



# Motherhood as Armenianness: Expressions of Femininity in the Making of Armenian National Identity

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## Abstract

This article explores the discourses on gender roles and the place of Armenian women in the Armenian nation-building process, especially focusing on the changes since the 1988 national movement formation. This study is based on extensive interviews conducted in Armenia and Karabakh in 2011. Although Armenian women were praised for their role during the nationalist movement of 1988 and the Karabakh war, they went back into their 'traditional' role in the aftermath. Motherhood is a strong concept in Armenian women's (self-)identification with their nation, constructing it as a unique Armenian trait that distinguishes Armenian women from 'others'. The self-expression of women highlights the authenticity of Armenian constructions of femininity as motherhood, embedded in the national and ethnic self-identification of Armenian women. The concept of Armenian motherhood is therefore a particular expression filtered through a distinct history of national struggle and genocide, and upheld by Armenian women through that perception.

## Introduction

In her documentary film entitled 'Grandma's Tattoos', Suzanne Khardalian (2011) tackles the forgotten history of the women who survived the Armenian Genocide of 1915 after being raped, abducted, and sometimes forced into slavery in Turkey; the tattoos were marked on their faces and hands by their kidnappers. Suzanne's grandmother had always been distant and unaffectionate towards her husband and

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her children. As her family members mourn her loss, they remember her as a cold person, especially towards her husband; she did not like physical contact with him. She spent hours gazing out the window, lost in her memories, pain, and parts of her life hidden from her family. Why did she have tattoos on her hands and face? Had she been forced to leave her children behind before being ‘rescued’ by the Armenian organizations to be reintegrated into the Armenian community? Had she been tortured by her abductors? Something had changed her forever; something that not even her children or husband could help her overcome with time. This is not just a story about pain and suffering, but perhaps more importantly about the burden of remembering that women had to carry after enduring so much, all by being expected to reproduce and give life to ‘continue’ the Armenian nation. This story of the documentary is significant in this context because it helps to unravel the construction of Armenian femininity and Armenian women’s perception of their national identity. The construction of Armenian motherhood as femininity is particularly worthy of examination because it is tied to the history of the Genocide and the struggle for Karabakh. This is the story of many Armenian women, who had endured the same fate during the events of 1915, but whose stories have not been told in the history books written about the Armenian Genocide, or genocide in general.<sup>1</sup>

History books are written by men, Suzanne Khardalian highlights in her documentary film.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, these realities experienced by women were overshadowed by narratives and discourses of national suffering and victimhood (for the Armenian context, see Dadrian 2003), and as Joane Nagel (2003:159) highlights in a more general historical context:

It turns out that the idea of a nation and the history of nationalism are intertwined with the idea of manhood and the history of manliness . . . In these national dramas, women are relegated to mainly supporting roles . . . [while the men] are out and about on important official business – fighting wars, defending homelands, representing the nation abroad, *manning* the apparatus of the state. Thus the real actors in nationalist productions are men defending their freedom, their honor, their homeland and their women.

In light of the issues raised by a fuller consideration of gender, the purpose of this article is to explain the place of women in the nation-building process of Armenia from 1988 to the present. The article examines why in the aftermath of the struggle of the nationalist movement in 1988 in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (hereafter Karabakh), the war in Karabakh, and the difficult post-independence years, the role of women shifted from protestors, soldiers, and martyrs, to home-carers, housewives, and mothers. I conducted a total of forty-eight extensive semi-structured interviews in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh in 2011 with high profile politicians, political party leaders, non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders, journalists, and scholars, in order to better understand elite constructions of Armenian femininity and masculinity in the nation-building process since 1988. Of the forty-eight interviews, fourteen were conducted with women, and four with repatriated Armenians who settled in Armenia after 1988. Initial interviewees were selected based on their high-level positions in politics and

the non-governmental sector, and in the case of scholars, their academic research interests; this was followed by snowball sampling. This study also draws on my observations while in Armenia and Karabakh, participation in workshops and events, as well as conversations and discussions with women and colleagues I met during my fieldwork.

The article includes three main sections. First, the legacies of the Soviet policies on the ‘woman question’ are explored. Second, the contribution of feminist theory to the study of nationalism and nation-building is examined, and the case of Armenia is positioned within this literature. The third section demonstrates that Armenian women understand their role primarily as caregivers in the family and the custodians of hearth and home, as signified by motherhood.

Motherhood is a strong concept in Armenian women’s (self-)identification with their nation. They believe that the concept of motherhood is constructed to be a unique Armenian trait that distinguishes Armenian women from the *otar(ner)* or ‘others’, meaning non-Armenians.<sup>3</sup> This article shows that the self-expression of women highlights the authenticity of Armenian constructions of femininity as motherhood. In conclusion, I argue that motherhood is embedded in the national and ethnic self-identification of women in Armenia, and even though the construction of motherhood is historically present in the national discourse of various nations, what makes it different in the case of Armenia is that the concept of motherhood is filtered through a distinct history of national struggle and genocide and upheld by Armenian women through that perception. This history is identified as the struggle to maintain Armenianness over centuries of attempts of (forced) assimilation, territorial loss, the Genocide of 1915, Sovietization, and the war with Azerbaijan; this particular history has been the burden of women and reflects itself within feminine expressions of Armenianness. As such, the construction of Armenian femininity as motherhood reflects the deep historical development of Armenian feminine national identity, rendering motherhood as a symbolic feature of national (self-)identity within the nationalist project. The constructed ideal image of the Armenian woman, much admired and respected, is one of a sacrificing, caring, and nurturing Armenian mother for her family and her nation. Similarly, an image of men as fighters and soldiers is also constructed in Armenia and upheld by most men, particularly amid the militarization of Armenian national discourse due to the fragile ceasefire with Azerbaijan over the Armenian de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh.

