

PN-ACF-543

USAID Strategy Assessment:

Gender in Armenia

January 1999

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Introduction

This report assesses current gender roles and responsibilities in Armenia with special consideration to how they pertain to the continuing process of economic and political transition. Attempting to do so is a difficult proposition because gender can be found in essentially any and every sphere of activity. Gender issues are present not just in the gender composition of the current Parliament or in employment issues, but they are also intertwined with the basic social and cultural fabric of Armenian life at every level. Thus, it is difficult to adequately discuss gender issues without undertaking a complete analysis of all aspects of Armenian society. Although this report will not undertake such an analysis, it focuses on a number of key issues that paint a relatively good picture, if an incomplete one, of how gender and the economic and political transition are related. This, in turn, has important implications for the donor community at large, and USAID specifically, as it assesses how best to assist Armenia in its transition.

The information presented in this report was primarily gathered during November and December of 1998 in Armenia, through an examination of existing studies and data and through interviews with various individuals. In addition to formal interviews with politicians, decision-makers, NGO leaders, academics, and others (a list of those formally interviewed is in Annex B), a large number of informal discussions took place with a variety of individuals, many of whom provided important anecdotal information. Due to the fact that much of the available data is of questionable reliability and validity, this anecdotal or qualitative information helps to present a more balanced picture, if a more confusing one.

The first section of this report examines gender in the context of Armenian economic, political, and social life. Available data is presented, augmented by anecdotal evidence. The second section addresses gender in the broader context of social values and family, and notes the dynamics between economic and political change and changes in gender roles and responsibilities. The importance of the family unit in understanding gender is stressed. The historical roots of current gender issues in both Soviet and Armenian history are examined in the third section. Fourth, based on responses of interviewees, three obstacles to change in gender issues in Armenia are identified and analyzed. Finally, the report offers some conclusions and outlines implications for USAID.

I. Economic, Political, and Social Life

A Economic Life

There is some evidence to suggest that women have been disproportionately affected by the economic transition. This claim is often based on the fact that women are a large percentage of the unemployed – up to 70%. Information from the Ministry of State Statistics (reflecting Armenia's official unemployment figures) corroborates this claim, showing that women constitute a vast majority of the officially unemployed (See Chart 1, Appendix A). And, this trend appears to be worsening, with women constituting an increasingly smaller share of the official workforce (See Chart 2, Appendix A).

Men are given priority in many jobs, because men and even many women want to see men as the primary breadwinners. This means that women were sometimes “first to be fired, last to be hired.” Women also face a perception that they are not as economically viable as men, because of pregnancy leave and because of family responsibilities. A study conducted during the 1960s in the Soviet Union estimated that women spent 3-4 hours per day on housework outside of responsibilities to children.¹ This figure is not likely to have shrunk much in post-Soviet Armenia, particularly in the early years of independence. Since women are still expected to do the lion's share of the domestic work, this division of labor is not conducive to women entering or staying in the workforce.

Furthermore, women are generally not in decision-making positions in economics. Land, property, and businesses are registered under men's names most of the time and independent control of financial resources is often not an available option for women.

However, a closer examination of unemployment statistics reveals that the large disparity between men and women is perhaps not so large. Official unemployment statistics reflect only those who are officially registered, and because of low benefits (about \$5 per month), excessive red tape, lack of services, and other reasons, only an estimated one out of four of the unemployed register.² Additionally, people are dropped from the rolls if they do not re-register every year, which many do not do for the same reasons. This helps to explain the almost ridiculously low official unemployment rate – 6% in 1993, up to 11.1% in 1997, as does the phenomenon of artificial employment and the large shadow economy.

In a trend suggesting that the official statistics are not necessarily representative of the composition of unemployed by gender, women seem to be more likely to register for

¹ Basu, A. *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*, p. 357

² MSS. *Social Snapshot of RoA and Poverty*, box 16

unemployment benefits than men. Those interviewed offered a number of different reasons to explain why - women have less pride than men and thus do not feel degraded by the entire process, women are more likely to be happy with even the small amount of benefits than men who consider it a slap in the face, etc. So, not only is the official unemployment rate itself very low, but even the composition of the unemployed by gender - that is, the high percentage of women - may not be accurate. In a 1996 World Bank poverty study, men accounted for 62% of the unemployed in the sample, for example.³ This same study also notes an increased participation of women in petty and middle-level trade and small business,⁴ while other studies and interviewees have also emphasized that women have increased their presence in business during the transition period in spite of the discrimination they faced.

Additionally, the Ministry of State Statistics estimates that only one out every 4 private entrepreneurs is registered and that up to 1/3 of income generated by households may come from the shadow economy.⁵ This is especially significant because women's involvement in the shadow economy seems to be especially high. As one indicator, only 4.5% of employed women work in registered small businesses.⁶ Meanwhile, men are often officially employed but suffer from "hidden unemployment." Thus, women's employment is also undercounted because a significant proportion of their economic activity takes place in the shadow economy.

Although no official statistics were available on the number of women who own registered businesses, the number is believed to be relatively low.⁷ It is also difficult to assess the validity of this statistic as an indicator of women's involvement in business, since traditionally, men officially put their name on all business relating to the family.

Official statistics indicate that women continue to dominate fields that are traditionally "feminized," such as health, education, and culture. In 1996, 76% of employees in the health sector and 74% of the employees in the education sector were women (see Table 1, Annex A).⁸ These sectors are also disproportionately low-paying in many instances, contributing to overall salary discrepancies between men and women - women earn 2/3 of what men earn, on average. However, once more, these statistics do not include informal sector activity and may not present an accurate picture of gender in overall economic activity.

B Political Life

³ Document of the World Bank: Armenia Confronting Poverty Issues, p. 11

⁴ Ibid. Annex 5, p. 1

⁵ MSS Social Snapshot, box 4

⁶ UNHCR Needs Assessment, p. 1

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ MSS Women in Transition, p. 2

The political picture is slightly easier to quantify, at least on the national level. Simply put, women are currently not in decision-making positions in politics. Women hold only 12 out of the 190 seats in Parliament, or 6.3%,⁹ while all 22 of the Ministers and all but one Deputy Minister are currently men, and there was only one woman minister in the previous cabinet. Although official statistics show that the overall gender balance in governmental positions is not too skewed (see Chart 3, Appendix A) and has in fact improved in recent years, it should be noted that these statistics include all employees, including cleaning staff, secretaries, etc. - women are not well-represented in senior positions. The first woman registered to run for president last year, though she elected to withdraw her candidacy and her name on the ballot.

