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# WOMEN ROLE PERCEPTIONS IN TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN ARMENIA

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**Goal:** The goal of this research is to reveal perceptions of women role in traditional and non-traditional religious communities of Armenia by the community members, clergy, pastors as well as to find out what kind of leadership roles women have in religious communities. The women role perceptions in religious communities mostly depend on the religious or dogmatic particularities of a religious community as well as on the different approaches to women role in Armenian society. The discourse on the role of women in Armenian society is one of the controversial topics because within the last decades the women role perceptions is reevaluated, the old stereotypes are weakened or eliminated which usually are in contradiction with traditional approaches, value systems, stereotyped roles prescribed to women. In this process the religious organizations and societies absorbed by religious ideologies sometimes took leading positions.

Considering the increasing attention towards the religious organizations as well as the increasing role and power of Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia, it became more interesting to find out how those changes and transformations influence on the women role perceptions within religious communities. Are there any differences between women role perceptions within traditional and non-traditional religious communities and what kind of leadership roles women possess in those communities? Recently some religious organizations and their leaders took active role in discussions concerning the term “gender” and its interpretation, and the positions of many religious communities are connected to the disinformation spread by Mass Media.

This research is an attempt to study the women role perceptions in traditional and non-traditional religious communities in Armenia as those issues were under taboo for a long while and were not considered as primary and problematic. The outcome of the research shall be recommendations to different authorities and interested organizations.

**Methodology:** The research is based on the qualitative methodology. In-deep interviews were conducted with clergy and secular persons working in different dioceses of Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as more than 10 in-deep interviews with the pastors and members of non-traditional religious communities who mostly represent the Protestant/Pentecostal denominations. The research concentrated on the study of the approaches and opinions of the people having leading roles in religious communities (bishops, priests, pastors, etc.) as they are the “multipliers” within their religious communities and they influence on the opinions of the members of the religious communities.

Field trips to the regions of Vayots Dzor and Syunik regions were organized within the framework of the research. The selection of these regions was conditioned by the traditional weak religiosity of people and from this point of view the influence of religious ideas on the perceptions of women's role is more visible in these regions. The advantage of the research team was based on the previous experience with many religious organizations and the atmosphere of trust and cooperation shown by majority of religious communities. This is very important in respect to non-traditional religious communities especially as based on their negative experience and the negative attitude towards the religious minorities in Armenian society they are quite suspicious to various research activities, whereas in this respect the research team could overcome this hindrance very effectively.

#### **Short description of the research:**

The research is composed of two parts: the first part of the research analyzes the perceptions of women role in traditional religious communities based on the example of Armenian Apostolic Church as this Church is the majorities' religious organizations and its study shall reveal the basic attitudes and approaches in Armenian society. The second part analyzes the perception of women role in non-traditional religious communities, which are mostly Protestant/Pentecostal (i.e. "Word of Life", "God's People, Baptist Church, Reima Church, Mormon Church, etc.).

At the beginning the research analyzes some historical aspects of religious law concerning the women role in the traditional Armenian society. The laws on women and relationship between a man and a woman were mostly based on the rules by Mikhitar Gosh, Davit Alavka Vordi and Smbat Gundstabl. According to the laws and rules described by them a man had more rights and privileges than a woman. The role of a man was mostly limited by social issues meanwhile a woman should follow the moral rules. There are very strict rules on the marriage, virginity of woman, health, honor, etc. For example, if a woman lost her virginity before marriage she could be sentenced to death penalty. Rape was a serious crime and was punished strongly by one of these laws. Many of these rules and laws have been transformed throughout centuries but mostly remained in traditional families in rural areas. The underlined advantages of man against woman are still very vivid in rural regions which may be explained by the vital traditional approaches.

The members and clergy of traditional religious communities in Armenia have a lot of stereotypes concerning the women role in the society. The second part of the research studies such stereotypes. The basic approach is that women may not become a clergy as Jesus and his disciples were men and the Christian tradition also does not allow enabling women to take priesthood. The clergymen of Armenian Church were convinced that such approach does not mean that the Church does not recognize the equal rights and responsibilities between men and women but the Church emphasizes the different roles of the sexes. The

approaches of the clergy of Armenian Church were based not on the dogmatic differences of specialties but on the national traditions and customs.

In this matter the position of Armenian Apostolic Church is based on the following approaches: a) woman as Mother and pillar of family, b) woman as a virtue being, c) woman as a Virgin Mary's image or Mariology in Armenian Apostolic Church.

During the interviews the clergy of Armenian Church express the opinion that an Armenian woman should take care of her family issues and only after be involved in social or public activities. It is also very important to study the opinions of clergy on the ritual of wedding in the churches when the priest asks the male "are you the master" and the female – "are you obedient". This raised many question among the NGO members or people concerned by the women's rights to consider this kind of ritual as violations of women's rights. The representatives of the Church do not agree with such opinion and think that it is a traditional ritual and this should be interpreted allegorically in the sense of being caring and taking care of each other.

