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The Impact of Conflict and Militarization on the Lives of Women and LGBT Persons in Armenia

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Abstract

The most recent 2022 Global Militarization Index ranked Armenia among the top ten most militarized countries in the world. During militarization, the institution of the military assumes a central role in society, with its values permeating almost every area of life. This article explores the complexities and challenges of life in Armenia's militarized society from the perspective of women and LGBT¹ persons. Militarization not only perpetuates patriarchal gender relations but also enforces trans- and homophobic environments based on cis- and heteronormative values. Thus, this article examines the impact of conflict and militarization on gender equality norms, such as the protection of women against violence, as well as the fight for LGBT rights.

Introduction—Gender Inequality and Militarization in Armenia

There are many complex and interlinked factors that can contribute to gender inequality in a country. In Armenia, however, one subtle but persistent factor is a prolonged military threat and the subsequent militarization of society. The most recent 2022 Global Militarization Index ranked Armenia among the top ten most militarized countries in the world². This is not surprising considering that Armenia and Azerbaijan endured a stalemate of 'no war, no peace' over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory between the 1994 ceasefire and the resumption of serious conflict in autumn 2020. Armenia's military defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war had profound security, political, socioeconomic and psychological consequences, which Armenian society is still dealing with today. Military tensions in the region run high with ceasefire violations and military offensives by Azerbaijan, not only in Nagorno-Karabakh but also in the border regions of Armenia.

However, militarization is a larger phenomenon than war; militarization can be practised during times of peace and permeate structures not directly concerned with the conduct of war, such as educational institutions and the family. Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend on militaristic ideas for its well-being (Enloe 2000: 3). It requires both women and men, but it privileges men and masculinity. Women are used as tools for the military, as

they are needed to play essential militarized roles, such as boosting morale, providing comfort during and after wars, reproducing the next generation of soldiers, serving as symbols of a homeland worth risking one's life for and replacing men when the pool for suitable male recruits is low (Enloe, 2000: 44). Hence, militarization affects women's lives both in the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of states, markets and institutions. War is about violence and death, but militarization and consequent heteronormative responses are about the reproduction of life. Unsurprisingly, patriarchal attitudes and heteronormative values are a large part of these militarization processes.

Generally, in Armenia, women are underrepresented in most professions, with lower wages and fewer opportunities than men, although as of January 2022, there are more women (53% [1,564,198]) than men (47% [1,397,169]) in Armenia (The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia [Armstat] 2022). According to UN Women (2023), although 83.3% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator are already in place, Armenia is ranked only 98th out of 153 countries, lagging behind neighbours Georgia at 74 and Azerbaijan at 94 (Global Gender Gap Report 2022). In particular, Armenia performs poorly on measures of political empowerment (Dermoyan 2023). For example, as of 2023, out of a total of 107 members of parliament, only 38 are women, with only two female government ministers (total of 12) and 10 deputy ministers (compared to 36

1 The author uses the term "LGBT" as it is the primary initialism for sexual orientation and gender identity and was mostly used by research participants in interviews during fieldwork in 2018 and 2019.

2 According to the GMI 2022, apart from Armenia, the countries with the highest level of militarization are Israel, Kuwait, Singapore, Oman, Bahrain, Greece, Russia, Brunei and Saudi Arabia. The Global Militarization Index gives the relative weight and importance of the military apparatus within a state in relation to society as a whole. To achieve this, the GMI compiles a number of indicators, such as military spending as a proportion of GDP, the proportion of military personnel within the total population, the ratio of heavy weapons systems, etc., creating a comparative measure.

male deputy ministers) (Dermoyan 2023). In many ways, this is unsurprising, as women's exclusion from political power is an outcome of the country's heightened militarization processes, including the premium placed on maintaining security.

Against the backdrop of military defeat in 2020 and the increasing unreliability of Armenia's long-standing security guarantor, Russia, efforts to build up Armenia's military capacity have increased. For example, Armenia's 2023 national budget saw a 46% increase in military spending (506 billion drams—\$1.28 billion) from the previous year (Freund 2023). Generally, military service is compulsory, with a two-year period of national service for men. Male citizens aged 27 to 50 are registered in the reserve army and may be drafted into regular army units if national mobilization is declared. Women's involvement in the army is growing now as well, especially since the Defence Ministry allowed women to enter the two military academies in 2013 (Avedissian 2023).

Militarization, Patriarchy, and Dutiful Wives

A large part of Armenia's history is a history of conflict, war and militarism. Due to Armenia's short history as an independent state and the absence of statehood, the concept of 'nation-as-family' evolved in Armenian society (Ishkanian 2004: 267). Against this backdrop, women have come to play key roles in maintaining the family and its values and norms, thereby solidifying the image of the 'sacred mother' in Armenian society (Ohanyan 2009). In a highly militarized state such as Armenia, motherhood often represents for women what soldiering represents for men—an opportunity to serve the nation (Ziemer 2018). In the case of Armenia, motherhood is also processed through multiple and distinct historical events, such as surviving genocide and struggling to preserve 'Armenianness' for the diaspora after their forceful eviction from their historical homeland and the more recent wars in Nagorno-Karabakh (Ziemer 2020).

