

WOMEN'S RIGHTS PROTECTION SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN THE MODERN ARMENIAN SOCIETY*

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Abstract. Current research article is devoted to the exploration of women's rights protection movement in modern Armenian society. The exploration of the current situation of the women's rights protection movement in modern Armenian society includes two components. Firstly, through an analysis of documents (the Soviet state's first codes of different years), the study examines the evolution of the women's rights protection social movement from the Soviet Union. This investigation illustrates how the Soviet Union's political system had formed and shaped the women's movement, which also affected the further development of the movement in modern Armenian society. Secondly, this research paper is based on an analysis of 34 in-depth interviews performed in Yerevan city from 2020-2023, with informants engaged in different types of women's rights protection activism during the last 20 years in Armenian society. Information gathered from interviews allowed us to split the history of the development of the movement into two time-lapses in modern Armenian society. Triangulation of qualitative document analysis and in-depth interviews, equally contributed to the understanding of the main features of the women's rights protection social movement as a whole social phenomenon in Armenian modern society. One of the key findings of the research is that despite the existence of diverse groups of women's rights protection activists and just individuals coping with social system gender inequalities, there is difficulties in establishing social movement in modern Armenian society. The most prevailing definitions of social movements assume non-institutionalized collective actions with a clear set of goals. Instead, what currently exists in modern Armenian society is a form of street activism organized by efforts of different institutionalized organizations, where people engage in sporadic protests to raise awareness about gender issues and gender inequality. The paper also sheds light on social obstacles that prevent the initiative from becoming an institutionalized social movement for women's rights protection in Armenia. The main social-cultural obstacles can be seen as a combination of factors including the absence of a general feminist agenda, lack of structural strain pushing for mobilization and social conservatism, etc.

Key words: *social movement, feminist movement, social conflict, social change*

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Համառոտագիր: Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է Հայաստանում կանանց իրավունքների պաշտպանության սոցիալական շարժումը: Աշխատանքում նախ

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անդրադարձ է կատարվում խորհրդային ժառանգությանը, որը անմասն չէ ժամանակակից Հայաստանում կանանց իրավունքների պաշտպանության սոցիալական շարժման ձևավորումից: Այդ առումով ուսումնասիրվում է կանանց իրավունքների ակտիվացման դինամիկան քաղաքական և սոցիալական տարբեր համատեքստերում՝ խորհրդային շրջանում և անկախ Հայաստանում:

Հոդվածը հիմնվում է փաստաթղթերի վերլուծության և 2020-2023 թթ. Երևանում իրականացված դաշտային աշխատանքների՝ 34 ինֆորմանտի հետ իրականացված խորին հարցազրույցների վերլուծության վրա: Աշխատանքի հիմնական բացահայտումն այն է, որ չնայած կանանց իրավունքների պաշտպանության տարբեր կազմակերպությունների և բազմաթիվ անհատ ֆեմինիստ-ակտիվիստների գործունեությանը՝ ժամանակակից հայ հասարակությունում կանանց իրավունքների պաշտպանության շարժումը կայացման դժվարություններ ունի: Փոխարենը գոյություն ունեցող կոլեկտիվ վարքը կարելի է բնութագրել իբրև փողոցային ակտիվության ձև, որտեղ կանայք հաճախակի բողոքի ցույցեր են կազմակերպում գենդերային անհավասարությանը վերաբերող կոնկրետ խնդիրների մասին իրազեկվածությունը բարձրացնելու համար:

Հեղինակն անդրադառնում է նաև այն հիմնական խոչընդոտներին, որոնք թույլ չեն տալիս, որ կայանա մարդու իրավունքների պաշտպանության այս շարժմանը ժամանակակից հայ հասարակությունում և փորձում է ուրվագծել դրանք հաղթահարելու հիմնական ուղիները:

Բանալի բառեր – *սոցիալական շարժում, կանանց իրավունքների պաշտպանության շարժում, ֆեմինիզմ, սոցիալական փոփոխություններ*

ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ В ЗАЩИТУ ПРАВ ЖЕНЩИН В СОВРЕМЕННОМ АРМЯНСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ

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Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена изучению социального движения по защите прав женщин в современном армянском обществе. В статье предпринята попытка рассмотреть наследие советского прошлого, которое сыграло немаловажную роль в формировании общественного движения по защите прав женщин в современном армянском обществе. В этом смысле в статье рассматривается динамика активизации защиты прав женщин в различных политических и социальных контекстах - в советском и современном Армянском обществе. Анализ, приведенный в статье, основывается на использовании двух методов сбора информации - анализе документов и методе глубоких интервью, проведенных с 34 ключевыми информантами в Ереване в 2020-2023 гг. Анализ полевых работ приводит к выводу о том, что несмотря на наличие разнообразных групп феминистских активистов и отдельных личностей, борющихся с гендерными неравенствами в социальной системе, в современном армянском обществе социальное движение по защите прав женщин испытывает трудности становления. Тот вид коллективного поведения, который сегодня наблюдается, можно охарактеризовать как форму уличного активизма, организованного правозащитными организациями, с целью привлечь внимание и найти решения для конкретной социальной проблемы, связанным с гендерным неравенством. Статья также освещает причины, которые мешают становлению

правозащитных инициатив в институционализированное социальное движение по защите прав женщин в современном армянском обществе. Основные социокультурные причины отсутствия движения включают такие факторы как отсутствие общей феминистической повестки, недостаточная консолидация разных правозащитных групп, социокультурный консерватизм и т.д.