There is currently a "Gender in Development" (GID) unit in the government, located in the Ministry of Social Welfare in the Department of Women's and Children's Issues, supported by UNDP. Furthermore, a National Plan of Action to address gender has been formulated and is currently being implemented. However, it must be noted that these activities are as of yet quite formal in nature rather than substantive, due to a lack of institutional support, among other things. Though its very existence is a positive step, there appears to be resistance to the idea of any kind of gender program within the government.

This disparity in national politics is symptomatic of a more general retrenchment to and a reassertion of traditional Armenian gender divisions of power in politics. The new organizations that rose to power and came to dominate political life after the collapse of the Soviet Union did not actively seek female participation, nor did women, for the most part, try to push their way in.

On a local level, there is evidence that women are more involved - in political parties, heading local electoral commissions, etc. Requests to political parties for information on female participation at local levels were met with blank stares, and the government was unable to give the gender breakdown for heads of local electoral commissions. However, a number of those interviewed seemed to think that women were in fact more involved at the local level than at the national level, though men remained the decision-makers. Expats, for example, who participated in as election observers during past elections in Armenia recalled strong female participation in local election commissions.

As an example, however, of the difficulties women face in politics, one observer remembered that during the second round of the 1998 Presidential elections, at the community level, there were two women on the commission at the community level election committee where he was stationed. One of the women made a formal complaint with the chairman that she felt that the coupons were not being counted in a fair way, that she saw evidence of ballot-stuffing, and she demanded a recount. The other members of the committee berated her for being too meddlesome and shouted

⁹ UNDP National Human Development Report 1998

her down, even insulting her name in the process. The other woman on the committee appeared to have no other function other than to make coffee for the other members and to answer the chairman's phone. This situation illustrates well the reality of gender roles in politics - women in politics are either there in a subordinate capacity or are simply ignored.

According to some of those interviewed, there also appears to be a certain continuation of the Soviet gender quota system mixed in with the clan system in local politics. That is, when a particular clan or network takes control of an office, there is a habitual deference to some sort of female quota, though usually in the lower levels. These women, in turn, do not feel discriminated against because they have their position due to personal ties and because the sense of a meritocracy does not appear fully developed. Job discrimination based on a patriarchal clan is an accepted hiring practice. Women who owe their positions to a certain person rather than to merit are in turn less likely to speak out against discrimination because of gender.

Furthermore, the small sample of politicians who were interviewed for this report, including the head of the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, the leader of the "women's" party in Parliament, Shamiram¹⁰, and various government officials did not believe that there were any real or significant gender issues or problems in Armenia at all - economically, politically, or socially. Combined with the governmental track record on gender, this seems to indicate that those in decision-making positions do not consider gender to be an important issue for development.

Women's activity in NGOs is relatively strong - 12% of all NGOs deal with women's issues¹¹ and more importantly, the overwhelming majority of all NGO members are women.¹² NGOs seem to be a socially acceptable outlet for female political activity, which is something that can be built on.

The issue of raising women's involvement in politics is clearly tied to an improvement in democracy as a whole. Until representatives are more accountable to their constituencies, until the electoral process improves, until the influence of patriarchal clans is reduced, and until the democratic process itself becomes stronger, women will continue to be underrepresented. Mobilizing women in political action, however, may be one way to achieve these democratic ends.

C Social Issues - Poverty, Health, and Education

¹⁰ Although all of Shamiram's members are women, it should be noted that it is not in fact a "women's party" in the Western sense. Additionally, the origins of Shamiram are tied in to the clan and quota mentality mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Since they are among the few women in Parliament, however, it is interesting to note their views on gender issues.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 34

¹² UNDP National Human Development Report 1996, p. 16

According to existing poverty studies, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that gender is a determinant of poverty¹³ Refugee women and women whose husbands are abroad as migrant workers do form an important at-risk subset, however. And, an astonishing 86.8% of single pensioners are women –another high-risk group that appears to have suffered from the lack of state support¹⁴

While the overall health indicators (such as life-expectancy) of both men and women have declined during the transition period, women's health has been especially affected. The difficulty of paying for health care costs has only complicated the situation. Complications during child-birth have increased dramatically, abortion remains the primary form of birth control¹⁵ and has helped lead to a high rate of infertility (25%), and maternal mortality has increased steadily for the last four years¹⁶. The overall reluctance and/or inability of the population to seek health care except when absolutely necessary has led to a decrease in prenatal care and to an increase in home childbirth. The serious problems posed by the transition period to women's health are especially worrisome, particularly given the long-term nature of many health problems.

Finally, gender statistics in education show some interesting trends. Females continue to graduate at a higher rate from secondary school than males (See Chart 4, Appendix A). In tertiary education, there is a similar tendency, as women's enrollment, expressed as a percentage of men as 100%, was 123% in 1993, 143% in 1995, and 127.8% in 1996¹⁷. The dropout rate is higher for boys than for girls and this trend is more pronounced in rural areas¹⁸. Additionally, attendance problems are also higher for boys than girls (6.3% vs. 2.8% according to an MSS/WB survey)¹⁹. Thus, it appears that women are faring better than men in education, which can be tied to a number of factors.

First, given the difficult economic conditions, boys are likely to seek employment at a young age to help their family, or, in rural areas, their help may be needed within the family business. Second, education is considered a status symbol and an asset for women, particularly for marriage prospects, and thus priority is often given to female education²⁰. Third, there is a perception that education will not necessarily lead to any improvement in job prospects and so, especially with the rising cost of education, there is not a strong motivation to continue school, especially for boys. Given the number of PhD's driving taxis, this somewhat cynical attitude is perhaps not surprising.

