

Feminist discourses in Armenia: Five activists' points of view on contemporary feminism in Erevan and Vanadzor

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Gavar, Gegharkunik region, 2018 - © Marina Fedorovsky

Résumé

Ce Champ Libre a pour objectif de transmettre les voix de cinq féministes arméniennes actuellement engagées dans plusieurs formes d'activisme. Les entretiens ont été réalisés en janvier et février 2022, à Erevan et Vanadzor. Quelle est leur définition du féminisme ? Comment mènent-elles ce combat en Arménie ? Quelles sont leurs sources d'informations et d'inspiration ?

Nous considérons que le patriarcat n'épargne aucune société. Il nous semble donc important d'appréhender ce système à travers les témoignages de celles qui luttent contre ses manifestations locales.

Mots-clés : féminisme, activisme, Erevan, Vanadzor, Arménie

Abstract

This Open Fora constitutes a record and a transmission of the voices of five Armenian feminists, currently involved in several forms of activism. Interviews were led in January and February 2022 in Erevan and Vanadzor. What is their definition of feminism? How do they carry out this struggle in Armenia? What are their sources of information and inspiration?

We consider patriarchy spares no society. It therefore seems important to us to understand this system through the testimonies of those who struggle against its local manifestations

Keywords: Feminism, activism, Erevan, Vanadzor, Armenia

The Armenian patriarchy is dark, heavy. It seems very well accepted by society, even for women who get violated, beaten, and stuff... Men take women's rights and freedom. [...] Patriarchy is fuelled by this simple idea: it has always been this way, let's keep it up like it.

Tatev, an Armenian feminist

Preface

The goal of this Open Fora is to share the voices of some Armenian feminists.¹ We met with five feminist women, related to different cities and organisations, in January 2022, in Erevan and Vanadzor. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and a half and were semi-structured. However, we have tried to evade the structure of the interview, when necessary, to best reflect the activists' own narratives. This text follows the path that their reflections took during the discussions.² We see this first series of interviews as the beginning of a wider project, focused on feminist concerns and approaches in postcommunist states.³ We initiated this project in an internationalist perspective in order to understand the specific issues they face in their own countries, and to actually meet them and to share their voices. We are trying to bring their perspective and knowledge without distorting them, not to consider them as object of our knowledge, but as subject of their own. Admittedly, the opinions and narratives of five individuals do not reflect the totality of feminist thought in Armenia, nor does their description of patriarchy constitute the only reasonable perception of it. Their words have been matured by years of observation, reflection, and analysis of the Armenian patriarchy, and by the struggle against it. We consider patriarchy spares no society, and the goal of this article is not to compare its different forms to judge any “advancement” or “backwardness”. Rather, it aims to listen to Armenian feminists reporting on the Hydra's heads of patriarchy, in order to better fight it everywhere.

The five people we interviewed, i.e., Gohar, Anahit, Diana, Hasmik and Tatev are between 25 and 42 years old.⁴ Two of them produced the podcast *Akanjogh*,⁵ talking in Armenian about feminist issues. Two other activists have created a feminist space in Vanadzor, whose aim they describe as “the emancipation of all people”. The fifth interviewee is involved in various feminist and environmental struggles. The five women are Armenian, or of Armenian origin, and live in Erevan and Vanadzor.

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As elsewhere, patriarchy, its social structure and its consequences are found in all spheres of life, both private and public, and contribute to shaping them. As Gohar acknowledges, common structures between Armenian and non-Armenian patriarchy, especially Western patriarchy, do exist: “I thought that everything was specific to Armenia, until I realised that it is the same everywhere”. The interviewed feminists underscore those similarities, but they also talk about the local specificities they are fighting against, which are often linked to the central role played by the nuclear family in Armenia. They emphasise that divergence from nuclear family norms is very badly perceived and quickly repressed.

Marriage is a very important institution, with its own set of rules, spreading from the first dates between young people to the different roles attributed to the genders in the family. Hasmik evokes some dating norms in Armenia. The main one, according to her, is the fact that it is always the man who initiates the contact – and they do not mind doing it. Whilst men are supposed to show initiative, on the contrary, women should never be too quick to accept a man's advances, even if they like him. Otherwise, as explains Hasmik, she risks being categorised as a “slut who would say yes to any man”. This encourages the man to insistently repeat his advances. As a result of those norms, a young couple will sometimes get married just two weeks after meeting as having a relationship without being married can be severely judged by relatives.

