labor increased dramatically, and the involvement of women in the labor force became more intense” (Kirilina 2000, 48). In 1936, a book called “The Woman in the USSR” was published in Moscow. The book was prepared at the Central Office of the

National Economic Accounting of the State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*) and contained statistical data on the situation of women in the Soviet Union during the first and second five-year plans. It also provided data on pre-revolutionary Russia and the capitalist countries of the West for comparison.

In this book, it is noted that “the native nationalities of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics significantly fall behind in the inclusion of women’s labor force in the process of production” (Central Office of the National Economic Records of the State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*) of the USSR 1936, 11). In the rest of the Soviet Union, the motto introduced by the government was supported by women often not just with enthusiasm, but also with certain fanaticism. An example of such working enthusiasm were the women participants of the *Stakhanovite movement* – encouraging hard work and overachievement at work. Another initiative marked by the emergence of the neologism “*khetagurovka*” was prompted after the publication of an open letter

by Valentina Khetagurova calling on young girls to take part in the development of the Far Eastern region to which 250 thousand girls responded. The tractor driver Pasha Angelina’s initiative “100 thousand female friends – onto the tractor!” gathered 200 thousand supporters (Kirilina 2000, 51).



The analysis of the Soviet legislation on gender roles shows that an asymmetry was still persistent in the “socialist family”. However, it was an asymmetry different from the previous traditional forms, discourses, and practices. A mother’s function in the family became much more complicated. From now on, she was performing all the previous tasks

imposed by the traditional model, including the upbringing of children and household chores and in addition, she was supporting the family budget with her paycheck. Promises made by the government on easing this burden always had less importance than other “priority” tasks. Thus, the *state feminism* of the

Soviet era in essence not only left untouched the traditional division of labor between the sexes, but also legalized a double load for women, who were never relieved of their household and childcare duties. The combination of family and professional life gradually emerged as a new distinct social problem. The Soviet woman bore on her shoulders “the great construction projects of socialism” (Rogachev 2014) becoming the Cinderella of modernization. (Barsukova 1998).

The Soviet social experiment resulted in a dilemma. On the one hand, the inadequate social infrastructure and the traditional domestic labor led to an increased workload for women, who in addition to traditional roles, were forced to deal with the burden of a public role and a professional career. On the other hand, a woman’s education and especially her labor, often going beyond ordinary exploitation (hence the metaphor of the Cinderella), became a stimulus for the status of women and paved the way for possibilities for female emancipation. It was precisely the unprecedented practices of that historical period created by the doctrine of *state feminism*, that reconfigured the role model gendered subject, producing the *Femina Sovietica*.

The system of reservation: Quotas

In later years, the vigorous political activity advocating for Soviet women of the 1930s gradually declined. The thesis that “the women’s issue has been resolved” resulted in the elimination of the *women’s departments* from the party structures. In 1934, the women’s sector of the Central Committee of the All-Soviet Communist Party of the Bolsheviks was dissolved. However, the involvement of women in the political life through the quota system became an important part of the Soviet policy of affirmative action. Adjusting the election system, the Soviet government challenged the alienation of women from politics and power that dominated in the rest of the world. The share of women in the Supreme Soviets of all levels was relatively high. By the early 1980s, for example, in the USSR it was 32.8 percent; in the RSFSR it was 35 percent; in the Union republics it was an average of 36.2 percent; in the autonomous republics it was 40.3 percent. Thus they constituted the so-called “critical minority” in the parliament of the country ranging anywhere from 30 to 40 seats. Despite the drawbacks and abuses, the quotas became the steel crown of the Soviet egalitarian ideology. The first elections to representative bodies without the quotas in 1989 and 1990 showed that “the women’s issue” was far from being solved in the country. Women lost these elections. In 1990, female members in the Supreme Council of RSFSR were only 3 percent and in the Supreme Council of the USSR, the share was 8.9 percent from the total number of members.

The level of gender equality in the Soviet period even when it comes to the quota system should not be overestimated. The system of granting women their political rights and representation had serious flaws locally. For example, in all the three South Caucasus republics, men dominated in the higher positions of the power structures. In addition, their labor was paid five times higher than the same work performed by women (Dudwick 1997, 238-239) (Ishkanian 2003, 482). At the level of the Union republics, there were no women with ministerial portfolios. Most often, women were appointed as second deputies of the local Central Committees of the Communist Party, and this was their “glass ceiling”. Since the 1980s, women appeared in the dissident sphere, but not in conventional politics.

Women made it to power only during times of crises – when there was war, chaos, and devastation. The Second World War is a vivid example, when the entire burden of the work “behind the lines” fell on the shoulders of women. This period accounts for the peak of female appointments to high-ranking positions in urban and rural areas. For example, the war played an important role in Zakhra Kerimova’s career. In 1941, she was appointed as the minister of social security of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, and maintained this position for almost ten years. During the war, Zakhra Kerimova mobilized women to work at the oilfields taking the place of men who had left for the frontline. She personally was present at the production sites to ensure uninterrupted supply of fuel to the frontline. After the war, Zakhra Kerimova held high-ranking positions in the Party and in the government: in August 1952, she was appointed as Chairman of the Azerbaijan Council of Trade Unions and from September 25 of the same year and until 1954 she was a member of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (Nəzərli 2015).

The number of chairwomen of the collective and state farms (*kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz*) in the South Caucasus republics and the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) was at its all-time high when the general military mobilization did not leave another choice. In other words, despite the egalitarian mottos, women were delegated supporting roles, and the access to prestigious positions was available on a residual basis.

Women’s rights in the post-Soviet period

The realities of the nation-states: the dashing 1990s

The political processes and conflicts of the past two and a half decades and the dominant trend of the politicization of ethnicity have led to violent clashes, refugees and forcibly displaced persons, and have contributed to the rapid intensification of economic emigration of the population of the South Caucasus countries.

“The late 1980s, along with the establishment and development of national movements in the republics of the USSR and the radicalization of the struggle for national independence, were marked by an interesting phenomenon – an active participation of women in political processes (but not in the government)” (Abasov, *Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhanе. Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* 2001). After the collapse of the USSR, the National Front came to power in Azerbaijan. With this, the status of women in the country changed in several ways: there was a complete shift in the construction of the hegemonic image of a woman. While the image of a *woman-laborer* was promoted during the Soviet times, the “woman-patriot” became more appreciated in the era of national movements. Socially active women-nationalists vehemently advocating for the restoration of “national roots” were honored. The ethno-nationalistic bias of these trends was reflected in slogans that called for the restoration of the “Turkic world” and the “Turkic blood”, the creation of an ethnically-homogenous state, and the support for the “autochthonous national values”. For obvious reasons, the conservative pathos of these statements could not promote women’s participation in the government bodies. In a conservative climate, the woman’s role and, in a way, her “honorable mission” was to adhere to the traditional codes of femininity – modesty, chastity, and obedience within the strict boundaries of the home and family. Thus, the woman was invisible in the public sphere.

The construction of this type of femininity with an emphasis on a woman’s role as the keeper of the home and traditions became a powerful trend within the post-Soviet transformations. In an attempt to match the image of a “truly-national” Azerbaijani woman, as opposed to the Soviet image, and under the powerful influence of the post-Soviet ideology of “patriotism”, women would voluntarily hand over their gold jewelry to arm nationalist military groups leaving to fight in Nagorno Karabakh (similar phenomena took place in

Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh as well). Women stood in the front rows during the protests without being afraid of clashes with the police and later with the military. At the same time, some Azerbaijani women appealing to the symbolic traditional power of *adat* (customary law) tried to stop the bloodshed, even if unsuccessfully, by using the Caucasus-wide tradition of throwing their headscarves under the feet of the aggressive mob.

