

# **CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: Empowering Women in Post-War Communities**



**Conflict Transformation:**  
**Empowering Women in Post-War Communities**

**Analysis of Research Results**

**by**

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## **Introduction**

The implementation of the project "Conflict Transformation: Women's Role, Needs, and Capacity Development in Post-War Society" is aimed at revealing the needs and capacities of women living in urban and rural communities of the Republic of Armenia in order to contribute to the development of their community and the state and society as a whole.

The goal of empowering women in Armenia, identifying and promoting their leadership potential in the context of the transformation of the Karabakh conflict, is of strategic importance not only for the South Caucasus region, but also for the European Union, within the framework of its neighborhood policy. The goal suggests the changing roles of key actors in transitional societies, the possibilities for involving new stakeholders, the potential risk of resumption of war, efforts towards peace negotiations, as well as other possible scenarios in the current situation of "no war, no peace".

After the 44-day Karabakh war of 2020, in the context of the protracted and transitional conflict, Armenia's society should particularly appreciate the importance of efficient use of human potential for the purposes of security, defence, state and society development, which implies overcoming various gender-based stereotypes, the active involvement of women in post-war stabilization and development programs, and the discovery and promotion of women's leadership abilities.

This program is research-based and includes elements of training aimed at identifying women's needs, leadership potential, and experience, as well as developing women's leadership capabilities.

## **Project Components**

### **Component 1. Theoretical Overview of Armenian Society Research**

At this stage, the characteristics of Armenian society in the current stage of Karabakh conflict transformation were studied and highlighted, and a theoretical overview of previous research and publications was done.

Previous studies were reviewed, addressing the traumatic condition of post-war societies, socio-psychological characteristics (uncertainty about the future, loss of confidence, passivation/activation, disappointment, etc.), the dynamics of recovery, and

the issues of identifying and promoting women's leadership potential. Academic articles, reports, and studies related to post-war reconstruction, community management and women's leadership, and women's involvement in traditional and modern sectors were analyzed. This study served as a methodological basis for the fieldwork.

**Component 2. Field research**, the main objectives of which were as follows:

- To identify the potential and practical contribution of women as community leaders in the process of conflict transformation and societal reconstruction.
- To identify the needs and potentials of women as leaders, taking into account possible scenarios of both war and peace.

Research methods:

- In-depth interviews with women living in communities who have demonstrated leadership skills and initiatives in governance, entrepreneurship, education, charity, civil society organization activities, volunteerism, and other areas.
- Focus group discussions with women from the same categories.

**Phases of organizing and conducting research:**

1. **Respondent mapping.** Key stakeholders identified (NGOs, government agencies, local leaders, women's organizations, and women in academia). A list of approximately 110 women was compiled, 10 representatives from each of Armenia's 10 provinces and Yerevan.
2. **1. In-depth interviews.** In April-May 2025, 55 in-depth interviews with community-based active women (5 from each province) were conducted to assess their views on the current stage of conflict transformation, community dynamics, expected developments (including war and peace scenarios), and women's potential and actual roles, potential, barriers, risks, and challenges in these situations.
2. **Focus group discussions.** In June-July 2025, 5 focus group discussions were conducted, each with 8-11 participants, who were pre-selected to participate in the program, but were not included in the in-depth interviews. Ֆոկուս-խմբային քննարկումներ. Focus group discussions were conducted in the provinces of Ararat, Gegharkunik, Lori, Shirak, and Syunik.

**One of the analytical approaches is SWOT analysis**, through which it is possible to identify the impact of positive and negative factors on the manifestation of women's

leadership potential and capabilities in conflict transformation, assess opportunities and risks, including developing programs to support women.

# **1. Characteristics of Armenian society in the current phase of transformation of the Karabakh conflict, and the issues of promoting women's leadership potential**

## **1.1 The main issues of transformation of the Karabakh conflict**

Conflict transformation is defined as a process that changes the participation, relationships, intentions, communication processes, and, when necessary, the nature and structure of a society that would otherwise continue to seek violent, military solutions to a conflict.<sup>1</sup> In fact, conflict transformation implies changes in the participants, their intentions, and actions, to be aimed at a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but does not always contribute to it.

As noted by experts, conflict transformation is a long-term process and should have long-term goals, involving state bodies and public institutions, and transforming the conflict participants, the conflict itself, its structure, and approaches.<sup>2</sup>

Any conflict, especially, a lasting one necessarily transforms from one phase to another. The authors can be divided into two groups in terms of their approach to the conflict transformation problem: one group takes a neutral stance on the issue, finding that the transformation stages do not necessarily lead to normalization of relations between the conflicting parties and conflict resolution.<sup>3</sup>

Another group of authors views conflict transformation as an opportunity for conflict regulation and resolution, and therefore the ultimate goal of the transformation process is the conflict resolution stage, which is preceded by the establishment of communication opportunities between the parties, the identification of common interests,

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<sup>1</sup> Miall, H. 2004. Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task. Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. URL: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/71735641.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Lederach, J.P. 1995. Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures, New York: Syracuse University Press; Vayrynen, R. (ed.) 1991. „To Settle or to Transform? Perspectives on the Resolution of National and International Conflicts.” New Directions in Conflict Theory: Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation. London: Sage, 1-25.

<sup>3</sup> Graf, W., Kramer, G., & Nicolescu, A. (2006). Conflict Transformation through Dialogue: From Lederach's Rediscovery of the Freire Method to Galtung's "Transcend" Approach. *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*. 22. 55-83. 10.20446/JEP-2414-3197-22-3-55. URL: [https://www.mattersburgerkreis.at/dl/nktuJMJKokJqx4KooJK/JEP-3-2006\\_04\\_GRAF-ET-AL\\_Conflict-Transformation-through-Dialogue-From-Lederachs-Rediscovery-of-the-Freire-Method-to-Galtung-Transcend-Approach.pdf](https://www.mattersburgerkreis.at/dl/nktuJMJKokJqx4KooJK/JEP-3-2006_04_GRAF-ET-AL_Conflict-Transformation-through-Dialogue-From-Lederachs-Rediscovery-of-the-Freire-Method-to-Galtung-Transcend-Approach.pdf)

the initiation of joint actions, and the establishment of stable relations.<sup>4</sup> According to the famous conflictologist L. Kriesberg, conflict transformation is an increasingly frequently used concept in the field of conflict analysis and resolution, peace studies, and international relations, and generally refers to a fundamental and sustainable change that should lead from a prolonged and destructive struggle between adversaries to the formation of constructive relations.<sup>5</sup>

The classic of conflict theory, Johan Galtung, notes that most conflicts are not resolved, we live with them: conflicts are like diseases that can be mitigated to some extent, temporarily treated, but just as we are never completely healthy after leaving the hospital, we can "recover" in conflict situations only when our body itself is willing to heal, making efforts and taking measures to that effect. According to Galtung, the ultimate goal of conflict transformation is peace, however, either all parties must strive for it and picture this situation, desire it, and make efforts, or the conflict will not transform into peace.<sup>6</sup>

The role of women in conflicts and transformation thereof depends on the conflict dynamics, as well as, significantly, on the roles that women perform or that are attributed to women in a given society. Given that conflicts are directly related to security by their nature, and security enforcement has traditionally been attributed to men, currently, in traditional societies, all areas of security enforcement, primarily military and political, are mainly associated with men, and the role of women is derived from decisions made and implemented by men. Given that conflicts are directly related to security by their nature, and security enforcement has traditionally been attributed to men, currently, in traditional societies, all areas of security enforcement, primarily military and political, are mainly associated with men, and the role of women is derived from decisions made and implemented by men.

In modern societies, where historically, and especially in the contemporary period, reforms aimed at protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality have been implemented, women's involvement in security systems is more significant in both

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<sup>4</sup> B. Austin, M. Fischer, H.J. Giessmann (eds.) 2011. Advancing Conflict Transformation. The Berghof Handbook II. Opladen/Framington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Kriesberg, L. 2008. Conflict Transformation. In: Lester Kurtz (Editor-in-Chief), Vol. [1] of Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict, 3 vols. p. 401. URL: <https://lkriesbe.expressions.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008-Conflict-Transformation.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Galtung, J. (2000). Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means (The Transcend Method). Participant's and Trainer's Manual. United Nations Disaster Management Training Program, 5. 10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9\_5. URL: [https://www.transcend.org/pctrcluj2004/TRANSCEND\\_manual.pdf](https://www.transcend.org/pctrcluj2004/TRANSCEND_manual.pdf)

qualitative and quantitative terms, such as holding positions, service in the army, police, and agencies to prevent emergency situations.

At the same time, the issue of women's involvement in contemporary military conflict studies remains ambivalent and intricate. Research shows that during conflicts and at different stages of transformation, women act as both active and passive parties, and as active parties, they can take on the roles of perpetrators of violence against other people, including the enemy's women, as well as rescuers and supporters.<sup>7</sup> Women's involvement in armed conflicts can take place in armed units, in civil resistance groups, on the front-line and in the rear, as well as in post-conflict reconstruction work. Conflict experience and relevant studies show that depending on the stereotypes prevailing in society, women can be held back from active participation, as well as become direct and indirect victims of military operations and war crimes.<sup>8</sup>

The Karabakh conflict, being the longest and most complex conflict in the post-Soviet region, originated in the earlier past<sup>9</sup> and has manifested itself at the intra-state, inter-state, inter-ethnic, and military-political levels, involving individuals, groups and societies, state agencies, as well as the human, economic, military, and information resources of the parties. The Karabakh conflict is related to the interests, values, and rights of the parties, and has been discussed on domestic and international legal platforms, mainly as a manifestation of the protection of human rights and the right to self-determination, and an issue of territorial integrity,<sup>10</sup> and in the current phase of conflict transformation, also as an attempt at the genocide of an entire ethnic group.<sup>11</sup>

The Karabakh conflict, starting from its late-Soviet stage and in all subsequent stages of manifestations (transformations), has also significantly determined the

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<sup>7</sup> Hedström, J., Senarathna, T. (co-editors, 2015) Women in Conflict and Peace. IDEA, URL: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/women-in-conflict-and-peace.pdf>; Cruz Almeida, C., Cochrane-Buchmüller, V. and Dudouet, V. (2022). Gender-inclusive conflict transformation: Insights from female former combatants and women associated with resistance and liberation movements. Policy Insight Series (1) Berlin: Berghof Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building (2002) United Nations Development Fund for Women. URL: <https://unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3F71081FF391653DC1256C69003170E9-unicef-WomenWarPeace.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Svante E. Cornell (1999) The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict. Department of East European Studies, Report no. 46, Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University. URL: [https://is.muni.cz/el/fss/jaro2019/POL587/um/Cornell\\_The\\_Nagorno-Karabakh\\_Conflict.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/fss/jaro2019/POL587/um/Cornell_The_Nagorno-Karabakh_Conflict.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Manasyan, A. (2019) The Artsakh issue: problems subject to new interpretation. "Banber Yerevan University: Armenology", № 3 (30), Եշ 37-53: URL: [http://www.old.ysu.am/files/04A\\_Manasyan.pdf](http://www.old.ysu.am/files/04A_Manasyan.pdf); Pashayan, H. (2015). Legal and Political Arguments of the Karabakh Conflict: 21st CENTURY, (3 (61)), 13-37.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Moreno Ocampo. Expert Opinion Genocide against Armenians in 2023. New York, August 7, 2023. URL: <https://www.cftjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Moreno-Ocampo-Expert-Opinion.pdf>

preference and development of the domestic and especially foreign political course of the Armenian and Azeri sides, also, after the military phase of 2020, when the Armenian side began to significantly rethink the nature and effectiveness of its strategic relations with the Russian Federation.<sup>12</sup>

The transformation of the Karabakh conflict has taken place in several stages. Since the first phase, parallel to the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the Artsakh movement has had political nature, manifesting itself as mass rallies, demands, and a referendum by the population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region to secede from Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and to unite with the Republic of Armenia.<sup>13</sup> The transformation of the Karabakh conflict from the political phase to the military-political phase took place in 1991-1994, and was interrupted by the victory of the Armenian side and the proclamation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Thereafter, the conflict returned to the political phase again. However, unlike the first phase, when the Karabakh conflict took place at the domestic political level, within the Soviet Union, and was considered an internal political conflict,<sup>14</sup> after the first military phase (1991-1994), it transformed and became international, involving the independent republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the newly independent and unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, as well as third parties: mediator states, including the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries, the Russian Federation, the United States and France.<sup>15</sup>

The stages of transformation of the Karabakh conflict have been expressed in the political agendas and programs of the leaders of the Armenian and Azeri parties, and have determined the dynamics of trust in political figures. Whereas the leadership of Azerbaijan has not changed since 1993, and, being undemocratic, does not depend on the will of the people, the reputation, popularity and effectiveness of the authorities of the Republic of Armenia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, (which ceased to exist in 2023 due to the forced deportation of its population), as democratic states,

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<sup>12</sup> Atanesyan, A.V., Reynolds, B.M., & Mkrtichyan A.E. (2024) Balancing between Russia and the West: the hard security choice of Armenia, European Security, 33:2, 261-283, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2023.2258528

<sup>13</sup> Kotanjyan, H. (ed., 2010) Strategic guidelines for scientific counteraction to Azerbaijan's distortions of Armenian history in the context of RA national security: science and education as a priority for the networked development of Armenians. Supplement to the Armenian Army Military Science Journal, 4/16/: URL: <https://razmavaraget.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/at4- 2010.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Manasyan, A. (2015). The Karabakh conflict in the context of the collapse of the USSR. 21st Century, no. 4 (62), pp. 47-77. URL: <https://artsakhlib.am/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Manasyan-Aleksandr-Karabakh-conflict-USSR-trohum.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Armenia and Azerbaijan: Between war and peace. European Parliament, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2023. URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747919/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747919\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747919/EPRS_BRI(2023)747919_EN.pdf)

were essentially directly related and dependent on the efforts, approaches and the degree of their effectiveness demonstrated by the Armenian Party during different stages of the Karabakh conflict.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the stages of the transformation of the Karabakh conflict and the change of Armenian authorities were intertwined and interdependent, including the war of 2020 and post-war phase, when the Armenian authorities, under the threat of force and pressure by Azerbaijan, adopted the process of publicizing and implementing the peace agenda. As already discussed in the conflict transformation section, transformation should ultimately aim at establishing peace, but it implies the efforts and commitment of all parties to the conflict to cooperate. In the 2020 war, the actions of the Armenian side are unilateral, carried out under the coercion of the victorious side, suggest unilateral concessions, and do not reflect public opinion. In addition, the Azeri side has been periodically threatening to resume the war. For these reasons, at the current stage of the Karabakh conflict, it is possible to speak of unilateral efforts to transform the conflict, the parties' diverse, incompatible approaches, and the imminent threat of war and violence, which thwarts peace efforts.

After the 2020 war and the forced deportation of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in 2023, Armenian society has been transformed again, reliving traumatic events, demonstrating heroic drive and disappointment, and facing the need to rethink its capabilities and unite its forces and efforts. In this context, it is important to consider the role of women, including their approaches, perceptions, efforts, hopes, and capabilities toward the present and the future.

## **1.2 The situation and characteristics of the post-war Armenian society**

The unexpected defeat in the 44-day war of 2020 led to widespread feelings of being deception and disappointment in Armenia's society, among the Armenians of the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, and in the Armenian Diaspora. This was exacerbated not only by the startling outcome of military-political process for the majority of the society, but also by the accompanying official state messages, which in fact differed from the real processes, sounded encouragingly ("We Shall Overcome", etc.), drove the people towards heroic exploits and, at the same time, were deceptive.

The disappointment was manifested in a sharp decline in trust, first of all, towards the Armenian authorities, which after the 2018 "velvet revolution" enjoyed the enthusiasm

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<sup>16</sup> Stages, status and prospects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement process. Luys Foundation, 2020: URL:

<https://www.luys.am/img/artpic/small/719d9a46a82fdcab7573%D4%BC%D5%82%D4%B3%D5%B8%D6%80%D5%AE%D5%A8%D5%B6%D5%A9%D5%A1%D6%81.pdf>

and trust of a significant part of Armenians. It should be noted that women and girls, including female students, played a significant role in the mass process of the "velvet revolution": in particular, blocked streets, organized peaceful marches, went on strike, spent nights in Yerevan's Freedom Square, constantly circulated news online, covered the situation, and even acted on their own initiative, acting as independent and self-sufficient subjects of political life.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the population, including women, later have become disillusioned, and in the post-war period, they belong to the majority that does not support any political force.

What also significantly declined was trust in Russia, a foreign political ally of fundamental importance for Armenia's security, which was blamed for not being pro-Armenian, but rather neutral, while in this case, neutrality was equivalent to passive contemplation of Azeri actions and was perceived as "leaving the Armenian Party alone." Surveys have also shown a decline in trust in the Western, primarily EU, states and European institutions, due to the same appeals by these institutions to "all parties to the conflict," their ineffectiveness, and the public perception that they are not true to life. It should also be noted that wide circles of the post-war Armenian society have also made self-deprecating admission of one's own guilt for suffering defeat in the war.<sup>18</sup>

An important place in the study of post-war societies is occupied by the totality of approaches and efforts aimed at identifying mass trauma, traumatic shock, and overcoming trauma. This is especially characteristic of societies that have been defeated in wars, which allows us to discuss the situation, problems, challenges, and opportunities of the post-war Armenian society in this dimension.

The study of psychological trauma of participants and victims of armed conflicts is a modern field of many sciences. Psychology and social work focus on the main issues and traumas of direct participants, witnesses and victims of armed conflicts.<sup>19</sup> In sociology, post-war societies are studied from the perspective of collective (social, cultural) trauma, also, in terms of the culture of memory, which is aimed at reinterpreting and overcoming the traumatic consequences of historical events, including military

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<sup>17</sup> Atanesyan A. V. (2018) "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia: Potential, Achievements and Risks of Political Protest Activity // POLIS (Political Studies), N6, pp. 80-98. DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2018.06.06 URL: <https://www.politstudies.ru/article/5463>

<sup>18</sup> Atanesyan, A., Mkrtichyan, A. (2021) Armenian Society at the Crossroads: Foreign Policy Orientations, Priorities and Perceptions. Sociological Research. Yerevan, YSU Publishing House.

<sup>19</sup> Markosian C, Layne CM, Petrosyan V, Shekherdimian S, Kennedy CA, Khachadourian V. (2022) War in the COVID-19 era: Mental health concerns in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. International Journal of Social Psychiatry. No. 68(3): 481-483. DOI: [10.1177/00207640211003940](https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640211003940)

ones.<sup>20</sup> Especially in the case of ancient nations, such as Armenia, the memory of numerous events that occurred in the historical past is combined with each new event, either intensifying, bringing forth positive memories of victories, or, conversely, bringing to the forefront of memory negative, traumatic memories of hardships and defeats.

According to the famous scholar J. Alexander, "Phenomena are not traumatic in themselves. Trauma is a socially attributed characteristic."<sup>21</sup> This means that the impact of a particular phenomenon on people essentially depends on our expectations: if preformed expectations are positive, and the consequences are unexpected and negative, then this can create traumatic experiences. However, it's wrong to consider collective trauma to be a subjectively constructed collective perception without sufficient objective reasons. Many events throughout history are objectively negative, traumatic, regardless of how we perceive them: for example, genocide itself is such a massive and willfull crime that it cannot be attributed solely to subjective feelings and experiences. At the same time, acknowledging collective trauma is the first step needed to overcome it. Otherwise, saying that nothing actually happened and had no impact means escaping reality and postponing the necessary measures."Through construction of cultural trauma, social groups, national communities, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only recognize the existence and sources of human suffering, but also assume responsibility for taking action against it."<sup>22</sup>

According to P. Sztompka, events, phenomena and processes can be traumatic and cause collective trauma, if they at the same time meet the following characteristics: they occur suddenly, are of comprehensive nature, affect all representatives of society, are deep and fundamental, embrace all major areas of the life in the state and society.<sup>23</sup>

In general, to understand the mood in post-war societies, one must compare perceptions of the consequences of objective events with perceptions, feelings, and experiences present in society.