In the communities they frequent, labelled as “alternatives”, the interviewees point out that men still tend to replicate traditional weddings and husband-wife hierarchy. Although during their youth they go out with the “cool girls”, i.e., those who are open to ideas considered as Western, “in the end they will choose an obedient wife who does not think too much”, explains Tatev. “They do not want a woman who fights for her rights”. And the structure of marriage itself did not change: during the wedding ceremony, the man is asked if he agrees to provide for the family, while the woman is asked if she promises to obey.

The new bride still very often moves in with her family-in-law right after the wedding, where she will be serving this new family. The virginity of the future wife is a criterion: one respondent explains that even her self-proclaimed “alternative” friends willingly state that they want to marry a virgin woman, in order to “shape her in the way that suits them”. According to a survey published in 2016, 85.9% of people in Armenia (n=1617) agree with the statement “A woman should remain a virgin until marriage” (United Nations Population Fund 2016, 211). This emphasis on the wife's virginity can explain the high rate of hymenoplasty in Armenia (Smaniotto and Melkonyan 2018; Lopatina S. et al. 2022, 4). Within the married couple, the idea that the woman “must meet the sexual needs of the man”, as describes Gohar, is present. Sexual intercourse with her husband is considered to be part of her duties, even though young women do not receive sexual education – they are only told about menstruation in a biological context. On the other hand, if a woman has sex outside of marriage, she is considered a “bad woman” –with it being even worse if she does it often, or with several men.

If the husband cheats on his wife, she is told that she has not been able to take care of him and that she should try harder: even then, she is considered responsible for the bad turn of the marriage. (Anahit)

Anahit tells us the story of a woman who, after being beaten by her husband, took refuge at her parents' home: they told her to have another child with her husband, after which “everything would be fine”. She says she knows of hundreds of such stories. Children are indeed viewed as the mission of the woman, who is pushed to procreate by the older generations.

But some children are preferred over others: Armenia is one of the three countries in the world where sex-based abortion is most practiced, together with Azerbaijan and China. Women are so devalued in society that some families push the woman to have an abortion if the embryo is female. Because of this, there were 115 male births for every 100 females in 2010 in Armenia (United Nations Population Fund, 2012).

Anahit explains that the region of Gegharkunik, located in the eastern part of Armenia, holds the morbid record of the highest number of sex-based abortions. According to her, the population there is particularly misogynistic. She recalls that when she was born, her father was very angry and disappointed that she was not a boy, even though he already had an older son.

The interviewees also insist upon the gendered division of roles at home, to the point of speaking of women's "servitude". Gender roles are the condition of a system that allows domestic violence and sex-based abortion. While men are heads of the family and breadwinners, women serve the family; they are devoted to the cooking, the laundry, the housework, the education of the children and the social relationships. Tatev adds:

Boys are always given priority over girls for education, and the inheritance goes to them.
A very strict rule is that girls will serve their brothers at home.

Hence, by becoming a spouse, the wife must often disengage from her previous social life to devote herself to her new family. Tatev summarises: "Women disappear from social life after marriage". But the domestic sphere is the common place of violence. This violence is poorly penalised in Armenia (Council of Europe 2017, 12). It is perceived as a family matter, as illustrated by one of the previous testimonies. Gohar explains that means of action against such brutality are scarce. She systematically intervenes in the street if she witnesses violence but asserts that it is much more difficult to do so if it happens within the family.

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If private space is particularly gendered in Armenian households, public space is not set aside. Two of the activists explain that in Armenian public spaces, women are mostly considered as objects of beauty. Their value is based on the way they look and is linked to the correspondence of their body to certain standards of beauty. This phenomenon is strongly internalised and leads to a specific period in Erevan: the "nose job season". Indeed, in the spring, as it is recommended to wait for a mild climate to aid recovery from the surgical procedure to recover as fast as possible, many bandage-covered faces appear in Erevan, Gohar develops. This is the attempt of many women to meet beauty standards, which are also deeply linked with racial norms, as the supposedly most beautiful noses are described as "European noses" according to Hasmik.

