Political Participation of Women

in the Elections for the Local Territorial Administration Bodies:

Problems and Perspectives

BRIEF SUMMARY

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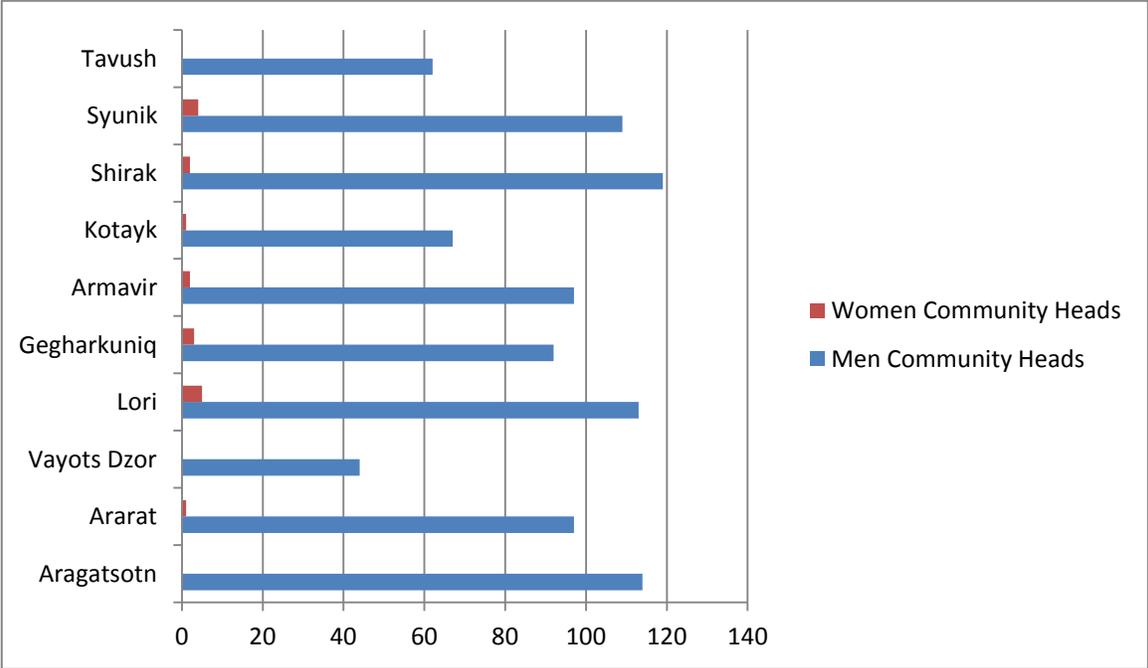
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Executive Summary

The one of the main goals of the country that establishes democratic institutions is to ensure equal gender participation in political life. Unfortunately the lack of women's participation is one of the problems that faces our country nowadays. The aim of the research was to enlighten some aspects of the problem and find effective ways to empower women participation in political life. The research was a try to understand the inner and real reasons of women's participation in elections as candidates, and thus the reasons of self-withdrawal, the stereotypes that decrease women's political participation in general. Political participation of women in Armenia is an issue that has been researched in different perspectives though this angle was never introduced and the issues are highlighted mostly in mass media or some NGO's on-line networks (www.womennet.am). The research of the problem through investigating the issues of self withdrawals during the elections of Community Heads helped to illustrate some core problems that have been essential for the Armenian society and politics in transformation. The main objective of the undertaken research was

- to discuss the important problems concerning women's political participation especially in local administration in order
- to put forward some new answers and solutions
- to outline the importance of further research on the topic.

Research Justification

The territorial administration system in the Republic of Armenia is conducted through 915 communities (49 urban and 866 rural) with the Head of the Community and Community Council. The Community Heads are elected for 4 years on the basis of universal, equal, and direct suffrage as is defined by law. The Electoral Code of RA also defines the equality of voters and rejects any grounds of discrimination. Besides, electoral quotas for women are introduced though Armenia adopted quota legislation for parliamentary elections only and no gender quotas are adopted for the elections of local self-government bodies. As a result the statistics we have in the field is quite expressive – only 18 (during the time period the research was conducted) elected Community Heads are women (out of 915 – 1,97 %).

The elections of Community Heads on March 9, 2014 once again brought the question of women's political participation to the forefront. There are some issues that can be viewed as general

problems though they specify the mentioned elections: self-withdrawals of women candidates (4 women-13.8% of self-withdrawals) that ensure the victory of other candidate. The mentioned election of 40 Community Heads was marked with 28 self-withdrawals in general where 82.14% of self-withdrawals (23 out of 28) provided the victory of the only candidate. This fact highlights the idea of providing fake alternatives for the elections and the more distressing is the idea that gender representation could be provided for this reason as well. Thus we can observe a real attitude and notion about women as members of government that Armenian society bears. The other interesting fact is that in spite of mass men migration from rural areas this fact does not foster women participation in political life. The major concern on the mentioned points is the dread that this kind of approach and attitude both towards women as leaders and democratic elections in general will become a pattern and a way of life.

