

## UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF TRANSITION OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN ARMENIA: CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION AND INCREASING POLITICAL INFLUENCE

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the origins of women's social movements in the transit Armenian NGO network, which are closely linked to the emergence of modernity, where capitalism, state-building, urbanization and other factors created conditions for collective action. The results of women's civic initiatives are divided into direct results, such as changes in public policy, and indirect results, such as shifts in public opinion. The article draws attention to the fact that women's movements in Armenia are distinguished by the fact that they are future-oriented, ideologically driven and more inclusive than other civic initiatives. These new movements are often devoid of hierarchical structures, advocate for horizontal cooperation and are often marginalized by the media and public opinion. In this sense, the aim of this article is to analyze the resilience of women's movements in Armenia using the theory of civil society and political transformation of post-Soviet countries, focusing on the quality of political institutions and regimes, mobilizing social networks and protest cycles. The theoretical and practical position of this article reveals the peculiarities of the development and effective political adaptation of the women's community in the context of European integration of Armenian society. The main provisions of this article contribute to further research into the problems of women's political adaptation in a transitional economy, identifying the main directions for establishing gender equality as one of the priorities of public policy, as well as strengthening the political activism of women in Armenia.

**Keywords:** women's movements, women's rights, NGOs, radical groups, gender-sensitive policies, women's representation, domestic violence, political space, activism, political opportunities, social movements.

### Introduction

For a long time, political and social movements were exclusively a male sphere, and the mass entry of women into government and parliament is a relatively new phenomenon. Despite the proclaimed equality of the sexes and the widespread use of

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political correctness in many spheres of life in Armenia, it must still be recognized that many people's stereotypical ideas about politics are primarily associated with men. A female politician acts as a kind of deviation from the standard, which is reflected in Armenian media discourse (Akisheva 2023; Jeroense, Luimers, Jacobs et al. 2022). The question of inequality is fundamental for women's social movements both in previous years and in modern societies. Social stratification is one of the key tasks of political and social research, around which many scientific and ideological disputes have been and are being conducted. The main ones are differences in property, power and status. Political researchers of women's social movements have asked the following questions: why are some groups in society prosperous or have more power than others; how does inequality manifest itself in modern societies; why does poverty continue to exist in modern developed societies (Paxton, Hughes and Green 2006; Antonyan 2023; Forester and Mazur 2024).

Traditionally, social movements in 1960s had focused mainly on issues of labour and national while since then we have witnessed not only an increase in new forms of political participation which changed the quantity and quality of protests and prompted significant innovations in social scientists' approach to these questions (Jeroense, Luimers, Jacobs et al. 2022; Porta and Diani 2006; Aleksanyan 2021). To describe and interpret women's social movements that fought against social stratification, which meant a vertical cross-section of the social structure, revealing the place of women's specific social groups in the system of social hierarchy. In this context, Armenian transit societies are also considered as consisting of 'strata' ordered into a certain hierarchy: groups with the highest statuses at the top and the lowest statuses at the bottom (Tilly 1984; Tilly 1985; Linden and Mitzman 2009; Weldon 2024).

The political outcomes of social movements can be divided into two broad categories: direct outcomes, such as a movement-generated change in public policy, and indirect outcomes, such as changes in public opinion on a specific issue (Lebanidze, Aleksanyan and Gonashvili 2022). Within these broad categories, scholars have developed more specific outcome typologies, focused primarily on policy outcomes (Shevtsova 2023).

Social movements are a phenomenon that became relevant in the 1960s of the 20th century, covering many different forms of collective action aimed at social reorganization. The goals of women's social movements can be broad, such as changing the system of power, or narrow, such as installing devices that limit or slow down the movement of vehicles on a street in the suburbs. Some social movements are distinguished by a high degree of organization, the presence of a well-developed bureaucracy and leadership, while others are mobile and informal (Tarrow 2008; Tilly, Castañeda and Wood 2019; Tarrow 1998, 106-122).

With the advent of innovative technologies, the forms of governance in women's social movements are also changing. It can be assumed that not only the processes of interaction between participants, but also the processes of coordination and governance are partially or completely, actually or formally carried out online. The online form assumes the possibility of rapid coordination of a large number of people and the ability to track their various activities. Since it is technical means that provide such an opportunity, a new form of centralization appears. The social movement perceives the

online form as a means under its control. On the one hand, each participant in the social movement is equal with other participants in the communication process, on the other hand, there are participants who moderate this communication, organize technical support, and they have more power than other participants. Thus, the new form assumes both a non-hierarchical and a hierarchical aspect. On the one hand, the online form is a continuation of the non-hierarchical system that is characteristic of social movements, on the other hand, it provides an opportunity for centralization and hierarchy.