In Georgia, during the same period, activities aimed at servicing the conflicts were carried out by the so-called “black tights” – Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s most fanatical and devoted followers who were organized akin to fighting squads. In Armenia, in addition to the efforts to support the logistics of the frontline, about a hundred women took an active part in the military operations during the Nagorno Karabakh war of 1992-1994. Women in Armenia also participated in coordinated actions including the reproduction and distribution of printed information representing the Armenian version of the conflict in the years of the Karabakh movement (N. R. Shahnazaryan, Unpublished field materials and observations 1988-1991), (N. R. Shahnazaryan, Unpublished field materials and observations 2000-2001).

Azerbaijani scholar Ali Abasov underlines that in concurrence with the establishment of the new national elites of the 1990s “in the streets of the capital city of Baku, one could see well-organized groups of women who were establishing ‘their order’ in the city. Through public protest (chanting radical slogans and so on), these groups could achieve resignations of unwanted ministers and high-ranking officials and prevent people from getting to their work places. At times, women were against the government more aggressively and uncompromisingly than ‘male’ popular fronts and movements. Of course, this mobilization was orchestrated behind the scenes by seasoned puppeteers of the opposite sex, who had an excellent understanding of the role of women in the ‘fight against the empire’. Women united and sought from the authorities the impossible, resisted the law enforcement authorities, and later the army in a way that men were unable to do” (Abasov, *Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhane. Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* 2001). Nevertheless, despite the shifts in the dominant, officially-promoted criteria of femininity (that were socially marginalized in the Soviet period) and the clear social and political activism of the time, women’s political participation and representation in the power structures in the post-Soviet period, decreased sharply.

Women as parliament decor: New facets of political object-/subjectivity

The three South Caucasus countries gained independence in 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, at the same time inheriting the culture of women’s mandatory participation in political and public processes. The quota system used in the Soviet Union ensured women’s participation in all state and party structures, including a 30 percent quota in all-Union and republican legislatures, as well as local councils. What changes has this inherited political culture of the quota system undergone in the post-Soviet period?

The dissident period of transition towards independence and the reforms in the political systems of the republics began with a reversing logic: everything associated with the Soviet experience was rejected. The abolition of the quota system began during the *Perestroika* at the end of the 1980s (Posadskaya 1993). As in the majority of post-Soviet states, in the countries of the South Caucasus, women were practically excluded from the new governments. In a way, these changes can be viewed as a reaction to the artificiality of the Soviet quota system that contributed to the appointment of “compliant” and “pliable” women rather than competent female politicians as a result undermining women’s political participation in general (Dudwick 1997, 243).

In Armenia, for example, in 1985 out of the 219 members of the Supreme Council, 121 were women. In 1991, the first National Assembly of independent Armenia had only eight women despite their active participation in the national movement (Ishkanian 2003, 487). Nevertheless, there have been certain changes in this area. In the 1990s, the main advocate and fighter for women’s participation, or more precisely, for women’s *presence* in the public sphere in Armenia was the then-Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Siradeghyan, who saw in it a “decorative value”. He initiated the creation of women’s divisions within the structure of traffic police, which was highly unpopular because of the lack of professionalism and unethical behavior of these divisions during routine interaction with ordinary citizens. He also advocated for the mandatory presence of women in the National Assembly considering meetings exclusively with men very boring. He is the author of the phrase “Our ladies should decorate the parliamentary hearings with their presence”. In 1997 women made up only 8 percent in the National Assembly, and held only one ministerial portfolio (Dudwick 1997, 243). This number doubled by 2008.

During the first years of independence, the opinion that economically and politically successful women achieved everything through the patronage of influential men prevailed. Nora Dudwick underlines that such an attitude signals the dilemma that women participating in political activities in Armenia face (the same trends exist also in Azerbaijan and Georgia). It was believed that without approval and support of men, such careers would be practically impossible. This attitude confirms the “popular prejudice that women in politics are simply tools for men” (Dudwick 1997, 244-245).

Even today, women-public figures continue to face serious criticism especially if they prioritize career at the expense of the family duties ascribed to them through “tradition”. Social portrayal of their own image first and foremost as *bona fide* mothers and wives (Beukian 2014) continues to be a vitally important strategy for gaining approval in political life (G. N. Shahnazaryan 2015, 11). Neo-traditional trends are reflected in the patterns of women’s appointments as cabinet members in Armenia: after independence only few ministers were women and they are usually appointed for underfunded positions that don’t provide for real power (for example, the current Minister of Culture and Minister of Diaspora)³.

There are no grounds to believe that women appointed to high-ranking positions have been using their position for the advancement of the idea of gender equality. Instead, they are publically supporting patriarchal relations. For example, in her public statements, Hranush Hakobyan has noted repeatedly that the Ministry of Diaspora sees its mission, among other things, in the “promotion of the traditional” Armenian family and gender roles. She has made media appearances advocating for the preservation of the hegemonic role models of behavior for Armenian women (including traits such as modesty, motherhood, and the understanding of “boundaries” and “limits” of one’s claims to public visibility). In support of the idea of big families, the Minister of Diaspora authored one of the ministry’s slogans as “Let’s gather around a dinner table with at least three sons”. She also “mourned” the issue of mixed marriages in the diaspora (Epress 2010) (Ministry of Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia 2012).

³ The Ministry of Diaspora was established in 2008 with Hranush Hakobyan as the minister unchangeably since then. The Ministers of Culture have also been women since 2003 – Tamara Poghosyan (2003-2006) and Hasmik Poghosyan (2006-present).

In Azerbaijan, there were women with successful political careers during the Soviet years as well. In 1980, Elmira Kafarova replaced Mehdi Mehdizade at the post of the Minister of Education of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1983, she was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic (Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership 2015). Kafarova stayed at her post also during the troubled period in Azerbaijan’s history. On December 30 in 1989 Kafarova was successful in renaming the city of Kirovabad (named in 1934 after Sergey Kirov) back to its historical name – Ganja⁴. On March 2 in 1992, Azerbaijan became a member to the United Nations (UN). Right after that, Kafarova resigned due to health issues. Elmira Kafarova’s resignation coincided with the first years of Azerbaijan’s independence. For comparison, there were no female ministers in Soviet Georgia (Sabedashvili, Gender and Democratization: the Case of Georgia 2007).

Lala Shevket took the first prestigious position in independent Azerbaijan. With Heydar Aliyev coming to power in 1993, she was appointed as the Secretary of State. In 1994, she was assigned the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, and the culmination of her successful career became the President’s decree on appointing her to the post of the representative of Azerbaijan to the UN. However, “in protest against the corruption in the higher echelons of power” and because of disagreements with the policy carried out by Heydar Aliyev, Lala Shevket resigned (Shevket n.d.). After leaving the President’s team, she established the opposition Liberal Party of Azerbaijan. In the presidential elections in 1998, Lala Shevket was part of the so-called combined “top five” candidates for the post (Abasov, Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhanе. Tsentral’naya Aziya i Kavkaz 2001).

The Azerbaijani authorities took measures meant to be geared towards women’s needs largely guided by their own goals. One example of this is the decree “On measures aimed at strengthening the role of Azerbaijani women” adopted on January 14 in 1998, which included a set of activities. Another very typical presidential decree “On strengthening the role of women in the society” adopted recently in essence re-introduces the “women’s quota” system for

⁴ Ganja is the pseudonym of the first Azerbaijani poetess Mehsati Ganjavi. According to a legend, Ganja was the first city of women’s freedom in Azerbaijan, when in the 12th century Mehsati Ganjavi gathered around her a group of forty ladies and taught them oratory, dance, poetry, and music.