¹³ Document of the World Bank, Annex 2, p. 1

¹⁴ UNDP Social Indicators 1998

¹⁵ UMCOR Round Table on Women's Health, p. 6

¹⁶ UNDP Social Indicators

¹⁷ UNNHDR 1995, 1996, 1997, appendices

¹⁸ UNDP National Human Development Report 1998

¹⁹ Gomart, E. Social Assessment Report on Health and Education Sectors p. 111

²⁰ Ibid, p. 17

II. Gender in the Context of Society, Social Values, and Family

The transition period has significantly affected social roles of men and women, particularly the economic difficulties, and these changes must be viewed through the prism of the family, the basic social unit of Armenian life

A Family

In Armenian families, men have traditionally been considered the breadwinner in the family – that is, their basic social function has been to provide for the family financially. Their position within the family depends on this fact, as does the respect and status they command outside the family, in society. Even during Soviet times, this idea was never erased or overcome. Furthermore, women's social status is also tied with the status of their husbands, and, more generally, with the family as a whole. For those men who have not been able to fulfill this traditional role, serious levels of depression have resulted, an inability to cope psychologically with the changing times. For many men, their entire *raison d'être* is now gone, since they cannot work to provide for their family, leading to feelings of shame, depression, and loss of a sense of self-worth. This, in turn, has adversely affected the family structure, at least in the short-term.

Women's role, by contrast, has traditionally been to deal with family and domestic issues. This entails, of course, child-bearing and child-rearing, but it extends beyond maternal functions. Women are responsible for the family itself – ensuring that their children and their husband are kept in good health, that food is kept on the table, that the house is kept in good order, that household expenses are managed and so on. However, this responsibility has included, to a significant extent, a subordination to men. Serving husbands is traditionally an important duty for women. Though these familial gender roles may appear unequal, it must be noted that most Armenian men and a significant Armenian number of women do not outwardly believe the traditional division of labor to be unequal, dysfunctional, or wrong.

Often with no real choice in the matter, women were pushed further into the economic realm during the transition period, and, compared to men, women seem to have been more economically flexible. They have been willing to take "lesser" or "lower" jobs to provide for their family, sometimes as traders of small items or as house-cleaners or as secretaries and occasionally as prostitutes. And they seem to have shown more creativity – what we might call "entrepreneurial spirit" – opening small businesses of various kinds, selling baked goods, etc. Men, meanwhile, seem to have been excessively hampered by the past, as they often waited for industry to recapitalize or for a position that matched their previous status. The role of breadwinner was

paramount, yet it did not extend to accepting too sharp a reduction in status. Bitterness and resignation, or migration and reliance on family networks seems to have characterized the male response to dire economic straits, compared with the flexibility and creativity that women exhibited.

The net effect of this, then, has been that in many cases, men have not been able to fulfill their roles as the breadwinner in the family and that women have stepped up to fill the void in one way or another, and kept the family surviving in difficult periods. Even in situations where a man may be formally employed, his position as breadwinner may be undermined because his salary is so low. This change has posed a stiff challenge to traditional gender roles in the Armenian family. Although women in Armenia appear to have always been economically active in one way or another, the nature of this activity changed. In the face of widespread male depression and unemployment, women have proved remarkably resilient in finding ways to keep the family afloat, particularly in the early years of independence. While not all men have reacted negatively to their wives becoming more overtly economically active, this subtle shift in gender roles has not been easy on the family structure. But it has created an opportunity for women to further extend their roles in business, an opportunity that can perhaps be enhanced further by programs that carefully support women in the economic world.

B Migration

The sharp economic difficulties have also affected gender roles through the phenomenon of migration. An estimated 1 out of 5 Armenians are abroad, of which over half are single migrant workers. Approximately 2/3 of emigrants are men, which has helped to skew the gender proportions, particularly in rural areas, and most of these are of working age, which has affected the age pyramid.²¹ In areas outside of Yerevan, many men who have been unable or unwilling to leave the country have come into Yerevan to look for work. Both the migration to Russia and other CIS countries and internal migration have affected the gender balance.

It has left some women, first of all, as heads of families, albeit reluctant ones. While their husbands work in Russia or elsewhere in the CIS and send money back to Armenia, women have assumed many of their husband's responsibilities in Armenia. The social acceptability of women as heads of households is still quite low, however, and these women suffer a loss of status in the community as a result.

Second, migration has affected the marriage rate, which has decreased significantly since independence. The decrease in the marriage rate can also be attributed to other factors – couples are less likely to marry if the man does not have a steady source of

²¹ UNDP National Human Development Report, 1996, p. 14

income, for example, and the skewed gender ratio, particularly among young Armenians, has also contributed

C Divorce

The divorce rate has climbed steadily since independence, from 13.8 per 100 marriages in 1991 to 18.5 per 100 marriages in 1997.²² This reflects both the new freedoms and opportunities and the increased tensions in gender relations brought by the post-Soviet period. Although divorce is still heavily frowned upon, particularly in rural regions, unhappy couples are now taking advantage of the increasing social freedoms and divorcing more often with fewer social consequences. At the same time, the increase can also be partially attributed, at least indirectly, to economic troubles. The inability of men to find work coupled with a rise in women's economic involvement, as discussed earlier, seems to have brought familial tensions that sometimes leads to divorce.

In one family, for example, an unemployed husband was unable to cope with his wife's newfound status as the breadwinner, telling her that she had become arrogant and pushy in the household. This also seemed to reflect his own frustration at his inability to fulfill his traditional role as the head of the household. Rising tensions eventually led to separation and eventually divorce (or at least, this is the wife's side of the tale). Although this example is certainly not universally true, it is clear that women who are the sole breadwinner or even an equal breadwinner in the family must walk a fine line to keep peace in their household.

A recent study, surveying students and their families, found that 64% of respondents believed that both men and women should contribute to the family budget. However, that same survey found that almost 50% of those surveyed believed that women should receive less money than her husband in order to keep peace in the family.²³

While there is no concrete data to make this correlation, it seems reasonably safe to say that economic tensions are reflected to some degree in increasing social instability, such as higher divorce rates, etc. There is also some evidence that domestic violence and sexual harassment may have risen from 1991 to the present,²⁴ but additional research is necessary to confirm this.

Migration has also played a part in the rise in the divorce rate. There are many stories of husbands in Moscow with second families, for example. A particularly difficult subset are cases when the husband has gone to abroad to work and has never sent any money home. These women are left in very difficult circumstances. There is loss of

²² MSS Untitled Handout

²³ Ohanian, M. Value Problems and Gender, p. 2

²⁴ UNHCR Needs Assessment, p. 10, Engibaryan, L. Violence in the Family, pp. 1-3

social status for the woman and the family that is hard to overcome. Additionally, these women must now find sources of income for their families. This is a segment of the population that is especially at-risk, along with refugee women, since they are both outside traditional methods of community and family assistance, to differing degrees.