Collective trauma in crisis and post-crisis societies allows to consider these societies "trauma societies."<sup>24</sup> This concept itself needs clarification: by saying "trauma society", we create an impact on society members that does not always motivate people

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<sup>20</sup> Eyerman, Ronald. (2019). *Introduction: Identity, Memory, and Trauma*. Palgrave Macmillan

<sup>21</sup> Alexander J. C. (2012) *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge & Malden: Polity, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Smelser N. J., Alexander J. C., Eyerman R., Giesen B., Sztompka P. (2004) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 158-159:

<sup>24</sup> Volkov Yu. G. Trauma Society: Searching for a Path to Healing (Invitation to Discussion) // Sociological research. 2020. № 9. C. 16-27.

DOI [10.31857/S013216250009344-1](https://doi.org/10.31857/S013216250009344-1)

to overcome negative phenomena, exert will and effort. It is likely that the description of "trauma society" labels people, overpowers them, and prevents them from recovery. Just like in healthcare, in this case, some people, when told that they are sick, do not make efforts to get well, but, on the contrary, panic, become weak, and passive. It is possible to motivate some people to be active and to recover by avoiding the objective diagnosis of their problem, but, vice versa, by inspiring, emphasizing their merits, and praising them. This is also true for a significant portion of Armenian society, who prefer to hear words of praise rather than criticism.

For this very reason, social diagnosis should be followed by approaches that are consistent with people's perceptions and targeted. Thus, if we consider, for example, using women's potential in the post-war Armenian society, developing and applying their leadership qualities, then some of this target group may be mobilized by the trauma they have experienced, while others, on the contrary, may be encouraged by citing inspiring examples from the historical past, where women led, demonstrated courage, wisdom, organizational abilities, strategic planning skills, etc.

Nevertheless, the modern post-war Armenian society is characterized by such manifestations as quoted by the authors, and are characteristic of a "trauma society":

- lack of a clear development strategy,
- economic degradation,
- lack of creative social forces,
- convergence of political and economic elites,
  
- voluntary as well as forced exclusion of the majority of the population from political life,
  - absence of state ideology and/or national idea,
- either neglect or absolutization of national interests,
- deepening social inequality,
  - disrespectful attitude towards the history and past of the state and active efforts to perceive and change it in a new way, or, conversely, a tendency to live only in the past."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Makarov T. Trauma Society: Between Evolution and Revolution (round table) // Sociological research.. 2019. № 6. C. 3-14. DOI [10.31857/S013216250005477-7](https://doi.org/10.31857/S013216250005477-7)

Similar distinctive features may be characteristic of post-war societies, especially those that suffered defeat. These manifestations are also recognizable when observing modern Armenia's society.

The "trauma society" has not only external, but also internal causes: it is not necessary for the society to live in a war and post-war phase, to be defeated in a war, etc. The state's long-term internal instability can also stimulate the spread of negative public sentiment, a sense of uncertainty about the future, pessimism, political nihilism, and other negative phenomena. The internal phenomena that contribute to traumatic experiences in society are as follows:

- instability of political power, including when the political elite represents the interests of individual political groups whose main goal is to gain and maintain power at all costs,
- when the people are barred from influencing politics, when people cannot determine not only the future of the country, but even that of themselves and their families,
- In "trauma" societies, there are no clear ideological tenets to be incorporated in state ideology. Their absence leads to confusion in public consciousness, loss of clear guidelines for life, and random and negative impacts on public consciousness. The spread of negative sentiments, confusion, and disappointment in public consciousness is aggravated by the elites which circulate slogans such as freedom, independence, democracy, and protection of human rights, when none of these are true to life.
- One of the internal factors contributing to the social trauma of society is the lack of opposition, or its conditional, purely symbolic, demonstrative nature.<sup>26</sup>

In crisis, "people are constantly forced to reflect on traumatic changes, reconsidering their values. Thus, the following manifestations can be distinguished, which are also very typical of the mood prevalent in post-war Armenian society:

1. Development of distrust. After positive expectations and optimism, the "Morning After Syndrome" emerges, as manifested by a continuous decline in trust in state institutions.
2. The spread of a perception of gloomy future, as manifested by fears and anxiety.

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<sup>26</sup> Toshchenko Zh. T. Trauma society: between evolution and revolution (an attempt at theoretical and empirical analysis). Moscow: Ves' Mir, 2019.

3. Nostalgic ideas about the past: people think and talk about things like, for example, "The Soviet Union was good."
4. Manifestations of political apathy, the absence of worthy candidates in elections, and the ineffectiveness of civic initiatives.
5. Reinterpreting the past.<sup>27</sup>

According to Kravchenko, "Over time, trauma enters a phase of "healing," as manifested by the growth of public trust in democratic institutions, the market, and the church: a "new cultural consolidation" is formed."<sup>28</sup>

Obviously, victory in war and conflicts on the whole helps overcome post-conflict problems, including socio-psychological, economic, and domestic difficulties, while military defeats further deepen such traumas. Accordingly, the burden of social processes, changes, perceptions, fears, and expectations in societies defeated in war can be alleviated over longer periods of time.

Historical experience shows that post-war societies chose the path of modernization of the economy and social relations through industrialization, ensuring human rights, and collective discipline. For example, documentaries about Germany, which was defeated in World War II, have been shown in the Internet or on television, showing how members of a society in collective trauma, inspired and encouraged by their leaders, and then devastated, disappointed, and exhausted, clear their streets of rubble, line up in an organized manner for free food, and demonstrate discipline. There is an opinion that the way out of post-war trauma in societies in such situations lies in the active collective overcoming of intrasystemic deficiencies.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, whether a "trauma society" can autonomously recover and modernize after significant economic and military-political losses is still an open question. Historical experience shows that, along with the mobilization of internal resources in "trauma societies," some post-war societies received significant assistance from other states. For example, the Marshall Plan was created by the United States to rebuild

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Kravchenko S. A. Sociological theories of trauma: discourse in modern theoretical sociology // Sociological studies. 2020. № 4. C.60-69. DOI [10.31857/S013216250009131-7](https://doi.org/10.31857/S013216250009131-7), c. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Makarov T. *Trauma society: between evolution and revolution (round table)* // Sociological studies. 2019. № 6. C. 3-14. DOI [10.31857/S01321625005477-7](https://doi.org/10.31857/S01321625005477-7); Barakat S., Zyck S. A. (2009) The Evolution of Post-Conflict Recovery. Third World Quarterly. No. 30(6): 1069–1086.

Germany and other Western European countries that were defeated in World War II, and it also ensured a permanent US military-political presence in Western Europe.<sup>30</sup>

This means, in particular, that Armenian society's expectation of independent recovery after the defeat in the 44-day war in 2020, without outside intervention, may not correspond to reality and the objective capabilities of society, even if they are fully utilized.

Separate studies are devoted to the contribution of women to the reconstruction of post-war societies. Most of them consider women to be victims of hostilities and concomitant physical and psychological violence. Accordingly, the experience of post-war states in restoring women's physical and psychological health, providing them with opportunities for economic activity, and utilizing women's potential and resources to contribute to the restoration of society is discussed<sup>31</sup>. This issue is addressed, in particular, by UN programs in post-war zones.<sup>32</sup>

It is noteworthy that in post-war societies women have special needs, and the addressing and ensuring the latter are concerned with international and local legal and political approaches, resources, and efforts.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, the specific needs of women in conflict and post-war reconstruction societies makes women the most vulnerable group, which can prevent women from being regarded as potential and real leaders in such societies. In this sense, certain theoretical and socio-political approaches are not conducive to the development of women's leadership abilities, on the contrary, the latter reinforce the widespread stigma of women as the "weaker sex."

Accordingly, we consider more effective those studies, approaches and programs that are aimed at identifying and developing women's leadership capacities in post-

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<sup>30</sup> Dobbins J., Poole M. A., Long A., Runkle B. (2008) Post–World War II Nation-Building: Germany and Japan. After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush RAND Corporation: 11–36.

<sup>31</sup> Տ՛ս, օդիսակ. Sørensen, B. (1998). Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources. Social Change. 29. 10.1177/004908579902900423. URL: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/38684/WS-OP%2003.pdf>; Nordenving, S., Rogall, T., Zarate-Barrera, T. (2025). Women's Empowerment and Post-Conflict Recovery after Mass Killings. In: Presented at the ESOC Annual Meeting. URL:

[https://viewsforecasting.org/wp-content/uploads/Womens\\_empowerment\\_postconflict\\_recovery.pdf](https://viewsforecasting.org/wp-content/uploads/Womens_empowerment_postconflict_recovery.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Ryan, C. (2020) Women, Peace and Security: Women's Post-War Economic Empowerment, Joint Brief Series: New Insights on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for the Next Decade, Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, PRIO and UN Women. URL:

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/New-insights-on-WPS-Womens-post-war-economic-empowerment-en.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Տ՛ս, օդիսակ. Naomi, C. (2006). Women in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dilemmas and Directions, 12 Wm. & Mary J. Women & L. 335. URL:

[https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/faculty\\_publications/article/13671&path\\_info=Women\\_in\\_Post\\_conflict.pdf](https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/faculty_publications/article/13671&path_info=Women_in_Post_conflict.pdf)

conflict societies, supporting women's political participation and role, and developing their knowledge, abilities and involvement.<sup>34</sup>

The experience of women in post-war societies creating non-governmental organizations and implementing programs to support women is noteworthy;<sup>35</sup> it can be not only useful for Armenia, but may also have its prototypes and national examples in Armenian society.

### **1.3. Manifestations of traumatic phenomena in post-war Armenian society and opportunities for overcoming them by promoting women's leadership potential**

The transformations that have taken place in today's Armenian society, first of all, the defeat and losses suffered in the 44-day war of 2020, then the forced deportation of Armenians from Artsakh in the autumn of 2023, the immigration of Artsakh residents to the Republic of Armenia, the resulting socio-psychological, economic, and everyday hardships, as well as the general disappointment with the government's practices in the post-revolutionary period, have led to manifestations of collective trauma. As already mentioned above, in times of crisis, societies tend to seek the causes of current difficulties in their past. Similarly, in official discourse, the "has-beens", i.e. the former authorities, have been constantly cited as the cause of current problems.

The deepening of general negative perceptions is also aggravated by the Armenian people's role as victims in the past, which is added to our current experiences: the characteristics of a "trauma society" have significant historical precedents in Armenian society, in particular, due to the unresolved collective trauma ("intergenerational cultural trauma") after the 1915 Genocide.<sup>36</sup> Turkey's failure to recognize the fact of the Genocide prevented us from getting rid of the tragic and dramatic perception of the historical events

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<sup>34</sup> See: Advancing Women's Participation in Post-Conflict Reconstruction. Permanent Mission of the UAE to the UN 2020. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Advancing-Women%20%99s-Participation-in-Post-conflict-Reconstruction.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Rugamba, D., & Gitahi, N. (2023). Women Empowerment and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Women for Women NGO in Rwanda. *Journal of Public Policy & Governance*, 7(3), 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t2242>

<sup>36</sup> Karenian H, Livaditis M, Karenian S, Zafiriadis K, Bochtsou V, Xenitidis K. (2011) Collective Trauma Transmission and Traumatic Reactions Among Descendants of Armenian Refugees. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. No. 57(4): 327-337. DOI: [10.1177/0020764009354840](https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764009354840); Mangassarian S. L. (2016) 100 Years of Trauma: The Armenian Genocide and Intergenerational Cultural Trauma. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. No. 25(4): 371-381. DOI: [10.1080/10926771.2015.1121191](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2015.1121191).

of the last century for the entire Armenian people, including the Diaspora. The traumatic experience of history has been periodically "updated" by events such as the assassination of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in Turkey, the latter's support for the Azeri anti-Armenian policies,<sup>37</sup> and now the 44-day war. In fact, all the features that, according to P. Sztompka's approach discussed above, are characteristic of collective trauma are conspicuous: the uniqueness of the current situation, its shock for the majority of society and its impact on everyone, the depth and fundamentality of the consequences.

In fact, the defeat of the Armenian side in the 44-day war of 2020 should be regarded not so much as a new trauma, but as the actualization and exacerbation of the old one. Sociological surveys conducted in the post-war period have revealed feelings and experiences of anxiety, apathy, uncertainty, despair and abandonment, depression, anger and deep disappointment among the population. In the 2020 war, Armenian society once again demonstrated mass patriotism and self-sacrifice, but this did not lead to success, which has further deepened the above-mentioned feelings.

Public opinion also shows a certain optimism about the future, which Armenians associate with patriotic, enlightened, quality-educated Armenian youth guided by national values, as well as with intellectuals (e.g., scientists, clergy), whose participation in state governance is considered highly relevant.

In the perception and orientation of representatives of Armenian society, one can see internal mechanisms of self-control, e.g. through carrying out socially useful activities, pro-Armenian upbringing of children and youth, and mutual assistance. Armenians largely do not believe in the involvement and support of external forces: only society can help itself.<sup>38</sup>

In this sense, our historical experience of overcoming the traumatic phenomena and developments we confronted in the past, through the efforts of all representatives of society, including women, has become relevant. The first stage of the Karabakh conflict coincided with the foundation of the Republic of Armenia, the creation of state bodies, and the beginning of army building. This moment saw the resumption of the Armenian Army's history, and the historical memory of the Armenian people's liberation struggle and participation in wars, the continuation of which was the initiation and implementation of modern processes in the Republic of Armenia.

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<sup>37</sup> Eyerman, Ronald. (2019). Introduction: Identity, Memory, and Trauma. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Atanesyan A.V., Anikin V.A. "Society of Trauma": Public Perceptions, Hopes and Fears in the Armenian Society After the Karabakh War. *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya [Sociological Studies]*. 2024. No 12. P. 102-114

Speaking of the contribution and exploits of Armenian women in the state, society, Armenian communities and families in the historical past, measures have been taken and approaches applied in the newly independent Armenia to continue the inclusion of women in solving public problems, to support the development and application of women's leadership abilities, to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all spheres of Armenian society, state authorities, economy, politics, governance, defence and other spheres.

State authorities, educational institutions, civil society organizations, international organizations, and women's initiatives have played and continue to play their unique role in these developments. Thus, since 2013, the Center for Gender Studies and Leadership has been operating at Yerevan State University;<sup>39</sup> with its support, numerous programs dedicated to women's leadership in various fields have been implemented.

The NGO "For Equal Rights" has implemented a series of training courses entitled "Women's Leadership Academy".<sup>40</sup> The NGO "Women's Resource Center" has provided counseling for women and girls for years, protecting their rights, and implementing a number of public events.<sup>41</sup> They have not always received positive response and support from society, also, due to their inconsistent approach to national values.

Women's involvement in the security and defence sector, also, in leadership roles, has been discussed since the outset of army-building, and has also often had negative response, not only from men, but also from women. Despite numerous historical facts and references (including the First Karabakh War) about Armenian women serving in armed units, protecting their families, communities, and country, there was and continues to be a widespread approach that women in the security and defence sector should perform more limited functions and, whenever possible, refrain from participating in direct combat operations. This approach is also used in many leading countries, including Israel.<sup>42</sup>

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 laid the foundation for a change in thinking and perceptions in this area. This resolution is the first document

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.old.ystu.am/gender/hy/1383045644>

<sup>40</sup> <https://forequalrights.org/projects/%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%B6%D6%81-%D5%A1%D5%BC%D5%A1%D5%BB%D5%B6%D5%B8%D6%80%D5%A4%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%A9%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%B6-%D5%A1%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%A4%D5%A5%D5%B4%D5%AB%D5%A1/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://womenofarmenia.org/>

<sup>42</sup> Atanesyan, A.V., Avetisyan, A.R., Savtalyan, A.M. (2022) Women in the Armed Forces. A summary of survey results conducted in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia and the United Nations Population Fund Armenia Office. E., Antares.

adopted by the UN Security Council to address the **impact of armed conflicts on women, the involvement of women in the settlement of armed conflicts, and their participation in peacebuilding through institutional approaches**. It reaffirms the importance of women's equal and full participation in conflict resolution, peace negotiations, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, other humanitarian missions, and post-conflict reconstruction, and calls on Member States to take steps to that effect.<sup>43</sup>

The importance of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is that, while not having a legally binding nature (being a document adopted under Chapter 6 of the UN Charter, "Peaceful Settlement of Disputes") and enforcement mechanisms, it has nevertheless gradually acquired the characteristics of a "voluntary-binding" document for several reasons. First, as a result of the targeted work of specialized UN structures, the provisions of Resolution 1325 have been incorporated not only into the working documents of bodies within the UN system, but have also significantly expanded their scope and have gained wide application in various formats in the working agendas of other international organizations (NATO, EU, Council of Europe, OSCE, etc.).

In addition, specialized structures, advisory and/or working groups operating on a permanent or temporary basis have been established within the framework of various international organizations, which periodically prepare reports on the implementation of obligations in this domain by member states, make recommendations and develop monitoring mechanisms, awareness-raising measures, etc. For example, NATO-led programs encourage countries to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement Resolution 1325. The implementation of the resolution is gradually being incorporated into the countries' Security Sector Reform (SSR) activities.

If we try to streamline and group the requirements of Resolution 1325, they mainly have the following orientation:.

1. guaranteeing and protecting rights, especially in the context of conflicts,
2. guaranteed participation in decision-making and actions,
3. raising awareness and conducting exercises, also, within the framework of peace support missions and post-conflict processes.

As already mentioned, the issue of protecting women's rights and correctly assessing and effectively using their potential in the RA defence system has been included in the RA defence reform agenda for quite a long time, which, it should be noted, is already

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/WPS%20RES1325%20.pdf>

yielding certain practical results. An obvious evidence of this is the increasing number of female cadets in military educational institutions year by year. As a result of this process, which began in 2012-2013, by 2016 their number in the military educational institutions of the RA Ministry of Defence was about 20 and became relatively stable. This was a step towards increasing the number of female military specialists in the armed forces and institutionalization of their involvement.

The development of a cooperation program between the Ministry of Defence and the United Nations Population Fund was very important to coordinate efforts in this domain. Within the framework of this process, which began in 2014, programs aimed at analyzing the current situation, identifying public opinion, identifying organizational and socio-legal problems, and finally solving them were implemented in a logical sequence, in which representatives of civil society and the academic and expert community also actively participated.<sup>44</sup>

The “Guidelines for the Protection of Women’s Rights and Ensuring Equal Opportunities in the Defence Sector of the Republic of Armenia” with its action plan, developed within the framework of the cooperation program between RA Ministry of Defence and the UN Population Fund and approved by decree of RA Minister of Defence in 2016, was of particular importance in clarifying the role of women in the defence sector, protecting their rights, and ensuring equal opportunities. The adoption of this document clearly determined the orientation of reforms, the departments responsible for implementation and the deadlines.<sup>45</sup>

A survey conducted in 2022 with the support of the UN Population Fund was dedicated to the social adaptation of female cadets and officers in RA Armed Forces in the post-war period, the motivations for military service, and their visions for the future. Within the framework of this survey, the advantages and opportunities of women's military education, as well as necessary guidelines for reforms, were identified. The survey also revealed stereotypes, mostly among male officers, regarding the restrictions on women's military service, which are actively challenged by women during their studies and military service.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The author of this report, A. Atanesyan, participated in these programs as an expert.

