

Gendered space and political statement in Armenia

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The idea of this research was originally about studying the dynamics of development and restructuring of public spaces in Armenia from the viewpoint of the gender component of social processes. Coming from our personal experience of moving and living in the city, as well as from the experience of participation in street actions in Yerevan, we decided to narrow down the understanding of public space to only one of its aspects, namely – the possibility of making public statements in the public space of streets and squares. We were interested to observe how patterns of media presentation, comprehension, perception, reproduction and archiving of statements change depending on the gender identity of the subject who makes the actual statement. We will try to spread light on several aspects of reproduction of gender structurization and genderized public space. By saying «structured space» we mean a space where certain types of statements, behavior or self-positioning are accepted and considered prestigious, or on the contrary, are negatively sanctioned and blocked, depending on the gender of the person or the group of people who demonstrate that behavior or position. In the meantime, we talk about structural manifestations of patriarchal domination that are supported by the apparatus of violence and are based on diverse practices and settings. Furthermore, in the reflection process we touched upon internalized concepts such as fear, feeling of danger, and social constructs connected to the abovementioned; we have not limited ourselves to merely making statements but have tried to present group practices of emancipation and empowerment.

The rhetoric of care and protection of women as a limitation

A full, equal and active participation of women in urban life is often blocked by the argument that public spaces are, in principle, not safe. Within this discourse public space is constructed as a field of interaction between strong independent subjects - men. In the framework of this logic and argumentation, women are by default weak victims, objects. Therefore, women are considered to be supporters of the legitimate social order and practices and are assumed to be incapable of independent existence in the public space. The care and protection are manifested not in the sense of creating a safe space and letting women be active subjects there but rather in the sense of excluding women and securing public spaces for the complete disposal of men and thus, making it impossible even to pose the question of emancipation and equality. This reinforces the objectified situation of women and redistributes social resources in favor of the

development of tools for even stronger control over them. Identical control and exclusion take place in the public space – certain districts and places are considered, i.e. manifested as more dangerous. And therefore, for the sake of protection and care, women are «strongly recommended» not to be in those places. When a woman comes across a threat of physical violence in the street it is often considered to be her fault because by moving in an «unsafe» space she has violated the rules that reinforced the existing social order. An escalation of such a setting can cause legitimization of curfew for women or a direct ban of women's presence in different urban spaces – a practice used in several countries up to date.

Patriarchal society responds to sexual violence, pursuit, harassment and other forms of abuse and violence by ignoring, condemnation, refusal of taking a certain stance, mistrust towards the victim or even blaming her for what happens. From early childhood women are socialized with an internalized setting that they permanently need to be cautious and take precautions when going out at dark/night or, to certain places, even during the daytime. Meanwhile, passive roles are imposed over women together with tactics of adaptation and acceptance, instead of active resistance and fight for the right and possibility of using public spaces on equal position with men. Thus, instead of making streets more inclusive for everyone, violence is legitimized and women are excluded from full participation in urban life.

Parallel to objectification and sexualization of women's bodies, which are manifested as sexual objects, the post-soviet countries tend to «domesticate» women and place them within the private sphere of their «homes» with the excuse of protecting them and caring for them as public spaces are not safe and therefore it is undesirable to be there. At the same time, a reverse shift of functions of social reproductive labor takes place: childcare, which, in the soviet period, was the prerogative of the state – through kindergartens and schools, placed in the «hands of women». In the framework of neoliberal reforms, kindergartens and schools are being privatized, closed or becoming paid institutions which strengthens class contradictions, transfers a considerable part of socially necessary labor to private, «domestic» space and limits possibilities for women to be present and active in the public space. Similarly, the state redistributes the «maternal capital» and institutionalizes patriarchy, as the right to maintain assumes the right to control.



