

# **DO YOU GIVE US A NEW ROUTINE? THE SOVIET GENDER CULTURE, STATE FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION: NAGORNO-KARABAKH/NKAO'S CASE**

**NONA SHAHNAZARYAN**



The paper was prepared within the framework of the project “Feminist web and events”  
by Heinrich Boell Foundation Yerevan Office.

# **DO YOU GIVE US A NEW ROUTINE? THE SOVIET GENDER CULTURE, STATE FEMINISM AND WOMEN’S EMANCIPATION: NAGORNO-KARABAKH/NKAO’S CASE**

**NONA SHAHNAZARYAN**

**senior researcher at the Armenian Ethnography Department,  
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of  
the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia**

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and  
they may not reflect the views of Heinrich Boell Foundation.

 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**  
**YEREVAN**  
South Caucasus Region

Yerevan 2020

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	5
METHOD	6
THEORIES OF BOLSHEVIK FEMINISM: DEBATES ON POLITICAL RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATIVENESS OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ERA	7
THE POLICY OF <i>INDIGENOUSIZATION</i> : ORIENTALISM – SOCIALISM – GENDER	9
THE SOVIET WOMAN OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH (NKAO): DYNAMICS OF STATUS CHANGE	11
SOVIET REALITY VS. “REAL LIFE”	18
CODA	22

Photo on the cover by N. Shahnazaryan

*“Women’s Liberation will be a very painful process, but I believe that it will be a necessary, vital stage in the transition to a better society for men and women.”*

*H. Marcuse. Marxism and Feminism.  
Lecture. Stanford University, 1974*

**Key words:** *state feminism, everyday life, indigenosization-nativization, orientalism, representations, biographical research method, family history*

# ABSTRACT

What niches and clusters did the Soviet Union offer to the “*woman of the East*”, how did she *herself* perceive this offer? What are the consequences of the gender experiment for the transformation of social relations? The Bolshevik government *orientalized* its republics, but one can also state the fact that enormous forces, resources, and funds were spent on progressive socialist projects for the emancipation of women. However, we may long debate over the issue of how this social project was later applied to service another Soviet project for «modernization», namely the *industrialization* of the USSR.

In this sense, Nagorno-Karabakh and everything that happened there is an amazing case. Along with the widespread promotion and *professionalization* of women (both in the city and in the countryside), *political quotas* were defined for *women*. Female labor on collective and state farms was paid equally with male labor on the basis of the fulfilled norm – “*urakan-workday*” (*urakan* - *dialect.*, or “*ashkhor*”, meaning *workday as a unit of labor*). This dramatically changed the status of women in the family, forming and fostering her identity as an *economic agent*. In the region, the theme of Soviet realities is topical also because the experience of state feminism and equal opportunities for the sexes had its long-term consequences, in particular, in the form of political quotas for women and, as a result, their *empowerment*.

In connection with a new look at the Soviet era, of particular value are the texts of the family history genre, namely, in the form of a in-depth stereoscopic biographical interview. The Soviet past is not a static history. The social ladder, mobility, and liberalization-emancipation carried a completely unprecedented dynamism (and dramatism), especially in the early, «experimental» period of the history of the USSR. The doctrine of state feminism then developed its key ideologemes – the idea of a *new woman*, the collectivization of everyday life, the emancipation of Soviet women from all types of dependence, which ultimately meant the destruction of *patriarchal femininity*. In other words, the *regimes of gender citizenship* changed radically during this period.

# METHOD

Despite the academic phenomenon, conceptualized as a crisis of representation,<sup>1</sup> I selected the in-depth biographical interview as the main element of the methodological framework for this research. In connection with the new view of the Soviet life, texts in the genre of private memory – particularly, family or clan history, taken both from archival (the archives in Stepanakert) and epistolary and other written sources – are of great value. The story of Mkrtchyan Arpenik, or Apo, was quite fully reflected in the samples of “women’s script”, presenting the Soviet women’s culture. During my research, I conducted only about 35 interviews. The biographies of women from Karabakh and the analysis thereof do not only present the lives of individual women within the USSR reality, but also give them a human image. The scanty archival data from household books and published Soviet biographies served as secondary sources.

---

1 For details on the method see: Graftaux S. *Meme Santerre. A French Woman of the People*. Ed. by L. A. Tilly. 1985. Schocken Books. New York; Ardra L. Cole, G. Knowles *Lives in Context. The Art of Life History Research*. AltaMira Press 2001; Gabriele Rosenthal *Reconstruction of Life Stories. Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews* / in: *Narrative Study of Lives*, Sage 1(1). 1993; Navailb F. *The Soviet Model* / in: *A History of Women in the West. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. F.Thebaud. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England 1994.