The role of women within the family is crucial for traditional communities as woman not only gives birth but also takes care of many issues within the family, including the education of children, preparation of food, etc. This model of families is justified by the priests by the division of roles within the families between male and female. Priest Smbat Sargsyan mentions that the division of work and responsibilities does not mean inequality. If a women prepares food and men takes care of financial issues, this is not a sign that men are more important than women. This is a stereotype that men are always taking care about the financial issues while women are housewives.

According to the representatives of traditional communities wife should be tolerant to her husband which is not stated so many times in case of men. Even priests think that women should sacrifice themselves for the sake of their families which means women should tolerate any kind of injustice or violations of rights because the inner problems of the family should not be publicized. The Armenian women are described by such terms as "virtue", "tolerant", "flexible", "kind", "secretive", "merciful", "humble", etc. and such terms usually used in the context of sexual morality. The priests of Armenian Apostolic church mention that women should keep their "purity" having in mind the virginity of women.

In this context the Armenian Apostolic church has clear position towards the abortion. In his article called "Mothers that are not being born" Bagrat Bishop Galstanyan condemns abortion and considers it as a problem for national security and demography. He condemns not only the women and their husbands but also the doctors who conduct abortion. He thinks that religious communities has a lot to do to condemn and to prevent this problem through teaching and preaching especially in some regions of Armenia with high rate of abortion.

The level of awareness in traditional religious communities is not high which is studied in the next chapter of the research. There are different women's organizations within the Churches and also attached to Churches such as *oriordats miutyunner* (Virgins' unions), *kanants khorhurdner* (women's councils) and other organizations which are not doing enough work to make women aware about their rights. The Armenian Apostolic church pays special attention to the Institution of priest's wife who has a special mission to implement in the respective communities together with her husband.

Another basic problem is the women's education especially in the regions. Women are involved in the education sphere. The majority of the teachers for "Armenian Church history" are women and also women are involved in teaching process in different unions, communities, Sunday schools, etc. However, the level of education of many women is still unsatisfactory for understanding and defending their rights in different situations as they are bind by family, community, group values and stereotypes. The 2010 was declared as a women's year by the Great House of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon.

In non-traditional religious communities there are some differences in the perception of women's role as their position is derived from the dogmatics of Protestant/Pentecostal denominations. Their approaches vary from very liberal to very conservative positions. Compared to the Armenian Apostolic Church the non traditional religious communities are not limited by tnational borders as they are transnational organizations and their positions can be common for communities in different countries. These organizations sometimes have more political and cultural outward pressure and they have to adapt to new situations and give more places to the opinions of different international organizations and actors in women's rights protection process. In some of these non-traditional communities women take more responsible roles and even sometimes become pastors which is not possible in case of traditional communities.

In marginal religious communities (Wessinger, Catherine (ed). 1993. *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations outside the Mainstream*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press) demythologization process on the role of men in priesthood has taken place, the formal priesthood has been rejected and the role of women was widened from the borders of motherhood and marriage. In many of such communities (spiritualism, theosophy, etc.) women have prophetic authority and the charisma of women transfers to power within the community. However, usually after the leadership of such woman prophets the power transfers to male leaders.

The non-traditional religious organizations have an institution of secular leadership which in many places is covered by women. Women have active role in group gatherings, preaching activities and faith based activities. The increasing of women's role in non-traditional

religious communities is usually conditioned by the pressures coming below when women require having more functions in the church. In some conservative religious communities such as traditional Pentecostal Churches, women form the main opposition against allocation of women a higher role in the community and specifically functions of pastor. This denomination prohibits women to use make-up, to wear short skirts or dresses, and to do abortion. This religious organization is more “Armenian” in the sense of traditionalism than many traditional churches.

In-deep interviews with pastors of religious minorities showed that the national identity prevails over religious identity in many of them. This explains the similarity of many approaches towards the women role in the society with representatives of traditional communities. To many of the questions on women role they answer not as the pastors of their communities but as Armenian men with traditional Armenian stereotypes on women roles.

Many of religious minority groups do not have precise social concept on women role in the church or in the society. The only exception is the “Word of Life” religious organization with clear statements on women role and equal rights between male and female. However, the social concept of this church contains much broader statements and mentions the equality between male and female condemning the violations of women’s rights. Like many other churches this church also emphasizes the difference between roles of man and woman mentioning that role difference do not affect the equal relationships between the sexes. The churches of evangelical family mention the role difference especially in the family and stress the importance of the family for the formation of individual and society.

A pastor from an evangelical community mentions an interesting fact. He stressed that many religious communities in Armenia are based on women not only in the sense that women are involved in various spheres of church life but also in the face of huge seasonal work migration the majority of Church attendants are women. The sphere of church services is occupied by women as they are involved in Sunday school works, in everyday community work, in different working and singing groups, etc. The evangelical church states that the role of women does not resemble man or be equalized to men’s role but to serve God and to develop the capabilities devoted to women by God.