Experiences of benevolent sexism have been shared by the five interviewees. Lifting or carrying heavy things as a women provoked strong reactions from surrounding men, and no door appears to be openable by women themselves from a male point of view. Beyond

the benevolent sexism, strong rules are harshly applied. For example, smoking is seen as an inappropriate behaviour for women. To build a career is still considered masculine, and many fields remain sorely gendered said Tatev.

According to Tatev, to claim that you are a feminist in Armenia, to affirm this political identity, is challenging. This daring political stance is illustrated in many everyday life micro-conflicts. Tatev sums it up through this personal example:

For my mum it is also about having this difficult child. I have a sister, she is normal, but I am not. [...] She does not like that I am a feminist, and she asks me where I got these ideas.

Tatev also explains that as soon as she engages in a discussion with a young relative about issues that could somehow be related to feminism, she is told by adults of the family not to discuss those topics. This stereotype of the feminist figure being out of the norm has two degrees; firstly, to distance oneself from normality by becoming a feminist, and secondly, to go even further by becoming an “extreme feminist”, explains one respondent.

I have been told “Oh, but it’s okay, you’re not an extreme feminist, you’re normal”. What does that mean? Feminists are feminists! There’s this cliché that feminists have to hate men, be aggressive, not wear make-up, be lesbian... They tell us “But are you feminists? You don’t look like feminists”. And they think they are paying us a compliment by saying that! Yikes! (Anahit)

Feminists are also perceived as a threat, especially in Armenian society. Indeed, interviewees mention the nationalist discourse that claims feminism is from “outside” and carries foreign values that could threaten traditional Armenian culture. This fear is even more acute as feminist groups often work with, or within, the LGBTQ community. This link is used to discredit feminism as something which is morally wrong, as expressed by Diana:

Also because often we would support LGBT or Queer people, they [right wing groups, nationalists] would say it is perversion.

The tension that thus exists between feminists and many right-wing and far-right groups creates a charged atmosphere, where violence is never far away.

The memory of an alternative bar in Erevan being bombed a few years ago, in 2012, by ultra-nationalists (Low 2017), was still vivid and reported by three of the activists. The interviewees acknowledge the several forms that activism-linked danger can take, whether it concerns the creation of a safe space or the appropriation of public space by a feminist demonstration. It seems that nationalist and traditionalist groups are keen to take offense at feminist actions (Martirosyan 2013). Some pictures of those actions had been shared multiple times on nationalist media, exposing any recognisable activist to violence and threats, as Diana explained to us.

As other political groups, Armenian feminists indeed take over the urban public space on occasion, for a demonstration or a protest performance. But the different types of social movements and protests were reported to be very scattered by the interviewees.

Far from a common front, ties with other fights are rare. Even though all interviewees value intersectionality, they have great difficulty in uniting around causes. For instance, in Vanadzor, an industrial city in decline, interviewees wished for stronger ties with unions. Other interviewees tried to bring feminist issues into ecologist groups, but they faced the same trouble with regard to really uniting, as each group stayed focused on their specific field only. Even inside the Armenian feminist movement, several points of disagreement can be observed, sometimes leading to splits.

The liberal part of Feminism is the bigger one in Armenia, because NGOs are the most visible elements, and they work on issues like domestic violence, and gender equality laws. They are the loudest. And then they are also radical groups, which are not organised, artists, writers, individuals, and smaller groups, talking about patriarchy, and creating horizontal spaces. (Diana)

As this activist observes, a distinction of political stance between liberal and radical, which corresponds more or less to a structural distinction between NGOs and unorganised small groups, seems to shape feminist activism in Armenia. But one interviewee expressed some doubt about the very fact that they could be separated:

Here the community [of feminists] is so small that it's kind of all one together, we don't have different tracks... I would not differentiate them into different movements by any means. (Hasmik)

The limited size of what we could call the feminist community of Armenia, which would bring together every activist committed to the feminist cause, seems to be an inherent difficulty in the movement, directly impacting its members. As Diana expressed it: "Activists are often overburdened. The last two years were burn-out years for our group". As turnover is almost impossible without a lot of new recruits, the activists' weariness caused by the lack of participants can evolve into discouragement or even physical or mental health problems. Whilst small political communities favour strong ties and allow trust, interpersonal links suffer from interpersonal griefs and do not allow the community members to cooperate in a permanent way, as described by all the interviewees.