# THEORIES OF BOLSHEVIK FEMINISM: DEBATES ON POLITICAL RIGHTS AND REPRESENTATIVENESS OF WOMEN IN THE SOVIET ERA

The main approaches to the women's issue are outlined in the famous work by Friedrich Engels «The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State», the concept of which he thought out with K. Marx. "The Bolsheviks became, perhaps, the first leaders of the state in history who created their own system, reconstructing the basic human relations, namely social relations between the sexes. Along with the adoption of decrees that fully and unconditionally equalized men and women in their rights, all independent women's associations were, however, banned. The Soviet government assumed the monopoly of the protection of women's interests. Thus, a course of action was announced for the «emancipation» of all Soviet women, which laid the foundation for a fundamentally new phenomenon, i.e. «state feminism.» So, the state, represented by the ruling party and pursuing the above-stated policy, assumed the protection of the «women's departments» and then "women's councils" it had formed. The legal rights of women and their equality, in general, were proclaimed immediately after the revolution. In 1918, the first All-Russian Congress of Workers and Peasant Women was held in Moscow.

The main merit in the very formulation of the need for a special and dedicated state policy for women belonged to the recognized Bolshevik theoretician Alexandra Kollontai. In her works of the 1920s, «Women Work for the Evolution of National Economy» and the story «Love of Labor Bees» (1924), Kollontai suggested that the revolutionary state relied on the woman as its privileged partner to create a new way of life, because the unreliability of the man as an agent of new social relations was obvious to her. The proclaimed ideas of «emancipation», «free love» and «free family» were aimed at undermining the «instincts» and «skills» for a private life, which was considered to be the main disrupter of socialist relations. According to Kollontai, a marriage should be a marriage "without routine," or even disappear altogether. The role of the woman was to be distinguished from that of the man by the maternal function only, an honorable function to be encouraged by the state. But already in the second half of the 1920s, they began to gradually abandon the course of action, aimed at the «revolution of the routine» in connection with the emergence of new directions – the transition from the agrarian to the industrial phase. It was time for industrialization, collectivization, the «great construction projects» of socialism. The state desperately needed cheap labor, and women were exceptionally suited for the role. Thus, the public practice of solving the women's issue in the 1920s-1930s was based on the theoretical provisions of Marxism, namely participation in public produc-

tion is a decisive condition that determines the social status of women. The idea that a woman need not work in production completely disappeared from the Soviet public consciousness. In this regard, the nature of gender relations in the Soviet period is qualified as a “working mother’s contract”. In the context of an ill-provided routine, this meant a double burden.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 Здравомыслова Е., Темкина А. Советские гендерные контракты и их трансформация в современной России // Социс, 2002. № 11. С. 4-15.



# THE POLICY OF *INDIGENOUSIZATION*: ORIENTALISM – SOCIALISM – GENDER

In 1925-1934, the Soviet authorities in the national republics, as well as in the USSR as a whole, implemented the so-called policy of nativization-indigenization. These years saw the peak of recruiting national/local personnel, that is, the policy of nominating national representatives (mainly from the lower rural strata) on favorable terms. The indigenization policy began to shrink only by 1933-34.<sup>3</sup> The Russian language had not yet become the lingua franca, both local languages and home-grown personnel were prioritized.<sup>4</sup> But already by the beginning of the 1950s, the situation with the status of languages, as well as the human resources policy generally changed.

Women's departments were created within the central and local party bodies and existed until 1929. In the 1920-1930s, the women's movement carried on in the form of delegates' meetings at enterprises and at the place of residence for housewives. In December 1924, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b) passed a Decree "On the objectives of work among female workers, peasants and toilers of the East", where the primary objective was to employ women."<sup>5</sup> The delegates of British trade unions, visiting the Soviet republics, described their impressions as follows: "In Baku ... the natives took us to the central model club for oriental women, it had over 2000 members. The club has a nursery, an outpatient clinic, and workshops for training in all kinds of trade and crafts, including bookbinding, sewing, embroidery, shoemaking, etc. In addition, there are courses that prepare women for admission to the Workers' faculty, a teachers' training school and the Soviet party school. There are also music and drama clubs. These exclusive clubs for women are an exception. They are organized only for the women of the East, since it would be impossible to attract women to clubs where men are present."<sup>6</sup>

What niches and clusters did the Soviet Union offer to the "*women of the East*", how did she *herself* perceive it, and -what consequences did these innovations have for the transformation of the social relations? Of course, we can say that the Bolshevik government *orientalized* its republics and other political autonomies. Bolshevik leaders chose to use orientalist tropes and anti-relativist terminology in their description, in which the Soviets were defined as *modernist* and the Soviet East was seen as *primitive*. Thus, they 1) stereotyped the Soviet East; 2) generalized it condescendingly, they

3 Terry M. The Affirmative Action Empire. Nation and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939. University of Chicago.

4 See the documents on the household logs of different villages in NKAO, Daghray village, in particular: the records were in Arabic script, in the Armenian and Russian languages. In the archive of Stepanakert

5 Кирилина А.В. Гендерные аспекты массовой коммуникации // Гендер как интрига познания. Сб. ст. Изд. "Рудомино" М. 2000. С. 48.