III. Historical Roots of Gender Roles

Gender issues in Armenia are closely tied with the Armenian social system, which in turn is strongly based on the family unit. An examination of historical roots of the family and the gender roles within it can help to explain why traditional Armenian gender roles, or at least many elements of what we call traditional roles, are still so strong today.

Armenia, as with many of the other former Soviet republics, did not have a tradition of independent statehood before Soviet times. The First Republic of Armenia lasted only from 1918-1920 and before that, there had not been an independent Armenian state since 1375. This is important because what allowed Armenians to survive as a culture - in fact, what defined Armenians as a culture - was most importantly the family unit. It was through the family that the important qualities of Armenian culture were passed down through generations. Since Armenians lived in other "host" countries - namely, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran - where they were minorities that were sometimes welcome and sometimes not, Armenia only existed at the level of families and small, relatively unconnected communities.

Since the family has been the main guarantor of Armenian culture for hundreds of years, even a relatively benign attempt to change gender roles is seen as an attack on the family and thus on the system of Armenian cultural preservation. Although more "urbanized" Armenians likely reflected more cosmopolitan outlooks, the traditional division of gender roles discussed earlier was dominant. Still, it is a mistake to blithely label the pre-Soviet era as the "traditional" era and assume that women were blatantly oppressed by men. Concurrent with domestic subordination, Armenian women traditionally seem to have a streak of strength and stubbornness - they have not been meek or quiet. While men are the head of the family and the breadwinners, women are also strong in how the family is presented to the outside world - this has brought, among other things, an emphasis on women's education as bringing status to the family, something that continues today.

The Soviet period, lasting 70 years, did have some impact on these more traditional Armenian gender roles. The imposition of the Soviet ideology of formal gender equality brought women into the urban workplace (although this was a functional imperative for industrialization as much as it was an ideological one) and into politics. Men and women, from rural and urban areas, had relatively equal access to education and there were good opportunities for all to make it into the Soviet bureaucracy. Women were represented in government, although by quota. Spheres that were traditionally women's domain became somewhat socialized - health, education, and so on, and working women were often concentrated in these "feminized" sectors, a division which continues today. And, particularly during World War II and the following years, the idea of strong women was pushed as an ideal by the state. There

were posters of women with a cigarette in their mouth and a gun in their hand, for example

However, Soviet rhetoric on gender equality sometimes remained only that and did not translate into action or change old mentalities, as rhetoric is apt to do. Women generally faced a “glass ceiling,” both in politics and the economy. While the achievement of universal literacy, increased opportunity to participate in economic and political life, and the promotion of the ideal of gender equality all represented steps forward for women, women were generally unable to rise above the middle ranks in enterprises or in politics, and problems such as sexual harassment and domestic violence existed, with no recourse for women, as the concepts themselves did not exist. More traditional values dominated.

Thus, when the Soviet era ended, in spite of some real gains, it became clear that much of the progress had only been at a surface level, and that in fact, more traditional gender relations continued to drive society rather than the Soviet ideal. Even though the Soviets did much to try and erase traditional methods of social organization, through their attempt to create atomized individuals loyal to the state and through their attack on family, clans, traditional gender roles, etc., this attempt had essentially ended by the 1970's and 1980's, with the ascent of the Brezhnev regime. Totalitarianism, to use Hannah Arendt's term, does not adequately describe the late Soviet period, which was a much more benign system than the early and middle years. The re-emergence of pre-Soviet family and gender structures, in retrospect, are not much of a surprise, given the weakness of state control over societal values in the late Soviet period.

Consciously and unconsciously, these same traditional gender structures which ended up being incompatible with the Soviet model of gender relations are in place today as well, albeit in a modified form. Particularly because Armenians were faced with uncertain circumstances in the post-Soviet period, one can make the argument that the strong re-emergence of more traditional gender patterns was a social self-defense mechanism. That is, gender roles relapsed into traditional ways because there was in fact nothing else there – the Soviet system had collapsed and left a vacuum of sorts.

Clearly, then, the Armenian family and the social structure, which dominate gender roles and responsibilities, have deep roots, going back hundreds of years - roots that not even 70 years of Soviet rule really reversed. In order for gender to change significantly, then, it must be considered within this historical framework.

IV. Three Obstacles

Three general arguments were made by interviewees during discussions on the potential for gender roles and responsibilities to change in the near future. Though the first two of these three obstacles are more theoretical objections than they are practical impediments, they are nevertheless important in what they say about social change in Armenia and how this relates to the donor community.

First, what is termed the “Asian values argument,” a by-now familiar argument which is made most often and is most clearly enunciated in certain Asian countries. The basic claim is that while economic development along Western lines may be an acceptable goal or model for a particular non-Western society, these societies also have the right and even the duty to maintain their own cultural patterns and systems in the face of universalistic claims, including, of course, maintaining their own ideas on gender roles. This argument, in various forms, was made by a vast majority of the Armenians who were interviewed or with whom informal discussions were held. While gender equality is a good and desirable thing in theory, and should to some extent apply to political and economic life, they argued, there are certain basic gender structures which both should not be changed and cannot be changed. They draw a sharp distinction, then, between economic and political life and cultural, social, and familial life. According to this line of argument, what the West may perceive as gender inequality in Armenia is a problem of relative values and that the division of labor by gender and social gender roles imply no inequality, only a different method of social organization that Armenians believe has suited them well. One Armenian woman summed this belief up quite well when she said that “Women know that we are discriminated against in the family, but there are some kinds of discrimination which we like and do not want to change!” Armenians, then, as a very broad generalization, seem to remain unconvinced that gender equality, as it is formulated in the West, is in fact an enunciation of universal rights that applies to Armenia.

The danger inherent in the “Asian values argument” is that it may be used by a society to justify real inequalities or human rights abuses such as domestic violence, to mask them under the guise of relative differences in morals. In Armenia, as elsewhere, the argument stems from a perceived threat against the existing order of life – the threat that Western culture may encroach or already be encroaching too far into Armenian life. This, then, points to a need to present gender issues in a careful manner, in a way that does not appear to be a direct threat to existing social values of family – this, as noted earlier, represents an attack on the institution that preserves Armenian culture. This is especially true in Armenia because Armenians, due to a perception that they have a long history of cultural domination by other nations, feel especially insecure about their social structure and are very wary of changes to it. This, then, is the fine line between respecting local traditions and working to achieve “universal” rights.

