Flowers to Mothers: Discursive Analysis of the March 8 Wishes by Politicians in Armenia

by

Mariam Varosyan

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Abstract

This study does a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of March 8, the International Women's Day wishes by Armenian politicians. It analyzes the impact of the Velvet Revolution in 2018, and the 44-day war in 2020 on the construction of women's identity through discourse. Moreover, the study focuses on the creation of meanings and ideologies through the language of the wishes.

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Spring in Armenia has become synonymous with women's holidays, celebrations of beauty, and motherhood. There are two special days dedicated to women: the first one is the International Women's Day on March 8: a day marked worldwide as a significant occasion to celebrate women's accomplishments and raise issues of gender inequality. March 8 has a long history that is traced back to the early twentieth century, even before World War I. The idea of having a day to raise women's issues was proposed by Clara Zetkin, an important figure who advocated for working women's rights. She led three international socialist women's conferences in Germany attended by revolutionary figures around the world, including Vladimir Lenin. She pushed the idea of having International Woman's Day (singular) so that women around the world could organize protests and lobby the governments to have equal rights. The date of March 8 was not chosen yet. In the following years, demonstrations started around Europe. Women took to the streets to protest their rights to vote and have equal pay and better working conditions. When World War I broke out, men went to the frontlines, while women took over their positions in the factories, but with less pay and harsher conditions (Kaplan, 1985).

In 1917 on February 23 (Gregorian calendar), which was March 8 in the West, many women in Petrograd, Russia, started the biggest protests, striking against the war and poverty. The protests that began with just women inaugurated the February revolution and ended the monarchy, which had ruled for more than three hundred years. Women were granted the right to vote. In the Second International Conference of Communist Women in Moscow, Clara Zetkin recognized March 8 as the official date for International Women's Day, which became a

Communist Holiday (Kaplan, 1985). Having a socialist origin, March 8 spread around the world. It has evolved and changed its meaning many times, but the core of it is the issue of gender equality. Women of the twentieth century have achieved much; however, there are still many injustices and violence towards women and minorities, and March 8 is the day to raise such issues and recognize the work of changemakers.

In Armenia, however, March 8 is not recognized for its significance. Moreover, the day has turned into a holiday of flower-giving and gift-giving to mothers and sisters. March 8, which was "a holiday to celebrate the socialist struggle for women's rights over time, began to contradict its own content and turned into a platform that reproduces femininity within a patriarchal scope" (Tsaturyan, 2016).

The second holiday dedicated to women is on April 7, which is recognized as Motherhood and Beauty day. March 8 was left out of the Armenian national holiday calendar and April 7 was introduced to replace it. However, it was not called women's day but a holiday of Maternity and Beauty. This simple change of language enforced women's identity as mothers and reproduced the patriarchal idea of femininity. After independence, in 2001 March 8 was brought back to the national calendar, but it had already lost its original meaning and history. Unfortunately, the majority of Armenians don't even know about Clara Zetkin or many other female activists who earned us our rights.

The time between those two holidays is considered "women's month", and nail and hair salons are fully reserved during the month, many kitchen appliances are on sale, and roses are ridiculously overpriced. Politicians and public figures address women with various speeches and statements and fuel the discourse of femininity. This study focuses on the public statements and wishes sent to women on March 8 by the leaders of the five major Armenian political parties and

alliances, who are all men. It shows how people in power and leadership positions create narratives about women by manipulating and misinterpreting the significance of International Women's Day to form a single identity of an Armenian woman strictly tied to her reproductive role.

Literature Review

Language is a very subtle yet discrete tool to shape the social world, create narratives around different issues, and form public opinions and attitudes toward minority groups. Moreover, we live in a world of diverse political opinions, where political parties use language to persuade crowds, change their views, and introduce new values. The emergence of private media outlets and free access to information turn media into a powerful mechanism for spreading those ideas among a vast number of people.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) pays special attention to the formation of identities and meanings through discourse. One of the early contributors to the theory, Michel Foucault, wrote that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak"(Foucault, 2002, p. 54). Constant repetition of such ideas and statements solidifies the discourse and can shape social reality and people's actions. An individual's cognition is informed by constructs, also known as social representation-" the concepts, values, norms, and images shared in a social group and activated and maintained in discourse" (Tenorio, 2011, p. 191). The individual's sense of who they are comes from historically created meanings communicated through institutionalized patterns of behaving and speaking (Tenorio, 2011). The formation of identity via discourse is a common theme in different discourse analysis approaches. Feminist research on the topic has been concentrated on understanding the role of gender and gender