From early 2000s series of NGOs and grassroots civic initiatives started to emerge in Armenia. The number of such initiatives, as a new form of political participation, started to increase. In 2010s there were more than 30 such initiatives both in the capital Yerevan and in other towns of the country (Ishkhanyan 2014). The ambition towards building a democracy was seemingly the underlining theme for all the initiatives which then explained a certain level of trust and cooperation among themselves (Exadaktylos et al. 2024). The initiatives were informally joining the efforts in some of the concrete processes. One of the key directions of those movements were led by women's groups, by NGOs and civic initiatives, who were stressing the women's situation in the country and an urgent need to change it.

In Armenia women's movement are different from other movements in the following ways: women groups are future oriented, pro-active and ideologically driven, are more inclusive than other civic initiatives and movements, have minimal hierarchy, more cooperation on horizontal level, have less media access and general support due to public attitude and get more targeted, prefer not to use street as the main space for protest, take and discuss issues multidimensional, are always concerned by security issues and are only or mostly represented by women (Aleksanyan and Aleksanyan 2021).

Globally, movements on women's rights have long served as a transformative force in challenging and redefining societal structures and has sought to address the systemic oppression of women, advocating for the advancement of their political, social, and economic rights. The movements have been instrumental in shaping social, political, and cultural landscapes, confronting patriarchal systems that have long marginalized women. Feminist academic work on women's movements not only chronicles their accomplishments but also explores the intricate dynamics of resistance, identity formation, and collective action within these movements.

As feminist scholarship developed, intersectionality became a fundamental framework for understanding the complex and interconnected systems of oppression that women encounter. The contributions of black feminists, such as Selina R. Stone (2024) and Miriam Hinz (2024), significantly expanded feminist theory by highlighting how race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender-based oppression. This critical analysis reshaped the feminist movement, ensuring that the struggles of women of color, working-class women, queer women, and other marginalized groups were not overshadowed by the dominant narratives of white, cisgender, heterosexual feminism. The feminist academy plays a crucial role in critically examining these movements, bringing to light the histories, ideologies, and resistance strategies that drive women's liberation globally.

The purpose of this article is to look at the political context, mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles and contentious repertoires of the women's movement in Armenia from the perspective of Political Processes theory.

### **Political context and opportunities**

In the context of European and Eurasian integration processes, Armenian social movements are studied extremely rarely, often only the impact on society and public authorities is studied using keyword search methods through various mechanisms and projects. Many social movements have political goals, but not all of them are political parties. The liberal approach presents women's social movements as groups of supporters of the same ideology. The Marxist interpretation is based on the understanding of women's social movements as bearers of the interests of a particular layer. The structural (organizational) approach sees women's social movements as a mechanism, system, apparatus for interaction between citizens, deputies and members of political parties (Bloom 2014; Jeroense, Luimers, Jacobs et al. 2022). For this, the institutionalization of women's social movements, ruling and opposition political parties is of great importance (Sarter, Hegarty and Casini 2024).

From the late 1990s to 2018, Armenia was seen as a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime marked by restricted political freedoms, weak democratic institutions, and a repressive political climate. The government showed little interest in human rights and often suppressed women's groups and activists advocating for gender equality and social justice, silencing dissent and ignoring calls for policy reform. However, the 2018 peaceful revolution, driven by widespread discontent with entrenched elites, transformed Armenia's political landscape. This non-violent movement led to the resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and ushered in a more open environment under Nikol Pashinyan, signaling a slight positive shift in the government's approach to civil society, including women's rights and marginalized communities.

The most notable advancements in women's rights following the 2018 revolution include the adoption and implementation of the Armenian Gender Strategy<sup>1</sup> (2019-2023), the approval of the National Action Plan for the UN 1325 Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security<sup>2</sup>, a doubling in the number of women MPs in the 2021 snap elections, and the establishment of the first-ever state-sponsored regional shelters for victims of domestic violence<sup>3</sup>. However, the progress was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 war. The pandemic exposed the state's reliance on gender-insensitive mechanisms in social assistance programs, highlighting a critical area needing reform. Additionally, reports from the police and hotline services

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<sup>1</sup> The Strategy and Action Plan for the Implementation of Gender Policy in the Republic of Armenia for 2019-2023. October 11, 2019 (in Armenian). Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=134904>.

<sup>2</sup> National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2019-2021 and the Program Implementation Schedule. March 21, 2019 (in Armenian) Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=128902>.

<sup>3</sup> OxyGen Foundation. 2021. Gender policy concept paper for political parties. Yerevan. Accessed October 13, 2024. [https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GenderPolicyConceptPaper\\_PolitPart\\_ENG\\_final.pdf](https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GenderPolicyConceptPaper_PolitPart_ENG_final.pdf).

indicated a sharp rise in domestic violence cases as many perpetrators, predominantly men, remained at home during lockdowns.