### **National Identity Construction and the ‘Woman Question’ in the Soviet Union**

In Armenia, the Soviet state attempted to break down traditionalism. The most traditional institution or structure in Armenian society was the family, and this became the target of the Soviet state. The *Kinbazhin*, a local branch of the *Zhenotdel*, had one main purpose: to ‘indoctrinate women with Communist principles, to enroll them in the party, to train them for government service and to help them advance on the job’ (Matossian 1962:65). To implement this objective, the *Kinbazhin* sent its representatives (*delegatki*) to visit homes and provide

‘scientific’ suggestions and guidance to women on child-rearing, hygiene, craft skills, and so on, to encourage women to abandon old traditions, and to help by raising their educational level and bringing them into public life and work (ibid.:67).<sup>4</sup> These practices were also completely contrary to the collective values of the family life of Armenians. But the efforts of *zhenotdel* had a contradictory effect on the Caucasian and Central Asian societies. Instead of convincing women to give up their traditional roles and to change the traditional family structure, it had the effect of reinforcing traditional family and kinship norms in these societies (Lapidus 1978:67; Stites 1978:339–41). It seems that society, and women particularly, resisted those interventionist Soviet models of reconstructing the family – they viewed them as attempts to destroy the traditional family structure.

Although Soviet attempts to interfere in the structure of the family and alter the traditional division of labour brought strong changes to the Armenian family, especially in the villages, the Soviets were not as successful in their mission to ‘modernize’ the family structure and division of labour inside the household. There was a clear contradiction in the Soviet approach: women were expected and encouraged to partake in the paid labour and in public life, but at the same time, Soviet paternalism continued to encourage the image of women as mothers and household carers (Eichler 2008). In this sense, the extended and close-knit family was yet again an important source of support for many women in Armenia – not only to help women in childcare during work hours, but also as a way to provide the necessary services and goods to replace the Soviet state (see Dudwick 1997:236; Heyat 2000:192–93, on the case of Azerbaijan). Finally – and strikingly in Armenia – these Soviet policies and views of women were combined with the ‘authentic’ traditional social values and roles of Armenian women as the guardians of the hearth and carers of the home (Dudwick 1997:237).

### **Nation-Building and Nationalism through the Lens of Feminist Theories**

The literature on post-1989 has emphasized the economic processes of the shift to market economy and rapid privatization, the transition to democratization, state formation and (re)structuring, and the birth of civil society, grouped under studies of transition and democratization, including work on understanding the political and economic implications of such a transition. Within the transition literature, there has also been an increasing focus on the place of women and the problems they face.<sup>5</sup> Scholars conducting such studies have found that women have been excluded from public space and positions in the public arena in post-Soviet countries, but women have chosen to be more active in the non-governmental sector where men have not dominated (on Armenia, see Ishkanian 2004; on Azerbaijan, see Tohid 2004), creating a feminized space in the public sphere excluded from the masculine public domain of politics. Studies on women in Armenia have usually been examined through the transition-literature lens, downplaying gender and nation-building. This article takes the latter approach in the attempt to understand not only the constructions of nation-building in Armenia regarding women, but more so to reveal the self-identity of women and how they

relate to their ethnic and national identities through their perceptions of motherhood as a unique Armenian trait.

In Armenia, there is a stronghold of the traditional view over Western views of modernity and feminism. However, the strong discourse of returning to traditional family values had already begun in the form of resistance to Soviet policies, to a certain extent, but has become accentuated in the independence period, particularly with the conflict in Karabakh that also revived the memory of the Genocide. As Soviet policies infiltrated societies in both public and private spheres, Armenians responded to the imposed values on families, for example, by strongly holding on to Armenian 'ideals' and identity (see, e.g., Geukjian 2012; Matossian 1962; Panossian 2006; Suny 1993). During such heightened periods of crisis, nationalists tend to rely on discourses of the home and family to secure the sense of identity that may be threatened by the crisis itself (Moghadam 1994:16).

Nationalist projects against colonial domination, for example, often need the presence and support of women to achieve transformative results. In the nationalist movements of the late 1980s, as in Armenia for instance, women were in most cases fighting beside men for their independence and desire to separate from the Soviet Union; in the aftermath of independence in these countries, however, it seems that women were mostly pushed back to their traditional domestic roles (Moghadam 1994; Vickers 2008). This is also formulated as the national role of women, so their duty for the nation, especially for vulnerable nations like Armenia, with a 'problematic' neighbourhood and a traumatic history of the partially internationally unrecognized Armenian Genocide of 1915. How can we view the role of women in the nation-building process in the post-Soviet, post-socialist context, more particularly? The mere involvement of women within political space traditionally occupied by men does not necessarily mean that women want to demand rights or struggle to overcome the traditional image of femininity.

The literature on nationalism generally shows that the process of nation-building involves various elements such as language, tradition, religion, and memories. However, in addition to these elements, the images of 'women', 'family', and 'home' are at the core of every national imagining and self-perception, proving the perception of authenticity and uniqueness of the culture and nation itself that are relegated to the category of the traditional or the inner domain of nationalism (Chatterjee 1993), in opposition to the colonial influence (Abu-Lughod 1998). In the case of the Caucasian and Central Asian societies, the space of authenticity has been maintained, to a certain extent, by rejecting the imposed values and norms on family and women from the Soviets, including through organizational bodies such as the *zhenotdel*. The post-Soviet era witnessed the possibility of bringing out these traditional values protected in the inner domain into the public sphere of Armenian society. Therefore, the woman question becomes almost synonymous with tradition, cultural authenticity, national honour, and image, and these, in turn, are interwoven within the discourse on women, family, and home.

Scholars of feminist studies have questioned the nation-building project and have shown that nation-building is a gendered process, and indeed, state-building, nationalism, and national-identity formation and consolidation are all gendered

processes (see Abu-Laban 2008; Chatterjee 1993; Moghadam 1994; Moghadam 2000; Pateman 1988; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). The literature on gender and nationalism shows how the perceptions of women within national projects is expressed either through an ethnonationalist discourse whereby women are the biological (re)producers of the nation as mothers or through the view that women are the cultural transmitters or the ideological reproducers of the nation (to borrow Yuval-Davis and Anthias' (1989) term). Additionally, women are typically the transmitters of national culture and tradition to the younger generations, particularly in the role of mothers, but also as teachers, for example, which is perceived as a traditionally feminine job. Furthermore, women are the symbol of ethnic and national boundaries within a nation and mark the 'us' (see Abu-Laban 1998; Cockburn 1998; Nagel 2003; Yuval-Davis 1997; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). As a national symbol, identified in the language of 'motherland' (*mayrenik*) and 'mother tongue' (*mayr lezou*), for example, women have been elevated to an important pedestal of admiration and respect through which culture and ethnic authenticity are idealized. It seems that by controlling the limitations, moral boundaries, and duties of women in a nation, men, embodied through the state, are better able to control the way the nation is oriented. Men are also idealized in the nation through the image of soldiers, the defenders of hearth and home, and the protectors of women. They are the ones who sacrifice their lives for the sake of the nation, and it seems that this gendered view of the nation has implications for both women and men.

