

Harsner and Holiness: Young Armenian Brides and Church Authority at the  
End of the 19th Century

by

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## **Abstract**

This capstone attempts to uncover societal expectations of newly married Armenian women and the influence of the Armenian Apostolic Church on defining the role of women within the family. By examining the archival texts of Catholicos of All Armenians Mkrtich Khrimian provides important primary information about family situations and gender roles in Armenian communities at the end of the 19th century. Mkrtich Khrimian's progressive writings for his time show how the church defined women's rights, morality, their economic independence, and their right to education.

## **Harsner and Holiness: Young Armenian Brides and Church Authority at the End of the 19th Century**

I was twelve when my parents took me to church. They encouraged me to attend services, and follow religious practices. They hoped I would one day become a good priest. I spent two years involved in church life. During that time, I read sacred, biblical texts and learned a lot. These experiences shaped some of my early understanding of identity and values.

But I also observed church ceremonies and sermons, where some messages disturbed me. Weddings were especially striking. Priests spoke of clear roles for men and women. Men were called to lead, provide, and protect. Women were told to submit and obey. These sermons made me question things. Had the Church always promoted this? Was this truly part of Armenians' national identity?

To find answers, I looked at history. After the 14th century, Armenia lost its independence. For six hundred years it was ruled by empires. During that time, the Armenian Church became the main force preserving national identity. People gathered around it and accepted its authority.

Even today, the Church holds power. It influences not only faith but also family life by taking political positions. According to them they are trying to defend "traditional Armenian values." Yet these often include ideas that limit women's rights and freedoms.

I am doing this capstone to answer a question that I saved for many years. I explore the role of the Church in shaping gender roles in 19th-century Armenia, before the first independent republic. This project focuses on newly formed families and young brides. I started writing this

by asking myself questions like, did the Church always have these values? Are today's problems new, or old? Did independence change anything?

### **Key terms and definitions**

**Catholicos (Կաթողիկոս)** - The title of the supreme spiritual leader of a number of Eastern churches [Armenian, Georgian, Assyrian, Malabar (India), Nestorian Assyrians]. In Armenian reality, Catholicos is considered the legal successor of the apostles Thaddeus, Bartholomew and Gregory the Illuminator and the heir to their authority. The term Catholicos began to be used in the middle of the 5th century. (Malkhaseants, 1944)

**Harsner (Հարսներ)** - The plural form of hars (*հարս*) (meaning "bride" in Armenian). The term *harsner* is used in the title of this capstone and carries cultural, social, and symbolic significance within Armenian traditions and narratives.

**Kondak (Կոնդակ)** - In church usage, it means a Catholicosate document, letter, message, circular, testament. It has historical, political, socio-economic, legal-administrative, national-social, cultural, educational, and other content. Accordingly, the *kondak* is sometimes an important historical source. (Malkhaseants, 1944)

**Patriarch (Պատրիարք)** - In the Armenian Church, the Catholicos is considered the Supreme Patriarch of Armenia. Patriarchs are the spiritual leaders of Constantinople and Jerusalem, who differ from bishops in their primacy (their title is retained even after they resign from office). (Malkhaseants, 1944)

## Literature review

This literature review discusses the key theories and historical texts about this research project. First, I explore feminist epistemology which explains how women's experiences can offer important views on power and knowledge. Then, I examine how the Church shaped gender roles in late 19th-century Armenia. Together these ideas help to understand how religion and gender were connected in that time.

### Feminist Epistemology

This section discusses the core theory of this capstone. This research relies on feminist epistemology, especially the standpoint theory. This theory helps understand how knowledge is shaped by our social positions. The goal is to examine how standpoint theory applies to the Armenian Apostolic Church's influence on women's roles within the family.

American philosopher of feminist and postcolonial theory, Sandra Harding (1991) claims that knowledge is linked to social positions and that marginalized groups such as women have a unique advantage in understanding power structures. She writes, "The conceptual frameworks themselves promoted historically distinctive institutional and cultural interests and concerns, which ensured that the knowledge produced through them was always socially situated" (Harding, 2004, p. 5). This view comes from Marxist theory, which says that just as the working class has a clear idea about capitalist oppression, the same way women, especially those who are affected by patriarchal systems can provide critical insights about mechanisms of gender control. (Harding, 2004, p. 7). Moreover, Lorraine Code (1991) points out that "Knowledge produced in seemingly objective ways carries an authority that mirrors, reinforces, and probably also derives

from masculine authority” (p. 25), which helps contextualize the Church’s authority both spiritual and gendered.

Harding (2004) quotes feminist studies scholar Dorothy Smith (1987) who expands on this idea by highlighting that women’s experiences, often ignored by dominant epistemic frameworks, are important for analyzing institutional power. Smith states that “women needed to understand the conceptual practices of power through which their oppression was designed, maintained, and made to seem natural and desirable” (as cited in Harding, 2004 p. 6). This is especially relevant when analyzing historical contexts where religious institutions, like the Armenian Apostolic Church, played an important role in defining women’s role in society.

Standpoint theory faced some critiques as well. One of them is that some critics argue this theory assumes that all women share the same experiences and ignore differences. Theorists like Patrica Hill Collins (1990) and Chela Sandoval (2000) speak against this claim, arguing for intersectionality that identifies differences shaped by race, class, and sexuality. Collins argues, “Knowledge validation processes controlled by elite white men suppress alternative standpoints” (Collins, 1990, p. 234). I see this debate relevant when applying standpoint theory to the Armenian Apostolic Church because not all women in Armenian families were treated the same. For example young brides often had less power and more pressure to follow Church rules.

Another critique claims that standpoint theory leans toward relativism. If all knowledge is socially situated, does that mean that no knowledge can be universally valid? Harding (2004) opposes this by arguing that standpoint theory strengthens objectivity. She writes, “We need not—indeed, must not—choose between 'good politics' and 'good science,' standpoint theorists argued, for the former can produce the latter” (Harding, 2004, p. 10). This shows why standpoint

theory is useful for studying how religious ideas are formed, for understanding how the Armenian Apostolic Church stated religious narratives as absolute truths and marginalizing the perspectives which are different.

When applying standpoint theory to the Armenian Apostolic Church's role in shaping women's role in society, it is important to look at religious leaders' writings as knowledge systems that strengthened patriarchal expectations. By examining the Catholicos's writings from the end of the 19th century through a standpoint lens, I want to find out how the church framed women's social role and eliminated them from theological and civic discourse. This also supports Code's idea that "Knowledge is neither impartial nor objective but 'a construct that bears the marks of its constructors'" (1991, p. 55). Thus, these writings reflect not just theology but also the patriarchal view of their authors.

I also consider Harding's (1991) emphasis on studying power from below, which means instead of analyzing the Church's doctrine in detail, I should also study counter-narratives from women's lived experiences. This connects with Smith's call for "study up", which Harding mentions in her text (Harding, 2004, p. 6). "Study up" refers to examining how institutions exercise control over marginalized groups. Smith says that "standpoint projects must 'study up'; they must be part of critical theory, revealing the ideological strategies used to design and justify the sex-gender system" (as cited in Harding, 2004, p. 6). The Armenian Apostolic Church's produced expectations, inserted in religious texts and policies, can be studied as mechanisms of both oppression and social structuring.

Standpoint theory gives me a valuable framework for studying how the Armenian Apostolic Church set social expectations for women in the end of the 19th century. By having in

mind that knowledge is always situated within power structures, I can critically analyze religious authority and existing gender norms. Addressing critiques of essentialism and relativism, standpoint theory helps me to awaken marginalized silenced voices and challenge dominant historical narratives. Through this research, I aim to apply these theoretical insights to historical texts and *kondaks* (official orders), ensuring that perspectives of women affected by church policies are not lost to history. As Haraway (as cited in Harding, 2004) states, “The prisonhouses of knowledge production... can become toolboxes offering new perspectives... and a better life” (p. 5). By revisiting religious texts through feminist analysis I hope to transform them into sources of critical reflection and empowerment.

### **The Armenian Apostolic Church**

When I am trying to understand what was the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in shaping societal expectations from Armenian woman in the end of the 19th century, I find myself on both sides of the scale, between admiration for its figures’ thoughts and the rigid imposed expectations. Was the church only a force of patriarchal oppression, or did it also serve as a space where women could find their voice and could be heard? The answer is not simple. The real picture, as I explore key historical texts, is a complex connection of faith, tradition and social norms which limited and at the same time empowered Armenian women. This literature review explores how existing religious discourses, education, traditions, marriage and legal systems defined women’s roles, by looking at this complex relationship between oppression and resistance.

