REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT ARMENIAN HISTORY

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# **Abstract**

This paper examines the evolution of the representation of women in Armenian communication throughout a large period of history, starting from ancient times all the way to the today’s Republic of Armenia. The author argues that despite the fact that Armenian women were deprived of many rights and privileges throughout history, their role in the society was still very important and that they were actively involved in aspects of life, including traditionally male-dominated realms, such as politics and even warfare. Provided historical facts come to testify that women in Armenia were traditionally valued, and not limited only by stereotypic mindset. In addition, the role of women in communication and in society gradually increases and today women are much more free from stereotyping and fulfilling their potential than that was the case throughout much part of the Armenian history. From ancient times to our modern days, Armenian women left us a huge heritage by their patronage of art, architecture, their involvement in politics, and even warfare. This does not deny the discrimination of women and their inability to realize their full potential, instead, that their role in the Armenian society and history was quite valuable and unique.

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# **Introduction**

The role of women in Armenia is a vast and why not, a quiet controversy topic. If we look at history from today’s perspective, we will see that women were very much oppressed in society, not being able to fulfill their potential in almost every aspect of their lives. However, not to fall to anachronism, one should always consider generally everything in the context of that particular historical period, and if we do so, we will get the image that is more precise and truer. It is not a secret that in Armenia women were deprived of many things that were allowed to men. However, that does not compromise the huge role women played throughout history. What concerns to Armenia, our country has always been intact with the reality of every epoch of history. This paper tries to show the role of women in communication in Armenia throughout different parts of history as well as the evolution of gender perceptions in Armenia from ancient times through today.

What is clear throughout history is that women always played an essential role in Armenian society no matter which period we are talking about. From the standpoint of today’s reality, that role would be secondary, indeed, as mentioned, since women and men had different roles and women have been secondary in many aspects of life. If we talk about the positions of power or personal self-fulfillment, the role of women will be secondary, but if we talk about the representation of women in the communication in society as such, we will see a different picture.

# **Background Information**

From the historical perspective, both in times of “Paganism” and Christianity women played a huge role in communication, people’s mindset, in the household, and why not, in politics. Like many other nations in Armenia as well, female deities played a crucial role, being associated with many traditionally positive traits such as motherhood, tenderness, beauty, and such traits that are traditionally are associated by males and manly hood, such as physical strength, protectiveness, war. Armenian Goddess Anahita, was one of the most worshipped deities, associated with motherhood, beauty and as it may be surprising with war. Despite the fact that ancient Armenians had a separate god of war (Vahagn), soldiers and generals were praying to Anahita before going to military affairs: This comes to testify the importance of this deity and to show ancient Armenians did not only think with gender stereotypes and were not thinking that women are unable to do traditionally male things, such as warfare. Arguably one of the reasons Anahit was so popular in Ancient Armenia was that being a female deity, she was combining both male and female traits as motherhood and warfare. Another famous deity, Astghik, was also widely worshipped among ancient Armenians, being associated with traditional female characteristics and traits such as beauty, and love.

This last assumption also spreads to the political life of ancient Armenians. In the I century B.C.E., a famous queen Erato, was raining in Armenia with her brother Tigranes. This is a rare thing not only in Armenia but outside of it. There are extremely few cases in world history that the queen rained together with another, the male heir of the throne. Also, in the coins of that time, both Erato and her brother Tigranes were depicted. This is an even more rare case. Historical facts prove that the figure of a woman was praised and respected both within and outside the traditional and stereotypic boundaries. We see, women deities like Anahita were one of the most prominent and worshiped goddesses who despite being worshiped as the patroness of motherhood and beauty was also associated with warfare and military, which as we know, is a traditional occupation of males. This comes to testify that some traits of “masculinity” in women were praised within ancient Armenians. This is also proved in other cases as well. Such as the fact that first century BCE Armenian queen Erato was co reigning with her brother king Tigranes and her face is depicted in the coins of that period demonstrating her as equally important. Throughout the middle ages, Armenian queens like queen Katranide and other noble women were patronising arts and architecture and equally participating in the political life of the country, sometimes even leading warfare like queen Parandzem. The fact that those women were praised for their courage and non traditional behaviour comes to demonstrate the role of women was not limited within the traditional scope of occupation and that the attitude they received was due to their global impact and merits and not because of the stereotypes. The attitude towards women and their rights significantly improved during the two stormy years of the first Armenian republic back in 1918.

