

WALKING A MILE IN THEIR SHOES


Posted on November 11, 2013 by Keghart



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By Lucine Kasbarian, USA, 12 November 2013

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Conversely, on touching down at Zvartnots airport in Yerevan this summer, I observed native Armenian women on the flight unzipping their duffle bags, slipping off their flat shoes and putting on stiletto heels. As it turned out, this too was a local custom, albeit a very modern one.

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Beauty and fashion are serious matters in Yerevan. And why shouldn't they be? Armenia is a beautiful country. And its culture highly prizes beauty in art, architecture, ornamentation, nature and, of course, women. Not to be confused with International Women's Day on March 8, Armenia's Day of Beauty is a national holiday, celebrated annually on April 7.

Yerevanian women, in particular, pay close attention to their appearances. They dress fashionably and attractively. Some even dress flashily and suggestively. Walk along Abovyan and Sayat Nova streets, and you will see women who put a lot of time and effort into their wardrobes, makeup and hairstyles.

Best Foot Forward

Yerevan is a city best experienced on foot, where people walk considerable distances. It is startling, therefore, to see local women striding at all times of day and night in 6-7 inch high heels. With its share of fractured sidewalks, Yerevan can already be an obstacle course, never mind with towering heels. Even so, local women defended their footwear, telling me that high heels were much more comfortable than flat shoes and that heels flattered their legs.

To be sure, high fashion has often been a punishing business. During the Victorian era, feminine fainting spells were often attributed to the widespread use of corsets. As such, I am just barely joking when I wonder aloud if Armenians should consider entering the podiatry profession as treatments for bunions, hammertoes and neuromas will surely be in demand in Armenia in the coming years.

Dressing Up or Down?

On the other hand, Yerevanian women tell me they are perplexed by what some would call a low-maintenance look worn by many Western women. "Why", they ask, "would a woman want to look like a man by wearing loose-fitting pants, disheveled hair and no makeup?" and "Aren't these women concerned that their men will look elsewhere for female companionship?" Western women might respond that the so-called women's liberation movement gave them the right not to dress up, and to choose careers alongside, or even over, marriage and motherhood. Yerevanian women, on the other hand, may believe that Western culture, including unisex fashion, is destructive because it subverts traditional gender roles.

There may be practical reasons for the high-maintenance approach to beauty in Yerevan. Many interviewees believe that women in Armenia, who today outnumber males 3-to-1, have to ramp up their appearances to compete for potential mates. The three-to-one ratio may have come about partly because sex-selective abortions continue to favor male births, as males are considered to be the more prized gender. Also, men continue to journey outside Armenia to make a living, while still others are serving in the military. Several interviewees stated that, as a result, "peacocking" conduct, once prominent in males seeking to impress and win females, has become an overwhelmingly female behavior, particularly in the larger cities.

Which Traditions to Keep or Discard?

Why do some new, dubious ideas such as plastic surgery for women easily enter today's popular culture in Armenia while other long-held but problematic traditions – such as women not speaking up -- remain relatively intact? One woman, an educator and administrator, would not speak openly in the presence of her fiancé -- a literary fixture in Armenia -- even though she had very definite views about emigration, the topic we were discussing. I often encountered this phenomenon among women of all levels of education and social status. Locals agreed that women may behave compliantly with their men because of ingrained cultural attitudes. Female deference may be especially necessary now, many say, as rampant male unemployment and underemployment in Armenia have hurt male self-esteem. Thus, in Armenia outspoken women who are "liberated" by Western standards can be perceived of by men and women as unfeminine, aggressive, anti-family and emasculating. Like it or not, at present, native Armenian women seem to more easily adopt new habits that relate to external appearances.

Comparing East and West?

The women in Armenia are so beautiful that you could drop them in any cosmopolitan city around the world, and they would shine. When I expressed this to a local friend, he said, "Yes, the new generation of young women in Armenia is stunning. But when many open their mouths, their beauty disappears." He said today's local Armenian women need to put greater effort into cultivating inner beauty, that is, moral values and character. That's just one man's opinion, and, though it contains

some truth, the emphasis on external appearances is really a global and not just an Armenian phenomenon, abetted by television, fashion magazines, and other popular media.

From conversing with locals and watching TV comedy and talk shows, I know that in Yerevan it is understood that more attractive women may be given preference when applying to a male employer for a job. Those women willing to sleep with the boss may stand an even better chance of landing the job. While this is an abysmal fact, is it all that unique? In fairness, such behavior exists in many countries around the world, not just in Armenia.

Diasporans visiting Armenia sometimes remark about what they perceive of as excessive attention to appearances. Perhaps the judgmental attitude some Diasporans hold towards some native Armenians exists because Diasporans hold their brethren to a higher standard than they do other ethnic groups. While Diasporans may reminisce about the high moral fiber of the Armenian nation prior to the Genocide and among exile communities, they must acknowledge that the repression of the national church and corruption that accompanied Sovietization disrupted the millennia-old virtues of the Armenian nation. Some native Armenians also carry judgments about their Diasporan brethren. A few obvious ones are the impressions that the newest generation of Diasporan Armenians no longer speaks the Armenian language, and is Armenian "in name only."

Some of the generalizations that native Armenians and Diasporans hold about each other may contain some truth, but never the whole truth. In many cases, they may be wrong.

Understanding Needed

This essay is not about which Armenian cultural attitudes are better, Eastern or Western. But should all the values that come with either orientation be accepted wholesale? Should all Western attitudes be adopted in Armenia, even if some do not come naturally or are unhealthy for a small, vulnerable country? Who or what institutions are ready, able -- and justified, for that matter -- in taking on the task of arbitrating? As the authority once vested in public and private schools and the national church may now carry less influence, where else other than in the home can issues relating to cultural and moral guidance be taught?

How can we in the global Armenian community come to terms with our differences and work cooperatively towards the enrichment of the Armenian people? If our nation and people are to survive and prosper in the long run, understanding and acceptance must go both ways. Various NGOs looking to introduce alternative modalities and bridge the divide between the peoples of Armenia and the Diaspora might consider organizing round table discussions that recruit people from each segment, allow participants to address the conceptions and misconceptions Armenians have about one another, and work towards establishing greater understanding. Placing energies here would be time and money well spent.