Ключевые слова: *социальное движение, феминистское движение, социальный конфликт, социальные изменения*

PREFACE

The women's rights protection movements are one of the types of human rights protection movements, which have begun to form in modern Armenia under the influence of the Soviet past. In modern Armenia gender norms and attitudes were influenced by the Soviet legacy⁶. Therefore, the examination of the women's rights protection movement in Armenia should start from its roots, from the Soviet period.

During the history of the Soviet Union, feminism as an ideology began with the views of Friedrich Engels, who in his work "The Emergence of the Family, Private Property and the State" presented the oppression of women as the oldest form of discrimination known to mankind, as a class antagonism between men and women⁷. Accordingly, the struggle of women in Soviet Armenia was primarily a struggle for women's equal rights. In 1917-1918, the first decrees adopted within the framework of the Socialist Revolution recorded the equality of women's and men's rights before the law⁸.

However feministic views were not alien to Armenian society. Still, during the First Republic (1918-1920), women in Armenia had the right to vote in the parliamentary elections held in 1919. During that time Armenia was the first republic to give the world its first female ambassador. Diana Abgar became the first woman in history to be entrusted with a diplomatic mission, to represent Armenia in a foreign country. Besides, three of the 80 members of the legislative body responsible for state administration were women: Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan, Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan and Varvara Sahakyan. Since the 1830s, it can be seen a number of Armenian women - public speakers, writers, and public figures - who speak out about women's issues. Among them, we can mention Elpis Gesaratsyan (1830-1913), who founded the "Kitar" periodical in 1861 and was the first female editor. Among her most famous articles are "A Message to Young Women", "Service to Society", and "Having Rights is Not an Audacity". Srpouhi Dussab (1840-1901) was also one of the famous women writers, who in her poems discussed the importance of marriage based on love and not force, the role of work in liberating women. She is also the author of three novels titled after women's names: "Matya", "Siranush", "Araksia". Zapel Yesayan, a

⁶ Zaslavskaya M., Agadjanian V. (2022). Gender attitudes across generations in contemporary Armenian society (comparative analysis). *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (36) pp. 48-60, pp. 48.

⁷ Engels F. (1884) *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, <https://parg.co/Ukna>

⁸ Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars on divorce <https://parg.co/UknF>

translator, writer, and publicist, owns the famous words that "a woman was not born just to be pleasant. A woman has come to develop her intelligence, mental, moral and physical qualities". Many other female authors can be listed among such authors.

The constitution of the Soviet Union adopted in 1936 also recorded equal rights for women and men⁹. The latter granted women the right to vote and be elected, to receive equal pay as men, to have maternity leave, and also the right to rest and have social protection. Thus, the state took over the regulation of women's issues. This approach of the state aimed to involve women in the process of state building, defining the role of a citizen as primary for women. In the same period, various academic papers were published, that called for women to become active participants in social life. One of the authors was Alexandra Kollontai, who presented many works emphasizing the necessity of involving women in the production process and revising the institution of the family. Henceforth, women should be distinguished from men by only one function: physical reproduction. Attempts to root the mentioned ideas were also expressed in the architecture of the period. After the revolution, the construction of communal housing became widespread. This new type of housing was intended to bring people together, putting the interests of the collective in the first place. Such residential areas imposed ideological frameworks that had to form a new type of relationship between women and men, where the woman even became part of the collective in the family, sharing her life with others.

During the Second World War and after it, the role of women in the economic life of the society increased significantly in the Soviet Union, including Soviet Armenia, but not because of the policies adopted by the state, but because of the post-war consequences: demographic decline, lack of workers and the decline of the general economy. For instance, there were 224 people¹⁰ who received the reward of heroes of social labor, from which 83 were females, that is 37%. Later, in 1967 the symbol of Yerevan city, the capital of Armenia became a statue of a mother with a sword. The monument "Mother Armenia" represents the female personification of Armenia, thus emphasizing the women's role in Armenian society. Notably, the statue replaces a monumental statue of General Secretary Joseph Stalin that was created as a victory memorial for World War II. The statue symbolizes peace through strength reminding about strong female figures in Armenian culture such as Sose Mayrig¹¹ and Aytsemnik¹² an etc.

⁹ Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics <https://parg.co/Uknj> article 122, 137 accessed on 01.09.2023

¹⁰ See National portal <https://parg.co/UkBu> accessed on 01.09.2023

¹¹ Sose Vartanian was surnamed "mayrig" what means mother. She participated in many fedayee battles against Kurdish brigands.

¹² Aytsemnik's character is extremely important in Armenian history. In the Soviet years, the study of her heroic biography was part of the school curriculum. In the 12th century the Armenian city of Ani was threatened with capture by Persia. The inhabitants of Ani, both men and women, selflessly defended the native city and she was one of the most prominent warriors.

The Marriage and Family Code adopted in 1969 significantly improved the issue of women's rights¹³. Despite this fact, the equality of women's and men's rights was observed only at the legal level, and the opportunities for self-realization of an active citizen continued to be different, as a result of which the constitution¹⁴ adopted in 1977 included only provisions on equal rights, but never on equal duties. Thus, on the one hand, the state tried to ensure equal rights, but at the same time, the image of the woman as the guardian of the family was preserved, with the difference that the mother of the family could and should now also be a part of the labor process. The state continued to maintain the image of a woman as a mother, which did not allow a woman to be seen as a full-fledged citizen, while at the same time not seeing a man as a family member and a father¹⁵. As a result, equalizing the rights of women and men did not lead to true equality. This circumstance, as well as the doubling of the woman's role and therefore the increase in workload, eventually led to the "return" of women to the family. Thus, taking into account all these circumstances, it became necessary to institutionalize the struggle for equality of women's rights by integrating them into social and political life. For this purpose, women's councils were created in the late 80s, which aimed to transform the institution of family and marriage. In addition, quota seats were established for women in the Supreme Council, thanks to which women had the opportunity to become deputies and engage in political activities. Very often, it was women deputies who were elected through women's councils, which enabled women to voice their problems and solve them at the political level. So, through the efforts of the Soviet authorities, through institutional mechanisms, but with the participation of the masses, a general political environment was created that promoted systemic cultural changes, transforming the social roles of women. Most rights our Western counterparts had to struggle for were granted to all women in the Soviet Union¹⁶ and protected by law.