The second general argument which rejects any immediate attempt to change gender roles in Armenian society is the “economic development argument.” This argument is that economic development will inevitably lead to some sort of equalization of gender roles. Thus, the reasoning goes, Armenia must wait for economic development to occur, or strive to make economic development happen, before it can start discussing the concept of gender equality. In fact, it is argued, it may even be counter-productive to introduce gender equality before the country’s economic situation improves, since there is no foundation for it. This argument is based, in large part, on a retrospective analysis of the emergence and development of gender movements in the West, where economic progress and the emergence of a middle-class, which formed the basis for a women’s movement, were the catalysts for change. This also points to the difficulties inherent in attempting to apply the results of historical development in one society to a different society where the results must be constructed.

The proponents of the “economic development argument” cited the fact that the economic conditions of the last seven years have already changed gender roles to some extent. The tradition of the man as the breadwinner has been somewhat undermined by economic change, for example. Thus, further economic development may also help the process of social change.

However, it must be noted that there are also many examples in the world where economic progress has in fact not substantially changed the underlying social structure or significantly altered gender roles. And, without being unduly pessimistic, one does not know when, how, or if how the Armenian economy will progress.

In fact, a few interviewees argued that the inverse of the “economic development” argument may even be true. That is, social change may lead to economic development rather than vice versa. Given that Armenia likes to stress that its main resource is in its human capital, it would seem that women (with their high levels of education, economic flexibility, and so on) might help lead the way to economic progress and political change rather than vice versa.

Identifying a simple linear relationship between the economy and gender, in either direction, is an oversimplification. Economics and gender are closely intertwined, and change must be a concurrent process.

The third obstacle, and the most practical one, is the “information problem.” Most interviewees who knew what gender was noted that it was a widely misunderstood concept in Armenia, especially by decision-makers but also by the general public. For example, one newspaper account tells the story of a government official who was proofreading a memo. He read the memo and when he came to word “gender,” he changed to “dender” (an Armenian word meaning illness), figuring the word was a misprint. Gender is either an unknown idea or a misunderstood one, as many people interpret it to mean radical feminism.

Interestingly, almost every Armenian woman with whom we spoke went to great lengths to deny that she was a feminist, often without any prompting. Upon questioning, the aversion seems to stem from a perception of feminism as an extremely radical and destabilizing movement rather than a movement for gender equality and with an unspoken connection with lesbianism. Soviet ideology espoused equality, but portrayed feminism as one of the Western “isms,” lumped together with surrealism, modernism, and so on, and condemned as a bourgeois movement.

A study done in 1980, 1987, and 1995 in Armenia (as well as the US, Ireland, Chile, and Italy) measured feminist attitudes, asking questions such as “Should men and women who do the same work get the same salary,” and “Should women have more responsibility than men in caring for a child,” and so on. The study found that feminist attitudes in Armenia were the lowest of all the nations in the sample, and that Armenia’s “score” remained the same over the three studies (8.3 on a 24 point scale), from the Soviet period to the independence period.²⁵ This indicates that the problem is not just one of misinformation, but that there is also genuine resistance to some ideas of gender equality.²⁶

Combined with the continuing climate of social and cultural insecurity, the concepts of feminism and gender appear to be widely mistrusted but widely misunderstood as well. Thus, there is a need to address the information gap, perhaps through trainings and seminars, but more importantly to address general social attitudes towards gender equality, through long-term efforts in education. Addressing the information problem will also play a role in changing more deeply held social attitudes.

²⁵ Jeshmaridian et al. *Feminism Research*, p. 111

²⁶ However, it should be noted that “feminist attitudes” are not necessarily the same thing as attitudes towards gender equality.

V. Conclusions

The continuing economic difficulties have affected male heads of households significantly, reducing their social and familial role as the main breadwinner. Migration has been one method of adaptation, primarily to Russia, but many men who remain unemployed have difficulty coping with the new situation. Women have helped to meet the increased financial needs of the family through increased participation in economic life while also continuing to do household work and maintain a traditional division of labor along gender lines. This shift has resulted in a disturbance of traditional Armenian gender roles, the long term results of which are still unclear. In spite of its potentially destabilizing effect on the Armenian family, increased participation by women in economic life especially in decision-making contexts, could complement the overall process of economic progress and would be most successful in that context.

Women have been shut out of national political life, although anecdotal evidence suggests that there is greater involvement in local political and social institutions such as educational boards, electoral commissions, and NGOs. Armenia's slow move towards democracy necessarily entails progress in involving a more representative gender sample, again, especially in key positions but also at a grassroots and community level.

Current gender roles can be said to be somewhat functional for Armenia's social cohesion – they provide a measure of social stability, and, as a very broad generalization, there does not seem to be a widespread desire among women for a Western-style emancipatory movement. These gender roles and responsibilities are engrained very deeply in the Armenian psyche and will require long-term changes in education and social values to alter. However, the continuing emphasis on preserving the Armenian family unit should not be tied to preserving human rights abuses or blatant gender discrimination.

What, then, might some of the important implications be for USAID?

First, two broad implications. It seems clear that an integrated approach is necessary. Since gender is ubiquitous, working for change in gender roles must be part of a larger effort to achieve progress in all spheres. The potential gains of gender-specific programs may be offset by the negative impact on an Armenian social structure that is already frayed. Gender should be addressed through a larger, coordinated effort when possible. Since USAID engages in a wide variety of activities, it is in a good position to do this.

Second, gender must be approached within an Armenian context. That is, the current state of gender relations in economic and political spheres must be viewed through the prism of long-standing Armenian values of family and gender, and change must be

achieved by walking the fine line of applying universal principles to local conditions
This necessarily entails a gradualist approach

More specifically, there is a great need for reliable data and information on which to base policy decisions. With the current set of data, it is difficult to pinpoint needs and opportunities for change – it is difficult to assess the functionality of current gender roles in the economy when the economic picture itself is so murky, for example. This information is necessary not only for USAID, but for other donors or NGOs who want to work in gender development.