identities in politics. Sevan Beukian (2014) has significantly contributed to the further analysis of gendered discourse by analyzing the historical context and effects of the Armenian Genocide, the Soviet Union, and the first Karabakh War in constructing the national identity of Armenian women as mothers. All these events threatened the Armenian identity, and therefore preserving Armenianness became the burden of Armenian women out of the survival need. Beukian (2014) writes that "during such heightened periods of crises, nationalists tend to rely on discourses of the home and family to secure the sense of identity" (Beulian, 2014, p. 251). Women actively participated in the Karabakh war, but as soon as things went back to comparative normality or stability, women reverted back to their primary role as mothers and transmitters of culture.

CDA views language as a "social practice" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 5) where the context of language use is crucial. In addition, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) write that discourse constitutes identities, objects of knowledge, and relationships among groups. It also plays an essential role in sustaining the status quo and producing and reproducing "unequal power relations between social classes, women, and men" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 6).

Another seminal author in CDA is Van Dijk, who had a considerable contribution to developing discourse analysis. He highlights the need to understand power structures in discourse. CDA is always aimed at "revealing structures of power and unmasking ideologies" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 8). Organizations or groups that strive for power will use discourse to influence the ideology of a society because ideologies help to establish and maintain power and domination. It is crucial to analyze the language use of those in power to identify inequalities, social dominance, and power abuse and give those groups the tools for emancipation through self-reflection. Van Dijk also emphasizes the control of discourse as a means to gain access to

power. Language can legitimize power, and CDA aims to reveal power structures and "unmask ideologies" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 10), which is another important aspect of CDA.

Ideology and values also play a significant role in discourse analysis. In discourses of wars and racism, ideological polarization is deployed to justify violence. The famous definition of ideology formulated by Van Dijk (1998) defines ideology as the general and abstract beliefs shared among a group that organize or control the attitudes of the social group. In political discourse, ideologies are widespread among dominant groups and elites, who are also the reproducers of those ideologies through mass media and education. "Us" versus "them" polarization of the society by highlighting the positive characteristics of the self and emphasizing the negative aspects of "them" is a common way of imposing dominant ideologies on the public and inspiring some action. In her research, Ana Belén Cabrejas-Peñuelas (2017) uses the Appraisal theory to evaluate the positive and negative representations in the political discourse of Spain's prime minister, Mariano Rajoy's parliamentary speech. The author identified and discussed how the Prime Minister used descriptions to create a negative image for the other. At the same time, he represented himself and his party as law-respecting democrats (Cabrejas-Peñuelas, 2017).

Separation of us against them can also be found in the Armenian women's identity as mothers and how it compares Armenian mothers with other mothers around the world. Beukian writes that "the concept of motherhood is constructed to be a unique Armenian trait" (Beukian, 2014, p. 249) which distinguishes them from the rest. The tales about the sacred image of the Armenian mother continue to impact the role women play within the family and society. Moreover, the idealized image of motherhood creates the perception of Armenian mothers as being different and unique from European, Western or Russian mothers.

Critical Discourse Analysis also pays special attention to manipulation because it can imply domination and abuse of power. For a long time, scholars have researched the manipulative discourse of political speeches and have developed theories and methodologies to understand how manipulation works. One of the seminal works in this field remains Van Dijk's (2006) trilateral approach for analyzing manipulation. He writes: "manipulation is a social phenomenon – especially because it involves interaction and power abuse between groups and social actors – a cognitive phenomenon because manipulation always implies the manipulation of the minds of participants, and a discursive–semiotic phenomenon because manipulation is being exercised through text, talk and visual messages" (Dijk, 2006, p.361). Politicians use the emotions of shame and blame to divert the attention of citizens from social issues in society. As a result of such manipulative discourse, the social classes influenced by the propaganda of oppositional political parties clash, and society becomes more and more polarized. Heidi L. Maibom (2010) writes, the more dominant a person or a group, the more they have the power to shame others. Shame can make a person feel bad about themselves, their behavior or their background. In order to avoid being ashamed, people are willing to become a part of the collective identity represented as the positive side, as the good ones, the "us". The discursive construction of national sameness and the excluded "other" rely on four types of macro-strategies: constructive, justificatory, transformative, and destructive. As the word suggests, Constructive strategies are aimed at constructing the national identity. Justificatory strategies conserve and reproduce the national narratives and ideologies. Transformative strategies aim at changing the national identity, while destructive strategies aim at their dismentalization (Maibom, 2010). This research also focuses on this idea and looks at ways Armenian politicians use their power to encourage a particular action by women.