The pressure of motherhood has become even more severe as a result of the 2020 war, when approximately 4,000 men were killed in action. Owing to an increase in demand for reproductive assistance from parents who lost sons during this conflict, the Armenian government began providing fertility treatment, including in vitro fertilization, for free to veterans and the families of fallen soldiers. Previously, the program was only available to women under 42 years of age, but this limit was raised to 53 (Avedissian 2023).

Alongside heightened motherhood responsibilities, women also face pressure to produce a son. As protectors of the nation, men have a more privileged status and authority in a patriarchal society such as Armenia. For Armenian families, giving birth to at least one boy is more than just a desire to continue the family line through the surname. Although there has been some improvement in recent years, sex-selective abortions remain a pressing social issue in Armenia. In 2000, the gender imbalance was at its highest recorded level, with a ratio of 120 boys per 100 girls (Khachatryan 2022). By 2021, this rate had dropped significantly—109 boys per 100 girls—but then jumped to 112 boys per 100 girls in 2022 (Sargsyan 2023). For most countries, in the absence of gender discrimination or interference, there are approximately 105 males per 100 female births, although this can range from approximately 103 to 107 boys per 100 girls (Ritchie and Roxer 2019).

Femicide and Violence against Women

Femicide and violence against women (VAW) are pressing issues in Armenia. Research has shown that militarized societies often see higher rates of domestic violence and violence against women. Military men are socialized into thinking that their role is manly to protect women and children and that it is manly to take risks, to be active not passive, to be competitive not compromising and to use violence to neutralize a military threat. In this way, military training often nurtures an exaggerated ideal of manhood and masculinity that is accomplished through the denigration of everything marked by difference, whether that is women or homosexuality (Whitworth 2004: 242–3).

In Armenia, the Istanbul Convention³ has yet to be ratified by parliament (despite being signed by the previous government in 2018) and is still debated in public and opposed in some conservative quarters of society, notably the Armenian Apostolic Church (Meljumyan 2019). The issue of VAW and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is often presented as a clash of values in public discourse, as conservative groups (some pro-Russian) seek to oppose this introduction of European regulations by framing them as 'alien' norms that threaten Armenian society. In this respect, these oppositional actors seek to discredit the current more 'pro-European' government by appealing to a deeply conservative society (Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). However, as in Armenia, these types of anti-gender mobilizations are active across Europe (Graf and Korolczuk 2022).

3 The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence is better known as the Istanbul Convention, deriving this abbreviation from Istanbul, Turkey, the place where the treaty was opened for signatures in May 2011. It is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe that legally defines and opposes violence against women. Therefore, it is an important step towards the protection of women from discrimination and abuse.

In 2022, 16 women were killed as a result of male violence in Armenia. According to the Investigative Committee of Armenia, during the first half of 2022 alone, there were 391 domestic violence criminal cases, comprising eight murders, including one due to negligence, 183 assault cases, 11 cases of committing severe physical pain or severe mental abuse, and 51 cases of murder threats or serious harm to health or destruction of property (Khachatryan 2023). In 2021, a study on domestic violence against women conducted by the Statistical Committee of Armenia showed that 31.8% of the respondents were subjected to psychological abuse by their husbands/partners, 6.6% were victims of sexual abuse, and 14.8% were victims of physical abuse (Khachatryan 2023).

These figures are striking in terms of the relatively small population of Armenia (a total population of 2,961,367 as of 2022 (Armstat 2022) but also in light of the significant underreporting of VAW. In Armenia, women are reluctant to report domestic violence, particularly because domestic violence is mostly considered a private family matter (UN Women 2018, Ziemer 2020); therefore, the incidence rate is likely to be much higher. According to the 2021 Armstat survey on domestic violence against women, only 5% of women who experienced physical or sexual violence said they sought help from the police, and 53.5% said that help is not expected from anyone (Khachatryan 2023). As per a public opinion survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in September 2020, 31% of those surveyed agreed that women should tolerate violence to maintain family unity. Close to 50% of respondents also indicated that they are unlikely to report a case of domestic violence if they see one, with 71% of men and 76% of women supporting the position that a family should “sort out its own problems”.

These attitudes indicate that discussing domestic violence and VAW publicly is a very difficult venture, often attracting criticism, as the issue continues to be viewed as a private rather than public matter (Armenian women’s rights expert interview, Yerevan, July 2019). However, women’s rights organizations have had some success with their work. In April 2021, a state-sponsored campaign against domestic violence was launched, displaying posters in public places exhorting women to speak out: ‘Don’t be silent. Nothing justifies domestic violence’. This was the first such women’s rights campaign in Armenia, and it constitutes significant progress.