In this sense, it is possible to talk about these systemic changes as a social movement with the only difference that the initiator of social changes was not a group of citizens, but the state¹⁷. In this case, the state defined the primary and long-term goals of the movement, and the strategy, and chose the type of necessary changes. In this case, it is not possible to make a clear distinction between spontaneous social movements and social movements created by the state, because both types of social movements aim to change the social environment for the benefit

¹³ The Code on Marriage and Family (1969). <https://parg.co/UkBZ> article 4,5, 13 accessed on 01.09.2023

¹⁴ Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1977). <https://parg.co/UkBp> article 35, 53 accessed on 01.09.2023

¹⁵ Ayvazova S. (1998). Russian women in the labyrinth of equality: Essays on political theory and history, M; RIK.

¹⁶ Gevorgyan H. (2010). Gender identity in the National Framework. *Banber: Bulletin of Yerevan University, Sociology, Economy* Vol. 130.5 pp. 50-54, p50.

¹⁷ Stearns, L. B., Almeida, P. D. (2004). The Formation of State Actor-Social Movement Coalitions and Favorable Policy Outcomes. *Social Problems*, 51(4), 478–504.

of a specific group or society as a whole. However, if we follow Michel Foucault's theory about the relationship between power and the state, in this case, one can see a difference between spontaneous and state-formed social divisions. A spontaneous social movement fights against state power because it recognizes the government as the only one responsible for creating and or maintaining problematic social order. Meanwhile, the movement shaped by the state struggles to transform at the micro level the nature of the many social relations in which, according to Foucault, power relations are actually concentrated. Accordingly, the difference between these two types of movements can be seen in the target of change and thus at different levels. One such movement was the "Obshestvennitsa" movement¹⁸. The participants of the movement were women who organized public events and groups on a voluntary basis with the aim of increasing the educational level of society. Thus, women with "tender hearts, caring hands, and sharp eyes" became the defenders and advocates of the nascent Soviet order¹⁹.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought systemic changes to all spheres of public life, including the protection of women's rights. The collapse of all previously existing structures took the women's movement to a new and different stage. So, there is a strong need to research these transformations, to understand whether public activities that take place as a part of the protection of women's rights in Armenia today can be considered as a social movement, and to understand its unique characteristics. This research is relevant and topical because it allows not only describes the past and present of women's rights protection in modern Armenian society but also explains the direction and nature of the social change taking place in the field of human rights defense. The aim of this research paper is to examine the women's rights protection movement in modern Armenian society and identify the main social obstacles that prevent the movement from its development.

METHODOLOGY

To study and understand the nature of the women's rights protection movement in modern Armenia, in-depth interviews were conducted with three groups of informants in 2020-2023. The first group is represented by women who dealt with women's rights issues in the last years of the Soviet Union and the first years of the Republic of Armenia's independence, the second group is people who are members of the organization engaged in the protection of women's rights since 2000, and the third group are activists concerned about women's rights. The selection of informants was carried out using purposeful and snowball sampling methods, where the main

¹⁸ Neary, R. B. (1999). Mothering Socialist Society: The Wife-Activists' Movement and the Soviet Culture of Daily Life, 1934-41. *The Russian Review*, 58(3), 396-412, p. 397.

¹⁹ Wood A. E. (2000). *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Indiana University Press p. 66.

criterion was public activism related to the protection of women's rights. A total of 34 in-depth interviews were conducted in Armenia where informants represented human rights protection organizations from different cities of Armenia but also women rights protection activists. 21 of the informants belong now or at some point belonged to human rights protection NGOs and their branches, international organizations. The rest of them have no affiliation to any formal organization. The majority of informants were females, with a total number of 28. It is worth mentioning that 7 informants have been engaged in women's rights protection activities for around 1 year, 8 informants have been engaged in activities for 1-3 years, and the rest of the informants, a total number of 19 have been engaged in activities more than 4 years. Informants who were engaged in institutional activities represented the following organizations Women Resource Centre Armenia, Women Centre Shushi, Womens Fund Armenia, Womens' Support Center Armenia, Sexual Assault Crisis Center Armenia, Women's Rights Center, Society without violence, Women's Solidarity Corner Vanadzor, Armenian International Women's Association, Council on Women's Affairs of RA, League of Women Voters, "Shamiram" political party, and Women for peace.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN MODERN ARMENIAN SOCIETY?

During the years of independence, the movement for the protection of women's rights in Armenia was in a state of extinction because, as a result of the transformation of the political system, the policy of state feminism was no longer possible to implement. In the absence of a functional legal environment, many women went back to traditional and somewhat patriarchal views and customs²⁰. In addition, the women's structures formed in the Soviet Union and the newly independent Armenia did not aim to fight for the protection of equal rights for women. NGOs established in those years tried to involve women in various spheres of public life. There were many such organizations in Armenia. The "Republican Council of Women", which was formed back in 1989, aimed to involve women in political activities. Later, the "League of Women Voters" was formed on the basis of the composition of the same organization, the purpose of which was to familiarize women with electoral workers, to form interest, and to involve women in the political administration system of newly independent Armenia. During the years of independence, a number of other structures were also created, composed entirely of women, who, as they mentioned during the interviews had different visions of what meant to protect women's rights.

