

**Women empowerment and cooperation in Armenia
with a focus on the Syunik region**

**An assessment report prepared for the OSCE Office in Yerevan
by Birgitta Wistrand with the assistance of Armine Mkhitarian**

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Preface

This report has been prepared for the OSCE Office in Yerevan by the gender expert, and former Swedish MP, Birgitta Wistrand, in cooperation with the Armenian expert Armine Mkhitarian. We tasked them to look at the gender situation in Armenia, particularly in the Syunik marz, to analyze the level of, and barriers to, women's economic and political empowerment and provide recommendations for a programme of activities to strengthen the involvement of women in the political and economic life of that region.

The OSCE Office is represented in the Syunik marz through the OSCE Programme Presence in Kapan, that opened in June 2006. Its objective is to promote local economic development and environmental protection. In addition to its other activities, the Presence, together with the Democratization Programme of the OSCE Office, has already supported some activities promoting the involvement of local women in business.

Gender issues is an important part of all OSCE activities. The 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality identifies activities to promote equal opportunity for the participation of women in political and public life and in the economic sphere as key priorities to promote gender equality in the participating states. It is our expectation that this report will contribute to the discussion about gender equality in Armenia and serve as a basis and inspiration for us and other interested parties to develop activities to address gender inequality and promote the role of women in political and economic life both in Syunik and at the national level.

Summary and recommendations

This report and its recommendations are based on written documents on Armenia from different sources, both national and international, and will be referred to in the text, when used. Other important inputs come from research and discussions with staff of the OSCE Office in Yerevan and from our fifteen focus groups in the Syunik region - monitored by our national expert Armine Mkhitarian - concerning **women in politics, unemployed women and women in business**. I myself interviewed MP's, NGO representatives and officials in Yerevan and in Syunik, in all forty persons. Last but not least, experiences from a fieldtrip in the Syunik gave inspiration and knowledge about this beautiful region. These activities took place during September and October 2007.

My recommendation is that the overall objectives for a future OSCE project shall be to support the development of democracy and sustainable economic development in Armenia, with a focus on women empowerment and cooperation, especially in the Syunik region, by involving and increasing the number of women in the political and democratic decision- making process in general and as elected politicians and as active business women in particular.

As the situation for women in the Syunik region mirrors the overall situation for women in Armenia, the report starts with a survey on the status of equal opportunities for the whole of the country. However, it is not an easy assignment to analyse the position of women in Armenia, as a great part of the society is gender blind and ambiguous to gender issues. Even if a statistical handbook on women and men in Armenia with gender based information exists, most statistical reports from the government and international organizations lack data on gender. Not even the Ombudsman has access to gender based statistics in his office, a circumstance also evident in the Syunik region, where it was nearly impossible to find data on women/men. The only area where gender based statistics are available is in the political sphere. First with access to statistics, change can be measured and validated. **To enhance gender based statistics whenever research or studies are carried out is therefore my first recommendation. In this area, OSCE can take a leading role and for all its activities present gender based data.**

One prerequisite for equal opportunities is the implementation of the *National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Society in 2004-2010* with a national machinery and financial resources, a demand since several years from both international organizations and women's NGOs. However, so far the government has taken no action.

My study shows that cooperation and collaboration between women and between women's groups/NGOs are rare; this is a crucial factor and perhaps one answer to the slow progress for women in Armenia and **the non-existing women's movement**. The society has never experienced a united body of women claiming their rights. In many countries you talk about the “critical mass” of women as a prerequisite for change. **As the OSCE already has taken an initiative to address women's issues in Armenia with supporting a monthly insert on Women and Politics in leading newspapers of Armenia, a complementary activity - which supports and reinforces the impact of these inserts - could be to invite leading women from Yerevan and other parts of the country to monthly meetings for discussions on the content of the newspaper and other women's issues.** These network meetings could open up the debate on women's rights and confront the double-standards towards women in public and political life.

In connection with these activities, initiatives should be taken with the different TV-channels in order to promote programs on gender and gender stereotypes, as panel discussions or/and as soap operas.

