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Women's World Conferences, NGOs and the Writing of Women's History in the Republic of Armenia

The current study of women's history in the Republic of Armenia reveals a complex relationship between the needs of the women writing women's history in a postsocialist society which has also experienced war in its short history of independence, with an earlier history of statelessness, and the influence of international gender studies on historiography. The paper examines the state of history writing, addresses the issue of how "the trajectories of women's history/feminist history [are] different in differing global settings?," in an increasingly globalized environment, analyzes the role of international gender studies discourse, and explores some trends in the future of women's history writing by taking into account issues raised by the development of women's history in a postsocialist and postconflict state.

The writing of women's history in the present-day Republic of Armenia has begun to be written by women working in non-governmental organizations (NGO) who have been trained in gender studies, learned largely through international development programs and attendance at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Due to the absence of state support of Armenian women's history, either through support of projects and positions in universities or through the maintenance of women's history collections in libraries and archives, the women writing history in the Republic of Armenia tend to be university educated women working outside of the academy, primarily in the NGO sector. This fact has two direct results: firstly, the type of history writing they do is focused on the history of women in politics, particularly early forms of civil organizations, and secondly, they are reliant on international funding, particularly international grants, from the United Nations, the United States or European Union, these grants are usually earmarked for women's issues and development. Since funding is usually focused on women and development in the present and future, there is little money available for the study of the past. Nevertheless, some women working at NGOs feel the need to rediscover the history of Armenian women as a necessary step in creating legitimacy for themselves and for providing historic models of Armenian women's activism and participation in the political arena prior to the Soviet period in Armenian history. NGO women writing history see their role as building a women's movement in present-day Armenia and in finding an Armenian women's movement in history. This is not to suggest that they are manufacturing a historic Armenian women's movement, indeed one certainly existed; however, what is significant about NGO women's history writing is that the writers of it feel the need to make a conscious break with the socialist past and rediscover the history of social activism by Armenian women in the 19th and 20th century who were viewed as bourgeois feminists in the Soviet period and consequently were dismissed as irrelevant.

Women's history received little attention in Soviet Armenia with the exception of a few books on individual Armenian women writers of the late 19th and early 20th century. The fact that these individual authors were also the principal creators of a feminist discourse in the Armenian language at the turn of the 20th century was mentioned in Soviet-era works; however, the possibility of Soviet Armenian women

sharing concerns or learning from the feminism of these early women authors was not explored in these texts on women writers. Studies of women writers focused on those women who had been inspired by socialist thought, although the emphasis was on their socialism rather than feminism. The notion of a connection between the 19th century Armenian women's movement and a present-day women's movement would only be made in the 1990s in the Republic of Armenia.¹ Prior to the 1990s, the only available works on women's history were by two men, Vartan Hatsuni and Yeprem Poghosian, who were members of the Armenian Roman Catholic religious order, the Mkhitarists. Hatsuni wrote, *The Armenian Woman in History*, published in 1936 in Venice, while the latter penned histories of Armenian women's organizations in the 19th century. However, neither of these authors' works seem to have been read in the Soviet period with a view to writing Armenian women's history, although they were available in the National Library in Armenia.

Armenian women's historiography began to change after independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Since Armenia's independence, two NGOs have published articles or booklets on aspects of Armenian women's history. One, the Centre for Gender Studies of the Democracy Union, was established in 1995, and is an affiliate of the Women's /Gender Studies Association of Countries in Transition. Its goals are to: "establish an open, independent, accessible library and resource Center, to conduct research, to create training programs for women and men, and to promote gender sensitivity and democracy in Armenian society."² In 1997 the Democracy Union NGO published two booklets, one in Armenian and one in English translation entitled, "Portraits of Armenian Women." This booklet is a collection of biographies of women in Armenian history. The women selected for inclusion range from goddesses from Armenian mythology to medieval poets to Armenian writers and artists in the Diaspora to the female members of parliament at the First Republic's parliament to Soviet nurses. While most of these biographies come from standard Armenian dictionaries or encyclopedias, the most original aspect of the booklet—the brief biographies on the three women who were members of parliament to the Armenian parliament in 1919—come from information specially compiled by the Head of the State Archive, G. Sargisian, for the NGO.³ On the following page the next biographical entry is on Diana Abcar, who acted as the Ambassador from Armenia to Japan from 1919 to 1920. These two biographical entries highlight an important point and one particularly relevant to Armenian NGO women today, namely, that in the first Republic of Armenia, which lasted from 1918 to 1921, Armenian women were political actors. Armenian women were granted the right to vote in 1919 and women were elected to the parliament and could serve as political representatives abroad as Diana Apcar did. The histories of the female members of parliament were not well-known in the Soviet period because these women belonged to a political party rejected by the communist party. The rediscovery of this aspect of Armenian women's history is an important part of