The research objectives were as follows:

- study the normative environment including electoral legislation concerning mechanisms for women electoral participation

- define the deep problems and inner reasons that lay under the women's decision to be nominated as a candidate and file an application on self-withdrawal

- compare the results with the elected women's opinion on the issues of self-withdrawal and the decision to participate in elections

- define the scope of problems concerned with women's political participation in local administration bodies

- prepare recommendations for policy makers

As the lack of political participation of women in Armenia is a complex problem with deep roots in society it can be resolved only holistically with the involvement of all spheres of the society and changes that will be executed simultaneously. This research was focused on the investigation of

some universally probated polices that could be marked as appropriate to incorporate into the different aspects of life in Armenia including legal, social, administrative, etc. The relevance to adopt some approaches for women empowerment in Armenia were questioned through this research and the some policy suggestions were discussed that concern the issues of

- making changes in Electoral Code of RA on the issues of legislative quotas for women in Local Administration Bodies,

- the implementation of encouragement system for women for political participation especially in Local Administration Bodies,

- making changes in administrative organization in a way that the participation of women will become a must,

- fostering women's participation in local politics by increasing their opportunities in different spheres of life,

- organizing special trainings for women on different topics

- developing community programs that involve men to fight stereotypical thinking,

- increasing awareness of women on their rights,

- establishing partnership programs with non-governmental sector, private companies ensuring the participation of women partners, etc.

Methodology

The policy research was conducted

a)Content-analysis of legal documentation,

b) In-depth interviews,

c) Comparative analysis,

d) Expert interviews,

e) Statistical data analysis.

Content-analysis of legal documentation helped to define the legal terms of women's political participation: Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, The Electoral Code of RA, the Decree On Public Administration in RA Marzes, On Administrative-Territorial Division of the Republic of Armenia, European Charter of Local Self-Government, RA Law on Protection of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women

In-depth interviews were conducted with 2 types of respondents:

1. women who were initially nominated for and later self-withdrew in the elections of March 9 (4 women)
2. women Community Heads (18 women-all women Community Heads of RA)

The interviews were focused on the reasons of being nominated for the elections and the reasons of their self-withdrawal. The questions touched upon the issues of women's participation in political life of Armenia, especially their participation in local administrative bodies. The interviews with Community Heads as well touched upon the points of their own reasons to act as leaders of their community and other relevant issues.

The main topics covered in the questionnaires aimed to

- define the deep problems and inner reasons that lay under the women's decision to be nominated as a candidate and file an application on self-withdrawal
- compare the results with the elected women's opinion on the issues of self-withdrawal and the decision to participate in elections
- define the scope of problems concerned with women's political participation in local administration bodies

The comparative analysis helped to define the scope of the issues, helped to find answers for questions such as

- What are the obstacles that acting women Community Heads can face while in office?
- Were the acting women leaders ever exposed to violence (physical, psychological, economic, etc.)?
- Are the acting women leaders independent in making political decisions or they are influenced by a)political party, b)family, c)community, etc.?
- Do the women leaders feel uncomfortable working surrounded by men?
- Do women think legislative quotas used for local elections will help to improve the situation?
- Were they ever exposed/learned about of unfair competition?

And discuss issues such as

- The objective reasons that interfere women to participate in politics
- The reasons women do not want to serve as leaders in their communities
- The reasons for non-participation described as legal or psychological
- The reasons that stem from personal matters
- The attitudes towards women leaders in the community
- The reasons for acting leaders to participate actively in political life
- Personal experience after participation in elections.

Expert interviews were conducted with 10 experts in the field including NGO activists, specialists from think tanks working in the relevant sphere, civil servants, decision makers, PR specialist, HR specialist, and academics. The discussion touched upon the above mentioned points with the focus on further steps that can be marked as important in solving the problems. The aim of the Expert interviews was to

- gain a different perspective of the issues,
- discuss the main points that will be gathered from the in-depth interviews,

- help in the development of policy recommendations.

Statistical data analysis served as an important methodological tool to further the comparative analysis and to decide the reasons and causes of differences observed for women's political participation through the available figures such as data on: living conditions, education, employment, migration, etc. The research was mainly done through data provided by National Statistical Service of RA, the official site of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Emergency Situations though some ideas were probated by referring to different analyses, statistical data elaborated by the internationally recognized think tanks and research groups.

Main findings:
Women's Political Participation in Local Governance

Analyzing the problems of women's political participation, it is possible to distinct many reasons and considerations that are mainly expressed in the society's stereotypical attitudes that are generally reproduced by the means of mass media and education.