## *Religious Figures and Women's Roles*

Garegin Srvandztiants was a prominent religious figure at the end of the 19th century, and by looking at his writings, we see how his thoughts helped shape ideas about women's role in society. Srvandztiants described women as moral anchors of the family. He wrote that women's duty is taking care and managing the household with modesty, also portraying women as helpers to their husbands. (Srvandztiants, 1982, p. 469). His thoughts show the tension between respect to women's role in the family and the pressure placed on their societal role.

One of the opinions about Armenian women's roles in the end of the 19th century comes from Armenian ecclesiastic ethnographer Garegin Srvandztiants (1982), who wrote about Armenian family values in Trabzon, where he was serving as a priest. He wrote “Մայրն է, որ յուր որդեկին ջամբած կաթին հետ՝ կը ջամբէ անոր նաև բարոյականության կամ անբարոյականության կրթությունն յուր մայրական խոսքերով և յուր անձին օրինակով” [it is the mother who, along with the milk, gives to her child morality or immorality and teaches through her maternal words and from her own personal example.<sup>1</sup>] (1982, p. 469). This perspective, deeply shown in religious thought, positioned women as the first moral guides within the home, the only person who is responsible for shaping the character of future generations. However, while this ideology raises women's importance in the family, it also limits women's influence in the private sphere, pushing forward the idea that woman's primary duty was to her family rather than to bigger societal engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Armenian to English are my own.

Moreover, Srvandztiants writes about the expectations from women, saying that “կիներեն կը պահանջվի համեստություն, համբերություն, զգաստ և արթուն լինել, լավապես տնտեսել, խնայել, ավելորդ ծախուց, ավելորդ զարդուց զգուշանալ, ո՛չ գրկել և ո՛չ շռայլել: Իր ամուսնույն, իր մայրության, իր տնատիկիկնության ջերմ հավատարիմ մնալ, ճանաչելով թե ինքն օգնական կոչված է իր առն. և իրենց անձնական ու տնական պարտքերը հավասար են միմյանց:” [a woman is required to be modest, patient, alert and vigilant, to manage well, to save, to beware of unnecessary spending, unnecessary adornment, not to deprive or to waste. And to remain warmly loyal to her husband, to her motherhood, to her homemaking, recognizing that she is called to be her husband's helper; and their personal and domestic duties are equal to each other.] (1982, p. 469) Here, while Srvandztiants writes about domestic responsibilities should be equally distributed, the framework still is hierarchical, where the woman is pictured as a helper. Also, the highlight of frugality, modesty and vigilance shows that a woman’s worth was closely tied to her ability to keep a stable household rather than her personal goals or intellectual pursuits. This creates the broader societal expectation that women’s main role was to serve and help rather than to lead or create.

The views of Srvandztiants show how texts written by religious authority both uplifted and limited Armenian women. Although his texts acknowledged women’s strength in the family, they also claimed a framework that limited women’s roles to the private sphere. While this perspective from the church shaped values in society, it also reflected the complicated struggles between tradition and early understandings of equality.

## Education and Intellectual Independence

Vahan Artsruni and Levon Mkrtchian write about their concerns on how education can challenge traditional family norms. Their texts also reflect questions about societal, religious, and economic control over women's independence. Their reflections help us to see how education, while nominally encouraged by the church often played a role in strengthening gender hierarchies.

The question of women's education also explains the contradictions within church supported social norms. Armenian Doctor, physician Vahan Artsruni was concerned about girls' role in the society and he dedicated one whole book titled *Aghjik* (A girl) published in 1903, where he discusses many controversial topics about girls in Armenian society. He was critical of society's attitude toward educating girls, writing that “Մեր ո՛չ ընտանեկան կեանքը, ո՛չ դպրոցական շրջանը և ոչ հասարակական վերաբերման ձևը դեպի աղջիկը ընդունակ չեն զարգացնելու նրա մեջ ֆիզիկական ու հոգեկան յատկությունները, որոնք առհասարակ են թե նրա անձնական բարօրութեան և թե ազգի բարգաւաճման” [neither our family life, nor our schooling, nor our social attitude toward the girl child are capable of developing in her the physical and mental qualities that are essential to both her personal well-being and the prosperity of the nation] (1903, p. 3). Artsruni's claim shows the tension between the church's nominal support for education and its indifference to providing women full intellectual independence.

Vahan Artsruni, also writes about the systematic nature of women's subordination. He says that even Christianity couldn't free women from subordination, as the root cause was economic collapse. Not only religious but also economic revolution could uplift families and improve conditions for workers and peasants (1903, p. 56). Here, Artsruni goes beyond the

influence of the church, acknowledging the fact that economic structures played an important role in keeping gender inequality. His argument offers that without broader socio-economic changes, the subordination of women would continue regardless of religious teachings.

Armenian intellectual Levon Mkrtchian has three different research books on marital and family issues in Armenian communities, all published in the 1890s. The final one from this series is *Amusnakan Khndirner* (Marital Problems) (1894) which is about Armenian young women and new brides from urban areas. Mkrtchian claims that young girls who are getting education tend to delay their marriage, or they become more selective in choosing husbands. He claims that this tendency brings a decline in marriage rates, especially in cities. For example, he writes that in 1860, there were almost 1200 Armenian weddings in Constantinople, while in 1890, 1891 and 1892 combined, the number of Armenian marriages barely can exceed this number (1894, p. 5). He connects this change with the rise of female education, arguing that it is keeping women away from their traditional role as wives and mothers. He elaborates this by stating, “Ռամիկը կատարելապես իրաւունք ունի երբ առհասարակ մեր աղջիկներու կրթութեան վրայ խոսելով կը յայտարարէ թէ կարդալ գրել չգիտացող աղջիկները աւելի արժանիք ունին քան մեր հիմակու շրջանաւարտ օրիորդները, որովհետեւ բոլորովին անուս աղջիկները գէթ իմաստակներ ըլլալու վտանգէն զերծ են” [The peasant has every right to declare, when speaking of the education of our girls, that illiterate girls are more worthy than the young girls of our time, who have graduated, because without education girls are free from the delusion of being wise] (Mkrtchian, 1894, p. 18). This claim shows a deep anxiety that education might redefine traditional gender norms, that women will not accept arranged marriages, subordinate roles in the household, or they would challenge the patriarchal system and want to be leaders.

However, Mkrtchian did not completely reject the importance of girls' education. He claims that the problem was not education but its direction, writing that “Չէ՛, հայրեր ու մայրեր, դաստիարակութիւնը ձեր աղջիկներուն ֆրանսերէն ու դաշնակ սովորեցնելու մէջ չկայանար, այլ անոնց մտաւոր կարողութիւնները ողջամիտ ուղղութիւնով մը մշակելուն ու զարգացնելուն մէջ: Թող ձեր աղջիկը դաշնակ ու ֆրանսերէն չգիտնայ, բայց թո՛ղ ճշմարտապէս զարգացած միտք ունենայ” [No, fathers and mothers, education does not consist in teaching your girls French and the piano, but in cultivating and developing their mental abilities in reasonable directions. Let your girl not know the piano and French but let her have a truly developed mind.] (Mkrtchian, 1894, p. 18). So, his concerns were not with women becoming more educated, but the type of education they got, the one that in his opinion, should be practical and connected with family and societal stability rather than directing them toward westernized elite culture. This opinion stresses a broader debate in 19-th century Armenian society. Should education serve as a tool for managing traditional gender roles, or could it be a way toward larger autonomy for women?

Through the books of Artsruni (1903) and Mkrtchian (1894), we see that the problem was never just about women's education, but it was about what kind of women was education supposed to produce. Even though it was seen as a threat to family stability or as a missed chance for women's empowerment, education became a topic of debate about gender, tradition, and progress in Armenian communities.

### **Marriage and Family Life**

The role of marriage and family life in 19th century Armenian communities was deeply shaped by traditions and the church. Prominent intellectuals such as Raffi, Fr. Arstakes

Sedrakian and Ervand Lalayan observed and often challenged the societal norms that controlled gender roles, education and the expectations placed on women in the family. Through literature, ethnographic reports and social commentary these figures provide a view into the contradiction between tradition and change, especially about women's autonomy and the changing nature of marriage.