These explanations on the links between gender and nation-building may lead to a perception of women as passive symbols. However, the self-perception and role of women as active participants in the construction and reproduction of the nation are also significant and should be recognized in the study of women and nationalism. Thus, even in their role as the biological producers and the cultural or ideological transmitters, women are actively expressing their national identity. Women have agency, expressed in their active participation in nationalist and independence movements, or in the way they choose to identify themselves as members of a particular nation. In some instances, women are actively involved in nationalist movements (Jayawardena 1986; Vickers 2008). In other cases, women actively participate by adopting a particular form of national expression, such as a traditional or cultural dress code (Wilton 2012). In the case of Armenia, women were actively involved in the nationalist movements in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and they also fought next to the men in the war and actively assisted the fighters in preparation, cooking, caring, and healing. Armenian women seem at first glance to be only playing a passive role in reinforcing the Armenian patriarchal nationalist perspective on women as mothers, caretakers, and guardians of the hearth. In some cases, they are partaking in that but in doing so are, in fact, active participants in the making of the nation from their own subjective perceptions as reproducers of culture and through their roles as mothers and guardians of the hearth (*ojakh*).

Therefore, women's reproductive capacity becomes the main marker of the survival of the Armenian nation and also the primary measure of authenticity and traditionalism in the maintenance of national identity in the face of the traumatic

history of genocide, in the 1988 Karabakh movement, and the war with Azerbaijan, which revived the discourse of genocide and Armenian victimhood and the difficulties of adapting and settling into host countries as a result of forced and violent migration from western Armenia.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, I take inspiration from Katherine Verdery's (1996:62) argument on subjective identity: 'Gender and nation exist in part as an aspect of subjective experience (nation or gender "identities," for instance) – as a subjectivity that orients persons in specific, distinctive ways according to the nationness and gender attributed to or adopted by them.' And more importantly for this article, this subjectivity is nestled within the 'prevailing cultural understandings and people's social situations' (ibid.). This is particularly true in the conception of motherhood in the case of Armenian women.

Armenian women's national self-identification is experienced and felt through the history of a struggling nation. Traumatic periods have a symbolic continuity in national identity and stretch through time in the construction of Armenianness. Through interviews I conducted with female Armenian politicians, activists, journalists, and NGO leaders, the next section shows that the ethnic and cultural self-identification of Armenian women stems from their role as mothers.

### **From Activists, to Fighters, and Back to 'Mothers': Shifting Roles of Armenian Mothers between Tradition and Modernity**

Looking at the images of the 1988 protests, many women were present and stood by their brothers, husbands, sons, and fathers. This was the moment of change for Armenians. It seems therefore very surprising that the many books on the 1988 national movements do not mention the role of women in particular or simply exclude it from discussions of nationalist movement and national identity.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps they do not distinguish the gendered division of labour, and they consider women and men to be equally dedicating their lives to this cause? Post-Soviet Armenian society conformed to the traditional view of women's role within the nationalist project, and women did not find this situation disturbing and welcomed it for the sake of the nation. This was part of the maintenance of Armenianness (*hayabahbanum*) that had been part of the Armenian post-Genocidal diaspora discourse for decades. In addition, the search for identity has to be contextualized within a global framework including different sides, such as Western (the European Union, especially recently), Russian, and regional influences such as Turkey and Iran. Not least, the strong influence and presence of the Armenian diaspora in different host countries where the diasporans reside is also relevant.<sup>8</sup>

The attempts to strengthen post-Soviet identity began mostly in 1988 in Armenia, when Armenianness became more pronounced and consolidated. This Armenianness (or the 'us') was taking shape as non-Soviet, anti-Turkish (and anti-Azeri), and in many ways non-Western ('other'). Armenian was to be unique, based on traditional values, perhaps stretching back to pre-Soviet values. One of my interviewees, Narine Aghabalyan, the current minister of culture of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, described the role of women during the Armenia-Azerbaijan war and explicitly compared Armenian women – and particularly Armenian mothers – to *otary* by stating that the importance of the role of women

becomes accentuated in educating and raising children, while ‘among the Russians and Europeans, it is not the case’.<sup>9</sup> She compares the ‘qualities’ of Armenian women to the Russian and European mothers and women, stating that it is different in those countries. There seems to be a certain image of Armenian women as different, unique, and of course as non-European (or non-Western) or even non-Russian. This traditional image of the woman as the caretaker and custodian of the hearth is viewed as purely Armenian.

The greatest difficulty is that this search for Armenian values as unique was ongoing amid the pressure for establishing capitalist economic values, rapid changes towards an open market system, and cultural influences from the West, especially through the increased interaction and establishment of Western organizations in Armenia (e.g. USAID). Stretching back to tradition (versus modernity) was important for the consolidation of Armenian identity and for the binding of the nation together as one, undivided. With the war with Azerbaijan already beginning, it became necessary to revert to a strong language of ‘brotherhood’, of unity of all Armenians, both local and diasporan. Women and gender discussions were lost amid the larger brotherhood romanticization, and women did not organize or mobilize into women’s movements to demand gender-specific rights or changes, and the idea of a women’s movement was perceived as highly divisive for Armenians and was deemed counter to the feminine image of women. So women not organizing separately into their own movements to demand their rights was part of the way Armenian women attempted to construct their femininity and maintain the image of the ‘ideal woman’ who supports her man during the struggle for the survival of the nation. This is the way Armenian femininity is portrayed and engrossed in society, and many women endorsed these ideas. In addition, the strong discourse of ‘othering’ Azerbaijan (and the Turks) necessitated an equally strong discourse of ‘us’ that underscored Armenianness as unique, thus justifying respect for traditional values and customs. In this traditionalism, women were expected to behave in a certain way, strengthening an ‘ideal woman’ image as a model to follow. But this construction of femininity also reinforced a certain image of masculinity. Men were constructed as the fighters, the soldiers, the brave men, expected to sacrifice their lives for their nation and become heroes.<sup>10</sup>

Armenian women actively participated in the 1988 nationalist movement in both Armenia and Karabakh, beside their men, to struggle against the Soviet Union. These same women participated in the war, either by carrying a weapon and fighting together with the men on the frontier, caring for the wounded, or taking care of the family in their absence. But once Armenia became independent, women returned to their traditional role in the family and home, and in many cases this was done with their consent. During the war years between 1991 and 1994 when food, clothing, and fuel were scarce, the struggle of women to keep food on the table, to educate children, and to take care of the husband was extremely demanding. Therefore, the main question that I asked the women I interviewed in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh was how they felt about reverting back to their role in the ‘private’ sphere. Why was there this shift from heroines and protesters in the streets, soldiers, and nurses in the battlefield, to household caretakers whereby the men took over the public sphere to make decisions affecting women’s fate?

