CHANGING STATUS, ROLE OF WOMEN IN ARMENIA

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Category: Opinions

The following is the speech that Mrs. Maria Yeganian (wife of RoA Ambassador) delivered on the occasion of Women's International Day. The celebratory event was organized by the Armenian Women's Association of Canada in Montreal on March 4th, 2012.

Սիրելի տիկնայք,

Թույլ տվեք Կանադայում Հայաստանի Հանրապետության դեսպանության անունից շնորհավորել ձեզ Կանանց Միջազգային Օրվա կապակցությամբ: Ինչպես գիտեք, Մարտի 8-ը Հայաստանում ոչ աշխատանքային օր է և այդ օրվանից սկսած բոլորը շնորհավորում են կանանց մեկամսյակի կապակցությամբ, որովհետև ապրիլի 7-ը ըստ Հայաստանի օրենսդրության Մայրության և Գեղեցկության Օրն է:

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Իմ բարեմաղթանքները լավագույնս կհնչեն հայ պոետի՝ Հովհաննես Շիրազի խոսքերով՝

Քեզ որ առնեմ՝ էլ չեմ թողնի,

Ես քո ցավը կտանեմ,

Թեկուզ սերդ դժոխք լինի,

Ես քեզ դրախտ կտանեմ:

Կարծում եմ, որ մեր այս հանդիպումը չափազանց արդիական է, որովհետև Հայ Կնոջ դերը շատ կարևոր է թե Հայաստանում թե Սփյուռքում: Մեր նյութն է Ով է Հայ Կինը այսօր, նրա արդի տեղն ու դերը մեր հասարակությունում:

Women's rights have been recognized in Armenia since ancient times. However, the transition to democracy and a free market economy has further changed the situation of Armenian women in the past two decades. The ongoing changes in social, political and economic spheres of the country have not only elevated women's role in society, they have also broken gender stereotypes. Free economic relations and democratization in all spheres of life create the basis for eventual equal social rights for any human being, regardless of gender.

Let us start with stereotypes that Armenians have created during our long history. Let us, once more time, underline our role and place in society to find advantages and disadvantages and discover a better present and brighter future for us, women.

What is the task distribution in a regular Armenian family?

The father of a family is expected to fulfill the material needs of the household. Major economic decisions (buying a car, banking), household repairs and taking out the garbage are his domain. The mother's responsibility is to cook, clean, and raise the children. These tasks are reserved to females, even if she has a career. No man would venture into changing diapers or cleaning the toilet, because he won't be as efficient as a woman. In other words, women are genetically designed to excel in such tasks. Besides, such chores are considered useless, do not provide any material benefit, and are degrading to a man's honor. Groceries can be a shared task, or they can be planned by the mother and executed by the father. Driving the kids to extra-curricular activities can also be shared, depending on the parent's work schedule. Shopping for kids' clothing, enrollment to social or sport activities, parent-teacher meetings, maintaining the children's health are also a woman's domain. Verifying the child's report card and disciplining are the father's duty.

Now let's talk about Armenian Kingdom.

The kitchen is the Armenian woman's kingdom (and prison). When the man comes home from work, the meal is expected to be ready, even if the wife was also working and had to pick up the kids from school. The Armenian man is an excellent food critic; he knows which dish his mother made better than his wife, and will not be shy in his comments. Oh yes, let's not forget, the husband can invite guests for supper and inform his wife at the last minute. She must always have something ready for unexpected guests. An Armenian woman is judged by her cooking. The greatest honor for her is being asked for a recipe by a more experienced woman. Of course, she would have added her own little touch to the recipe. No Armenian woman will allow any other woman to cook in her kitchen, even if she has 30 guests for supper.

The wife makes doctors' appointments for the husband; the man doesn't need to see a doctor until he is very sick. The woman gets health-related information from friends and siblings. When not feeling well, she tries to treat herself or tough it out. A woman's prestige increases when she is obviously sick but doesn't consult a doctor and continues to take care of the others. While some health conditions are easily discussed with friends, many topics remain taboo. Hypertension, diabetes or minor surgeries are talked about. Great efforts are deployed in order to hide epilepsy, cancer, AIDS or mental disorders (including depression) in the family. Such words are never pronounced out loud.

During the 1990s these traditional stereotypes of gender roles underwent certain changes brought about by a drastic worsening of socio-economic conditions, by the necessity to leave Armenia to earn a living and by other factors. To begin with, certain changes occurred in the stereotypical views

on the family roles of men and women. Even though men, as before, are still considered to be the head of the family, women are starting to play a more active--sometimes leading–role in solving the family's financial, educational and other problems of the family.

Secondly, women's acquisition of a more prominent role in educating their children and in providing for their families can also be accounted for by the fact that many Armenian men (almost one-third in some regions) are abroad, having left Armenia in search of work. Even though most of these men financially support their families, their absence is putting enormous physical and psychological burden on women. Mothers in almost all Armenian families today live under stressful conditions. In 1998-1999 their situation became even worse owing to the financial crisis and the ethnic strife which hit Russia–the destination for most of the young and middle-aged men who had left Armenia.

Thirdly, a certain weakening of the father's role in the Armenian family has occurred as a result of his prolonged absence or unemployment. His image as head of the family has undergone negative changes, some of which may have an adverse impact on children's growth, especially on boys for whom such 'helpless' fathers cannot be the ideal example and object of psychological identification.

It's been observed that the democratization of relations in the Armenian family has resulted in the growth in importance of the mother and wife roles, the relaxation of stereotypes regarding the woman's role, and children becoming more active in their development since they participate in the discussion of family matters more often. Concurrently, the traditionally low level of divorce has not risen in Armenia.