<sup>45</sup> See also: Avetisyan, A.R., Atanesyan, A.A. (2016) Women and the Army: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities. Yerevan, United Nations Population Fund.

<sup>46</sup> Atanesyan, A.V., Avetisyan, A.R., Savtalyan, A.M. (2022) Women in the Armed Forces. A summary of the results of research conducted in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Armenia and the United Nations Population Fund Armenia Office. Yerevan., Antares.

Focus group discussions and awareness-raising events with women conducted by the OxYGen Foundation in three provinces of the Republic of Armenia: Tavush, Vayots Dzor, and Syunik from October 2022 to March 2023, were dedicated to field research on the role of women and their participation in security sectors in post-war, crisis-ridden societies.

Like the previous survey, this one revealed the stereotypes existing in communities (including autostereotyping by women), which have been formed during the life of the society and relate to women's involvement in the security domain.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, in the post-war period, surveys to identify the anxiety in Armenia's society, plans for the future, security concerns, emotions, and attitudes towards their own contribution to the restoration and development of the state, necessary actions, and in particular, the role of women, must be permanent, long-term in nature, and are highly relevant.

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<sup>47</sup> Research Report On Perspectives for Women's Participation in Security and Peace Processes in Armenia. OxYGen Foundation in partnership with WomenNet NGO and Mughdusyan Art Center. Yerevan, 2023. URL: [https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Research-Report-WEPS\\_ENG-05.03.2023-final.pdf](https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Research-Report-WEPS_ENG-05.03.2023-final.pdf)

## 2. Traditional and modern roles of women in the transforming Armenian society

### 2.1. Value transformations in Armenian society

The democratic processes that took place in the post-Soviet period, the spread of Western values, the opening of the state through tourism, education, international cooperation, information processes, and the Internet, led to significant changes in the value system of Armenian society, mainly the transition from traditional values and approaches to modern, fadish, liberal values. The above is also age-related: younger members of society adhere to modernization, while representatives of the older generation adhere to traditional values and approaches.

Our research revealed that both traditional, modern, and hybrid approaches to traditional/national and modernized/global values are common among Armenian women. In particular, those who hold traditional values are found among both the younger and older generations, while the attitude of the older generation toward modernized, contemporary values is just as positive as that of young girls.

Almost all interlocutors mention the loss of traditional values, the decline in the level of mutual trust. This is what many respondents say, who believe that the strengthening and protection of human rights and freedoms should not be carried out to the detriment of the unity and solidarity of other people, the family, the community, and society.

*"There is also an approach of rejecting national values. I myself do not accept that approach. Changes are necessary and useful, but not everything should be rejected. There are things that should remain in our nation. They are what keep us together. The division: the strong friendship, the trust that existed before, is now disappearing. Such strong relationships have been destroyed before my eyes that I would never have imagined. This is another great tragedy, when now small things can lead to conflicts with each other, to serious problems, and all this has a serious impact on the nervous system and psychology of all of us. We become very irritable." (Mariam, Kotayk province).*

Some respondents, representing the Soviet intelligentsia, note that in the post-Soviet period there has been a widespread decline in spiritual and moral values. People have become indifferent, selfish, distrustful, critical of everything. The homeland in their perceptions has become a material thing, having lost its spiritual value. It is noted that even those engaged in intellectual activity, who should be more stress-resistant and lead others, are now in the same psychological state as everyone else.

The Internet has contributed not to the spread of values, but anti-values. The massive abuse of freedom of speech on social networks is considered especially dangerous, as a result, hate speech and violence have been propagated.

*"They sit on Facebook all day, writing whatever they want, cursing each other, thinking that no one will know who it is, all of this will go unpunished. The Internet and freedom of speech have led to the deformation of the value system. In parallel with this, values are not being spread." (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).*

*"A lot of things come from parents. They forbid children to be educated, to develop, but at the same time, for example, they watch swear words on the Internet, or soap operas on TV. Schoolchildren are sitting next to them, won't they emulate them?" (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province)*

In fact, there is a noticeable contradiction: on the one hand, the "liberation" of Armenian society from traditions, the overcoming of traditionalism, including the liberation of women, is emphasized and positively assessed, but on the other hand, there is talk about the decline and loss of national values, collective values, approaches to coexistence, the importance of these values and the need to return and restore them.

*"Young people know their rights, but they don't know their responsibilities" (Focus group participant, Lori province).*

*"Now I often see: in girls and boys, respect for elders has decreased. I do not share the opinion that in public transport one should always give up one's seat to older people, it depends on the situation, but in a minibus, for example, a young woman is sitting, she puts her 2-3 year old child on the seat next to her. The kid can sit on her lap, especially since she's not paying for the child, and give up your seat to those standing:" (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province).*

The transformation and loss of values is especially evident in everyday life, where disrespect for the elderly has become common.

"Underneath our building, on the first floor, there is a computer training center, there are many female students. They are constantly littering at the entrance. An elderly woman on the first floor made a mild remark: 'Girls, if you litter, clean up after you.' I see that those girls answer rudely: 'We understand, stop talking.'" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

One of the negative changes that occurred in the post-Soviet period is the passive attitude towards work, which has been replaced by a wait-and-see attitude towards receiving help and having an easy lifestyle. State policy towards receiving humanitarian and financial assistance from abroad has formed a psychology of "beneficiary", "socially vulnerable class" among people.

*"Our people don't really like to work, they are waiting for help" (Iveta, Tavush province).*

The summary of negative opinions leads one of the respondents to the following conclusion: "society is sick," because there is a decline in moral and universal values in society.

*"What is spreading in Armenia are not national or modern values, but anti-values. People want to be served. They want to get rich quickly. They dump their duties onto others. They have a very high opinion of themselves, and a very low opinion of others. They are rude both in their behavior and towards people. Even at a time when the nation was in mourning after the 44-day war, there were people who were playing loud music on the streets. It's about the moral status and condition of society. Or when they come to concerts and bring food in rustling packages and eat. It's disgusting when they sing for you while you're eating. Then they throw it all around you and leave. Our society is sick" (Maro, Vayots Dzor).*

It is the youth who are considered by many to be the hope of society, the main driving force for recovery and development.

*"Young people are the masters of their community. Of course, the community administration is involved in all this, but selectively and at their own will, while it is the young people who are truly not indifferent to the problems existing in their community. They also have a thirst for knowledge: they always find and participate in various trainings, trying to find new opportunities for self-expression" (Gohar, Gegharkunik province).*

Along with positive opinions about young people and hopes associated with them, some respondents note the regression, passivity, and demotivation of the younger generation, which they also ascribe to the infantility prevalent in the current conditions, namely, the unwillingness to mature.

*"I haven't seen any changes in our city since the war, that something has opened up, that processes are taking place, that young people have become more active. Young people are not active in any community, and they have put all the initiatives on us, the adults. We have raised our children in such a way that children cannot do anything on their own; our parents raised us to be more resilient. That is exactly the problem with young people" (Naira, Kotayk province).*

The distinction between Yerevan-based and provincial/rural youth is also interesting: it is noted that provincial residents treat their community more carefully than Yerevan residents, continue to feel responsible for their community and, accordingly, demonstrate activity and initiative in community development programs.

*"We have a group of young people - not all of them are active, and they need to be brought in, but those young people who know what they want immediately "catch" any event or initiative - absorb, assimilate, and come so that they can later receive a small grant and do something good and valuable for their community." The difference between the youth of Yerevan and our community (Dilijan, Tavush province) is that the youth of Yerevan, I believe, think very little about their communities, while the youth here say, let's do something good for "our village", "our community". For example, they have a greenhouse next to one of the village schools, they are thinking about growing strawberries, supplying the school cafeteria, children, doing community service. When I was just starting out, in our case the projects were more short-term:*

*garbage collection, planting trees, etc., but now they are 15-16 years old, but they are thinking about organizing longer-term projects" (Meline, Tavush province).*

## **2.2. Positive and negative changes in the province, community, and town in recent years**

Among the positive changes, urban development, road improvement, street lighting in villages, partial renovation of kindergartens and schools, and improvement of public transport in some provinces were noted, which, however, depends on the location: public transport between some villages and provincial centers, on the contrary, has ceased to operate and deprives rural residents of access to education, culture, and healthcare (more on this below).

As a positive change, "giving more room to specialists, those with knowledge and education now than before" was noted, emphasizing the importance of specialized knowledge. One of the interviewees recounted his positive experience of getting a job:

*"Last year, quite by chance, one of my friends asked if she wanted to work in the information department. I started working after school, and also on weekends. I was communicating with the doctors. One day there was an operation in the gynecology ward, the doctor came, said that the resident couldn't come, she invited me, I participated as an assistant, and that's how I started participating in the operations with them" (Ani, Syunik province).*

It is noted that tax authorities are working effectively, and private activity has been brought from the shadow sector to the legislative field.

*"We have a thousand and one good and bad things in our country, but one of the positives is that there is no longer anyone engaged in unregistered activities in our country; everyone has been brought into the tax field. On the other hand, many who engage in entrepreneurial activities do not know the tax legislation, they need support" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).*

Tourism has been developing rapidly in Armenia's tourist resorts in recent years. Women involved in this sector note that they are struggling with inflation and are taking

into account competition with neighbors. Thus, the respondent coordinating the tourism business in Tsaghkadzor notes that similar tourism offers are developing in the cities of Bakuriani and Gudauta in Georgia, at cheaper prices than in Tsaghkadzor.

Tourism is developing in Ijevan and Dilijan, however, pollution and the almost complete absence of state policy in the field of environmental protection are also noticeable.

*"For example, in Ijevan, we already notice that if there is a large store, then cleanliness is not maintained around it. Our Aghstev river is being polluted, waste is being thrown there. We need to start educating our children, starting in kindergarten, about what garbage is and how to dispose of it without harming nature. Some institution should deal with it, campaigns should be organized, etc. That culture is very weak among Armenians" (Karine, Tovush province).*

At the same time, many of the interviewees noted that changes in their settlements, including road and building improvements, are a matter of course, and are carried out with taxes paid by residents. In addition, such work is often done for the self-promotion of government representatives, and is not always targeted.

*"What is being done is a show-off. For example, they put lights in the cemetery. What does that give people? For me, it's absurd. We have one hectare of land and we don't have a tractor to work it. That would be the necessary support" (Siranush, Kotayk province).*

The interlocutors note that the settlements in their provinces are developing disproportionately, many are not developing at all. For example, the city of Gavar in the Gegharkunik province, then Martuni, and Vardenis are developing less than the tourist destinations of Lake Sevan. The city of Sevan itself remains underdeveloped. The disproportion of development is manifested, for example, in sharp price differences. People prefer to go to the United Arab Emirates to relax, but not to Sevan, because it is disproportionately expensive.

*"The Martuni side of Lake Sevan is very unkempt, we go to Sevan city to relax on the shore of the lake. The shore on our side is in very bad condition, and if tourism were to develop, jobs would be created for women and girls" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).*

Almost all respondents from Gegharkunik province spoke about the underdevelopment of the city of Sevan. There are no jobs, new organizations are not opening, no jobs are being created. Tourism is not developing in Sevan and in the province as a whole. Apart from Sevan Monastery, the peninsula, and the shores of Lake Sevan itself, they cannot send tourists to any other interesting places. The Sevan city museum is old-fashioned and has no interesting exhibits.

*"You can't develop tourism by showing a dried eagle. The same goes for the National Park. As a tourist, I would never go to that museum. In this sense, the only interesting place is the Bohem cafe, where local musicians give concerts, interesting things are presented, and you can taste national dishes" (Gohar, Gegharkunik province).*

Residents are making efforts to apply their energy somewhere, but such places are extremely limited. This situation directly and indirectly creates difficulties for women and young girls in terms of finding work and fulfilling themselves.

*"There are no resources and interests in Sevan that women and girls can participate in. There is no place in Sevan where girls could work, use their knowledge, and earn an income. The girls' activism is helped by the fact that there is nothing. They are trying to create something from nothing" (Gohar, Gegharkunik province).*

Armenia's development is highly concentrated in Yerevan, compared to which other provinces are not perceived as developed.

*"Armenia is Yerevan. Everything is concentrated in Yerevan. Our children who make a little progress here run to Yerevan. Yerevan is already swollen with people" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).*

One of the problems in the provinces is the availability and insufficient functioning of inter-community and inter-provincial public transport. Thus, it was noted that previously minibuses used to travel from Talin to Yerevan, Gyumri, etc., including via villages, but now this transport has disappeared, and people are forced to travel by taxi. The respondent was forced to move English lessons to an online platform because rural children cannot afford to pay a thousand drams one-way for taxis to get to and from classes.

*"Now we are trying to solve that problem, especially within the framework of the "Open Space of Culture" project. Let's see who we can get a car from. We have children in the villages who are good at drawing, and it would be great if the children could come here, meet with artists, and learn" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).*

Among the positive changes are the elimination of illegal garages and kiosks in yards, the construction of children's playgrounds, and the lighting of parks. At the same time, as respondents note, it is necessary to develop agriculture and industry in the provinces, reopen closed factories and create new ones, and provide residents with jobs and transportation.

*"They have focused more on playground and park issues, while the important issues, such as the drinking water problem, the roads - many roads are closed in the winter - and jobs, have not been resolved. People say: we have no work, no income. What can I do if I go and sit in the parks? First of all, social issues need to be resolved, then the lighting of the parks" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).*

Among the negative processes, many noted the spread of gambling and drug abuse, especially among young people and the unemployed, even among schoolchildren. Such phenomena, according to respondents, were not present in Armenian society and the Armenian way of life and are not appropriate, as well as being extremely dangerous from the perspectives of Armenian identity, well-being, and security. The spread of gambling and drugs, especially among children and young people, has the goal of destroying society and is not being sufficiently prevented by the authorities.

*"Boys are obsessed with computer games, they often don't leave the house, they don't go to school. That's why they also passively participate in various programs, they don't develop." (Ani 1, Vayots Dzor)*

*"Drug abuse is a serious, alarming problem in this province. Young people use drugs a lot, they are even distributed in schools. The morals of girls have changed, and the boys are addicted to drugs" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).*

*"The boys are obsessed with scrolling through TikTok on their phones" (Ani 2, Vayots Dzor).*

The degradation of the educational system, especially in schools, was mentioned, which is due to the constant, often unfounded "reforms" and experiments in the education sector, the destabilization of the education system, and the devaluation of education in general. Schoolchildren are demotivated, they do not want to attend school, there is no mechanism to motivate them with knowledge and educational prospects. In parallel, the spread of artificial intelligence reduces the ability and desire of young people to think independently.

*"Many colleges only have one or two students. The educational model is bad. They say, 'We're going to school,' but there's no one, so why should we go? Should we leave young people of that age on the streets? I often see schoolchildren of that age on the streets." (Ani, Vayots Dzor)*

*"I am very much opposed to artificial intelligence. I recently participated in a training where we had a creative assignment. Everyone immediately entered ChatGPT to find solutions, while they could have thought on their own. Recently, they have also started using these tools to discredit each other's honor, this is a very serious threat" (Mariam, Kotayk province).*

One of the negative and dangerous phenomena is both internal and external **migration**: rural communities are striving to move to cities, especially Yerevan, as well as to leave Armenia in general.

*"The girls go to Yerevan, some of them settle down there, while the boys become labor migrants and rarely come back. They mostly go to the army, come back, and leave Armenia. They rarely try to get higher education. It's a sad fact" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).*

*"There is currently a dynamic in the community. They are improving the community, repairing some things, but unfortunately, there is constant emigration. Young people do not see what kind of development is possible in the community. Unfortunately, it is not visible. Young people are our future, and there are no prospects in our community, specifically. People in Sisian are more "cold-hearted", they do not see hope, including compared to Goris, Kapan. Sisian is not active" (Laura, Syunik province).*

Another factor contributing to emigration in Armenia is unemployment and low wages: while low wages are more or less acceptable for women, men either hold managerial positions or refuse other jobs.

It was noted that, for example, the average salary in Yeghegnadzor is AMD 120-150,000, which is completely insufficient for men, especially in families with children where the wife does not work.

Due to internal migration, small communities are being emptied, and as young people move mainly to Yerevan, it is very difficult to implement initiatives to support women in the provinces, including provincial cities. Initiatives supporting women often contribute to their migration to more promising towns.

*"Since Yerevan is close to Charentsavan, our young people study there and organize their daily lives there. Therefore, they don't need to be active here. They come home late, and what else is there to be active about?" People over 30 are more active. Young people don't come up with initiatives, we beg them, even if they do initiate something, to contact us for help. For example, they want a concert. But when we organize that concert, they don't come. They're not interested even in a single event during the year. They don't come. You have to invite them individually so that a few people come. They don't even attend events dedicated to young people, when we plan gifts for them, incentives, etc." (Satenik, Kotayk Province).*

Emigration is the main factor in the brain drain, outflow of specialists, often young ones; its consequences pose a serious threat to the future and prospects of the state and society. All efforts aimed at developing human potential may be in vain due to emigration. Most of the female respondents spoke about this: this is a real disaster. Connecting with the external environment and implementing the knowledge gained "outside" in Armenia is an important but rare option: the majority leave and do not return.

*"Starting from school, college, and then university, young girls find it easier to imagine choosing their future path, or leaving Gavar, studying, and never returning. After my own school years, I noticed that after years, there were no people around me; only a few of us remained. Those children, we mentioned: what brains they have, how talented they are! Then they disappeared from the province, maybe they left Armenia. Very few of us stayed, we continued. I don't blame them; there are very few opportunities here. I myself have not limited myself to Gavar, I have organized my*

*"work with the outside world, I have always been on the move, thanks to that I have been able to ensure my advancement and not leave. If we do not maintain contact with the outside world, it will be very difficult to develop here, to make progress"* (Diana, Gegharkunik Province).

Emigration from Armenia intensified in 2020 after the Karabakh war and the negative processes that followed. Some people express their disagreement with state policy by emigrating. In the case of women, emigration either has the tendency to study and not return, as already mentioned, or has the form of tacit consent with the emigrating man (husband, father).

*"Everyone has been in a state of stress, everyone is broken. I have felt a little bit that people live for today, they don't know what will happen tomorrow. There is uncertainty, they can't think about tomorrow. From villages, they go to work abroad. Previously, when they left, they would leave something behind here so that they could return, now they are emigrating. The role of women in emigrating is passive consent: they say, 'If my husband has left, I must go too.' There are cases when they do not adapt there and want to return to Armenia, there are people of that type, they cannot adapt abroad"* (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

### **2.3. Transformations in women's social roles in the post-independence period**

Women's activism, self-expression, development and manifestation of leadership abilities, and personal fulfillment were discussed in all interviews. Over the decades of Armenia's independence, as a result of the rapid development of information and communication technologies, the accessibility and diversity of services offered in the education sector, the impact of tourism and other processes, women's legal awareness, self-reliance, and purposefulness have increased. Women are engaged in economic, social, and political activities.

*"I also do business: I bought a hair removal device, I work at home. I cultivate land. I deal with political issues, I am interested in it"* (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

At the same time, as the women we interviewed note, some women in Armenian society are active and developing, progressive in one way or another, while the other part is indifferent: they are not interested in anything.

*"I see two types of women in my environment: there are women who are not interested in any activity. Women are engaged in their household and do not want to engage in civic life. On the other hand, there are women who see themselves precisely in public activity, in civic life. The former probably do not imagine that besides their household and raising children, there is also another life" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).*

As noted in one of the focus group discussions, the financial and economic factor is an important, but not sufficient, prerequisite for women's progress, education, and development. Some girls from poor families prefer to marry early, seeing marriage as a solution to some of their economic needs. Others prefer to make an effort and try to change their unfavorable status through education and work.