The Medieval History of Armenia has known many other famous queens who were also praised and stayed in the memory of people as very courageous rulers, being able to show themselves in warfare as well. Infamous queen Parandzem of IV century who was courageously fighting with the Persian army vastly outnumbering Armenian forces. She was very much praised in Armenian history and the memory of her descendants for showing qualities of a leader, a warrior who never retreated in the face of the enemy. In addition to this Parandzem showed traditional female virtues such as purity, when she killed herself not to fall in the hands of the enemy and save her integrity as it was understood at that epoch of history.

Talking about culture, one should also remember the painting of Vardges Surenyants, who depicted his famous “Woman Warrior” or Queen Zabel of Cilician Armenia.

Armenian queens of the Middle Ages have left us a huge cultural heritage. One of the most famous and praised churches in Armenia “Haghpat” was built by queen Katramide of the X century. We know that from the many inscriptions praising the queen, and even after he died, she was buried in front of the church. She was also famous for her patronage of many other architectural sites.

#  **Literature Review**

Throughout recent history, the role of genders, especially those of women, has been studied by many scholars who have had the aim of proving the equality that should exist between genders. While it is my personal observation that the genders are not equal, somewhat equivalent, it is essential to highlight the evident issues that exist in many societies and civilizations of the world in regard to gender - ones that distort and objectify human rights. The dominant role of males in contrast to the recessive role of women is engraved in the habits and beliefs of many social groups, including the Armenian mindset of the roles of women. Let's talk about another phenomenon, which is widespread, and in some cultures it is even a matter of concern. Thus, in a number of Western cultures, the preference of the male firstborn is incomparably higher. Unfortunately, this trend is causing some concern. In a number of countries around the world, the number of sex-selective abortions is increasing due to this culturally and economically significant phenomenon. Pregnancy is terminated when it turns out that the fetus is female. There are also cases when babies are simply taken to an orphanage. According to tradition and mentality, the boy is the direct bearer of the name of the family and the nation, the successor of the dynasty . Thus, the boy is considered to be the immediate bearer of the family's values, the one who will take care of his parents in the future, etc., while the girls usually get married and "leave" their father's house, join their husband's family, taking care of the latter. This way of thinking helps to understand where the preference for newborn boys comes from or what causes it. In this literature review, we find research studies surrounding how women are portrayed in Armenian communities, and whether this perception has changed throughout the years of the country's shift to more democratic tendencies.

It is an undeniable fact that gender issues, including gender and communication, are relevant in a number of countries around the world, including the United States, Europe and elsewhere. Not only the representatives of different cultures, but also women and men speak differently. In fact, the relationship between a man and a woman is reminiscent of a unique intercultural relationship. Sociolinguist Fern L. Johnson in her article “*Political and pedagogical implications of attitudes towards women's language”* writes that women and men live in different worlds, which is reflected in the different types of communication they use. From this point of view, it is appropriate to consider male-female communication styles as two different verbal communities. The notion that women and men are absolutely identical people is wrong from the beginning. Of course, both are people, individuals who have equal opportunities, rights and freedoms. The result is that one often misunderstands and interprets the situations as "real problems with gender communication." We ourselves have gender communication and communication every day and almost every moment.

As we take a look at Minasyan's article *"Armenian Heroine Women,"* we can see how he refers to the heroic activities of Armenian women during the Armenian liberation war of the early 20th century. The heroic actions and movements of the Armenian women during the Second World War, as well as the Armenian women who took part in the Artsakh war, are the subject of a separate examination. In his research, it is shown what the Armenian woman was like in ancient times and touched upon the image of today's woman. The methods chosen by the researcher had been in the form of data collection for having enough history statistics regarding the situation of women's role throughout Armenian history and how it has changed.