In response to COVID19, women's groups pivoted during the pandemic to address urgent needs, distributing food and hygiene supplies, offering re-skilling programs to help women adapt to a shifting job market, and increasing support for domestic violence victims (Cardoso, Nalbandov and Rocha 2023). These efforts were carried out in partnership with state institutions, though regional NGOs often demonstrated greater expertise and capacity than government agencies, resulting in highly effective collaborations. This model of cooperation was further solidified during the 2020 war, fostering stronger state-NGOs relationships and establishing a framework for joint crisis response efforts.

During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, women's issues, like many others, largely disappeared from the authorities' agenda, prompting women's groups to shift their priorities significantly (Karlinsky and Torrisi 2023). Between 2020 and 2024, these groups primarily focused on integrating women's security into the broader human security agenda, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of women during the conflict. Militarism became increasingly prominent within the NGOs community, accompanied by a rise in nationalism that often targeted women's and LGBTQ+ groups (Sjöholm 2022; Barrientos and González 2022). Building on their collaborative experiences with the state during the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs provided critical support to refugees in 2020 and 2023 Refugee Crisis, particularly women, while also organizing and delivering much-needed aid to the front lines (Cardoso, Nalbandov and Rocha 2023).

Between 2020 and 2024, women's groups prioritized several key areas: providing psychological support for women refugees, lobbying for a peace agenda that included the implementation of the UN1325 National Action Plan, and advocating for state benefits for women living along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. However, a notable shift occurred in the post-war period, with women's groups entering a phase of introspection and reevaluating their priorities. This shift, often described as the 'localization of women's problems', reflects a move towards addressing issues guided by local needs rather than donor-driven agendas, which were often criticized for lacking transformative impact. The changing public space after the war significantly influenced this reorientation, reshaping the focus and strategies of women's movements.

The experience of cooperation between the state and NGOs during the pandemic and war highlighted the value of such partnerships and demonstrated the critical role of civil society in responding to crises (Council of Europe 2022). It also underscored the importance of a gender-sensitive approach to both social assistance and emergency response, providing a valuable lesson for future policymaking. Despite these positive changes, one area that remains challenging is the mechanism through which civil society can influence decision-making on sub-legislative normative acts. Public councils, designed to provide civil society representatives with an advisory vote and encourage broader participation in policymaking, have not always been effective or influential in practice. While these councils were established with the intention of enhancing civil society's role in governance, their actual impact has often been limited.

The experience illustrates how women's movements in Armenia navigated shifting political landscapes, responded to crises, and adjusted their strategies in pursuit of gender equality, while also grappling with systemic challenges in influencing policymaking.

### **Mobilizing structures**

Mobilization refers to the process of organizing and activating existing entities within a community or society to promote change. These entities, whether political, social, or grassroots, provide the necessary infrastructure—such as membership, leadership, and communication networks—that support a social movement (Amro and Purohit 2023). In the case of women's rights movements, mobilizing structures often include both formal and informal organizations that work together or separately to address gender inequality. However, in Armenia, there is no unified women's movement or cohesive agenda that brings together the various women's groups working on similar issues. Although there are numerous groups addressing women's concerns, from domestic violence to economic inequality, they do not collaborate effectively or form a cohesive strategy for advancing women's rights. Each organization operates independently, often following different tactics, ideologies, and strategies to address shared challenges.

The lack of cooperation among these groups is partly due to the differing levels of consciousness within the movement and the diverse approaches used to tackle gender-related challenges. While all these organizations are concerned with improving the status of women in society, their methods for achieving this goal vary widely. Some may focus on policy reform, others on community-based initiatives, and some on advocacy through media and public awareness campaigns. This fragmented structure makes it difficult for women's organizations in Armenia to create a collective, unified front that could advocate more powerfully for gender equality. The Armenian women's movement includes a broad array of stakeholders, such as NGOs, non-formal activist groups, research organizations, media, and the Diaspora. These diverse groups form part of a larger network working to address women's issues, but their interaction is limited by differences in structure, approach, and goals.

NGOs are the more formalized organizations in the network. They tend to have a hierarchical structure with internal rules, clear governance mechanisms, and a degree of accountability to the government and the public. Their formal status allows them to access funding, collaborate with state institutions, and engage in policy advocacy, but it also means they are more likely to be subject to state scrutiny and regulation (Kaufer 2023). On the other hand, non-formal groups are informal, often grassroots initiatives that lack official registration, formal leadership structures, or accountability to the state. These groups are more flexible and quick, operating without bureaucratic constraints, but they also face challenges in terms of sustainability, resources, and influence. Because they are not legally bound or registered, they can often take more radical positions or engage in more direct forms of activism. However, their lack of formal status also means they are more vulnerable to repression or lack of visibility in the policy-making arena.