*"I teach, and I also communicate with children from disadvantaged families. As the saying goes: social existence determines consciousness. Many girls from disadvantaged families think only about one thing: getting married early so that they can have their own money, a house, a corner, and improve their lifestyle. I give them my own example: look, I have studied, I teach, I am not married, I manage my own affairs, etc. It does not help them, because they have the only family model, when they have to get married early and absorbed in their family affairs" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).*

Making changes in the lives of rural girls is especially problematic.

*"It is especially difficult to involve rural girls when organizing courses. Even when you call the parents and say, 'We provide everything, transportation from the village to the city and back, your child can come carefree and safely, we also provide food, we organize everything, your child will return home with new knowledge,' the parents react very suspiciously. We even organized a course once, to which the parents could also come, or the older members of the children's family; even then they didn't want to come. The problem is the family's mindset, the way of thinking. Sometimes when you tell them, 'Look what I have achieved, I was your daughter's age, when I started to advance with such courses, they even perceive me negatively, if I am active and*

present in different fields. Sometimes I think about not talking about it, otherwise it will have a more negative impact." (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province)

The research shows that there are tendencies among women to **combine or oppose professional life and family life**. By opposing them, a woman is deprived either of her personal life in favor of professional advancement, or of opportunities for self-development and the desire to establish herself in public and political life in favor of her personal life.

In addition, it was found that, according to women, in Armenia there is a constant desire for self-determination and self-development among women, while men have a weaker desire for self-development and self-improvement. As a result, developed women are unable and unwilling to connect their personal lives with men who are weaker and have no aspirations, and seem to confirm the stereotype that a career in a woman's life jeopardizes her personal happiness.

"I have studied so much myself, I have several diplomas, I am actively working, I am already forty years old, and I am not married. You know, the higher a person's level, the higher the expectations and demands, and I have not been able to start a family. Indeed, perhaps, it's either family or career" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

Meanwhile, many respondents note that it is necessary to try to reconcile and effectively combine personal life and professional advancement.

"It is traditionally accepted that a woman should get married, raise children, and that is her main occupation. I am progressive and I try to set a different example. Especially in politics, there was a clear division: this is men's business, and this is women's. Now a lot is changing, for example, one third of the council of elders are women. But interesting events need to be organized so that women have more active involvement" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

Interestingly, there are not many effective examples of combining family life with professional advancement and leadership roles at the community and provincial levels. Thus, during a focus group discussion in Vanadzor, the example of a well-known female leader in the province, Professor Tereza Shahverdyan, was mentioned, who "has not lost

her feminine qualities: she has a very good family, children. But for the whole of Vanadzor, we celebrate one Shahverdyan, there is no other. A woman should be strong, but not lose her femininity."

It is noted that women and girls have made great progress, especially in the last decade: "There's no stopping them" (Arevhat, Syunik province). They work in all sectors, and are also actively involved in local self-government bodies: the municipality, the council of elders, etc.

*"In my opinion, as a woman, I can't say that I used to think the way I do today. I am a human being. I want life to be decent, and I want an interesting life" (Naira, Kotayk province).*

*"The noticeable change is that women have learned to voice their needs more loudly. Maybe I am the one who communicates with women who want to change their lives, and others do not have that courage, but in my environment there are more and more such women, both local and from Artsakh, who are initiating small businesses, trying to change their lives. We have the Diliton festival, where women bring, present, and sell the products they have made. I definitely don't remember that women did all that a decade ago; they mostly stood in the background, and men were mainly involved in sales. Now women do all that themselves, and it's not so much about making money as it is about being visible in the community. It's a very, very big thing" (Meline, Tavush province).*

Society's demands and pressure on women have decreased, and have been reduced by the efforts of women themselves: women are no longer "**afraid to make mistakes.**"

*"The fact that previously women could avoid and withdraw before engaging in any activity has now changed. They take risks more easily, women's self-esteem has increased, they are not afraid of making mistakes or failing. They enter into activity, achieve success, and if they don't, they leave, change their field, and that is normal" (Diana, Gegharkunik province).*

**A woman is an omnipotent being:** she is able to effectively combine family life and work, make efforts, and move forward. She just needs to be hindered and hampered.

"I have met a woman who has two children and works all the time, and her husband also works. Women have greater ambition than men. The more you set a woman free, the greater her achievements will be. You have to set a woman free." (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province)

It should be noted that the perceptions of the respondent women regarding the place, role, and functions of women in society are different, and can be characterized as a transition from traditional to modern: for some, the most optimal option is women's active participation in mid-level initiatives: community programs, organizations, small and medium-sized businesses, and, at the same time, the traditional role in the family, in matters of parenting.

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that the increase in women's participation is linked not only to national-level politics, but also to transformation at the community level. In villages and cities, women became leaders of school boards, community councils, and local initiatives. They organized collective actions around practical needs such as water supply, road repair, education, and health care, demonstrating that governance is not only about high politics but also about everyday life.

The presence of women in community leadership positions had a twofold impact. On the one hand, it directly improved community problem-solving, as women often prioritized social cohesion and well-being. On the other hand, it changed cultural norms, regulating women's authority in the public sphere.

In this sense, political positions and state leadership continue to be reserved for men. This is also the opinion of women who have leadership roles, are self-established in their communities, and are also politically active (the opinion presented below is that of a provincial office manager of a political party, a businesswoman).

"I am a traditionalist, I like to preserve the heritage of our grandfathers and grandmothers. Society is now obsessed with various things, forgetting itself. A woman, as a fragile being, the flavor and aroma of society, must protect herself. I do not see a woman in ministerial positions. I see a woman in small business, having her own occupation in the field of education, culture, and activities related to the preservation

of spiritual values. I do not see a woman in harsh fields - in the police, in the army. A man and a woman should do mind their own business" (Karine, Syunik).

It is also noted that the traditionally assigned social roles of women and men have long changed, however, women and men are not objectively equal, therefore, under the conditions of equality of their rights, the differences in their responsibilities, which stem from the objective differences between men and women, cannot be ignored. Again, these opinions were expressed by active, leading women who have achieved significant achievements in their communities and professional fields.

"A woman should play her role. In any case, a woman and a man are different. What does it mean to be equal? If there is equality, then let men also have children (laughs). A woman should have her own functions, a man his own. I am not saying that, for example, a woman should not serve in the army, but she should serve in those areas where she can be effective, e.g. be a translator, diplomat, negotiator. A woman is a fragile being. I even think that a woman should not drive a car, let men drive" (Laura, Syunik province).

"Women, girls are future mothers, naturally they don't need to know everything in the business sphere. If they get too carried away with business, the family is put aside" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).

They unanimously noted that all sectors where women have gained greater representation have benefited from their presence. These qualities, from empathetic communication to complex problem solving, are not simply "add-ons" to governance, but essential components of building inclusive policies and sustainable social development. Therefore, for social harmony and good governance, it is inevitably important that both sexes are represented in all spheres of public life.

This recognition of women's contributions reflects a significant shift in attitudes within Armenian society. Historically, politics, state administration, and community leadership were considered male-dominated spheres, while women were confined to the private sphere of family care and household management. Such divisions were reinforced by cultural traditions, social expectations, and the legacy of patriarchal rule. However, the instability of recent decades, including Armenia's independence, economic transformations, political upheavals, wars, pandemics, and mass deportation, have

disrupted these boundaries. Women have repeatedly taken on roles that were once inaccessible to them, not only out of aspiration but also out of necessity. This expansion of women's roles has reshaped both the structure of public institutions and the norms of community life. The focus group discussions also highlighted the need to promote and develop women's leadership skills and, at the same time, differentiate the social roles of women and men.

*"A woman should not pretend to be a man. For example, there should not be a woman in many leadership positions."*

*"A woman is created by her nature, by everything she has, to create, to be light... But it is very difficult to take on that responsibility in the conditions of our reality, and we are forced to behave and act like a man. It works, but instead we lose our femininity, and that is not right in terms of nature" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).*

It is interesting to note that young girls in particular associate their modern role in society with "European" values and influence, and the limitations and discrimination of women's rights with the Soviet past and the historical influence of Islamic countries on Armenian society.

*"Now people are lighter, freer, more self-confident. Soviet morals were more restrictive, European mentality is much more confident, freer, they give more space to women. When we study Armenian culture from ancient times, for example, Armenian mythology, we see that women were free. I suppose that during the Soviet era, Armenians and Muslims lived together, and this affected Armenian morals, constrained them" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).*

Women are increasingly participating in civil society organizations, academia, the media, and even in sectors such as security, police, and the military—sectors traditionally associated with men. Their involvement in these fields shows that women can succeed in roles that require strength, endurance, and authority.

In the civil society sphere, women emerged as key leaders of non-governmental organizations, grassroots initiatives, and rights advocacy campaigns. These areas often allow women to operate more freely than in formal politics, providing platforms for addressing social issues such as domestic violence, environmental protection, education, and cultural preservation. Many of those interviewed emphasized that civil society has

become a vital testing ground for women's leadership, enabling them to gain experience, build networks, and ultimately move into political roles.

The presence of women in academia and the media has also played a significant role in reshaping public life. Women scholars have contributed to policy analysis, gender and social research that has informed governance. Women journalists have presented perspectives that have challenged dominant opinions and highlighted the voices of marginalized groups.

Modern women know their rights and are ready to defend them. The female respondents speak about this in both a positive and critical sense. Positive opinions refer to women's self-realization, their ability to assert themselves, while criticism refers to the **egocentricity and calculating mentality** of young girls, especially "not doing something for nothing."

"We, the people of our generation, even in the hungry, cold years, were always ready to help people on a voluntary basis. And the girls of this new generation are more educated, defending their rights. They are looking for areas of work where their work will not be exploited. Maybe that's more correct. If, for example, I make concessions regarding working hours, for example, I am willing to work outside of working hours, or on Saturdays, they will always want to familiarize themselves with the working conditions in advance, they will make a clear deal, they will not work more. That's right. I also cooperate with NGOs, where we have 20-25 year old girls who voice their rights and conditions in such a way that even if force majeure situations arise, you can't ask them to resolve the issue. I agree that it's good: a person values their work, their time, and I think (I'm 40 years old) why didn't I do it myself? Also, self-realization is very important for us, to be able to do everything that we didn't manage to do when we were young. Today's girls are not like that, and that's good" (Focus group participant, Lori province).

"Now I am so happy for the mentality of my daughter and her generation, sometimes they even think in a way that makes me ashamed. They think very competently about their rights. Even I, a government employee, when I suddenly work longer hours, she says: Mom, will they pay you for overtime?" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

At the same time, the influence of gender stereotypes is still present and often acts as an obstacle, especially in the labor market. Many people note that one of the negative phenomena in the labor market is the emphasis on women's appearance, even in workplaces where it is not required by the functions, as well as ageism - discrimination based on age.

"Often, when announcing jobs, such requirements are specified, for example, young, good-looking, etc., that women and girls do not want to work there. It should be explained that women are important not only for their appearance, and can work equally with men" (Sarvard, Syunik province).

It was noted that women who tried to work in non-traditional fields encountered resistance, skepticism, and even hostility. In particular, in political leadership positions, women were sometimes ignored as being "unsuitable," "too emotional," or "distracting from real issues." It is noted that even when women hold leadership positions, they are expected to have a masculine leadership style and qualities in order to be taken seriously, which limits women's potential.

Some respondents are concerned about maintaining a purely symbolic approach: women are admitted to institutions to meet quotas or to ensure an equal/comparable mix of men and women on staff, without giving women real authority. In such cases, women face the double challenge of proving their abilities and simultaneously combating organizational isolation.

Traditional approaches and family expectations can also be limiting for women's professional advancement. Some families support women's active involvement in public and political life, while others discourage it, seeing the most important role of women in the family.

A respondent living in Ijevan notes that women are mainly employed in service positions in resort areas and hotels, while management staff and managers are mainly men. Many women also avoid working night shifts, as this can lead to negative comments.

"The mentality here is such that when they hear that there are jobs in hotels, for example, administration, they refuse. There is a belief that if it is a hotel, then the aura is not good" (Iveta, Tavush province).

"We have a very developed tourism sector, in which women are actively involved, but there are taboos, for example, if it is a night shift, a woman should not work there, or

the service sector in general is not perceived positively. Over the past ten years, perhaps, women have begun to pay less attention to what other people, especially strangers, say about them" (Meline, Tavush province).

Women's social activism and active involvement in public affairs have faced resistance and distrust, but over time, traditional perceptions have changed.

"Women have become much more legally aware, they see themselves more in social life, we can see women in higher positions. In Yerevan, more so. In the provinces, when I was little, I don't remember women being involved in public life at all. Our province, Gegharkunik, is one of the most conservative ones, and it was about five years ago that women became more active. I remember when seminars were organized in our province, for example, on gender equality topics, they took it all a little too seriously, saying that they wanted to change some things in us, put forward some ideas. Now all of that is perceived more as an opportunity" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).

The expansion of women's place and role in society, the assumption of roles traditionally attributed to men, is the result not only of women's efforts, but also of men's regression. Almost all interviews noted that boys study worse than girls from school onwards. This is about the negative morals and stereotypes prevalent in society, such as the idea that studying well is "not for boys," or that "a boy who studies well looks like a girl," etc.

Such distorted perceptions and stereotypes stem from narrow, one-sided notions of masculinity, which are widespread especially among young men and inhibit young men's motivation to educate themselves, develop themselves, and express themselves at school and university. As a result, boys lag behind girls during their school years not only due to their diligence and determination, but also due to boys' passivity and negative stereotypical attitude towards learning.

"Boys are more indifferent than girls. Many boys, after returning from military service, focus on earning money, and for many it is an end in itself: just to earn money, not to invest, for example, in education, in order to develop." (Siranush, Kotayk province).

"In recent years, the initiative has passed to girls. Even in school, girls implement any program or initiative, while boys watch from the sidelines. The balance has been upset,

this time towards girls. This is also demotivating: there is no healthy competition and cooperation between boys and girls" (Mariam, Kotayk province).

The same view and concern was voiced in focus group discussions with progressive women. Everyone noted a clear difference between boys and girls: boys hide their unwillingness to develop, to be educated, to broaden their worldview behind traditionalism. Moreover, they are regressing. Getting an education, studying well in boys' environments is labeled, associated with feminine qualities, is not encouraged, and is ridiculed. **Boys who study well are bullied by their peers.**

"A girl is an adult at 16, she knows what she wants, she has a plan for the next three years; she wants to succeed. Boys of the same age come up to her and say, "When will we eat, when will we drink..." What do you want to become? "Well, we'll see..." Good "bright" young people are rare. Even from poor families, they have great aspirations, they achieve a lot. There are extremes with boys: they are either very good or very bad. There are 17 boys in my class, and only one is studying. But that one boy is bullied, because no matter what happens, everyone says, "He will do it, he will say it," and it's a laughing stock, and he starts to refuse to do anything." (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province)

"There are families where boys who study and read a lot are bullied by their parents, for example, they say, 'shame on you, look what your peers are doing, while you sit and read books...'" That child is shaped by the family. "Shaming" means when you can criticize your child for studying and reading, as if to say, 'go, run around in the square, so that they will say, 'You're a boy, you're a smoker, boy, why are you reading a book?'" (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province).

Boys' low motivation to study is also due to the internal rules of the labor market, including the likelihood of getting a job through acquaintances and friends, and the declining value of education. Boys prefer to find a job quickly, earn money, and lack the possibility and desire for long-term investments in their future.

"Especially in recent years, the demotivation to study among boys is as follows: they think: if I have to study and in any case I will go abroad for work, then why should I study? As a result, the demographic picture will also change: more literate, accomplished, developed girls will prefer boys from outside their province, who are

underdeveloped and poorly educated, which will contribute to the emigration of girls from the province. Girls emigrate for the purposes of study and development, boys for work, the population in the province is constantly decreasing" (Diana, Gegharkunik province).

"The situation in the country is very uncertain. If we take our young people out of that uncertainty, we will do something very important. More women stay than men. Men are emigrating. We need to inform, show that knowledge is power. Now, whoever you talk to, they say there is no money. We need to explain that money is created later, first is knowledge, it is through that that money is created" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).

Added to this is the above-mentioned spread of the vicious habits of drug abuse and gambling among boys, which render some members of society inactive, deprive them of the motivation for self-determination and development, and weaken the entire society.

Some of the female respondents noted that failure to learn or ignoring schooling is also a negative tendency that characterizes girls.

"It seems to be accepted that boys don't study, they don't bother studying. But it's the same with girls. They can spend hours on their phones, instead of reading a book" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).

In general, online communication is also a means of women's activation, progress, and self-expression. Some respondents note that the development of online communication is both an opportunity and an obstacle for women's activation. In particular, many women have begun to prefer online communication, and when various events and trainings are organized in the province, many "don't feel like going. They say, if it's online, by phone, by computer, I'll join, but if I have to go, then no" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

It is no coincidence that respondents suggest increasing women's media literacy, teaching them to use mobile phones and communication tools in a useful way, and to use them for work purposes.

"Not only is it a widespread trend to go live on TikTok. I have a neighbor who doesn't distinguish between discounted and free services. Or they share their personal data

here and there, which is dangerous. Raise legal awareness!" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

Thousands of male casualties in the Karabakh war, as well as the involvement of mainly men in outbound labor migration, have created a lack of male potential in Armenian society, which forces women to take on not only new, non-traditional functions, but also their disproportionate burden. This is both an opportunity and a challenge. In addition, as mentioned, girls' greater desire for education and self-development can also serve as an example for men and children. However, in cases where education and the desire for self-development for girls become a means of emigration for educational purposes, this process also does not contribute to the development of society.

### **3. The Karabakh conflict and the 44-day war: women's role and perceptions**

#### **3.1. Transformation of the Karabakh conflict, possible scenarios, and women's forecasts for the future of Armenia**

The 2018 "Velvet Revolution," the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the 44-day war that same year, and the 2023 forced deportation of the entire Armenian population from Artsakh have all been repeatedly cited as decisive, life-changing events. Each of these events carries not only immediate but also long-term consequences, reshaping personal choices, community dynamics, and the trajectory of national development. This cumulative burden of hardship shaped the direction of women's daily lives, their sense of security, and their vision for the future. These transformations can be better understood through the lens of feminist theory, conflict transformation, and human security, which emphasize how individual experiences are interconnected with broader frameworks of power and resistance.

The "Velvet Revolution" initially sparked a wave of optimism. For many women, it was the first time they felt truly represented in political life. The sight of women holding high positions in government challenged entrenched attitudes and gave women a sense of new possibilities. This symbolic shift was important. It forced some of the women to reconsider their own abilities. A mother, a teacher, and other panelists recalled how they began to encourage their daughters, nieces, and students to believe that their voices could matter on national level.

The "Velvet Revolution" acted as a catalyst for women's political representation. Women saw the doors of government structures open. Symbolically, this challenged traditional political culture, inspiring not only women in Yerevan but also in rural areas.

However, the optimism of 2018 was soon overshadowed by subsequent crises. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced families into isolation, shifting the burden of care disproportionately onto women. With schools closed and healthcare systems strained, women became the "shock absorbers" of social systems, absorbing the burden at the household level. Their professional ambitions were often put on hold while family responsibilities increased. Some lost their jobs completely as sectors such as tourism, services, and retail declined, depriving them of financial independence. Others who were able to keep their jobs often did so while carrying the double burden of caregiving and professional obligations.

The crisis also redefined the role of women in their communities. The “Velvet Revolution” inspired many people to become more active in public life, joining local initiatives, speaking at community meetings, or engaging in civic activism. Informal networks played an important role in providing mutual aid in a context of overstretched state institutions. These forms of solidarity strengthened bonds between women, fostering new forms of community resistance. They also expanded women’s visibility as community leaders.

