

GENDER AND NGOS IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA

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Social experience in post-Soviet Armenia is characterized by a state of flux, a constant process of tearing down and building up that is rife with internal contradictions. The uncertainty and constant transformations in the social, political, and economic domains cause individuals to find new means of coping with all the myriad changes and these adaptations are informed by an amalgamation of pre-, post-, and Soviet era elements. In this paper I will discuss how women in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become quite adept at manipulating and employing the discourses of tradition and modernity, as locally defined, to succeed and survive under the new socio-political and economic system. I will argue that it is necessary for them to use both discourses since the demands placed upon them differ depending on context.

The NGOs as models of the “New Life”

The growth of the NGO sector in Armenia in the 1990s was hailed by government officials as being “a step in the right direction” and as: a) a sign of acceptance of democracy and civil society, b) a means to get grants and promote economic development from a grassroots level, and c) a means to become part of a new global dialogue involving the international non-governmental sector. By 1999, there were over 2500 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice in Armenia. According to a Democracy Union survey, over two-thirds of these groups are led by women.

In 1996 and 1997 I conducted fieldwork with two of the largest and most influential NGOs in Armenia, the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (HCA) and the All Armenian Women’s Union (AAWU), in the capital Yerevan. Both groups were led by women; the HCA was led by former parliamentarian Anahit Bayandur and the AAWU was led by then First Lady, Ludmilla Ter-Petrosian. The majority of the members of these groups are from the old elite (intelligentsia or the Party) and they have transformed themselves into social workers and public servants by acquiring new skills such as grant writing, fundraising, public speaking, computer use, media relations and advertising that are instrumental in their success. By repackaging their skills and qualities, some individuals have become very efficient and are able to secure funding and support through their extensive internal and external networks.

The large number of women in the NGO sector is a product of the removal of the Soviet quota system that led to a sharp decline in the number of women in official positions. In 1985 121 of 219 members of parliament were women, once the Soviet system collapsed and a new National Assembly was elected in 1991, the number of female parliamentarians dropped to eight. Following the May 1999 elections, that number has decreased to four. Although women had been crucial in the independence movement by participating in the demonstrations, work and hunger strikes, making speeches, and collecting money for the effort, once independence was achieved, women found themselves excluded from the new government. The NGOs became a popular path for public participation for the women who were excluded from the political parties and government positions. A preference among donors in supporting women’s initiatives and organizations has also made NGOs a viable alternative for women. As one of my informants stated,

You learn what the donors fund and then you talk about that in your grant proposal. They all like gender issues (*genderii hartzer*) so women have a better chance at getting grants as do women’s organizations (Raquel).

Since the women are operating at various levels (the local, national, and global), they have learned that to succeed, they must manipulate the discourses and rhetoric of “tradition” and “modernity.” By portraying themselves as traditionalists and as anti-feminists, the women appease local bureaucrats and politicians who resent the entry of women into the public sphere. The use of the democratization/ modernization/ development rhetoric, on the other hand, allows them to secure funding and support from Western donors who wish to promote women’s involvement in Armenia’s socio-economic development. The use of the contradictory cultural models of modernization/Westernization and traditionalism is reconciled by the women’s portrayal of themselves as reproducers and nurturers of the nation. The women argue that they have entered “public life for the good of the nation” (Nor Or 1995) and describe their NGO/public activities as being extensions of their domestic child rearing and nurturing duties. By invoking the rhetoric of moral motherhood, they insist that they are participating in the honorable practice of nation building through educating future citizens about the values of democracy, civic responsibility, and self-sufficiency. By shifting the focus away from women’s issues and hence, feminism, Armenian women in NGOs are able to deflect criticism and side-step obstacles which would otherwise complicate their work. The use of the contradictory discourses of modernization and traditionalism allows women to successfully operate at the local and international levels and in this context; NGOs become instruments for dissembling and challenging various structures and relations of power. The dialectical opposition between “feminine” and “feminist” is also employed by the women who consider themselves “feminine” rather than “feminist.” This difference is crucial since feminine (*kanatzi*) denotes a continuation with the past and traditional gender roles, while the category of “feminist” clearly denotes a break with the traditional. The activities of the Armenian women’s NGOs can be conceptualized as being “practical” movements since, as Molyneux

(1986) argues, practical gender interests are those which emerge from an acceptance of cultural gender roles and which do not directly challenge gender subordination. While the women in the HCA and AAWU do not challenge gender subordination, they use and manipulate their traditional gender roles (i.e., mothers, wives, etc.) to enter public life. Once in the public sector, gender identity becomes a strategic commodity that is selectively deployed. Depending on the audience, the NGO women are “liberal, progressive, women fighting for change” or “caring, nurturing mothers working for spiritual and cultural renewal.” This strategy has been effective in providing short-term benefits for NGO members, yet has also led to the marginalization of women from the governmental and political sectors. The privileging of donors of women’s groups and “gender” projects, as well as men’s migration from the NGO sector, have meant that the NGO sector has become feminized. To overcome this marginalization and maintain certain leverage in their dealings with public officials, the women in the NGOs are constantly involved in building and maintaining alliances with male politicians. These male sponsors protect and promote the women’s interests as long as they benefit from those activities.