Moreover, Armenia being a small country, with a strong patriarchy as we have seen, the interviewees say that they know almost all the people involved in the feminist movement in Armenia. They point out that there is little feminist action outside of the capital, and that they have no links to other organisations in the Caucasus or beyond, despite the presence of the Armenian diaspora around the world. The specific position of Armenia on the international scene, being a post-soviet country between Western and Russian influences, results in a particular configuration of international feminist solidarity:

Solidarity is often one sided: we hear about problems in Ukraine⁶ and in the United States and we organise solidarity activities here. But we see that there is no equivalent action in the other direction, that the same is not being returned. I think it is connected with a general post-colonial approach. The Third world is still not visible. In our case, we have seen only solidarity from individuals to individuals, but not between organisations.

Although interviewees were all working in active organisations, none reported international ties between their groups and others. Only the FRIDA Foundation⁷ was mentioned by one activist, as an association that helped her group to establish the contact with Lithuanian feminists working on a project similar to theirs. Here again, only interpersonal ties exist.

Another difficulty that several interviewees reported lies in the “over-intellectualisation” of the feminist fight.⁸

This is the problem with feminism in Armenia: it is very elitist. Highbrow people and their vocabulary... they try to act cool and say cool words even though the people do not understand what they are saying. (Tatev)

According to Anahit, this problem concerns specifically Armenian feminists educated outside of Armenia:

I have this problem with other feminists, who studied abroad and then came to Armenia with those theories. And they talk to Armenian women like they would write an article. And normal women do not understand them, they do not understand their vocabulary. (Anahit)

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The activists spoke about feminism in the following terms:

“It’s the fight to break free from the oppression of women and LGBT people; the will to create a better society, to get rid of oppressions”.

“It is the will for women to change the way they see themselves”.

“It’s enabling women to live their lives to their fullest potential —and men too”.

“It is the fight for women’s liberation, which must be intersectional and join with other causes: environmentalist, anti-racist, animalistic; class struggle...”.

“Feminism is about justice”.

“It is adopting a clear-sighted perspective on the world: feminism is a necessary reading prism for understanding our society”.

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As activists, the women we met, like feminists in general, use different methods to put their thoughts into action, to fight against patriarchy. The desire for a space away from family norms, where you can meet like-minded people, discuss politics, and learn more about the various alternative schools of thought, pushed towards the creation of feminist spaces. Gohar and Anahit state that “activists’ first action is to educate themselves”, through readings, discussions, conferences; then they often create spaces “where women, feminists, and homosexuals can meet”. Thus, several of them advised us to visit the Feminist Library in Yerevan, run by three women. There, one can read feminist books in Armenian, Russian, English, or French, but also attend conferences and events. It is a meeting place for people who break out of the norm imposed by the family. Similarly, the learning space created by Vanadzortsi feminists allows the city’s youth to learn how to use video editing software, as well as to discuss feminist issues and meet for various creative workshops. They describe

their space as “an extra-familial setting where, for once, women can be themselves, in peace, and can express themselves without having to play a role”. For Tatev, having such a space, that can be devoted exclusively to women, is the most important thing: “as soon as men are present, the atmosphere of the place changes”. Women-only spaces are rare in Armenia. According to Hasmik there are only two of them: women’s gyms and kitchens.

In Erevan, such a space can be found at the FemLibrary [ՖեմԳրադարան]. The way the only feminist library in Erevan works is also symptomatic of the Armenian society’s imperviousness to feminist ideas, underscores Diana. This library is a space where you can borrow feminist resources and meet people, a “safe space for feminist education”, as the library’s creators labelled it. The structure has already had to move a few times because of the rejection they were facing from neighbours, reluctant to inhabit a building in which could gather “blue haired people”, as described by one of the interviewees.

Besides specific spaces, some activists learned at home, visiting each other, and having conversations in cafés. Anahit and Gohar tell us how they learned about feminism together. Indeed, Anahit asked Gohar to teach her English through activist reading. They started with the well-known essay *Bad Feminist* written by the American writer Roxane Gay (2014), which they still cite as a reference. Anahit explains that they went slowly, word by word, with Gohar breaking down new words for her, like for instance the concept of something being “internalised”. They exchanged reading tips, files, articles, and documentaries. Then they had the idea to create a podcast that would talk about feminist topics, inspired by their daily lives. To do this, they read even more to feel comfortable with their subjects. They articulate that they now see every moment of their lives through a feminist perspective. Their podcast has 20 episodes and has been very successful. Despite their growing audience, they decided to stop producing it during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, their minds having other concerns at that time.