²⁰ Gevorgyan H. (2010). Gender identity in the National Framework. *Banber: Bulletin of Yerevan University, Sociology, Economy* Vol. 130.5, pp. 50-54, p50.

"Of course, we were not feminists, but we fought for increasing the role of women in social and political life. That was our goal, not like nowadays feminists."

Interview #11; 28.03.2021

Some non-governmental organizations and parties were among these structures. Formed during the national liberation wave, these structures tried to involve women in the process of establishing newly independent Armenia. "Armenian Intellectual Woman", "Hayuhi/Armenian Woman" charitable organization, and "Soldier's Mother" NGOs united active women already in 1991 and tried to contribute to increasing their participation. The All-Armenian Women's Union Foundation was engaged in the protection of women's and children's rights and the development of women's professional abilities.

"We wanted to participate in the establishment of independent Armenia, and manage the fate of our country, and participate in the social changes. That is why we supported those affected by the earthquake and the war, especially women and children, refugees, soldiers and their families."

Interview #9; 27.03.2021

Thus, it can be said that the first wave of newly created women's non-governmental organizations in RA was not aimed at ensuring equality of women's rights and their protection, but simply at using women's potential to overcome issues of national importance. In the same years, the "Armenian Women" party was founded in Armenia. Initially, the party expected changes of an economic nature, but during its activity, the latter brought together a large number of women scientists and artists, who in 1995 put their candidacy to appear in the parliament, which was not successful due to the emergence of another party, also composed of women. Already in the elections of the first convocation of the RA National Assembly, which took place in 1995, "Shamiram" overcame the limit of 5% established by law and created their own faction in the parliament, which also consisted of 8 female deputies²¹. Perhaps this party, which unexpectedly appeared in the parliament, also did not aim to deal with women's issues, the latter carried out various charity events. These two parties, as well as the previous non-governmental organizations, having been created in the breakthrough years for Armenia, both after the earthquake, independence, and the first Nagorno-Kharabakh war, aimed to contribute to the establishment of the national state with women's forces, but not to ensure the equality of women's rights, which ultimately dissolved the remains of the previously existing movement.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made Armenia an independent subject of world politics. Armenia, becoming a participant in various international processes, undertook to ratify and pursue the implementation of measures to ensure the protection of human

²¹ See National Assembly of RA <http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=parliament> accessed by 10.10.2023

rights, including the rights of women and children. Thus, the later formed public organizations, which took upon themselves the gap in the protection of women's rights in the Armenian reality, were based on the priorities of Western societies, which, arising from that conference, were completely different from the previously existing vision of what women's rights protection is. The development of NGOs and civil activist groups in Armenia started in 1996 with funding from western foundations and state structures²². Newly created non-governmental organizations, working with Western organizations and reproducing their value system, focused on the issues raised at the 4th UN World Conference, including domestic and other types of violence.

These ideological differences attracted many like-minded people, who even today form the nucleus that can lead the women's movement in Armenia. Among these organizations²³, the main actors are "Women's Support Center", "Women's Resource Center", "Women's Rights Center", "Women's Fund in Armenia", "Society without Violence". Formal and informal members of these organizations have for many years carried out various actions aimed at the protection of women's rights, overcoming gender stereotypes and taboos, as well as changes in the legislative field, and the development and adoption of the domestic violence law. The interviews conducted with the participants of the women's rights struggle allow us to outline today's women's rights struggle with the following guidelines:

➤ **Life cycle of the movement.** As a result of the conducted research, it became clear that today the struggle for women's rights in Armenian modern society is facing difficulties in establishing as a social movement in its classic understanding. Social movement definition assumes the existence of movements as free, non-institutional collective efforts that seek to bring social changes in society²⁴. More contemporary authors also emphasize non formal nature of social movements. In line with the definition of Donatella Della Porte and Mario Diani, social movements are involved in conflictual relations where oppositions are clearly defined; they operate through informal dense networks and share a certain identity²⁵. Many more authors focus on this characteristic of social movement. We define social movement as a type of collective action carried out through an informal social network, which involves in social conflict and aims to change the existing societal order²⁶. What social phenomenon we see now in modern Armenian society, are mostly various groups of human rights activists or NGOs that are fighting for women's rights, equality, and

²² Manukyan S., Babakhanyan S. (2022) Political culture and the protest potential in Goris community, *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (36)10-23, p.13.

²³ The links to these organizations are as follows: [Women's Support Center](#), [Women's Resource Center](#), [Women's Fund in Armenia](#), and [Society without Violence](#).

²⁴ Sztomka P. (1996) *Sociology of social change*. M. Aspect Press, p. 242

²⁵ Della Porta D.; Diani M. (2006) *An introduction: Social movements*, Second Edition, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., p 20

²⁶ Harutyunyan G. (2021) On the Issue of Social Movement Definition, *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan University*, № 2, 62-75, p.74

discrimination against women on an institutional level. Still, one of the factors that social movements differ from other types of collective behavior is they represent informal and not institutionalized networks as it was mentioned in the definitions. In the opposite case, the institutionalized network will become just a simple organization which is different from a social movement. Besides, as result of the research will show they lack clear long-term goals, structure, and shared vision, so there is no overall strategy for collective action that outlines the path to change. In this case, existing measures are situational, as they are formed due to a problem that arose in a specific situation. It is for this reason that existing groups do not establish as a movement, but continue to exist at the level of actionism even though they identify themselves as a part of the women/feminist movement in Armenia. If we look at this from the perspective of a functionalist approach, we can say that the existing structural tension is not enough to contribute to the unification of different groups, the definition of common long-term goals, and the formation of a movement. Accordingly, it can be said that the struggle for women's rights that exists in today's reality is in the process of forming a social movement.