NGOs and Networking

The success of NGOs is limited by access to money and connections. Most Armenian NGOs rely solely on foreign grants to fund their programs and the competition for these funds is very intense. Even if a group is awarded a large grant, the successful implementation of a project depends on the group having a good working relationship with local authorities. For these reasons, NGO leaders are constantly involved in negotiations and bargaining with *both* local governments and international agencies. The two NGOs I studied, the All Armenian Women’s Union (AAWU) and the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (HCA), were quite successful at maintaining positive working relationships with both the local authorities and international groups. Unlike many of the other NGOs operating in Armenia, they were brokers connecting the people, the state and the global institutions and juggled the contradictory roles of patron and client simultaneously. At the grassroots level they were the patrons of the people who sought their assistance and depended on their interventions with local officials and ministries. At the state level the HCA and AAWU, which were led by powerful political figures, were both patrons and clients to the ministry bureaucrats and local officials. Although, these bureaucrats and officials utilized the tactics of both resistance and compliance in an effort to receive something in return for their cooperation, they were careful not to resist too much otherwise complaints that they were uncooperative would reach their superiors and threaten their position.

At the level of international organizations the NGOs were clearly clients since they depended on their funding and support for their livelihood and status. Without the international organizations their existence would be difficult, futile, and perhaps even impossible. In the next section I address the problems created by the growing number of “grant-eaters” who are drawn to the funding offered by the international organizations.

The Trials and Tribulations of the NGO Sector: the Grant-Eaters

While some NGOs are involved in creating new institutions to promote democracy and civic participation, not all NGOs are “vehicles and instruments of civil society and democratic reform.” Quite the contrary, some NGOs in Armenia, as in the other states of the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe (Abramson 1999, Sampson 1996), are a survival strategy for elites who do not necessarily accept or practice the models of democracy and civil society. For example, based on research conducted in Albania, Steven Sampson argues that, since people are desperate for money and NGOs provide access to that money, intense competition and mistrust become part of the NGO sector. This is also true in Armenia, where for some individuals; NGOs have become a means to an end, rather than an instrument of promoting civil society and democracy. In Armenia, these opportunists in the NGO sector are called “grant-eaters” (*grantagerner*). According to my informants, these grant-eaters are attracted more by the large amounts of available funding than by the desire to promote civil society and community development. The entry of these “grant-eaters” detracts from the work of more dedicated NGOs and generates competition, gossip, and manipulation within the sector.

Everyone who now writes a grant application claims to be working for peace, human rights, women’s rights, the environment, democracy, and all the other issues that are popular with donors. Everyone is opening an NGO because they think they can get money for doing nothing. These grant-eaters (*grantagerner*) think if they simply write these things down they will get money and the sad thing is, sometimes they do. What they do with that money, however, remains unclear. These *shahamolner* (opportunists) also try and come join legitimate NGOs like ours and try to benefit from that association by winning individual grants but by using our name. In the last year I have expelled 5 people from the group for trying to benefit in this manner. The best NGO manager that I have seen is Raquel. She has an organization which is led by her husband and herself and is staffed by her son, daughter-in-law, niece, and several close friends. They hire coordinators and staff when they have a large project and release them once the project is over. They have learned to run their NGO like a business that makes it really efficient. This is what we are still trying to do, but we need to get rid of some of the garbage (*zibil*) first (Anna).

The advent of these opportunists has led NGO leaders to institute stricter controls on membership. These limitations tend to restrict the number and type of individuals who become involved in NGOs. The exclusion of various individuals by established NGOs, has led to the creation of new NGOs by the excluded individuals. This factor also accounts for the tremendous growth in the number of NGOs in the late 1990s.

In addition to the work with the NGOs, I also did research in a working class suburb to understand the differences in attitudes, responses, and acceptance of the new system. My research in the working class suburb made it clear that the NGO sector was quite elitist and membership was determined by class and connections. While some NGOs sponsor activities and programs in the working class neighborhoods, their contact is (or at least, has been) limited and superficial. Therefore, while some NGOs in Armenia are engaged in socially beneficial programs, it is important to view the sector from the local context in which they are seen as survival strategies for elites and instruments for obtaining power, prestige, and resources and access to the West.