Research supports the idea that most of the time, politicians intend to achieve something beyond the literal meaning of their utterances. Van Dijk identifies several criteria that make people more susceptible to being manipulated, and those are "lack of relevant knowledge, fundamental norms and ideologies that cannot be denied, strong emotions or traumas, and social position" (Dijk, 2006, p. 375). Although Van Dijk gives techniques for identifying manipulation, he refrains from formally defining the concept. His work characterizes manipulation as a communicative and interactional practice in which the "manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests" (Dijk, 2006, p. 360). The strategy behind manipulative rhetoric is the use of these criteria to modify the content of the text, and the research in the field has successfully identified the strategy for achieving it.

In another study, Nancy Berns (2001) looks at how the social issue of violence against women is addressed in non-political magazines printed for men. Although those magazines are not known for their political viewpoints, Berns identifies strategies of "degendering the problem and gendering blame for domestic violence" (Berns, 2001, p.263) The published articles showcase stories of women who are abusers and critique the tolerance of such cases with titles such as "Women are responsible, too" (Berns, 2001, p.266). Those articles present violence as a human problem by diminishing the gendered factor. On the other hand, the authors blame women for playing the victim (Berns, 2001).

A considerable amount of studies have been conducted in the field of CDA in different countries. Collection, categorization, and data analysis are the commonly used methodologies. In his study, Peter Furko (2017) focuses on pragmatic makers, which are words or phrases used for the flow of the talk or speech, and their manipulative use in political speeches broadcasted on mainstream media stations like CNN, BBC, and Hungarian ATV. Furko's study shows the role of

single pragmatic markers such as, "of course", "sure", "so on and so forth", "surely", and "oh", in serving manipulative functions. The identified intentions for using those markers include "recontextualization and decontextualization, playing down the importance of other options, the use of ambiguity, suppression and backgrounding" (Furko, 2017). Aadel Shakkour and Abd al-Rahman Mari (2020), on the other hand, analyze the manipulative qualities of metaphors used in political discourse in the Israeli parliament. They support the idea that the use of metaphors is not arbitrary; moreover, they are intended to convey special meanings. By adopting the cognitive approach, they classify the metaphors by fields and show that metaphors not only reflect the way we see reality but also influence the way we perceive the world around us.

Although the broad research covers the vast majority of cases around the world, there is a lack of discursive analysis of Armenian politicians' speeches. The Armenian case provides a good ground for discursive research because of its political past and historical events. Firstly the 2018 Velvet Revolution that shifted the power from a semi-autocratic regime to a more democratic system created a cycle of constant comparisons of old and new regimes and led to a more polarized society. Moreover, the new government started to heavily rely on social media to spread the news because many of the existing media channels belonged to the party members of the previous regime, and the messages reached far more people via social media. And finally, the 44-day Karabakh war in 2020 that became another threat to the Armenian national identity and resulted in discursive changes in politics.

Anna Pambukchyan (2018) addressed the propaganda and human rights discourse in Armenia, where she separated the discourse around different values and issues such as patriotism, domestic violence, LGBTQ rights, and motherhood. Pambukchyan's contribution is significant to the Armenian context. She argues that before the 2018 events, the core value

system supported by the Republican Party was based on "traditional values". They portrayed and propagated an image of an Armenian family which had specific characteristics and distinctly separated gender roles. Pambukchyan writes that the accepted role of a woman was wife and mother.

This research continues the significant work done in analyzing the construction of identities by Armenian politicians through discourse. It feels the gap in analyzing discourse around March 8, International Women's Day, a big celebration in Armenia and a national holiday. Moreover, the research covers the period after the 2018 Velvet Revolution until the recent war and the post-war period, which is not yet analyzed.