Another analysis of the representation of women in Armenia is ethnographer Rafik Nahapetian's article, "*Women in a traditional Armenian family*." From ancient times, the place and position of a woman, responsibilities, and rights have been determined in human society, which has differed according to their age. In his article, Nahapetian points out some materials which have been preserved in the family and society about the role and behavior of women in communication in Armenia: proverbs, phrases, kind words. The various forms and customs of avoidance and restrictions imposed on women were mainly aimed at keeping the moral foundations of the Armenian family secure in unfavorable socio-political situations in the absence of statehood, and had an educational significance for generations. The author writes about the changes according to their ages. While in the past there have been many restrictions, the role of women has been assessed with restrained rights, and the system of restraints has restricted them, in his research, the ethnographer stated that in the past when 12-13 year-old girls was getting married, the family's attention was focused on her, which has changed throughout the time. Besides, the author also analyzes the representation of women in Armenian families. The article tells how women have changed the image of the Armenian traditional family.It is said that the creation of roles of genders has "helped" maintain their cultures with the cost of Armenian women being pressured into reproducing and only prioritizing the creation of families above everything else.

Some activation of the representation of women was taking place in Soviet Armenia, especially in public and economic life. The Communist Party initially announced that it would not only ensure women's equality but also achieve that it would cut women off from humiliating domestic activities. The Communist Party tried to actively use women to destroy slavery and bourgeois customs and traditions. According to the article *“The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus,”* by Armine Ishkhanyan, throughout the history of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, the role of women became very active in various social, scientific and economic realms. Women became actively involved in science and various economic professions. The practical application of this policy has led to the formation of a majority of women (doctors, teachers) in several professions. Soviet Armenia in the 1980s had 9,000 female researchers, as many female physicians, and 30,000 teachers. Some women have held senior positions in large enterprises, especially in the light and food industries. These were the areas where the female workforce weighed heavily. In other words, the activation of the economic role of women took place in order to manage women's labor more effectively. To emphasize women's equality, March 8 was celebrated as International Women's Day in the USSR. Nowhere in the world has this holiday been celebrated with more considerable pomp. Since 1965, March 8 has been declared a non-working day, followed by several other socialist countries. Nonetheless, during the Soviet era, there were also many restrictions on women's rights. The moral code preached by the Soviet leadership first and foremost restrained women. For example, during the Soviet era, beauty contests were never held so as not to ruin the image of a "working woman.” While the first decades of Soviet rule contributed to the growing involvement of women in various spheres of public life, the manifestations of gender inequality have become more and more apparent in recent decades.

Armenian novelist and feminist Zapel Yesayan wrote a lot about her experience and the importance of the representation of women in her notes and books. Yesayan's memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar* is one of the most famous, which involves stories of Armenian women during soviet times and the Armenian genocide. The articles were distinguished by clear feminist ideas, telling about the role of women in communication, society and the author's ideas about the latter. In her notes, she writes about genocide survival, Soviet Armenia, Stalinist repressions, Feminist Movements, and presents the vital role of women in society and family. Moreover, she included her previous writings and published interviews with Armenian Genocide survivors.

# **Research Question & Methodology**

Conducting research on gender communication and the treatment towards women defined by stereotypes, I used different methods and collected some data from different sources. The main research questions are: How has the representation of women in communication evaluated throughout the years in Armenia ? How have the stereotypes changed? How are the roles communicated in history? The hypothesis is that throughout history the representation of women in Armenian communication and society was not limited only within the traditional scope of occupations, and the perception of women’ role in the society was very diverse. In order to answer the research question, a content analysis of several historical sources was done to come up with a solid ground to prove or disprove the hypothesis. What is more, in order to understand the mentality of Armenian natives and in order to reveal the perception of the representation of women in the society nowadays as well as to find out what modern people think was the role of women throughout history, I conducted 2 focus groups both consisting of 6 participants (3 men and 3 women.) The participants are all Armenians, have different professions and 3 of them live abroad. Focus group discussions also focused on identifying gender aspects of parenting practices, prevailing gender perceptions, stereotypes and their differentiated attitudes, and differentiated perceptions about children's futures.

**1.** The Soviet Generation (30-50 years old) (7 participants)

These participants belong to the first group, who were born and raised during the Soviet times. Regarding their generation and education, they have completely different thoughts and perceptions on communication and stereotypes. The main goal is to reveal and understand the differences and similarities of the perspectives between generations. Surely enough, there might be some traits that are still accurate, but the perspectives are more or less different because of the generations.