“I wish I could tell that today we have a strong and powerful social movement that represents womens’ rights protection. Unfortunately, what we have is fragmented groups doing their job to shape a better society. Still, I see strong strong preconditions for it”.

Interview #33; 1.12.2023

“I wish I were a part of women’s movement in Armenia, but today everyone is busy with her/his own daily overwhelming problems as a consequences of poverty, war and ethnic cleansing, and women's rights are not a cause.”

Interview #34; 07.12.2023

Participants. Activists who participate in the initiatives of women's rights protection are mainly young and middle-aged women, mostly with humanities, social sciences or arts education. The activists respond to issues that have high priority in their opinion and, depending on the situation, carry out a division of labor, which involves informing like-minded individuals and organizations and disseminating information about the upcoming action, preparing posters or other demonstration materials. Participants can be conventionally divided into two groups: "radicals and "moderates", depending on the scale of changes they expect. The extremist type subgroup wants to see more radical changes and envisions the fight for women's rights in more radical ways. According to them, the struggle for women's rights implies the overthrow of the phenomenon of patriarchy in general, because the latter is considered a type of power that builds the entire system of social relations, where the woman is always in the role of a subordinate. From this point of view, changes must take place in political and institutional systems, which will lead to changes at the cultural and

individual levels. Meanwhile, the subgroup of "moderates" believes that the struggle for women's rights should be localized according to the priority problems of Armenian women. In general, the struggle against the patriarchal system must be directed, targeted, and carried out by socially acceptable means. As a rule, members of the "moderate" sub-group have ever been or are currently involved in the activities of an NGO as an employee or volunteer, which is why they believe that women's struggles should be targeted at specific risk groups, while those with extremist views who have not been involved in any kind of organizational activity, they believe that the target of changes should be global issues, which are universal for women from different strata of society. Still, for both groups motivation for joining the initiative is generally seen as a possibility for raising voices about gender inequalities and especially gender violence in Armenia. Due to interviews, it was possible to classify several types of motivations:

- Personal experience of discrimination by family members, colleagues and/or society,
- Realization of the global idea of social justice and elimination of gender inequalities in Armenian society,

It was also possible to divide the activists according to the scale of their activity, conventionally naming them "active" and "latent". Active participants take part in all stages of events: planning, organization, and public presentation. Meanwhile, "latent" participants are ready to carry out any type of activity that does not involve revealing their image to the public. In other words, this type of participants avoid engaging in flash mobs, mass marches, or any other activity involving any public activity. The desire to remain hidden stems from various reasons: but most individuals do not want to be identified and labeled as feminists because society does not welcome such activities anyway.

"By participating in street actions, we don't wear crowns, but many times we are labeled as feminists and perverts, family destroyers and hear other insults addressed to us."

Interview #11; 1.04.2021

In this matter, the pressure of society is so strong that these individuals prefer to remain undisclosed, not to be stigmatized with negative labels than to fight for the idea of women's emancipation and freedom. On the other hand, individuals fighting for their rights often do not want to be associated and identified with any organization or initiative, preferring to fight "silently". The desire to be "invisible" is another obstacle that prevents individuals from uniting and forming a movement.

From the perspective of the participants, it is also important to understand who is acting as the antagonistic characters for the potential movement. From this point of view, the main resistance comes from the society itself, which in every way resists

the destruction of traditional stereotypes and roles. Today, even though Armenian society is heterogeneous, but still, it is still a more conservative society than liberal one, which determines the negative response and even more resistance to the protection of women's rights. This resistance might be seen in the different levels of society. Especially rural population and elder generation has a critical approach to the liberation of women's social role and its consequences. Talking about general resistance it is important to mention that there are certain anti-gender groups, that are very proactive in targeting initiatives tending to support women's rights and voice women's issues with hate speech, misogynistic rhetoric, and public events interceptions. In post-revolutionary reality, the members of anti-gender campaigns received a new, fully oppositionist stance that opened the possibility of assuming a more aggressive role²⁷. In this way, society performs a function of social control aiming to preserve and reproduce the dominant values within its borders which contradict the main values of the initiatives.

Speaking about roles, it should be noted that no single person will be perceived as a potential leader of the movement. There are individuals who are perceived as defenders of women's rights within the activities of non-governmental organizations. Among them are the directors of three women's rights organizations: Lara Aharonyan, co-founder of the "Women's Resource Center", Susanna Vardanyan, director of the "Women's Rights Office", and Maro Matosyan, the founder of the Women's Support Center. The role of these individuals as leaders is seen as an "Illuminator", a person who has come to inform all women of their rights and ways to fight for them. But outside of organizational activities, these individuals are also not seen as future movement leaders because they are already leading organizations, and the interests of the future movement and their organizations may not coincide. Therefore, for all respondents, the leader of the movement should be a person who does not have any kind of obligation to such organizations. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that most activists generally believe that the women's movement does not need a leader because it is a reproduction of the hierarchical relations that they themselves are fighting against. Perhaps, from the point of view of any social movement, the existence of a leader is one of the most important processes, because it is this role of interaction that outlines the strategy of the movement, guides and organizes its activities. In our opinion, the lack of leaders in the women's struggle leads to the formation of individual individuals and existing initiatives, which operate mostly independently and in different directions, trying to bring changes in different, mutually exclusive areas. The main initiatives in this area have a relatively short history. Among the most active initiatives, we can mention "Rhythms of Floods", "Imitating Yerevan" and "Feminist Platform", which were

²⁷ Khalatyan M., Manusyan A., Margaryan N., (2020) Anti-gender campaigns, rhetoric's and objectives in post-revolutionary Armenia, *Socioscope*, p.15.

formed after 2011. The domestic violence incident in October 2010 greatly contributed to the formation of initiatives, as a result of which 19-year-old Zaruhi Petrosyan died as a result of her injuries emerged after her husband's abuse. Each of these initiatives seeks to raise issues related to women's rights.

