

CLOSER LOOK ON ONGOING REFORMS IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES¹:

ARMENIA: REMAINING CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUALITY PRINCIPLES March 2018

Summary²

Armenia has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and supported the adoption of a number of the Council of Europe Resolutions that are focused on the attainment of gender equality. Also, several laws and documents about gender balance have been adopted in Armenia, such as the *Gender Policy Concept Paper* (2010), *Gender Policy Strategic Action Plan for 2011-2015* (2011), the *Law on securing equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men* (2013). The gender quota in the national elections is 25%. The *Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men in the Republic of Armenia* has been established. Changes in the Armenian legislation allowed in the 2017 elections to raise women's representation in the National Assembly from 10.7% to 18%.

On 4 November 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reviewed the 5th and 6th periodic Report submitted by Armenia. The Committee made critical comments regarding low representation of women in power. The Armenian Government has not come up with measures to energize activities aimed to eliminate the shortcomings.

Main findings and challenges

- Regardless of long-existing legislation supporting gender balance, representation of women in political decision-making in the executive branch of government in Armenia has been steadily declining; also, representation of women in local governments and local self-governments remains low.
- The reason for the gender imbalance is insufficient action by the Armenian authorities to institutionalize and integrate gender quality related actions into policy making and

¹ Based on input and analyses of information collected by ECEAP local civil society/area experts

² Detailed comprehensive analysis report is available at request

- Despite fulfilling all international commitments described above, there is still political and administrative reluctance towards mainstreaming gender equality in practice and low awareness and understanding among decision makers of the essence of this matter. There are no systematic analysis is undertaken of the gender situation in elective and other governance bodies.
- The other reason is lack of awareness and the negative attitude towards gender issues in Armenian society and aggressive campaigns under the slogan of protection of the Armenian family traditions.
- During reforms that were underway in Armenia not enough necessary measures were taken that would aim to create enabling conditions for the advancement of women and to overcome discriminatory practices.
- Armenian Government has done formal changes in legislation to raise women's representation in elected bodies, but at the same time number of female members in Government has been declining. It shows that is not enough to have changes of laws, accountability for implementation needs to be put in place
- Public attitudes toward women's participation in politics needs to change (to become supportive not negative as it still overwhelmingly is now). This, in turn, will encourage politicians for promote women's political participation – to meet to public demand.
- The Armenian NGOs and foreign support/donors' programmes should therefore not concentrate only on demanding changes in legislation, but also support public awareness raising on gender equality. Especially important is to work with women directly to raise their own awareness.
- The NGOs and foreign support/donor programmes should push Armenian Government towards revitalizing the Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men. Effective institutional body is essential to achieve significant dialogue on importance of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in democratic developments in society in Armenia between government and civil society and to counter the raising influence of conservative, anti-gender equality groups in Armenian society.

Key recommendations for further action

- To initiate real change in the situation, the following amendments should be made to the *Law on election of bodies of local self-government*: to have impact of special measures for improvement of women's political participation, a quota of at least

30% (or so called zip system) should be introduced on candidate lists for elections of local self-government bodies in consolidated communities; a gender quota of representation in a local Council from all villages comprising a consolidated community should be introduced into the Law on election of local self-government bodies.

- Gender equality (measures of accountability and implementation) in public administration should be enforced in substance, not on paper. The Armenian Government should revitalize the *Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men in the Republic of Armenia*. The Council should provide an assessment and give assignments to Ministries and Agencies to prepare and submit proposals concerning measures for the implementation of recommendations given by *the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*.
- It should be recognized that gender equality matters are not sufficiently tackled in governance system in Armenia. Training programmes on gender equality must be enhanced by international/donor support programmes in all fields, including in public administration employees' qualification.

1. Overview of the current situation

1.1. Existing legislation and positive results

Armenia has ratified the *UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) and the Optional Protocol thereto and supported the adoption of a number of the Council of Europe Resolutions that are focused on the attainment of gender equality, thereby assuming obligations that entail taking measures aimed to rule out discrimination against women in political, social, economic and cultural spheres.

The Armenian Government approved the *Gender Policy Concept Paper* in February 2010 and the *Gender Policy Strategic Action Plan for 2011-2015* in May 2011, while the Armenian National Assembly adopted in May 2013 the *Law on securing equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men* and raised in 2016 in the Republic of Armenian Electoral Code the gender quota from 20% to 25% in the national elections.

The adoption of the Concept Paper and the Law laid the groundwork for gradual attainment of *de facto* equality between women and men in the executive and legislative branches of government. Changes in the Armenian legislation indeed allowed in the 2017 elections to raise women's representation in the National Assembly from 10.7% to 18%.

The *Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men in the Republic of Armenia* was established in the Armenian Government as national machinery for achieving gender equality. However, the Council has not convened a single meeting for over two years.

1.2. Challenges in gender issues

At the same time, in recent years, representation of women in political decision-making in the executive branch of government in Armenia has been steadily declining. There is only one woman among 19 Ministers, whereas there were three women in the previous Government. As at 1 January 2018, there were only 2 women among 54 Deputy Ministers.