**2.** Armenian Third Republic (16-30 years old) (5 participants)

The participants of this group are people who were born and raised during the Third Republic of Armenia. Different people from different places were in this group. Each of them wrote their own perspective on the topic. These people helped to determine how different today’s generation thinks. Due to their responses, I was able to understand the differences and similarities between my generation and my parents’ generation. Surprisingly, though a lot has changed over the years, while comparing the results, in most cases they share the same perspectives.

The content analysis brought up several historical facts of different periods to show that women, despite being discriminated against and unable to realize their full potential, had left us a significant heritage in various aspects of life starting from patronage of arts and architecture to active participation in political life and even warfare. As mentioned above, focus groups have been conducted and the participants were all given topics to discuss, which included questions that introduce the concept of gender, communication and stereotypes.

# **Research Analysis & Findings**

The analysis of historical facts comes to prove that despite the fact that women were strongly discriminated and stereotyped, this was not only particular to Armenia but rather universal historical fact, and that the representation of women in communication, and the understanding of that role in the society was not limited by the stereotypes that women faced.

The country which fell a prey for multiple wars, epidemics, refugees and other cataclysms lawfully acknowledged equal rights of men and women and most importantly, the right of women to vote. The fact that during this interwar period of the republic, the universal suffrage law was adopted means that the decision is not based on the prior experience but the culture and contemporary tendencies. Armenian People have always valued the role of women in their routine life and government as well. Having this kind of cultural background, the government of the First Republic did another exceptional act. The act consisted of appointing women in vital governmental roles. One example of this was Diana Abgar. Diana was among the first female ambassadors in history. She was the ambassador of Armenia to Japan. Thanks to her immense efforts, Japan was among the first countries to recognize Armenia’s independence. Unfortunately, the First Republic was able to survive approximately two years and throughout the Soviet Republic of Armenia women never occupied governing or diplomatic positions.. In addition, their role was not only limited by indirect assistance to the fighters but also with direct participation in military operations as well. This last circumstance was one of the reasons, contributing to the fall of stereotypic mindset of the Armenian society against women. One of the most bright representatives of Armenian anarchist movement was Sofia Areshian-Ohanjanyan, who even participated in an action aiming to kill the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire Abdul Hamid II. The above mentioned facts come to testify the involvement of women not only in traditional occupations like housekeeping, etc, but also in warfare and politics in various roles.

As mentioned above, Diana Abkar, was the ambassador of Armenia in Japan and was among the first female ambassadors across the world. Ishkhanyan noted in her article that during the period of Soviet Armenia many stereotypes were finally broken. Women became an active part of the scientific and economic life of the republic bringing their invaluable contribution to the scientific, economic and cultural life of the society. Despite that, in comparison to the First Republic of Armenia, women in Soviet Armenia never occupied any senior political or diplomatic positions. This demonstrates an interesting difference between the communist and democratic countries. Despite the fact that in Soviet Armenia women had much wider participation in various aspects of the society, they still rejected the positions of power and decision making. The current Republic of Armenia balances the two achievements of previous two Republics, since know women in Armenia have active contribution in virtually every realm of the society, including the positions of power and decision making.

At the time when the First Wave of Feminism was taking place, The First Republic of Armenia adopted the rule of universal suffrage in the 1920 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, three women were elected to the parliament. Varvara Sahakyan, Katarine Zalyan-Manukyan, and Pertchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan were the first-ever women in the parliament of the First Republic of Armenia. The First Republic was established after the collapse of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic in 1918. The most exciting thing is that before the establishment of the Armenian Republic, we did not have any previous experience of democratic institutions.

Though traditionally not so much involved in politics, Armenian queens have left a significant footprint in Armenian history. They have been praised for their patronage of arts and architecture. On the other hand, Armenian history has witnessed many cases where queens have been involved in traditional politics and even warfare and demonstrated much courage and leadership skills. Those queens were and are still praised in historiography and memories of descendants for their self-sacrifice and courage.