The existence of these two distinct types of organizations—NGOs with formal structures and non-formal groups with flexible, decentralized frameworks—creates both opportunities and challenges for the women’s movement in Armenia. On one hand, NGOs bring professionalism, legitimacy, and the ability to collaborate with government bodies, but their more bureaucratic nature can make them less responsive to urgent grassroots issues. Non-formal groups, while more responsive and innovative, often struggle with a lack of resources, legal recognition, and formal influence in decision-making processes.

Ultimately, the fragmentation of women’s organizations in Armenia reflects a broader challenge for social movements: how to bridge the gap between formal, institutionalized organizations and informal, grassroots activism. This division may hinder the potential for a unified and powerful women’s movement capable of effectively pushing for significant, structural change in the country’s gender policies. For the movement to advance, there would need to be greater coordination between these two types of organizations, as well as a shared understanding of the most pressing women’s issues and how to tackle them effectively in the context of Armenia’s political, social, and economic environment.

### **Women’s NGOs in the development of women’s civilarchic activity**

The most important condition for solving gender problems in Armenian society is women’s NGOs and their active dialogue and social partnership with state structures, political parties and public initiatives, as they are the link between the state and civil society in the context of European integration (Aleksanyan 2024). Therefore, achieving gender equality is an important part of the development strategy, which is designed to give everyone the opportunity and right to avoid poverty and improve their standard of living (Grigoryan 2023; Asoyan 2021; Hastings and Mikayelyan 2022; Kaser 2021).

In the context of the European political integration of Armenia, it is not just a rethinking of women’s NGOs, but also many primary ideas, stereotypes, and the rejection of old dogmas. The experience of women’s NGOs shows that achieving equality between men and women is a long-term process, during which it is necessary to change all existing stereotypes about the role and status of women and men in Armenian society. In this regard, it is necessary to actively involve women’s NGOs in the development of such a policy, since women working in public administration, as a reality of modern society, have not become the subject of close sociological and political analysis, although the essence of women’s government requires gender research (Aleksanyan and Aleksanyan 2022). The study of the role of women’s NGOs in public administration has not yet received due scientific development.

In sociological and political studies, the tasks of women’s participation in the political life of Armenian society and women’s representation were considered only in the most general formulation of the question. In sociological and political studies about the Armenian reality, the study of the social group of women in the political life of society, as well as representation, begins with European integration. In recent years, women’s NGOs have been actively engaged in issues of the theory and practice of the

role of women, which also provide an analysis of the process of increasing the role of women in Armenian society.

In this regard, it is important to understand the experience of women's NGOs, which is associated with the creation of favorable conditions for women's participation in the political life of the new society (Chamie 2022; Ana 2024). Therefore, in the framework of this study, I would like to see a number of NGOs as a key part of the NGO network dealing with women's issues and aimed at filling the gap regarding the role of women in the political life of society: 1) Women's Resource Center<sup>4</sup>, 2) Women's Support Center<sup>5</sup>, 3) Women's Fund Armenia<sup>6</sup>, 4) Women's Rights House, 5) "Winnet Armenia" Network of Women Resource Centers, 6) Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, 7) Women's Agenda, 8) Martuni Women Community Center, 9) Yerevan State University's Center for Gender and Leadership Studies, 10) Woman and Society Information Analytical portal founded by members of "WomenNet" NGO, 11) Sexual Assault Crisis Center, 12) Agate Rights Defense Center for Women with Disabilities, 13) The Women's Center; 14) Kanani NGO, 15) You are not alone NGO, 16) Sose NGO.

Non-formal groups dealing with women's issues:

- Fem House (Fem Library) Armenia is a feminist community that aims at creating a safe space for feminist organizing, collaboration and resistance. It brings together and intertwines feminist activism, art and academia in the spirit of feminist solidarity and sisterhood.
- Queering Yerevan group is a collective of artists, writers, cultural critics and activists queering and using Yerevan as an experimental space<sup>7</sup>.
- Queer Sista is queer young feminist initiative, aiming to create safe spaces for lesbian, bisexual women, trans and queer people by promoting solidarity, mutual support, and well-being.
- Adolescent Girls of Charentsavan "Girls are Power" - Adolescent girls organize a series of meetings among their peers in their community. Psychological and art trainings, seminar-discussions about feminism will be implemented.
- Voice to girls want to show that girls have the right to vote, their voice is heard, and their rights are protected, they have opportunities to do what they like without being ashamed, stereotyped, and discriminated against. They hold meetings and discussions in their school to find out the problems of the girls studying there and to solve them.
- Girls Talk initiative is an initiative of a group of young girls. Through art-activism, they try to make visible the problems that the girls and women living next to us may face.

<sup>4</sup> "Women's resource center" NGO. 2022. Annual Report. Accessed October 13, 2024.

[https://womenofarmenia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WRC-Annual-Report-2022\\_eng.pdf](https://womenofarmenia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/WRC-Annual-Report-2022_eng.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "Women's Support Center" NGO. 2020. Challenges and gaps in Armenia's response to domestic violence. Yerevan. Accessed October 13, 2024.