More specific actions could include but are not limited to

- 1 Coordination with GoA to ensure equal application of laws to men and women in the economic sphere and opportunities for women in the political sphere
- 2 Continued support for dissemination of appropriate information through NGOs, mass media, conferences, trainings, seminars, etc – targeting both men and women
- 3 Provision of short-term relief for especially vulnerable women – refugees, single pensioners, and heads of families who are women
- 4 Establishment of local centers that work to fight domestic violence and promote gender equality, and promotion of grassroots political organizations

While achieving change in Armenian gender roles as part of a broader program of human rights and economic and political development is desirable, the ultimate responsibility for this change must rest with Armenian society. The donor community can play a role by providing information and opportunities for this change to occur, however, for these changes to be lasting and real, it must have broad support from and consensus in Armenian society.

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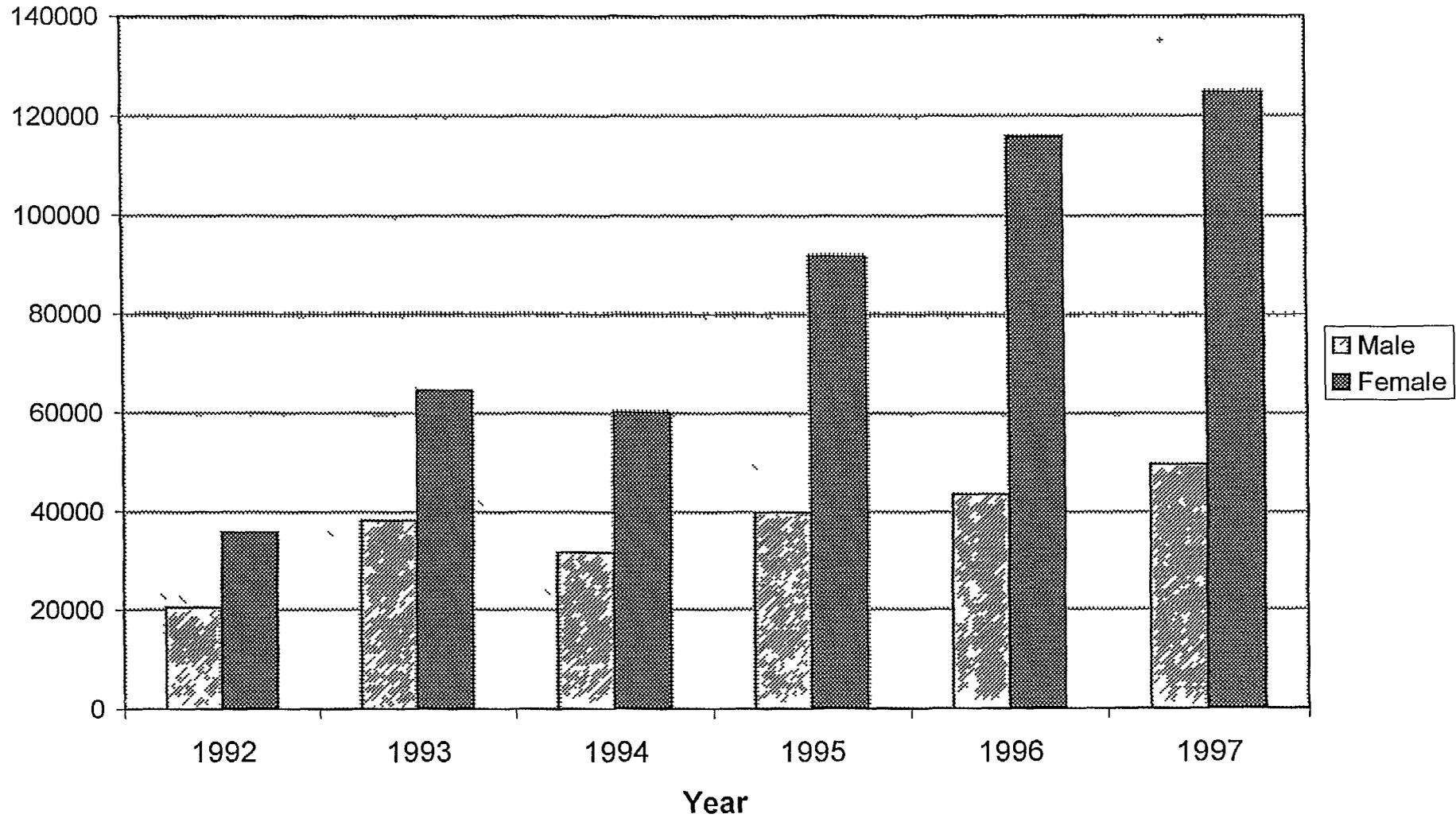
UNDP United Nations National Human Development Report for Armenia United Nations, 1995