¹ This paper examines only the history writing being done in the Republic of Armenia. Some studies of Armenian women's history has been done outside of Armenia, including the publication of two volumes of conference papers by the Armenian International Women's Association, and Victoria Rowe, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880-1922* (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003). There is also an increasing number of graduate students working on aspects of Armenian women's history in universities outside of Armenia.

² <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.yu/wgsact/armenia/ar-cgsdu.html>

³ *Portraits of Armenian Women*, p. 64.

the contemporary Armenian NGO movement and history writing, because, although these women fit into what Natalie Zamon Davis has called “women worthies,” such biographies do seem to do what Davis has suggested they do, namely, they act to provide women with models of what women can do if given the chance.⁴ In the Armenian women’s movement such “women worthies” provide indigenous models of women’s social activism and liberation.

The principal NGO writing women’s history is the Armenian Association of Women with University Education (AAWUE), which is a member of the International Federation of University Women. The Armenian branch lists its mission as the “support of democratic processes in Armenia, advancement of women’s status in the society, more active participation of women in politics, in governance and decision-making; raising of gender awareness, ideology of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women; the human rights protection, lobbying for the interests of women; implementation of the Beijing Platform "Action for Equality, Development and Peace" and integration into the international women’s movement.”⁵ Beginning in 1999 AAWUE has published a series of articles on the history of the Armenian women’s movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the NGO’s members, Anahid Harutiunian, has written two articles in particular which reveal the needs of NGO women writing history today: “The Women’s Rights Question in the Progressive Armenian Press at the Turn of the Century,” and “The Armenian Women’s Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.”⁶ In the latter article, Harutiunian uses Vartan Hatsuni’s *The Armenian Woman in History*, as well as primary sources from 19th and early 20th century journals. Hatsuni’s book, the only one of its kind in Armenian, discusses women in the family, in schools, in the royal courts, and in Armenian society through his reading of classical and medieval manuscripts. In her article, “The Armenian Women’s Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” Harutiunian is most interested in Hatsuni’s discussion of Armenian women’s role in political life. She quotes him:

“We are convinced that in ancient times and the Middle Ages, the Armenian woman occupied a valued position in society, and that she was always and everywhere able to sit around the banquet table or the battlefield, and when there was a national crisis or when peace was being formulated, she was beside the men, their helpmate and their competitor; worthy of respect, self-denying, freethinking, brave and tough, she is stamped on the pages of our history.”⁷

It is noteworthy that Harutiunian quotes Hatsuni on women’s participation in national crisis, war and peace talks, because these issues affect the Armenian women’s movement today. Contemporary Armenian women are writing in the aftermath of a

⁴ Natalie Zamon Davis, “Women’s History’ in Transition; The European Case,” *Feminist Studies*, 3, no.3/4 (Spring/Summer 1976), pp.83-102.

⁵ <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.yu/wgsact/armenia/ar-awue.html>

⁶ Anahid Harutiunian, The Women’s Rights Question in the Progressive Armenian Press at the Turn of the Century (An Analysis of publications in “Mshak” periodical).” In *Woman and Society*. [Gine ev Hasaragutiune]. (Armenia, 1999):138-144; and “The Armenian Women’s Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.” In *Feminism: Perspectives and History* [Feminizmi Desutiun ev Patmutiun. Yerevan, 1999): 368-389.