Women in Syunik have less influence in economic and political life than most other women in Armenia with low or no representation in local decision making bodies. Men control vital parts of the society and take decisions on behalf of the women.

Even if women are excluded from the male informal networks both in business and politics, they are dependent on men's support, approval or promotion for their future career. The overall situation for them is stressful with double or triple workload. Many admit that they are unaware of their rights and without access to essential information. Limited economic resources restrict their activities in business and politics, some of them being unemployed for a long time and seeing no opportunities to find a job. Most of the women lack networks and contacts outside their family and seldom or never cooperate with other women on business or political issues. There are no public arenas where women can meet. Therefore, it is quite natural that some women gave a pessimistic outlook on the future.

In order to empower women and involve them at all levels in society, my recommendation is to start four resource centres in Kapan, Goris, Sisian and Meghri.¹ These centres should work for empowerment of women in two areas - local government and business - and serve as a meeting place for women and with activities according to the local needs and involving local women.

¹ Resource centres have been successful in countries as Sweden, Ukraine and Russia but should be adopted to the different needs of the women and of the society.

Armenian women - invisible in public life

In order to better understand the needs of women in the Syunik region, I have chosen to start with a study of the overall position for Armenian women and then proceed with the more specific situation for Syunik women.

The Armenian society and economy have gone through an impressive development during the last ten years, with the country today ranking 46 in terms of income per capita (2,100 USD, compared with 485 USD in 1999).² At the same time, other sources talk about increasing corruption, a large shadow economy and additional social polarization, a situation with a negative influence on the situation for many women. According to the 2006 UNDP Development Report, Armenia is ranked 80 in the world by the Human Development Index (HDI).³ One consequence of the socio-economic and political changes was the shutdown of enterprises, which affected both women and men. While more than 600.000 men migrated for work since independence in 1991, women stayed in Armenia, facing a totally new situation as breadwinners but without paid work. The result is still obvious today, the level of unemployment among women is much higher compared with men.⁴

However, the main asset for Armenia is its women. I met many women with dynamic personalities and leadership skills during my visit, a phenomenon which ought to be appreciated and utilized to a much broader extent by the society than today.

However, it is not an easy assignment to analyze or even to describe the position of women in Armenia, as a great part of the society is gender blind and ambiguous to gender issues. Even if a statistical handbook on women and men in Armenia is published by the government with international support, most statistical reports from the government and international organizations lack information on gender, giving no information on what reality women face.⁵ Not even the Ombudsman has access to gender based statistics in his office. At the same time, women from different NGOs in conversations opposed the figures in the governmental statistics, considering them misleading and the same situation occurred with the governmental agencies which often criticized figures presented by NGOs. Why the government does not use the unified system used by the UN, the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) was never clarified.⁶

² *Doing Business 2008, Armenia*, World Bank Group, Washington D.C., USA 2007.

³ *Alternative Report*, Armenian Association of Women with University Education, Yerevan 2007.

⁴ The same situation emerged in many ex USSR: states. The demise of state socialism and the transition to democracy and market economy brought a collapse in numbers of women in public office and a stagnation in their involvement in civil-society activities.

⁵ *Women and Men in Armenia*, National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia, 2006.

⁶ *Human Development Report 2006. Beyond Scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crises*. N.Y., UNDP, 2006, p.364.

This circumstance was in particular evident in the Syunik case, where it has been extremely trying to get relevant data concerning the situation of women.

Therefore, women's achievements, experiences and conditions are made invisible and not even attainable for discussions or change, as there are no facts or figures to refer to. The only real reliable gendered figures appear to be the results from the elections which explains why these figures are debated and attract a lot of interest.

Another obstacle and problematic circumstance for enhancing gender equality is the fact that the government of Armenia has adopted *the National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing Their Role in Society in 2004-2010* without creating a national machinery and financial resources to implement the plan. This has been addressed since several years in the analysis by CEDAW Committees and by many NGOs, without any action taken by the government so far.