It is a common concern and a stereotype in Armenia that the situation of women is much worse in rural area with certain elements of "traditional" or "patriarchal" thinking. Unfortunately, the reproduction of stereotypes aggravates lack of political participation of women. Such situation is much more dramatic in rural areas where the existing socio-economic conditions increase women's vulnerability.

The analysis of the research outcomes enables to

• identify and define some specific problems in local administration system

• identify the factors that affect women's political participation,

• categorize the factors that enhance women's political participation.

Summing up the problems of the communities leaded by women the problems can be conventionally classified as

- Solvable or situational
- Unsolvable or institutional.

Moreover, the problems of political participation of women are mostly discussed in the context of social, economic, household and concerning matters. The Community heads define their mission as an "answer to social and economic challenges. According to the definitions of the Community Heads the solvable problems are problems that require minimum financial investing while the unsolvable ones require vast budget means that are unreachable for the poor rural communities.

The factors that were mentioned as obstacles to political participation of women are *stereotypes and economic conditions*. The stereotypes are perceived as surmountable while the poverty of the communities are seen as a major problem. Experts do agree mostly with these attitudes, stating that special projects aimed at fostering women's participation may help to overcome the issues of stereotypical thinking. In this context experts mostly indicate the lack of managerial skills and computer literacy of Community Heads and Members of the Community Council thus the implementation of educational programs considering an important issue.

The factors that affect the political participation of women are classified as:

- Discriminatory attitude towards women in politics (direct impact factors)

- General social and economic, political reasons that hinder women's political participation (indirect impact factors).

It is difficult to indicate which set of factors affect more because though a direct impact factors are more obvious, indirect factors usually form more problems that are more difficult to define and thus overcome. Also there are many factors that at the first sight are seen as easily solvable but in reality they indirectly act as obstacles to political participation. These kind of problems always raise the question of how women are protected by their husbands, families or communities.

Women's political participation in general and in local self-governance in particular can be fostered and ensured by encouraging women's full participation in all spheres of society and by enhancing and supporting women's economic, educational and social involvement.

An interesting attitude towards the implementation of quota system for local elections was marked. While some experts and community heads mentioned the artificial nature of this system, others have been thinking of it as an effective tool that can help to ensure equal participation of men and women in political life. Another notable phenomenon was a fact that women serve as Community Heads in poor, less populated, with minimum budget rural communities.

All mentioned problems are seen as results of underdeveloped, not institutionalized civil society and thus the problems of women's political participation can be solved within the scope of specific issues bearing in mind the need in systematic approach to the acquired problems

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the problems defined during the research are multidimensional, the recommendations aim to solve the following problems by:

- overcoming stereotypes that hamper women's participation in politics, particularly at local level

- creating a positive character of woman leader, particularly of a Community Head and of women members of Community Council

- encouraging the full involvement of women in all spheres of society, ensuring equal access to resources

- making changes in legislation that can promote and guarantee women's political participation

- creating educational programs that are designed to develop women's professional skills and to ensure opportunities for continuing and life-long education

The suggested recommendations stem from the logic of dividing the affecting factors into 2 groups: direct and indirect, but are grouped in sets by spheres of their impact, thus the recommendations are as follows:

Legislative/institutional

- Develop the quota system for local self-administration bodies, develop relevant mechanisms for their implementation

- Suggest changes in legislation that regulate certain spheres, e.g.: develop encouraging mechanisms to ensure business women's participation in economic life of preferably poor rural areas

- Arrange mandatory trainings for Community Heads on a)Management, b) HR management, etc.

- Create on-line informational and resource portal to coordinate and systematize information on different projects, grants, etc. that can be used by Communities

Informational/Media

- Organize awareness building campaigns to form positive attitudes towards politically active women, especially at local level

- Develop and disseminate social advertisements that will positively position the economic, social, cultural role of women

- Create films, serials, TV programs that can break stereotypes and form positive attitude towards women in politics

- Inhance the role of regional gender councils, organize different type of activities (debates, discussions, trainings, etc.) with and for them.

- Foster the political participation of women in cooperation with political partisies.

Educational/Research

- Organize professional and other trainings for women in rural communities, develop the system of continuous and life-long learning in rural areas

- Organize trainings on the issues of gender equality in the regions

- Organize trainings for women that develop

  - Computer skills

  - Grand writing skills

  - Cooperating skills

  - Agricultural development and management skills, etc.

In order to disseminate the findings of the research the following activities are planned:

- Presentation and discussion at the Center for Gender and Leadership Studies, YSU

- Preparation of articles for different print and internet media, academic magazines (e.g. articles for www.womennet.am, "Women and Society" information analytical portal),

- Organization of on-line forums using the means of Facebook to foster the discussions on the topic.

The research can serve as a pilot project for further investigation of these extremely important issues.