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Women's participation at the national level: what has been achieved and what could be done to overcome existing impediments?

Lack of women participation in different fields at the national level is existing in the Republic of Armenia.

Since 1991, the independence of Armenia, the picture of women participation in different fields has been changed. But along with some developments and changes the strong "male" traditions, stereotypes, "conservatism" take place, too.

At present in the Republic of Armenia, the two top problems young women face are unemployment problem, lack of participation (at different levels) problem. Thus, the main problems are in political and economic fields. These are very much connected with each other.

Women in Armenia are still unable to make a significant impact in most areas where political and economic influence matters. They are still struggling to break traditional barriers in the political, economic, and business life of the country.

Promotion of gender equality is one of the challenges that Armenia faces. Women comprise 52 per cent of the population of the country and 58 per cent of those with the higher education; however, the level of women's representation and meaningful participation in governance and decision-making continues to stay low. Women comprise 9.1 per cent of the parliament members (12 out of 131), 11 per cent of the ministers (2 out of 18), 0 per cent of the governors of regional administration (0 out of 10), 2.5 per cent of the leaders of local self governance bodies, and 0 per cent of the mayors (municipality heads).

The number of women in executive leadership positions is limited. A similar situation is to be found in territorial administration and local self-government bodies.

Equal participation of women and men takes place at the middle level of administration, as well as in the international organizations that operate in Armenia.

Under the Millennium Development Goals, Armenia has committed to ensure that women would make at least 25 per cent of the legislative body and 10 per cent of the local authority leaders by 2015. At present, Armenia is ranking 75th among 157 countries by gender development index (DGI) (HDR 2007). Should the current development pace persist, the MDG 3 would be hardly achievable. Equal rights are enshrined in the Constitution of Armenia (Article 14.1), but equal opportunities are not reflected in the legislation and there are no mechanisms to provide equal opportunities for women and men.

According to a UNDP report in 2009, development progress in the CIS has declined as a direct result of the global economic and financial crisis. The Millennium Development Goals Report states that in almost all areas, the two groups of countries that are part of the CIS – one in Asia and the other in Europe – have experienced a very different pace of progress. These facts are in the first hand refer to Armenian society.

The peculiarity of the social conditions of women in Armenia is in the fact that their constitutional rights are in no way inferior to those of men; legislation now as before recognizes equal rights for all regardless of gender, age or ethnic origin. This sets Armenia and the other former socialist states aside from developing countries and even some Western nations. Moreover, the Armenian Constitution in some instances grants women certain advantages and privileges. This has led to women surpassing men in several social indices. Among these are educational level, social benefits, medical coverage, and preferential parenthood rights.

Presently, in many areas of Armenia women make up the largest percentage of the workforce in a number of sectors, such as the services, education, culture, health and social work, among others. Nevertheless, this does not mean they have greater access to managerial positions. The number of women occupying senior-level positions in the executive branch of government, for example, is still quite limited. On the other hand, the number of female elected officials in the parliaments and assemblies has steadily increased in recent years.

Women mostly exercise their decision-making rights in the non-governmental organizations' sector. The number of women involvement in NGO field is quite high. But in this field still there is lack of partnership between state bodies and NGOs.

In social practice, women remain subordinate to men in a number of issues. The Armenian woman traditionally had an accessory role in the family and in society. The way of life, popular rites, social norms and common mentality have presumed a woman's subordinate role in the family and to her husband. These traditions have not lost their substance even today. For example, the possibilities for promotion are not the same for women as they are for men and women often remain economically dependent upon men. The overall average salary for women is less than two thirds of that of men because of the low involvement of women in high-paid activity. Social mobility for women is lower than for men. Women's representation in senior civil service positions is as low as 3 to 5%. And, women bear the burden of the so-called informal sector of the economy, which includes assuring the functioning of the family, educating and caring for the children, and the household.

Gender situation is further aggravated by low public awareness, widespread gender stereotypes and confusion of concept of gender equality with feminism.

Women's movement and networking is weak, too.

In the field of women political participation the quotes for women increased up to 15%.

In the result of 2007 elections the number of women parliamentarians increased comparing with 2003 elections. Anyway, the figures are not satisfied.

The quotes for women should be increased as a tool of promotion of women's political participation. At present, a group of active women are on the stage to promote the increasing the women's quotes in the Parliament.

Several surveys mention different obstacles which create the real fact of gender inequity, even having legislation which defines equality between men and women. Some of these obstacles are:

- there is no real National Program on Women progress promotion;
- there is different understanding of political culture, which defines "The policy should be led by men";
- criminalization of political and economic fields;
- lack of free competition.

During the surveys, the answers of "Why men and women would like to become a parliamentarian?" question were different from women and men.

Most men answered "To be "a roof" of their own business, to have an authority" while most women answered "To be able to make the policy more transparent, to change the political atmosphere, to solve social problems".

The number of women involved in small and medium entrepreneurship is small as the promoting mechanisms for its development are missing. Especially for women, there are more difficulties. The major part of micro-credit programs for women do not create encouraging conditions: they have high percentage.

In this field it is recommended to establish micro-credits program with acceptable conditions for women. International donor society could be also involved in this strategy.