SAND IN THE GEARS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS PROTECTION MOVEMENT

After interviewing the activists, it became clear that different internal and external obstacles limit the development of the women's rights movement in Armenia. The internal obstacles which are rooted in the social movements itself are the following:

➤ *Absence of a common feminist agenda.* The lack of a common feminist long-term agenda is the biggest problem hindering the formation of the movement, which essentially means that today in Armenia there is no single common issue related to the equality of women's rights and their protection, which would be unequivocally perceived as a landmark for the movement. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is that very often discrimination or inequality against women is not recognized as such by some groups in society. Even defining inequality as inequality is met with great resistance²⁸. Here it is appropriate to mention William Thomas theorem. "If people define a situation as real, that means it will be real in its consequences." Thus, the theorem reminds us that people respond not only to the objective features of the situation but also to the meanings that the situation has for them, on which they build their further actions²⁹. Of course, there are many issues that activists struggle with. Among such issues, the violation of civil rights, the cover-up of cases of domestic and sexual violence and the lack of a fair trial, the liberation of the woman's body, the dominance of the patriarchal system, etc., Even the feminization of poverty, perhaps none of these have yet become a landmark for movement establishment. In essence, this very circumstance indicates that the processes taking place in the field of women's rights in Armenia today cannot be called a social movement, because they do not have one common goal.

➤ *The lack of cooperation between different activist groups.* The established various groups of activists who have more or less the same values do not cooperate with each other, leading to segregation and fragmentation of already scarce resources. In this case, non-cooperation happens because of various reasons. First, individuals do not want their projects to be identified with other initiatives. Besides, there are ideological differences among activists. Supporters of two ideological directions can be distinguished: radical and liberal feminism. Activists with extremist views believe that,

²⁸ Tadevosyan A. (2016) Woman and man in everyday life. the problem of inequality in the area of tradition and practices, *Gender issues in modern Armenia. From Research to Policy*. YSU, p. 157.

²⁹ Merton R. (2006) «Social theory and Social structure », Khranitel, M., p. 606.

as elsewhere, the reason for the non-protection of women's rights in Armenia is the system of patriarchy, which is first of all manifested in the state administration system and constructs a dominant discourse based on its interests. The latter implies the reproduction of the image of women as subordinates. That is why this group of activists considers it necessary to fight against all government relations. Liberal feminists fight for equal rights based on the idea that everyone should have the freedom to choose and make their own choices regardless of their gender. These two groups see the problem of women's rights in modern Armenian society in different ways, which is an obstacle to the formation of cooperation. In addition, individuals with radical feminist views do not see the need and therefore do not want to unite with others and make joint efforts.

Each group has its own vision and there is no need for everyone to do the job by the same means."

Interview #14; 02.04.2021

➤ *Feminist identity-sharing challenges.* As it turned out, there are individuals who are involved in the struggle for women's rights, but at the same time want to remain disclosed and not reveal their image in the public eye. They recognize and value the need for struggle, but their positions in fact remain only on an emotional and cognitive level and never become actual on a behavioral level. In this case, the question arises whether these individuals have a feminist identity and avoid showing it, or whether it is absent at all. If we look at this situation from the point of view of social psychology, it can be clearly seen that some participants faced a role conflict that prevented them from fulfilling the role of a feminist activist. It turns out that these "latent" activists, on the one hand, cannot participate in the struggle for women's rights in general, because they are ideologically in favor of it, but on the other hand, they cannot fully participate in it, because it is not a socially acceptable role. Continuing this idea, we can say that in such a case the group cannot act as a carrier of feminist identity. Any idea of identity implies a two-way identification³⁰. An individual identifies with a particular group by attributing that group's characteristics to himself, sharing that group's values, and imitating that group's behavior. As a result, the individual is also identified as a member of that group by the external environment. However, in the above case, this group of individuals only identifies itself but is not identified by the environment, because it remains disclosed by its own will. This circumstance speaks not only about the lack of feminist identity but also about the insurmountability of social pressure.

➤ *Absence of generally accepted vision of a possible movement.* The movement for the protection of women's rights, being in the formative stage, does not have a clearly formed vision and strategy. Moreover, different groups within the

³⁰ Barth, F. (1969). Introduction. In F. Barth (Ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (pp. 9-38). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

movement have their own vision of how the movement should develop. The subgroup with radical views sees the raising of systemic problems and their systemic solution as a goal, which should begin with the transformation of the traditional Armenian family.

"We believe that the overthrow of the entire patriarchal system should be pursued as a goal, we don't want to deal with trivial issues of a cosmetic nature."