Research question

The primary interest of this study is to understand how the wishes and public statements of Armenian political party or alliance leaders posted on March 8 (International Women's Day) create a single image and identity of the Armenian woman and construct the social world. The sub-question of this research looks at whether the 44-day Karabakh War has affected that identity and how. The research also focuses on the historical context as well as other themes, in particular ideology, power, and representation.

Methodology

The main methodology for this research has been Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach enables hermeneutic analysis of the text, which is focused on the content. CDA is characterized by the common interest in "de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systemic and reproducible investigation of semiotic data" (Wodak & Mayer, p. 3). To collect

data, I have identified five major political parties in Armenia based on their popularity and the 2021 National Assembly Election results. The selected parties and alliances are the following:

- **Civil Contract** is led by Nikol Pashinyan, who is the current prime minister. It came to power after the Velvet Revolution in 2018, and although its legitimacy was questioned many times, it kept winning the majority votes. Theparty has also formed an alliance called My Step with independent civil society representatives and the Mission Party, which is not on the following list of selected parties.

- **Armenian Revolutionary Federation** (ARF), also known as Dashnaks, is the oldest political party in Armenia which also has historical significance. ARF operates in the diaspora as well, in countries such as the US, Canada, Lebanon, Iran, etc., which increases their outreach and influence. They are well known for their traditionalist views. Since the party is led by board members, the data collected from this party comes from the Facebook profile of the party itself, not the leader's page.

- **Prosperous Armenia**. Founded and led by Gagik Tsarukyan, the party is on neither edge of the polarized spectrum of Armenia's political ground. Yet, it has always held some mandate in the government. It has been a part of the government for many years and they keep their stable place due to their loyal followers. The founder also does charity work which helps him maintain his rating. Although they are not a part of the current government, however; they have an active role in the society.

- **Bright Armenia**, led by Edmon Marukyan, is a classical liberal political party. Although it didn't win enough votes during the 2021 elections to have seats in the national assembly, the party still has a presence in the political discourse.

- **The Armenian Alliance**, led by Robert Kocharyan, is the newest one on this list. It was founded in 2021; however, since the founder and leader is the former president of Armenia, the party gained many supporters among different social groups and is the opposition group with the biggest number of followers compared to other parties in opposition.

Facebook was selected as the main social media platform for data collection because, after the revolution, the role of social media in Armenia dramatically increased. Party leaders have thousands of followers on Facebook, and they post actively, do live streams and interact with the crowds directly. Facebook is the primary source of political news for many Armenians.

Data collection was based on research. I carefully followed social media posts of politicians or the political party starting from the 2018 Velvet Revolution up until the present post-war period. There were 24 Facebook posts dedicated to March 8 by the five political party leaders in the identified period. After collecting quotes for each identified party, I carefully analyzed them. First, I translated the quotes into English. Then, I identified common themes and analyzed the quotes in the specific context they were found.

By carefully reading and rereading the collected texts, I identified key themes, which drew the picture of meanings and ideologies that constitute the social world. All the components of CDA (meaning-making, identities, ideologies, power structures, manipulation, and social context), which are thoroughly explained in the literature review, were the basis for the analysis.

The qualitative aspects of the text, such as the kinds and forms of argumentation, the implications, presuppositions, hidden meanings, collective symbolism, or other figurative language elements including metaphors, simile, the actors and agents, idioms, cliches are among the features that this research analyzed.

CDA as a methodology is problem-oriented. To assess the quality of its findings, I followed Wodak's triangulation approach to ensure validity. The approach takes into account the following four levels: "immediate language, intertextual and interdiscursive relations between them, the extralinguistic level, and the socio-political context" (Meyer, 2001, p. 29). The findings were evaluated from the mentioned perspectives to minimize the bias. Some quantitative research was also conducted to find out the repetitions and frequencies of certain words, such as motherhood, beauty, right, etc., among the selected text of the wishes.

Research findings and analysis

International Women's Day on March 8 is a celebration that many Armenian women look forward to every year. A day meant to recognize women's accomplishments and raise awareness about gender inequality, the meaning of the day in Armenia has been reduced to a gift-giving celebration. Armenian politicians' discourse on this day is flooded with messages of femininity and the reconstruction of patriarchal gender roles. Discourse can structure our experience of the world and create collective identities. Armenian women's primary role has been reproduction throughout history: giving birth and raising future heroes and patriotic children. That message is astutely constructed and reinforced through different discourses, including March 8 holiday wishes. The analysis detects and analyzes social representations of women in the post-revolution and post- 44 day war period.