The feminist thinking of the activists is also reflected in their daily actions. For instance, two of the respondents talk about how they went to talk to a local garage owner, who displayed on the front of his premises a huge sign picturing a naked woman. They asked him:

Why are you putting this up there? Why don’t you put, for example, a naked man instead, washing the car?

Quite surprisingly, following this discussion, the garage owner removed his sign, replacing it by one displaying a “genderless” snowman.

Demonstrations are also a means of feminist action, even if they remain rare and scarcely attended. Feminist demonstrations take place mostly in Erevan, and there is usually one every year on 8 March, celebrating the International Women’s Day. Sometimes, following the news, events are organised in the country. Gohar recalls a demonstration in Gyumri, held to protest against domestic violence. A woman was recently killed there by her husband, who had also beaten their young daughter into a coma. During this demonstration, Gohar specifies

that the police was rather supportive, noting that this is quite unusual. However, protesters faced virulent reactions from the murdered wife's neighbours, who supported her criminal husband. According to them, "she's a prostitute, she had an affair with a younger man, she deserves what happened to her".

In several of the interviews we led, the demonstrations were not seen as central in feminist activism, even though the interviewees recognised the merit of bringing people together in a collective action. One of them drew a parallel with "demonstrations that take place within the family, when one dares to give one's opinion or discuss a feminist issue with one's relatives": she finds it more difficult than demonstrating in the street.

The women we met also practice a kind of creative activism: they write many texts, articles, and books, they conduct research, carry out translations, or create fanzines. For example, they mentioned a children's book co-written and co-illustrated by a hundred different people. It deals with feminist issues and takes the form of a project devised in a non-hierarchical organisation, from writing to publication. They also produce posters, drawings, or express themselves through graffiti and stencils on city walls in an anonymous way. The public space is sometimes invested by performances or installations in the street.



Conclusion

We would like to conclude this article by sharing the references the five activists gave us. At the end of each interview, we asked if they were willing to tell us about their influences, their role models, feminists who have made an impact on them, and to share with us Armenian feminists' names whose work deserves to be known. Their references are rich and go far beyond Western feminists: they mentioned **Arundhati Roy** (an Indian writer and environmental activist), **Nawal El Saadawi** (an Egyptian writer and psychologist), **Roxane Gay** (an American academic), **Simone de Beauvoir** (a French philosopher), **Susan Sontag** (an American essayist and feminist activist), **Sara Ahmed** (an Anglo-Australian academic), **bell hooks** (an American academic and activist, theorist of Black Feminism), and **Cynthia Enloe** (an American writer).

Since February 2022 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Erevan is indirectly affected by the conflict. As no visa is required and Russian is a commonly spoken language in Armenia, many Russian citizens have settled there, and especially in the capital (*The Guardian* 2022; *The Moscow Times* 2022). As some of the newcomers fled Russia because they oppose the war and the regime, they might join the rank of feminist activism in Armenia. But the long-term consequences of these changes on local fights are yet to be understood.

Notes

- 1 We thank Kate Dunning for the proofreading of this paper.
- 2 We publish this article with their explicit agreement on its content. The paper had been read and accepted by all of them.
- 3 The list of countries is not yet defined, but each post-communist country could be integrated. Their shared history, especially concerning the “Women Question” in the USSR and the different paths they have undergone since the collapse of the USSR could enlighten us on various ways to understand and to “do” feminist activism.
- 4 The names have been changed except for Gohar and Anahit according to their request.
- 5 The name of the podcast is a play on the words “earring” and “take heed” in Armenian.
- 6 This interview was recorded in January 2022.
- 7 This fund is an international network that provides help for feminist projects in different countries. See the website of the [FRIDA Foundation](#).
- 8 While we should be wary of our own participation in this trend, working at the University of Geneva, we tried to reverse the process, bringing their perspective and knowledge into an academic publication. We also had the opportunity to share the experience of those activists with students of the Armenian department of the University of Geneva, thanks to Professor Valentina Calzolari who invited us to present the collected materials in her seminar “*Les Arméniens entre l'Empire ottoman/Turquie, l'Iran et la Russie aux XIX^e-XX^e siècles*”. We would like to thank her warmly for this opportunity.

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