The evangelical pastors mention that in Armenian reality the role of women has double side. On one hand, it is the family where the role of women is very high and on the other hand women have important role in the society, in politics, in working places, in higher political and governmental positions where everything is occupied by men. They mentioned the importance of security of women and their protection from violence and violent attitudes. The pastors sometimes try to identify such attitudes towards women in their communities and to overcome it through preaching and explanatory work. As many non-traditional religious organizations practise home gatherings. During such meetings they speak about

their problems, so the pastors are aware about their problems and have more chances to resolve any problems or give good advice. They also mention that the role of women started to increase in Armenian society during recent years but the tendencies are very weak and unsatisfactory.

Both religious majority and minority groups have negative attitude towards the sexual minorities and they complain that in different reports or researches people use the term “minorities” to describe both religious and sexual minorities. They are against of any equalization which in their opinion sometimes is used by some pseudo-nationalistic groups to criticize and condemn religious minorities. They think that the rights given to sexual minorities contradicts to their understanding of family, family values, the roles of sexes, etc. The same attitude was expressed to the use of the term “gender” and its use in legislation. Only two evangelical pastors had clear understanding about the term and they could interpret it, the others had stereotyped position and were under the governmental propaganda. They think that the introduction of the term “gender” and the reality behind it is a Western tool to destroy the family and traditional values of small nations, such as Armenians.

In many of non-traditional religious communities’ women have secondary, even tertiary roles. Men deny the role of women in their communities by two ways – through idealization or marginalization. Many feminist groups consider the problem of marginalization of women as a false interpretation of Holy Scriptures by men for justification their patriarchal authority. The pastors of non-traditional religious communities mention that the rate of divorce in their communities is comparatively low as during their preaching the pastors regularly talk about family, its firmness, the importance to forgive and other values. If a couple is a regular attendant to the same church, the possibility for reconciliation is very high (*Wesley Shrum, "Religion and Marital Instability: Change in the 1970s?" Review of Religious Research, Vol. 21 (1980), pp. 135-147*).

However, the basic problem identified in almost all religious communities is the issue of education for women. Especially in rural areas women get married in at early age and do not have a chance to get quality education in order later on to educate their children. Considering the fact that the majority of men in rural areas go away for seasonal work, the basic functions connected to household, children education remain on women. Thus, non-educated women may not educate their children which directly impacts to the education level of new generation and in the future shall impact the country.

Finally, this study showed that in the majority of cases among the non-traditional religious communities the national, ethnic identity dominates the religious identity (the only vivid exclusion are Jehovah’s witnesses). The representatives of both traditional and non-traditional religious communities in Armenia define their attitude towards the role of

women in family, group, society mostly based on their traditional Armenian approaches rather than on their religious understandings or dogmatic or doctrinal positions.

## **Recommendations:**

### *To religious organizations*

1. Armenian Apostolic Church shall use the capabilities of women in the Church more effectively considering the lack of priests and the experience of Catholic Church in this matter (Wallace, Ruth A. 1992. *They Call Her Pastor: A New Role for Catholic Women*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.):
2. To develop the Institute of secular services by women. This does not suppose to ordain women but to involve them in the various spheres of Church life.
3. To initiate and start a discourse within the different levels of Armenian Apostolic Church on the women role in the Church which may be considered as one of the basic incompleteness in this sphere.
4. To organize seminars on the women's rights and responsibilities for the representatives of religious communities and especially for priests and pastors.
5. To establish effective cooperation mechanisms among the organizations defending women's rights and interests and religious organizations when the exchange of information and knowledge shall enable to overcome many of the existing problems.
6. To involve the representatives of religious organizations into the events organized by NGOs defending women's rights in Armenia and abroad to overcome the existing stereotypes and face the challenges
7. To promote the leaders of religious organizations to speak up about the issues connected to the increasing role of women and to publicize the cases of violations of women rights in their respective communities through preaching or by other means of communication.

### *To Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia*

8. To recommend paying more attention on the discussions and discourses on women's rights and responsibilities within traditional and non-traditional religious communities in Armenia within the subject "Public awareness" taught at high schools of Armenia. To organize such discussions also within the scope of the "Armenian Church history" subject through discussing and analyzing the role of Armenian women during the history and in modern times, the rights and responsibilities of women, the ban on the ordaining of women and other issues.

### *To Division for Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs under the Government of Armenia*

9. To implement different studies on the role, rights and responsibilities of women in traditional and non-traditional religious organizations and to work out respective mechanisms for improvement.
10. To encourage the representatives of religious organizations to speak up on the issues within the religious communities more frequently and openly which refer to the women's rights, relationships between man and woman, implementation of undertaken obligations by international conventions.
11. To organize discussions with the involvement of representatives of religious organizations and NGOs working for the protection of women's rights and as a result to work out projects and concepts to face the current challenges and to solve the existing problems.

*To International, local and donor organizations*

12. To pay more attention on the women's role and place within the religious organizations, to organize various discussions about these issues by paying more attention on the role of active women of religious communities within the family, group, society, etc.
13. To conduct more comprehensive qualitative researches on the inter-connection of religious organizations and rights of women in different regions of Armenia.
14. To support the advancement of women role within traditional and non-traditional religious organizations, as well as to promote and to encourage the women's right to education in those religious communities.