In those difficult years (1991–1994) of the early post-Soviet period when men were unemployed<sup>11</sup> or had to migrate to find work elsewhere and women had to take on the double burden as both breadwinner and household caretaker,<sup>12</sup> women typically did not devalue their husband's role as 'head of the family', nor did they want to question it. As Armenouhi Stepanyan and Svetlana Poghosyan, both anthropologists at the Armenian National Academy of Sciences specializing on gender issues, stated, women always kept the men's place as the head of the family and insisted on the full respect of the children for their father as the main head. Stepanyan, recalling her own experience and difficulties, stated:

Armenian women should enter the Guinness book for her deeds in those years, for being the strong pillar of the family, for preserving their husbands' emotional pride as soldiers and men in order to keep them from succumbing into hopelessness and disappointment, and women actively worked to keep their family's well-being under harsh conditions, such as the absence of electricity and heat at home. . . . I myself had two children, and I remember those conditions especially in the first year when there was fuel shortage, I do not know how we heated ourselves, maintained sanitary conditions at home, made laundry with very cold water, only when they [the government] gave us two hours of electricity a day! . . . When my husband came home with no bread, I remember crushing the wheat with the mortar to make flour and baked *blin*<sup>13</sup> . . . this happened in most families, and of course there were those who had better conditions . . . [The woman] wanted to be the spiritual support for her husband.<sup>14</sup>

Women during those years typically had to cook and feed their families with anything they could find; different generations of women in one family often helped each other maintain their families. In addition, kinship ties became one of the most important ways for Armenians to subsidize the shortage of food and other basic goods for daily living. Generally, women had to wake up in the middle of the night, whenever power was available, to heat water, do laundry, and cook. Schools were closed down, and education was put on hold until the stabilization of the country's economy. These difficulties are remembered and shared today by these women, because they were the 'household builders and preservers'. Men were heavily unemployed and did not want to work in any position – it was also an issue of honour and pride, as Poghosyan states: 'In our society, not all jobs are respectful. In the West, for example, jobs are jobs. . . . [But in Armenia] men cannot take on any job . . . it is a social issue . . . so he cannot just work for money.'<sup>15</sup> In the absence of employment for men, due to the blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and the ongoing conflict with it in Karabakh, some women took on the role of breadwinner by working as traders – mostly selling goods at the open market or on the street. It was often this work that allowed her to feed her family, but also to keep her husband's pride intact.<sup>16</sup>

Stepanyan, quoted above, recalls these years with great admiration for the role women had played:

Let us remember the four to five years right after independence and after. In society in those years, the role of women became so important. There was a

struggle for survival. The country became independent and became deprived of all economic and political contacts . . . the Soviet Union was like an organism . . . And when one segment leaves, it is as if one organ has been taken from the organism. This brought unemployment, and men could not play their role as bread winners . . . This caused a double burden of emotion, especially given Armenian men's mentality, and suddenly left him feeling like an 'outsider'. Non-official jobs became prominent, such as dollar exchange, products came in from Georgia such as candles, fuel, matches . . . the basic needs for the household . . . This of course is not like Leningrad during WWII, but it was close – no food, shortage [of basic items] . . . in these burdened and difficult years, the role of women multiplied. She was ready to work, no matter what her education level was, if there was an opportunity, to primarily supply food for her family.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, women generally did not reproach their husbands in those times for being unemployed, or sitting at home, because the situation was the same everywhere. Stepanyan continues to remember those years:

[The woman] wanted to be the spiritual [*abaven*] support for the husband. No one blamed the husband, because the situation was the same everywhere. The Armenian saying 'the death with a friend is a wedding' as if it is consoling that you are not alone. In those years with the difficult economy . . . it seems as if the woman returned to her traditional Armenian role with even more responsibilities. [She was] the one who kept the house [*odjakh*], and really kept it alive.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar light, Poghosyan, when I asked her if she believed that the Karabakh war had changed the life of women in society, perhaps to show that she, too, could fight, stated:

To say that it improved her situation, it is difficult to say – she took on much more on her shoulders because of the unemployment of men . . . and she is not blaming him as well . . . women [and society] understand that they have a role outside the home. But it is supremely the status in the home that matters. The women also do not want to change that, they are happy with it. There is fear of succeeding. [She is] not supposed to succeed in her career, but only at home. So the priority is at home. It is considered very ideal to have success in both spheres. As I mentioned many women who are successful in their careers try to stress their roles at home, as mothers and wives.<sup>19</sup>

Stepanyan added that women also educated her children at home in those years when schools were closed. Much like many other women in Stepanyan's generation, women who were mostly in their late twenties and thirties at the time, she wanted to be the main support for her husband in those conditions:

[T]he women worked, schools closed and to avoid children's education from suffering, we educated them at home: [there were] not only hygienic and economic difficulties, but we also worked with the children to educate them

in order that they not fall behind in their schooling. I worked to teach them Russian and English . . . and I am not a unique case, it was in most cases the same.<sup>20</sup>

Aghabalyan, the current minister of culture of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, similarly recounted the story of her own mother-in-law, who had, during the peak of the war, created classrooms surrounded by sandbag walls in the remnants of a bombed building to continue the education of the younger generations. This was inspiring to everyone, and especially to children, and she adds that ‘the role of women in child education and rearing is extremely valuable’,<sup>21</sup> concluding that this is a particularly Armenian trait in Armenian mothers and women, which in her view is distinguishable from other cultures. This is the way these women reflect upon their role and place in Armenian nation-building, and it seems that these constructions of femininity in Armenia centre on the uniqueness of Armenian women and their role in the national project. Going back to the idea of authenticity discussed by Chatterjee, Armenian constructions therefore also focus on the authenticity of Armenianness through the image of the woman as the caretaker and guardian of the hearth and as the support of the husband. This article does not aim to establish that Armenian motherhood is ‘better’ than others as the interviewee does here, but the way she describes Armenian motherhood shows that this is how Armenian motherhood and femininity are constructed and that some Armenian women have internalized this image or at least try to portray themselves as conforming to this image in order to look ‘ideal’ in their feminine roles.