6 Женщина-работница и крестьянка в СССР. Отчет женской делегации британских тред-юнионов. М., Изд-во ВЦСПС, 1925. С. 39.

did not distinguish between the remote and culturally heterogeneous republics of the so-called East (along with the republics of the Soviet Central Asia, including Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). Using the newly invented doctrinal clichés, the ideologists of Bolshevism constructed the primitivism of the “East” through the position of “the women of the East”, namely segregation of women, their isolation, hiding faces behind the burqa (in the case of Karabakh, *irestzatzkan* is part of a complex headdress that covered the mouth, as depicted in a Soviet monument *Our Mountains and Us*, erected at the entrance to Stepanakert), early marriages, polygyny-polygamy, and kalym or the price for a bride. This led to the conclusion that by transforming the Eastern woman, it would be possible to automatically transform the East. Thus, equating the East with the women of the East, the Bolshevik vocabulary clearly exposed local women to both eroticization and exoticization, for which the Soviets, as a progressive project, were later criticized.<sup>7</sup> The differences were associated not only with the characteristics of each republic or autonomous region, but, among other things, also with the social composition of each district and even village.

---

7 Northrop D. (2001) Nationalizing Backwardness: Gender, Empire, and Uzbek Identity.

# THE SOVIET WOMAN OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH (NKAO): DYNAMICS OF STATUS CHANGE

## THE LANGUAGE AND POWER OF NOMINATION

Karabakh villages still bore the obvious remnants of the patriarchal order. Here we should clarify the status of the oldest woman in the family (in the clan) in the Karabakh local subculture and the terms of kinship used to address her. All the relatives in the family called the oldest woman (who usually was the mother-in-law) “mother”.<sup>8</sup> With age, the woman’s weight and authority steadily grows, which is clearly manifested in the terms of kinship, used as a common practice in some villages in Karabakh to this day, but was such especially up to the 1950s - 1960s. The daughter-in-law, that is, the wife of the oldest woman’s son, has her own children, and she, together with her husband, are called simply by their names by everyone, including their children (belittling their status through nomination); the mother of the son, who is at the same time the mother-in-law for his wife (daughter-in-law), is called “mother” by all family members, although she is not their biological mother (here, on the contrary, we witness an upgrade in her status through nomination). The mother-in-law of the mother-in-law is called “big mother” (*mets mama*), and the mother-in-law of the “big mother”, if she is still alive, is called by the most honorable and authoritative term *aya*. Thus, the oldest woman in the family acquires, over the years, the highest status, relative to other women and young men. However, the scales weighed down to those rights which were slightly more articulated on a regional scale. This became especially evident during the Soviet period, in particular, during the war and the post-war period (in the 1940s) and in the early 1990s.

## PROMOTED WORKERS – ORIENTAL WOMEN

State feminism, the concept and image of the new woman were the key words of the new Soviet gender doctrine and politics, which assumed and anticipated the destruction of patriarchal femininity. Women were given access to the open, public, unprecedented new scenarios of socialization that were well beyond the private life. Some

---

8 Шахназарян Н. Язык как маркер отношений господства и подчинения (гендерный аспект) // Антропология, меньшинства, мультикультурализм. Бюллетень. 2003, ноябрь, № 4. Краснодар. С. 86-87.

women's biographies in Karabakh are stories of women who covered the difficult route of transformation from a "bourgeois element," i.e. a potential "kulak," to activists, teachers of universal education and schools for illiterates, chairs of village councils, and shock workers. In some cases, they were the relatives and close friends of entrepreneurs and oil magnates or simply wealthy people from Baku and Shushi, but mostly these were simple and peasant women.

In the mid 1920s, *'likkayans'* – centers for the elimination of illiteracy – were opened in all the villages in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, the implementation of the *cultural revolution*, that not only affected women, but sometimes was fulfilled by women, gained momentum from 1925 to 1928. Upon the establishment of various Soviet institutions, centers for the elimination of illiteracy, or the so-called *Universal Education institutions* were opened everywhere and were operated by the most active and educated citizens of both sexes. The women of the Soviet republics hastily learned to read and write and soon themselves became instructors of Universal Education. Marggo Dadamyan gave testimony of those times: *"My neighbor S. was literate, and even before the revolution she studied at a lyceum in Shushi where the instruction language was Armenian. Her second husband was very educated for those times, too: he knew Russian well, taught her Russian, and they both taught in the likkayan."*

## SOVIET SEXUALITY AND THE POLICY OF CONTRACEPTION: ABORTION CULTURE

During the Soviet period, the policies and ideologies of motherhood underwent complex multi-layered changes, due to active manipulation by Soviet ideologists and propagandists. Having proclaimed that "the family was withering away" as a petty bourgeois institution, a gigantic project was launched to radically change the gender system and relations between the sexes. In Soviet socio-political contexts, the discourses about parenting, motherhood and childhood stepped into the agrarian and industrial stages. The tone and moral imperatives, contained in the childcare textbooks of that era, are an excellent summary of the generation of maternity discourses, as well as the practice of "producing" mothers proper in the USSR.<sup>9</sup> Conception, pregnancy, childbirth, baby-care extended beyond the private domain into that of state regulation. The studies conducted by some historians, culture researchers and anthropologists of feminism highlighted the unprecedentedly high degree of influence, imposed by the Soviet political power on the sexual aspect of life, in general, and the reproductive aspect and the practice of motherhood,<sup>10</sup> in particular (it should be noted that this was typical of most industrialized countries of the world). Starting from the mid-1930s, the society, on the contrary, relied on the institution of the family, tightening the legislation on marriage and divorce. In 1936, the Stalinist state prohibited abortion.