UNHCR Needs Assessment on Women's Problems in Armenia Yerevan, 1996

Appendix A – Charts 1-4

Chart 1

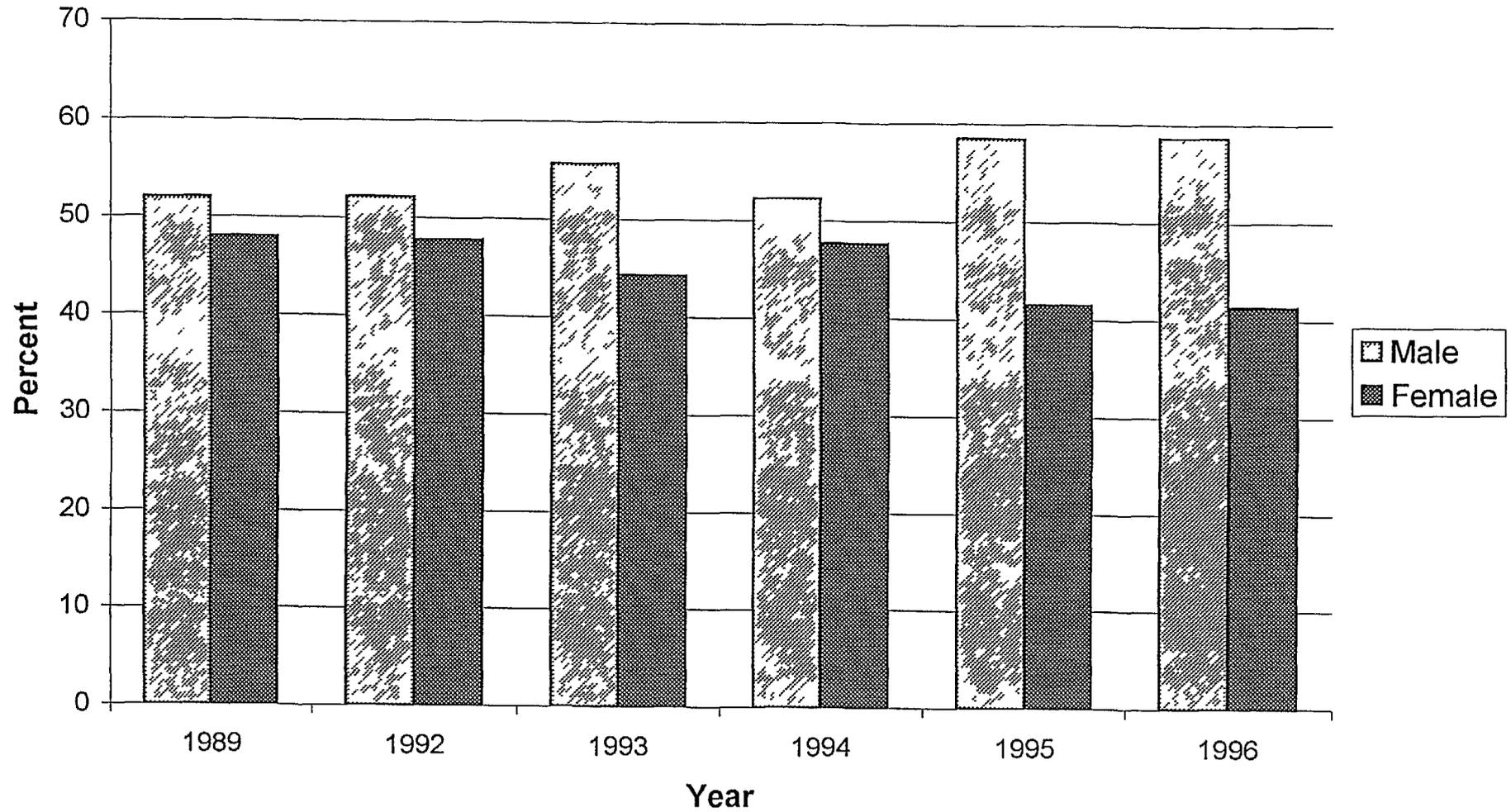
Officially Registered Number of Unemployed by Gender



Source Ministry of State Statistics

Chart 2

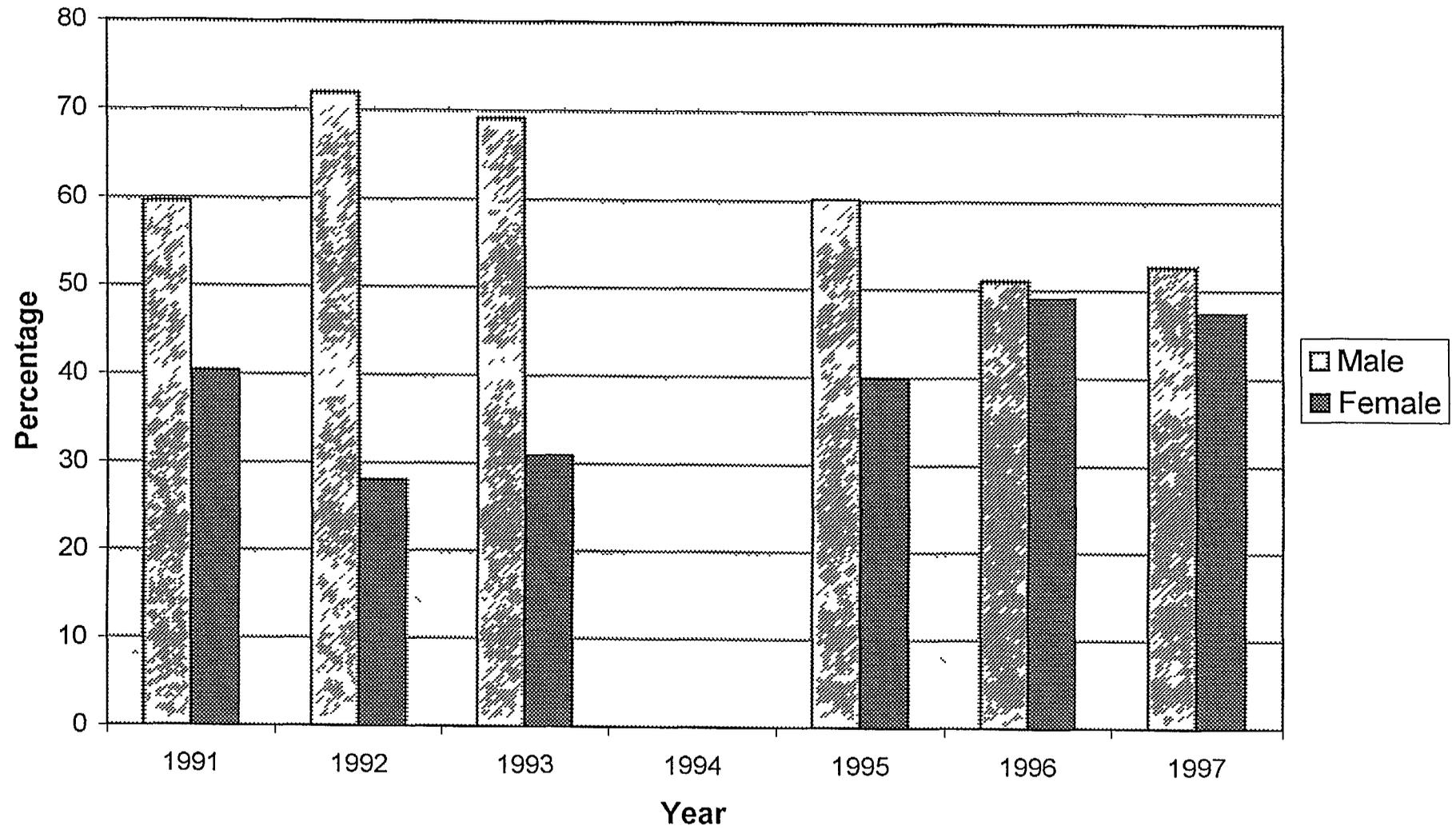
Official Composition of Employed Population by Gender (percentage)