[https://www.womensupportcenter.org/DOMESTIC%20VIOLENCE\\_GAPS%20-ENGL.pdf](https://www.womensupportcenter.org/DOMESTIC%20VIOLENCE_GAPS%20-ENGL.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Women's Fund Armenia. 2024. "Publications." Accessed October 13, 2024.

<https://womenfundarmenia.org/publications-by-wfa/>.

<sup>7</sup> The Queering Armenian Library. 2024. Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://queearmenianlibrary.com/queering-yerevan/>.



- Women 40+ initiative is a groups of women above the age of 40 who in their communities campaign about the rights of 40+ women,
- Women in Black Armenia Initiative,
- Sexism in Armenia facebook group talks about the widespread sexism in Armenia via visual means.

### **Framing processes**

In order to establish the framing of women's social movements that will be relevant for this study, it is necessary to rely on the theory of social movements in transitional societies. Framing processes of women's social movements means analyzing the network of formal and informal interactions between multiple actors (individuals, groups, organizations) involved in the political process for making public decisions and based on a social/collective shared identity (Rupp and Taylor 1999; Paxton, Hughes and Green 2006). In the context of the transformation of Armenian society, framing can be used as "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action." (McAdam 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996).

Some academic schemes for categorizing feminist movements in the past include 'social feminism' and 'hard-core feminism' (Cott 1989; Bardall 2023) or 'social feminism' and 'equity feminism' (Black 1989). In this sense, a social movement is a collective challenge (to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes) of people with common goals, solidarity in sustainable interaction with elites, authorities, opponents. At the same time, it distinguishes social movements from political parties or interest groups (Tarrow 2011). Therefore, the women's social movement is a form of political association between people who at least minimally feel connected to others in a common goal and who unite over a long period of time to implement social changes in the name of this goal (James and Van Seters 2014). Thus, the following dimensions of the women's social movement can be distinguished: 1) Focus on collective reorganization, social changes; 2) Having a common value; 3) Having a collective identity; 4) Practical actions aimed at social changes; 5) Participation in cultural or political contradictions.

In Armenia, on an ideological level, one can identify various groups such as liberals, socialists, and anarchists. However, it would be misleading to discuss them solely from this perspective, as there are no fully developed or cohesive ideological movements within the country. On a tactical level, it is possible to categorize groups into two broad approaches: radical and reformist. Structurally, these groups can be divided into NGOs and grassroots initiatives. NGOs tend to lean more towards reformist approaches, while grassroots initiatives are often more radical.

NGOs have well-established governance structures, formal systems, protection mechanisms, and stability, with vertical relationships and a clear division of responsibility. Most NGOs in Armenia adopt liberal or social agendas and pursue reforms within existing frameworks (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021). Even when NGOs aim to be more radical, they must adopt a communication style that resonates with the broader population and political parties to maintain relevance. As a result, the

liberal agenda often prevails in NGOs actions. Liberal feminists advocate for gender equality through legal and political reforms within existing societal structures. They focus on securing women's rights through legislation, emphasizing individual freedoms, equal opportunities, and access to education and employment. Liberal feminists believe that the state plays a crucial role in protecting women's rights and promoting equality, often advocating for policies such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and protection against gender-based violence. Their approach is typically reformist, seeking gradual changes to achieve gender parity, while working within the framework of democratic institutions and laws. In Armenia, liberal feminists often lead initiatives that aim to influence policy changes, engage in advocacy campaigns, and work towards creating a more inclusive society for women.

In contrast, grassroots initiatives enjoy greater freedom and engage in more horizontal relationships, but they face challenges related to limited resources. There may be a perception that these initiatives are more radical, anarchistic, and less inclined to cooperate with others. Furthermore, it is often difficult to target or engage individual members of these initiatives. Radical and reformist groups rarely engage with each other or synchronize their actions, which significantly reduces the overall impact of the women's movement in Armenia.

Radical feminists argue that gender inequality is deeply embedded in societal structures, particularly in the patriarchal systems that they believe shape all aspects of social, political, and economic life. They assert that patriarchy, as a system of male dominance and control, perpetuates the subjugation and exploitation of women, and that true equality can only be achieved through a fundamental, transformative change in society. Unlike liberal feminists, who focus on reforming existing laws and policies, radical feminists advocate for the dismantling of traditional institutions such as marriage, the family, and capitalism, which they view as key enablers of women's oppression. They emphasize the importance of solidarity among women and often challenge cultural norms, seeking to reshape societal values around empowerment, autonomy, and collective action. In Armenia, radical feminists focus on confronting issues like gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and societal expectations around women's roles, pushing for radical shifts in both societal attitudes and structural inequalities. Although their approach is more confrontational and less institutionalized than that of liberal feminists, radical feminists believe that only through this deep-rooted transformation can women achieve genuine liberation.