Interview #15; 05.04.2021

The latter means reaching such a level of consciousness that equal rights and responsibilities, the democratic principle of decision-making works starting directly from the traditional Armenian family. When it is possible to have a new model of the family, it will be possible to achieve the transformation of state structures and the operation of the principle of equality, the overthrow of the patriarchal order. Thus, this group sees the activity of the future movement in the legal field, which should be applied first in the family as a micromodel of the society, and then in the whole society. Meanwhile, the group with liberal feminist views sees the strategy of the future movement differently. The movement should include on its agenda the most important issues of the moment that may arise from the adoption or suspension of laws that violate the rights of every single woman. This group does not find it appropriate to separate the problems according to importance but considers that the future movement should fight not only against the system as a whole but also for the improvement of some of its subsystems.

"Changes should be implemented in two ways: through institutional changes, improving the work of state institutions, and individual liberation of every woman."

Interview #14; 02.04.2021

➤ However, given that the same institutional system identically reproduces values of which it is the bearer, frequent institutional intervention does not lead to significant changes. For this reason, activists believe that the emerging movement of the future must lead to cultural changes first at the individual level, which will later lead to institutional changes as well. Different researchers identify a wide spectrum of issues such as the feminization of poverty³¹ or low level of women's political participation³². Still, even these issues do not generate enough structural strain to recall and organize long-lasting mobilization. Internal obstacles are not the only reason why fragmented social initiatives are not able to rejoin into a powerful movement. Some of the obstacles have an external nature and depend on geopolitics

³¹ See Shahnazaryan G. (2022) Gender inequality and poverty in Armenia: a multidimensional approach, *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan University*, Vol. 13 (2), pp. 38-47 p.39.

³² See Shahnazaryan G., Hovhannisyan S. (2016) Priorities of the Policy of Women's Political Involvement in Local Self-Governance, *Banber: Bulletin of Yerevan University, Sociology, Economy* Vol. 7 No. 3 (21), pp. 3-13 p.3.

or the mentality of Armenian society. *Social conservatism as a way of preservation of existing social structures, norms, and values.* Liberal movements such as the women's rights protection movement for Armenian society may challenge these structures by advocating for greater social equality, individual rights, or alternative lifestyles. This challenge can be viewed as a threat to the established social order and stability. The existence of traditional barriers creates taboos to raise issues in the field of women's rights. So, activists lobbying for women's rights protection often have to overcome taboos, which is condemned by the Armenian society.

➤ *Fear of insecurity and disorganization.* Change can be unsettling for both individuals and society. Traditional values often provide a sense of security and familiarity. Movements that promote liberal values and norms challenge traditional values, might generate social fear and resistance, as people may be apprehensive about the potential disruptions that come with societal change. This became more topical especially after 44-day war triggered by Azerbaijan and the ethnic cleansing of Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh.

➤ *Generation gap.* Even in traditional societies like Armenian there might be seen a generational divide in perspectives over women's role in the society. Younger generations usually embrace liberal ideas and is more open to change, while older generations are attached to traditional values. This divide contributes to tensions between different age groups and regulates acceptable behavior which drags a large-scale mobilization.

➤ *Cultural change takes time.* The protection of women's rights ultimately comes down to the cultural edge of the perception of the image of a woman and her functions in society. Accordingly, the initiatives can go out to the streets and demand change or suspension of laws from government agencies, but they cannot demand a culture change. It can only be achieved through long-term and systemic measures. For example, one of the targets of the activists' main activity is the "revival" of March 8, traditionally a holiday of beauty and femininity. According to the activists, their actions are aimed at reminding the real history of March 8 and pointing out other social roles of women, which are not unconditionally related to the characteristics of gender roles. In this way, the activists do not celebrate March 8 in its current sense but also organize a march, which aims to inform society about women's social problems. Here it is interesting to note that the leaders and members of the structures formed after the Soviet period and on the basis of the national channel celebrate March 8 as the day of women's beauty and motherhood, even though in Soviet Armenia this holiday was declared as the "International Worker's Day". It is notable that in 1996 March 8 was removed from the list of public holidays of Armenia, despite the fact that the holiday was celebrated by the masses as a holiday of women's beauty. Instead, April 7 was declared Motherhood and Beauty Day, with the aim of forming an Armenian holiday tradition, overcoming the Soviet past. As a result, from the point of view of the semantic content of the holidays, the celebration of a woman -fighter

who defended her rights and has a social function was replaced by a woman who is just beautiful and has no social function, except for the function of physical reproduction. In 2001, a new law on holidays and commemorations was passed, which reinstated March 8 as a public holiday. Thus, there were two holidays dedicated to women, but both semantically ignored the social role and importance of women, emphasizing only the function of motherhood and other attributes associated with it beauty and daintiness.

➤ *The lack of confidence in the implementation of institutional changes.* Ordinary citizens who share the same values act as supporters only on a cognitive level, but not behaviorally. They do not resort to specific actions, because they do not trust institutional changes³³. *Anti-gender and smear campaigns expansion.* The existence and expansion of anti-gender campaigns contribute to the retardation of women's rights protection movement by targeting feminism, associating it with negative stereotypes, influencing policymakers to roll back policies that promote gender equality or just portraying gender equality efforts as unnecessary, and even dangerous for Armenian family and state in general.

➤ *'Velvet Revolution' that took place in 2018 also played a negative effect on the development of the women's rights protection movement.* The reason was huge expectations and hope of real change that would happen in the state due to educated and liberal representatives of newly established government. Expectations and kin and kith among representatives of government transformed movements activities on more passive way, because there were popular opinion: now it is time for the government to bring change.. Still, time passed, but the high hopes hadn't come through.

"We all were in euphoria waiting that our friends and companions in the new government will start acting, raise voice about problems and values we all share, but happened the opposed. Most of them started to distance themselves from our community like they never were involved in anything".