Marriage remained an important part of social order, and the church played a pivotal role in controlling marital expectations. Armenian writer and leading figure in 19th-century Armenian literature Raffi, in 1879, in *Mshak* Armenian weekly newspaper started publishing his anthropological research called *Hay Kin* (The Armenian woman), which had several units. Raffi begins this series of articles by describing how the birth of a girl was met with “deaf discontent”, in contrast to the birth of a boy, which was celebrated. This economic and cultural preference for sons formed marriage customs, highlighting the idea that girls were financial burdens who needed to be “given away” in marriage rather than seen as independent individuals (Raffi, 1979). He also writes that the Armenian woman, from the moment of her birth, is taught that she is born into this world to serve, to be obedient, and to sacrifice herself for others (Raffi, 1979). This claim shows the societal expectation that women's lives should be completely dedicated to their families, leaving very little place for personal goals.

In another article of this series, Raffi highlighted the limitations placed on girls' education and intellectual growth, he writes that a man is free to learn, to read, to develop himself, while a woman must always remain in the shadows, lest she forgets her primary duty: to be a wife and mother (1879). Similarly noticed by Vahan Artsruni and Levon Mkrtchian that were mentioned above. There was education for women, but that education ensured that their

learning was kept under control, within limits that would not challenge patriarchy. Moreover, Raffi shows the double standard of how morality was applied differently to men and women. Raffi describes that a woman's honor is guarded as though it is the only valuable thing she possesses, while a man may sin, may wander, and no one questions his worth (1879). This argument lines up with broader discussions on how the church and society together expected from women to be guardians of family honor, putting on their shoulders a level of moral responsibility that men were expected to take very rarely.

Fr. Arstakes Sedrakian's "*Has and Chhas*" (Mature or immature) suggests another insight into marriage through his documentation of over 200 divorce cases. He writes that “ եթէ ժողովուրդն սկսում է կեանքի նոր շրջան նրան համապատասխան պիտի փոխին և առաջին շրջանի համար գրւած օրենքները, որպէս զի ներդաշնակութիւնը՝ օրէնադրոյ հաստատութեան և ժողովրդի մեջ՝ պահուած լինի:” [if the people begin a new period of life, the laws established for the first period must be changed accordingly so that harmony is maintained between the legislator and the people] (Sedrakian, 1891, p. 8). He also says that divorce was strongly discouraged, but the church sometimes tried to be as a mediator, rather than an enforcer, acknowledging that marital life was not always sustainable. This challenges the perspective of the church as completely oppressive and emphasizes the difficulties of church's role in managing marital life. This view contrasts with Mkrтчian's (1894) perspective, which says that marriage as an institution is threatened by modern developments such as women's education. While Fr. Sedrakian (1891) saw the need for legal and social adaptations in family life, Mkrтчian (1894) lamented the decrease of marriage arrangements, by blaming the rise of

female autonomy. We can see that one side accepts that societal expectations must evolve, and the other is against these in fear of losing already established norms.

Ervand Lalayan's ethnographic research, conducted between 1896 and 1916, provides valuable information of how finance and economic necessity played an important role in marriage. He wrote that “ վաղ պսակելուն նպաստում է այն հանգամանքը, որ աղջկա ծնողները աղքատ լինելով, աշխատում են կարելովույն չափ շուտ ազատվել մի “ուտող քերանից”” [what contributes to marrying off a very young is the fact that the girl's parents, being poor, are trying to get rid of “one more mouth to be fed” as soon as possible] (Lalayan, 2004, p. 121). Lalayan's findings are very alike Raffi's research, because both did their work almost the same period of time in the end of the 19th century. In this context, marriage was less about love or religious sanctity and more about survival. Richer families, on the other hand, sought young brides to secure a labor force in their family. Lalayan also documented a marriage tradition, where the new bride had to wear the clothing of her husband's first dead wife during marriage ceremony, and the idea of it was to "bring the ex-wife back to life and restore her memory" (Lalayan, 2004, p. 126). The Armenian Apostolic Church condemned such things as remains of pagan belief, yet they continued, demonstrating the gap between religious principle and local customs. This raises some important questions. To what extent did the Armenian Apostolic Church truly form marriage practices, and to what extent was it shaped by them?

Raffi, Fr. Sedrakian, Lalayan and others emphasize the interplay between traditions, economic pressures and religious expectations in framing Armenian marriage and family life. Although Mkrtychian was against reforms, and was afraid of losing traditional norms, on the other hand, Raffi and Fr. Sedrakian highlighted the need for change and justice. These views highlight

the struggles faced by Armenian women and the societal debates over progress, equality and the role of the individual in the family.

The Armenian Church played an important, but also contradictory role in shaping expectations from Armenian women at end of the 19th century. The church was one of the providers of education, which in turn reinforced patriarchal structures, and they also had elements of moral reciprocity and adaptation. Figures like Garegin Srvandztiants supported more healthy and equal marital relationships, while others like Levon Mkrtchian exposed the failures of the system that refused women's educational opportunities. At the same time marriage remained a site of social control, where purity, duty and economic challenges affected women's lives. While the church baned certain oppressive practices it also mediated conflicts and adapted to evolving realities. The historical debates over women's education, marriage, and moral responsibility remain relevant. The discourse of these 19th century debates can still be seen in contemporary Armenia where the role of women continues to progress at the crossroads of faith, culture, and modernity. By looking at these historical texts, I see not only a story of restriction, but also one of resistance, adaptation, and the continuing struggle for gender equity.

### **Religion and Feminism**

*“Religion is one of the most important sites for social and individual construction of gendered roles and meaning.” (Wessinger, 2020, p. 2)*

Religious teachings are not neutral. They are shaped by historical and social conditions. Wessinger (2020) writes “religious myths, scriptures, theologies, ethical norms, and religious law codes reinforce unequal gender arrangements, class hierarchies, and other social

inequalities” (p. 3). These arrangements become especially visible in patriarchal religions where gender roles are very separated. When analyzing the influence of the Armenian Apostolic Church on women's rights it is necessary to ask how such texts and traditions defined gender and justified male authority.

Even in patriarchal systems religion contains contradictions. Wessinger (2020) argues, “every religious tradition is internally diverse and contains resources that can be used to support gender equality, as well as other resources that can be used to support the subordination of women” (p. 3). This duality is important when reading the church’s writings from the 19th century – while it can present conservative views, it can also hold overlooked openings for feminist re-interpretation.

Classical patriarchy many times enforces obedience through both religious and social pressure. Wessinger (2020) notes, “religious scriptures, law codes, and customs are frequently invoked to make members of society conform to patriarchal gender roles” (p. 161). These tools were used to control not only behavior, but also belief. Feminist epistemologies challenge researchers to look at who wrote the texts, for whom, and whose perspectives were silenced in the process.

Religious authority is tied to gendered power. Wessinger (2020) writes “women are excluded from being full participants in religious institutions, because of patriarchal interpretations of scriptures” (p. 103). This exclusion has long-term effects. It shapes who is allowed to speak, teach, and lead in a tradition.

The subordination of women is not just theological, it is also psychological. Wessinger (2020) explains, “patriarchal societies shape the self-esteem of girls and women through religious teachings that devalue them” (p. 89). This internalized devaluation keeps women in roles of obedience and silence. In religious texts, it may appear as humility, modesty, or purity. Feminist critique uncovers the control behind those ideals.

Feminist theories show that religion is not only a spiritual space, it is also a political one. It forms and enforces gender roles. Wessinger’s work offers tools to question religious traditions from within and outside. In studying the Armenian Church’s late 19th-century writings, these feminist insights help expose how power and gender shaped the faith.

This literature review discussed the intersection of feminist epistemology and the Armenian Apostolic Church’s influence on gender roles in late 19th-century Armenia. It reviewed the situated nature of knowledge through standpoint theory, the Church’s dual role in both reinforcing and adapting patriarchal norms and the tensions between tradition and women’s rights, education and marriage. These insights provide a foundation for understanding how faith and feminism intersect in shaping historical and contemporary gender dynamics.