From the Cinderella of Soviet Modernization to the Post-Soviet Return to “National Traditions”: Women’s Rights in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia

power” (Abasov, *Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhanе. Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* 2001)

In the period from 1990 to 2000, there were relatively few women in the upper echelons of power in Georgia. In the period from 1998 to 2000, Tamar Beruchashvili was the Minister of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations, and Nino Chkhobadze held the post of the Minister of Environment Protection and Natural Resources from 1995 to 2004. One of the most prominent women-politicians in the 2000s in Georgia, Nino Burjanadze became the first chairwoman of the Parliament of Georgia holding this post from 2001 to 2008. At the same time, from 2003 to 2004 and from 2007 to 2008 she was the Acting President of Georgia (Sabedashvili, Unpublished interview “Polozheniye zhenshchin v SSSR i nachalo 90-kh godov” 2016). In the 2000s, there were several other women-ministers in Georgia – Cecily Gogiberidze, Vera Kobalia, Khatuna Gogoladze, Eka Tkheshelashvili, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze. These and other appointments are gradually transforming the image of a woman-minister in Georgia.

The debate on quotas: A redeeming solution or a conflation of concepts?

The objective of the quota system is to allow women, who make up at least half of the population in most countries in the world, to have at least the so-called “critical minority” of 30 to 40 percent of the seats in party-representative bodies, including the parliaments. The quota system is important as it ensures the creation of a “critical mass” of women in politics capable to significantly influence the political decision-making process and political culture as a whole, so historically it is justified as an effective tool of redistribution of power (alas, it is too early to speak about equality). The principles of representative democracy are difficult or even impossible to uphold with other ways. (Shvedova n.d.)

Currently, there are two legislative initiatives in Georgia relevant to the quota system. The first initiative purposes proportionality in party lists, which assumes equal numbers (50 percent each) of –women and men. In case this law was passed, only 38 out of 150 parliament members might have been women, which in any case is less than 50 percent. This draft law was initiated by the NGO coalition “Task Force on Women’s Political Participation” which was carrying out a campaign to change the existing system of gender inequality. However, this initiative did not move beyond public debates (Rusetskaya 2016).

The second initiative envisions to allocate 30 percent of the slots to women in party lists. Masterminds of the draft law were Nana Keinishvili and Tamaz Chkuaseli, members of the “Georgian Dream” party. On the 25th of May the initiative was discussed at the first reading of the plenary session of the Parliament.

In general, in Georgia the level of women’s’ political activity is very low, including in the Parliament with only 11.8 percent women. Of course, if compared to 1918-1920, when there were only 5 women in the Parliament, which was about 3 percent, then the current situation can be regarded as a certain positive change. It is evident that quotas are being used to change the index in an accelerated way. Experts consider that if a quota system is not introduced, it will take Georgia about 50 years to get to a 30 percent threshold of women’s participation in political structures (Rusetskaya 2016).

Armenia currently restored the reservation system for women through making amendments in the electoral code. The other two reservation methods – the direct reservation of seats in the Parliament or through party lists, the latter depending on the good will of the parties, are not implemented in Armenia (Hovnatanyan, Women's Movement and Gender Quotas in Armenia 2016). This decision was accompanied by heated public debate. Lara Aharonyan from the Women’s Resource center says, “I would insist on a 50 percent quota. Going below that is not even worth discussing. They need to be visible. Perhaps then they would fear less of the membership to the “boy’s club”. But if there is one woman per hundred men... Weather they are good or bad parliamentarians is unimportant especially since in any case they are not going to be worse than men...” (Aharonyan, Unpublished interview “Women in Politics” 2016).

Reforms have yielded significant result in the *de facto* NKR.

In Azerbaijan there is no polemics on quotas. Women are represented in the Milli Majlis in proportion of 18 out of 125 parliamentarians.

In general, the quota issue is being widely discussed in Georgia, Armenia, and in the *de facto* NKR, and during encompassing public debates all pro et contra are meticulously considered. On the one hand, the proposed innovations oblige men at the power to think about involving women at the political level of decision-making. This means that men have to “scooch over” and designate part of the political space for women. On the other hand, there are significant risks of obstructionist behavior, when male politicians will specifically look for

those women whom they can easily manipulate and who are socially ready to accept the “traditional” dominant position of men.

In addition, a special research on women’s participation in different political and public spaces has showed that women politicians can behave in an anti-feminist way showing a low level of tolerance toward the idea of women’s solidarity⁵. (N. R. Shahnazaryan, *V tesnykh ob'yatiyakh traditsii: voyna i patriarkhat* 2011, 135-157, 229-235). In the best case scenario, female politicians act as gender-free professionals distancing themselves from advocating for a more proportional women’s participation. In such a situation, earmarking of seats for marginalized groups can operate as a *deus ex machina*, offering a simple solution to the problem.

The authors of the article consider that the quota system can be used as a temporary measure until the results of the struggle of the ideological battle between patriarchy and gender equality become tangible. When the “natural” barriers against women in politics that have been forged and nurtured in the mainstream patriarchal tradition are removed, the quota systems can be revised. Until then, undoubtedly, the quota system is a state guarantee of equal rights and opportunities for both sexes (Shvedova n.d.).

At the same time, this raises a number of serious problems with the doctrinaire simplification of the gender spectrum. For example, observations in the South Caucasus countries reveal that often a woman coming to power as a result of the quota system tries to adapt the masculinist behavior. In this case, the survival strategies of a woman-politician in an unfriendly male-dominated environment aim to legitimize her access to power and achieve recognition as an equal. In an alternative scenario, a female politician publicly demonstrates adherence to the “traditional” rules, conveying and, and by virtue of authority, replicating the values of “national” femininity and the entire feature-set for a

⁵ For example, the former Lieutenant Colonel of the *de facto* NKR defense army Elmira Aghayan both verbally and in her behavior, manifested extreme patterns of a masculinized dominant mindset. Aghayan’s case illustrates how a woman (despite her biological sex) shows minimal sympathy towards women’s social issues. As a balancing act, the opposition “brought up” a new cohort of women activists with the ambition of applying for ministerial portfolios in the case of victory in the elections. These new women-politicians have nothing to do with the military experience and are determined to combat internal social problems. The opposition has already designed a prospective cabinet with female ministers comprising half of it. (N. R. Shahnazaryan, *V tesnykh ob'yatiyakh traditsii: voyna i patriarkhat* 2011, 229-235)

“normal” woman – a good mother and wife that is modest, hardworking, and so on. This circumstance may maintain the myth about the uselessness of increasing women’s representation in government institutions, since “the existence of rules and regulations themselves are a necessary but not a crucial component: whether or not the quotas will reach their goal depends largely on the application process” (Shvedova n.d.).

Effectiveness of quotas is being undermined by post-election self-withdrawal. This is a usual practice in the countries of the South Caucasus. For example, in Armenia in 2012 from 102 candidates who self-withdrew after the elections 26 were women. And while the majority did not even provide an explanation, it is obvious that the whole procedure was originally initiated only formally to ensure that the quota requirements are fulfilled. In an extreme case of 2012, the share of women in the party “Prosperous Armenia” decreased from 21.8 percent in the party’s election list to 5.4 percent of the seats in the legislature (Woman and Politics 2012 (in Armenian)) (G. N. Shahnazaryan 2015). “However, at present there is a special clause in the election codex that calls for a woman substitution in case of a self-withdrawal of a woman. The same is true for any public position; if a woman resigns, she is replaced by a woman.” (Aharonyan, Unpublished interview “Women in Politics” 2016). Tamara Hovnatanyan points out that the law calling for the substitution of a woman withdrawing from office by another woman is relevant only for the proportional system that is through the party lists (Hovnatanyan, Women’s Movement and Gender Quotas in Armenia 2016).

