
The 'Gender Equality Law' Hysteria In Armenia

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YEREVAN (A.W.)-In May 2013, Armenia's Parliament adopted the law on "Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women." For the past two months, adoption of this piece of legislation has been the topic of an extremely frenzied debate. The discussion became even more heated during the last two weeks of August, when it drew in voices from almost all segments of Armenian society, including civil society groups, the church, nationalists, traditionalists, state representatives, various NGOs, human rights advocates, bloggers, the mass media, pop stars, and political parties.

Women's Resource Center participating in a demonstration for increased equality Yerevan. (Photo by Svetlana Antonyan)

The main focus, at least in the beginning of this hysteria, was Article 3 of the legislation, wherein gender is defined as the "acquired, socially fixed behavior of persons of different sexes."

Essentially, this definition of gender was either ill understood, not understood at all, or deliberately distorted by many, making gender related issues-LGBT among them-the most discussed topic in Armenia.

The law

Although many believe that the law was orchestrated to destroy traditional Armenian values, it is in fact the over-reaction to its adoption that was orchestrated.

If we look at the process of the draft law's preparation, it becomes clear why it was the logical continuation of the gender equality policy. Back in 2009, then-MPs Heghine Bisharyan and Hovhannes Margaryan from Orinats Erkir (Rule of Law Party) proposed the bill.

Until 2011, hearings regarding this bill proposal were delayed in parliament several times until the government of Armenia proposed a similar bill. Since the proposed bills were almost identical, a decision was made to combine the two. As a result, the draft of what was adopted this May as law was created.

Hearings on this new draft bill were once again delayed in parliament.

In May 2012, parliamentary elections were held, and the expected hearings in the newly elected parliament were delayed twice, as there was a need to reexamine the proposed drafts. Eventually, parliament held the long awaited hearings this past May, and the draft became law No. 57 on "Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women."

Here, it is worth mentioning that unlike this law, other official state decisions pertaining to gender equality had never attracted the ire of Armenian society. Armenia had developed its gender equality policy long ago; the adoption of law No. 57 was nothing new.

In 2010, the government adopted a protocol decision on gender equality, which clearly indicates priority areas, main goals, and strategies for the implementation of gender policy. "Gender equality fosters sustainable development, intensifies democratic processes, and contributes to vital

activity and organization of public life for the real equality of all social groups, for solidarity, cooperation and tolerance, for the effective utilization of human potential, and for better quality of life." These words, written in the protocol decision, never caused exasperation, and there was not a single person, let alone an organized mob, that publicly attacked this decision or blamed women's groups for sabotaging the image of the traditional Armenian family. Everyone seemed to agree with the concepts of gender and gender equality.

There was also another protocol decision that established strategies and action plans of a gender equality policy for the years 2011-15.

Again, no one's rights were violated by this decision, no one's traditional Armenian family was perverted, no one seemed to even care that the government defined a task of "including gender component in state policy of education and science" (No. 28) in this decision, and no one suggested gender equality would jeopardize the future of their children.

In 2004, the government adopted decision No. 645 on establishing a "National Project for Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Public" for the years 2004-10. The decision had many components, including the task of enhancing knowledge of gender equality-related issues in educational and state institutions. Why didn't the same individuals, who now attack those working towards gender equality in Armenia, speak against this 2004 decision? Where were they then?

In 2012, a methodology guidebook titled "Gender Sensitive Indicators" was published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Apart from national legislature, Armenia also signed several international treaties. In 1993, Armenia signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and in 1995 joined the Fourth World Conference on Women's Beijing Declaration. Armenia also signed the UN Millennium Declaration and agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, the third goal of which aims at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

None of these decisions, treaties, or documents engendered a fraction of the anger that the bill on "Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women" seems to face.

Despite the fact that the above-mentioned decisions are aimed at promoting gender equality, and consequently improving the general notion of what gender is, none of these steps have resulted in a tangible shift in women's role in society.