The weighty obligation assumed by Armenian women involving the formation and preservation of the family has never prevented them from assuming responsible positions in political and public life. They have made a considerable contribution to the development of Armenian political thinking and the organization of our national life. Here it is necessary to mention the increasingly prominent presence of Armenian women in the political field, following the regaining of Armenia's independence, as well as the active participation of Armenian women in the efforts being carried out in the Diaspora in the pursuit of the Armenian Cause (Hye Tadd).

Such questions as women and their place in society, their political and social activity, as well as enlightening of those problems in mass media, creating informational data-base as well as maternity and childhood cannot be effectively solved by governmental bodies, especially during an economic crisis. That is why it is important to assist the creation of such mechanisms through the activation of women's public organizations. Non-governmental charity organizations are a single source for support of such projects.

It is worth noting that, after the Beijing Conference (1995), women's organizations became more active; new ones were founded and several international organization, including UNDP, USAID, OSCE initiated research on the topic. These organizations, as well as other international donors, awarded numerous grants to women NGOs. This contributed to the promotion of women's NGOs,

particularly in civil society. Empowering women has been one of the main objectives of women's organizations. It serves as a unifying idea for all these organizations, regardless of the diversity of their fields of activity. In the beginning women's organizations were launched to promote women's civil rights or to address social problems affecting women.

Armenian women's NGOs can be credited with the significant promotion of positive changes in the stereotyped views of family roles and in the democratization of family relations. Making use of the nation's democratic traditions and of historic data, which shows the honorable place women have always had in the Armenian family, these NGOs have done great work on women's rights, advocacy, leadership and in confronting gender-based violence and the trafficking of women. These organizations have spared no effort in publicizing the results of modern gender studies and at the same time, in initiating their own studies. A significant number of publications are available. These are distributed throughout the country. Psychologists, who proceed from the theory of social roles and attitudes are also a part of these efforts. Proceeding from the assumption that stereotypes and prejudices are specific kinds of social attitudes, psychologists demonstrate what devices can be used to make an impact on affective and behavioral components to change them in a desirable way.

These social-psychological assumptions help men to become more tolerant within their families and not to impede the activism of their women.

The most important achievement was the approval of the "2004-2010 Republic of Armenia National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Society" It's also known as decree number N 645 N dated 8 of April 2004 of the Government of the Republic of Armenia. The Action Plan defines the principles, priorities, and key targets of the public policy that is pursued to address women's issues in Armenia. It is based on the relevant provisions of the constitution of the Republic of Armenia and is targeted at the fulfillment of the UN Convention on the elimination of all forms of violence against women (CEDAW), the recommendations of the Fourth Beijing Conference (1995), the documents of the Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Equality between Women and Men, the UN Millennium Declaration requirements, and commitments of Armenia under other international instruments.

The Action Plan comprises following sections:

--Ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in decision-making and in the social and political spheres;
--Improving the Social and Economic Condition of Women;
--Education Sector;
--Improving the Health Condition of Women;
--Eliminating Violence Against Women;
--The Role of the Mass Media and Cultural Institutions in Reporting on Women's Issues and Building a Female Portray Model;

--Institutional Reforms.

Some entities were created over the past decade to tackle social, health related issues, and employment concerns. Regrettably, we are still experiencing difficulties with funding of these programs.

Women make up more than half of Armenia's population. But what is the situation when it comes to elections? They won just 12 of 131 seats in the last parliamentary elections.

In one of his speeches Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan called for an increase in the number of women in the executive and legislative branches to 30 percent. There is currently no quota for women serving in the executive branch and the few who do serve mostly as support staff.

Soon after that the National Assembly voted on a new election code, which included a requirement that women constitute 20 percent of party lists and that (for the first time) every fifth candidate after the second spot be a woman. These quotas would be some of the most progressive in the country.

Today we live in an era of global mobility with a capacity to transfer knowledge, technology, experiences and skills. The Armenian Diaspora is sophisticated enough and well organized, with a bank of highly trained professionals and experts in a variety of disciplines that can serve as bridges of knowledge and experience and can help initiate a national discourse on issues affecting the nation. Effective diasporan organizations, networks or movements can help shift the brain drain from the homeland to a brain circulation.

Կցանկանայի էլի մեջբերել Հովհաննես Շիրազի խոսքերը, որ լիովին արտացոլում են Հայ Կնոջ կերպարը:

ՄԱՅՐՍ

Մեր հույսի դուռն է մայրս,
Մեր տան մատուռն է մայրս,
Մեր օրորոցն է մայրս,
Մեր տան ամրոցն է մայրս
Մեր հերն ու մերն է մայրս,
Մեր ճորտն ու տերն է մայրս,
Մեր տան անտունն է մայրս,
Մեր արծվաբույնն է մայրս,
Մեր տան ծառան է մայրս,
Մեր տան արքան է մայրս,
Մեր տան անճարն է մայրս,
Մեր դեղ ու ճարն է մայրս,
Մեր տան աղբյուրն է մայրս,
Մեր ծարավ քույրն է մայրս,

Մեր տան անքունն է մայրս,
Մեր անուշ քունն է մայրս,
Մեր տան ճրագն է մայրս,
Մեր արեգակն է մայրս։
Մայրս, մեր հացն է մայրս,
Մեր տան աստվածն է մայրս..

I strongly believe that the Armenian Woman--capital letters--can be a role model in modern society, because the Armenian Woman has the capacity and millennial wisdom to keep high the true Armenian traditions and family values and at the same time lead a very progressive and active social and political life.

Շնորհակալություն:

Montreal, March 4, 2012