The 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh was the most painful collective trauma for the entire society, including women. They bore the responsibility of supporting their sons, brothers, and husbands who were drafted into military service, often without sufficient state support. Female soldiers also participated in the war.

Respondents reported living in a state of constant anxiety, and their sense of security has been eroded. The forced deportation of the entire Armenian population from Artsakh in 2023 added another layer of trauma. Many women were forced to rebuild their lives from scratch, often in unfamiliar cities and villages across Armenia. They suffered the pain of losing not only their physical but also their intangible cultural heritage, memories, and sense of belonging to the land. For women, the inability to plan for the long term due to security threats highlighted the fragility of their personal stability.

The war exposed the weaknesses of governance and disillusioned citizens, including women, about the promises of democratization. National politics became associated with unfulfilled promises, loss, and instability.

Thinking about and experiencing the Karabakh conflict has a clearly traumatic nature: the majority of respondents preferred not to talk in detail either about the conflict in general or the 44-day war of 2020, its consequences, and possible future scenarios for the transformation of the conflict.

“I don’t particularly like to talk about it. I am very happy that people from Artsakh have come to our community, they have become a sweet part of our community, they have brought new freshness, a breath of life to our community. Of course, there are different people among everyone, but they strengthen our community. I think that no one knows what will happen next” (Satenik, Kotayk province).

They note that the 44-day war of 2020 was not started by Armenia, and peace is the value that Armenia strives for.

"I myself am a supporter of peace. During the war, my nephew was fighting, we had very difficult experiences. The Armenian people will not want to experience such hardships again" (Armenuhi, Kotayk Province).

"Studying history, for example, relations with Persia, we can say that Armenia had very bad neighbors centuries ago, and now Iran helps Armenia a lot. Armenia is always a stage for great powers. But I don't believe in peace with neighbors" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).

The 2020 war and then the forced deportation of Artsakh Armenians in 2023 further deepened the community's dependence on each other. Displaced families were integrated into the host communities, mainly thanks to the efforts of women: they organized clothing collection, shared shelters, prepared food, and provided psychological support. Their role in maintaining social cohesion has become indispensable. However, these responsibilities have also created new challenges. Women often carry the emotional burden of their communities, bearing the grief and offering comfort even when they are in trouble themselves.

Striving for peace, they do not believe in the prospects of peace at the same time: it is noted that neighbors Azerbaijan and Turkey have never been friendly towards Armenia, and that under the current conditions they continue to implement anti-Armenian policies, using the term "peace" and through it trying to achieve concessions that threaten the security of Armenia and the Armenian people. For some, this situation is a reason for alarm and escape, for others - restraint, perseverance, and the ability to live.

"The war is not over yet. That is a fact. We live in Vayots Dzor, and war directly threatens us. But if we constantly live in fear, it will not help us. If we instill that fear in children, it will have very bad consequences. We must be fearless, live for today. People live and create on the border. We must maintain calm and see what will happen" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).

"In the border settlements, boys don't build houses, they don't see a future in Armenia in general. Nothing will stop a struggling person, but there are both conservatives and liberals in society. It's very difficult to influence conservatives. If I didn't strive, didn't study, I would get married like many others, emigrate as if to seek good fortune, sit at home, maybe have my own greenhouse, but I would remain at the same level. A person

needs to be connected to everything – spiritually, politically, so that you don't get lost in it all, figure it out, and advance." (Siranush, Kotayk province)

There is also an opinion that peace should be pursued at all costs, trying to avoid greater threats to Armenia. In this sense, more active involvement of women in politics can be a favorable factor.

"Recently, tension has been observed again. I do not think that our country will be ready to participate in war again now, or even in the next five years. Therefore, everything must be done in the foreign policy sphere so that war does not happen again" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

"A woman is a peacemaker, her opinion and intelligence are important in politics and can bring more positive results. It is necessary to expand women's participation. Also, we need to work with men to activate women, encourage them, or at least not hinder them. Intelligence and education will win even in war" (Laura, Syunik province).

While many respondents emphasized the importance of mutual recognition of the parties to the conflict and inclusive peace agreements based on the principle of mutual respect between the two societies, they also acknowledged that such prospects continue to be limited by the asymmetry of power and the hostile rhetoric of the Azeri authorities. As a result, a significant number of interviewees identified three interrelated strategies that they consider necessary to prevent the resumption of violence and ensure Armenia's long-term security: the involvement of major international powers in mediating a resolution to the conflict, the expansion and strengthening of Armenia's diplomatic network, and the strengthening of Armenia's military capabilities to prevent the resumption of aggression against Armenia. With a constantly unstable geopolitical position and a complex neighborhood, Armenia needs effective diplomacy to complement its limited resources and military capabilities, including through international partnerships and the mobilization of the global diaspora. By leveraging diaspora networks, Armenia can amplify its voice on international platforms and counterbalance the influence of anti-Armenian discourse.

Unfortunately, Armenians have been hearing talk about effective diplomacy since the independence of the Republic of Armenia, but until now, state authorities have consistently ignored and exploited this area of strategic importance for narrow

government interests. It is noted that in the current conditions, there is a lack of faith in tomorrow, uncertainty and anxiety prevail, people live one day at a time. In particular, focus group participants described the future as unpredictable, due to social, economic and political changes that are often beyond individual control. However, women speak of their resilience, demonstrating professional and domestic strategies that can help them and their communities navigate uncertainty. For many, uncertainty is not only a source of anxiety, but also an opportunity for reflection, growth, and proactive engagement.

The discussions highlighted the importance of developing the ability to "learn and move on": accepting failures without giving in to them. This approach reflects pragmatic optimism: acknowledging difficulties while maintaining hope and the determination to act constructively. Women described resilience as a trait that is strengthened through social networks and relationships that are built through activism, mentoring, and shared experiences. Education, community participation, and resilience are interrelated strategies.

**The enlargement of communities in Armenia has created new opportunities and challenges.** After the enlargement of communities, some settlements have found themselves in border communities. There are different moods in such communities: after the 2020 war, some, including some residents of border villages, have decided that they will not leave, will not move, will continue to live in their settlements, marry locals, and continue their lives regardless of threats.

"Last year I was in the border village of Aghbradzor in Vardenis. The flag of our neighbors (Azerbaijan) is visible on the mountain. And under that mountain there is probably a ten-meter clothesline, and on that line, a whole load of children's clothes. This is an important statistic that, regardless of all these dangers, you should not leave. This is very encouraging to me. Now everywhere in the world is unstable, dangerous. You just need to talk to people. If they are not afraid, then you cannot be afraid" (Nazeli, Gegharkunik province).

Women's approaches to living and working in the border provinces are an expression of both concern and anxiety for the future, as well as the willpower and hard work of a certain segment of women. We must continue to live, defend the state, create, invest, and develop, regardless of threats.

"I manage projects in Syunik. When they say, 'Aren't you afraid to go to border settlements, for example, Chambarak?' I say, 'All these years, there has always been a threat of attacks from the neighboring state, they have always fired at our settlements. We have been border-guarding settlements, not bordering ones, but border-guarding. People have always guarded the border, and in these conditions they have continued to live, engage in agriculture, study, and work. The community has always been targeted, and people have continued their lives. Naturally, now it has become much more difficult to create opportunities, but we continue. In our own programs aimed at women and girls, we have had very successful women who have been able to create guest houses in their homes in border areas, develop tourism, become the driving force for the development of their communities, help their husbands, and have been able to earn money here" (Diana, Gegharkunik province).

There are also opposing sentiments and fears.

"The border demarcation process has begun, and there are settlements in our province that are very close to the border demarcation line, for example, the village of Azatamut. People are rushing to sell their houses because there is no self-defense system, they don't believe in it. They say, we will go and live in Hrazdan, because there is no border there (smiles). I know people who can now buy a house in Ijevan with a mortgage, but they don't want to, they feel anxious." (Anahit, Aragatsotn province).

However, approaches of strength, endurance, and persistence prevail: under no circumstances should one leave one's home and homeland, should not run away, and should continue living.

"Vayk has become an enlarged community, and thus a border community. The village of Khndzorut, which is located on the border, is two kilometers from the border. But life is in full swing there, despite everything, no school has been closed there, it is a beautiful village (Ani, Vayots Dzor)."

"We have always been surrounded by enemies. We have to live with that psychology. There should be no fear, it should not prevent us from creating, from developing. We need to become stronger. Everyone can escape. I myself am not going to escape from here, although I have such opportunities" (Laura, Syunik province).

The daughter of one of the respondents was trained in the Art of Survival courses. This is a border zone, and being prepared for military threats is a necessity.

"We don't trust the Turks, but we're not afraid either. Our mountains protect us. If they attack, they won't get out of here" (Arevhat, Syunik province).

Skeptical attitudes toward the peace agenda are also combined with negative public opinions about the tense domestic political atmosphere: female respondents note that in times of crisis, they expect not only mutual hatred but also joint efforts from Armenia's political forces.

"We are divided into several groups, for example, I am an optimist. Yes, now there is a tense situation everywhere, both in society and in political life. When the leaders of the country treat each other like this, what can you say about ordinary people? We need to unite. Now everyone seems to be avoiding their work, living for one day, coming to work already tired, unwillingly. We need to unite, work so that it will be better later. I do not believe in talks about peace. We are dealing with an enemy who is talking about peace today, and can do anything else tomorrow" (Iveta, Tavush province).

It is no coincidence that the socio-psychological atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and skepticism about peace is especially characteristic of the residents of the provinces bordering Azerbaijan, including women, who live in conditions of uncertainty and anxiety. It is noted that **there is a need for socio-psychological mechanisms and approaches to overcome this situation, and these approaches are not being applied at the state level: in some communities, women are trying to support each other on their own initiative.**

"People do not have a clear tool-kit with which they could pull themselves out of that post-war "hole". Those women who felt the impact of the war on themselves still seem to be lost. It would not be bad if such a set of tools were passed on to them" (Meline, Tavush province).

"After the war, in the villages of Berkaber, Kirants, and Vazashen we noticed that there was internal tension and fear. They were also told that war could break out again at any moment, and they always kept their passports, water, and basic necessities ready at hand so that if it started again, they could quickly leave their place and use shelters,

etc. To reduce these fears, we invited psychologists, and we also organize yoga classes. I am sure that if psychologists visited border settlements, not only women, but the entire population would apply to them" (Karine, Tavush province).

The resolution of the Karabakh conflict does not depend on Armenia and the efforts of the Armenian people; all this is attributed to the relations and competition between superpowers, on which the future of Armenia also depends.

"We don't have the resources we need, not in terms of manpower, not in terms of weapons. When we wake up in the morning, we don't know what awaits us. The conflict can be resolved as a result of political decisions made by higher powers, not by Armenia" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).

At the same time, they also do not believe in the intervention of the international community, in the pro-Armenian stance, the desire and willingness of others to protect Armenia's interests. The women interviewed believe that it would be possible to ensure the security of Armenia and the Armenian people only with their own efforts, and that turning to superpowers and asking for support is humiliating and ineffective.

"During the 44-day war, only appeals were made from other states, we did not receive any support, and we saw that we cannot rely on anyone. I no longer believe in that. But we should have military agreements with many states. But not with the CSTO; it did not take any steps during the war. As for the rest, with the EU, the US, and NATO, I am in favor of it" (Armenuhi, Kotayk province).

"As a translator, I recently met with international observers stationed in Jermuk. I asked: if, for example, there is an attack on Jermuk, will you help, for example, evacuate the children? They said, no, we have no right. I would very much like us not to "bend our necks" and wait to see who will take control of our fate. About four months ago, I had unpacked my bag that I had prepared, in case God forbid, I had to flee, so that I would have money for basic necessities, to take the children and take shelter" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

Trust and faith in the Armenian political leadership is also low, which is characteristic of "trauma societies." The part of the women who participated in the study who were ready to talk about politics, the conflict, its prospects and problems (the

majority preferred to bypass these issues, were not ready to talk) note that the deterioration of relations with Russia was a wrong, short-sighted approach. As a result, Armenia's position in the processes surrounding the Karabakh conflict also deteriorated, and Russia's support for Armenia decreased.

"We didn't behave wisely. What was the need to pretend to be sick with Covid, for one day, and not accept the invitation to participate in the May 9 event in Moscow? We shouldn't offend others, even if we don't expect anything. Maybe we had the opportunity, but after such steps, we can't expect anything" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

Thus, the majority of respondents emphasized both the importance of establishing peace on the principle of equal recognition and respect for each other by the parties, the obstructive role of Azerbaijan's anti-Armenian and militaristic statements, and the preventive importance of developing Armenia's diplomatic and military capabilities. Given the constant threat of anti-Armenian violence, Armenia must be prepared to defend itself if negotiations or external actors fail to prevent military actions against Armenia. The importance of maintaining and strengthening Armenia's military capabilities was repeatedly emphasized in interviews. This view reflects a pragmatic recognition of the volatile security environment in the South Caucasus, where historical conflicts regularly resume and escalate into violence.

Conceptually, women's emphasis on Armenia's military preparedness can be understood from the perspective of a security dilemma, in which states arm themselves for defensive purposes but are perceived as a threat by adversaries, thus perpetuating cycles of mutual distrust. For women, military capabilities are not praised as a value in themselves, but rather accepted as a painful necessity in conditions where hostile intentions are seen as unpredictable and probable.

Several interviewees directly addressed the painful lessons of recent wars, which revealed the vulnerability of Armenia's defense capabilities and highlighted the risks of underestimating military threats. For them, strengthening the armed forces is not incompatible with the pursuit of peace, but rather a guarantee that the peace agreements signed can be protected from violation. This perspective is consistent with realist theories of international relations, which emphasize the central role of force and deterrence in preventing conflict. However, it also aligns with feminist analysis, which emphasizes that

women in conflict zones often occupy difficult positions, while simultaneously emphasizing peace and recognizing the need for protection.

However, many respondents are cautious against excessive militarization, noting that directing resources to military needs could undermine social development, democracy, and prospects for reconciliation. Their nuanced views reflect a broader feminist critique of militarized security, which warns that relying solely on physical force can perpetuate cycles of violence and hinder the social transformations necessary for peace. Thus, although they are in favor of strengthening Armenia's military component, they also emphasize that this must be combined with diplomacy, social resilience, and inclusive governance.

These three strategies—Armenia's international engagement, strengthening diplomacy, and military preparedness—together reveal the multidimensional approach with which female respondents conceptualized conflict resolution and national security. Their views do not lend themselves to simplistic dichotomous comparisons between "peace" and "war", "diplomacy" and "militarism". Instead, they indicate a multi-layered understanding of security, where survival in a hostile environment requires simultaneous application of multiple approaches. Dependence on external forces reflects both Armenia's resource constraints and the realization that great power involvement remains an inevitable feature of regional geopolitics. The emphasis on diplomacy underscores Armenia's desire to expand its reach, legitimacy, and alliances beyond its immediate adversaries. Finally, the call for military preparedness underscores the pragmatic realization that peace cannot be maintained without reliable deterrence.

These reflections challenge traditional assumptions about women's roles in peacebuilding. Respondents do not limit themselves to idealized notions of peacemaking/pacifism, but instead articulate a pragmatic and multifaceted vision of security that combines diplomacy and security thinking, soft and hard power, external support and domestic action. Their views align with broader feminist ideas that women's role in conflict cannot be limited to a single discourse, but is shaped by a combination of their lived insecurity, political pragmatism, and demand for justice.

### **3.2. The role of women in the Karabakh conflict, war and post-war context**

During the 44-day war of 2020, the entire society was mobilized, and while men went to the battlefield, most women worked in the rear, providing the army with the necessary food, material resources, and transportation. All the women respondents, of different ages and from different places, spoke about this, and spoke about it as a natural, normal phenomenon. In no interview was women's support for the state and the army mentioned as heroism, a special and exceptional phenomenon: it was necessary, and everyone did it naturally. At the same time, they speak about it with pride.

The 2023 deportation crisis, in particular, highlighted the importance of women's perspectives in national policymaking. Women have been at the forefront of relief efforts, highlighting gaps in housing, employment, and psychosocial support for deported families. Their advocacy put pressure on the state and international actors to address these issues more comprehensively. In doing so, women positioned themselves as central actors in the national struggle for recovery and resilience.

Women's personal experiences of loss and adaptation translated into new community roles, which in turn influenced national debate and policy. The impossibility of long-term planning, a sentiment that was repeatedly expressed throughout the discussions, reflects not only the uncertainty of personal lives but also the broader national situation. Yet it is precisely this uncertainty that has motivated many women to become more involved in community life. Recognizing that state institutions are fragile, women often take on the responsibility of building resilience from scratch. In doing so, they expand the meaning of citizenship and redefine the relationship between citizens and the state.

**During the war and post-war period, women's community activism and leadership were both unprecedented and at the same time consistent with traditional approaches, the strong-willed qualities and courage demonstrated by Armenian women throughout history.**

"We have all suffered losses as a result of the war. It seems that people have become dull, indifferent to life and everything. At the same time, we see examples when people are not depressed, they try to look forward. As a result of the war, women and girls have become more tempered, alert, and stronger. We also see the example of the women of Artsakh: they are trying to be strong, not to be depressed" (Mary, Tavush province).

"We need to support the people of Artsakh, their willpower and determination are higher than that of local women" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).

"Everyone gathered at the culture house, both women and men, we were there day and night, collecting clothes, food, etc. for servicemen and refugees. All organizational issues were carried out by women there. Yes, men were there because it was necessary at night, but during the war, women's organizational skills were truly demonstrated: distributing food, medicine, and providing psychological support" (Kristine, Vayots Dzor).

The 44-day war of 2020 changed the life, lifestyle, and thinking of the entire society, and also directly or indirectly affected people, families, and communities, taking the lives of loved ones and changing the normal course of life.

"I had losses: my brother was killed. We have three victims from the village. We always think about it and remember it when we enter the village. I got married in 2022, after the war. We postponed the marriage because of the war. My husband is a serviceman. We struggled with our psychological experiences, and we managed to resolve that." (Siranush, Kotayk province)

"Even those who were not directly involved in the war were very affected. We have a community center in Dilijan, where many women gathered, and left their homes and children, weaving camouflage nets, doing everything possible, then supporting the displaced Artsakhis with food and clothing, and offering them a home, and all of that was an initiative. This also increased the level of empathy for each other. I mention these good things, these are "flowers," but there are women who have been directly damaged by the war: they have lost the colors of their lives, they have become difficult to recognize, even their eyes have changed. I also know that there are families where they have even lost two sons, and these women are standing strong: they gather women, discuss their problems, organize psychological sessions in schools. You see, that woman, that mother has received a second wind, because there is no other option" (Meline, Tavush province).

It is noted that during the war, everyone, even the schoolchildren, were very active and supportive. Everyone felt compassion, "motherly love." Everyone cared for each other.

"One of the essential differences between men and women is that women express themselves, while men keep everything inside. During the war, for example, whoever was in grief would gather, talk, and help, while men did not share, they took it harder" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).

One of the respondents lost her brother in the 2020 Artsakh war. She notes that many have suffered losses, and their families have tried to support and encourage each other. She sees the role of women in the war and post-war situation as both direct participation and supporting participants. Again, rather than serving on an equal footing with men, such defense functions are preferable, which, in the interviewee's opinion, are more in line with women's abilities:

"I have read that women are good snipers. But since Armenia's security is in extremely bad shape, that is not a woman's place. It is neither a woman's nor a man's place. Our place is in the field of diplomacy, negotiation. Women are more patient, better negotiators, more yielding" (Gohar, Gegharkunik province).

Women's memories of the war contain a disposition to overcome, to be restrained and strong, to organize, to make efforts, and to provide for others.

"We made camouflage nets, socks for soldiers. It's mostly volunteer work. We have acquaintances in military units, we take old uniforms that should already be discarded. We make camouflage nets from them" (Karine, Syunik province).