Surviving and Succeeding in the NGO Sector

In 1997 the HCA was awarded a grant from Tacis¹ to create chapters in the cities of Vanadzor, Charentsavan, Ijevan, and Kapan. The four local chapters sponsored a series of seminars titled, “The Role of NGOs in the Development of a World Community” and “Tools and Mechanisms of Dialogue between NGOs and Local Authorities”. The purpose of these programs was to strengthen civil society structures in Armenia’s regional areas and build productive partnerships between NGOs and the respective local governments. In most of these areas, there had never been any communication between the NGO leaders and local government because some local officials resent the intrusion of NGOs. The presence of foreign representatives at the conferences was intended to subdue the animosities of local officials and demonstrate the “visible” concern and solidarity from abroad for NGOs. Anahit Bayandur, the HCA co-coordinator spoke about the difficulties of implementing the local projects during a visit to Los Angeles in 1998.

It was difficult to work with the local mayors at times. They felt that we were intruding in their territory. I always had to maintain positive relations with them. When I went to one town, I always told the mayor of that town how the mayor in the previous town had cooperated with us and was praised by our foreign guests and higher government officials for his cooperation. This tactic seemed to work well, since no one wanted to appear uncooperative in front of the foreign representatives and the media. We always brought along reporters, so the local authorities were careful not to impose too many obstacles and instead sought to be good hosts. Its difficult dealing with all these personalities. Some of these local leaders are drunk on their own power (*harpatz irentz oozhi vra*) and it takes great finesse and adept negotiations to have them comply and even assist in our projects. At the very least, not interfere.

In September 1999 I visited Armenia for a month and spent time interviewing members of the NGOs I had studied in 1996 – 97. At that time the HCA was attempting to establish a free legal clinic for the large refugee population in Charentsavan. Until our visit, the local HCA representatives had been unable to secure the cooperation of local bureaucrats, particularly the mayor. The aim of our visit was to persuade the mayor to allow the HCA use of the reception area near the Charentsavan Music Conservatory. A few weeks earlier the mayor had verbally agreed to allow the HCA access to the area and then had rescinded his promise. During our meeting he expressed his reservations, doubts, and even questioned the utility of having NGOs in Charentsavan. He argued,

We don’t need NGOs or intellectuals here, we need businessmen. We need moneymakers to come here and create jobs. We have enough old *apparatchiks*, we don’t need anymore. What jobs is your group going to create? What income is it going to generate for our town?

His doubts about the utility of NGOs were shared by other local bureaucrats who were more inclined to allow NGOs and political parties to operate if there were financial benefits to be gained. Bayandur is a former parliamentarian and has many connections within the government² and since she could not promise the mayor any financial returns, she used her political capital. She employed a tactic, which in the Soviet period was called the *khtzb* system (*khnami* - in-law, *tzanot* - acquaintance, *baregam* - relative). She told him about her meeting with Minister X and how she would introduce him to the Minister.

You know, the other day I was in Parliament and had an opportunity to speak with Minister X and Deputy Y about the problems in Charentsavan. They have learned about the difficulties your town is facing and have promised to look and see what they could do. Of course I told them what a wonderful job you had done in the last year in reconstructing some roads and creating jobs and they were very impressed. You know, the next time you come to Yerevan you should let me know ahead of time and I will set up a meeting with Minister X and you could discuss some of the problems facing Charentsavan. I know they really would like to meet you and it would be a simple matter for me to set up a meeting for you.

She continued to impress upon him the necessity of accepting NGOs and other democratic institutions and argued that this might enhance his and his town’s opportunities for obtaining future grants. Whether it was the promise of the “future grants” or the introduction to the influential Minister X, the mayor acceded. He promised the HCA free use of

the auditorium and surrounding rooms. This time Anahit suggested they sign a contract to make the deal “more official.”

The women in the AAWU were also quite adept at using the system of khtzb to advance their aims. When Levon Ter-Petrossian was in power, they did not have to try very hard since wherever the AAWU traveled, it was greeted with great fanfare and cheering crowds. The fanfare and crowds disappeared after the February 4, 1998, coup of Ter-Petrossian and AAWU is now operating with only three coordinators instead of twelve and the membership has seriously diminished from the 5,000 members that it had in 1997.

Despite their fall from power, the remaining three AAWU coordinators continue to implement the “I am a 21st Century Citizen” project (funded by UNICEF), which they began in 1997. The primary objective of the project is to spread the values and practices of democracy to schoolchildren across Armenia. According to the official AAWU publication, the project entails,

Sociological researches [sic], practical work seminars, special classes of democracy, during which the children will get the necessary knowledge on human rights, rights of a child, the Constitution of the RA [Republic of Armenia], mastering the skills of active behavior necessary for every citizen and constructive discussions of the problems concerning themselves (1997: 13).