By increasing access to these networks and fostering cooperation between both reformist and radical agendas, the women's movement in Armenia has the potential to overcome its current fragmentation. This approach could lead to greater unity, improved impact, and a more powerful collective voice for women's rights in the country. It is crucial for the women's movement in Armenia to increase access to networks and foster cooperation between reformist and radical agendas because unity enhances the overall effectiveness of the movement. When these groups work together, they can leverage each other's strengths: reformist groups often have the institutional knowledge, connections, and resources to push for policy changes, while radical groups bring fresh perspectives, bold ideas, and a commitment to deeper societal transformation. This synergy creates a more diverse and powerful collective voice,

capable of addressing both immediate needs through reforms and long-term structural change (Tilly 2004). Additionally, a unified movement can break down the silos that currently hinder progress, making it easier to mobilize more individuals, attract greater public support, and influence policymakers. In a fragmented state, women's voices may be diluted or ignored, but by coming together, the movement can challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and push for comprehensive societal transformation (Rahm 2022). Ultimately, fostering cooperation allows the movement to be more resilient, adaptable, and impactful in advocating for women's rights in Armenia.

Three key factors have contributed to women's involvement in the women's movement in Armenia, as highlighted by women who were interviewed: education, volunteerism, and networks. Many members of women's movements are graduates of training programs organized by women's NGOs. Joining an NGOs is generally easier than becoming part of a radical group, as radical groups tend to be more closed off, making access difficult for outsiders. Women NGOs, on the other hand, provide a wealth of volunteer opportunities, creating an ideal space for young graduates to start their involvement. Through their volunteer work, they gain valuable experience and further education, strengthening both their personal development and the broader movement. By expanding access to these networks and focusing on building both reformist and radical agendas, the women's movement in Armenia can potentially achieve greater unity and impact, despite its current fragmentation. It is also interesting to note that it was via networks that women's movement brought people to the movement, some people, especially friends and close contacts decide to self-organize.

### **Protest cycles**

The identity-focused nature of new social movements does not easily translate to Armenia and other post-Soviet contexts that are notable for their different historical developments. Like some other historical aspects of the development of the South Caucasus region, the history of local social movements in this region differed from, for example, Europe. What was in fact a South Caucasus novelty in the 1990s was the massive emergence of NGOs. In the case of Armenia, these organizations emerged in response to new financial opportunities provided by international donors, to the coercive and paternalistic actions of states, and to a reality that the concept of new social movements fails to capture. Both the long history of identity-based organizations and the emergence of NGOs can be explained by the focus on political opportunities and the changing nature of protest.

The new social movements embrace a politics of everyday life that prioritises changes in lifestyles, values and the defence of civil society. The organisational consequence of these distinctive aims is an emphasis on informal grassroots networks, which in turn allows the new social movements to operate outside institutional channels, taking direct action on a limited range of issues and by creating cultural innovations that challenge the laws through which informal activity is structured (Blumer 1969; Tilly 1978). In this regard, trade unions are characterised as being limited to the old style of political affirmation. Their aims are couched in terms of political integration, economic rights for workers – the pursuit of full social and

economic citizenship – aims that may have a radical or reformist emphasis, but which are in any case silent on issues such as local autonomy and micropolitics. Their modes of organisation are instrumentally adapted to more abstract aims and therefore take on formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic dimensions. Conversely, their actions emphasise a narrowly defined political mobilisation, such as support for a social democratic party. Although new social movements are constituted as an analytical category, they are often conflated with trade unions. The emergence of societies as multiply intersecting and overlapping networks of power gives us the best available entry into the problem of what is ultimately primary or defining in society (Ziemer 2020; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).

In the Third Republic of Armenia, the emergence of civil society began with the Karabakh movement in 1988. A number of Armenian scholars identify 3 main stages in the development of civil society (Gevorgyan 2023; Gevorgyan 2020; Aleksanyan 2020; Ishkhanian 2014), and E. J. Paturyan (2021) identifies the 4th stage.

The emergence and development of women's groups in Armenia, as part of the broader civil society, can be understood through several distinct phases, each reflecting shifts in both the social and political landscapes of the country (Ohanyan 2021). Over time, each generation of women's movements has built upon the achievements of the previous one, gradually expanding the scope of their activism and pushing for greater rights, recognition, and structural reforms (Al Jayousi and Nishide 2024).

The first generation of women's groups emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, primarily focusing on humanitarian concerns, especially in response to the devastation caused by the First Karabakh War (1988-1994). These groups played a vital role in assisting the war's victims, particularly displaced women and children, often collaborating closely with the state to establish essential services. Their efforts were mainly centered on immediate relief, such as providing shelter, food, medical care, and psychological support. However, during this phase, there was little focus on advocating for women's political rights or social change. Women's organizations were not yet working on gender equality or systemic issues, but were instead primarily concerned with addressing the basic, urgent needs of affected women in the context of war and displacement.