The quota system and the national structures of state power

Armenia switched to a semi-presidential system with a president, a prime-minister, and a single-chamber parliament. The National Assembly has 131 members elected every five years (41 seats are elected through the majoritarian system, and the remaining 90 through proportional representation)⁶. The official quota that ensures women’s participation refers only to the 90 seats of proportional representation and touches the gender composition of political party lists (candidates are being selected from those lists). According to the law

⁶ On December 6, 2015 Armenia held a referendum on changing the Constitution and limiting the power of the president; thus significant changes are expected in 2016 beyond.

starting from number two every fifth candidate in the list should be a woman, which in theory means that 20 percent of elected members of party are women.

The National Assembly of Armenia returned to the quota system in 1999, adopting a law providing for mandatory inclusion of women in the party lists – no less than 5 percent (in 2007 the quota increased to 15 percent, and in 2012 to 20 percent) (Hovnatanyan, *Women in Armenian Parliament: Metamorphosis of Gender-Based Quotas* 2015). In essence, according to the Gender Policy Strategic Action this number can increase up to 30 percent (Government of the Republic of Armenia 2011). After the recent elections of 2012, 14 out of 131 members of National Assembly were women (11 percent). As a result, women representation was less than envisioned by the current quota of 20 percent.

Very few women run and get elected to regional and local governments, where specific quotas do not exist. Female mayors or governors of regions are non-existent, and there are only a small number of women working as heads of village administration. According the UNDP report, women make up only 9 percent of district and local councils. This social pattern eloquently testifies to the effectiveness of gender quotas as an important lever to ensure women’s representation in government.

As it was mentioned, in Georgia out of 150 Parliament members, women take up only 18 seats – 11.8 percent. Only one Parliament committee out of 15 is headed by a woman. The same pattern is present at other state structures. Three of 19 state ministers are women. But this is one of those cases when quality overrides the quantity. These three ministerial portfolios are a rare combination and challenge the stereotype of the gender-based division of labor.

Tinat Khidasheli, in May 2015 became the first female Minister of Defense of Georgia. The second portfolio is held by Minister of Education and Science Tamar Sanikidze, and the third position is occupied by Minister of Justice Thea Tsulukiani. This is only 16 percent of ministerial posts, but it is more important that we are not talking about positions artificially created for women (such as a Minister of Youth Affairs, or an Assistant to the President for Cultural Affairs). However, this has been the limit of such positive dynamic. There is no single woman among the nine incumbent governors across the country. Rural peculiarities are also important. There are no woman ministers in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara.

In Azerbaijan, during Heydar Aliyev’s administration, a few women were appointed to government positions. Fatma Abdullazadeh took over as the head

of Humanitarian Policy Department of Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and until now continues her career in that position (Official Website of the President of Azerbaijan n.d.).

In 2006, only 14 women were elected to the Azerbaijani Milli Majlis (125 seats). In 2010 the number of women members of the Milli Majlis increased slightly and reached 20. As of today, there are 18 deputies (Azerbaijan respublikasi milli meclisi n.d.). There are no female ministers in the government. Even despite the fact that in Azerbaijan female teachers and doctors generally enjoy public approval and acknowledgement, in secondary schools and universities the highest positions are held by men. For example, there are no women in the position of a rector of a university. Although, the situation is better at the level of faculty deans and departments chairs, it is still far from balance. Statistical data for 2010 shows that only 14.1 percent of the total number of department chairs at universities were women. 19.8 percent of deans also were women. The number of male and female high school principals is 62.6 to 37.4. (Rumyansev 2012, 7)

The attitude toward female leadership: Mass media

In the South Caucasus republics, the attitude toward female leadership is wary. First of all, it can be due to the dominance of patriarchal norms that impose a passive social behavior model on women and provide men all the public space. The level of female solidarity is extremely low in the South Caucasus. Women in the society highly mistrust female politicians thinking that “a woman has to know her place” (which seems to be housekeeping chores). To put it differently, the locomotive of sexism is often headed by the women.

In Azerbaijan patriarchal-traditional mores and practices are a powerful impediment for not only women’s participation in the politics, but at a larger scale their presence in the public sphere. Female executives often face disapproval and disbelief. In Azerbaijani mass media that is filled with sexist clichés this phenomenon is called “sensitivity towards the mentality”. Mass media directly popularizes sexist views and outlooks. The analysis of Azerbaijani press shows that in any negative news report where the protagonist is a woman the news makes the headlines and is purposefully overemphasized. For example, if a murderer or the cause of a traffic accident is a woman then this is presented to the readers as something worthy of special attention, something out of ordinary.

In fact, there is tendency to consciously exoticize the presence of women in the public sphere especially as an active actor. The issue of sexism and this type of assessment of women’s presence in the public sphere not only remain without proper exposure, but are openly trivialized. Thus, in the public consciousness the (pseudo)morality and the right of access to power and publicity go hand in hand.

The press pays particular attention to women’s political participation. A photo of one of the female candidates for the election to the Azerbaijani Milli Majlis in 2015 holding a cigarette and a glass of beer was published on October 30, 2015 in the news feed of nezermedia.az webpage. Numerous times it was underlined that she is a candidate for the position of a parliamentarian, and this “event” from her private life was delivered as a scandalous story. The national press has never created a problem around smoking or alcohol abuse by men. Photo of a smoking or drinking male parliamentarian or a parliament candidate was never presented as breaking news on the front pages. It is clear that the public sees nothing criminal or forbidden in consumption of alcohol or smoking by an adult man. However, as soon as a woman is involved, the issue of consumption of alcohol or smoking is framed as an issue of morality. Ayten Mustafayeva’s photo was presented as a front-page news, and the headlines underlined that a female candidate was at the casino drinking alcohol and smoking (Azinform 2015).

There are also examples of hegemonically legitimate images of women in politics. For example, Milli Majlis member Ganira Pashaeva is considered one of the most influential people in the country. She is addressing the issues of not only her constituency but also of all the citizens that turn to her. Pashaeva has a significant influence not only in the Milli Majlis and her constituency, she is highly respected by the media, all active parties, opposition and wide circles of public, including the youth. This attitude is due to her highly conservative views, upholding of “national-moral values”, and purposeful rejection of “joys of a personal life”. Ganira Pashaeva in her frequent interviews stresses that in order to avoid being compromised by the members of the society a woman who is active in public-political life has to “put on some sort of armor and live a lifestyle of an ascetic-dervish” (Gün 2014).

Election campaigns allow to learn lessons on hidden – implicit and direct – explicit gender discrimination. Media monitoring of the Women Information Center in Tbilisi during the election months in 2014 revealed several abuses that took place prior and during the elections for the local self-governing bodies and

city mayor elections (Women's Information Center, Charter of Journalistic Ethics of Georgia 2014). The main conclusions were highlighted in the final monitoring report: male candidates got the most TV airtime; mass media paid little attention to gender-sensitive issues during the pre-election campaign, news stories covered only issues of domestic violence, and even then superficially, without looking deep into the issue; often journalists used discriminatory terminology, such as “the weaker sex” which implied that women don’t have place in politics; neither the public television nor private channels allocated time to cover gender issues; in regional news reports gender stereotypes often were only further strengthened.