9 Черняева Н. Производство матерей в Советской России: учебники по уходу за детьми эпохи индустриализации. ГИ № 12, 2004. Харьковский центр гендерных исследований. С. 120-138.

10 Goldman W. Women, the State and the Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Stites R. The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, Bolshevism. Princeton 1978.

Infanticide is a sensitive topic. It is directly related to various aspects of the mankind's existential problems – and firstly, those of contraception and malnutrition or famine, that is, the lack of resources. A euphemistic term was used for this practice in pre-revolutionary Karabakh villages – “to leave the child under the trough” (*tashten taken togheh*). They got rid of children of both sexes – they strangled them, did not feed them, left them in the frost. However, most often this was the fate that befell newborn girls. The Soviet times put an end to these practices almost entirely. However, the excessive workload on collective farms and the unfulfilled promises of the Soviet state to provide infrastructure for motherhood and childhood, in particular in Nagorno-Karabakh, led to a situation when the elder children looked after the younger ones while the mother was absent almost all day long. A long-liver woman from the village of Berdashen, named Vardan, recalled: *I was still quite a child myself and dropped my newborn brother so often that he died*. At the same time, abortion had become almost the only method of contraception against the above-described background.

In the 1920s, as part of the Bolshevik project of state feminism, the USSR became the first state in the world to legalize abortion. Of course, the legalization of abortion is a complex topic with too many layers. In fact, in terms of contraceptive culture, and reproductive behavior *per se*, the USSR ultimately became an abortion culture. At the same time, according to the assessments of the Karabakh women, it was less psychologically detrimental, “resource-intensive” and “labor-intensive” in comparison with infanticide. Most of the respondents, whose reproductive period was in the Soviet era, could not remember how many abortions they had had in their lives. Abortion had a disastrous effect on a woman's reproductive health. Nevertheless, according to the results of feminist studies, the right to terminate pregnancy is an inalienable, important, integral part of women's freedom and female agency. In this sense, the liberalization of abortion is viewed by women as an absolutely progressive project. The problem, however, is that often, throughout the history, any social experiment of this kind, including the world sexual revolution of the 1960s, revealed that it was always the woman who paid for all types of emancipations, especially sexual liberalization, putting at stake her health, funds, and emotions. And this was exactly the case with Karabakh women.

## ARPENIK OR APO:<sup>11</sup> CASE STUDY

This rendering of Arpenik/Apo's case from the viewpoint of a Soviet woman's/gender history is a case study, based on a Soviet Karabakh woman's biography. Arpenik/Apo was the wife of Pavel from the village of Daghratz in NKAO, Pavel was one of the three brothers in the family. Pavel's brothers – Mikhail and Alexander – left the village, so Pavel had to take care of their parents Arshak and Heghine (Helen) and look after the family household. Arpenik herself was born in the village of Nakhichevanik, where her mother Taguhi moved when she married Mukhan. Taguhi was a midwife. *Some time*

---

11 The quotes from the interview are presented in italic. The text contains excerpts from the letter by Amalia Mkrtchyan, Arpenik's niece, living in Ashkhabad, Turkmenia.

*after the wedding, a child was born. That was good. But it was a girl, and that was bad. Everyone in the family was upset. It was 1910. The girl was named Arfenya. <...> Two years later, Taguhi gave birth to another girl. The family was irritated by this outrage. Taguhi's position in the family changed for the worse. They began to bash her. The mother-in-law was especially trying hard, given that she was Mukhan's stepmother and also one of his mistresses. Father-in-law Avanes did not spend much time at home, he was a hard worker. But the mother-in-law tortured her daughter-in-law and even beat her. Once, when the daughter-in-law was washing her hair, the mother-in-law hit her on the head with a metal jug (dolcha) so hard that she became an epileptic. <...> Taguhi became pregnant for the third time, she firmly decided that if a girl was born, she would strangle it. Therefore, when labor pains began, Taguhi went to the barn to give birth (it was the winter of 1914). A boy was born ... Taguhi saw that the child was male, did everything as needed, wrapped the child in her apron (an apron is a mandatory element of women's clothing in the village), brought it home and said: "Here is your boy, just as you wanted it." <...> In 1916, another girl was born into the family.*

## ORHNVİ SOVETY! LONG LIVE THE SOVIETS!

The Armenian population of NKAO associates Soviet power with pax Sovietica, with a period of relative calm in interethnic relations.

