ACCEPTING NEW CHALLENGES

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By Lalai Manjikian, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, 7 March 2010

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Not surprisingly, the woman figure has been adopted by Armenians as well, to express certain core ideals that remain tightly intertwined with Armenian cultural identity and nationalistic values. Terms such as mother tongue (mayrenee lezou), mother Armenia (mayr Hayasdan), and mother church (mayr yegeghetsi) are omnipresent in the Armenian lexicon. Coincidentally, such elements are deemed to be the pillars of Armenian existence and survival, namely throughout the diaspora.

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As much as this personification of language, land, and church as woman is flattering, it is also intriguing, given that patriarchal structures and hierarchies are known to dominate the Armenian political and religious landscape.
As Armenian women continue to increase their visibility within various Armenian and non-Armenian spheres, a community organization where women have always occupied a strong presence is the century-old organization known as the Armenian Relief Society (ARS). It allows for women to evolve as humans, as women, as citizens, and as Armenians amid the seas of dispersal that we navigate. The ARS continues to be an efficient, inspiring, and even fun organization, acting as the socially conscious nerve in many of our diasporic communities. Run and maintained by highly motivated and determined women, the ARS serves as a model for Armenian women. Furthermore, it constantly strives to propel Armenian women forward, to new heights both in Armenia and throughout the diaspora, while reaching out to non-Armenian communities in need.

When I watch the ARS at work, it reinforces the notion in me that women are proactive by nature. I feel that we come from a lineage of strong women—from Sose Mayrig's infallible model, Zabel Yessayan's avant-garde ideas, and Carla Garabedian's audacious realizations, to our own mothers, sisters, grandmothers, great aunts, and female friends.

Undoubtedly, the Armenian woman is a central figure in the nation's perpetuity, particularly throughout the diapsora.

With the threat of annihilation long behind us, but the fear of assimilation forever lingering throughout the diapora, how is the current role of Armenian women who are members of the diaspora defined today?

Needless to say, this separation from the homeland has created large amounts of anxiety throughout the diaspora. For years, the main concern and challenge for women living in the diaspora has been how to conserve the "Armenianness" of the family, given the reality of living miles away from Mother Armenia's protective shield and sword.

Given the above-mentioned links between women, national and cultural values, as well as the numerous challenges that being a woman entails, how do Armenian women embody the noble burden of their nation's survival? And if they do, how do they articulate it? Surely the associations between woman and nation are still at the foundation of our diasporic existence, but are they as rigid as they once were? Is a woman's central role within the diaspora being challenged by various personal choices, or simply by virtue of finding ourselves in the midst of endless cultural influences? Either way, perhaps we should refresh our viewpoints and consider flexible notions of identity, nationalism, and cultural values that reflect our diasporic realities more adequately.

Regardless of the old or newer guard surrounding ideas of woman and nation, I view women to be an important part of the driving force that has sustained the diaspora's existence. Following the catastrophic rupture created by the genocide, Armenian women played an instrumental role in the public, domestic, and educational spheres, in efforts to re-build, re-organize, and re-populate.

Besides the obvious biological reasons that contribute to this continuity, the vital traditions and values prominent both in the public and private spheres and embedded in our collective identity are transmitted from generation to generation through women. Armenian mothers have been and will continue to be the carriers and transmitters of Armenian ideals, however one chooses to define those ideals.

I often wonder if Armenian women embody such responsibilities consciously or instinctively. Perhaps both. Whether instinctive or conscious, I find this process of birth and transmission on behalf of women so vital, given the sense of internalized loss many of us in the diaspora still carry.

Needless to say, each woman has a unique life trajectory and therefore experiences cannot be generalized. Surely not all women feel this way or have simply made other decisions, leaving them outside of the normative heterosexuality and nation-building molds I describe above. Even if they fall into the mold in some ways, a number of Armenian women also choose to take other positions pertaining to cultural, religious, and lifestyle decisions—adding color, texture, and dimension to our already eclectic collection of beads.

Regardless of whether one does or does not fit in such molds, the bottom line is that many Armenian young women in the diaspora are left feeling conflicted. With access to the entire world wide open, often a clash of cultures, values, religions, and races occur. The challenge is to remain open and flexible enough to engage as cosmopolitan world-citizens while remaining true to the values that have been transmitted, have been salvaged and blossomed against all odds, despite the attempt to yank out the root permanently.

As members of the diaspora, perhaps compensating for the loss is making amends with the new, and at times, the unknown. This just may be the real challenge we all face.