The quantitative data gathered from analyzing 24 Facebook posts celebrating and sending wishes to women by different political party leaders further shows the patterns. For example, the word "*right*" appears only 13 times and is divided among two posts, whereas the word "*mother*" or "*motherhood*" appears 23 times and is spread among the posts: meaning the great majority of the posts include the word mother at least once. Mothers are the main addressees of the wishes, followed by "*sisters*" used 14 times and "*daughters*" 6 times. The principal wishes are happiness, being loved and appreciated by their family, and beauty. In fact, the word "*pretty*" appears 16 times. The significance of the day is lost in Armenia, and March 8 reproduces the patriarchal definitions of femininity. Ignorance in raising awareness about the existing gender issues in Armenia is alarming. In the first half of 2019, ten women were killed by their partners, and 331 domestic violence cases were investigated (World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Armenia, 2020). In this context, the word "*violence*" appeared only four times in the whole five-year period, whereas the word "*family*" appeared eight times. These numbers give us some ideas about the general themes in March 8 discourse, and those themes will be analyzed individually.

Pre-war discourse: Women as mothers and caregivers

Repetition of ideas and statements, especially by people who are on the higher edge of power hierarchy, solidifies the knowledge about the subject and shapes it. The majority of March 8 wishes start with this expression: "*Dear women: mothers, sisters, and daughters*" (Pashinyan, 2019, Tsarukyan, 2019). The definition of women indeed includes mothers, sisters, and daughters; however, it also includes grandmothers, widows, women with disabilities, women in science, military, divorced women, and as many categories as there are people identifying as women. By narrowing down the definition of a woman to only those three options and repeatedly using them in discourse, especially on occasions like Women's International Day, enforce a

restricted identity of women as mothers or daughters who will eventually become mothers one day.

Women's role as mothers is highlighted in the context of a family. Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which is the most vocal and traditionalist party on the list, stresses women's caregiving nature and portrays them as the light of the home. "*March 8 is a great time to appreciate the role of Armenian women as the educators of the Armenian generations, as the lights and virtue of our hearth and homes, as ones who historically played an important role in our national and social life*" (ARF, 2018). In the original Armenian text, they use the word "*ojax*" for household, which in the society is understood as the traditional patriarchal family with distinct gender roles and the use of that specific word in this context implies that meaning. Another similar wish by former president Robert Kocharyan starts like this: "*This beautiful spring holiday is a pleasant occasion to send words of respect and love to our mothers, sisters, and wives. I wish warmth, health, and solidarity to your families.*" (Kocharyan, 2019). This message is supposed to be addressing all women, but it has separated into three categories: mothers, sisters, and wives, which represent Armenian women and indirectly exclude everyone who doesn't belong to any of those categories which are tied to the family. Because discourses are manifestations of ideologies, they form individual or collective consciousness which influences people's actions. Many women have internalized this constructed identity and they become active agents in reinforcing it by wishing each other "կանացի երջանկություն" (womanly happiness), a widely used term with no specific definition, yet which combines all the stereotypical ideas of a woman's happiness: family, good husband, children, in one expression.

Women have become objects of admiration and respect, which idealizes our cultural and ethnic authenticity. Their historical role is emphasized and praised, but that role also dictates the future by preserving and continuing that role. As Sevan Beukian wrote, "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" (Beukian, 2014, p. 252). Another interesting wish again from the ARF stresses collective identity. It posted a quote from an article written by one of its party leaders in Lebanon who argues that along with the discourse of gender equality, the question of the Armenian woman's role in our social life must preserve its value. "*There is no issue of Armenian women's rights for us. The Armenian woman is the source of that right; she is the one who promotes the right to our life*" (ARF, 2019). Here, the party separates the international women's rights discourse from the Armenian one, presenting ours as a unique case. The article ends like this "As a woman, especially as an Armenian woman that bears additional responsibilities, we can say with double gratitude that we are proud of you.*"* (Բագրատունի, 2019). Throughout history, the Armenian woman was conceptualized as the creator of the Armenian nation, who also transferred the traditions to her children, preserving the culture and hence playing an important role in nation-building. This added special role creates the division between Armenian mothers and the rest of the women around the world, where Armenian mothers are praised and idealized through songs, poems, public discourse and holiday wishes.