The overall knowledge of the legal instruments on human and women rights is low and seldom focused in the media.⁷ The weak role of the printed media in the Armenian society with a maximum circulation up to 6000 copies daily for a single publication in Yerevan is one reason for the insufficient knowledge and outreach. Most newspapers have only local outreach and therefore television is the most important and influential source. The access to information is often used as a power resource and not open to everybody. Without exaggeration, you can therefore characterize the public discussion on gender as non-existing, with the exception of some women's groups/NGOs and international organizations.

In the last parliamentary elections, women gained 12 seats (9,2 %) in the parliament which shows that the newly introduced 15 % quota contributed to increase the number of women in party lists, but not sufficiently to reach 15 % representation of women in the parliament.⁸ The traditions with men on the executive or decision making positions in public and political life therefore more or less remain unchanged. The **absence of women in decision making bodies** must be regarded as **a deficit of democracy** and an indication of **ineffective use of human resources on all levels in society**. But this attitude is not shared by everyone.

The recent election results put Armenia far behind the world average in terms of women representation and even on the last position among the republics in the South Caucasus. In the OSCE/ODHIR report from the last election, the

⁷ CEDAW A/57/38/part III(2002), para 69.

⁸ *Analytical Overview: Women's political participation in the 2007 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, 2007*

conditions for women are noticed and mentioned: "Armenia's legal framework provides for equality between women and men, including an anti-discrimination provision in the constitution.[...] However, an effective mechanism for implementing and monitoring are not fully in place.[...]. The traditional attribution of gender roles is prevalent in Armenia, and women need substantial support when trying to enter politics."⁹

When the power is connected with men, it is natural that women distrust both themselves and other women, seeing themselves as powerless.¹⁰ Women in politics do not even look upon themselves as women or associate with the situation of women. Other stereotypes supported by both sexes claim that women in politics are something odd and foreign and that "the mentality of Armenian men is incapable of even imagining that they can be governed by a woman". Comments of this kind give a certain angle to the fact that 80 % of the routine work in the last elections was accomplished by women, but with little or no payback. But not even women in politics are aware of their situation, and try to reformulate men's behaviour.¹¹ Another frequent opinion, (from both women and men), is the following: "Women need more education/training if they want to succeed in politics". But women in Armenia are already extremely well educated, and this is in fact the only sphere where there seems to be equality. On the other hand, nobody asked for education of men going into politics.¹² In fact all sorts of stereotypes and discriminating statements are floating around and disseminated in the society and in the parties: "Women should not go into politics and if they do, they shall not act as women. Democracy need women, but men will never give up his position to a woman. Women do not want to go into politics as the political system is so corrupt and criminal". These comments reveal the ambiguity and double-standards imbued in the attitudes on women's position in politics.

Women are in fact made invisible in the government, in the parliament and local government (only 2 % of the village mayors being women, and 0 % of the city mayors), in agencies and in the political parties. Even in media, women are made invisible. The absence of material on women and women's issues in mass media does not apply only for elections, it counts also for everyday life. A recent study made by women journalists in the South Caucasus shows that Armenian

⁹ OSCE/ODHIR *Election Observation Mission Final Report*, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Gender Equality. Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*, United Nations Research Institute For Social Development, 2005, pp. 9-18.

¹¹ The MP Ruzanna Arakelyan stated in one interview: "There is no discrimination, but there is something else. Women's words are not taken seriously." *Women's Political Participation in the 2007 Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Armenia, Analytical Overview, AAWUE, Yerevan 2007*, p. 44

¹² *Gender Situation in Armenia*, AAWUE, Yerevan 2005, p.45. The report states also that even if women constitute almost 60% of the Education Ministry's staff, they do not hold positions in the decision making bodies in the educational sector.

women present low figures by comparison with other countries in the region.¹³ The authors, Armenian women journalists are self-critical, analyzing their results, pointing out that media mostly has been passive. **Instead of showing the gender imbalance, media has reproduced gender stereotypes or made women invisible, i.e. women are not interviewed or photographed.** In conversations with women journalists they clarified that even if women make up the majority of journalists, the editors in chief are male and they do not easily accept or publish material on gender, women rights or equality.