⁷ Anahid Harutiunian, “The Armenian Women’s Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.” In *Feminism: Perspectives and History* [Feminizmi Desutiun ev Patmutiun. Yerevan, 1999), p.368.

genocide of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 (many of the people living in the Republic of Armenia are descendents of the survivors of this Genocide, and the memory and consequences of this Genocide continue to affect them), the Sumgait massacres of Armenians in 1988 in Azerbaijan (many Armenians living in Azerbaijan fled to Armenia after this massacre) and the war between Armenia and neighbouring Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1994. As historian Robert O. Krikorian has shown the Sumgait massacre and conflict with Azerbaijan lead to an upsurge in interest in Armenian history, with articles, particularly on the history of freedom fighters and the Armenian liberation movement from the 1890s to the 1920s, appearing in Armenian newspapers from 1988 to 1991.⁸ Armenian women's historiography written in the 1990s also focuses on the same chronological period but is different in its outlook. The Azerbaijan trade and energy embargo and war constituted a national crisis and had a devastating effect on Armenia. Poverty, lack of heat, fuel and food in winter, and the collapse of the economic sector in Armenia resulted in massive immigration to Russia and the United States. Because many men enlisted as soldiers, or later, were among the first wave of emigrants in search of work, Armenian women were left behind to care for the society. For those who remained, like the NGO women, there was a persistent sense that the country might not survive without women's intervention. In this context Armenian women took a particular pride in maintaining the family, children, schools and society. For this reason, Armenian women's historiography is focused on Armenian women's role in national crisis and societal reconstruction. When historians consider the issue of different trajectories in women's global history, one of the elements that needs to be considered and problematized is the factor of war and the kind of demands this makes on women's movements and historiography. Perhaps one trajectory is the idea of postconflict reconstruction. Current studies on women and postconflict reconstruction, which are never focused on postconflict in a historical framework, have emphasized that post-war reconstruction influences, for better or worse, gender roles, and that post-war reconstruction must focus on women's participation in "defining new guiding social values and establishing corresponding relationships and institutions," because women are integral to postconflict reconstruction and peace-building.⁹ The writing of Armenian women's history by NGO women who have experienced both the collapse of the Soviet Union and then war suggests that one aspect of social reconstruction may be the need for empowering models from the past in order to reconfigure gender roles and reshape post-war social structures which have been inevitably altered by war. Whether or not these gender reconfigurations perpetuate further oppression of women depends on the postconflict circumstances and women's engagement with liberating ideology. One of the trajectories that could come out of this experience is greater attention by historians to the history of conflict and postconflict social reconstruction in the context of women's history.¹⁰

⁸ Robert Owen Krikorian, "History, Subversion and Low-Intensity Conflict in the Soviet Union," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* (Vol.21, No.2): 3.

⁹ Birgitte Sorensen, *Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, p.ix

¹⁰ AS Nicole Ann Dombrowski has noted in her article, "Soldiers, Saints, or Sacrificial Lambs? Women's Relationship to Combat and the Fortification of the Home Front in the 20th Century," studies on women and war are usually located in presentist debates where the historical trajectory and global perspective gets lost.

When Harutiunian turns to the 19th century she focuses on the history of Armenian women's charitable and educational associations that were established in the 19th century by Armenian women in the Ottoman and Russian empires. Harutiunian notes that these organizations, which were prominent in the 19th and early 20th century, fulfilled a number of societal roles:

"It is difficult to distinguish between charitable organizations and educational/cultural organizations. First, to achieve charitable goals it was necessary to collect money through cultural performances (theatre, dance shows, entertainment shows, walks, etc.), from these events, and membership fees and donations, they created revenue. Due to historical circumstances, the latter half of the 19th century was full of tragic episodes, massacres, liberation struggles, slaughter, tyranny and oppression, large numbers of orphans, migration and poverty. As a result as one event followed another the organizations were forced to adapt, to be a humanitarian organization, and an educational organization, always having to expand their activities and heroically trying to heal the community's wounds."¹¹

In addition to examining the societal and educational function of 19th century Armenian women's organizations the author emphasizes the issue of transparency. She notes that Armenian women's associations in the pre-socialist period published annual narrative and financial reports.¹² Because present-day NGO members consider transparency a feature of democracy, they value this aspect of the 19th century women's organizations.