Armenian female deities also were widely worshiped for a wide range of virtues people believed them to have, and those virtues, as was demonstrated above, were not those traditionally associated only with females (such as warfare). Here we see, that ancient Armenians were not thinking in terms of gender stereotypes as one might think. From here, we have female deities widely worshipped and traditionally associated with Armenia (Anahit). However, the representation of women in political life was formal. There have never been women in the Communist Party's elite, and their participation in parliament was also formal. On the eve of independence, the Supreme Council of the First Convocation of Armenia had 260 deputies in 1990, 11 of whom were women. These manifestations of gender inequality are still being felt today, as evidenced by the rise of domestic violence, political involvement, and the limited involvement of women in governing bodies. Currently, 32 of the 131 deputies of the RA National Assembly are women. However, in general, inequality between men and women in Armenia is not an acute problem.

 When describing the image of the Armenian woman, Armenian painter and ethnographer Lusik Aguletsi, first of all, describes her as a creator. At the press conference, she said that in the traditional Armenian family, a woman is the strength of the family. A woman has a creative nature. In the past, women were described in Armenian families as restrained, modest, and silent, and only with age did they play a significant role in the family. Over the centuries, the representation of women in Armenia has increased. In every nation, women have unique aspects, and in Armenian society, she described the woman as a nurturing, future-generation mother. According to her, today, the mission of the Armenian woman is to educate the first generation. However, no matter how much a woman's role in the family has increased, she remains a tender creature. It is undeniable that in any family, a woman is still respected. To continue, during the discussion on "Armenian Woman," Aguletsi singled out the primary missions of the Armenian woman, which are the following: To preserve the land and the homeland, the family, and the ritual traditions. According to her, today, in addition to these three missions, the woman also does public work.

**Focus groups**.

The research has shown that stereotypes which are communicated about women in Armenian culture have changed a lot. As mentioned, the participants of the groups were people of different ages, personal backgrounds, gender, education.

The analysis of the research results allowed us to identify and single out the best ways and means of transmitting gender stereotypes and attitudes and shaping the foundations of unequal gender status. Those are:

* Family upbringing practices that initiate gender inequality between women and men in public relations create the preconditions for the subjective privilege or superiority of the male sex (from the sexual distribution of the items to the direct encouragement of sexually explicit behavior).
* The differentiated attitude towards girls and boys by the representatives of different socialization circles, which leads to the preferred position of the male sex.
* Perceptions of gender differences and gender roles in the family, in educational institutions, among peers, which are directly transmitted by social figures, or indirectly influenced by differentiated attitudes and differentiated upbringing.
* Defining the qualities that are considered necessary for men or women, based on gender stereotypes, as well as the main limitations fixed in the public consciousness, which are applied to the male and female sexes.
* Gender stereotypes and misunderstandings arising from religious rituals.
* Differentiated expectations about the child's future, depending on his or her gender.

Since the focus groups included representatives of different age and gender groups, we were able to understand how and when parents, other adults, passed on the basic ideas of gender, the emergence of male preference.

The study revealed the attitudes and behaviors of these genders among young people and adolescents, and how they reproduce in horizontal and vertical relationships. The first gender stereotype is that a girl is perceived as a leaving, temporary family member, as opposed to a boy who is considered a key member of the family and a guarantee of its prosperity.

In the Armenian society, the main gender perceptions are based on the stereotypes of roles and the traditional distribution of power (the woman is for the family, the man is for the society), the stereotypes like «Աղջիկը գնացող ա» (“The girl leaves”) and «Տղան տան սյունն ա» ("The boy is the pillar of the house"). The importance of the obedience trait is now increased for girls (11% think it is essential for boys, 3% think it is essential for girls), independence is almost twice as needed for boys (7.3% think it is important for boys, 3.9% for girls), trust - 9%, for boys and 6% for girls, self-expression, 6% for boys, 4% for girls However, it is interesting to note that the characteristic feature is twice as high for girls as for boys (2.6% think it is good for girls and 1.3% think it is good for boys).