The Armenian woman - trapped in a patriarchal structure

The double-standard mechanisms in public life, where active women are made either invisible or belittled, interfere also in the private lives of Armenian women. The following conditions are well-known, but still I want to highlight two issues - property rights and domestic violence against women - as they were frequently brought up as examples of the discrimination and the power of the patriarchal values.

In the constitution, the property rights are equal for women and men, but women continuously indicated that in reality the father, the brother and then the husband take care of the property which by law is owned by the woman/wife. Having no property it is impossible to take a loan or start your own business without permission of your father or husband. As all research shows that the first steps to empowerment are taken when a woman can exercise her economic rights, this situation is serious discrimination. When bringing up this circumstance in conversations with women, they often referred to “the Armenian mentality” and something they could not change, only obey to the family/husband traditions. In the focus groups with women in Syunik, it became obvious they did neither know their rights or how to exercise them. They were only depressed by what they recognized as being the facts of life.

A recent study on domestic violence shows which important role the “non existing property rights” play in the lives of women.¹⁴ Not only does the report state a high rate of abuse, both physical and mental; **six out of ten women state that “a good wife always should obey her husband even if she disagrees”.** These attitudes also relate to the situation on who decides over the money earned by the wife. Not obeying the husband could therefore justify, according to the wives, physical abuse/force. Especially rural women and women outside Yerevan were more apt to agree on men's right to abuse. But even among the

¹³ *Women's Opinion in Mass Media. Monitoring of national newspapers in countries of South Caucasus and Central Asia*, GenderMediaCaucasus Journalists' Association, ODIHR OSCE, 2005

¹⁴ *Report on Nationwide Survey Findings: Domestic Violence and Abuse of Women in Armenia*. The Womens' Rights Center, Yerevan, Armenia, May 2007.

women justifying abuse, the double standards are alive, since **all the women in the study were against violence from their husbands and asked for a law on domestic violence and help from the government. In these situations women could not - as in most other cases of life - rely on the family.**

However, some women were of the opinion that the traditional family structure is changing, especially in Yerevan, and that young women today could choose more freely. But even young women indicated that the double-standards in relationships between women and men still exist, i.e. men have sex relations before and after marriage, while this behaviour is prohibited and impossible for women.¹⁵

Today, Armenian women therefore often encounter a society where they by law have equal rights, but where real life situations show that they cannot exercise these rights, neither in public nor in private life, a situation which is more frequent outside Yerevan than as in Syunik. This creates not only an enormous frustration and insecurity but also diminishes the self-confidence and assertiveness making women passive and blocking them from taking their responsibility in the society. When active in public life, as in the recent elections, they are not rewarded for their contributions; in private life abuse/violence can be the answer to an assertive wife's economic activities.

NGOs take action

The situation for Armenian women today is therefore difficult to comprehend, as attitudes are ambiguous and some changes have taken place, but after all, more has to come in order to achieve gender mainstreaming and gender equality. **The first step is an open discussion on values and attitudes in areas of gender in private and public life.** One important agency in this area can/has been the NGOs, where many women took action influenced by the Beijing conference already in 1995. The NGOs play an active part in all areas of society. Just to name a few: The gender education and gender research by the Armenian Association of Women with University Education emphasize the importance of education to reach equality. To empower rural women has been a major activity for Democracy Today, while the Women's Rights Centre has among other things made a study on domestic violence and abuse in Armenia.

After having studied reports from several NGOs and met with representatives, you must be impressed by their work and achievements. But some critical points

¹⁵ The lack and need of sex-education was often brought up, but looked upon as a sensitive issue, though it creates difficulties and hardships, especially for women in rural areas. Another result of this ignorance is the trend that abortions are used as contraceptives.

must be raised. The first concerns the structure of the NGOs. The membership is often vague, i.e. the members can consist of 3-4 people, where a common notion was that “more people are employed if we have grants for projects”. In one city, we met one man representing an association with him as the only member. Another issue is who gives an NGO the competence/right to work in all sectors of the society.

The heavy dependence on grants from international organisations for activities and projects makes voluntary based work more of an exception. In some cases, you understand that the NGO had been set up more as an excuse to get grants for your own living. This has created a situation where you get a competition for grants instead of a competition for cooperation and results. Some studies made by women-NGOs are not even disseminated to women outside the organization.