It is important to note that during the war months and after the war, according to women, they performed tasks attributed to both women and men, and bore the full brunt of the hardships, without characterizing it as a man's or woman's obligation.

*"We, the women of our department, worked hard for almost six months, almost forgetting that we were women. Together with the women of Artsakh, we experienced everything that happened during and after the war, both physically and mentally. We would rest physically, and it would pass, but psychologically we could not overcome it all at once. At that time, there was also the coronavirus pandemic, we took it on our feet. I believe that a woman is a very strong being, she can overcome anything, and we were convinced of that. We did so much work that now I wonder how we were able*

*to do all that. Then, in September 2023, Artsakh residents came again, well, we already had experience, it was still working out" (Naira, Kotayk province).*

During and after the war, businesswomen and philanthropists played a major role in initiating charitable activities, often not vocal about their support, but they contributed to unity and joint activities in communities.

"We have a nursing home here, we help, for example, the Mountainous Armenia Foundation, the Gagik Tsarukyan Foundation. By the way, Rosa Tsarukyan often comes, says: "You call me Babo. I am an elderly volunteer." She sent so much thread to knit socks. The grandmothers who work on them knit socks, write notes in them, and send them to the soldiers. This volunteer program has been operating for six years now. It is also Ara Shahinyan's charity. In reality, it is not the knitting of socks that is the result, but the idea that the grandmother who knits socks supports the soldier, the army, and the soldier protects himself and thinks about the people behind him during his service. Susanna Martirosian is the director of the Tsiatsan company, she is also a philanthropist, an activist, joins trainings, our activities, is a good entrepreneur, always supports Armenian women to have a life and an open mindset" (Karine, Syunik province).

It was noted that after the 44-day war of 2020 and the forced deportation of Artsakh Armenians in the fall of 2023, programs have been initiated and are being implemented for Artsakh women to support their employment through the transfer of new knowledge and skills.

"The Ministry of Social Affairs is carrying out work to attract women from Artsakh. I work in an electronics store, we have hired two women from Artsakh. They are a hardworking, creative people. It is a lie that "Artsakh people do not like to work" (Laura, Syunik province).

At the same time, some of the women living in the province mentioned in their interviews that it would be desirable not to specifically target Artsakh women when implementing such programs, but to implement the programs for all women who need such knowledge and skills, without giving priority to those deported from Artsakh.

"Many courses are organized for deportees from Artsakh: sewing, hairdressing, manicure, so that they can work later. But here a distinction is made, which I cannot accept: "Courses for Artsakh women." That is not right. Why not conduct courses for all women?" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

The opinion of not singling out Artsakh women and not making a distinction between them and local women was mentioned in a number of interviews and in focus group discussions, but it was not approved in the discussions. It was explained that the Armenian population forcibly deported from Artsakh, including women, have special needs, which should also be addressed by special programs for the development and promotion of women's capabilities.

"Especially among deportees, the problem of properly distributing their scarce financial resources has arisen after the war. For them, the implementation of capacity-building programs is important. Many, for example, want to create a greenhouse, but do not know how to do it. Among rural residents, including women, it is necessary to develop the skills of establishing and developing small businesses, preparing applications for grants. Some even need to master computer programs, and then the skills necessary to develop business plans" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).

It is interesting to note that, according to many of the interlocutors, the Armenians of Artsakh have a stronger, more stable, restrained character, resistant to difficulties, and at the same time unbreakable, active, and capable of leadership than the people of Armenia, which was probably formed as a result of living in difficult conditions and facing challenges.

In addition, it is also noted that the Armenians of Artsakh have a higher domestic culture than the people of Armenia, and are less "infected" with a consumerist attitude towards culture, art, and each other; they are more humane.

"Years ago, we staged a theatrical performance and went to Artsakh on a tour. In Shushi, there were people of different ages in the hall, including soldiers and children. So many different people, and no dust or garbage. I will never forget how attentively the soldiers listened. In fact, it was a few hundred kilometers away from here, and on a completely different level" (Maro, Vayots Dzor).

After the war, the burdens placed on women have increased. As they say, women are often forced to fulfill the duties traditionally assigned to men. After the war, there are many families with incapable male members. The women in these families try to work in as many places as possible, even as cleaners, waitresses, etc. Men who are regularly sent for reservist training are absent from home, and the wives of the military, including contract servicemen, take on all the care of the family and the land. Many women also drive cars to take their children to school in the absence of their husbands. This is not about equality, but about necessity.

During and after the war, the women of Armenia once again demonstrated willpower, endurance, mental and physical strength, and a willingness to defend the state and society.

"Our nation has always been adaptable, and content with little. I would very much like us to be more combative, like centuries ago. But we are not weak. For example, those resettled from Artsakh are very strong, they are looking for opportunities. These people want their country, their territory, their land. We all realize that we can all find ourselves in the same situation, and we must do everything to prevent this from happening. But in fact, we did everything we could. Women gave their children, who disappeared. It is terrible when you raise a child for 18-20 years, and suddenly you encounter an abyss with which you can never adapt. I ended up in the hospital and met women my age who had lost their children in the war. They had gone for artificial insemination to have another child. They were women my age, who looked like 60-year-olds. Strength appears in them, they give everything they have for victory. Also, if there is a war, the people will fight, struggle, but the people cannot become the government in order to make the right decisions. The people have actually done everything they could. It is not necessary to say that the people are asleep, indifferent, etc. That is not the case. We do not have a strong leader, and since we do not have one, we are now in chaos. The war taught us to love what we have. It is possible that the war made women stronger. If necessary, women can also take up arms and defend the homeland" (Karine, Tavush province).

The events of the last decade also highlight intergenerational dynamics. Young women, observing the activism of their mothers and grandmothers, are likely to continue this legacy. The expansion of women's roles as community leaders, activists, and public

intellectuals is a significant cultural shift that could have long-term consequences for Armenia's future. If the 2018 "Velvet Revolution" opened doors for public participation in a purely symbolic, demonstrative manner, then the crises of 2020 and 2023 made women indispensable players in keeping society together. The majority of interviewed women note that the Karabakh conflict remains unresolved, both for their personal lives and for the state. In their opinion, the resolution of the conflict cannot be limited to signing a ceasefire or a temporary cessation of violence. Instead, they emphasize the need for a peace agreement that all parties to the conflict will mutually recognize, value, and implement. In the opinion of the respondents, only an agreement that ensures legitimacy through mutual recognition can create a solid foundation for coexistence.

It is noted that the rhetoric and practices of the opposing side of the conflict (Azerbaijan) have not demonstrated a willingness to adopt such a transformative approach. Instead, they have pointed to an intensification of hostile discourse, denialist attitudes, and hostile gestures that signal continued hostility rather than a move toward reconciliation. Their experience aligns with scholarly analyses of protracted conflicts, which emphasize the central role of political discourse in perpetuating or eroding hostilities. The women's accounts suggest that such dynamics remain prevalent, reinforcing their perception that the conflict is still far from resolved.

According to the women interviewed, for peace to be meaningful, it must extend beyond the geopolitical sphere to the personal spheres of everyday existence, ensuring physical security, restoring dignity, and fostering a sense of security. Without such changes, even official declarations and regulations will not lead to sustainable peace.

Many of the women noted that their personal experiences of loss, displacement, and uncertainty have not been sufficiently recognized in national or international peacebuilding frameworks. For them, the unresolved nature of the conflict is not only a legal or political issue, but also an embodied reality that shapes their daily lives. As research on post-war societies has shown, the psychological and social consequences of unresolved conflicts, including trauma, mistrust, and marginalization, can persist long after the cessation of active hostilities. These consequences affect not only relationships between individuals but also between generations, as unresolved grievances and fears are transmitted within families and communities. Thus, when women describe conflict as "unresolved," they focus on both the structural, external, and internal aspects of the threat, which persist despite changes in official policies or diplomatic processes.

Conflicts remain unresolved when basic needs such as security, identity, and recognition are denied. The women's insistence on a peace agreement that both sides "recognize and value" illustrates this: without mutual recognition, agreements can be superficial and quickly broken. This is especially true in contexts where the denial of historical contradictions or the refusal to acknowledge the suffering of others is used as a political tool. For Armenian women, the recognition of their own approaches and difficulties is not an abstract legal concept, but a prerequisite for healing collective trauma and imagining a shared future.

Therefore, women's perspectives help to rethink what it means to declare a conflict "resolved." From their perspective, conflict resolution cannot be equated with the cessation of hostilities or the signing of treaties prepared by the elite. Instead, it implies a holistic transformation of conflict, encompassing the discursive, structural, and experiential aspects of conflict. This understanding is consistent with broader debates in peace studies that question the effectiveness of state-centered and military approaches to peacebuilding, and call for the full inclusion of conflicting societies.

The women's comments lead to the conclusion that under the current circumstances, the Karabakh conflict cannot be considered resolved. While official statements may indicate progress in resolving the issue, the reality continues to be characterized by uncertainty, mistrust, and the absence of real dialogue. Women's emphasis on issues of mutual recognition, inclusive participation, and everyday security underscores the limitations of narrowly defined "peace" declarations by state bodies. It also highlights the potential contribution of women's voices to the development of alternative paths to reconciliation. The women argue that as long as hostile rhetoric and exclusionary practices prevail on the Azeri side, the conflict will remain unresolved, both for them as individuals and for Armenian society.

Some respondents doubt the possibility of having their own input into political decision-making regarding the conflict, noting that decisions on peace and security are made at the highest political and military levels and remain largely inaccessible to ordinary citizens, particularly women.

At the same time, Armenian women believe in their own strength, knowledge, and abilities to contribute to the empowerment of the country through their continued social, community, educational, and political engagement. The role of women in communities, civil society organizations, and broader national programs is emphasized in shaping public

opinion, voicing and representing the needs of vulnerable groups. Women are not only a party affected by conflict, but also pioneers of change, who build networks of solidarity and advocate for justice.

At the community level, some respondents described their continued involvement in education, humanitarian work, and non-governmental organizations. At the national level, women's increasing participation in civic initiatives, public discussions of political processes, and the functioning of the state governance system was highlighted. The interviews reflected the expanding participation of women in the formation and expression of public opinion on defense and security issues, and the direct and increasing involvement of women in the defense system as an important factor in strengthening democratic culture and accountability. Women's involvement in security and peacebuilding, in both soft and hard power institutional structures and processes, reflects the observations of the "Women, Peace and Security" agenda, in particular UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which emphasizes the vital role of women's participation in peacebuilding and the reconstruction of societies after conflict.

## 4. Women's leadership potential and reality

### 4.1. Leadership as perceived by women: effective cases

When discussing their conception of the leader, surveyed women mostly mentioned male leaders from both history and modern life, including figures who left not only positive but also negative imprint in history.

This trend highlights a deeper understanding among participants that leadership itself is not synonymous with virtue or morality. Rather, it is the ability to influence, mobilize, and direct collective behavior, whether the results are constructive or destructive. For many, leadership was equated with visibility, authority, and the ability to leave an imprint in history.

Speaking about the desirable qualities of a leader, the interviewed women mentioned:

- honesty: even hardly acceptable truth is more valuable than a beautiful lie,
- the ability to foresee the future, a national development plan, having a vision,
- compassion and care for one's own society,
- resilience and adaptability,
- inspiration and guidance, "showing the way",
- responsibility,
- accountability: leaders should never "hide behind the group",
- the ability to listen,
- the ability to make effective decisions in complex, crisis situations,
  - mastering the art of communication: conveying messages clearly, adapting them to different audiences, and ensuring that everyone feels informed;
  - conflict resolution: mediating disputes fairly and preventing factors that undermine unity;
  - the ability to delegate work effective division of labor,
  - strategic thinking: predicting risks, planning for unexpected situations and aligning actions with long-term goals.

*"If I can't trust the words of my leaders, their actions mean nothing to me."*

*"A leader must always remember that he represents more than just himself."*

When talking about famous female leaders, they mentioned Margaret Thatcher, Nancy Pelosi, and Lyudmila Harutyunyan.

*"Margaret Thatcher: they called her the "Iron Lady," but inside she was a very fragile woman."*

*"Nancy Pelosi's statement, especially her statement, "At the age of 47, I realized that I had to leave my kitchen and enter big politics," was crucial for me, meaning that a woman should think even in the kitchen not only about what to cook, but also have a broad mindset, a worldview. You can even take off your kitchen apron and enter big politics."*

*"Of all such female leaders in Armenia, I only remember Lyudmila Harutyunyan" (from focus group discussions).*

Young respondents, in particular, often cited their mothers as the most obvious and enduring examples of leadership. Participants described how their mothers assumed leadership roles in their families in ways that were so natural and unquestioned that their authority was never challenged. These women were not necessarily prominent in public or political life, but within the family they embodied many of the very qualities that participants had identified as essential for effective leadership: determination, responsibility, adaptability, and the ability to inspire trust.

There is a special understanding between women: in such a situation, it is natural and justified for them to talk about women's issues and express their opinions.

*"I interact with women a lot. We are in the same boat, we know that our problems are very similar." (Naira, Kotayk province)*

The surveyed women trust in their own abilities, believe that women are strong, intelligent, persistent, purposeful, and can achieve any goal if they set it and make the necessary efforts.

*"Whatever we proposed, demanded, has been achieved. Because the proposals are well-founded. If I don't do it, I won't be able to achieve anything. I have the motivation to develop. For that, we need resources and money" (Siranush, Kotayk province).*

"If we sit and wait, no one will support us. We need to empower ourselves" (Ani, Tavush).

"A girl, a woman should be knowledgeable, they should develop their abilities, knowledge. They should understand that they are important to society, they should value themselves. Sitting at home will not change anything. We need to expand our connections, make information more accessible" (Mary, Tavush province).

In addition to perceptions of and references to women leaders at the national and international levels, there was discussion of women's leadership at the community level, initiatives and ideas implemented by women at the local level, organizations and enterprises founded, and women's support events.

Micro-level leadership is no less important than national leadership, as it stimulates the development of communities and contributes to the strengthening of state foundations and cooperation among people. Such is the story of one of the respondents, Gayane Khachatryan of Talin, Aragatsotn province, who established the Talin Women's Resource Center-Foundation, and supports women in training and handicrafts, which she helps to implement, including in cooperation with foreign embassies and benefactors in the Republic of Armenia. Handicraft is a common skill in the Talin region, even, as the interviewee says, "it's a shame if a girl doesn't know handicrafts."

*"We toured the villages, took photos of the women's work, the Norwegian consul said, 'Your women's work is very neat and clean.' We accepted the first order, created a foundation" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).*

The interviewee made this a source income for women. Women make dolls wearing costumes, trinkets, Christmas tree toys, etc. They accept large orders, help with sales, including sending them abroad, and provide women with income, the need for which is great in the province.

"Many people are not so lucky, especially girls from rural areas. I was lucky, I studied, became a teacher, a translator. When I walked around communities, especially villages, I saw women who had no education, no work, and no opportunity to get a job, and I always dreamed of doing something to help these women. They were ashamed to speak out, they were ashamed to participate in focus groups. One woman even told

me, 'You're welcome. I have a nice dress, but I have nowhere to wear it, now I wear it to the events you organize'" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).

The foundation also organizes other events, such as first aid courses and running competitions, which bring together people of both sexes, including children who came from Yerevan to participate in the race in the province. This also, as the interlocutor notes, "levels gender stereotypes and forms new connections."

Another example of micro-level leadership can be one of the respondents, Rita Davtyan (Ashtarak), who initiated the cleaning and landscaping of her settlement, facing a negative and indifferent response from the community and residents, and then managed to transform public perceptions and unite people for the improvement of her own settlement.

"When I retired, I first started cleaning the area, trying to set an example for others not to pollute and clean public spaces. Then I started growing flowers all over the street, then planting trees. Seeing that I was alone, they didn't help me, at first I felt powerless, I was upset, I thought: I can't change people. Three years later, I already have a team with me. They are interested, they ask. They ask for flower seeds. But in any case, they are mainly interested only in their own area, in the yard; they are not interested in the common area. Many say: I'm sorry that we don't help you. In any case, their compassion has moved somewhere, they feel guilty. I'm still waiting for that movement. But since they don't throw garbage on the street, they don't pollute, it's already good" (Rita, Aragatsotn province).

The respondent notes that patriotism should be taught, and that it is not only in discussing and solving big issues, but in loving, improving, keeping clean, and making your home, nature, and environment flourish.

"Teach to love the Homeland, to treat it as a permanent, spiritual value that will be passed on to generations" (Rita, Aragatsotn province).

A unique example of community leadership is the Political Cafe created by Anahit Simonyan in Talin and Ijevan, the idea of which stemmed from the need to create a platform to discuss political issues in the community. According to the respondent, their

cafes are particularly for women, who can share community issues, approaches, exchange experiences, and unite over coffee.

"Let's take, for example, our Political Cafe. We created it together with my husband, but in fact I run it; my husband is busy elsewhere. Not because my husband can't, but because I can. I am capable. We don't have to pay some manager to do it all; I can do it all myself. When we opened the cafe, we broke many stereotypes both in Talin and Ijevan. When we opened, we didn't have any service staff. In Talin, it was very difficult to find a girl working in the service sector. We had to do everything ourselves. When we moved to Ijevan, we faced another stereotype: young people don't want to get involved in that sector" (Anahit Simonyan).

In her cafe, the respondent hired a family forcibly deported from Artsakh, having seen leadership qualities in the Artsakh woman.

"We have a woman working in our cafe, she is from the Martuni region of Artsakh, she has three children. Her father-in-law died in the Karabakh war in 2020, and her husband during subsequent events. Her sick mother-in-law also lives with her. When I look at her, she is such a balanced, stable, "profound" girl. When we discuss different problems, she says: well, it's okay, let it pass. It's difficult to surprise her with anything. They have gone through so many difficulties that they are not afraid of anything" (Anahit Simonyan, Aragatsotn province).

Another example of women's leadership abilities in the provinces of Armenia is the business program of Karine Saribekyan of Ijevan (Tavush province), with the help of which she initiated the development of national arts and crafts by women living in the province and the sale of the created products, contributing to women's self-expression and additional income.

"We have many talented women who are masters of crafts: rug and carpet weaving. They help organize and sell all of that. I have noticed that they are often embarrassed to stand in a stall and sell the products they have made" (Karine, Tavush province).

The initiator of the program notes that it was designed not only to provide rural women with additional income and employment, but also to motivate, empower, and involve them more actively in social relations.

"In our first programs, we tried to get girls out of the house. If at first they refused to present their products on the market, we tried to convince them not to be shy, in the future the quality of the products improved, and we helped to make market calculations. If women are not included in our programs, we include them" (Karine, Tavush province).

Within the framework of the program, beneficiaries are provided with organizational knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurial abilities.

"We have beneficiaries who, as a result of cooperation with us, have already registered as individual entrepreneurs. For example, if you need an individual entrepreneur selling pigs, we immediately provide information on who to buy from and what to buy, and we also teach how to operate in the tax field, because there are fears related to it. At the moment, the number of male beneficiaries is greater, but there are cases when we have helped women to buy a sewing machine, to register an individual enterprise, to advertise and sell their products online. I would like companies from Yerevan to come to the provinces and employ our women. Our residents are very talented, but they cannot open up due to the lack of information" (Karine, Tavush province).

Leadership starts with small initiatives, which are easier to finance and implement, and allows women to gain organizational skills that can later be applied to larger initiatives.

Despite some inclusion of women in state bodies, including local self-government bodies, respondents do not consider it sufficient. It is noted that women have advantages over men: women's special qualities would contribute to more efficient work of state bodies and collectives, reduce corruption risks, and improve the working atmosphere.