Caption: Action «Take back the night» in Yerevan

by Lara Aharonian

Political actions for reclaiming dangerous spaces and for empowerment

The fight for freedom has to start from the fight for freedom of movement as a primary precondition for any other freedom. On March 11, 2015, in the framework of events named «March 8 is every day» an affinity group of feminists organized a direct action named «Take back the night». A large group of women marched in the city at night – an action that is assumed by many women as baring a large risk of rape. The women marched in places where rapes have happened and which are considered to be dangerous for women to go on their own, such as parks, subways, dark courtyards. Interestingly, some of the participants of the action were gradually going home, i.e. were leaving the public space because it was getting late. There were also participants accompanied by men – their brothers and partners, because their homes were far from the place of the action; these things were once again demonstrating the reality of everyday lives of these women.

In the situation of patriarchal domination each woman is isolated, and although many women face similar difficulties, they are lonely. Common meetings for discussing taboo topics, for reclaiming public spaces which are now inaccessible – the dark streets – is an important step towards creating a collective power capable of changing the society.

Invisibility of women during public actions

Unfortunately, the protest movements, even those that declare their aspiration for emancipation and eagerly appeal to the concept of freedom in their rhetoric, are no less prone to patriarchal prejudices. In the street actions, as in the world of patriarchal routine, women remain invisible and devoid of subjectivity.



*Caption: Men with megaphones . Protest in Mashtots Park, Yerevan.
by Photolur*

In an absolute majority of cases men are the ones who speak on behalf of the movement. A woman with a megaphone or on a tribune in a street action is a rare exception; even during protests, the speakers who raise women's issues are men. Men are interviewed and write expert articles and thus appropriate the entire protest through skillful, although not always conscious use of the politics of representation. The politics of representation happens not only through active intervention but also through selective media attention which reproduces patriarchal settings. For example, if you watch the film «Public Sphere in Armenia» which was created by people close to activism, which is symbolic in a certain way and at a certain level claims to present social movements in Armenia, you will not see a female activist expressing her opinion or acting as an independent subject in some other form. The film director and the author of the scenario (both are male) enforced their view on whom to let speak and whom to present as legitimate actors in the sphere of public politics, i.e. actors that are not only capable of acting but can also reflect on the happenings; once again they denied recognizing this capacity of women activists.

But this is not always true. From the first glance, media is full of images of women in public actions; however, they usually appear as objects of exclusively aesthetic value which is proven by the fact that media chooses women's images that respond to the acknowledged rules of male perception of sexual objects. These images are called to add aesthetics to the protest and, as some male activists put it, to «beautify it». Moreover, in the name of liberation and emancipation media adds to protests images connected with demonstrations of various

traditionally heterosexual sexualized actions such as hugs and kisses for record. There is nothing about women's subjectivity; here the woman is an attachment to the man, a background and flag- or poster-holder.



*Caption: Near the Armenian Parliament building
by Vrezh Zatikyan*

Work division in the process of preparation and conduct of street actions

Street actions are results of collective activity where different male and female participants can voluntarily (and not only) undertake different tasks. The task division often, if not always, reflects and reproduces the structural peculiarities of the gender division in the society. Women are usually responsible for problems, the solutions of which often go unnoticed and do not promise significant dividends in terms of publicity and access to resource redistribution but are rather connected to the reproduction of the movement; this includes legal support during activist arrests, collection of data-bases, informational activities in social networks and work with media, creation of the visual imagery of the actions, organization of meetings. Men take over the financial responsibilities, reach agreements with the police, make strategic decisions in urgent (and not only) situations in the course of public actions, as well as assess the work done by women.

This state of affairs is well realized by male protesters, and not only do they not recognize it as problematic but they even welcome it. The idea of bringing women's role down to that of «a beautifying object» and aesthetic servant of men is openly promoted by actors such as Shant Harutyunyan, a politician with an image of a revolutionary in Armenia. Speaking about the role of women in the revolution he stated: «Women have to flash passion and motivation to men, search and find a hero in each of them». «Many of them say that they want to come and stand by me on the barricades, I answer – no!» His interviews offer deeper and much more honest

comments on the topic, nevertheless they did not have an influence on wide acceptance of Harutyunyan by the activist community. Moreover, his misogynist rhetoric is taken over and reproduced during public actions and in the media.