At the same time, cartoons and memes often create and reinforce a non-feminine, brutal image of female politician especially in the social media. For example, Nino Burjanadze was called “Tutsi”, Tina Khidasheli was compared to a man and portrayed in military uniform in ridiculed situations. In the Georgian society there is a prevailing opinion that “politics is not for women”. This attitude is taken to the extreme in the regions, which is immediately reflected on the election results.



Picture 1 Source: The forum of the portal Ge-Ru.com <http://goo.gl/udZJf2>

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s data as of February 1, 2016, in the ranking of the representation of women in the national parliaments Azerbaijan ranks 106th, Georgia the147th and Armenia the151st position (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

“Non-feminine” professions: Police and army

Inclusion of women in “gender-specific” professions and professions that are “not recommended” for women can be regarded as efforts aimed at leveling gender hierarchies that may contribute toward political participation. On the surface, in all the republics of the South Caucasus, visible changes in the state-sponsored leveling programs in the area of gender hierarchies can be noted.

In 2009 admission of women to the military universities in Azerbaijan was suspended. But in 2014 discussions on the intention to restart recruitment of women for military institutions, and for the Ministry of Defense and other power institutions commenced again in the Milli Majlis (Oxu 2014). In Armenia, since 2006, when the decree on the reform of the national police was announced, the idea of free access of both genders to this profession was being discussed. As a result, in November 2011 women’s departments in the new elite battalions of reformed police were created. The special unit – a female squad of 12 officers ages 19 to 32 – is being trained for seven months with other officers at the Police Academy. There are also special women’s units in the Armenian professional army. In this regard significant work has been done in Georgia. The motivation of the women who choose these “non-feminine” professions is often a mix of patriotic and economic reasons.



Picture 2 Source: Georgian Journal <http://goo.gl/bwpdzt>

From Soviet-time women’s councils to civic activity: Women in the civil society

With its report “Nations in Transit”, the Freedom House assessed Georgia’s civil sector for the period from 1 January to December 1 of 2012 on a 7-point scale to be 3.75 (where the greater number means lower score). It is interesting to compare this figure with the data for the same period for Armenia which is also 3.75 and for Azerbaijan that scored 6.75 (Freedom House 2013) (Freedom House 2013) (Freedom House 2013).

In Azerbaijan there are about a dozen NGOs specializing in gender issues, but in reality only less than half of them are functioning. In fact, only three organizations have visible activities: LGBT – Azerbaijan, “Pure World” and “Women’s Crisis Center”.

By 2005 out of 28 women’s organizations officially registered in Azerbaijan only the “Society for Women’s Rights Protection” could be classified as a political

and oppositional structure. Several years ago, the chairman of the organization claimed that 75 thousand women are involved in the organization. Other women’s organizations “specialize” in national, religious, professional and economic issues. Several organizations address issues of families, peace, refugees, social issues within the army such as the “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers” (Abasov, Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhanе. Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz 2001).

A whole group of individuals needs to be mentioned separately. For example, Chairman of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly in Azerbaijan Arzu Abdullayeva (member of the Presidium of the Social Democratic Party and part of the leadership of the first convocation of the Board of the Popular Front) is one of the most prominent human rights defenders. Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy Leyla Yunus has been on the political arena of the country for a long time. She was also a member of the leadership of the first convocation of the Board of the Popular Front and for some time she led the party that branched out of the social-democrats party. In recent years, Yunus was imprisoned due to her human rights activities. In April 2016, the authorities allowed her to leave the country for the Netherlands. Novella Jafarova is the co-chair of the “Association for Women’s Rights Protection named after Dilara Aliyeva” (named after the activist, who stood at the origins of the organization and who died in unknown circumstances). In fact, this organization is an influential “women’s wing” of the Popular Front.

According to Ali Abasov women’s movement in Azerbaijan is quite strong, but they are still in the margins when it comes to the decision-making level. “At the decision-making level in the state apparatus women are represented (in percent): ministries – 6.2, justice structures – 15, public administration – 30, executive government – 9.2”. One of the reasons contributing to the growth of women’s activity has been the Beijing Conference in 1995 which set rigid requirements for the states to strengthen the role of women in social, economic and political spheres. In Azerbaijan a State Committee on Women’s Affairs was established. Armenia does not have this type of committee. However, on June 26 of 1998, the decree “On the National Plan for the Improvement of Women’s Status and Enhancement of Their Role in the Society for the Period 1998-2000 in the Republic of Armenia” was approved. In Georgia, a presidential decree established the State Commission on the Elaboration of a State Policy for Women’s Advancement, and another presidential decree on the “National action plan for improving the condition of women in Georgia for 1998-2000”

was signed. (Abasov, *Demograficheskiye protsessy i analiz gendernoy situatsii v Azerbaydzhanе. Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* 2001)

The formation of the civil society in the independence period in Armenia had its peculiarities due to the existence of the western diaspora several representatives of which moved to Armenia bringing along set packages of ideas on women’s equality. However, no serious changes took place at the institutional level one of the reasons being the conservative position of the Armenian International Women’s Association (AIWA). The latter took a passive position “electing” the current Minister of Diaspora Hranush Hakobyan, who had no relation to the women’s movement, as the president of the association. Raffi Hovannisian became a balancing force in the political field through promoting women’s leadership in his opposition “Heritage” party with the 20 percent of the party members being women. For comparison, based on the party lists the other pseudo-opposition party “Prosperous Armenia” led by a woman – Naira Zohrabyan, has only 5 percent female members.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, women who were used to actual power or at least to “catching its rays” were the first to react to the changing situation. After the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace, the Ministry of Education and Science and the women’s organizations started the process of institutionalization of gender education in 10 universities and 35 secondary schools in Armenia (Hasratyan, Hovhannisyan, et al. 2005) . Two women’s organizations in Armenia have become the beacon of the Beijing trends. One of them was the women’s party of intellectuals, wives of ministers and other political leaders with the symbolic name “Shamiram”⁷; the second has been the “Armenian Association of Women with University Education” (AAWUE) that united women who occupied a certain professional niche during the Soviet era. In this case, we are talking about former nomenclature which tried to find alternative niches to keep themselves within the boundaries of the diminishing “culture of privileges”. Nevertheless, although the party “Shamiram” did not live long, AAWUE, headed today by Jemma Hasratyan, proved to be a viable and effective structure.

⁷ Shamiram is a character of the Armenian mythology, the goddess of love and lust, and the queen of Assyria, who fought with the kings of Urartu. According to the epic poem told by Movses Khorenatsi, Queen Shamiram killed King of Armenia Ara the Beautiful-Geghetsik on the battlefield.

The next type of organizations can be classified as “youth” (often young people 20-35 years old work here) or “activist”, which unite intellectuals devoted to their work, having an active civic position, with visible attention toward human rights protection. They purposefully nudge the public, draw attention to social injustice (the so-called “whistleblowers”). They try to carry out various kinds of public events. This category of NGOs includes the Women’s Resource Center (Lara Aharonyan, Gohar Shahnazaryan) with branches in the regions and Nagorno Karabakh, the Women’s Support Center (Maro Matosyan), “Society Without Violence” (Lida Minasyan, Anna Nikoghosyan), “Democracy Today” (Gulnara Shirinyan), and several others. The latter works actively in the regions organizing trainings on running a family business and other themes.