As most NGOs are small, the outcome is limited, a situation that could be adjusted with cooperation and shared goals. Projects were described as nearly finished but as the financial support was terminated, the project could not be completed. On the other hand certain programs were reported as successful as the project established by OXFAM - the Association of Women Farmers in Kapan. The women in Kapan considered it working extremely well, hence the farming in this area is much more developed than in other parts of Syunik. **It has some crucial qualities: it is a long-term project, tangible and it builds on cooperation between women.** For the Syunik region, as for other far away regions, fewer projects are running as most activities occur around Yerevan, and therefore women have less competence/experience to manage bigger projects.

One important and critical factor, perhaps one answer to the slow progress for women's issues in Armenia is the absence of an autonomous women's movement. The society has never met a united body of women claiming their rights. In many countries you talk about the “critical mass” of women as a prerequisite for change. The challenge is therefore to get an understanding by the women NGOs of the need for a common agenda and collaboration.

The Syunik region

The OSCE Programme Presence in Kapan in the Syunik region opened in June 2006 to promote local economic development and environmental protection. Together with the Democratization Programme, the Presence has already taken some initiatives promoting women's involvement in business and civic awareness of youth. The Syunik region was deeply affected by the war, which had a negative impact on the economy and the socio-economic situation, especially for many women, who lost their husbands either in the war or as

breadwinners when they migrated to Russia or other countries for work. Therefore, the population now consists of nearly 60 % women, many of them as heads of families.

Syunik is located not only far from Yerevan, but it also has the lowest population density in Armenia. Since the war, the lack of transport and communication is a significant problem. The railway is out of operation and the airports are shut down, since the early 1990s. Development of internet access and mobile services is also slow, with a limited TV and FM-radio coverage.¹⁶ The transportation problems are related not only to distance to Yerevan, but also within the marz, where long distances, bad roads and insufficient public transportation create difficulties for business activities and communication between people, especially for women who often do not have access to a car. Women in the rural areas often complained over the difficulties to reach their markets in the towns.

Many of the problems that are unique for the Syunik region today, are inherited from the former Soviet legacy, i.e. the government at that time established not only a wide range of industrial facilities but also special distribution of goods, socio-cultural and educational activities for the population. All this resulted in a high living standard, where several generations had no need to cultivate their land or to get additional income, which explains why the population was not ready for the challenges of the market economy and lacking entrepreneurial skills.¹⁷

An OSCE-study presents at length the many obstacles, constraints and barriers for SMEs in the region, where the whole region is more or less dependant on the mining sector. But as the report gives no gender based information or indications on the situation for women, you cannot easily draw conclusions about their conditions. However, considering both the information in the OSCE-study and the results from our focus groups in the region, at least one significant difference between women and men is evident, namely the difficulty to get employment. The study names also some obstacles, which are relevant for women in business as **the administrative barriers, the financial constraints and the lack of entrepreneurial skills.**

¹⁶ *The Perspectives of Syunik Marz. Socio-Economic Development*, OSCE, Yerevan 2004

The OSCE report also indicates that in many instances sometimes the lack of information depends on weak professional background of the community leaders, who are not capable to utilize and find the right information, p 31.

¹⁷ *The Perspectives of Syunik Marz. Socio-Economic Development*, OSCE, Yerevan 2004

Women in Syunik

Therefore, to get more relevant and qualitative data on women in the region fifteen focus groups were monitored with between 8-15 women as participants, in Kapan, Agarak, Meghri, Goris and Sisian, representing women in politics as councils member or mayors, women in business and women being unemployed. According to OSCE staff, it was rather difficult to reach these women; another sign of the difficulties in communications/contacts.

Kapan is the capital of the region with 46.800 inhabitants and is the fourth largest industrial centre in Armenia. It was earlier a city with an active cultural life and a tourist industry. The situation has deteriorated and for the moment there are not many tourists, good hotels or restaurants. But the potential is still there.

Goris is another industrial city with 23.000 inhabitants (and a large rural community with 21.000 inhabitants). Diamond cutting, electronics and food processing are the main industries.