To further analyze this merged identity of motherhood and Armenianness, we can look at the number of times the word "*Armenian*" and "*woman*" were used in all those speeches. The adjective Armenian, which was used 16 times, almost always precedes the noun "*woman*", used 13 times. Even expressions and short wishes like this one, "*Yerevantsi girls are the most beautiful*

in the world. Armenian girls are the most beautiful ones in the world" (Pashinyan, 2018), create a juxtaposition of "us" and "the rest". The ideological construction of subjects is done through coherent repetition of the same messages, and the analysis of the used language can reveal the power structures. Fairclough puts it beautifully by saying that "language is a material form of ideology and language is invested by ideology" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 59). Armenian womanhood is viewed as something with higher value and as a concept which bears more meaning than womanhood in general. It is tied to national identity; therefore, the discourse about women's rights and empowerment is perceived as a threat to tradition, national honor, and cultural preservation. This role of Armenian women as nation-builders enables them to participate in national liberation movements, wars, and protests. Still, as soon as there is relative stability, women are pushed back to their primary role, which is reproduction.

In Armenia, there is no March 8 celebration without flowers. Every year the celebrations involve giving flowers to prominent women or passersby. "*Youth from Bright Armenia party walked around Yerevan and gave flowers on the occasion of International Women's Day*" announces the party leader (Marukyan, 2022). Or another post by Nikol Pashinyan says, "*I brought violets for the mothers, sisters, and daughters of Karashamb village"* (Pashinyan, 2020). Such initiatives are endless. Gagik Tsarukyan is another figure famous for his "generosity." There is nothing wrong with gifting flowers, yet it is wrong to reduce the history and significance of International Women's Day to the mere act of gift-giving.

The emerging discourse of rights

2020 was the year that March 8 wishes included narratives of women's rights and wrote about the historical context and the significance of the day. Since Pashinyan's government came

to power by denying everything the former regime represented, his ideology became the opposite of the previous regime. The value system and ideologies propagated by the previous elite were based on the traditional image of the family, which in its turn, was the core of the society. The propaganda of family values pushed the issue of domestic violence and many other gender issues to the margins (Pambukchyan, 2022). Since the emergence of the newly formed government rejected everything tied to the old elite, the spread of the discourse about gender issues rose. Moreover, various NGOs and other organizations began lobbying the new government with hopes of change. In 2019, the prime minister did a live stream titled *"About the meaning of March 8: not only flowers"* (Pashinyan, 2019), during which he walked around the city, giving passerby women flowers and asking them about the gender issues in Armenia. Despite his efforts, the live stream turned into a picture-taking event, where people were only interested in taking a photo with him.

The next year on March 8, his post stood out with its content. Nikol Pashinyan visited the 13-year-old girl who had been a victim of domestic violence and was in the Intensive Care Unit. He wrote, "*Many of us feel sorry for this girl and her mother who became a victim of homicide, but let us finally admit that this girl and her mother are also victims of the mentality that violence, particularly violence against women, can have any justification"* (Pashinyan, 2020). The post had some backlash. Many thought this was an attempt to justify the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which in Armenia is perceived as an anti-cultural convention aimed to destroy traditional family values.

The prime minister's official statement posted on the same day also talks about women's rights. The message starts with the cliche statement addressing women, mothers, sisters, daughters, and the proud citizens of Armenia: a statement that was born during the street rallies

and remained in the political discourse. It highlights women's role in the revolution and states that in the "new Armenia", women must take higher positions in leadership in politics, economics, and public spheres. This "*new Armenia*" is seen as a better place, different from the old one (Pashinyan, 2020). Edmon Marukyan, the leader of the Bright Armenia party, also sent a strong message on March 8, 2020. Previously his wishes were not prominent; he shared memes or wrote general statements, but in 2020 Edmon Marukyan suddenly started talking about the history of March 8, and Clara Zetkin's name was mentioned for the first time in the whole five-year period (Marukyan, 2020). Marukyan stresses the significance of the day and writes that, unfortunately, women's rights are still violated around the world, including in Armenia. There can be several explanations for this sudden change, all of which are mere assumptions. One possibility is the increasing pressure from NGOs and their activity in society that made the gender equality topic a trending one. 2020 was the most distinct one in terms of March 8 wishes, where politicians spoke about domestic violence or paid attention to the day's true meaning.