The program was considered by the AAWU coordinators to be very effective in promoting the ideals of democracy, civil society, and political engagement among the youth. They argued that they were teaching children what it meant to be citizens in a democratic state and intervening before the children succumbed to the overwhelming apathy and disillusionment of adulthood. What is significant is that they went about teaching these skills and beliefs by posing as concerned parents who were producing or “reproducing” citizens for the nation. As Emily, the chief coordinator of the group argued,

During the Soviet period there was a weakening of feelings of community. By “spiritual reawakening” we don’t intend to reinvent the wheel but to promote understanding and in this difficult period to provide women and men with support, a sense of community and communality. We want to make women feel strong so that they will be the pillars for the families and society may lean on. Women should provide a safe environment for their children. In order for them to do so, they must be strong and we must help them to be strong. Women must become part of the democratic process. Women are going to be leaders in the democratic process and in promoting civil society. I see democracy as a process. A dynamic process and women can play a role in terms of educating their children about democracy, which entails rights as well as responsibilities.

Moral, spiritual and traditional reawakening is truly necessary. Women have always kept everything together and now more than ever; we need them to be there for our families and the nation. Women need more of a voice in the nation.

Inherent in her speech is how the AAWU was working towards these many different goals that were intended to create the same end result: a democratic society where citizens have equal opportunities for participation. Emily describes the need for “spiritual reawakening” and maintaining tradition at the same time in which she is advocating a break from the patriarchal system of governance and a shift towards democracy that she identifies as being more egalitarian (both from a class and gender perspective). She sees women as playing an instrumental role in the process of democratization and in the establishment of civil society. Emily often invoked the rhetoric of moral motherhood during our interviews and this belief and practice was shared by other AAWU members who argued that since women are primarily responsible for child-rearing and the inculcation of proper social and cultural values and morals in the home, as NGO members they are in an ideal position to nurture the Republic’s children. According to this argument, the social and cultural reproduction of values and morals that is conducted within the family can and should be extended and conducted at the public level. Through NGOs, the women argue, they can help train and educate democratic citizens.

It will be good if women become active in public and political life. Since by nature women are more honest, caring and conscientious than most men. Women view their work in public life as an extension of their work in private life. We never abandon our roles as mothers. Even in public life that is how we see ourselves, as mothers. So we feel that we must always be caring and responsible. NGOs are specifically aimed at increasing women’s participation in public life and politics (Camille).

The belief that women are more “honest, caring, and conscientious” was very popular among women in public life. By describing themselves in this manner they presented the case that they were the most able candidates to deal with the “moral revitalization,” “spiritual reawakening,” and “boosting the public morale.” This was part of their strategy of legitimizing their activity in the public sphere. Brenner argues that in Indonesia,

...women tend to be identified as the keepers of tradition and the guardians of those institutions, domains, values and practices that are more closely linked to tradition. Their role is to maintain continuity with the imagined core moral values of the ancestral past and to transmit them to future generations. Particularly in their roles as mothers and wives, they are considered to hold the moral fate of the nation in their hands. In contrast, men are typically envisioned as the pioneers of the economic, political, and social innovations associated with modernization....women are encouraged to participate in the government’s campaign to promote “development”,

but only in ways that do not interfere with the stability of the family unit or their role as the guardians of morality and tradition. (1992: 16).

While the NGO women in Armenia readily accept their role as the “keepers of the traditions” and “guardians of those institutions, domains, values, and practices that are more closely linked to tradition,” they also see themselves as modernizers in the sense that they are promoting democracy, civil society, and modernization via development. Democracy and civil society are identified as being modern since they are associated with the West, and for many of the women whom I met and interviewed, the West was and is the producer and exporter of modernity.

Conclusion

In 1996 - 97 the AAWU and HCA members were aware of the discontent and disillusion which was prevalent in the city and countryside and were attempting to address these problems through their various programs. These small-scale efforts briefly boosted the people’s mood, but were hardly sufficient in improving their overall opinion regarding the new system, its values, and its leaders. The anomie, apathy, and disenchantment persist and while NGOs attempt to alleviate the situation, other factors beyond their control have led to further deterioration of the public’s morale. During the October 27, 1999 attack on Parliament eight legislators, including the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament, were assassinated. The assassins claimed that they “used guns because democracy doesn’t work.” While the public condemned the attack, many people who were interviewed in the newspapers or on television claimed that they understood why the assassins had done what they had. NGOs have a long and difficult road ahead since their efforts are complicated by their dependence on the cooperation of local bureaucrats, international donors, competition from opportunists, and having to work with a public that is deeply disillusioned and impatient with democracy and its promises.

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Notes

¹ The Tacis Democracy Program and Phare are European Union initiatives to help promote democratic societies in the countries of central and Eastern Europe, and the New Independent States and Mongolia.

² In 1993, Bayandur and her Azeri counterpart, Arzu Abdulayeva (also a woman) were awarded the Olaf Palme Peace prize from the Swedish government for their work with refugees and in the hostage releases.