There are some structural problems in the women’s movement in all of the societies of the South Caucasus. Quite often, women’s civil society organizations are building their discursive strategies on a dual game: speaking the language of gender equality for the international audience, and at the same time, disseminating the position “we, women, are the weaker sex” within the local environment. Because of this and other reasons, the women’s movement remains weak and divided despite the presence of many active organizations in the field (Hovnatanyan, *Women's Movement and Gender Quotas in Armenia* 2016).

Gender and the law: Domestic violence: Personal is political

According to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) data of 2007, 600 women die of domestic violence in Europe every year. However, this did not prevent the prevailing nationalist voices in all three South Caucasus republics from denying the existence of domestic violence in these countries. A scandal unfolded in Armenia in this regard. In the early 2000s, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) published a short report highlighting the story of an Armenian married woman, who attempted to get shelter from her husband’s and his brothers’ tyranny at the Women’s Crisis Center. For this, her husband splashed her face with nitric acid, leaving her blind. This case was not enough for the authorities to stop the denial of the existence of domestic violence in the country. In the last decade, the discourse of denial of domestic violence has been marginalized.

For nine years, Armenia has been failing to pass a law on domestic violence. A coalition of organizations against domestic violence was formed in 2007. The

backbone of this coalition are the active NGOs and civil society activists. The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women with support from the Open Society Institute (OSI) issued a brochure in May 2016 entitled “Femicide in Armenia: A Silent Epidemic” that presents shocking statistics: since 2013, the authors have counted 27 cases with names and photographs of young women falling victims with a deadly outcome to domestic violence (Aharonyan, Unpublished interview “Women in Politics” 2016) (Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women 2016).

Director of the Center for Support to Women, Maro Matosyan notes that Armenia does not have specific policies towards victims of domestic violence. There are no governmental mechanisms or means of support or services to the victims and their children. The police are also idle; there are no mechanisms of investigation or fair treatment towards the victims. The divisions of social support also lack qualified specialists. Maro Matosyan identifies the lack of a law on domestic violence as the underlying cause for such a dire situation. (Khachatryan 2016)

Lida Minasyan from the NGO “Society Without Violence” suggests that the reasons for the stalemate lie not with the judicial or legislative procedures, but rather the inertia in the traditional relations and the victims’ acceptance of the unequal gender roles as natural. A case in point that took place in one of the provincial cities of Armenia is the story of a young woman and a mother of three children that was stabbed 21 times by her husband. By mere miracle, she survived the assault and with the support of the “Society Without Violence” activists and a lawyer from the organization went through the entire litigation process. However, a call from her husband – at the time already a criminal in prison – forecasting a future of a single mother without a husband was enough for her to withdraw the charges in order to return him into the family. This is not an isolated case although it is one of the most dramatic.

A 2008 study on “Violence against Women” carried out in Azerbaijan indicates that about a quarter of the surveyed women reported violence against them by a partner or other family members. In the 21 percent of the cases the cause of the violence is jealousy. According to the study, 18 percent of the abused women had suicidal thoughts, and 8 percent have actually attempted suicide. Only 1 percent of the women subject to violence have applied for assistance from the relevant authorities. The reasons behind non-reporting are the fear of recurrent violence, “shame”, concerns of condemnation by the society, and the fear to lose the family and kids (Orudzhev 2013).

The official website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan features the 2014 UN report on the violation of women’s rights, domestic violence, and selective abortions stating that “in the period from January 1 to November 30 of 2013, 4053 cases of domestic violence were reported” (Orudzhev 2013). For the past few years, news about domestic violence has been flooding the Azerbaijani media. Fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands subject women to physical (beatings, murder), sexual, and psychological violence. Sometimes violation of women’s rights begins already in the mother’s womb. In most cases, learning that the future baby is a girl, parents at best are upset and at worst abort the pregnancy.

The situation in Georgia is not very different. In the troubled years of the early 1990s, when war and other reasons effectively led to the collapse of the Georgian economy with a loss of the 70 percent of the previously achieved development, women’s labor migration saved the country from famine. At a meeting with women’s NGOs the then-president of the National Bank of Georgia Giorgi Kadagidze said that remittances from women working abroad make up to \$800 million annually, which is comparable to the amount received from the export of nonferrous metals, nuts, wine, and mineral water combined. Despite this, women remain a vulnerable part of the population. (Badasyan, B'yet, znachit, lyubit? Nasiliye v gruzinskoy sem'ye kak zapretnaya tema 2015)

There is a widespread stereotype in Georgia that victims of domestic violence are mostly poorly-educated women in the regions. Nevertheless, the scandalous murders that occurred in Tbilisi in 2014 changed the perspective on this problem. According to the crime statistics, 34 women were killed in 2014 and 742 were subject to violence in the family. A series of murders resonated loudly in the society stimulating a more aware assessment of the situation. It became clear that violence can happen to anyone and anywhere, regardless of the place of residence, education, and social status. University lecturer Maka Tsivtsivadze was shot by her ex-husband in the university hallway. Justice House employee Sopo Zurabiani was shot and killed by her ex-husband at a bus stop near her house. Sadly, even in these cases, there were people who tried to justify the killings.

Georgian writer and journalist Nino Tarkhnishvili points out in one of her works that in Georgia, women are often given the blame for falling victims in a murder. After watching a TV show featuring the mothers of the murdered women confessing that they knew about the beatings but did not think it would end with a murder, Tarkhnishvili decided to write a vignette on the

responsibility of these mothers. According to her, “If reading this vignette leads at least one woman to a deep reflection and a shift from the opinion that a woman should tolerate violence, because it is her destiny, then it was not written in vain”. (Badasyan, B'yet, znachit, lyubit? Nasiliye v gruzinskoy sem'ye kak zapretnaya tema 2015)

The regional coordinator of the nation-wide network “Protection from Violence” Eliso Amirejibi who has years of experience in providing assistance and legal protection to victims of domestic violence recalled that in 1998 when NGOs initiated a discussion on domestic violence in Georgia, it was not regarded as a burning problem. Now the problem is being discussed publically. However, according to the expert, a patriarchal ideology dominates in the Georgian society negatively affecting these discussions. (Amirejibi 2016)

The representative of the “Sukhumi” Fund Lali Shengelia, who has been working on these issues since 2001, states that in 2006 Georgia adopted the law “On the Elimination of domestic violence, protection and assistance of victims of domestic violence”. Lali Shengelia thinks that despite the law, victims of domestic violence are left on their own with the problem and the further improvement of the legislation should be a priority.

Lali Shengelia also points out that significant barriers are due to the absence of state funding and relevant programs. These are crucial for the increase in the number of rehabilitation centers with free legal and psychological counseling and the development of the institution of the school psychologist. Funds are needed also for renting temporary accommodation for sheltering the victims of domestic violence from the perpetrators and conducting awareness campaigns among youth on domestic violence. To tackle the scarcity of resources, the state can actively cooperate with the non-governmental sector making use of its services. Lali Shengelia believes that systematic work towards changing public opinion is necessary and can be achieved through the active involvement of mass media in the process. (Badasyan, B'yet, znachit, lyubit? Nasiliye v gruzinskoy sem'ye kak zapretnaya tema 2015)

Routine discursive construction of gender inequality

The analysis of the routine discourses interestingly points out that everyday speech practices constantly support the legitimacy of the social and, in particular, gender inequalities. There are numerous examples of domination over women through linguistic means. For example, the languages of all South Caucasus societies, as well as the Russian language, have the expression

“woman-man” or “male woman” – a phrase that seemingly praises a woman. It suggests that a strong character, determination, courage, and dignity are exclusively masculine qualities.