"I would like to see more women elected. In our local government elections, fewer women have been elected, although there should have been 30%. Women are more flexible, more skilled, kinder, more attentive, more conscientious. It is difficult to bribe a woman, no man can bribe a woman. A man can persuade a man, bribe him, and speak for his own good. I am not a money-loving person, I am ambitious. I would like

not money, but to improve my city by my work. If a woman is an official, it is easier to find a way to get along with her. We have only two female members of the council of elders. It is natural that since there are few of them, they do not speak out, their voices are not heard. We have 12 department heads in our municipality, two of which are women. The mayor has two deputies, one of whom is a woman (the second deputy). She mainly supervises kindergartens, and she works well, she is a specialist. I would like there to be more women, to be heads of departments and advisors" (Naira, Kotayk province).

"Women are more conscientious in their work. If I needed to hire an employee in a management position now, I would hire a woman. Because women are much neater, more meticulous, more organized, more responsible, and have greater empathy. And they learn very quickly. They need less time to acquire new knowledge" (Anahit, Aragatsotn province).

It was noted that women need to take on positive leadership: not to command, assert themselves against others, and punish, but to lead, support, encourage, and serve as role models.

"Lead, but not at the expense of someone's humiliation, not at the expense of others for the purpose of self-affirmation, but lead people through your abilities and literacy, but not at the expense of belittling them so that you can rise" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

#### **4.2. Factors supporting and hindering women's leadership**

In nearly all interviews, women first mentioned the factors that hindered and then the ones that facilitated their self-expression. One of the primary factors that hindered self-expression and development of women and girls is their social environment. The environment, in the opinion of many, is not conducive to progress, development, and self-expression.

Young women in particular note that urban and rural women have great potential, but it is difficult to realize. To that end, programs need to be implemented and information disseminated.

"In Ijevan, including in the villages, we have great human resources: women and girls rich in knowledge, who, for example, got married in the villages and cannot be realized, they have no space for self-expression. We need approaches that will allow them to express themselves, at least to implement business projects in the future" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

"A woman is a very strong figure for me. We have many, very strong women in our community in the sense that even though they may be single mothers, they can work, change their profession, field, move forward, take initiatives, and know where and why they are going" (Meline, Tavush province).

Women's behavior and thinking are influenced by their parents and then their husbands. In order to express themselves freely and develop, a more favorable environment is needed. One such example is TUMO. Thus, in addition to the school in Vayk, the TUMO temporary center in Yeghegnadzor has also been opened since September. At the moment, a new, large building is being built for it. TUMO is an opportunity to gain broad knowledge and skills, to think broadly. Children meet visiting professionals, gain a new worldview. Some of the young respondents have become leaders in their communities, have been able to study at foreign universities, and are trying to improve the lives and livelihoods of their communities since attending TUMO.

Over time, perceptions of the need for women's self-development in the family environment have changed, and the practice of family members making decisions about women has also decreased in rural communities.

"I grew up in such a traditional family that at the age of 12-13, if you sang a song about love, for example, under your breath, it was considered god knows what. I don't know what they would do to you, especially my grandmother. But as you get older, you start to disobey your family, and your neighbors also add to that. For example, their children are always at home, and one day you are in Yerevan, the next day in Tsaghkadzor for classes, etc., it's not appreciated. Or you find a job, you come home late, you start to fight against your family, and it's not easy" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

"When I wanted to get a driver's license years ago, to drive a car, my father was very opposed, but I got my 18-year-old daughter a driver's license, encouraged her to take

classes, learn to drive, and my father was very excited about it (everyone laughs). Now he keeps asking me, why don't you buy a car for your daughter?" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

At the same time, the tradition of making decisions about each other in the family environment is still partially preserved, which can have both negative and positive functions, including being aimed at the safety of family members. At the same time, women's initiative, activity, and increased activity in communities also contribute to the well-being of families.

«The times when a man could pound the table and tell his wife: «you can't work» are gone» (Ani 2, Vayots Dzor).

"For example, the community council announced small grants, and one of my acquaintances applied with a project to build a women's chat room in their yard, so that women could sit in the yard and chat. Such projects are funded, and it seems to be more common for women to come up with initiatives. At the same time, for example, girls' participation in trainings is not always smooth; parents and relatives are cautious, they do not allow girls to participate in anything that is unfamiliar to their parents" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

Women are financially and psychologically dependent on men. Women's equality with men is achieved through women's efforts, work, and assuming not only rights but also responsibilities, which, according to the surveyed women, is the most effective option.

"I am completely independent, self-sufficient, I have achieved this. I am a serviceman's wife, and you know how military people treat their family: they protect and cherish them. At the same time, I have achieved the point where I fully participate and am an equal pillar of the family" (Siranush, Kotayk province).

"Women in our province are more passive, but that comes more from men, it comes from family status. It has always been the man who says what a woman should or shouldn't do, it's been like that for centuries. But if a woman is smart and can have good suggestions, I would be happy if such women could hold high positions, because women are more caring, patient, and think deeply" (Karine, Tavush province).

Small business programs are beneficial for women in the provinces to occupy an equal place and status with men in communities and families. By engaging in or initiating them, women become more economically secure and are able to contribute to the economic protection of their families and communities. In this sense, it is often women who help each other: they create commercial organizations, workshops where women work.

"If previously women's voices were not heard, especially in rural communities, now they, by working on themselves, are able to develop women's participation. If one woman can lead three women, it becomes a driving force. Active women are able to lead other women after them, including from other provinces. Concrete associations are being formed. For example, our individual enterprise "Arus Ghazaryan", which has a canning factory in Lori province, but does not have enough berries and labor, is able to involve women from other provinces with their resources. If we say leadership, then men are still the active side of society. At the same time, this picture is changing over time" (Mary, Tavush province).

Female representatives of political parties also contribute to the expansion of the activism of provincial women, thus they contribute to both the increase in women's independence in the provinces and the expansion of the ranks of supporters of a given political force.

"We have girls who want to participate in development and entrepreneurial programs, for example, they open travel agencies. I don't mind. There were girls here who wanted to do entrepreneurial activities by creating a sewing workshop. We supported them. We applied to the Women's Resource Center in Kapan, we wrote the program together, we applied to the German Embassy. They funded it. We expanded. Now the girls are doing their own business, they have expanded, they have their own income. There are also agricultural programs, they apply to me, I already have the framework of the program. We fill in forms, apply, and develop the greenhouses, we implement the dry-fruit program. A woman is a creative being" (Karine, Syunik province).

It is noteworthy that girls raised in strictly traditional families, upon becoming parents, raise their children more freely and restrain them less.

"I grew up in such a traditional family, so strict that when I got married, I felt freer in my husband's family than in my parents' home. Now, if we compare how my daughter lives and what she allows herself, it is incomparable to my life, because we allow our children what our parents did not allow us. We allow them to fulfill their desires: if they want to study, they study, if they want to work, they work" (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province).

Leadership is not for everyone, it is not a necessity: realizing it is just as necessary as discovering and transferring leadership potential and abilities.

"I have participated in many courses organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation on the topic of leadership, for example, women in politics, etc., and I have understood that on the first day there were women who were no longer there on the second day of the course, in fact, they understood that leadership is not for them, they are not interested. This is very good, because everyone should objectively assess their abilities and decide whether they are ready to invest the knowledge they have gained in the future, for example, by entering politics, demonstrating their leadership qualities in some structure or not" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

It is noted that as a result of the reforms implemented over the years, the involvement of women in political power bodies has increased,<sup>48</sup> Women are also included in local government bodies, where, according to the law, they hold no less than 30% of positions.<sup>49</sup> They also serve in the armed forces, police, etc. The surveyed women evaluate all of these reforms positively. Panelists spoke about the significant increase in the number of women in political positions in Armenia since the 2018 "Velvet Revolution": in the RA parliament, ministries, and high-level government positions. This was a marked

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<sup>48</sup> On this, see, for example: Shahnazaryan, G., Hovhannisyan, S. Priorities of women's political involvement in local self-government bodies. "Journal of Yerevan University. Sociology, Economics", 2016 No. 3 (21), pp. 3-13.

<sup>49</sup> "If as a result, more than 70 percent of the party's mandates go to representatives of the same sex, then the mandates of the most represented sex exceeding 70 percent shall be allocated to the candidates of the least represented sex on the electoral list, if any, ensuring a representation of the least represented sex of no less than 30 percent. If there are no representatives of the least represented sex on the electoral list, then these mandates shall remain vacant." RA Electoral Code, **Article 141**.

departure from previous periods when women's presence in political life was minimal and often demonstrative. For many women, this visibility was more than symbolic: it was inspiring. Women's positions created the impression that politics was not exclusively a male domain.

The gains from women's political participation were not only symbolic but also practical. Respondents emphasized that policies developed by diverse groups were typically more comprehensive and responsive to societal needs. For example, female leaders often drew attention to issues that male policymakers ignored, such as child care, access to healthcare, domestic violence, and work-life balance. While these concerns may seem "personal" or "domestic" from a traditional perspective, they directly shape the functioning of the economy and labor markets, contributing to social stability. Thus, the inclusion of women ensured that public policies took into account the full range of needs of society, without giving priority to needs traditionally associated with men. The increase in the number of women is especially noticeable in local government bodies.

"There were times when the majority of employees in community councils were men. Now there are many women, and many women also serve in the police. I wouldn't say that there is gender discrimination. If you are a woman and can do that job well, why not?" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

"It is a misconception that women's voices are not heard in community councils. As a member of the council, I have always made suggestions and have never encountered discriminatory treatment towards me. I have been a member of the council since 2018. At that time, out of seven members of the council, only I was a woman, six were men. And since 2021, we have 15 members of the council, 4 of whom are women" (Armenuhi, Kotayk province).

"Women's voices have become more audible. They now know the value of their voices, they participate in meetings and discussions of local self-government bodies, they can take permission from their workplace and participate, and they do it with pleasure. Recently, a teacher who had dropped out of school established a dumpling factory, and also increased her production volumes by receiving an additional 600 thousand drams from our program" (Mary, Tavush province).

There is also an opposing opinion: women's participation in community governance processes is still met with stereotypical attitudes and misperception from men, or is merely formal.

"When you try to raise an issue in the community council to get a solution, you get strange looks. They treat and perceive boys better, they may say, 'You're a woman, this is none of your business'" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

"When they say in the voter lists that this percentage should be women, I tell you, it's a formality, it doesn't work" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).

Focus group participants also noted that women who assume leadership positions often face skepticism and resistance from colleagues, community members, and even family circles. Leadership, especially in public or organizational contexts, can be perceived as incompatible with traditional female roles, leading to social sanctions or invisible erosion of power. Women must overcome a double hurdle: they are expected to lead decisively, yet they are often penalized for qualities associated with effective leadership, such as assertiveness or determination.

"Women who step outside the 'boundaries' expected of them often face labels like 'iron lady' or 'masculine woman', which shows how society regulates deviations from traditional femininity."

It was noted that increased representation did not automatically translate into equal influence. Structural barriers, entrenched patriarchal attitudes, and resistance from male colleagues often limited women's influence in politics. Some interviewees recalled instances where female leaders were excluded from decision-making processes or had to work harder to be heard. However, even if limited, women's presence gradually changed the political discourse about who has the right to participate in governance.

At the same time, the expanding presence of women in public administration has not always been qualitative and effective. Structural barriers, entrenched patriarchal attitudes, and resistance from male colleagues have often limited women's influence in politics. Some interviewees recalled instances where women in government were denied decision-making opportunities or had to work harder to be heard. However, even if limited, women's presence gradually changed the political discourse about who has the right to participate in government.

Women's participation in political life continues to depend on interpersonal connections and relationships within the community, which do not promote women's advancement and independent political activity.

"There is a need for women's participation in community processes, including in community development and governance. Women's real participation is almost zero. Whatever there is, it is thanks to NGOs. Community organizations do not do anything to empower women. Women do not know where their rights and responsibilities begin. The mayor, for example, is their neighbor's son, they think, 'We won't stand up and speak out against him'" (Anahit, Aragatsotn province).

"The participation of women members of community councils is very passive. I have not noticed that they try to solve any problems or raise any issues. They sit in the council meeting, vote for or against and leave. This situation has not been broken in our country yet" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

"If we take into account that quotas for women are also applied in government bodies at the legislative level, then there are changes. All this, of course, in small communities is done for the sake of doing it, it is of a formal nature. Sometimes it is done because it is a mandatory provision and must be done, and not because it is right" (Meline, Tavush province).

The inequality in society is discussed by women, especially the younger generation, who are not ready to come to terms with this phenomenon. In short, we are talking not only about inequality between women and men, but about inequality in general, which is determined by the different opportunities for financial and social capital among people. Equality between the two sexes is one of the necessary conditions for the development of society.

"Equality will be the best tool in the development of our country. We have scarce human resources and many problems. Only with equal contribution of women and men can they be solved. This implies, for example, that women should serve on equal principles with men in the army, in the police, and assume leadership positions. For example, there are many positions in the army that women can occupy. Even in terms of physical exertion, many girls who are involved in sports can serve in the army equally with boys. I think this would be the best option" (Taguhi, Tavush province).

"I myself worked for several years at the V. Sargsyan Defense University, where female cadets study. They are very strong. If boys, for example, treated their service as work, as a job, then the attitude of girls was different. They come to the army with a specific ideology. In addition to the military sphere, women can have great achievements in the fields of medicine and science, and bring a lot of progress to the country" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).

According to respondents, there is corruption: opportunities to hold positions depend on having acquaintances and friends, which hinders the advancement opportunities and overall development of young people, including women.

"I think that until we change, until we change our thinking and ideas, we will not have any changes. When we go to the polls without any idea who we are voting for, and we vote for the neighbor's son because he is good at that moment, without realizing what values he carries, then we will never have any changes. When we do not have a female community council, and I feel great pain thinking about it, how low is the self-esteem and civic consciousness of our women, that they are the majority in that community, and they do nothing for the purpose of positive changes, we will not have any changes. That does not mean that we live in the Stone Age; we are changing, but we are a part of society, and general, systemic changes are necessary" (Satenik, Kotayk province).

It was interesting to find out that the involvement of women in leadership positions is also conditioned by informal connections and relationships among acquaintances and friends, which, however, according to the interviewees, is not always a negative phenomenon.

"We have good girls in local government: single, skilled, active girls. They are enterprising, active. Those who are in that field find suitable girls among their relatives to fill positions according to the law, maybe that's not good, but later they bring those girls into the arena and show themselves" (Anahit, Gegharkunik province).

There are negative stereotypes in society related to politics, active involvement in politics, and being a member of one or another party. This can be explained by the low ratings of political forces and the low level of trust in all political forces in Armenia over

the past decade. One of the consequences of all this is that women's involvement in politics occurs in an environment of distrust and even shame.

"I would like women to say proudly and without shame: I am a woman in politics. I know many cases when women were ashamed to say out loud that they are a representative of this or that party. I would like us to inspire women" (Armenuhi, Kotayk Province).

Cultural norms intersect with broader social pressures, including expectations about marriage, childrearing, and caregiving, which disproportionately affect women. Participants emphasized that these barriers result not only in the visible lack of women in leadership positions, but also in the persistent underestimation of women's contributions in both the public and private sectors. Addressing these challenges requires societal changes that recognize and support women as leaders, not only in their professional lives, but also in civic and community life.

**Regularly organized training courses in this field definitely contribute to the development of women's leadership skills.** The courses have been organized for years, and their results are obvious: women and girls demonstrate initiatives, implement small business projects, cooperate with local self-government bodies and participate in elections, come forward with various program proposals, create and lead non-governmental organizations, etc.

"Trainings are very important in the sense that, being under their influence, we come and maintain that multiplier effect: maybe they pressure us, oppress us, but we are still the bearer of that influence. Frequent trainings allow this to be strengthened, and constant education is needed. I serve as an example for other people, and I would like to be the bearer of those values that would be instructive and useful for other people."

(Satenik, Kotayk province)

"There is a need for jobs, employment. There is a national mentality that often hinders the support of women. However, many trainings and programs have supported women's independence and development. I myself constantly interact with women and I clearly see this empowerment" (Mariam, Kotayk province).

Trainings have a specific practical significance: they contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, belief in one's own strengths and self-knowledge, and competitiveness in the practical domain.

"Last time I participated in a training, and right after that there were municipal elections. I participated, and it was so interesting that it coincided, and it was like I could test the knowledge I gained in the trainings during the elections. There I prepared a speech on the topic of what you would say at a meeting with journalists, it was very interesting, and a few months later I received an invitation to participate in the municipal elections. And everything went so smoothly, it seemed to me that something interesting was happening."

"I also participated in the community council elections. I had to make a speech, motivate voters to why they should elect me, and I came in third. The knowledge I gained in the trainings was very useful to me" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

It was noted that training courses addressed to women should not be an end in itself, but should also contribute to women's employment in the labor market. It was interesting to find out that hiring local women in innovative organizations created in the provinces is not a common practice, they prefer foreign or Yerevan specialists, while by training local residents in the relevant knowledge and skills, it is possible to make them more competitive for the jobs being created.

"Companies operating in Dilijan, for example, Impuls Management, founded by Ruben Vardanyan, not finding suitable personnel in Dilijan, bring employees from Yerevan and also from Russia, who, of course, are very good at, for example, languages, computer technologies, but do not know the regional specifics, do not know the community well. Locals are hired for very small functions. There is a need for just such soft skills in the community. Maybe there is also a need to increase self-confidence, because there are many women who are armed with knowledge, but are not self-confident. I had seen such a training, I was looking at it from the side and thinking, but is such a training necessary? But I saw that it was quite necessary. Because many women can be ashamed of men, or confuse self-confidence with arrogance" (Meline, Tavush province).

Programs that develop women's capacities and leadership initiatives are implemented by international organizations operating in Armenia, as well as political parties and civil society organizations. The trainings continuously organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation were repeatedly mentioned by the interlocutors.

"I have also studied the activities of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, I have seen that they are not pro-government, they are cooperative, they are effective, they are useful, they are not demonstrative, but they carry out important work. At least, that is what it seems like" (Siranush, Kotayk province).

"The level that they provide, I very rarely see in other trainings" (Mariam, Kotayk province).

The names of individuals, organizations, and programs that, according to respondents, play an important role in supporting women in the transition period were also mentioned, such as:

- The "Gifted Women" program implemented by the "Work and Homeland" NGO /Head: Ruzanna Ghazaryan/,
- "People in need",
- Oxygen
- NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION
- Solution Hub
- TUMO schools
- International program «We are together»
- "Rainbow" Leadership School
- In Aragatsotn province, the name of Anna Astvatsaturian Turcotte, an American-Armenian philanthropist and constant supporter of the community, was mentioned. With her support, in particular, the "Forest of Memory" was planted,
- Levon Barseghyan, Gyumri "Asparez" club
- Hermine Karapetyan, founder of the Ashtarak "Motiv" studio
- Hrant Avanesyan, YSU Psychology Department, author of the manual for overcoming psychological problems in the post-war context.

As a highly positive experience of local, grass-roots initiated trainings, the trainings organized by the "Menk" Lori province youth NGO were also noted. The organizer, Vahe Khachikyan, introduced the participants to the community budget, expenses, programs, problems, and options for their solution. Another positive experience is the support of Arthur Melkonyan, who works in the Sevan city municipality and teaches political science at the College, to youth initiatives ("He is the mentor of Sevan", who says: "you initiate, I will support you in every possible way").

In interviews with women, the need to raise women's awareness about their capabilities was repeatedly mentioned. According to respondents, women are often unaware of the opportunities that are available to them, including education, training, entrepreneurship, charity, and leadership. The effect of insufficient awareness of women is that, as mentioned, programs aimed at them are often implemented in "small circles" for the same beneficiaries. Some technical problems and difficulties were also mentioned that need to be taken into account, especially when implementing programs for women living in remote villages.