On paper, the state policy of pushing forward gender equality was a good process, and showed that at least on an institutional level concrete actions were being taken. Unfortunately, the implementation of these actions remained solely on a formal level. The 2013 law, too, was a routine gender equality-related law that likely would have remained on paper, and not become a robust working piece of legislation or bring about palpable changes. What is extremely vexing is that reaction to the adoption of this law was overwhelming, and people who were unaware of Armenia's gender equality path felt that gender equality was an extremely exotic and alien phenomenon, something that contradicted everything Armenian.

Reaction

Reaction to the law was a clear indicator that there is little to absolutely no concept of what gender equality really is, and why it is vital for women in any society.

The word "gender" quickly became an adjective. Ardent opponents of this law used the word to describe anything perverted and sinful, which aimed to undermine traditional Armenian values, families, and even history. Some opponents went further, and equated gender equality with homosexuality, mindful of the high levels of homophobia in Armenia. According to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 96 percent of Armenian respondents—representing the highest percentage in the South Caucasus—said homosexuality could never be justified (see also CivilNet's video segment about the overall level of intolerance in Armenia). Some now view the debate as a strategic move to unite the homophobic masses against gender equality.

Amnesty International's latest report presents hate crimes, discrimination, and harassment cases against LGBTI individuals in Armenia—another indicator of homophobia. The same persons who endorsed the firebombing of the gay-friendly DIY bar in Yerevan and the events that followed are the same persons who supported those who attacked and hijacked the International Diversity Day March last year. They are also the same individuals who were part of a protest movement against screening the film "Prada," which deals with LGBT issues and which was organized by the German Embassy and the European Union (E.U.).

The so-called "Pan-Armenian Parental Committee" joined the smear campaign against the gender equality law, fueling the anger. The main platform they used for disseminating hate speech and disinformation was their Facebook page, where they posted articles and videos (many in Russian) of suspicious origin and content. This page quickly garnered 7,000 "Likes." The creators used it actively and did not stop with only hate speech; they also started labeling specific individuals—who had publicly expressed their concerns regarding the growing hysteria and manipulation surrounding the issue—and posting their pictures, and granting them a made-up "Prominent Gender of Armenia" award. One of their prominent members, Arman Boshyan, along with many provocations and vague definitions, said during a press conference that "the Armenian government gives money from state budget for gender propaganda," adding, "I assure you, 99 percent of Armenia's population is against [gender propaganda]."

The name of another Facebook group tells all—"No to 'Gender' Law! No to National Treason." The only difference between the page of the "Pan-Armenian Parental Committee" and this group is that it is not a page but a group, which means that all members (and not just one person) can contribute to it. In terms of content, the two are almost identical, except with the latter, the discourse is more aggressive.

A quick glance at the content of this group is more than enough to understand the level of hatred and aggressiveness espoused by its members: "Gender is perversion. We won't let it be. Gender = transvestite," "Gender = homosexuality," "Stay human or become gender?"

This is the question," are but a few of the posted comments. The group is also pushing a petition against the "legalization of sexual perversion" and have a message to all Armenians, where they claim that the definition of gender in the law is "ambiguous and is beyond traditional legal perception of equality of men and women." Members of this campaign will soon hold a demonstration.

Various mass media organizations have also joined this big game.

Numerous articles have appeared both in printed and online newspapers.

TV reports didn't lag behind, and very ably manipulated the issue.

Armenia TV produced a report that claimed that "parliamentarians decided that [biological] sex is not a gift of nature but a gender."

The author of the report also highlighted the section of the draft law that mentions the state should have supervision over gender equality, and commented, "this means that new monuments of women according to gender will soon be installed in the city, or some artists will write articles saying that Mother Armenia is a male and a Roman Soldier in the Cascade is a female. The state will do anything to have women priests, women generals, and women criminals in law...we will start celebrating Day of Fathers and Unshaved Faces."

Another completely distorted report, which took the words of Women's Resource Center founder Lara Aharonian out of context, was disseminated by the TV station Al+ and broadcasted by ArmNews. The report made it seem as though Aharonian's response, during a press conference, to the question, "Could a person be taught how to become a homosexual" was, "If society teaches so, then [they] should learn so."

In reality, such a question was never posed and Aharonian's response was to a completely different question. Later, the real unedited short version footage of the press conference revealed the truth.