In an average Azerbaijani family, a woman plays the role of a “home-keeper”, “the honor of the man”, and “the mother of the family”. These concepts circulate in the routine consciousness in the other republics as well. In the traditional understanding, a woman nourishes with her milk children as the “future of the nation”. For the “firm future of the nation” she is obliged to uphold “the family honor” and be obedient. In the Azerbaijani language and, thus in the routine perception, the words “wisdom”, “knowledge”, “mind” are of enshrined in the male sex. Such concepts as “power”, “mind”, “luck”, “leadership” are exclusively synonymous with masculinity.

A number of canonical texts sustain and reinforce such idiomatic expressions and figures of speech. Popular sayings that are thought to be “the testaments of forefathers”, are the quintessence of these ideas and include many “wise” statements designed to approve the inequality between the sexes and justify derogative attitude toward woman. Here are some of them: “A woman can have long hair, but her mind is short”; “A smart man consults with his wife but does the opposite”; “A woman should cook *bozbash* and not interfere in the affairs of men” (Beydily Mamedoff 2004).

Both Islam and Christianity support and strengthen the idea of the inequality of sexes. Islam legitimizes inequality between men and women in favor of men. The 34th verse of the 4th Chapter (called “Sūrat an-Nisā” meaning “Chapter on Women”) of the Qur’an states, “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other [...]. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband’s] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance, [first] advise them; [then if they persist,] forsake them in bed; and [finally,] strike them.”. Ephesians 5:22-24 of the Bible states, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” To some extent, the problem lies in the divergence between formal and traditional or religious law and the latter often carries more impact since it is entrenched in everyday practices and discourses.

Women and peace initiatives

It is hard to overstate the role of women in the peace processes. In the South Caucasus, regional collaboration initiatives among women is an important resource for conflict transformation. In the 1990s, women’s initiatives made a significant contribution to the exchange of the prisoners of war, regional dialogues, dissemination of alternative and positive information, and the analysis of the politics of memory. The main resource here are still women’s NGOs, and despite the stagnation in peacebuilding in the South Caucasus, women still play a significant role in conflict transformation in the South Caucasus.

In Georgian, women’s peacebuilding NGOs have been operating for already more than twenty years. Women’s networks have connected Sukhum/i, Tskhinval/i, and Tbilisi. Quite often, these NGOs were created by women from among the forcibly displaced persons. The leader of the NGO “Consent”, Julia Kharashvili says, “When the intervention began in 2008, all communication channels were blocked and we were unable to tell the world what is going on in Georgia. This is when many respected human rights organizations in Russia, such as “Memorial”, were calling for the protection of the civilian population and were presenting an independent assessment of the situation. We disseminated that information, so that people here would not think that all Russians were our enemies”. (Badasyan, *Kak by ne bylo slozhno, my budem prodolzhat' stroit' mir* 2014)

Julia Kharashvili shared about the alliance of Georgian and Russian women-peacebuilders, a joint initiative of two women – Valentina Cherevatenko and Alla Gamakharia. The aim of the alliance was the dissemination of positive information about both societies involved in the conflict. One of the results of the peacebuilding activities of the alliance was the visit to Georgia of the correspondent of “Novaya Gazeta” Victoria Ivleva, who later wrote several articles. Another initiative was Elvira Goryukhina’s book on the forcibly displaced people from the Kodori gorge.

Julia Kharashvili also spoke about the collaboration between Tbilisi NGOs with their Tskhinval/i and Sukhum/i counterparts that has been ongoing since 1995. Initially within the framework of the program “Peace Camp”, the collaboration then transformed into the “Dialogues of Young Volunteers for Peace”. These types of youth dialogues have brought together young people from conflicting societies to get to know each other and discuss painful issues. People who have

undergone forcible relocation are those who express the biggest willingness to participate in such projects. “We were discussing conflict settlement models, because we have always had a hope to return home. But after 2008, everything changed dramatically. It is not possible now to talk about a quick return to the former places of residence. It is one thing when the borders are monitored by peacekeepers, and yet another if there are border guards there”, says Julia Kharashvili. (Badasyan, *Kak by ne bylo slozhno, my budem prodolzhat' stroit' mir* 2014)

Another noteworthy project has been the “Strengthening Women’s Capacity for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus Region” that lasted for three and a half years. The project devised models of legal solutions to local problems and the inclusion of women in economic activities. Julia Kharashvili noted that in the 1990s, the comprehensive field studies revealed that the maintenance of the connection between people was the priority for the forcibly displaced people. At that time, peacebuilding literally meant a dialogue between people. In contrast, now it is a more organized and professional process. (Badasyan, *Kak by ne bylo slozhno, my budem prodolzhat' stroit' mir* 2014)

The Tbilisi-based NGO “Society to Promote Harmonious Human Development” led by Tsovinar Nazarova took part in the implementation of a project from May 2014 to February 2015 carried out with the support of the Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), a joint initiative of the European Commission and the United Nations Development Program. The initial idea of the project came from partners in Tskhinval/i. The goal of the project was the restoration of trust between the conflicting parties, through assistance in the restoration of the personal documents of people who had to flee their homes because of the conflict. During the project, people could call the hotline numbers and describe the circumstances under which their documents were lost and the restoration process would follow. (Badasyan, *Sovmestnyy proyekt gruzinskoy i osetinskoy NPO pomogayet vosstanovit' uteryannyye v khode konflikta dokumenty* 2014)

Established by women from among the forcibly displaced people, the Kutaisi-based women’s cultural-humanitarian fund “Sukhumi” has been working in the west of Georgia since 1997. The fund has branches in six other cities and the priority areas of the fund are peacebuilding, work with victims of violence, measures to strengthen women’s impact on decision making with the main beneficiaries are the forcibly displaced women from Abkhazia. The main goals of the fund are reducing aggression, restoration of trust, and the transformation

of the enemy images in the two post-conflict societies. The fund has a partner in Abkhazia – the “Association of Women of Abkhazia” and since the very start of the collaboration the partners have established an agreement that in their joint work they will not touch upon political issues. (Badasyan, Interv’yu s predsdatelem fonda "Sukhumi" 2015)

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Global Fund for Women has been working with women’s organizations providing a stable source of funding since mid-1990s. In 2011, the NGO “Democracy Today” was the driving force for the establishment of the regional initiative “Women of the South Caucasus for Peace” bringing together 13 women’s peacebuilding groups from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Due to the resumption of violence in the region of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict that can no longer be considered frozen, women’s peace initiatives gain increased relevance for the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. Soldiers and civilians fell victims of the April 2016 military clashes that have been coined as the four-day war. As a result of the tensions and military clashes across the line of contact there is an increase in hatred and hate speech in the societies.

On the ground women’s groups call for peace negotiations to settle the conflict permanently (Global Fund for Women 2014). The call acknowledges that this conflict has been presenting an immediate threat to women including gender-based violence and causing large portions of women refugees and internally displaced people in the region. The conflict has limited women’s access to critical services including health care and education. The recent escalation has rolled back years of work by women leaders to drive peace and collaboration across the conflict divide. (Global Fund for Women 2014) Through social media, the Armenian branch of the women’s world-wide peace network “Women in Black” published a call to act together against the escalation of military violence (Women in Black 2016).

All these initiatives concern peacebuilding after the active military phase of the conflicts in the South Caucasus. The issue of sexual violence during armed conflict remains a separate issue that has been persistently hushed up by all parties of the conflicts in the region of the South Caucasus. Only a small number of women’s organizations, in particular in Armenia and Azerbaijan, continue working with the victims of sexual violence during war providing consultations, psychological and legal support. These organizations also try to introduce amendments to the laws to ensure victims’ access to justice.