The official discourse triumphantly proclaimed: "The victory of the Baku Commune (in 1918) inspired the workers of Karabakh, but the temporary success of the Dashnaks and Musavatists caused an artificial interethnic aggravation. On May 12, 1920, the XI Army, under the leadership of S.M. Kirov and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, entered Shusha. The residents greeted the liberators with bread and salt. Karabakh became Soviet, too."<sup>12</sup>

*In the early 1920s, when things calmed down a bit, Taguhi returned to Daghray with her children. The house was empty, even dilapidated. What could they live on? Taguhi herself was weak in health. The eldest daughter Arfenya went to work in the house of the Shakhnazaryans. She, of course, tried hard, because the whole family depended on her. The landlords saw she was a smart, hard-working, honest, and healthy girl. This chance could not be missed, she had to be taken into the family. Especially Apo (short for Arfenya) had advantages if compared with the female half of the landlord's family. Mistress Haghine was very sick, <...> she suffered greatly from a bone disease, she was all twisted. Apparently, she had rheumatism, or maybe polyarthritis. She was a good grandmother. Her face was of a very unusual and rare beauty. The eldest daughter Yermonia was beautiful but lazy. The youngest daughter Tamara was kind, affectionate, but a sickly thing. The fact is that during pregnancy, Haghine suffered from jaundice, and this affected the health of the fetus.*

Arfenya ended up in the Shakhnazaryan family as a servant, because she had to feed herself and her family. But soon the Shakhnazaryans talked with Taguhi, and the

12 Гюль К.К., Гулиев А.Н., Надиров А. А. Нагорно-Карабахская автономная область // Советский Союз. Азербайджан. М. 1971. С. 253.



little girl was reserved as a bride. *The Shahnazaryan family was one of the richest in our village. They had always had a large farm, so they used to hire workers even in the Soviet times (before the war).* Given the fact that the region was in deep periphery, it was spared from the class struggle and its tough specificities that wiped across the USSR, enabling the continuation of lordly manners up to collectivization.

*In 1924, the Shakhnazarians married their eldest son Pavel to Arfenya. And Taguhi's family lost their breadwinner. Therefore, my dad (Suren Mkrtchyan) applied to be hired by the Shakhnazaryans. Now he had become the main breadwinner in the family. Taguhi earned something, too: she baked bread for people, delivered babies, and treated gynaecological diseases.*

*They used to tell the following pre-war anecdote from Apo's life. On holidays, everyone gathered at shenamach (the gathering place, literally – the center of the village), they played games, swung on the swings, the men wrestled. Apo told us that her husband had also fought and had been defeated. Apo could not stand this and decided to take revenge. As a respectable wife of her husband, she asked him for permission to fight his opponent. Pavel, knowing the abilities of his wife, allowed. Apo went into battle and won. In my opinion, this is very cool, in modern terms. <...> Apo was gifted. People graduate from theatrical universities, take private lessons, go out of their ways, and with all this they still cannot even play an average role. While Apo, without any education, could portray anyone. At the same time, her voice changed, and she was fully transformed in appearance. She even had ready-made concert pieces that the audience demanded as an encore. And she danced enchantingly, too! How much joy and pleasure did Apo give to people with her art! I call her "the people's artist of our village".*

*<...> Besides, I remember that in the 1930s a competition of the longest braid was held in Stepanakert. Apo took either the 1st or the 2nd place, but after that she began to have very severe headaches. She came to Baku for treatment. She stayed at her brother Suren's place, who had already moved to Baku by that time. Arfenya, undoubtedly, had leadership qualities. Apo was sharp on the tongue. She always carried herself with pride and dignity. Why was she called Apo? Because she argued with someone in her youth and said that she was so confident in her opinion that if she lost the argument, she would change her name (a common language cliché in a heated verbal dispute – *anumys kphokhim* "I will change my name"). She lost the argument, and as a person of her word (this is an imitation of the male code of honor), she changed her name.*

By the 1930s, the excitement over the issue of women in the USSR had reached its peak, and its "solution" was significantly promoted and accelerated. "Later, when the state headed for industrialization, the demand for labor resources increased sharply, and women were involved in the labor force even more intensely.<sup>13</sup> In 1936, a book – *The Woman in the USSR* – prepared by the Central Department of the National Economic Accounting Bureau of the USSR State Planning Committee, was published in Moscow. It contained statistical data, portraying the position of women in the Soviet Union during the first and second five-year plan periods. The data referring to

---

13 Кирилина А.В. Гендерные аспекты массовой коммуникации // Гендер как интрига познания. Сб. ст. Изд. "Рудомино" М. 2000. С.

pre-revolutionary Russia and the capitalist countries of the West were given for comparative reference. This work noted that “the involvement of women into labor and production was the slowest and was lagging behind all in the indigenous peoples in Azerbaijan and Central Asian republics.”<sup>14</sup> Whereas, in the rest of the Soviets countries, women were reacting to the call of the state not just with enthusiasm, but sometimes also with a certain degree of fanaticism. The following may well serve as examples of women’s labor enthusiasm – the *Stakhanov movement*, *khetagurovka* – a neologism that appeared after the publication of an open letter from Valentina Khetagurova with an appeal to girls to take part in the development of the Far Eastern region (250 thousand girls responded), and the initiative of a female tractor driver Pasha Angelina “100 thousand female friends, let us get onto the tractor” (200 thousand women responded).<sup>15</sup>

With the start of industrialization, collectivization and large-scale construction of socialism, the young Soviet state needed cheap labor. As in the other regions of the USSR, a wave of ideological fanaticism swept over Karabakh, too. In parallel, the infrastructure network was being intensively expanded in the villages of Karabakh to provide jobs in the industrial and agricultural sectors. The refrained idea of the era was the cultivation of heroic labor for the sake of the country. And the woman was almost as involved in production activities as the man.<sup>16</sup> The collective farm workdays, for example, were paid by the output, regardless of gender, and sometimes the woman in the family earned more than a man, thereby breaking the stereotypical image of him as the breadwinner, which, in fact, is the basis of patriarchal power.