### **Mkrtich Khrimian (Hayrig)**

To understand how Armenian Apostolic Church discourse frames women’s rights and living experiences at the end of the 19th century, I decided to look at the writings of one of the leaders of the church at that time, Catholicos of All Armenians Mkrtich Khrimian (Hayrig). Notably, he was one of the Catholicos who was married and had a daughter. However, after their unfortunate death, he dedicated his life to the church. In 1848-1850, Khrimian taught at the girls'

school in the Khasgyugh district of Constantinople. In 1869 Khrimian, who was a bishop in Etchmiadzin, was elected Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, and fought for the reform of the National Constitution, especially to increase the number of delegates of the provincial Western Armenians in the National Assembly. In May 1892, Khrimian was elected Catholicos of All Armenians and remained committed to his position in the national liberation and human rights movement, continuing his activities until his death, 1907. (Asatryan, 2020)

### **Research question**

This capstone project aims to answer whether Mkrtych Khrimian's writings on marriage created the base for certain societal expectations of women in the late 19th century in Armenian communities. The research also explores the ways in which the Armenian Apostolic Church discourse frames women's morality, labor, and education as tools for both family stability and systemic subordination in late 19th century Armenia. In addition, it examines the extent to which Khrimian's writings reflect or challenge broader socio-economic pressures (dowry systems, emigration) that shaped Armenian women's agency within marriage and family life.

### **Methodology**

This research explores marriage-related *kondaks* (official orders) and the *Drakhti Yntanik* [family of paradise] book of Armenian Catholicos Mkrtych Khrimian from the lens of feminist theory. I used qualitative methods including archival research, feminist critical discourse analysis, feminist standpoint theory and thematic mapping to study how Khrimian's *kondaks* reflect power relations, gender norms, and institutional authority in the Armenian Church and broader society. Archival research involved examining historical church documents and feminist

critical discourse analysis was used to analyze how language defines and maintains gendered power structures.

## **Archival Research**

The primary data for this research are official *kondaks* and the “*Drakhti Yntanik*” (1887) book by Khrimian. I conducted this research using “*Documents of the History of Armenian Church: Book XXIV: Kondaks (1893-1896)*” (2021) published by the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin Publishing House, which contains many *kondaks* by Khrimian from the first three years of his reign. Additionally, I visited the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran) to read unpublished ones.

Barbara L’Eplattenier, who advocates for transparent and detailed archival research practices, in her article "An Argument for Archival Research Methods: Thinking Beyond Methodology" (2009) writes, “Methods are about achieving access to information, about finding aids, about reference materials, about archive locations and restrictions” (p. 69). By having this in mind, I focused on the conditions and contexts of each document.

I sorted each *kondaks* chronologically. Also, I recorded the location of issuance, the intended audience, and the socio-political context of the *kondaks* when it was available. This process was important for understanding how Khrimian’s views and approaches evolved over time.

## **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

*“To speak from the position of a ‘woman’ is not the same as speaking from the political perspective of a feminist.” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145)*

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) is a methodological tool that connects the insights of feminist theory with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A gender studies scholar Michelle M. Lazar in her article “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis” (2007) focuses on discourse, politics and the ideology of gender. She describes how FCDA seeks to discover and challenge the discursive reproduction of genderbased power imbalance. FCDA also looks closely at everyday language and how it makes patriarchy seem natural or normal. FCDA asks; who is allowed to speak, how they speak, and what values their words carry.

Lazar (2007) explains FCDA as “concerned with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order—relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women” (p. 145). In contrast to general CDA which addresses power and ideology often more broadly, FCDA positions gender at the center of the analysis. It presents gender as a socially constructed, omnipresent and relational category that intersects with other parts of power such as class, religion and ethnicity.

FCDA has a purpose not only to analyze how patriarchal ideologies are embedded in language and discourse but also to identify moments of resistance and transformation. Lazar describes this as “feminist analytical activism” where discourse analysis becomes a feminist political tool with a purpose of picturing a more equal society (2007, p. 145). By doing that

FCDA questions both openly sexist narratives and more subtle forms of gender inequality that are embedded in normative or institutional discourse.

In this research FCDA provides a framework to analyze the writings and official orders of Mkrtich Khrimian. As a priest and a public intellectual Khrimian's discourse occupies a significant ideological space where religion, nationalism and morality intersect.

By using FCDA this study questions how Khrimian's texts impact on gender roles, reproduce or resist patriarchal norms and use religious authority to define women's morality and rights, education, and economic agency. This approach allows for a critical reading that discovers the complex ways in which his religious and moral discourse supports but also critiques the gendered societal norms.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity**

While standpoint theory often encourages researchers to reflect on their own social positions, this research also critically considers Khrimian's positionality as a male priest speaking from a place of institutional authority. Following Rolin (2009), this paper treats knowledge not as neutral or universally valid, but as constructed through relational and often asymmetrical structures of power. Therefore, my own interpretive position (as a contemporary researcher engaging with nationalist and patriarchal archives) is reflexively acknowledged throughout the analysis.

This research combines historical and critical approaches to explore how Mkrtich Khrimian's *kondaks* and *Drakhti Yntanik* book reflect structures of power and ideology, especially around marriage. Archival research with feminist critical discourse analysis allows for

a detailed reading of Khrimian's writings. By using standpoint theory as a guiding framework this study examines how religious discourse reinforces dominant perspectives.

### **Research findings and analysis**

*Շատ քաջ է այն ազգ եւ ընտանիք, որ յոռին կը թողու եւ իւր նախնական կեանքին լաւ եւ ուղիղ մասն պի՛ննէ: [The nation and family is very brave, that leaves behind the past and holds the good and upright part of its original life.] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 61)*

In 1873, when Khrimian delivered a speech at the General Assembly in Constantinople regarding the resignation of his role as a patriarch, in that speech he also mentioned a 13-point proposal for changes in the society. In the final, 13th point he stated:

Հայոց ազգային ընտանեկան կեանքն, այն է՝ ամուսնական և բարոյական կապերը ամրապնդել, զեղծումներն բառնալ, պանդխտութեան առաջքն առնուլ, և Ազգը մի հանրական ընտանիք կազմելու դրութեան վերծանել: Ներքին և արտաքին հարստահարութիւններն բառնալու համար բարեխնման տերութենէն աւելի զօրաւոր միջոցներ խնդրել, գաղթականութիւնն արգելուլ, ազգային անհատական իրաւունքներն պաշտպանել, որով և Ազգի ամբողջութիւնն ապահովել: [To strengthen the Armenian national family life—namely, marital and moral ties; to eliminate corruption; to prevent migration; and to transform the Nation into a unified public family. To request from the benevolent authorities stronger means to eliminate both internal and external exploitation; to prevent emigration; to protect individual national rights, and thereby ensure the integrity of the Nation.] (Official Publication of the National Patriarchate, 1873, p. 892)

Three years after this speech, in 1876 he published *Drakhti yntaniq* ( Family of Paradise). The book aimed to be a warning alarm for Armenian families who had moved away from human rights, family values, and moral principles. Consisting of 18 chapters, this book had a purpose to serve as an educational manual, a call to action, and a moral guide, which Khrimian addressed to the Armenian people.

Khrimian's *Drakhti Yntaniq* (family of paradise) book and his official *kondaks* provide valuable insight about his religious views on many issues concerning women, such as access to remarriage, marriage between relatives (prohibited by the Church unless separated by seven generations), underage marriage, women's education, economic conditions, morality, and women's basic rights. Khrimian often showed progressive views for his time, openly criticizing patriarchal norms that were deeply rooted in Armenian society. In this project I mostly focus on Khrimian's perspectives on women's morality and rights, their economic capabilities, and access to education within the family.

### **Women's morality and rights**

...կնոջ ազատութիւնը շատ հին իրաւունք է. Եւրոպիոյ իրաւագիտութիւնը զայն նոր չի հնարեց, այլ միայն վերանորոգեց: [...women's freedom is a very old right. European jurisprudence did not invent it, but only renovated it.] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 75)

In Christianity, one can often encounter discourses on morality, the rights and obligations of individuals. Religion itself is a guide for the virtuous life of followers. Khrimian, being an influential servant of the Armenian church, but also a leader devoted to the Armenian nation,

often refers to all this in his texts too. In essence, he contracts a moral binary of good and bad, rooted in religious principles.