 In the book “Communication Matters 3rd Edition” by Kory Floyd, the author emphasizes the concept of culture, cultural gender representations and culture and communication. *“Many characteristics of cultures can influence our perceptions and interpretations of other people's behavior...Co-cultural differences can also influence perceptions of communication...A stereotype is a generalization about a group or category of people that can have a powerful influence on how we perceive others and their communication behavior.”* (Floyd, K, 2014) The representation of women in communications and society changes over time. It is unquestionable that stereotypes have changed since then, and gender communication about women is different today. Family in Armenia, in comparison with Western countries, is more traditional and stable. According to Doctor of Psychological Sciences Samvel Khudoyan, if earlier women worked less, then today we have a different picture: wives bring in money to families, sometimes even earning more than their husbands.The psychologist noted in his interview: *"The peculiarity of the modern Armenian family is that it has become more democratic, especially in the capital. The traditional, conservative attitude that a woman and a man should fulfill specific duties, stereotypes break."* Khudoyan believes that today husbands calmly help their wives around the house, not embarrassed by doing so, and women do “men's affairs”. This means that if in the past some fields were for men and only played a role in mental and physical work, now these stereotypes are being broken, and women continue to play an essential role in the further development of civilization and find their place in various fields.However, this is not true for many diasporan Armenians for instance in the middle East. During the focus group discussions, Armenians living abroad, who in our case are from the Middle East, said that women stay at home and men work and keep the house. In Armenian families of Syria, Lebanon, etc. traditional eastern manner of interaction within the family obliges men to work and bring in money, whereas women are expected to stay home and engage in housekeeping.

The structure of Armenian traditional family has changed a lot over time, but one thing is clear. The woman is the backbone of the family, the inner face on which the strength of the family and society depends. "Women in a traditional Armenian Family" is an article by Armenian historian Rafael Nahapetyan, in which he discusses gender relations and the representation of women in Armenian society. In his research, he states: *"If we don't value women today, we will lose a lot. The strength of our society depends on women. An Armenian woman is the most tormented woman, very attentive to her husband, most devoted to her family, nursing and caring, and deserves serious attention."* Ethnographer Rafik Nahapetyan considers the Armenian woman a guarantee of the family's strength, by claiming that the strength of a family depends on a woman. It was typical for a woman to show some responsibility to her family, relatives and the whole society, and this is still true today. This speaks to the strength of the family, which is maintained by the female root. In such involved families, women played a vital role. The woman's role was so great and significant that the woman was the honor of the family. While there have been many restrictions in the past, the role of women has been assessed with restrained rights, and the detention system has restricted them. According to the historian, from pagan times, women were considered the foundation of the family among Armenians. Evidence of this is the poetic fragments that have reached us, the legends, and the historical evidence. Moreover, according to the Armenian historian Agatangeghos, during the pre-Christian period, the Armenian woman was treated as a "mother source", "life-giving", "breath and life". The woman was created as a beautiful, delicate, and at the same time, strong creature.

# **Conclusion**

To conclude, the historical analysis of the facts come to support the claim that, despite being deeply stereotyped, women in Armenia were highly respected and honored throughout history. Armenian women were depicted not only as loving, beautiful and hardworking family tradition preservers as a part of traditional stereotyping in Armenia but also, they were praised with the masculine qualities that reveals their real importance in the universal male-driven society. Women in Armenian perception were also the idols of worship, who not only inspired to fight but usually fought in line with men to protect their families and lifestyle. They were and still are the ones who gave birth and promoted arts, architecture and other creative spheres.

The most important findings are that the sources and researches are clearly showing the positive evolution of women’s rights in Armenia. The stereotypes that determine the representation of women in the society (Floyd, 2014) have changed significantly throughout history, increasing the representation of women in the society as well. This hypothesis is supported by the survey results of people’s attitude toward women in modern period. Being depicted perceived through the prism of various stereotypes the role of women throughout the Armenian history has never been limited only through those stereotypes as was argued in the previous chapters. Having this said, the paper tried to show the changes in traditional stereotypes of women and the consequent change of women’s role in the society, claiming that the role women play now is more important and has evolved throughout the history. The survey conducted within the scope of this capstone proves the above-mentioned hypothesis, showing that respondents think of women as highly important triggers in the society. Though this is not a representative sample, the survey also shows the positive dynamics of people’s perception of women’s role in three Republics of Armenia starting from the beginning of the century, to our days. The focus group discussions spread light on the stereotypes that haven’t changed as well. For instance, in the case of diaspora Armenians of the Middle East women are arguably face more stereotypes and are supposed to do housework and not pursue a career or have a job. From this perspective women in Armenia are more free and both man and woman pursue some type of career or bring income to the household.

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