This history is important because it registers in comments given by interviewees about nation-building. In fact, these stories (or realities) also reflect the self-image of women in their role as mothers and their role to stand by their husbands – their men. The work women were doing was not considered a ‘career’, but simply a means to bring back bread to the family, to feed and care for children, to provide a means of survival, and when that need disappeared, the woman would return to the home as the household caretaker. It seems that this generation of women accept their position as the caretakers of the household, the main preservers of the hearth, and the main supporters of their husbands. This is evident in many of the interviews I conducted with various Armenian women mostly in their fifties who had survived the extremely harsh years after independence and the war years, when there were food and power shortages – indeed, shortages of all basic items.

Aghabalyan similarly described the role women played not only in the protests of 1988 in Stepanakert, but also during the war. She recalled some of her memories of the 1988 protests when she was still a student studying at the university in Stepanakert, in Nagorno-Karabakh. I quote her at great length because her words also describe women’s activism during 1988:

I remember when the movement began here, one of the first fronts to be formed for these struggles and protests were the women. Our intellectual representatives included women such as Zhanna Galstyan and Arzik Mkhitarian<sup>22</sup> and there was a woman cook, but they all went to fight, of course also the men. Their voice played such an important role, in these squares and the first protests began right here. I was still a college student at

the time, and half of the students approximately were Azerbaijanis at the institute here, and so not everyone had the courage to express their views. When on February 13, 1988 the first protest was to take place, the youth and students were to have an important role then. And you need of course older people sometimes, in high ranks such as the professors or lecturers or intellectuals to set an example to the students. And among the many professors from the university were women, the [male] rector at the time, under pressure from Azerbaijan and local authorities, closed the doors so we would not go out of the university, but we just jumped from the windows! . . . With us were a few lecturers among whom were some women . . . and especially if it is the women who are raising the flag, then men could not act weak, they had to join. . . we spent the night here in the square, no one went home (they were otherwise called traitors). We made tea, we distributed bread to everyone, and of course women had a strong role in that. When they organized the fronts to fight, many women volunteered as equals to men. Even Zhanna Galstyan, [who was] not only shouting and protesting, but was also fighting until the end of the war. And this really inspired men. If women left Karabakh to save their children, then men would not fight this war, it would not have to come to anything.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, in the post-conflict society, the role of women had focused not just on caring for their families, putting food on the table, and educating their children, but also on the role of psychologists who were to help their husbands' transition from the war to their lives as fathers and husbands. Aghabalyan expressed two important issues related to post-war rehabilitation and adaptation that societies undergo. She presented this in light of the role of women in helping the soldiers to transition to their 'normal' lives:

The men had a difficult time adjusting to peace after the war. The readaptation was difficult, their morale had changed (some had lost their friends who had died in their arms). Their psychological status needed to be lifted and that required a lot of effort. That effort was taken on by women, who played an important role in that. Women are the educators in schools in Armenia it seems. And that gives a specific role to women, as if the men can take a more physical and protective role, and women can do more caring, teaching the children, raising them.<sup>24</sup>

Women are also the keepers of memory and sustainers of culture, even under the strenuous conditions of post-conflict readaptation. They kept the memories of the war alive, the memories of the survivors, of the martyrs and heroes. In Karabakh, a mother of a martyr, Galya Arstamyan, decided to found (and currently directs) a museum dedicated to the martyrs (*azadamardig*) and heroes of the Karabakh war. This is the Museum of the Fallen Soldiers. She gathered the pictures of as many as 3,355 soldiers who had died during the war (her son among them) and their combat possessions, making various trips from Stepanakert to Yerevan. She did this to keep 'the memory of the boys alive', and in a TV interview with Civilnet, she referred to this museum as a 'living legend'.<sup>25</sup>

Maria Titizian, Director of the Hrayr Marukhian Foundation of the ARF Dashnak Party<sup>26</sup> in Armenia and a Canadian-Armenian who settled in Armenia with her family in 2001, expressed concerns regarding why women revert back to their traditional role. I quote her at great length because what she stated is extremely pertinent to present-day Armenia and reflects a more critical perspective:

There was a conference for ARF [Armenian Revolutionary Federation or the Dashnak party] at 120 years, they asked me to present on ARF women . . . I spent months going through ARF history and minutes of the meetings . . . the more I did my research the more I became convinced that history has been so unfair to us as women, of our role, of the critical role that we played not only in the formation of the party itself, but also in Istanbul in the second half of the nineteenth century, all the organizations that the women were part of, whether they were educational or benevolent organizations. . . . I mean Lola Sassoun, if you read her life story . . . Roubina Adamian, Maro Magarian, amazing selfless women who put . . . the survival of the nation above their personal happiness. If you look at any liberation movement, women are always there with the men, and the men want them there because they need them, whether there is tending to the wounded, feeding them, shooting snipers . . . but as soon as things revert back to some level of normalcy the women instinctually also revert back to this.<sup>27</sup>

Titizian accentuates how women willingly retreat to their traditional roles as mothers and as guardians of their homes, highlighting a sense of women's own perception of Armenianness, which is based on seeing themselves in their traditional roles. In this sense, women can actively contribute to the construction of femininity based on a patriarchal society's expectations of women. When an intense struggle is necessary for the Armenians, the women are ready to be actively involved with the men – whether in fighting or in assisting, caring for the wounded, cooking, and so on. It is how women feel and express their Armenianness, and it is how they contribute to the maintenance of their nation. At the same time, Titizian adds to this the perception that preserving Armenianness is always seen as the main responsibility of women who reproduce generations, serve as the educators and the transmitters of culture and identity, and so on. This is also the case of Armenian women in Armenia and the diaspora generally. To quote her, '*hayabahbanum* ideology told women indirectly that their role was to educate the children, to ensure that the woman is the transmitter of culture, music, to ensure the sustainability of the nation in exile, and the women took that role upon themselves'.<sup>28</sup> Women can therefore become active agents in reinforcing and maintaining the constructions of patriarchy and the associated perceptions of femininity and masculinity in society that define a woman's role.