In order to define and strengthen state women policy and its directions in the country, in 1998 the Government adopted the Program principles on improving women's status. Afterwards the Government adopted National Program on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing their Role in Society, for 1998-2000. As well, since 2000 the Council of Women Affairs by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia exists which is just an advisory body.

In 2004 the Government adopted National Action plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing their Role in Society, for 2004-2010.

The Action Plan defines the principles, priorities, and key targets of the public policy that is pursued to address women's issues in the Republic of Armenia. The Action Plan is based on the relevant provisions of the Republic of Armenia Constitution and is targeted at the fulfillment of the UN Convention on the Discrimination of All Forms

of Violence against Women, the recommendations of the Fourth Beijing Conference (1995), the documents of the Council of Europe Committee for the Equality of Rights of Women and Men, the UN Millennium Declaration requirements, and commitments of the Republic of Armenia under other international instruments. The Action Plan facilitates equality of rights and opportunities for women and men, as a prerequisite to shape a democratic, social, and legal state and civil society.

The Action Plan comprises 8 sections: • Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in decision-making and in the social and political spheres; • Improving the Social and Economic Condition of Women; • Education Sector; • Improving the Health Condition of Women; • Eliminating Violence against Women; • Elimination of trafficking of women and girls; • Role of the Mass Media and Cultural Institutions in Reporting on Women's Issues and Building a Female Role Model; • Institutional Reforms.

It should be mentioned that a disadvantage for promoting gender equality in the country, even the Government had adopted the National Program and Action Plan for 2004-2010, is the fact of not to foresee any financial resources for its implementation.

- Main challenges of Women Participation are: Inadequate involvement of women in decision-making and politics;
- Unequal participation of women and men in various spheres of social and political life;
- Lack of willingness and finding solutions from women's side on how to be involved in the political process;
- Existence of public opinion "women should not be in politics".

In order to overcome such challenges and increase the level of women participation the state and all stakeholders should:

- Empower and encourage women to participate in political, economic and other fields of the country;
- To work with the whole society to break down the stereotypes and make gender solidarity, to involve different partners and stakeholders (including Mass Media) in this action (it is also recommended to have a TV/radio program/newspaper on promoting women participation at different levels);
- To develop new documents and Action plans on improving women participation, as well as involving financial resources for their implementation;
- To develop laws, concepts and legislation on promoting women participation in political, economic and other fields of the country;
- To increase the quotes for women in the parliamentary elections;
- To make quotes for women in executive branch.

Armenian Young Women's Association as an NGO aims to strengthen the role of young women in all aspects of Armenian society. The activity of "Armenian Young Women's Association" is particularly directed to young women, and concentrates on their problems both in Yerevan and in the regions of the Republic of Armenia. AYWA works with young women between ages from 13 to 40. According to the 5-years strategy (2008-

2012) the approach for women (girls) from 13-18 and 18-40 ages is different. In some projects, AYWA gathers both women and men, thus raising the public awareness on Women issues and building healthy atmosphere between genders.

According to 5-years strategy (2008-2012) AYWA implements the following strategic directions:

- Young Women's Leadership Development (the programs within this direction provide young women leadership skills, empower them as leaders at local and national levels)
- leadership programs - schools, courses, camps for young women,
- establishing women/youth councils,
- awards for young women etc.
- Entrepreneurial and Personal Skills Development (the programs within this direction make conditions for economic participation for women)
- Economic assessment of a community, finding out fields where women could be actively involved;
- Entrepreneurial training courses (development of business ideas – how to start and improve business). AYWA is looking for partners to establish micro-credit foundation for women.
- Quilting courses: AYWA has established quilting studios where unemployed young women work and make different products,
- English language trainings,
- Computer trainings,
- Discussions on different subjects for women and men,
- Women's health issues etc.
- Democracy Education (the programs within this direction promote women and men to be open-minded and to be a part of the society)
- Civic education – Civic awareness raising tours,
- Programs for the first time voters - Electoral seminars. Young women/people don't participate in elections because of three main reasons – they don't maintain their one vote, they don't trust in the elections results, “they are not interested in politics”.
- Human rights awareness programs,
- Gender awareness programs,
- publishing informational materials and manuals,
- cultural performances – operation of the puppet theatre which make performances on women/youth participation and women/human rights,
- voluntary services,
- ecological initiatives.
- Exchanges (on national, regional, international levels) (the programs within this direction make opportunities for young women to share and be shared with their experiences on women's issues with international and local partners and colleagues).

The high participation of women at the national level, in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Comprising over 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to be under-represented as voters, political lead-

ers and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena.

Women around the world often face daunting social, economic and political challenges. For democratic governments to deliver to their constituents, they must be truly representative, and must be equal partners in the process of democratic development. As activists, elected officials and constituents, their contributions are crucial to building a strong and vibrant society. It is therefore essential to support women around the world because:

Women are strongly committed to peace building, as they often disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflict. Reconstruction and reconciliation efforts take root more quickly and are more sustainable when women are involved. By helping women become participating members of a democracy, one can look to mitigate conflicts or stop conflicts before they begin.

Women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure and health standards at the local level. Where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development and standards of living are also higher.

Women are particularly effective in promoting honest government. Countries where women are supported as leaders and at the ballot box have a correspondingly low level of corruption.

Women are highly committed to promoting national and local policies that address the socio-economic and political challenges facing women, as well children, disadvantaged groups and the society wholly.