Harutiunian attributes Armenia's loss of an independent state, from 1375 to 1918, to the decline in women's social status.¹³ Her point brings up an issue relevant to global women's historiography. Much of the way historians currently organize discussions of women's history focus on national histories, as indeed the organization of many of our panels at the conference today do, and rely on state archives and government funding. The study of Armenian women's history reveals the limitations of focusing on women's history as national history. In the Armenian example, as indeed many women's histories, the identified national group did not have a state. Armenians, from the medieval period to today, live in many states. In the 19th century the majority of Armenians lived in the Russian, Persian and Ottoman empires as well as small communities scattered throughout the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the United States. Thus, much of Armenian history is rendered invisible in national histories because they are not usually included with the history of the dominant group of the state in which they lived. Additionally, much of Armenian history is the history of Diaspora and methodology for Diasporan women's history has still not been extensively done. Histories of diasporas rarely focus on the pre-20th century period and even more rarely are they focused on women. This is a potential trajectory of women's historiography and one that would make visible those groups like Armenian women who have been rendered invisible by national historical narratives.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women has had an enormous impact on the creation of women's NGOs throughout the world, and, as an indirect result in the case of Armenia, on women's history writing. The majority of women-run NGOs in the Republic of Armenia were established in 1988 primarily to assist the victims of the earthquake which occurred in Armenia that year. These organizations had a charitable function. After

¹¹ Anahid Harutiunian, "The Armenian Women's Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," p.373.

¹² Anahid Harutiunian, Jemma Hasratian, Gayaneh Armahanova, Tamara Hovnatanian, "Women's Movement in Armenia: Traditions and Modernity," in Armenia. Women With University Education Newsletter (June 1999): 21.

¹³ Anahid Harutiunian, "The Armenian Women's Movement in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," p.369.

independence and the beginning of the war with Azerbaijan, these organizations continued to engage in humanitarian work. Most women involved in NGO work today in Armenia acknowledge that with participation at the Beijing women's conference in 1995 the NGO situation in Armenia changed drastically. As Jemma Hasratian, the current head of Armenian Association of Women with University Education, has stated:

“The fact that 16 leaders of women's organizations [from Armenia] participated in the Beijing forum of women's NGOs introduced [the] sociopolitical element in the women's movement in Armenia. For the first time the issues of representation of women in power structures, lobbying for interests, participation in law-making processes and in gender evaluation of draft laws. And it must be owned that concepts such as “gender” and “fundraising,” etc. were brought into general use after the Beijing forum.”¹⁴

Hasratian's statement reveals a particular interest in governmental structures and women's access to the political arena within Armenia. As already stated above, as one of the factors of this United Nations style training Armenian women's history tends to focus on women's public roles and their access to political participation rather than family or social history. It must be said, however, that this also conforms to Armenian historiography in general, which has, until recently, rarely produced social histories of any sort. In this way, Armenian women's historiography does not conform to other women's historiography which has often come out of social histories which ignored women but did provide some of the framework for studying women's history once there was a will to do so. Perhaps one of the positive aspects of contemporary Armenian women's historiography, is that it is occurring at the same time Armenian social history is being written, and thus has the chance, from the beginning, to include women. Factors that mitigate against this potential, however, are NGO women's lack of funding, and the disinterest in women in Armenian history departments.

Finally, politics, particularly statelessness, war, and genocide, has such a huge effect on Armenian women's lives that these issues cannot be separated from Armenian women's history. The historians Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel statement that in addition to gender “class relations, structural poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and imperialism also figure predominately in the oppression of most Third World women,” but that women nevertheless struggle for gender equality,¹⁵ is relevant to Armenian women's historiography which exposes multi-layered sites of oppression—economic, statelessness, conflict, as well as patriarchy, and strategies of coping, reconstruction and resistance. Thus future trends for Armenian women's history, and ones that have the potential for comparative, global women's history perspectives, include: additional work problematizing the role of the state in historiography, Diaspora women's history, and the gendered affects of genocide and war, and conflict reconstruction.

¹⁴ Naira Manucharova, “Women's Civic and Political Participation: Gender Issues: Interview with Jemma Hasratian” in *Women with University Education Armenia Newsletter* (June, 1999): p.5.

¹⁵ *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History*, ed. Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel (1992), p.x.