An (American) diasporan woman who had moved to Armenia, Salpi Ghazarian, the current Director of the Civilitas foundation in Armenia, similarly approached the status of women in Armenia in more critical terms. When I asked her what she thought of the role of women in Armenian nation-building, Ghazarian stated: 'My role is whatever I make it to be and it has nothing to do with my gender . . .

Self-defined roles of women are atrocious. The social status is awful, not self-evident, and it is often perpetuated by women, teachers and [school] principals. It's awful.<sup>29</sup> This critical view also highlights that women can play a role in 'perpetuating' a particular set of expectations from women. The performance of gender, or gender performativity to use Judith Butler's (1990) term, is also learned and transmitted by older generations of women in various roles, as the performances become tacitly agreed upon and deviation becomes punishable.

Gender is performed not only by women, but by both women and men who try to fit within their roles as ascribed to them in society. It is not an easy task to challenge these roles, which are almost marked in stone. The words of Aghabalyan accentuate a point of view that seemed to be common in Armenia and Karabakh: men had more capacity for physical activities and were thus the soldiers and protectors of the nation and women were more able to take care of children's education, care for the wounded, feed the soldiers and children, and also be mothers. Even when women participated in large numbers in the war in Karabakh, this image remained. In the words of Edgar Khachatryan, the Director of Peace Dialogue, a non-governmental organization in Armenia, the expectation of society is not just from women but also from men:

The society has expectations on how to be Armenian; it is forcing me (a man and not a woman) to play the 'right' role as an Armenian. So this is not just imposed by the government [not top-down], but society also plays its role. For example, I have done my military service, and if [I] want to leave, the 'military' is asking [me] to give them the copy of my ticket, of the visa to the country [I am] going to, and I asked why is the military requesting this information from me? And they responded: but we are a country in war, so do you want to come back and fight for your country? . . . And society is not against this behavior, so the rules force me, and society agrees to it because people believe we need it – this is military thinking – we are a country at war, there is the idea of war. And this is gender based because this is told to me as a man, not a woman of course.<sup>30</sup>

What Khachatryan means here is that the society has certain expectations not just of women to be pretty, to take care of herself as a woman (her clothing, make-up, and so on), but also of men to be strong, to serve in the military, *to want* to serve and to protect his family. This is the image of the man that is being constructed and internalized. For example, Nona Shahnazarian conducted a gendered analysis of the Karabakhi dialect and concluded that, amid the dominance of a militaristic and heroic rhetoric during and after the war in Karabakh, characteristics such as 'courage and valour' are highlighted and valued, and when praising women that have these qualities they are often called *tghamart-kenik*, which literally means 'a man-woman'. In a similar situation, when this concerns a courageous man, a tautology *tghmart-mart* – 'man-man', which comes to mean 'real man' both biologically and spiritually, is used (Shahnazarian 2010:3).<sup>31</sup> This point was also made by Poghosyan who stated, 'Those women who are in politics, business and so on are referred to as *tghamart-kenik*, because only men can be successful in higher positions in society's perception'.<sup>32</sup> These constructions of

femininity and masculinity correspond to the image of what Armenian men and women ought to behave as, to aspire to become, and builds within them comfort with this image, constructing it as the ideal Armenian woman or man.

From 1988 until 1994 particularly, Armenian women took on various roles at different stages of struggle. This period and the major events in Armenia and Karabakh, one could argue, had an important impact on the social and gender structure of the Armenian nation. As a result, women were actively part of the struggle and the fight, and were accepted as such by men. These non-traditional roles, sometimes voluntary and other times forced by circumstances, were deemed necessary for the survival of the nation, and were thus accepted within the discourse of national unity and security. One could argue then that the militarization of the national discourse justified the non-traditional roles. This post-Soviet trend in Armenia was justified by the national discourse during the war with the need to reinforce the ‘us’ versus the ‘other’ and build a strong sense of Armenianness. The end of the war and the return to the day-to-day socio-economic matters for Armenia signalled the retreat back to the norm, which called for the traditional place for women. Those who stood by the men, who helped in the national struggle, were now expected to follow the model of the ‘ideal woman’. As Poghosyan stated:

Women want to become the sexual ideal. And you can see the trend among women who want to emphasize that they have raised their children, taken care of the families and now that children are older, they can begin their career and start to work . . . If you hear our women politicians here in Armenia, in their speeches and their interviews, they like to stress upon this theme – they represent themselves as fitting the image of the ideal.<sup>33</sup>

The complexity in understanding the women’s role in Armenia is that the conception of Armenianness is expressed by women through their own identities as mothers, preservers of culture and traditions, and, of course, the guardians of the hearth (*ojakh*). This is not, however, a recent phenomenon but rather a historically tied characteristic of the way Armenian women express their own national identity and feel ‘Armenian’, particularly based on the specific history of the Genocide, Sovietization, Armenian-Azerbaijani war, threats of assimilation, and loss of Armenian identity. Moreover, in many nineteenth and twentieth-century literary works, for example the famous works of Zabel Yessayan and Shushanik Kurghinyan, the concept of motherhood as women’s self-identification is strongly present, as Victoria Rowe (2003:189) puts it beautifully:

[T]he Armenian mother was conceptualized as the creator of the Armenian nation and defender of Armenian culture through her raising of children, which in turn was related to nation-building by providing the nation with responsible and patriotic citizens. The ideological connection between the Armenian mother and the nation has a discernible genealogy in Armenian intellectual history.

One can conclude here by stating that the particular history of statelessness, the Armenian Genocide of 1915, and the revolutionary struggles against the Otto-

mans, the more recent struggle in Karabakh, as well as the movements starting in 1988, are all significant in shaping the identity of women. Women see themselves and are constructed as the mothers in the Armenian nation-building process and as the transmitters of culture and the guardians of memories. Motherhood as agency can therefore be understood not as a passive self-expression of women, but as an active expression of Armenian femininity in the face of influences and changes. The construction of and self-perception based on motherhood seems to be an identification of Armenianness for these women – an identity that sets them apart from other women. In this sense, then, a woman who does not appreciate her maternal role or does not perform it properly is deemed deviant because motherhood is considered as the most important role within the family for the woman; the woman's place in the family is therefore important in the ideal image. Sona Zeitlian (1992) argues that the sacred motherhood image has impacted and continues to impact ideas about Armenian women's place within the family and society. The idealized image of motherhood sacralises the role of the mother as the pillar and keeper of the family and hearth, by perpetuating and transmitting national and cultural traditions, values, and customs. Thus the purpose of a woman is to become a mother, firstly, and only after to seek a career or other goals outside the home. Armenian women's subjective national self-identification embedded in the expression of motherhood is extremely pertinent to understanding the Armenian attitude towards national identity construction. Motherhood, as the perception of femininity in Armenia, is also a self-expression through which Armenian women play an active part in the nation-building process.