## 1928 – 1930: COLLECTIVIZATION

Despite all accompanying excesses, collectivization in Nagorno-Karabakh, in general, is recalled in the most positive terms: these recollections in Daghratz had class dimensions. Many among the people in Karabakh were repressed for refusing to join the collective farm and fell victim to dispossession (*kulakathaph*).

The reverent attitude of the ordinary people towards the Soviet order was very different from that held by the children of former “kulaks” or the repressed and intimidated, who voiced the offense only after the collapse of the Soviet system. Arshak Shakhnazaryan, Apo’s father-in-law, considered himself a representative of the nobility: this is confirmed by the recollections of the family members about the lost property, namely family land, cattle, servants living on the farm, including Arfenya herself before marrying Pavel (the decision on marriage was made by his mother Heghine; Arfenya slept in the same bed with the mistress of the house and her employer until her first menstrual period, until the age of 13). Arshak hastily sold his livestock, and among the first voluntarily handed over all that was left, including the arable lands

14 Центральное управление народно-хозяйственного учета Госплана СССР 1936, с. 11.

15 Кирилина А.В. Гендерные аспекты массовой коммуникации // Гендер как интрига познания. Сб. ст. Изд. “Рудомино” М. 2000. С. 51.

16 Женщина-работница и крестьянка в СССР. Отчет женской делегации британских тред-юнионов. М., Изд-во ВЦСПС, 1925. с. 39.



and orchards (Shakhnazarantz Tap'er), to the collective farm. Artash, a cattleman who was formerly employed by the Shakhnazaryans and lived in their house, was now elected chairman of the newly formed Daghras collective farm. Artash, having become the chairman of the collective farm, "bore malice" (*chyratsala*): he mistreated Arshak's cattle, which was now part of the collective farm's property, beating the "shahnazarats" cattle at the watering hole, he demonstratively "cursed out". Grieving the breakdown of the former social hierarchies, Arshak could only grin bitterly, constantly repeating: *"Well, these are strange days now, my servant has become my master."* The villages in Karabakh were entirely affected by the doctrinal confusion of such "antagonistic relations" as the differentiation into the poor and middle-class peasants vs. the so-called class of rural exploiters and small-scale capitalist-producers within which employment was defined as exploitation. Arshak's story is a vivid illustration of the process, called *self-dispossession* or *averaging*.<sup>17</sup>

Arshak, a wealthy landowner who easily fit the definition of a *kulak*, died a year after he was forced to give all his livestock and land holdings to the new government, i.e. the collective farm. *He did not see my mother become a forewoman and ride around on the back of a horse, named Shabo. He did not see Stalinian repressions either: that was a scary time: people were informed on, mislaid, men were exiled for no reason to take over their beautiful wives*, Irina Pavlovna said when recalling her mother.

In Irina Arustamyan's memory, there is an interesting passage about her mother's forewomanship (an official position for a woman, an active social and economic role) and the shaping of a new model of mobility for the new Soviet woman of the East. Arfenya, who, began to ride through the village on her horse Shabo while working on the collective farm, is the embodiment of not only the transformation of mechanical mobility, but also the trespassed boundaries, established by centuries or millennia. A woman on horseback did not fit into an ordinary Karabakh villager's worldview in any way. Hence, this was the Soviet revolution of mobility, a new gender-based interpretation of space and its reclamation. Women were no longer locked in houses under multi-layered clothes, and not only this was not prohibited, but was declared a legitimate and voluntarily-compulsory line of female social behavior.

---

17 In 1927-29, the majority of successful farm-owners were extremely weakened and had to merge into collective farms. Social sciences have not fully studied either these processes, or the conduct of the "kulaks," in particular. See Lewin Moshe *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia*. 1985. Pantheon Books: NY. P. 140-141.

# SOVIET REALITY VS. “REAL LIFE”

## THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR: SOVIET WIDOWHOOD (BENEFIT FROM THE STATE AND PENSION)

In 1941, her youngest son Hrachik was only one year old when Arfenya accompanied her husband to the war. <...>... *It was for this very reason that Apo loved Hrachik the most.* When Hrachik was 5 years old, a relative, named Shushanik, the daughter of uncle Misha, came to Daghratz for the summer from the “advanced” city of Baku. Without hesitation, she tore up Hrachik’s birth certificate and, announcing the loss, wrote him a new document with the “modernized” name of Robert Pavlovich Shakhnazaryan. *His children will grow up to become serious figures, PhDs, doctors, professors, and if named by their patronymic, they will be called Hrachikovna. They will be laughed at. No, this is unacceptable,* the “summer resident” explained to her extended family.

