



## Gender Inequality and Everyday Practices: Problems and Challenges

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In recent years the gender inequality has become one of the key research topics in Armenia. The presented study refers to the gender inequalities manifested in the everyday life. The study of the issue from this perspective is conditioned by two reasons. First, no research on the everyday practices of the gender inequality has been conducted in Armenia. Second, besides the foreground gender issues, the background phenomena should also be taken into consideration in the programs dealing with the gender inequality. The background phenomena, though often remaining unnoticed, have crucial influence on the formation and reproduction of the foreground gender problems. They often instigate various forms of inequality, discrimination and even violence, but do not receive due attention in the everyday life, since they are often regarded to be in the order of things and natural. For example, in many Armenian families a man can invite his friends home for a dinner without agreeing with his wife, while a woman cannot do the same. Or, in many settlements out of Yerevan the public places - parks, cafes, pubs and restaurants - are considered to be male territory, and women have no access to the places like that. Many examples can be brought. Such everyday practices, which maintain in our society the narratives on the inequality of women and men, have not been in the focus of studies. Surely, this problem is very wide and deep, and it is impossible to discuss it thoroughly within this small-scale research program and limited volume of the analysis. Nevertheless, this study provided with opportunity to reveal those features of the gender inequality in the everyday life, which led to some conclusions and contributed to the development of the practical recommendations intended for the interested organizations, in order to help them to add some new accents to their programs.

Qualitative methods have been applied for the study. The main scope of the qualitative data was collected through the in-depth interviews. 24 in-depth interviews and 12 expert interviews have been conducted in Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor. The representatives of the organizations dealing with the gender issues, the analysts and the lecturers involved in the gender studies have been chosen as experts. In-depth face-to-face interviews have been conducted with women and men of various professions and educational backgrounds, as well as with the women, that had been victims of violence.

In addition, participatory observations have been conducted in the parks, cafes, restaurants, streets, squares and other public places.

I have also used the pieces in the on-line media employing the method of the content analysis. The analysis of the secondary sources, which has been done through the desk research, was also important.

The manifestations of the gender inequality in Armenian society are discussed in the first part of the analysis. The research outcomes state that the manifestations are rather diverse. I have grouped them into four conditional groups: *modern*, *transitional*, *conservative* and *traditional*. The mildest form of inequality is inherent to the *modern* type; despite the rather respectful approach towards the woman's individuality, the level of her autonomy and freedom is, however, an issue of negotiation with a man. Obviously, the woman is not subjected to the man's power, but she ought to coordinate her doings with the man. The inequality is more highlighted in the *transitional* type. In this case the man takes the woman's opinion into consideration, often helps her in the housework, however, the main decision maker in the family is the man. In the ambiguous situations the last word belongs to him and he possesses the right to the final decision. The physical violence is not inherent to the mentioned two types. The traditional division of roles with highlighted male dominance is typical to the third type – *conservative type*. But the involvement of the women in the decision making and the respectful treatment of her are typical to this type too. Violence is not spread within the conservative type, but is not ruled out theoretically. In the fourth – *traditional type* - the gender inequality is a tradition based relationship. Both man and woman are submitted to the tradition. The tradition endows a man with dominant, while a woman - with submissive roles. The toughest forms of violence are witnessed in this type.

One of the important conclusions of the study states that tough and mild forms of the woman's sexuality restriction are innate to all the mentioned types of inequality. The role of restraining a single woman's sexuality is undertaken by her father and brother, while the sexuality of a married woman is restricted by her husband. It is not exaggerated to state that from some acute perspectives a woman is perceived in the role of mother only. This means that the woman's sexuality is valued in the context of reproduction, rather than her individual happiness. The man's power over the woman directly conditions his reputation, status and power in the public environment. That is why the preservation of the daughter's and sister's virginity is among the values conditioning the honor and the status of a father and a brother.

A solid part of the analysis refers to the manifestations of the inequality in the everyday practices. The research materials claim that in all the aspects of the everyday life - starting from the time and space organization and ending with the freedom of speech – a

woman is submitted to the male dominance. In the special practices men decide and control the traces of women's movements. And the public spaces serve mostly for the men gatherings and women's access there is either strongly banned or not welcomed. In terms of time organization women have some freedom in organization of their time at home, while out of it, they ought to obey the schedule defined by the head of the family (man of the family). Another essential restriction concerns the day and night timing. Women are allowed being outdoors in the daytime, while after dark their stay outdoors is not welcomed and often forbidden by the man of the family. Male dominance is obvious in the leisure organization practices too. Especially in the traditional and conservative types the leisure of women is expected to be organized at home – drinking coffee, chatting, rumoring, watching TV series and doing other activities like those. The right to the outdoor leisure is the men's privilege mainly. The practices defer among the segment, which has *modern* approach. Among this segment women can organize their leisure themselves and share the leisure site with men. Generally such leisure practices are typical for the cafes, restaurants, clubs, bars and pubs situated in the center of Yerevan. Many manifestations of constraints and inequalities may be witnessed in dressing, food related practices and acts of speech too. For traditional and conservative types the man's will and opinion on the woman's clothes is decisive. The father or the brother may forbid a girl to wear any dress, shoes or hairstyle they would regard as inappropriate. The husband may do the same towards his wife. But the opposite – women controlling men's dressing practices – is ruled out. The prohibitions and restrictions are less in the food related practices. In these terms the inequality is mainly manifested in the alcohol using and the distribution of roles according to which the woman generally prepares and serves the meal while the man enjoys it. In the freedom of speech the inequality is typically manifested in the woman's limited freedom to speech, little importance of her opinion and the priority given to the man's words. In the verbal practices the man is mainly regarded as a speaker, and the woman - as a listener.