Empowerment – Karabakh-style: Different social realities

Security problems frame the rhetoric of gender in Nagorno Karabakh, popularizing the image of “our traditional” woman. During the 2007 presidential elections, the phrase “We don’t need glamor, we need a dad” standing for “a need for care and patronage” became a catch phrase, signifying the need of a strong figure suitable for a situation where the military and other power structures are at the peak of demand. The quota of 20 percent is the same for the political field of Nagorno Karabakh; however, there is a slightly higher political participation – 5 out of 33 members of the National Assembly and 2 out of the 11 ministers are women.

The story of women’s empowerment in Nagorno Karabakh is different from the other ones in the region. Immediately after the war and in the early 2000s, there were about 6 women with ministerial portfolios. Analyst Masis Mailyan reflects that all these women have been typical “self-made women” that have held high positions due to their professional skills and hard work (Mailyan 2015). However, this has not affected their support for the idea of gender equality. They regard themselves as professionals of their work deliberately distancing themselves from feminist values due to the low popularity of the latter. In an interview, Assistant to the President for Cultural Affairs, a participant of the Nagorno Karabakh war, and former actress Zhanna Galstyan captured her anti-feminist approach toward women’s solidarity in a short, but capacious phrase, “Why divide the nation into men and women?” (Galstyan 2004). However, the political arena in Nagorno Karabakh seems more prepared to accept women’s leadership, than the one in Armenia or Azerbaijan. In Stepanakert⁸ the prospects of a female president or defense minister are often discussed.

Lara Aharonyan from the Women’s Resource Center says, “In Armenia, it looks more like a boy’s club. In Karabakh, a woman has more chances to ascend to presidency because the structure of power and hierarchy are fundamentally different. Most of the political leaders have fought together in the war. Of course, women were pushed out of the political system after the war but the structure of power is different there. I have observed how the ex-member of the National Assembly Arevik Petrosyan was conversing with President of National Assembly Ashot Ghulyan absolutely on equal terms. Perhaps this is

⁸ The city is called Khankendi in Azerbaijan.

because the war was fought both by men and women for both men and women. The horizontal and vertical axes of struggle work simultaneously here and the horizontal one is very important here”. (Aharonyan, Unpublished interview “Women in Politics” 2016)

The civil society organizations specializing in gender issues is also quite strong in Nagorno Karabakh. The Women’s Resource Center with branches in the Republic of Armenia also has its own office in Nagorno Karabakh under the directorship of Gayane Hambarzumyan. The Center has a space where women can come with their children in the cases of abuse and physical violence in the family. In addition, every Sunday and on holidays, women come to the Center to socialize around a cup of tea, read gender related literature, and discuss political news.

These dynamics in Nagorno Karabakh leads to the question of whether there is a link between a more active participation of women in the political life with their active participation in the war. Did engagement in the military activities transform into a political status as a tangible result of social recognition of the women’s contribution? If this is so, then this case of women’s active involvement as subjects in political action is a historical aberration, rather than the “normal” scenario of post-war development and (re)distribution of power.

Women become active during any war, but immediately after the end of the war, they are usually “pushed back into their place”. Currently there is not enough evidence to conclude that the case of Nagorno Karabakh is exceptional in this respect. It is premature to draw any conclusions, and there is a need for a serious study and analysis of the gender situation in and around Nagorno Karabakh. It is also possible that the answer lies on the surface: a high rate of male mortality during the war contributed to the involvement of women in the political sphere due to the lack of “better” candidates. Now that a new generation of men has emerged, the situation could change again. However, it is not happening yet. In any case, the base of a more adequate political participation of women has been the total militarization of the society caused by the security dilemma. This in itself is a slippery foundation and brings many challenges that have been the focus of numerous studies on gender equality and war in the Israeli and Yugoslav contexts.

Feminist theories have varying views on the issue of women and war. Some feminists see a potential for empowerment in the image of a woman-warrior. Among these, some see militarization as necessary for the emancipation from

the patriarchal model of societal relations, others see the image of a woman warrior as a strong base for equality between men and women. These perspectives consider the militarization of women a path towards the gradual transformation of militaristic societies into a-hierarchical and more democratic ones. A different feminist perspective warns against the image of a woman-warrior and the “warrior mystique”, that is the mystification of the image of a warrior and war that promotes masculinist values rather than gender-balanced societies. From this critical perspective the fascination with the image of the woman-warrior is explained by women’s emancipation and the vision of the “warrior mystique” as a softening of the image of the military as a destructive force and towards seeing it as a democratic institute (D’Amico 1996, 379). It is argued by this wing of feminists that on the contrary the aim should be to deconstruct the “warrior mystique” and instead build a positive concept of citizenship and equality” (D’Amico 1996, 384) (N. R. Shahnazaryan, *Gender i voyna* 2013). The methodological dilemmas of this sort have been considered also in the context of Nagorno Karabakh (Goroshko 2013).

Conclusion

The analysis of the gender dynamics in the societies of the South Caucasus reveals that while women are formally granted access to power, this access takes place under the control of men. “Auxiliary” is a key descriptive word here. This issue should not be viewed only with the lens of competition between men and women. It is obvious that women are “beginners” in politics, and they certainly need systematic training and social resources that would allow to overcome the structural impediments towards political experience. Political activity surely requires special skills and professionalism; however, the current male-dominated political arena does not stand out by these characteristics. A prolonged closed political arena that has hindered the acquisition and practice of these skills among women serves as an excuse for further exclusion. And now, even when a woman is allowed into politics (whether for visibility or for real participation), she often performs the traditional roles that “cling” to her. So a woman’s political participation is often manifested in her work on cultural issues as an important link in passing down traditional and national values, health care to perform the prescribed gender role of an actor providing care for the sick in the family and in the country, and in education fulfilling the role of teacher of her own and all the other children.

This transfer of private roles into the public sphere consistently receives public approval. Since this transfer does not challenge the stereotypical perception of “purely women’s roles”, the inertia of thinking in old frames is not disrupted. When it comes to leading the country, a cognitive dissonance arises: “it is not a woman’s virtue; historically it worked out this way; and there is no need to break the order”. An exception is Georgia’s political structure, where women received the very “male” ministerial portfolios. Despite affirmative action by the state in all the countries, the situation is the worst at the level of the representation of women in local governments. The authors of this paper, therefore, conclude that the inertia and resistance of customary law (*adat*) to formal law remains very significant. The main conclusions can be summarized as follows:

- Soviet-style state feminism and the indoctrination of communist ideas with the purposeful aim to bend the traditionalist way of life have led to conflicting results: on the one hand, the Soviet state strongly invited women to the labor, public, and political spheres and on the other, it failed to meet the household needs of women or alleviate their burden.
- Despite certain drawbacks, gender quotas are an important strategy necessary for the formation of a balanced pattern of political representation.
- Even when special laws and mechanisms aimed at protecting victims of domestic violence have been adopted, often the victims themselves are not aware of these mechanisms and, as a result, do not use them. Therefore, the creation of a full legal framework with mechanisms for the implementation of these laws remains crucial.
- The analysis of the situations in the civil societies and in particular in women’s organizations in the South Caucasus, it can be concluded that in the post-Soviet period, when women were pushed out of the public and political spheres despite their active participation in the national movements, they had to take the available and residual niche in the NGOs. Thus, the current state of the civil societies, among other things, reflects the specificity of the gender competition for a place in the political arena.

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