Sisian with 17.000 inhabitants has a rural area of the same size. The industry consists of medium sized companies and a big textile factory, owned by the US Garni corporation.

Meghri with 9.600 inhabitants and close to the Iranian border, is famous for its figs and other exotic fruits. The canning factory has with financial support from USDA succeeded in exporting to several countries.

Earlier these towns were engaged in a wide range of industrial activities where women were employed. Today most of them are shut down.

There was no great difference of opinions in the focus groups. Women coming from different towns expressed the same experiences when discussing the same problems. Often, they were quite pessimistic about the future and about their opportunities, having problems with the authorities and a heavy domestic burden. On the other hand, in the interviews with the NGO-women, some with high potential, more optimistic and forward-looking ideas were raised.

The lack and difficulty to get information was the foremost frequent complaint from women in all groups. Women in the business sector stated that they were neither informed of their rights or about different opportunities as trainings and loan facilities not even where to find information concerning SMEs. Instead women referred to misinformation and misleading advice. More knowledge about tax regulations/administration and about the access to loans and credits

was often brought up as crucial for their businesses, but non-existing. Today their sources were friends and sometimes TV obviously not giving relevant and useful data.

The unemployed women expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the State Employment Service Agency for waiting up to 7 months to announce a tender for a training, a fact which according to them ended in that the employer took another person and not even used the agency. When these complaints were discussed with the agency in Yerevan, they denied that this was the situation and that trainings could and did start much earlier. Some women had taken training courses arranged by the agency which had not resulted in any employment. Therefore most women regarded the agency lacking necessary resources to help them and believed more in personal contacts, (which some did not have). The agency implements several programs to help unemployed women where the main focus is on **financial assistance, instead of job creation activities. This situation must be changed as must the trainings.** In the conversations, some women also expressed their ambition to start a business of their own, but at the same time knowing that it would be difficult as they did not have the financial resources.

Both **businesswomen and unemployed women** criticized the trainings they have passed for being too superficial and theoretical and of no use for them. On the other hand, a common demand was more trainings and courses, but adopted to their needs. Some NGOs reported having arranged seminars for women in business, but could not give any data about the women's careers afterwards. Ad hoc seminars seldom make a sustainable impact, instead they can start frustration as ideas and proposals from the seminars are impossible to achieve. As already mentioned, entrepreneurial skills are, due to the history of the region, lacking in Syunik and must be taken care of with intensive and tangible trainings for both women and men.

Never did any woman refer to other women as being of vital importance for her position in public life.

The situation for women in politics on the local level showed the same ambiguity and dilemmas as on the national level. Women in the councils also expressed ambivalence on running for political office; on the one hand they recognized politics as a men's world with dishonesty and corruption, and on the other hand they saw themselves as saviours of society. Once in politics, the councilwomen described a clear difference between male and female roles. To mitigate men's aggressiveness and to promote issues affecting ordinary people's life as medical facilities and schools were seen as the women's tasks, while men according to the women are taking care of their business and own political power. More elected women could, according to them result in better

government and improve the living conditions for the citizens.¹⁸ Also on the local level the absence of women cooperation is total. **There are no women's groups or women's unions or councils working in the towns.**

On the other hand, the village mayors made a deep impression, being result-oriented, assertive and positive. They were proud of their positions and so were their husbands who helped them as accountants and drivers. **These women mayors can act as role models for future women in politics.**

For women in business, the values in society have changed to their advantage, as their business improves the family income as many were breadwinners. And the need of the family was often raised as the main reason for going into business, not entrepreneurial drive or interest. Most of them were involved in business with 2-3 employed and in the service sector. The access to loans were always brought up as a problem, as the women found the interest rates too high, the collateral (having no property, as it was registered under the husband) unrealistic. The need for credit programs that provided long-term loans with low interest and without collateral was therefore often conveyed. Among the business women there were no networking or collaboration, except for the women belonging to the Farmers' Association in Kapan.

The patriarchal structure in politics and business, where the male networks hampered women from relevant knowledge and contacts, was a continuous source of complaints. According to the women, the male networks also served as an instrument to avoid the authorities and their interference in men's businesses. The women in business generally believed that the men did not follow the law and took special illegal advantages which were not open to them.