The main consideration that is often repeated in Khrimian's discourse is the obedience of women. A woman's obedience not only to her husband, but also to the older members of the family. According to Khrimian, a family will be strong if “գաւակաց ակնածութիւն եւ մեծարանք առ ծնողս, հարսներաց իրու հնազանդութիւն” [...sons show reverence and respect for their parents, and the brides complete obedience...] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 60). In addition to the fact that here he expects only absolute obedience from the bride, he also calls a man 'a son' and a woman 'a bride'. According to Lazar (2007) “asymmetrical gender relations cannot merely be explained by individuals' intentions” but institutionalized discourse practices, in this case the Armenian Church (p. 147). That is, Khrimian's repeated use of certain language and moral teachings helps justify gender inequality, even if reproducing them does not consciously intend harm. Describing the man in the family with an intimate lexicon, not calling him a groom, he alienates the woman in the family by calling her a bride, giving her the status of someone who is not as dear to the family as man, but an outsider who came into the family. Similarly, he also often uses “երիտասարդ” [young man] to describe a boy getting married and կոյս [virgin] when talking about a girl getting married, putting clear expectations from women, but nothing from men.

Khrimian's texts give the impression that morality is the greatest burden of a woman in the family, and she is forever condemned to be alone with the fear of defending her moral love from other men. He writes “Հարսին նուիրական պարտիրն է, որ նիւթական օժիտէն աւելի հսկէ իւր բարոյական սիրոյ օժիտին վերայ, չտալ երբէք զայն՝ կողոպուտ, եթէ միանգամ

կողմնորոշում, այնուհետև շատ դժուարին կը լինի զայն դարձնել վերստին” [it is the duty of the bride to guard her dowry of moral love more than her material dowry, never to give it away, for once it has been stolen, it will be very difficult to get it back] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 106). Ignoring the fact that this may be a systemic problem, he blames the woman for the failure, so that other men will steal her moral love. It is here that relations of power are discursively reproduced as the result of individual failings (Lazar, 2007, p. 149).

In the second half of the 19th century, Khrimian was in Constantinople and Armenians were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, and therefore it was Ottoman law that regulated the human relations of Armenians. But the marital relations and family disputes of Armenians, including divorces, were in the hands of the Armenian Apostolic Church. In Khrimian’s official *kondaks* and various texts, he writes about women’s rights in the family and emphasizes the equality of men and women, because according to him “ամէն Քրիստոնէայ հաւատացելոց պարտք է իրաւունքը միեւնոյն է. հաւասար է Աւետարանի ազատ կրօնին առաջ” [the duty and right of every Christian believer is the same. They are equal before the free religion of the Bible] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 115). However, he also adds that “Պօղոսին այս բանը որչափ որ կինը իւր հին ստրկութենէն կը հանէ. այլ չի ջնջեր նորա հնազանդութեան պարտքը, որ բնական է. քարոյական է” [this thing of Paul, insofar as it frees the woman from her old slavery, does not erase her duty of obedience, which is natural and moral] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 116). While acknowledging that all people have the same rights, he also notes that, nevertheless, only women have a duty of obedience. When he speaks of equal rights, the ideas are quite contradictory, as he gives advantages to men in this equality.

For a long time in the traditional Armenian family, when the boy's parents came to the girl's house with a marriage proposal, it was the father of the family who would give consent for his daughter to marry that boy. The girl would often see the groom for the first time on the day of the engagement or even the wedding day. Khrimian strongly condemns this phenomenon and writes that “հարսն ստրուկ չէ, այլ իբրեւ ազատ ընկեր իւր փեսային, նոյն հաւասար իրաւունքն ունի, որ իւր ազատական հաւանութիւնը նա եւս նուիրէ փեսային” [the bride is not a slave, but as a free companion of her groom, she has the same equal right to gift give her free willed consent to the groom] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 75). From the FCDA lens this is a discursive activism where the text is used as a transformative tool of social norm. Lazar explains “a feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations is aimed ultimately at effecting social transformation. The social status quo is contested in favour of a feminist humanist vision of a just society” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). By restoring women's voice and making them a full part of this decision-making process, Khrimian supports the creation of a social order with equal rights through this critique.

According to the church, there are several preconditions for marriage that couples must keep. One of them is compatibility, according to age, condition, behavior, and other circumstances. However, one of them, “widower to widow,” was not observed for a long time; widowers married virgins, and widowed women were condemned to remain widows until death. Khrimian strongly opposes this social norm that a widowed woman should not marry a second time. He questions “եթէ նոյնպէս սպաժամ մեռնի փեսայն՝ այրի մնայ իւր հարսն, որոյ կեանք նոր բացուած գարնան պէս դեռ ծաղկահասակ, կաղաչեմ, որ խօսիս ի՞նչ է քո արդար դատաստանը, դու որ խիղճ կ'ընես նորատի փեսային համար. նոյն խիղճ չե՞ս զգար

նորածաղիկ հարսին համար, եւ կ'ուզես, որ նա անամուսին, անպտուղ սեւաքող երթայ մինչեւ ի գերեզման” [if the groom dies untimely, his bride remains a widow, whose life is still as blooming as a newly opened spring. I beg you to speak, what is your just judgment, you who feel pity for the newlywed groom? Don't you feel the same pity for the newly blooming bride, and would you wish that she would go unmarried, barren, and black-veiled to the grave] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 80). He considers this approach very unfair towards widows. He challenges the gendered double standards that existed in the society. This critique humanizes the widow, positioning her as a subject with emotional and reproductive life, not a victim of an unfortunate marriage.

Khrimian shows his intolerance against underage marriage in *kondak* No. 1153, where a girl is described as “զանվաւերութիւն պսակի նորին ի տասնամենի հասակի, որպէս անթոյլատրելի ի կանոնս Մեր վասն պսակելոյ զայնպիսիսն” [Her marriage is invalid from the beginning, as she was married at the age of ten, which is impermissible according to our laws.] (1895). And at the end of the *kondak* the girl's later suffering and departure are met with Khrimian's compassion, recognizing the invalidity of the original union, and blessing her new marriage. Here, the Church constructs childhood marriage not only as immoral but also linguistically illegitimate. He uses authoritative language to label child marriage as “զանվաւերութիւն” [invalidity] by denying it the recognition typically granted to lawful unions. This labeling of underage marriage as a violation contributes to the deconstruction of the dominant gender ideology that would otherwise naturalize the early union.

The basic rights of the bride and groom in a patriarchal family are very well described in Yervand Lalayan's ethnographic research. Here it is clearly seen that the man was the head of the

family, the breadwinner, the earner, the last word in decisions belonged to him, while the woman had a secondary role in the family, she was responsible for the entire household, cleaning, caring for children, upbringing, absolute obedience to her husband's orders, her word and opinion were unimportant in decisions, she did not even have the right to sit at the same table with men (Lalayan, 2004). Khrimian is not at peace with these patriarchal social norms, for him:

Կինն ոչ հպատակ է, ոչ զինուոր է եւ ոչ ստորուկ ծառայ: Կինն իւր ամուսնոյն ազատ ընկեր ու հաւասար լծակիցն է ամենայն իրաւամբ: Ուստի կինն աղախին չէ. այլ տան տիկինն էլ թագուհի. թէպէտ էլ այր մարդ թագաւոր լինի, իշխան լինի, տէր էլ գլուխ լինի, բնաւ իրաւունք չունի եւ կարող չէ այնպէս իշխել, ինչպէս կ'իշխենն աշխարհիս այլ էլ այլ տիրող գլուխները իշխանական գաւազանով, վասն զի ընտանեկան կեանքին ու վարչութեան մէջ իշխանական սուր ոստիկանութիւնն էլ գաւազան չկայ. այլ միայն սէր, խնամք էլ միութիւն: [A woman is neither a subject, nor a soldier, nor a slave. A woman is her husband's free companion and equal partner in all rights. Therefore, a woman is not a maid. But a lady and queen of the house. Even if a man is a king, a prince, a master and a head, he has no right and cannot rule in the way that other ruling heads of the world rule with a scepter of power, because in family life and administration there is no sharp police and scepter of power. But only love, care and unity.] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 116)

This is an example of resistance discourse, where dominant ideologies are deconstructed and re-signified. As Lazar (2007) writes “A feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations is aimed ultimately at effecting social transformation” (p. 150). Here, Khrimian challenges the model of male dominance that also shows state power (“police sword

and scepter”), saying that it is inappropriate for family life. This is an important point that breaks down the notion that authority in marriage is similar to authoritarian control. Instead, he presents a new foundation for family, “love, care, and unity” and this aligns with feminist values of mutuality and shared responsibility (Khrimian, 1887, p. 116).