The second generation of women's groups emerged during a time of significant political transformation in Armenia, particularly after the adoption of the Armenian Constitution in 1995, the enactment of the Law on NGOs in 2001, and Armenia's membership in the Council of Europe. These political shifts created a more favorable environment for the growth of civil society, and many women's organizations began to take shape. These groups started to focus more on raising awareness of the gender-specific challenges faced by women in Armenia, such as domestic violence, limited political representation, and economic inequality. International donors started playing a key role during this phase, funding projects that addressed these issues and aligning with their priorities. The work of these organizations often included advocacy for legal reforms, awareness-raising campaigns, and efforts to hold the government accountable for its obligations under international human rights frameworks, such as the United Nations conventions on women's rights. Notably, these groups also began to use

international mechanisms like shadow reports to apply pressure on the Armenian government, urging it to fulfill its commitments to gender equality and women's rights.

The third phase of women's activism in Armenia coincided with the rise of civic activism in the mid-2000s, marking a departure from formal, donor-driven NGOs and agendas. During this period, several women's initiatives emerged that were more grassroots in nature, reflecting the broader trend of community-based activism. As described by A. Ishkhanian (2015), these new initiatives were distinct from formalized, professionalized NGOs in several ways, including the issues they addressed, their organizational structures, their methods of action, and their lack of engagement with foreign donors. The new focus was on local, community-driven issues and the desire for greater autonomy from foreign funding and external influence. One of the most significant milestones of this phase was the formation of the Coalition to Stop Domestic Violence Against Women in 2010. This coalition brought together various women's organizations and activists to address the pressing issue of domestic violence, which had long been neglected in Armenian society. The coalition worked to raise public awareness about gender-based violence and lobbied for legal reforms, pushing for the adoption of stronger laws and support systems for survivors of domestic violence.

The fourth phase, beginning with the Armenian Revolution of 2018, marked a significant shift in the political and social landscape of the country. The revolution, which was driven by widespread public dissatisfaction, brought about a wave of democratization and political openness. This political transformation created new opportunities for women's groups, as many activists and organizations became more actively engaged in shaping the country's post-revolutionary future. Women's issues became more prominent in the political discourse, and women's groups found new avenues to influence policy and engage in public debates about gender equality, social justice, and women's rights.

The major observable impact of women's groups in Armenia, particularly since the 2018 revolution, includes a significant shift in public attitudes toward gender issues. Women are now more aware of their rights and have better tools and resources to protect them, especially in areas like domestic violence. Legislative changes have also been made to improve women's rights, with reforms in laws addressing gender-based violence, workplace equality, and political representation. Women's rights have become an integral part of the broader political discourse in Armenia, reflecting a shift in how gender issues are perceived in society.

While these developments reflect substantial progress, challenges remain, particularly regarding the integration of women's issues into broader political and social agendas. The fragmentation of women's groups—due to differences in ideologies, approaches, and priorities—continues to pose a barrier to creating a unified, collective movement for gender equality in Armenia. Furthermore, women's organizations face ongoing struggles to maintain sustainability and independence, especially in light of the limited support from state institutions and the complexities of balancing grassroots activism with international funding priorities.

In summary, the evolution of women's groups in Armenia has a complex and evolving nature with each generation building on the efforts of the previous one. From

humanitarian aid in the early years to advocacy for legal reforms and broader societal change, women's groups in Armenia have played a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and women's rights. However, there remains work to be done in consolidating these efforts into a more unified, strategic movement that can achieve lasting change for women in Armenia.

### **Contentious Repertoires**

The fifth and final aspect of political processes theory is 'contention repertoires', which refers to the variety of methods and strategies used by social movements to advance their demands and make their claims visible to the public and the state. These repertoires typically include forms of protest such as strikes, public demonstrations, petitions, sit-ins, and civil disobedience, all of which serve as tools for mobilizing collective action. Over time, the methods used by movements evolve based on the political opportunities available, as well as the internal dynamics and external challenges they face. In the case of Armenia's women's movement, the trajectory of contention has been notably shaped by political shifts and the changing relationships between civil society and the state.

Before the 2018 revolution, Armenia's political environment was deeply authoritarian, with limited space for public dissent or opposition movements. In this context, many women's groups adopted radical and confrontational methods, such as large-scale street protests, strikes, and direct action, as the primary means of expressing their grievances and advocating for women's rights. These methods were largely a response to the entrenched political system, which was often hostile to civil society organizations and reluctant to address gender inequalities. The activism of women's groups during this period was driven by a sense of urgency and frustration, as well as a desire to draw attention to the systemic barriers facing women, including domestic violence, lack of political representation, and social discrimination (Gonçalves and Oliveira 2022). Their bold, direct actions were aimed at forcing the government and the public to acknowledge the importance of women's rights and the need for immediate change. Despite these efforts, however, women's groups often found themselves marginalized or repressed by the state, which sought to suppress dissent and maintain control over public discourse.

