



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



ASU THE MELIKIAN CENTER:
Russian, Eurasian & East European Studies
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY



WOMEN IN RURAL LIVELIHOOD IN ARMENIA: ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL AND FAMILY STATUS

Mkhitar Gabrielyan

- ✉ *Mkhitar Gabrielyan*
- ✉ *Center for Gender and Leadership Studies*

This study/report is made possible by the generous support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this study/report are the sole responsibility of the authors (or name of organization) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Women in rural livelihood in Armenia: economic activities, social and family status

Many latest studies argue that the changes in status and role functions of women are not isolated phenomena, but systemic processes, especially if the importance of women in context of socio-cultural relations and development of institutions are relevantly considered. Therefore, in range of many subfields of gender studies, the village dwellers or rural women have regularly received special attention.

In applied research this interest is backed with arguments concerned with the fact that rural women are more vulnerable and at risk in societies with high percentage of poverty and experiencing problems in social-economic development.

Reflections to status and role functions of women are also quite numerous in documents, guiding and accompanying the state policy.

Aim and Objectives of Research

The following two main objectives are discussed in the research, encircling a period of over two last decades: Status and functions of women in (1) Public and economic terms; and (2) Family relations, and the accompanying changes in perceptions.

The related problems, despite persistence of an active public and political discourse, is not sufficiently studied yet, consequently lacking suggestions about means of their resolution, based on applied studies.

Methodology

The research is qualitative, based on individual in-depth interviewing, expert interviews and focus-group discussions, conducted in four rural settlements: Azatan (Shirak province), Zangakarun (Ararat province), Barekamavan (Tavush province), and Areni (Vayots Dzor province). Besides the recently collected fieldwork material, ethnographic notes of the author for about twenty years are added to follow what has changed in the related field.

The next constituent of the research are state documents concerned with the role and status of female peasantry, or gender related policy documents and decisions.

Point of Departure: the few following milestone dates are chosen as indicative for the beginning of changes in village women's status and role: ***1985: the beginning of Perestroika, 1988: the beginning of Artsakh movement, and 1991: the Independence of Armenia (in village setting also importantly remembered as the beginning of land and stock privatization).***

Privatization decisively changed not only the economic, but also the socio-cultural landscape of village life within one single year. It established the dominance of the private land ownership as an institutional anchor of further delineation of nuclear family based households.

The assessments of privatization process and outcomes are to date extremely uneven and subjects of debate. Similarly controversial are the assessments of corresponding changes in status and role of rural women. The main controversy arises around the issue of how was doing the woman in soviet age, and hence: with what her modern day status and role must be compared. Problems might be suggested as laying in three related subfields: ***economic, social and cultural.***

Economic: This may be briefly explained with a formula, suggested by one of interlocutors as: "Earlier the woman was working; now she is tortured". This is an extension of the renowned "Not the land was given to peasant, but the peasant was attached to land" saying. These formulae highlight the logic and importance of institutional employment, when she was paid relevant price for her labor.

In institutional level this change reflects a deep fall in status: the woman member of collective farm, or an employee of state enterprise, while preserving agricultural labor as her main occupation, was devoid of individually assigned and regular wages. Henceforth, the women's "institutional" importance with this leap down was remarkably diminished.

Drawing certain parallels between the ethnographic field materials and other related primary and secondary sources allows arguing that the main characteristics of village woman as a type of "homo economicus" currently underlay other changes in her modern day status and occupations.

A. The main responsible for changes in economic positions, employment record and role functions of women in village was the land privatization.

B. Migration has additional impact on the set of economic activities of women.

C. The land privatization and what followed next have minimized the economic importance in institutional dimension.

Social: The modifications in societal dimension are similarly various and differ in nature. As in economic field, certain systemic factors are important here.

Modern gender studies value the degree of women's participation in public and community life, but in sample communities it was nearly next to nothing. Consequently, the engagement of women in public affairs and participation in important processes at community level must be weighed and judged in context of wider problems.

One of these problems with change in social status and role of home wives is related to their health care issues, as often attested in families with a part time migrant breadwinner. "Few of the families, which exercise part-time migration, are successful. We rejoice money at a moment, say how good is it, but there are deep psychological concerns besides that money ... Then Russia, contacts, acquaintances, sexually transmitted diseases. All negative accompanies" (Interview with a middle age woman, Shirak province).

Cultural: The cultural life in the studied communities is extremely passive. Parties and gatherings are rare, few cases annually, in smaller villages there may be no significant event for several years. Women usually do not participate, and explain their evading behavior as unwillingness, busyness or tiredness.

Suggestions delineated as results of the study are grouped in two levels: *a) general, systemic and b) local, community level,*

At first level we may presume necessity of systemic changes, i.e.: *infrastructural development, intensification of agriculture, advancement of non-rural employment opportunities for village dwellers.*

- *Change of the prevailing attitudes towards village and peasants, other vision of the village and farmers.*
- *Revision of the Agrarian policy.* Main questions may be addressed to involvement of gender related issues into guiding decisions in agrarian policy and their further implementation on the one hand, and to elaboration of sufficient monitoring and control mechanisms on the other.
 - The next problem is closely related with facility development in villages. Women respondents have especially noticed deficiency of corresponding infrastructures. And finally, must be again stressed the importance of improvement of attitudes towards women.

In local level were discussed more narrow issues:

- Organization of non-rural employment opportunities for women.
- Coordination of efforts in investment and benevolent projects at villages.
- More relevant planning, aimed on infrastructural development of villages.