Similarly in Khrimian's *kondak* No. 299 which dissolves the marriage of Gaspar Bezirian who left his wife Khorsik for ten years, describes the man's life as “զյոռի և զլկտի” [indecent and impudent] (1895). Yet, regarding the wife the *kondak* states “տասք իրաւունս կոնջն Խորսիկի մտանել ի նոր ամուսնութիւն ընդ ում և կամեցի” [We grant Khorsik the right to remarry whomever she wishes] (1895, p. 392). By using this linguistic act Khrimian not only grants Khorsik agency but performs a radical redefinition of women, as subject, not possession. From FCDA's view this is constitutive of gendered subjectivities, where power can be rewritten through institutional texts.

In the New Testament, the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians states, “the head of a wife is her husband” (Armenian Apostolic Church Version Bible, 2016, Corinthians 11:3). Religious texts were written at a time when the concept of law was completely different, religion itself was designed to not only guide but also to control people, and that is why Paul considers a woman to be headless, and therefore she needs a husband to fulfill the function of her head. Khrimian notes that times change and we cannot remain forever blinded by the ideas that keep us behind from the modern world. He responds to these ideas about the weakness of women in the following way: “Ուրեմն պէտք չէ բոլորովին սկսար հասարել զկին, կարծելով՝ թէ նա մի հողակերտ ու դիւրաբեկ անօթ է. երբեմն հրացեալ երկաթ կը դառնայ երբ Սուրբ Կրօնին, ամուսնոյն եւ զաւակաց սէր զինքն կը բոցավառէ ու կը մղէ առ ամենայն վտանգ” [One

should not consider a woman completely weak, thinking that she is an earth-made and easily broken vessel. Sometimes she becomes a fiery iron when the love for the Holy Faith, her husband and children ignites her and pushes her against all dangers] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 118). Then he adds, “Ո՛չ, կին այր մարդոյն նուաստագոյն մասն չէ. այլ նորա կողի բուն միջակէտն է. նորա սրտին հոգւոյն մօտ. յորմէ Արարչապետին իմաստութիւնը խորհրդով մի ոսկր առաւ եւ ամուսնական մարմինը լրացուց” [No, a woman is not the lowest part of a man. Rather, she is the very center of his ribs. Near the soul of his heart, from which the wisdom of the Creator wisely took a bone and completed the marital body] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 118). Here, Khrimian does not reject religion altogether but re-signifies its meaning in a progressive, inclusive way, showing that religion can coexist with gender equality. Also, he uses emotional language such as “fiery iron,” “near the soul of his heart” to redefine the identity of women from a passive position of defense to active, moral, and spiritual agents.

Even though Khrimian’s discourse is shaped by traditional Christian morality it also holds powerful possibilities for change. While he often reflects the dominant gender norms of his time, he also wants to challenge them. He speaks to women not only as obedient wives, but also as strong, spiritual, and moral beings. He redefines the understanding of family not as a place of control but as a space for love, care, and unity. His belief in equality before God becomes a tool to question injustice and uplift women’s rights. By using the language of religion he opens space for more inclusive ideas. He gives women a voice in marriage, a right to choose, and dignity in widowhood. These moments in his work are not minor. They show how deeply rooted beliefs can be changed. Khrimian’s ideas help to see faith and feminism not as opposites but as allies.

His writings remind that even in a conservative society positive change is possible and already beginning.

### **Economy: Women's Labor**

Marriage was closely related to the family economy. Raffi describes the approach of the parents of a girl getting married the following way “Մի ուսուող բերանից էլ ազատվեցինք” [we got rid of one more mouth to feed.] (Raffi, 1879) In Lalayan's and Raffi's ethnographic research, we can see a basic line about the economic status of the girl in the family. She is considered an incomplete member of her parents' family, who after some time must leave to get married. And boys, in contrast to this situation, were considered a great contribution to the family, a working force, an income generator. After marriage, the woman had to give birth to boys in order to once again provide her husband's extended family with a working force and income generator. It is also important to note here that the girl getting married was considered a monetary income with her dowry. The value, items, and size of the dowry were important. Also, the boy's family would give a certain amount of money to the girl's parents after the marriage proposal, which was also a source of motivation for the poor peasants to marry off their girl as soon as possible and have that money. Although researchers and ethnographers of that period mention very little about the work capacity of women, it is very rare to see stories about women engaged in agriculture, farming, and babysitting. Women were largely ignored as economic subjects in the patriarchal family, and their main activities were limited to the four walls of the house. And if the husband went for work abroad, away from the family and did not return for many years, the wife would remain in poverty with the children within the four walls of the house. We learn about these

cases from Khrimian's official *kondaks*, where he allows these women to start a new family and save the family from poverty.

The right of a woman and a man to work and to earn equal money for the same work is one of the basic human rights, which has been widely discussed in Western societies only at the beginning of the 20th century. Economic empowerment is a key to improve the role of women in society. In this regard the Armenian Apostolic Church does not separate its discourse from the customs of the patriarchal society, since the clergy themselves come from that same society. Khrimian approaches this issue from the perspective of natural law.

Երբ կը տեսնամ հողագործի արտի մէջ, որ մի զոյգ անդակից եզները լծուելով գետին կը հերկեն, երբ կը տեսնամ, որ միակտուր լծնափայտ՝ եզներու վզի վերայ հաւասար դրուած է. որպէս զի հաւասար քալեն եւ հաւասար ուժով հարօրը քաշելով վարեն արտն. ճիշդ այս բնական օրինակէն՝ բարոյական օրինակ հանելով, կարի՛ պատշաճ է ընտանեկան կեանքին մէջ թէ առն եւ թէ կնոջ աշխատութեան պայմանները որոշել ու չափել:” [When I see in a farmer’s field, that a pair of companion unpaired oxen are yoked and plowing the land, when I see that a single yoke is placed equally on the oxen’s necks, so that they walk equally and pull the plow with equal force to plow the field, it is precisely from this natural example, drawing a moral example, that it is appropriate to determine and measure the conditions of work of both men and women in family life.] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 125)

Khrimian defines gender as relational and cooperative, rejecting the patriarchal discourse that man should lead while the woman follows. He continues “Ընտանեկան ազարակին մէջ երկու գլխաւոր աշխատաւորներ կան. որոնց համար լծակից բառին նշանակութիւնը շատ

յարմար ու ճիշդ է. որ ցոյց կուտայ առն եւ կնոջ հաւասար կեանք եւ ընթացքը:” [There are two main workers on the family farm. For them, the meaning of the word “yokefellow” (or partner) is very appropriate and accurate. It shows the equal life and course (process) of men and women] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 125). As a representative of a church he speaks for equal labor and shared responsibility by writing “equal life and course” he reconstructs gender identity as shared and balanced rather than a hierarchy.

Khrimian’s example of yoked oxen suggests equality in burden, but not in status. His romantic description of household work as craft hides the structural injustices that abandoned women face. *Kondak* No. 688 acknowledges this gap. It recounts “վիճակեալ է թշուառացեաց, որդւոցն ասեմք, Հայաստան աշխարհի, յորոց բազումք ոչ միայն յետ քառամեայ կամ ասելի կենակցութեան ընդ նորահարսին, թողուն զհայրենի տուն” [It is the fate of the unfortunate, I speak of the sons of the land of Armenia, many of whom, not only after four years or more of living with their young bride, abandon their ancestral home] (1896, p. 597) In this framing, women are left to manage households, finances, and social stigma alone. Khrimian encourages women who want to remarry after their husbands left them, “Հայրապետական կոնդակաւ պատուրեմք ընդունել վերստին զՄարգարն Օհանեան, զկիինն իւր Եպրու և զնորածինս ի նոցունց ի ծնոց Ս. Եկեղեցւոյ մերոյ, ճանաչել օրինաւոր զամուսնութիւն նոցին թողլով նոցա զյանցանս” [By patriarchal *kondak*, we order that Margar Ohanian, his wife Yeprou, and their newborn children be once again received into the bosom of our Holy Church, recognizing their marriage as lawful and absolving them of their transgressions] (1896, p. 597).