### **Conclusion**

My extensive semi-structured interviews (both formal and informal) with high-profile politicians, NGO representatives, and intellectuals, as well as my observations during my stay in Armenia and Karabakh, show that there are certain images and perceptions about what role Armenian women and men should play in society. The public sector, where state- and nation-building ideas were planned and executed, was reserved for the male heroes of the 1980s' struggle. Women also do not see themselves as actively involved in the public domain, as evident even in the words of women politicians in high-ranking positions, who always emphasize not only their career as politicians but first and foremost their roles as mothers, caretakers, and educators. Thus the ethnic and national identity is prioritized over the gender identity of an Armenian woman. A woman is first an Armenian and then a woman, which means that her gender identity and rights are embedded within and delimited by the nationalist discourse, ideas, and beliefs rather than a feminist goal or project. In fact, the process of constructing national identity also idealizes the image of the man as the fighter, the courageous soldier, and the protector of the nation and women.

What is uniquely Armenian in the construction of Armenian femininity as motherhood is that this conception is processed through a distinct history of genocide, survival (early independence years and in the diaspora), war (in Karabakh), and the struggle to preserve Armenianness after the forceful eviction

from a historical homeland to a strange host country. Thus, the burden of women in Armenia and in the diaspora has been to bear the consequences of the exigencies of Armenian nation-building on their shoulders and putting the nation ahead of their own needs and desires. This article has attempted to focus on the self-identification of Armenian women and Armenian constructions of femininity to be able to capture the place of women in the nation-building process in Armenia from 1988 to 2010. One could thus conclude that there is perhaps an Armenian femininity in the making, one that has been in development for centuries.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Some of the literature on the Armenian Genocide generally does not present a sustained analysis of the gendered violence committed against women and girls, and usually refers to this type of violence simply as concomitant of the totality of violence of genocide. The suffering of the Genocide is primarily a national one and the violence towards women is represented as part of it (see, e.g., Dadrian 2003; Hovannisian 2007). More recent writings on the Genocide have begun highlighting the particular aspect of violence towards women, the impact this has had on the construction of national identity, and the traumatic reintegration of women back into the Armenian communities after living in slavery to Turks, Arabs, or Kurds. As Armenian relief organizations, in tandem with the European organizations, rescued these women, many of them were already married to the Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab men who had saved them or abducted them, and even had children by them. In many cases, the cost of reintegration into the Armenian community was very high, requiring women to leave behind their children, 'who had "executioners" blood in their veins' as Tachjian (2009:69) puts it. On the Armenian Genocide, see, for example: Björklund (1993); Derderian (2005); Miller and Miller (1993) for oral history interviews revealing the experiences and psychological traumas faced by survivors; Sanasarian (1989) for a historical examination of gender-specific violence committed against Armenians in the Genocide of 1915; and Shemmassian (2006). The Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan also posts the stories and pictures of kidnapped Armenian women during the Genocide. For more information see: [http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online\\_exhibition\\_2.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/online_exhibition_2.php).

<sup>2</sup> This is a point that Suzanne Khardalian makes in her documentary film 'Grandma's Tattoos', referring to the dominant perspectives written in (Genocide) Armenian history textbooks, which can be literally written by both men and women. In fact, to generalize this point, many women partake in the continuation of the dominant perspective in society, as

Salpi Ghazarian points out in her quote in this article (see also Derderian (2005) on the role of women in violence against women). In the case of the Armenian literature on genocide, for example, some generally do not offer a sustained analysis of the gendered violence committed against women and girls, and usually refer to this type of violence simply as a concomitant of the totality of violence of genocide. According to Derderian (2005), during and after the Genocide the Armenian community recognized the particularity of the experiences of Armenian women (for example, forced marriages or sex slavery) (see, e.g., Dadrian 2003; Hovannisian 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The term *otar* (Eastern Armenian) or *odar* (Western Armenian) – pronounced differently due to the linguistic differences between Eastern and Western Armenian languages – is used to denote the ‘other’ or the non-Armenian. *Odar* is used mostly by diaspora Armenians to refer non-Armenians in their communities. For diasporan Armenians living in a host country, the *odar* represents the ‘other’, outside their imagined Armenian boundaries (see Kaprielian-Churchill 2004). For women in Armenia, the *otar* is represented either through the image of the Muslim women living in their ‘traditional’ Islamic culture (particularly for Karabakhis), or through the image of the Russian women, or even the Western women, who are considered more ‘open-minded’, ‘emancipated’, and ‘non-traditional’. These stereotypes shape the way some of the women I interviewed spoke about the ‘other’.

<sup>4</sup> According to Matossian, a Commission for the Improvement of the Way of Life of Women was established in Armenia under the name of *Kanants kentsaghe barelavogh hantzanazhoghove* (KKBH) in 1923. The KKBH’s various clubs in Yerevan and other major cities were trying to mobilize women in order to educate them: ‘to popularize Communist policies, eliminate illiteracy, improve child-rearing and hygiene, train women in craft skills, and fight “old customs” ’ (Matossian 1962:67).

<sup>5</sup> For studies on how transition in political and economic spheres affect women and discourses of femininity, see: the edited volume on Central Asia and the Caucasus regions by Acar and Günes-Ayata (2000); Bridger and Pine (1998) dealing not only with transition in the economic and political dimensions but also cultural and border studies perspectives in various central and eastern European countries; Buckley (1997); Gal and Kligman (2000); Ishkanian (2003); Kuehnast and Nechemias (2004); Lapidus (1978); and Verdery (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Western Armenia is the term used by many Armenians to refer to Eastern Turkey in a geographical sense, and to remember their historical land where they lived before being expelled during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 committed by the Young Turk Ottoman government. For more information on how the Azerbaijani attacks against Armenian in Sumgait and Baku, for example, and the Armenia-Azerbaijan war in Karabakh revived the discourse and memories of Genocide among Armenians, see Marutyan (2009).