Not only were TV stations, newspapers, and Facebook groups part of this hysteria, but also public figures. "From Sept. 14-21 a meeting of homosexuals will soon be organized in Armenia that is financed by some European organization. The meeting will have 23 homosexuals. Their hotel expenses will be covered, as well as 70 percent of their travel expenses. It is homosexuality propaganda," said former MP Khatchig Stambolcuyan, commenting on recent developments. As it turned out later, Stambolcuyan was referring to the youth project of the Armenian Progressive Youth NGO, called "Gender Perspectives in Europe." The Armenian Progressive Youth NGO refuted Stambolcuyan's comments, and clarified that the project was organized in the framework of the EU-funded "Youth in Action" program. It demanded that Stambolcuyan publicly apologize or face slander charges. Stambolcuyan hasn't yet apologized, and is still determined to "fight against foreign forces."

Famous pop culture personalities Lusine Badalyan (aka Lulu) and Nazeni Hovhannisyan, too, joined the anti-gender-equality mainstream. Both were active on social media sites, expressing their concerns and essentially endorsing the hateful and aggressive mob mentality with their posts and comments.

Bishop Bagrat Galstyan, the head of the Social Doctrine Department of the Holy See, posted an article on his personal Facebook page that was later disseminated by online media. In his article, he too criticized the definition of gender in the law, saying, "this perception bears absolutely no relationship to the equality of rights between men and women," later suggesting that the word gender be replaced with "men and women," which, according to him, would resolve all the existing problems.

Another priest, Shmavon Ghevodyan, said in an interview, "I think last year the gay parade was prevented due to social networks," in a reference to the aforementioned International Diversity Day March.

"Why cannot we tell Europe that our national identity does not let us legalize homosexuality," he asked, despite the fact that homosexual

acts have not been illegal in Armenia since 2003, and Armenia is one of 94 states that supported the UN declaration on sexual orientation and gender identity in 2008. Not a single priest was against this UN declaration back then. "It is wrong that we have gotten used to the idea that there must be homosexuals near us," he added.

The Armenian police were also quick to react. A draft of an amendment to the Administrative Code was posted on the official website of the police department. The proposal suggested placing high fines on individuals and organizations if they were found to be spreading "propaganda on non-traditional sexual relationships." (There was no definition provided of what a non-traditional sexual relationship might be.) Overall, the proposal was too vague to become a piece of legislation. Despite the fact that it was later withdrawn due to "shortcomings," it greatly contributed to the gender hysteria.

The actions of these groups, mass media representatives, and individuals cumulatively caused tremendous harm to many human rights organizations, women's groups, and individuals, whose positive image in Armenian society was deliberately spoiled. The Women's Resource Center received many threats and was accused of promoting sexual perversion, leading its members to take additional measures for their personal safety. Thirty-six organizations issued a joint statement regarding threats against the Women's Resource Center.

Result

The government shortly after replaced the word "gender" with "men and women" in law No. 57, which had been almost unanimously adopted-108 for, and not a single against. The change in the law was the result of great pressure by the above-mentioned groups and individuals. Heghine Bisharyan, who had co-authored the law, quickly stepped back after witnessing the hysteria, and noted that "previously their draft bill didn't contain the definition of gender."

The government too bears fault here. The anti-gender campaign included a large portion of anti-government rhetoric.

And, not only was its response inadequate in stopping the dissemination of misinformation and hatred, but its decision also created a precedent. This precedent proved that by using misinformation, slander, and egregiously hostile extremist groups, and uniting them against any issue (experience shows that the easiest way to unite them is to use anti-gay and anti-gender equality rhetoric), it will be possible to force change. No one has guarantees that these easily controlled and easily manipulated groups will not be used later to stifle other civil movements by the ruling regime itself, by different oligarchs, or by third parties that have leverage on the mass media and those orchestrating such hysteria.

An overpowering wave of misogynistic, homophobic, and unjustified hatred covered Armenian society for two months. And it was a hard blow to the sustainable development of Armenian society. It will take a great deal of time for civil society to overcome its repercussions, and move towards efforts to refrain from reacting similarly in the future.

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