In contrast Khrimian provides a detailed description of the labor obligations of women and men in the family. His interpretation, saturated with religious discourse, nevertheless

considers that women should manage the household and try to manage the family income wisely. He writes that women's duty is fair and faithful economy, elaborating that “կնոջ մեծ ու առանձին արհեստն է տան կառավարութիւն, իմաստուն տնտեսութիւն, եւ մայրական դաստիարակութիւն” [the great and special craft of women is the management of the house, wise economy, and maternal upbringing](Khrimian, 1887, p. 124). By using words to describe household work, Khrimian uses “duty” and “craft”. He tries to elevate the domestic sphere rhetorically but at the same time limiting women in it. He considers that in that society men's work is “very extensive, heavy, difficult, and painful” compared to women's. However, he justifies this inequality by linking it to the severe pains of childbirth for women, and considers that this suffering is already an equal hardship compared to the work done by men. “իւր այս անփախուստ ցաւոց պարտիքը՝ այր մարդուն բովանդակ աշխատութեան դէմ հաւասար եւ շատ է” [Her debt of this inescapable pain [childbirth] is equal and great against the comprehensive labor of men] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 125). Lazar (2007) might call this discursive strategy of balance or justification. Women's biological pain is considered here as their contribution to labor. Inequality is justified by biology. Khrimian tries to justify equality through suffering, not equal agency or opportunity. The pain of giving birth is involuntary but men's work, though “painful”, gives them access to the public domain.

Religion plays as a conservative force which supports patriarchal norms even when women are getting economic empowerment in society. “They (religions) contain resources that can be used to support women's equality as well as those that can be used to support the subordination of women” (Wessinger, 2020, p. 87). This stratification and contradiction are not absent from the discourse of the Armenian Apostolic Church too. Khrimian tries to show that the

rights of women and men are also equal in the matter of family economy. He asks questions that seem to be in the interest of women's rights. For example, he writes, “Եթէ այր մարդոց իրաւունքն է ընտանեկան ու առ տնին գործոց վերայ խելամուտ լինել. Միթէ կնոջ իրաւունք չէ՞ արտաքին իրաց վերայ տեղեկութիւն ստանալ ու գիտնալ թէ այր մարդիկ ի՞նչ կը գործեն աշխարհիս կառավարութեան ու շահավաճառութեան մէջ:” [If it is the right of men to be wise in family and household matters, is it not the right of women to receive information about external events and to know what men are doing in the governance and commerce of the world?] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 127). He acknowledges existing inequality but he does not challenge it structurally. Then he adds, “Ուրեմն պարտազանց է այր, որ իւր կեանքի ու գործոց վիճակը թագուցանելով, չի թողուր որ իւր կենակիցն՝ իւր հետ հաւասար ընտանեկան կեանքին վերայ հոգածէ: Պարտազանց է կինը, որ իր ամուսնոյն հոգածութեան բաժանորդ չի լինիր” [Therefore, it is a sin for a man who, concealing his own life and affairs, does not allow his wife to care for the family life she shares with him. Undutiful is a woman who does not share her husband's care] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 127). Making this separation between genders Khrimian does not recognize it as a social problem but moral failure, at the same time increasing patriarchal control over women's behavior. He is creating the illusion of equality by mutualizing family responsibilities, but never questioning the existing discourse which positions men in powerful and women in a supporting role.

At end of the 19th century in Armenian society, women's labor was shaped by patriarchal norms. Their work was often invisible or limited to the domestic sphere. Khrimian's discourse tries to present equality through shared responsibility. Yet, it reinforces gender roles by tying women's value to biology and moral obligation. His words show both a wish for fairness and the

limits of his time. He does not challenge inequality structurally, only justifies it morally. These contradictions matter. Those help to see how religious and social norms worked together to shape gendered roles. But they also give us space to question them. Equality should not be built on pain or sacrifice. It should be based on agency, opportunity, and shared dignity.

### **Women's Education: Enlightenment and Motherhood**

*“Երջանիկ օրեր են այն օրերը երբ Հայոց տիկնայք ու կանայք հին պատկառանաց շնորհին հետը՝ նոր դաստիարակութեան լոյսով եւս կը փայլին եւ յայնժամ միայն կարող են իսկապէս նմանիլ Եւրոպիոյ կրթեալ եւ ժրագրուի կիներուն:”* *“Happy days are those days when Armenian ladies and women, along with the grace of old dignities, shine with the light of new upbringing, and only then can they truly resemble the educated and courageous (bold) women of Europe.”*  
(Khrimian, 1887, p. 197)

Women for a long time have been controlled by patriarchal societies by depriving them of the opportunity for education. Women's education has always been a problematic topic in patriarchal societies. Levon Mkrтчian, who wrote about family rights in the 19th century, sees a great danger in women's education, he believes that it is a threat to the collapse of the traditional Armenian family. According to him, if a woman gets an education, she will forget about her family and focus only on her career (Mkrтчian, 1894, p. 18). This discourse has been dominant everywhere, fearing that if a woman receives an education, it will be impossible to influence her. And this is indeed so, and it is crucial. The education of an individual is one of the important pillars of their development and progress. Although at the end of the 19th century there was already talk about equal education, it still separated the types of education for men and women. For example, Vahan Artsruni, who was a prominent doctor at that time, notes in his book *Aghjik*

(1903) that a woman's education should be worthy of a woman, her education should not be similar to a man's education. It is noteworthy that the Armenian Apostolic Church was already making efforts in the 19th century to create co-ed schools. And already at the end of the 19th century, we learn from Khrimian's *kondaks* that in Armenian communities, single-sex schools were being transformed into schools with co-ed classrooms by the decision of the church.

Khrimian condemns biased and unequal education, considering it unbalanced, “մարդոյն կէտը լոյս տալ, եւ նորս միւս կէս մասն թողուլ կոյր” [giving light to one side of humanity and leaving the other blind] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 59). According to Khrimian, Armenians can never achieve Western freedom in that way, only educated men and women can correctly manifest their freedom and not abuse it. Thus, the Armenian Apostolic Church, led by Khrimian, was in favor of full equal education, but sometimes, as a result of the oppressive public discourse, they also express contradictory ideas, which we will discuss below.

Khrimian's observations on women's education awakened optimistic hope for radical reforms in society. Education not only makes people knowledgeable but also provides freedom, equality, tolerance and legal awareness. Khrimian, speaking about the general right to education for women, shows radicalism but at the same time there is an inevitable conservatism in the discourse. He writes “Առաջին անգամ երբ կինը այբ գիրը արտասանեց՝ ինքնին լուծեց իւր համրութիւնը, կինը կարդաց ու ճանչցաւ իւր իրաւունքն, բողոքեց ու հռչակեց աշխարհին առաջ թէ ինքն եւս իւր ընտանեաց մայրն է, պէտք է խօսի եւ այր մարդոց ընկերութեան մէջ հաւասար աթոռ ունենայ” [The first time a woman recited the first letter of the alphabet, she solved her own muteness, the woman read and recognized her rights, protested and declared before the world that she is the mother of her family too, she must speak and have an equal seat

in the society of men] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 195). Khrimian recognizes that the silence of a woman in society is socially constructed and gendered, not that a woman has little ability, but that her access has been very limited and she has been silenced in society by not providing education. He takes a general view of material and institutional barriers to gender equality. And he is not showing here empowerment of women systematically but discursively and individually. However, mentioning that “she is mother of her family too” he justifies women’s entry to the public discourse using gender normative identity. Recognizing the importance of education in the context of women’s voice, protest and rights, he nevertheless tends to maintain his conservative discourse by mentioning women’s identity only as mothers. And in contrast to this he also recognizes the full potential of an educated woman who is absolutely equal to a man, he notes that if a woman receives an education that “անմոռունջ կին՝ խօսուն բանադատ դարձաւ. կարդալ գրե սորվելով, լեզուագէտ լինելով, նա կը ճզնի մեզ հետ խորհրդական լինել, աշխարհ կառավարել, օրէնք տալ, Սահմանադրութիւն գոչել” [silent woman will become an eloquent critic. Having learned to read and write, being literate, she will strive to be an advisor with us, to govern the world, to make laws, to proclaim a Constitution] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 196) This is what Michelle Lazar (2007) calls feminist analytical activism. This shows the will for radical social transformation. He goes beyond access or symbolic inclusion and recognizes the structural impact of women's literacy.