<sup>7</sup> For the major works on the 1988 nationalist movement in Armenia, see: Chorbajian (2001); Chorbajian et al. (1994); Libaridian (1999); Malkasian (1996); Marutyan (2009); Panossian (2006). These important works, however, do not tackle the role that women played in the 1988 movement, which creates a significant gap in the literature on 1988 on the focus on gender roles and particularly the way women have been portrayed in the Armenian nation-building process. Malkasian (1996) refers to the role of women in organizing some of the protests that began attracting more and more people, such as the march in Yerevan on the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh and the chemical plant in Abovyan, but he does so only in a descriptive aim, and the rest of the detailed study of the movement does not address the role of women.

<sup>8</sup> Western film and other media can also be considered as powerful influences today in Armenia. I want to thank one of my reviewers for this insight.

<sup>9</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author’s translation.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by the author with Edgar Khatchatryan, 2011, author's translation

<sup>11</sup> The devastating earthquake of December 1988 in the Gyumri region, the energy crisis, the economic and land blockage of Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan, the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh enclave, and the collapse of the Soviet common market and its economic structure, were truly traumatic for Armenians who had to adapt under those conditions. Unemployment rates were extremely high: according to UNICEF, by 1993, an estimate of one million people was either formally unemployed or on forced leave (Scott 1994 quoted in Dudwick 1997:237). Unemployment rates are difficult to find for the early years of post-Soviet Armenia. The unemployment rates are hardly accurate because in most cases the actual rate was higher or those who were employed were only partially employed (part-time or 'disguised' employment) due to the economic crisis in Armenia during those years. According to UNICEF (1999), the registered unemployment rate was 1.6% for 1992, 5.3% in 1993, and 6.1% in 1994.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Armenian men were very helpful and doing household chores during Soviet times. Quite the contrary, as expressed to me by Poghosyan. The burden of double duty existed even during Soviet times, but what aggravated the situation is the early years of independence in Armenia and the war in Karabakh that caused extreme unemployment (see previous endnote) and lack of available employment in many domains. This pushed women to work in any position, including cleaning and washing dishes, in order to support her family, while her husband would not help at home. I want to thank one of my reviewers for pointing this out to me.

<sup>13</sup> *Blin* is a Russian word that is short for *blinchiki*. Even though this is not the traditional bread, Armenians, like Russians, use the verb to bake (*tekhel* in Armenian) to explain the cooking of the *blin*, which is a staple in Russian and Eastern-Armenian cuisine.

<sup>14</sup> Interview by the author with Armenouhi Stepanyan, 2011, author's translation

<sup>15</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation

<sup>16</sup> Nora Dudwick notes that women, in many cases, had to borrow money to be able to travel to various places such as Turkey, Syria, countries in Eastern Europe, and even to Vietnam and China in some cases, in order to resell their purchases at the open-air markets in the city. Some women also formed their own unregistered businesses to make money on the side. These include activities such as 'knitting, sewing, embroidery, potting and baking skills' (Dudwick 1997:242-43).

<sup>17</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>18</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>19</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>20</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>21</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>22</sup> Zhanna Galstyan became a member of parliament in the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (de facto state) after the war. She is also the chairman of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic National Assembly Standing Committee for Defense, Security, and Law Enforcement Affairs. In 1988, Arzik Mkhitarian was a lecturer in the Psychology Department at the Stepanakert Pedagogical Institute, which became Artsakh State University in Stepanakert in 1992. Today she is the Dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy at Artsakh State University.

<sup>23</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>24</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>25</sup> Galya Arustamyan is also the chairman of the NKR Union of Perished Soldiers' Families, a non-governmental organization in Karabakh, and chairperson of the Mothers of Karabakh Freedom Fighters Union. This quote is taken from a YouTube video posted on 9 October 2011. The video was prepared by Civilnet news and posted by 'StudioAshnag'. I was not able to find the original date of the interview from the Civilnet website.

<sup>26</sup> The ARF or the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, also known as the Dashnak Party, was established in 1890 in Tiflis, today's Tbilisi in Georgia. It is a socialist revolutionary party that aimed for 'social justice, democracy and national self-determination for the Armenian people' as stated on their website, see <http://www.arfd.info/background/> (accessed 24 August 2013). The Dashnak Party headed the government of the first Republic of Armenia from 1918 to 1920 when it was Sovietized. After the Armenian Genocide, the Dashnak Party became the strongest diaspora political party that was able to mobilize and organize the Armenian community in different parts of the world where Armenians found a refuge and a home. It has established various organizations, schools, and churches in order to help maintain Armenian identity among the diaspora. It is also known for its lobbying efforts in Europe and the United States today to recognize the Armenian Genocide. The other two important Armenian diaspora political parties that were formed in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are the Social Democrat Hunchakian Party and the Armenian Democratic Liberal or Ramgavar Party. After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, these three parties were able to have a presence in Armenian political life. For a history of these parties, see Nalbandian (1963).

<sup>27</sup> Interview by the author, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>29</sup> Interview by the author, Salpi Ghazarian, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Interview by the author with Edgar Khatchatryan, 2011, author's translation. Edgar was one of the only interviewees who had a dual understanding of gender, meaning he viewed gender roles as both the roles of women and men, and not just women. This is not only a trend evident in Armenia but can also be found in the Western context. There has been a growing focus on studies of masculinity in nation-building, especially since the 1980s (see, e.g., Kimmel et al. 2005; Mosse 1996; Nagel 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Some of the consequences of the role 'reversals' or the adoption of more masculine roles by some Armenian women were stated by Khachatryan and Poghosyan during interviews with the author. However, there were limits to how much a woman was able to play non-traditional roles, and there was tolerance to some extent of some types of roles and not others. Nona Shahnazarian, a Russian anthropologist whose works focus on gender relations in Karabakh, demonstrates that those women who transgressed 'stereotypical roles' – for example those who were high-ranking in the army or in the fronts, those who drank and swore like men, paraphrasing her words – were only accepted temporarily during the time of active war, and were rejected in its aftermath. They were also praised before, but the praise word itself became derogatory when addressed to a woman in the aftermath as well (Shahnazarian 2010:2–3)

<sup>32</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

<sup>33</sup> Interview by the author, 2011, author's translation.

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