Post-war discourse: Women and war

On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a war against the de-facto republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. The war lasted 44 days and ended with devastating consequences and many casualties from both sides. The trauma of the war is still fresh in the memories of Armenians, and it is reflected in the political discourse on International Women's Day. A few of the listed political parties, including the ruling one, didn't dedicate a post to the occasion, which shows how women's issues are pushed aside and left out of discourse in hard times. The rest had amplified messages highlighting the role of the mothers of fallen soldiers.

"It is no secret that the Armenian woman has been the upholder and shine of the hearth for centuries. Nowadays, our best national traditions are preserved thanks to you, and it is because of your unbreakable will that we have such a patriotic generation.

I express my special gratitude to our mothers who gave birth to heroes, who sacrificed their most precious child for the Homeland" (Tsarukyan, 2022).

This wish reinforces several notions. Firstly, it underlines the special role of the Armenian woman, detaching her from the general women's discourse. Secondly, it creates a narrow identity of a "*true, patriotic*" Armenian woman, who helps to uphold her heart, and upbrings the future generations, and teaches them patriotism; moreover, she is especially appreciated if she has a son who goes to defend the homeland.

The identity of Armenian women as mothers has a long history. Sevan Beukian explains it as a response to threats to national identity and describes it as a survival instinct (Beukian, 2014). After the Armenian Genocide, women had to revive the nation by giving birth to younger generations. Beukian argues that the Soviet and later the first Karabakh war were also similar threats. The Soviet Union attempted to break down traditionalism, and the most traditional unit in the Armenian context was the family (Beukian, 2014). Maya Eichler (2008) writes that communists considered they had resolved the "woman question" and the "national question" by emancipating women and integrating them into the workforce. However, they had specific gender roles, and the work sectors and professions were separated between men and women. Women prevailed in the lowest-paying sectors. The Soviet's attempt to transform the traditional family was not out of the desire "to destroy the bourgeois family unit, but its desire to replace patriarchal authority with the authority of the state" (Eicher, 2008, p. 50). The attempts brought

many changes to the Armenian households; however, Armenians responded by strongly holding to the "Armenian identity", which for women was associated with being mothers and the transmitters of culture. Another threat to that identity was the first Karabakh war. This interwoven identity of women as both biological and ideological reproducers of the nation was especially highlighted after wars. The ethnic majority is seen as an essential aspect of preserving Armenianness. This cycle of threat-motherhood discourse repeats again after the 44-day war. In 2022 ARF was the most active political party on International Women's Day. It had several posts talking about the mass visit to Yerablur, the military pantheon where the majority of fallen soldiers are buried. Its whole discourse on March 8 revolved around mothers who have lost their sons, sisters who have lost their brothers, and wives who have lost their husbands. *"Dear women, On this day, you are desperate, with lost dreams and unrequited pain. We owe you a happy and peaceful country, a Homeland worthy of our heroes"* (ARF, 2021) The post-war discourse of March 8 reduces the identity of all women living in Armenia to motherhood tied to nation-building.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This study focused only on one of the two celebrations dedicated to women. It would be interesting to look at the discourse around April 7, which is a holiday especially devoted to motherhood and beauty for future research. Moreover, since the month between these two holidays is considered "Women's month", further discourse analysis can look at discourse within the month. I selected the major political parties and their leaders' Facebook posts through sampling. Still, the extension of this study can be looking at all the speeches by the party members, including women ministers and government officials, to identify whether they carry their internalized identity and continue to reproduce the same discourse. Since this study also

looks at the effects of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet development of women's discourse, it would be interesting to look at other post-Soviet countries' discourse around March 8 to identify similarities and differences.

Conclusion

The construction of identities in society through the repetition of discourse is important to analyze because structured identities dictate behavior and social actions. The analysis also enables us to understand the power structures behind those utterances. In the 1990s, March 8 was replaced with April 7 (Motherhood and Beauty Day) and was only brought back in 2001. The two holidays remained with assimilated significance. March 8 celebrations turned from being International Women's Day, an occasion to acknowledge prominent women and raise gender issues, into a flower-gifting event reproducing a discourse of patriarchal femininity. The analysis of the wishes explained the advocated narratives and identified changes affected by historical events such as revolution and war. Gender equality remains a big issue in Armenian society, and addressing it is crucial. People in power must start changing the dominant narratives and cliches in society if we want to bring change.

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