"When women and girls come to us, they are not aware of the opportunities available to them" (Ani, Vayots Dzor).

"Perhaps it is this complex that makes girls participate passively. In addition, there are many technical issues that make it difficult to participate. A very vivid example: on April 28 of this year, a training was held for girls in the IT sector in Jermuk. They were going to give a certificate, which is very good. On the other hand, they were not going to reimburse travel expenses. In addition, the training was supposed to last four hours, and they had not thought of anything there, they were not even going to organize a coffee break. That is why I did not apply" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

Raising women's awareness would contribute to their more active self-expression and activation in communities and society in general.

"Just today I was carrying the bag given by the Adenauer Foundation, and I thought how good it would be if various trainings were implemented, involving the municipality and schools. Also, the information process needs to be improved: people are not well informed, people do not show activity and are lagging behind on many issues. After every such event, training, my mind brightens, new ideas come to mind" (Arpine, Vayots Dzor).

"The good thing is that now women and girls have lost their previous caution about getting educated, about participating in seminars. Now, after coming to the courses once or twice, they call and ask when the next one will be" (Ani 2, Vayots Dzor).

"Although girls learn to speak faster, and then they learn better than boys, they still feel less confident in their public life than boys. We need to support them in terms of increasing their self-confidence" (Satenik, Kotayk province).

However, in the post-Soviet period, and especially in recent years, women in Armenia have become more self-confident.

"Women do not have resources, they have little time, that is why they cannot become more independent, self-reliant. At the same time, women are now more self-confident" (Sarvard, Syunik province).

"Women have become self-confident, they are trying to implement their initiatives. We have such an Armenian stereotype that Armenian women cannot express themselves. Now we have freedom of speech, a person can have their place and role. They do not think about what's allowed, what's not... They think about what the risk is, they try to manage risks, reduce risks and implement programs" (Karine, Syunik province).

Women's development programs and initiatives are not supported in all communities. A respondent from one of the communities in Aragatsotn province noted that the approach of their community leader and the community administration is not constructive.

"One of the previous community leaders, at that time the village head, said, 'Come, of course, present your programs, but don't do it like Worldvision: 'Gender, gender, don't do it again. I'm tired of it.'" The new community leader is not supportive at all. "When the Portuguese came to our community meeting again, the community leader's assistant told me: you won't go up (to the meeting). Many men in positions of power, seeing that a woman does more than them, and without money, start hampering me. I do a lot for free. All they can do is at least not hinder me. The Portuguese say, 'but

we came to meet with Gayane, how can it be that she doesn't go up?' I can't cooperate with them. Nor do I particularly need it (laughs)" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).

At the same time, there was talk about the consumer approach to training programs and trainings: some women have developed a habit of participating in trainings not in order to use the knowledge and skills they have gained to further their activity, develop, and expand their field of activity, but also to spend time and communicate. For some, participating in trainings is an end in itself.

*"Women seem to become more active and enthusiastic from program to program. In other words, if there is no program, women are passive again" (Kristine, Vayots Dzor).*

One of the possible shortcomings of training programs is the political component in their content, which should be avoided.

*"There are seminars that have a political context. They are, of course, useful in some cases, but I would like that component not to be there" (Mariam, Kotayk province).*

One of the ways to increase the community activity of women and girls in the provinces is their involvement in volunteer work and initiatives. According to many respondents, volunteerism is not developed in the provinces, especially in rural communities. Thus, according to one of the respondents from Aragatsotn province, the poverty level in their community is high, people work for low wages, many also work in agriculture, so they cannot afford additional work if it does not bring income. Many people ask: why spend time and effort if it does not bring income?

In terms of stereotypes, women in the province's Yezidi villages stand out in particular, as they have no right to take any initiative, and if they do attend events, "they don't speak, they come with their mothers-in-law, they look at their reactions to every issue" (Gayane, Aragatsotn province). Beyond politics, women's advancement in state and other governance sectors has been repeatedly highlighted as progress. Interviewees described how women working in ministries, communities, and local governments have contributed to qualities such as transparency, attention to detail, and a commitment to justice. Women, who have often managed households under difficult circumstances, have developed resilience, multitasking, and problem-solving skills that serve them well in leadership roles. For example, some female managers were known for their ability to

mediate community disputes, effectively manage scarce resources, or develop social programs that fit the realities of families. Their leadership style often emphasizes collaboration, communication, and consensus rather than hierarchy and dominance. This difference in approach has enriched management structures and created an environment where diverse opinions are more fully considered.

In addition to examples of real leadership, respondents also spoke about **false leadership** approaches. As a result of the spread of consumer culture, it was noted that not only a real, effective leadership culture, but also false leadership morals have spread among women: women who have acquired financial and economic capabilities (mainly through their husbands) have begun to consider themselves superior to others.

"Women feel like "leaders" if they have money without working, they hire a nanny for the children, and instead of cooking, they order food." (Maro, Vayots Dzor)

Young respondents in particular note that "Women **often hinder each other.**"

"Sometimes it is women who target women in many different issues; this is a phenomenon rooted in our reality. Even in very small issues, when it seems that women should not be targeted by women themselves, they are targeted. We need to constantly talk about the idea of women for women, there is still a lot of work to be done in that direction. We forget that people need empathy. We often treat each other in a very non-mindful (sorry for the expression) way. Many, many girls face not only lack of support from women, but also unhealthy criticism" (Meline, Tavush province).

During the discussions, the importance of assessing women's needs was emphasized, particularly for planning training courses for them. Before trainings, it is necessary to identify and assess women's capabilities so that the trainings are more effective and targeted.

"We need to conduct a needs assessment by province, to identify general and specific issues. For example, in Syunik province, girls are more free due to the development of tourism. In Gegharkunik province, they have more complexes, and they leave the province less often. Let alone that, not a single soul comes to the province, especially, Gavar. Sevan does not let them enter Gavar" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).

It was noted that through the assessment of needs and abilities, it is necessary to find out what a woman is capable of: to "pull it out" and develop it through tests.

The assessment of women's needs is actually at the heart of this research.

Thus, the identification of mechanisms that limit and promote women's leadership potential allows us to limit and prevent negative factors and promote those that have a positive impact.

#### **4.3. Women's needs and capabilities in the context of security and development of the state and communities**

In general, the following needs of women were mentioned in many interviews:

- Motivation and mindset change,
- Inspirational people, successful women role models, experienced professionals, heroes,
  - Increasing women's self-awareness,
  - Critical thinking,
- The need for proper financial management skills: "Women often buy expensive things on credit, and get into debt. There is a need for financial literacy" (Anahit, Aragatsotn province).

In terms of training for women, beneficiaries have indicated a need for the following thematic training, as well as the transfer of knowledge and skills:

- preparation, submission, registration of business plans, implementation of financial control,
- legislative changes, information on participatory budgeting,
- development of skills to communicate correctly and effectively with government bodies, write applications, and participate in programs
- development of skills to be informed about and apply for grant programs,
- the ability to use the Internet correctly, identify false information, and navigate the information field (media literacy),
- parenting,
- age psychology: development of knowledge and skills related to the characteristics of women's life stages,
- use of modern information technologies,

- application of artificial intelligence for professional purposes,
- mastery of public speaking, argumentative participation in socio-political discussions in order to feel more presentable and confident, including in contacts with various organizations,
- Need for training in "mental health" courses and techniques that will help in crisis situations,
- orientation in crisis situations,
- personal growth and development of abilities, self-assessment, self-discovery,
- development of necessary abilities at different stages of a woman's life,
- career development, financial literacy knowledge,
- the ability to combine private life and career, which will help not to lose private life, family, while also contributing to self-development and personal growth,
- the art of negotiation,
  - the desire to love the homeland, to attach importance to the problems of the state and society, and to contribute to their solution.

Especially in focus group discussions, speaking about the loss of traditional values, it was suggested that training be directed towards the dissemination of national values and the development of the capacity for collective action.

"Last year, in the fall and winter, I was conducting courses for young people in different provinces on professional orientation. Here we say values, what values the Armenian society lives by today. I say this with regret, but when I asked what values the children live by and are oriented by, they did not know. I would very much like the Adenauer Foundation to devote part of its trainings to people's self-knowledge. We are an old nation, but now we have the need for value orientation. Now when you say honesty or trust in others, it can be taken with a laugh, it is ridiculed more than valued. We need to demonstrate, spread, and propagate the value system that has always been characteristic of our nation" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

During the interviews and discussions, the special needs of the displaced population from Artsakh, including women, were mentioned, as well as the need to support them and organize relevant training courses.

"I would focus on training on creating small businesses for deported rural women" (Ani 2, Vayots Dzor).

Mastering the art of negotiation has been emphasized, not only in a practical but also in a personal setting.

"Whether it's your brother, your father, you should be able to negotiate with them about your progress, interests, and needs. You should be able to explain that you want to progress, achieve success, for example, become a member of the National Assembly. This is how I convince my husband, I say, 'I want to become a member of the National Assembly in the future' (they laugh). In other words, you're not going to spend time there, take photos, but you need to work, bring benefits. I say, 'Look, what's the matter? Am I worse than the others?' And that's how our discussions go, and in the end, I win." (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province)

The need for continuity of information processes on women's rights, as well as psychological support, was noted. It is important to transfer and develop knowledge and skills in women and girls about age psychology, including physiological and psychological changes associated with the stages of a woman's life. A woman should be able to support herself and other women and girls.

"Women's psychological support, awareness, especially in the legal aspect: 90% of women are not well aware of their rights and opportunities. This will also increase their self-esteem. We are talking about deportees, housing programs, organizing small businesses" (Ani 2, Vayots Dzor).

"Especially in adolescence and young adulthood, girls have problems that are almost impossible to overcome if they do not have a supportive mother, elder sister, and good friends. In such situations, knowledge and skills are needed, the teaching of which is extremely important. In general, depending on age, women need psychological knowledge" (Ani, Syunik province).

Respondents noted that girls in rural communities in particular need to develop communication, thinking, and emotional expression skills. Despite the fact that many respondents noted that women and girls have become more self-confident in the post-Soviet period, training in self-confidence and motivation is still necessary.

*"Trainings on getting rid of complexes and on self-confidence" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).*

The lack of communication and transportation between rural communities, and the employment of women in households often deprives them of a worldview, even of ideas and knowledge about their place of residence. One of the respondents suggested creating programs for mutual visits and joint events for rural residents in the provinces, which would contribute to the expansion of local thinking, women's worldview, and ideas.

"A woman from the villages of Ijevan works for us. She comes in the morning and leaves in the evening. Once we were talking about going somewhere with the team, she said, 'I have only gone to a far place alone once in my life, without my husband. She went to Yerevan due to health problems. In all other cases, she has only gone to Ijevan and returned to the village, she has never been anywhere else. She has not seen anything outside her narrow circle. Even here, she is constantly in a hurry to get home, she says, she has a lot of agricultural work, she cannot even sit down for a moment, calm down and drink coffee. She cannot imagine that there is life outside her rural environment. It would be interesting if women from different villages and settlements visited each other, exchange experiences, and broaden their worldview'" (Anahit, Aragatsotn province).

As already mentioned, in many interviews, there is talk about the underdevelopment of men's potential, the decline in motivation to learn and develop in a male environment, the spread of gambling and drug abuse. Women often mention that **training, development and empowerment programs should be implemented not only for women, but also for men.**

"I would advise you to conduct trainings not so much for women as for men in the provinces and villages. Equality is needed, opportunities for women are needed, men need to be educated. Men and women should be on the same level." (Siranush, Kotayk province)

"Trainings should be bisexual. Men should participate in supporting women, they should see that equality is needed. One should use the potential of the other" (Gayane, Aragatsotn).

"We have the most important task of creating a system of values, both for girls and boys. Leadership also implies equality, approaches to not harming each other, respecting culture, reading books, recognizing and preserving national values. Now there is a lot of information, it is pouring in from all sides. It is necessary to transfer skills in terms of a selective attitude towards information, the ability to analyze" (Diana, Gegharkunik province).

At the same time, supporting and strengthening women has led to the weakening of men: in fact, it is necessary to form and support leadership among women, not by restraining and limiting leadership qualities in men, but by combining and complementing the abilities and efforts of women and men.

"In fact, the time will come when boys will need support and training. Women's potential is developing, while boys are retreating. Boys' masculine energy has diminished, broken. It seems to me that this is the case all over the world. It has affected Armenia less, because we are a warring country anyway. But the retreat of men is felt all over the world. Men realized that women can be given a lot of responsibility, and they weakened" (Ellen, Gegharkunik province).

The same view was voiced and discussed in the focus groups. It was noted that the emphasis on women's rights has overshadowed the issue of women's responsibilities, as well as men's rights: men have become the object of constant criticism and are limited in their roles.

"Today, there is a lot of talk about the issue of domestic violence against women, incidents. It seems that these cases have increased. In fact, they have not increased, but they have started to be voiced. I think that when our girls start families, men will be subjected to domestic violence, including psychological violence (laughs). In recent years, there has been constant talk about women's rights, and a situation has arisen when there is a need to talk about men's rights as well. They suffer a lot. And that is also wrong. Not everyone understands the need for harmonious relations between women and men, and only the protection of women's rights violates that harmony. I myself have participated in many such seminars, trainings on women's rights, and if I

did not have critical thinking, I would have confused freedom with other negative issues" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

Women and men have changed roles: this according to interviewees has both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages is women's self-expression and self-determination, among the disadvantages is the above mentioned regression in men's lives, functions, and public perceptions.

"In my family, taking into account the current conditions, we tried to understand who is better at making money. We made a compromise. And the family as such no longer exists. Because in the initial stages, he was the one who pushed me forward, he ensured my advancement. But then I advanced, and he stayed in the same place. He provided the environment in which I could develop, build a career, and he helped, looked after the children. Later it turned out that we are people of different levels: I advanced, and he stayed in the same place. He pushed me forward, and I tow him (laughs)" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

It was also proposed to conduct trainings not on a centralized basis, but on a local basis.

*"We should not invite women from different provinces to trainings, but rather hold trainings for women on a permanent basis in each province" (Laura, Syunik province).*

The decline in the role of men in society is also associated by the interviewed women with their own "oppressive" influence: constantly accusing men of violating women's rights and restricting women has led to women being freer and men being more restricted. On the other hand, many men find it more convenient when the functions assumed by women can be completely assigned to them. In general, new manifestations of inequality are noticeable as a result of the transition from traditional to modern: women have become more active than men, and not together with men.

"Men see that the woman does everything, and they relax: there is someone who is doing the hard work anyway."

"There are many men who say, 'Well, she is the wife of the family, she should do all that, for example, go to the market and bargain. If I, a man, go and start bargaining

in the market, lowering prices, it is shameful, and a woman does it very well, let her do it then."

"But let's be honest: we also exploit them (men) very often. Honestly. We consider it an elementary thing, but, for example, a man opens the door for a woman to pass, and twenty women pass one after another, and he holds that door patiently. For example, I, seeing that, do not pass. We say, 'We are women, we must be respected, but men must be respected too.' Or say, you drink water, and women approach, one after another and drink water from a fountain, while a man is standing and waiting. Wouldn't it be better if he quickly drank and left, and then the women would drink slowly. Or, for example, it is accepted that the man pays for the woman. Often men's rights are violated" (Focus group discussion participant, Lori province).

The widespread decline in the value of education is mentioned: the importance, benefits, and motivation to learn are among the goals that should be constantly pursued and pointed out to both girls and boys:

"Motivation for education. Let me tell you about my example: there were both smart boys and girls in my class, some of them studying well, some of them not studying. Then years later they see me and say, 'You were right to tell us to study, to make an effort, we didn't listen to you'" (Diana, Gegharkunik province).

One approach to supporting people, including women and girls, in communities and promoting their self-development is to teach crafts starting in school, restoring an approach that was used in the Soviet years and then forgotten.

"Professional orientation, motivation. It is necessary to teach crafts, including starting from school. I saw a video of how they teach masonry in kindergartens in China, can you imagine? In kindergartens. So that, if they do not receive higher education in the future, they can have an important profession, knowledge and abilities, society needs them. And here they mainly teach girls and boys culinary arts" (Rita, Aragatsotn province).

"The need for professional orientation, which should be based on the analysis of women's desires, abilities and self-analysis" (Mary, Tavush province).

The need for motivation is felt a lot: it is noted that even in the case of organizing free and useful courses, women's participation may be low precisely due to a lack of motivation, or if they have financial needs: receiving free bags and notebooks from the courses is more important than knowledge.

"The priority is self-education. There are women in our society who are far from everything, dealing only with their household chores. For example, when we organize events, very few participate, even though admission is free. Often we cannot find any common topic with such women" (Iveta, Tavush province).

"If previously women participated in trainings in order to, excuse me, get something, for example, a pen and a notebook, now they actively participate in order to gain knowledge, to become active" (Mary, Tavush province).

There is a need to improve the quality of foreign language teaching. In particular, foreign language teaching needs to be conducted in an appropriate environment: schools need classrooms that reflect the environment and culture of English-speaking countries. Through language teaching, it is also possible to introduce provincial boys and girls to other cultures and broaden their worldview, which will also serve as a basis for open-mindedness and pluralism.

The need for professional orientation has been emphasized: in the Soviet period, as well as in modern societies, organizations implementing professional orientation help people obtain a profession necessary for the state and society, thereby expressing themselves and becoming effective, while in today's Armenia such approaches are absent: people are guided by fashionable professions, the majority, including women, do not achieve results, do not self-actualize.

"Professional misorientation: "Today, the most popular profession is programming, but the state and society need many other specialists. People need to be educated, informed, and oriented" (Maro, Vayots Dzor).

"Children need to be professionally oriented in schools. We always advise: when choosing a profession, you should plan so that your chosen profession will bring you income. My daughter graduated from school with high grades, entered the YSU Applied

Department, but did not graduate. She decided to go into medical cosmetology, currently she earns 30,000 per day. She has her own business" (Karine, Syunik province).

It was also noted that training aimed at supporting women should focus on the development of "soft skills" that will promote women's active orientation in the social environment.

"It seems to me it always pays to talk about taking initiative: where to start, what to start from. Many people do not know the most basic thing: what steps to take to implement something. I am probably talking about project management. Education should be promoted, especially among women, including civic education and awareness. Women often say, well, what can change if I do it? There is a need for many things in communities, mainly soft skills" (Meline, Tavush province).

**The opportunity for effective women to share their experiences to inspire other women, guide them, and contribute to the advancement of others, has been repeatedly emphasized.**

"I would like the Konrad Adenauer Foundation courses to show many beautiful examples of how different women have achieved success in professional fields and have been able to balance work, career, and private life" (Focus group discussion participant, Shirak province).

In conclusion, we would like to quote the words of one of the interviewed women, which are motivating, encouraging people to believe in their own strengths, and serving as an example.

"I have been hindered a lot, but the woman is very strong by nature. I have always overcome it. There is no such thing as "I can't, I don't do it". You need a desire. Even now, I am constantly educating myself, participating in courses, learning. Nothing is impossible. Whatever I wanted, although with difficulties, I achieved it" (Laura, Syunik province).

Summarizing the results of the interviews with women about their future and the future of their communities, we reveal a remarkable combination of realism and practicality. Accepting uncertainty as an inevitable aspect of life, women value approaches that empower both women and their communities. Approaches to constantly learn and gain experience, to actively engage in community life, to face difficulties and navigate uncertainty, and to support their families and communities as central pillars of their lives. Instead of giving in to despair, the women participating in the study are creating a reality where they learn from difficulties, strengthen their capabilities, and make meaningful contributions to collective life, shaping a path of progress that is full of hope and success.