The analysis of the focal signs of a woman and a man have received particular attention. The equivalents constructing the focal signs of a woman and a man have been analyzed and the typology of the focal signs has been developed. One should understand the equivalents as meanings which endow the focal signs of a woman and a man with content. The dominant type of the focal signs of a woman and a man and the variations have been delineated. For example the dominant type of the focal signs of a man is constructed through the equivalents like “keeper of the family” (*ընտանիք պահող*), “person, earning for the family” (*տունն փող բերող*), “strong”, “insisting on his words” (*իր խոսքը մինչև վերջ պահող*), “keeping a woman in his hand” (*կնոջը ձեռքում պահող*), etc. “Tenderness of a

man”, “mild and delicate character”, “compliance”, “following a woman’s words” are considered as unlikely equivalents for this focal sign. Similarly, the equivalents for the focal signs of a woman are “keeping the house clean, taking care of the children and the husband”, “being modest and obeying”, “following the husband’s words” (սմուսնու խոսքը լսող), “maintaining the husband’s honor”, “respecting the husband’s parents”, etc. And the “insistent”, “disregarding the husband’s opinion”, “being independent” are unlikely equivalents. Besides the dominant type of the focal sign there are variations too. The variations are constructed through transformations of the equivalents. For example, the following equivalents describing a man come out: “a man should be educated”, “should respect a woman”, “should love and respect his wife”, “should be generous”, “should not be angry and rough”, etc. The same concerns the variations of the focal sign of a woman.

The equivalents endowing the focal sign with content condition some background expectations too. For example, the equivalent referring to the insistency of the woman constructs the expectation that the woman should not counter the man’s words and speak in the men’s environment equally to them. Generally both women and men fulfill the background expectations spread in their social environment. The background expectations are actualized in the everyday situations. They generally change in case of the transformation of the equivalents.

The following conclusions are drawn from the analysis:

The main reasons of the gender inequality in Armenia are embedded in the culture. They are reflected in the dominant types of the focal signs of a woman and a man. They are manifested in everyday practices, through which the focal signs are represented in the public spaces. It is important, however, that in Armenia, besides the dominant types of the focal signs, there are variations of the focal signs too. Unlike the dominant types, the variations change easier. This means that even in a very traditional environment it is possible to change the focal signs of a woman and a man by changing gradually those equivalents, which construct the content of the focal signs. Besides, the change of the equivalents may affect the background expectations and contribute to their transformations, resulting in the changes of the special, time, dressing and other everyday practices, which condition the gender behavior.

The main reasons of the gender inequality and violence against women are embedded in the traditional and modern interpretation of men’s and women’s gender roles. In the context of the traditional interpretation both the woman and the man are objects of the power of the tradition. Here an individual can never have a status of a subject. Only a group can possess a status of a subject, while all its members have a status of an object. This

circumstance restrains men's and women's sexuality to spring from their individuality. And it impedes the communication between a man and a woman in the framework of their individual style of sexuality actualization. Their communication in the public spaces is restrained acutely. A highlighted masculinity is peculiar to that communication. Men are the main actors of the communication. And they occupy the public territory intended for the communication. That is why, spatially in the suburbs of Yerevan and out of it, women's access to public places is strongly restrained. The family is the main platform for the communication between a woman and a man, where they communicate in the framework of the equivalents given to the focal signs by the tradition. In this framework a woman actualizes the content of being obedient to the husband's words and caring the children, and the man – the content of a person feeding the family and keeping the wife submissive. That is why the subordinated rather than the cooperation cohabitation are typical to many Armenian families. This becomes a fertile ground for inequality and violence. Another feature of the gender communication is that starting from the early childhood the socialization of girls and boys passes under the vision of opposing the men's and the women's worlds and separating them poles apart. The two genders become communicative poles, and there are no intermediate communication spaces in-between the two poles.

The analysis led to the following recommendations:

- To include in the programs intended for the promotion of gender equality and protection of women's right activities aiming at the changes of those equivalents of the focal signs of a woman and a man, which have a content of the inequality and violence. For example, to change the equivalent describing a man as “insisting on his words” into “attentive and respectful to a woman's opinion”.
- To undertake activities contributing to the minimization of the polarity between the equivalents of the focal signs of a woman and a man, and aiming at shifting the accent from the gender identification to the human factor. For example, to consider the kindness and tenderness to be not solely female, but human characteristics. And they should be equivalents for male and female equally. The same can be said about the compliance, gentleness, politeness, forgivingness, and many other human characteristics, which are considered to be equivalents for women. The increase of universal equivalents may counterbalance the equivalents polarized and opposed to each other. And it may contribute to the regulation of the polarization of the communication between the women's and men's worlds.
- The same problem should be solved in the everyday practices. The number of those everyday practices - dressing, food related, time and space organization, verbal

communication, etc. – which are considered to be either male or female should be reduced through introducing of universal practices.

- It is also important to include in the programs dealing with the gender inequality reduction the enlargement of the intermediate platforms of communication between the genders. It concerns particularly to the socialization of girls and boys in the period of adolescence, when the communication between the genders starts lessening and the polarization increases. It is also important to pay attention to the development of the culture of cooperation between the genders from the early childhood.
- It is important to undertake activities aiming at the universalization (degenderalization) of the public spaces in the marzes of Armenia. It is particularly important to overcome the masculine character of the public places.
- Education of the young generation - i.e. substitution of the traditional model of cognition with the modern model - is very important. This concerns to the methodological ways of cognition, which are to be changed: the automatic adoption and spreading of the group truths should be replaced by strengthening the ability to make individual judgments based on the rational thinking.