Perceptions of «women's» actions in the public space

Media often ignores actions conducted by women. The police, too, has a presumption that actions attended primarily by women are harmless and do not deserve attention because women in the perception of the police cannot be political subjects, cannot make statements or be heard. I.e. women are voiceless. For example, on March 8, 2012, when women in Mashtots Park, Yerevan occupied a kiosk under construction, the law enforcement bodies were so stunned by the fact that women can be active that in order to prevent the occupation and stop the protest action they found no better solution than giving flowers to the protesting women.



Caption: March 8, 2012

from the archive of Mashtots Park movement

In situations when male and female activists stand together the police is more likely to check information about the action from male activists. If arrests take place, police tries to arrest and neutralize men first. The list of political prisoners of Armenia includes only men. But this

imaginary «secure situation» exists as long as women remain in the shade. As soon as they cross the limits of the prescribed «non-dangerous» and «feminine» practices, they are not only sanctioned as any other politically active subject but are additionally sanctioned for violating the structural bases of the existing social order, here - the patriarchal component of the social order.

For example, it has been several years already that every Thursday mothers of soldiers who were killed or tortured by higher rank officers or «older» soldiers during their compulsory military service organize protest actions in front of the Government building in Yerevan. They are raising a topic which is taboo in the Armenian society and therefore the police continuously tried to apply physical violence towards them despite the fact that the protesting women would seem to have the symbolic capital – they are mothers in a patriarchal society.

The reaction on women's participation in political actions can often be summed up in the following phrase “Go home! What are you doing here? A normal, well educated Armenian woman should be at home and not in the street. Shame on you!.” At police departments, women activists are stigmatized by being told that their behavior is inappropriate for women, that they are “spoilt, inappropriate, unnecessary and wrong”, that they undermine the foundations of the state and nation and even the course of history. Women activists are then compared to other women, in this case to police-women, who are, on the contrary, decent, serious, educated and true, married women. They are the ones who keep the foundation of the state, and police-men are forced to arrest and pursuit those other women – the activist women – who turn out to be the internal enemies and the disgrace of the nation.

In 2013, after a protest against illegal construction on 5 Komitas Street in Yerevan, active media discussion was provoked on a photograph and video where during the brawl a police-man was making a violent gesture towards a protesting woman and this gesture vaguely reminded a kiss. One of the reasons for publicizing this photo was to show other women what can happen to them if they attend protest actions, i.e. women were latently threatened with rape. Here, the common rhetoric of blaming the victim was widely used. It was assumed to be the woman's fault because she was not supposed to attend public actions. On the other hand, official governmental representatives publicly commented on the incident saying that no violence had occurred and there is nothing wrong if an «Armenian man kisses an Armenian woman»; thus, the woman was once again presented as a «love» object which has to be accessible to men under all circumstances, even if she actively resists.



*Caption: 5 Komitas Street, Yerevan
A shot from video*

The abovementioned demonstrated that exclusion from spaces reflects exclusions at other levels, while internalized fear and structural violence do not allow women to be active in social life. Fear, as a social construct, is transferred during the socialization process and is maintained by all social institutions covering the entire field of social interactions. Social or public space is perceived as hostile and is controlled in the framework of patriarchal redistribution of power and resources. In the post-soviet countries there is basically no interest to sexual and structural violence towards women.

Furthermore, the latter are oftentimes not even perceived as negative, because normative settings presume that every interest of men in any possible form is obviously pleasing and legitimate. This situation can be changed by creating or reclaiming separatist spaces for women where they will be able to reflect on their own experiences as women, to exchange and accumulate resources and find mechanisms for changing the situation.