LGBT Persons and Discrimination

In Armenia, the protection of LGBT rights remains contentious on all sides of the political spectrum, with

public discourse remaining overwhelmingly silent on the issue of diversity. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Armenia only in 2003. In 2007, the first Armenian LGBT community-based organization, “Pink Armenia”, was founded. Currently, Armenia does not have comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, and the state is yet to allow same-sex marriage or adoption (Human Rights Watch 2022). Widespread prejudice among the population remains, and people with a different sexual orientation often face intolerance and rejection from their own families (Chairperson at the Human Rights House, Yerevan, July 2018). IGLA-Europe’s Rainbow Index ranks Armenia 47th out of 49 countries in Europe and Central Asia for LGBT rights, and society remains overwhelmingly hostile to same-sex relationships. According to the World Values Survey (2017–2020), 92.8% of respondents in Armenia thought that homosexuality is not justifiable. In addition, 82% of respondents would not like to have homosexuals as their neighbours (Equaldex 2023). Such attitudes are not uncommon across the region. Although slightly ahead of Armenia in terms of the legal protection of LGBT persons⁴, neighbouring Georgia, for example, also shares these viewpoints, with 91.4% of survey respondents answering that homosexuality is not justifiable, and 61.7% rejecting homosexuals as neighbours (Equaldex 2023).

At the onset of the Velvet Revolution in spring 2018, Nikol Pashinyan was the first leading political figure to promote inclusivity in public, although often refraining from using the term LGBT in his public speeches (Human Rights Activist interview, Yerevan, July 2018). Once in power, the government under his leadership has been generally supportive of LGBT initiatives, such as the partial financing of the film *Mel*, which documents Mel Daluzyan, a famed transgender Armenian weightlifter and triple European champion (Ghukasyan 2019). In addition, Lilit Martirosyan was the first trans activist able to speak out in public at the National Assembly in 2019 and thus achieve some visibility for LGBT issues in the country (Martirosyan 2022). However, to date, there is still no hate crime law, legal gender recognition or access to trans health care in Armenia.

In Armenia, political homophobia is mostly associated with representatives of the old elite, the Republican Party, as well as the right-wing fringe group *Adekvad*. While *Adekvad* uses aggression and violent behaviour to contest liberal norms, the old Republican representatives use the strategy of fake news to the same end (Khandikian 2019). The political opposition manipulates LGBT issues to gain support and undermine or weaken the current government, as it seems generally supportive of

4 In 2014, Georgia adopted a widely debated law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (Gvianshvili 2020: 209).

LGBT issues (Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). Often, in public discourse, homosexuality and alternative sexualities are framed with a friend/enemy dichotomy, which can serve as a polarizing political strategy intended to alienate the population from the current government.

A militarist understanding of the nation and national survival embraces reproductive heterosexuality, where nonheterosexual individuals are conceived as “immoral” and “foreign” to an imagined national tradition and essence (Nagel 2003). Hence, this emphasis on traditions, family and marriage, which are a large part of the discursive strategies of political opposition groups in Armenia, emphasizes the patriarchy and masculinity in defending “our” nation from enemies’ nations. Thus, the relationship between the military and war (perceived as defending the nation) and masculinity is crucial in understanding the ways in which gender equality norms promoted by the European Union become contested in political discourse in Armenia (Roberts and Ziemer 2018, Ziemer and Roberts forthcoming). This construction and framing of masculinity as heterosexual and symbolically “natural” by referencing same-sex relations as “unnatural”, consequently rendering “queer” people as enemies of the nation, demonstrates how militarized thinking can become part of public discourse.

About the Author

Ulrike Ziemer (Ph.D.) is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Winchester, U.K. Her publications include numerous journal articles, book chapters and books on the Armenian diaspora in Russia, as well as on gender issues in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Her latest research project focuses on cybercrime issues in Armenia, cf. ‘Exploring the Relationship between IT Development, Poverty and Cybercrime: an Armenia Case Study’, *Journal of Cyber Policy*, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23738871.2023.2192234>

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Conclusion—What next?

As Armenia has an ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the nation remains in a state of military preparedness. This militarized perception of a nation under threat has been normalized by the population in everyday life, and therefore, privileging men as defenders of the nation helps to maintain a patriarchal social order. Although solving the ongoing conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region would certainly help accelerate the demilitarization of society and perhaps reduce militarized thinking and structured ways of life, it would not automatically improve the status of LGBT persons and women in society. Instead, and as highlighted in many feminist accounts, an empowerment of women in society will eventually reduce incidents of war and conflict. Multilateral agencies and international NGOs need to continue their work in peace building and expand peace education. Armenia certainly would benefit from increased levels of international cooperation and solidarity to make a transition from militarization and conflict to peace and stability, where women take a front role in peacebuilding and the demilitarization process.

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