The 2018 Armenian Revolution, however, represented a shift in the political landscape, creating new opportunities for women's groups and other civil society actors. The revolution was a non-violent movement that led to the resignation of long-standing political elites, including Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, and ushered in a more open political environment under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan. With the revolution, the Armenian political system opened up, offering new space for civil society engagement and a greater willingness from the government to collaborate with advocacy organizations. This shift was significant for the women's movement, as many groups began to reconsider their approach to activism in the post-revolutionary context.

In the wake of the revolution, reformist women's groups adapted their contention repertoires. Rather than relying solely on direct confrontation with the state, these groups increasingly sought cooperation with the new government to influence policy

and promote legal reforms. They recognized that, with the shift in political power, there were now more opportunities to engage in dialogue with policymakers and advocate for the implementation of gender-sensitive laws and policies. For example, women's groups began participating in policy discussions, joining advisory bodies, and working alongside the government to shape national policies on issues such as domestic violence, women's political representation, and gender equality. This strategic shift reflects a broader trend in social movements worldwide, where activists move from a confrontational stance toward a more pragmatic, coalition-building approach, seeking to influence change from within existing political structures.

At the same time, not all women's groups in Armenia embraced this shift. Radical groups within the women's movement, who had used confrontational tactics in the past, have largely maintained their previous approaches, continuing to advocate for more forceful actions to challenge the state and demand immediate reform. These groups remain skeptical of working with the government, believing that it is incapable of enacting meaningful change. Their efforts remain largely outside the formal political system, and they continue to rely on protests and other direct actions as their primary means of expression. While these radical groups continue to fight for women's rights, their influence has diminished compared to the more mainstream reformist groups, largely due to their lack of engagement with the new political opportunities created by the revolution.

The potential for NGOs participation in government decision-making has increased significantly after the 2018 revolution. Public organizations and civil society representatives have been included in various monitoring and inter-agency groups, which have been established to implement state policies and oversee the government's progress in addressing gender equality. These groups offer NGOs a direct role in shaping national policy, providing a platform for advocacy organizations to make their voices heard and hold the government accountable. This expanded involvement reflects the growing recognition of the importance of civil society in strengthening democracy and ensuring that policymaking is inclusive of all sectors of society.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

When discussing the characteristics of the women's movement in Armenia, it is crucial to recognize that there is no unified or joint women's movement or a single shared agenda. Instead, there are multiple parallel processes at play, all of which focus on improving the position of women in Armenian society. These various women's groups are composed primarily of NGOs and non-formal civic groups, many of which have emerged as a result of education, volunteerism, and networking efforts. While these groups share a common concern for women's rights, their approaches differ widely, and there is no overarching structure or agenda guiding their work.

In terms of tactics and strategy, two main factions can be identified within the women's movement: radical groups and reformist groups. Radical groups are typically represented by non-formal civic groups, which are often grassroots and more confrontational in nature. These groups tend to operate outside formal structures, focusing on direct action, public protest, and challenging the state or societal norms.

They are more likely to reject collaboration with the government, viewing the system as inherently flawed and requiring systemic change.

On the other hand, the reformist groups, typically represented by established NGOs, have adopted a more cooperative approach, especially after the 2018 revolution. These groups are more inclined to work with the state, seeking to influence policy, advocate for legal reforms, and ensure that women's issues are addressed within the formal political process. Since the 2018 revolution, reformist groups have built a stronger partnership with the government, working to implement gender-sensitive policies, support the legal framework for women's rights, and ensure the inclusion of women in political and social spheres.

This shift in cooperation and partnership after the revolution has led to a significant transformation in the contentious repertoires of women's groups. Before 2018, women's groups primarily relied on confrontational tactics, as there were limited opportunities for engagement with the state. However, after the revolution, the opening of political space and the more inclusive environment allowed women's groups to pursue alternative, more cooperative strategies. This has resulted in a growing focus on collaboration and dialogue with the government, as well as active participation in policy discussions, reforms, and the creation of laws that address issues such as domestic violence, gender equality, and women's representation in politics.

The political opportunities created by the revolution have played a crucial role in shaping the direction of the women's movement in Armenia. By altering the political context, the revolution allowed women's groups to move beyond their previous strategies of protest and instead focus on influencing policy through formal channels. This shift in the political environment significantly impacted how women's groups framed their agendas and how they responded to the country's most pressing challenges. While the women's movement is still diverse and fragmented, the political openings provided by the revolution have altered the dynamics of activism, providing new opportunities for influence and reform. This evolution underscores the broader theory that political processes and opportunities are central to shaping the tactics, strategies, and success of social movements.

### **Supplementary material**

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.9.141>

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### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### **Ethical standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.



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