Interview #30; 01.12.2023

➤ *COVID pandemic that reached Armenia on 1st of March, 2020 as it was the first time government reported of the case, significantly affected social movements in Armenia, and particularly women's protection movement development. Lockdowns and other restrictions for preventing spread of virus affected mobilization methods and movement tactics.*

³³ Many sociological studies have been conducted that substantiate low trust in institutional systems; for example, according to the results of the Caucasian Barometer 2021, which is carried out with a representative sample throughout the territory of Armenia, the following results are presented: 57% do not trust the executive power in Armenia at all, 57% the National Assembly, 46% the police, 33% local self-government bodies, parties 25%. CRRC Caucasus Barometer <https://caucasusbarometer.org/am/cb2021am/codebook/>

“Everything became more passive after Covid. Even now, one year later after official end of pandemic, I noticed decline in or activities in different aspects. It seems to me that people are still not in stable psychological condition.”

“Interview #31; 28.11.2023

➤ The 44 day war initiated by Azerbaijan in 2020, following tensions on the border and armed clashes that continued for the next two years, and ethnic cleansing of Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh, has affecting the whole society and particularly movements of women’s right protection in a negative way. Exposure to the traumas of war, including violence, loss of loved ones, displacement, feelings of physical insecurities and danger, lead to severe psychological stress for the whole society. In this situation, Armenian society turned its coping efforts toward survival questions. Thus, the attention to women’s rights protection movement yield its place to more urgent issues concerning social security and issues of displaced people.

“When there is physical danger, you are cold and hungry, you don’t know what is goint to happen with your country, you think only about security, you cant think about high values or rights”.

“Interview #31; 28.11.2023

FEMINISM AS A BASIS FOR A WOMEN’S RIGHTS PROTECTION SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Feminism is a foundational ideology for the women's rights protection movement. As it was previously illustrated, during Soviet rule, Armenian society adopted an ideology of state feminism, as the state was not only the main and the only initiator that created, developed, and promoted legislation for women’s equal rights protection but also ensured the social involvement of women in different spheres of social life.

After Armenia’s independence, the change in the political system led to a revision of preexisting social values and modes of life. Feminism as an ideology began to fade, as the newly independent republic of Armenia faced different social and political challenges that demanded different solutions, and the integration of women or their rights protection was not on the list.

Still, different socio-political changes not only took away the old values but also brought a new one that penetrating from the West again raised the issues of women’s rights. Nowadays, the young generation of feminists are not associating themselves with the legacy of the Soviet past. Thus, creating a new approach to feminism as an ideology and new forms of resistance. With the passage of time, members of human rights protection NGO’s and just ordinary members of society started to advocate feminism as a guarantee of equal rights and opportunities for women. Still, the conservative society rebelled against the new values, considering

that feminism is a system of Western imported values that is directed against the Armenian family and therefore the Armenian state. Today in Armenia, these two approaches can be found side by side, even those with feminist views are of very different groups and can be classified from eco-feminists to radical feminists. It is an interesting fact that in both groups this distinction is clearly stated by the bearer of the identity: "I am a feminist" and "I am not a feminist". However, they only remain at the level of the individual's value system and do not spread at the level of contemporary Armenian society.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE FORMATION OF THE MOVEMENT

There are various factors that can contribute to the transformation of existing initiatives and the establishment of women's rights protection social movement in modern Armenian society. Here are some key factors that contribute to the formation of movements:

➤ *Globalization of the problem.* Thanks to social media and other means of disseminating information, any problem that an individual previously thought of as his own and tried to overcome or adapt to on his own may be represented as a general issue that can be solved or managed by a social group. So, increasing awareness of women's rights protection, and outlining opportunities and chances of successful problem-solving may lead to higher consolidation and mobilization in the future.

➤ *Establishing networks and alliances.* The initiatives will be able to consolidate and mobilize people only in case if they as different initiatives will be able to establish successful networks of cooperation and a system of sharing different resources.

➤ *Setting one single agenda and strategy accepted for all initiatives.* As it was mentioned before initiatives can't form a powerful movement as there is no general goal along which other activists and citizens will mobilize.

➤ *Create inspiring leadership.* Charismatic leaders play the most crucial role in the mobilization of the masses and leading the movement to success.

➤ *Making cultural shifts.* Accepting culturally approved values and making small changes in attitudes may help to consolidate more people and start slowly moving toward goals which can in the future lead to desired societal changes.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that the women's rights equality movement which was created and supported by the Soviet state died in Armenian society after independence from the Soviet Union. In the newly created political, economic, and social conditions, the state established other priorities and no longer considered the issue of equality of women's rights as of primary importance. At the meso level, the

women's movement largely disintegrated. Active women who were involved in previously existing women's organizations continued their social activities, but not within the framework of the struggle for equality of women's rights and their social roles, but in the field of other, more significant issues from the point of society. In this way, the active women's struggle moved to related problematic fields and focused, for example, on support for victims of the Spitak earthquake, support for refugees of the first Artsakh war, protection of children, provision of inclusive education, and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

NGO's founded after independence focused on very specific issues based on western liberal values, institutionalized as structures, but not formed as a movement. And at the micro level, the struggle for women's rights turned into periodic social actionism. In this sense, social actionism as a phenomenon is opposed to a social movement. A social movement differs from the latter in its continuity of purpose, high organization, and scalability, as well as the expectation of value-based systemic changes. From this point of view, women's activism in Armenia does not show characteristics of social movements, which can be explained by the insufficient level of structural tension, absence of common agenda, social conservatism and expansion of anti-gender campaigns.

Still, nowadays existing initiatives that raise their voice from time to time leave hope for the future establishment movement for women's rights protection in modern Armenian society and its further exploration.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.