World War II paved the way to the new recomposition of the Soviet gender order. During the Great Patriotic War (WWII) it became clear that women were assigned an auxiliary role. Women, who took all the hardships of organizing life in the rear on their shoulders, were forced to quickly retreat when the men returned from the front. *The three sons of the Shahnazaryans – Pavel, Misha, and Sasha – participated in World War II. Pavel went missing, Misha died, and Sasha, my mother’s favorite, returned home safely with trophies. During all 4 years of war everyone in the village lived in the same poverty, everyone worked. Arfenya, Nina, Hrantik of the Shakhnazaryan family worked on the collective farm. The main worker was, of course, Arfenya. She worked hard at home, too. Thus, Arfenya became the sovereign mistress of the house, which she entered as a servant.*

In 1943, Apo received a paper notifying her that her husband – Pavel Arshakovich Shakhnazaryan – was missing. Leaving for the front, Pavel ordered Arfenya to breast-feed his one-year-old son Hrachik (Robert) until he returned home. As a devoted and obedient wife, Arfenya breastfed her son until the end of the war. In fact, she was left without a husband at the age of 29. *But until the end of her life, that ended on May 16, 1986 (in Baku, in the house of her eldest son Hrantik), no one ever dared to say that she even once looked at any other man. They did not dare, because there was no reason. This topic was never even gossiped about, even though the topic of sex was the most favorite one in the village. After the war, the collective farm sent Apo to take beekeeping courses in Stepanakert. She successfully completed these courses, became a good beekeeper, and earned well on this all her life. She said that not everyone completed the course, many failed. I remember Apo being invited to other villages as an expert, as a consultant on special occasions in their apiary, when they themselves could not cope.* The Soviet system offered Arfenya absolutely unprecedented opportu-

nities and a social ladder. She worked in 4 positions on the collective farm – as manager of a huge cattle-breeding farm and chairwoman of the Revision Commission (RK) in the village, she knocked the wheat crop (*kal takel*) with a stick in the season and was the collective farm beekeeper. In addition to all this, she was paid workdays, as well as monthly payments “in kind” – she received butter, wheat, cereals, legumes, fruits and vegetables and a share of everything that was produced on the collective farm. The gem in the crown of professional titles was the very significant status of the Chair of the RK, since it even trumped down the chairman of the collective farm. The Soviet way of life completely changed the image of the woman of the East, not only in terms of her appearance and clothing (the obligatory head and mouth covers belonged to the past), but also in terms of mechanical and social mobility. Arfenya rode across the surroundings of the whole collective farm on the back of a horse named Shabo, she studied professions, acquiring new statuses. However, as war widow, Apo did not receive any payments or benefits from the state. At the end of her multidisciplinary work career, she retired at the age of 50, and being a mother of 4, received a meager amount of 12 Soviet rubles a month, which she constantly complained about.

The women of agrarian Karabakh were given platforms for gaining economic agency, becoming a subject of economic relations, which implicitly meant inclusion in power relations both in the context of the extended and/or nuclear family, and at the state-political level.

However, one should not exaggerate the level of gender equality in the USSR. The system for granting women with political rights and local representation had serious costs and flaws. For example, in Karabakh, as in all three South Caucasian republics, men clearly prevailed in the highest echelons of power. In addition, their work was paid five times more than the same work done by a woman.<sup>18</sup> At the republican level, there were no women with ministerial portfolios, there were no women in the executive branch either. Most often, women were appointed second deputies of the local Central Committee of the Communist Party, and this was their “glass ceiling”. In this connection it is no coincidence that women began to occupy completely different marginal niches. Since the 1980s, women already featured in the dissident circles, but not in politics.

Soviet women broke into power only in crisis situations in the times of war, chaos and devastation, and this was a universal phenomenon. The fact that such social and status-related phenomena were ubiquitous testifies to the structural nature of such discrimination. World War II, during which the burden of work in the rear fell on the shoulders of women, may serve as a vivid example. It was the peak of high-ranking appointments among women in both the city and countryside. The largest number of chairwomen of collective and state farms in the South Caucasian republics and in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) could be observed in the period when there was no other option because of general mobilization. In other words, despite egalitarian slogans, women were assigned an auxiliary role, and access to prestigious positions was provided only if there was a leftover.

---

18 Dudwick, Nora. “Out of the Kitchen into the Crossfire: Women in Independent Armenia.” In *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*, edited by Mary Buckley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 238; Ishkanian, Armine. “Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus.” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 2003: 475-496.

## COMMUNITY VALUES, OR VALUES OF KINSHIP AND THE EXTENDED FAMILY. “SUMMER RESIDENTS”

The patriarchal order was constantly emerging, “peeking out” in the texts of interviews about the Soviet period, and usually through discourses and concepts, which sometimes borrowed their equivalent euphemisms from the Soviet bureaucratic discursive reality. For example, the word *gerdastan*,<sup>19</sup> often used in everyday life and during ritual speeches and toasts was replaced by “house book”; though *gerdastan* covered a wider range of extended kinship, the house book referred to a two-generation nuclear family. *I want to say that Apo lived with her mother-in-law all her life. I think Haghine died in the 1970s, that is, Apo lived with her mother-in-law for 30 years when her husband was not there. This is heroism by today’s standards. But then it was commonplace.*

In the 1940s-1950s, a new concept emerged in Karabakh, denoting villagers who left their native land for the cities and the capital, these people were named “summer residents”. The latter spent their holidays and vacations in the houses of their grandfathers and relatives, settling in them during the holidays. Thus, the connection with the ancestral village was not interrupted, and the “summer residents” promoted and developed their native villages. However, as city dwellers, they also burdened the life of the female villagers, loading them with additional “invisible”, unpaid, emotional care work at home. *In the summer, everyone brought their children and left. Overwhelmingly many children – 7 or 8 – stayed in the house at a time. But besides the children, she had a house, a farm to take care of, and her job on the collective farm.* This excerpt from Amalia Mkrtchyan’s letter reveals new gender-class dichotomies along the demarcation line between rural vs. urban women.