Representation of women in local governments remains low. Thus, all Regional Governors are male and among 22 Deputy Regional Governors there are only 2 women (one in Armavir region and the other one in Aragatsotn region). Over the entire period of democratic reforms there has not been a single female Mayor in the country's 48 cities and towns.

Gender imbalance remains unchanged in the country's bodies of local self-government. At the same time, due to the efforts made by the non-governmental organizations sector in Armenia and a more active stance of women in local elections, the share of women in local Councils in rural communities grew from 9.6% to 11.2% in the aftermath of local elections held in 2016.

Only due to lobbying efforts of the NGO sector, in particular of the Armenian Association of Women with University Education, that resulted in the introduction of gender quotas and of introduction a proportional representation system in local elections in the two large cities, in the aftermath of the 2016 elections the number of women in local Councils in the cities of Gyumri and Vanadzor increased and now women account for 25% of Council members. There are only 28 women in local Councils of the rest 46 cities and towns in Armenia.

However, as demonstrated by the results of the subsequent local elections that were held in 2017, the dynamic of women's representation in local self-government was negative because of the process of consolidation of local communities. While 17 rural communities were headed by women prior to the consolidation, at present only one woman heads a consolidated community. Gender asymmetry in the system of local self-government tends to grow.

2. Reasons for the gender imbalance

2.1. Insufficient action by the Armenian authorities and no systematic analysis undertaken.

In the course of reforms that were underway in Armenia no necessary measures were taken that would aim to create enabling conditions for the advancement of women and to overcome discriminatory practices. The situation resulted in violation of women's rights and in underrepresentation of women in the legislature and in bodies of local self-government. In fact, women are underrepresented in decision-making positions in many spheres of public life.

The Armenian Government does not undertake a systematic analysis of the situation with representation of women in elective and other governance bodies. The current policies of the Armenian authorities do not give grounds to conclude that gender equality will be achieved even in a distant future.

On 4 November 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reviewed the 5th and 6th periodic Report submitted by Armenia. The Committee made critical comments regarding low representation of women in power. The Armenian Government has not come up with measures to energize activities aimed to eliminate the shortcomings.

2.2. Negative attitude towards gender issues in Armenian society.

In the past three-four years a growing negative attitude towards the use of the term "gender equality" and real meaning it has been observed in Armenia. NGO *Pan-Armenian Parent Committee* has been conducting an aggressive campaign under the slogan of protection of the Armenian family traditions targeting those NGOs that use the term 'gender' and put forth efforts to promote women's political participation.

It has been actively impeding the implementation of the State gender policies set by *the Gender Policy Concept Paper* and the *Law on securing equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men*. It should be noted that those two documents were listed in the Eastern Partnership Action Plan that was approved by the Armenian President and adopted by the Armenian Parliament. They also demand that the Parliament should repeal the *Law on ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men*.

3. Recommendations for further actions by Armenian Government

3.1. In the area of legislative initiatives:

The following amendments should be made to the *Law on election of bodies of local self-government*:

- a special measure of gender quota of at least 30% or “zip system” should be introduced for elections of local self-government bodies in consolidated communities to ensure balanced representation of women and men in local Councils (“Councils of elders”);
- a special measure to ensure representation of women in a local Council from all villages comprising a consolidated community should be introduced into the Law on election of local self-government bodies.

3.2. In the area of public administration:

- The Armenian Government should revitalize the *Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men in the Republic of Armenia*. It is advisable in particular that some gender experts, NGOs dealing with women’s issues and with protection of women’s rights, representatives of the research community, of local self-government bodies and of the Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office should become members of the Committee under the Prime Minister.
- The *Council on Issues of Equality between Women and Men in the Republic of Armenia* should at its session hear the report of the Deputy Minister of Justice Mr. Vigen Kocharyan. Based on the results of the review of the report, the Council should provide an assessment and give assignments to Ministries and Agencies to prepare and submit proposals concerning measures for the implementation of recommendations given by *the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*.
- The Government should provide financial assistance to the operation of political parties taking into consideration the political parties’ activities on preparing women for elections of local self-government bodies and *de facto* representation of women from a given political party in a local Council.
- Measures should be taken to enhance effectiveness of a training system for both women and men elected to local Councils and to improve arrangements for re-training of personnel and activists of local self-government bodies.

- In the fourth quarter of 2018, a nationwide *Forum Participatory Democracy: Experience, Problems and Prospects. Women's Contribution to the Development of Civil Society* should be held and delegations from Eastern partnership countries should be invited.
- An assessment should be made with the help of international actors and civil society organizations about women participation at all levels of public administration.
- The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development should set up in the all urban communities commissions for ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities to women and men.
- The Ministry of Education and Science should set a list of activities for the implementation of the CEDAW Committee's recommendations on integration of gender awareness/knowledge into the education system taking into account the introduction of a gender component into curricula and textbooks of general education schools and institutions of higher learning.
- The Ministry of Agriculture should set a list of activities for the implementation of the CEDAW Committee's recommendations on improving the situation of rural women, including their involvement in community governance.