Khrimian acknowledges that the education of his time is biased and incomplete. Women do not receive the education they need. Most women learn French and piano, most of them lack proper and equal education. According to him, it is unacceptable to “give light” to half of society, and to keep the other half, “abandoned, blind, poor, slaves and idiots.” With such

unequal education, “Armenian family life will be suffocated.” (Khrimian, 1887, p. 198) By receiving proper education, “ընտանեաց մէն մի անդամը, իւր իրաւունք, իւր պարտիքը ճանչնայ, իրարու խօսքը հասկնան, միարբան խորհին, միարբան ընթանան առանց կաղալոյ. այր կամ կին, ծնողք կամ զաւակները, հարսն կամ սկեսուրն” [each member of the family will know their right, their duty, understand each other’s words, think together, walk together without any hesitation] husband or wife, parents or children, daughter-in-law or mother-in-law] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 60). He displays emotional anger towards men and accuses them of “ինչ որ կնոջ պէտք չէր՝ դուք զայն ուսուցիք, եւ ինչ որ պէտք էր՝ դուք կամ չգիտցաք կամ աւելորդ դասեցիք, միայն աղօս կիսախաւար լոյս տուիք կնոջ եւ արձակեցիք զինքն” [what you didn’t need, you taught women and what they did need you either didn’t know or judged useless, you only gave women a dim, half-dark light and let them go] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 198) And that is why freedom is exploited and misunderstood in society. It is obvious from the Khrimian text that the education providers are men, that is why he criticizes them. Khrimian's point that women got “what they didn’t need” shows this epistemic injustice, where knowledge is produced about women, but not for or by them. His criticism supports the feminist standpoint theory that once women are educated and articulate about their experiences, they become not only just speakers but agents of institutional change. The educational system acts not just through isolation, but through misguidance, by teaching women in ways that disable them rather than empower them.

Women's intellectual limitations are a result of a patriarchal society. Khrimian critiques the societal expectation that men should never rely on women, stating “Ուստի կինը իւր անհոգ վիճակէն հանելով՝ ընտանեկան հոգածութեան մէջ կրթելու համար, այր մարդիկ պէտք է զայն արժանի համարին իրենց խորհրդակցութեան, ամօթ եւ նուաստութիւն չհամարին

իրաց վիճակը ստուգութեամբ խօսիլ ու խոստովանիլ” [In order to lift the woman out of her carefree state and educate her in family care, men should consider her worthy of their consultation, and not consider it shameful or humiliating to honestly speak and admit the situation of the issues.] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 126) This statement highlights how the ignorance imposed on women was the result of being systematically denied participation in family decision-making processes. Khrimian does not accept this approach and considers this behavior a harmful norm. This is interpreted by the FCDA as how considering women or asking for advice has been perceived by men as weakness. Khrimian’s recognition that women are intellectually limited by the society, saying they must be “considered worthy of consultation” shows a protofeminist critique emerging from within a patriarchal, religious perspective. Again, Khrimian's position here is not completely liberating but represents a transitional voice that challenges the existing norms without completely departing from it, using the authority of religion in a careful way to redefine gender relations.

The education and upbringing of children, family harmony and the enormous burden of morality are carried by women alone in a patriarchal society. Khrimian’s observation that an illiterate woman raises illiterate children is not irrelevant to this. First of all he believes that women should receive education in order to create an intelligent and knowledgeable society. He blames the ignorance of society entirely on women in the following way: “նախ մայրերու կարճատեսութիւն կրթէ ու բժշկէ դաստիարակութեամբ. որպէս զի նորա կատարեալ եւ առողջամիտ զաւակ ծնանին” [First, educate and cure the short-sightedness of mothers, so that they give birth to perfect and healthy children] (Khrimian, 1887, p. 121). From a FCDA perspective, this represents a characteristic ideological contradiction.. Khrimian first supports

traditional norms that put down women in the family as the only bearers of children's education, but also he hints at the transformative power of education in empowering women. However, only to the extent that they continue to serve the society's and family's collective good. Thus, Khrimian both challenges and reinforces patriarchal hierarchies. As a religious leader he gives his views a moral and authoritative weight that hides the structural inequalities. Eventually he is implementing a system where women's education is valuable only as it produces better children and improves society's condition, rather than encouraging women's independent agency and rights.

Khrimian's texts about women's education give a recognition of the potential of reform. He understands that educating women can break the silence forced by society. He encourages women to actively participate in public life and contribute to societal progress. Although his views still tie women's education to patriarchal norms, however there is a clear optimism in his writings that education can lead to equality and freedom for everyone. Khrimian supports a more balanced education system, critiquing its shortcomings and pushing for changes that could help create a society where both genders are educated and empowered. Though his ideas are rooted in his time, he suggests the beginnings of a shift towards greater gender equality in Armenian society.

### **Limitations and avenues for future research**

In this capstone I focused on Catholicos Mkrtich Khrimian's marriage-related writings and their impact on shaping expectations of young Armenian women in families in the late 19th century. However, there are several limitations that frame this study.

Khrimian's texts offer valuable insights into how the Armenian Apostolic Church defined women's rights, morality, labor, and education, and this still reflects the institutional and patriarchal norms of the Church. Though Khrimian brings progressive ideas for his time, such as being against child marriage and advocating for women's right to education and remarriage, his writings still have expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and maternal duty that reproduce patriarchal gender roles. This duality of liberation and limitation shows how even progressive discourses can reinforce dominant power structures.

I mainly centers on Khrimian's *Drakhti Yntanik* (1887) book and his kondaks, without a comparative analysis of other Church leaders' views. Future studies could analyze whether Khrimian's views were unique or part of a wider current within the Church. Similarly, a more critical exploration of why Khrimian adopted such views, possibly influenced by his personal experiences, such as teaching at girls' schools or the loss of his family, was beyond the scope of this paper and remains an important direction for further research.

Another limitation is the lack of direct voices from women of the time. I analyzed how about women were spoken in official Church discourse but not how women got these messages or resisted them. Studing the lived experiences of women in 19th century Armenian communitis through memoirs, letters, oral histories or ethnographic data would provide a more grounded understanding of how religious gender norms were internalized, negotiated, or challenged.

This capstone explored Khrimian's writings from the standpoint of family and gender roles. But his writings including theological, nationalist, and cultural meanings which remain unexplored in this project. Future research could analyze how Khrimian's ideas on women's

roles intersected with the Armenian national liberation movement or how he used gender to speak about national unity and reform.

This study includes feminist theories and historiography, the conclusion could more explicitly challenge existing historical narratives about Armenian feminism. By showing how Church leaders like Khrimian both empowered and restricted women, this research opens space to think again about the relationship between religion and early feminist ideas in Armenia.

Avenues for future research can include a comparative study of Khrimian's views with other Armenian Church leaders of the 19th century, such as Garegin Srvandziantz. Also deeper research into Khrimian's personal biography and its influence on his gender discourse. An analysis of women's lived experiences during this period through ethnography, letters, or memoirs. A study of how Khrimian's discourse may have influenced the first wave of Armenian feminists in the early 20th century. A critical exploration of how Khrimian's gender discourse functioned not only theologically but also politically, as a tool for national and moral reform.

### **Conclusion**

Mkrtich Khrimian's writings tell us a complicated and sometimes conflicting story about gender and religion at the end of 19th century Armenian society. On one side, he supports the old patriarchal rules, demanding women's obedience, keeping their work and education tied to the home, and seeing their economic and moral struggles as just part of balancing male power. However, on the other side, he uses powerful language about equality before God, love, and unity to argue that women deserve real rights – the freedom to choose their marriage, to remarry if widowed, to take part in family decisions and public life, and to get an education that prepares

them for more than just motherhood. These opposing ideas between duty and freedom, biology and spirit, authority and personal rights show how a traditional religious leader could still spark important changes in how people think and how laws work. Khrimian didn't tear down the old system, but he carved out new spaces where faith and the idea of women's rights could meet and even support each other. By turning obedience into mutual love, by giving value to housework while calling for shared responsibilities, and by saying literacy and legal knowledge are just as important for women as men he set up the base to build on in the future. Khrimian's work is not about being perfectly progressive, but about questioning the rules of his time. He shows us that traditions are not always simple or fixed and religion can both hold people back and set them free, and that the fight for gender justice is complex and full of contradictions. His work calls on us today to follow those steps, celebrate the progress, and keep breaking down the walls, whether moral, legal, or cultural, that still hold women back from their full humanity.

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