The era of stagnation was, on the whole, stable and calm. The late Soviet period stood out by stable trends in terms of embedding women in the structures of political power (empowerment). Within the regional and district administrations of the NKAO, women were appointed as second secretaries of the Central Committee of the CPSU and other power structures by the target method (for example, Melania Adamyan in the Martuni district administration).

Zhenya, a resident of Martuni, sketched the social portrait of her mother-in-law who was a promoted worker from among the ordinary people. *Mom – together with Nakhshun, our neighbor – was the first to join the party in our area. In 1982, on the 50th anniversary of her experience as party member, our secretary of the district committee honorably invited her to his office and asked what she would like to receive as a gift from the state for her party and labor achievements. Not thinking twice, she asked to asphalt her yard. It was all done on the next day. There was no more squelching in the mud.*

Women’s promotion into the ranks of the CPSU and social activism, in general, were encouraged to such an extent that a relative gender balance was achieved in both party membership and involvement in the country’s political life. This directive from the center clashed against the passive resistance of families, especially in three-

---

19 *Gerdastan* (Arm.) – a concept, indicating the extended, multi-generational clan.

and four-generation families, where the elders still held the reins of micro-level grass-roots management. When Larisa Petrosyan got a call from her work and was informed that her candidacy was proposed for membership to the CPSU, her mother-in-law grabbed the phone and announced to the official in an icy voice: *Larisa will not become a member of the CPSU ahead of her husband. Do not call again on this matter.* In another biographical interview of the late Soviet period, the candidacy of a 19-year-old entrant as a bride in Yerevan was immediately rejected by the mother of the loving groom at the very first meeting, with the following argument: *I need a daughter-in-law, not a Clara Zetkin* (Faramazyan Larina, a native of Martuni, NKAO). Examples of passive struggle and secret sabotage of this kind are quite expressive evidence of realities, functioning in parallel with the “classical” patriarchy along with the opportunities enabled by “state feminism.” It is a different matter that officially the practices of “traditional patriarchy” were considered marginal and condemned, while loudly manifested gender “equality”, a new way of life and double-career family models were officially approved.

The theme of the Soviet past in the region is relevant for several reasons: it is often referred to, people are nostalgic for it, it is represented as a role model. It is also topical because, despite the general context of the patriarchal order, in particular, the experience of state feminism and equal opportunities for the sexes had long-term consequences for the region. Recently, in Karabakh (as well as in Armenia), the political quota for women came into effect again. It is interesting, however, that in Nagorno-Karabakh it is called a *gender* quota, which is indicative of a more gender-sensitive approach to the issue (that is, a gender quota means that if we are talking about a women’s organization or a party, at least 20% of its composition must be male; thus, the issue of gender stereotyping is removed).

## CODA

As a conclusion, I would like to dwell on several important points. The USSR proclaimed a course for the “emancipation” of Soviet women by means of the cultural and everyday revolution, which marked the beginning of a fundamentally new phenomenon - “state feminism.” The experience of women’s emancipation, of course, had a significant impact on the post-Soviet nation-building. This experience had its own dynamics and multiple parameters, which is worthwhile to generalize. The rise in the status of women and their political participation in the USSR had their own stages and ambiguities. Despite the adoption of decrees that fully and unconditionally equalized men and women in their rights, all independent women’s associations were banned. As in all other spheres, the Soviet regime held monopoly over the protection of women’s interests. The communal patriarch-father was replaced by the monopolist patriarch-state (the change of the gender paradigm became especially obvious in the Stalinist period).

As for gender identities, family narratives about Apo reflected the turbulent social change through the lens of just a woman’s biography. Despite the general orientalizing trend of a woman’s status (the general clichéd category of “women of the East” also included women in the South Caucasus), rural women of Karabakh gained access to social ladders of various kinds, in particular, through the acquisition of new professions and their application in the collective farm and other high-status institutions. Along with this, communal values did not, in any way, lose their strength, which reflects the dynamics and ingenuity of adaptive mechanisms, inherent in the Soviet system, in particular, and human societies, in general.

Although Soviet socialization, ensuring the adoption of the “rules of a game” across the country, presupposed the destruction of the mechanism for transmitting traditional values, traditional discourses remained influential in Karabakh everyday routine, especially in the villages, albeit pushed into the completely private domain. Moreover, those who adhered to a clear patriarchal tradition in the field of gender order were seen as agents of an inherently passive Švejk-style resistance and were viewed as fighters against the ideals of the official doctrine, undermining the Soviet regime from within.