Despite this, men were used as indicators of women's qualities and skills, and on the whole, women seem to be trapped in the male structure without recognizing any opportunity for change. Therefore women regarded themselves as dependent on men, i.e. relatives, both in politics and in business as men had contacts, money and power, something they themselves lacked. Support from men was, according to them, a prerequisite to move forward in business or in politics. **To adopt and adjust to the male values and the approval from men is therefore a must for women, who want to succeed in business or politics. This asymmetry is one strong reason why women do not cooperate with other women and why they lack self-confidence and assertiveness.**

¹⁸The village councils were often weakly developed and without real autonomy. Elections were looked upon more as a formality, creating problems for women to become elected.

Resource Centres - women empowerment in Syunik

Women in Syunik have less influence in economic and political life than most women in Armenia with low or no representation in local decision making bodies. Men control the most important parts of society and often take decisions on behalf of the women.

Even if women are excluded from the male informal networks, both in business and politics, they are dependant on men's support, approval or promotion for their future career. The overall situation for them is stressful with double or triple workload. Many admit that they are unaware of their rights and lack access to essential information. Limited economic resources restrict their activities in business and politics. Many women have also been unemployed for a long time, seeing no opportunities for a new job. Most of them lack networks and contacts outside the family and seldom or never cooperate with other women on business or political issues. No public arenas are available for women, only for networking and cooperation. Therefore, it is quite natural that women have a pessimistic outlook.

In order to empower women and involve them in all levels of society, my recommendation is to start four Resource Centres in Kapan, Goris, Sisian and Meghri.¹⁹ The Resource Centres shall work for the empowerment of women in two areas - **local government and business** - and serve as a **meeting place for women** and with activities according to their local needs. The centre should work on three levels with women as entrepreneurs and politicians:

- **the individual level** - where women who want to start a business or a political career through the centre get personal advice and training for their own needs
- **the group level** - the centre can arrange a wide range of activities, creating meeting places for networking, arrange seminars and events, organise training in groups and develop joint projects
- **the structural level** - the centre can cooperate with activities and projects in Syunik and Armenia or with foreign countries. To meet women from other parts of the world give new insights and networking and create a better understanding

The resource centres should offer advice/services, business development and coaching, trainings and networking in the areas of policymaking and business development to support women in politics and business. To build influence in policymaking bodies is another vital task.

¹⁹ Resource Centres have been successful in countries as Sweden, Ukraine and Russia but be adopted to the different needs of women and of the society.

It is important to see the individual woman, her resources and abilities and give her the opportunity to develop further.

As stated earlier in the report, the dissemination of information is very weak in the Syunik region and there is no real overview of what activities and possibilities are valid for women, neither which organizations are working in the area. To collect information on these themes and make it available must be a first initiative for the centres.

The absence of women in decision making bodies in the Syunik region is massive. Therefore, collaboration and networking among women with political offices is vital. Together with the female village mayors and women in the councils, trainings and strategy sessions could be arranged to stimulate more women to take active part in politics/local government and to be elected. Basic education on democracy building and the rights of women are other activities women have asked for in the focus groups.

Meetings with the taxation officers and personnel from the State Employment Service can also be arranged in the centres. As there are agencies in all four towns, it is a good idea that one person from the agency once a week/one day worked at the resource centre to give advice and to react more quickly to the demands from the market and from the women.

Knowledge of the rules and regulations on loans and micro credits is also scarce and in the centres officers from responsible agencies should be available for the women. Instead of seminars, the centre should offer hands-on training for women with continuous mentoring.

Assertiveness trainings, networking and teambuilding can give the women instruments to develop their business and start to cooperate. But as shown in the report, women distrust the authorities and have no experience in working together as women. Therefore, you must allow time to create a trustworthy environment and for them to build networks and collaboration. Once this is done networking within and outside the regions will be natural. **To reach sustainable results, any project addressing these issues through the creation of resource centres would therefore have to extend over a longer period of say three years with regular follow-ups.**