Source Ministry of State Statistics

Chart 3

Composition of Government Employees by Gender



Source Ministry of State Statistics

Chart 4

Composition of Secondary School Graduates by Gender

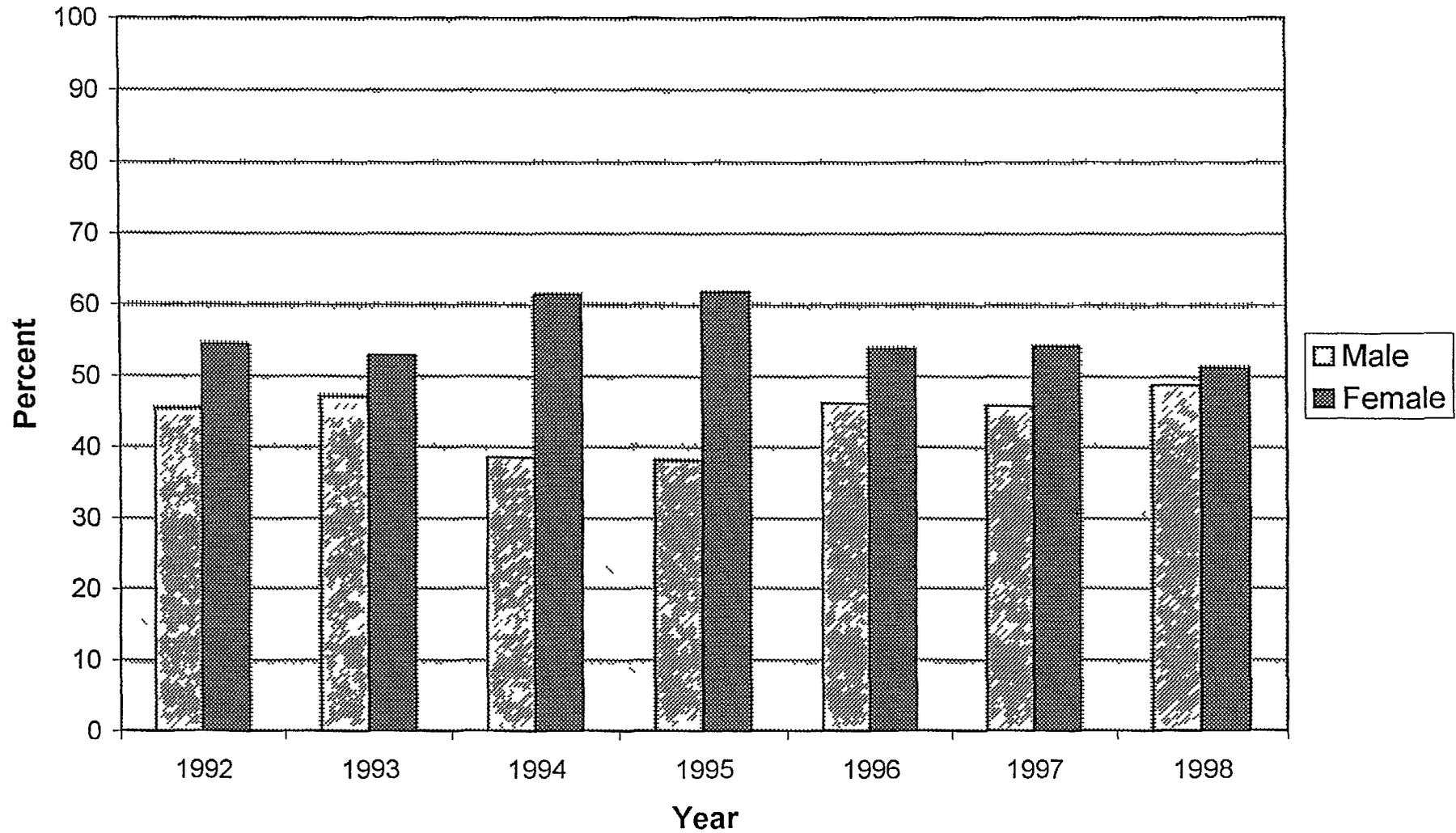


Table 1

Structure of Officially Employed Population by Sector

	1990			1995			1996		
	Men	Wome n	Total	Men	Wome n	Total	Men	Wome n	Total
Industry	26 7	34 4	30 4	16 8	25 8	20 5	15 4	21 2	17 8
Agriculture	19 3	15 4	17 4	47 2	23 2	37 2	51 4	25 3	40 6
Construction	19 2	2 7	11 3	7 6	1 7	5 1	6 8	1 8	4 7
Transport and Communications	7 1	3 2	5 2	4 6	2 2	3 6	4 1	2 3	3 3
Trade and catering, material and technical supply and sale, purchases	5 3	7 1	6 2	6 1	7 7	6 8	6 5	9 4	7 7
Information and computer services	0 1	0 4	0 3	0 0	0 2	0 1	0 1	0 1	0 1
Housing, non-production service industries	4 9	3 1	4 0	4 0	2 9	3 5	3 9	3 0	3 5
Health, physical culture, and social security	2 0	9 9	5 8	2 4	10 6	5 8	2 3	10 4	5 7
Education	5 0	14 0	9 3	5 3	16 7	10 0	4 3	17 8	9 9
Culture and arts	2 3	3 1	2 7	1 2	3 7	2 2	1 2	3 6	2 2
Science and scientific services	3 0	3 5	3 2	1 3	1 8	1 6	0 8	1 3	1 0
Crediting and state insurance	0 2	0 7	0 5	0 3	0 9	0 6	0 3	0 7	0 5
State and economic management bodies, management bodies of cooperative public organizations	1 9	1 5	1 7	2 0	1 9	2 0	1 7	2 4	2 0

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Other	30	10	20	12	07	10	12	07	10
Total in Economy	100								

Source Ministry of State Statistics

Appendix B – List of Formal Interviews

- 1 Alice Adamian – Armenian Intellectual Women, NGO
- 2 Anahit Simonian, UNDP (GID Unit)
- 3 Gayane Sarukhyan, Shamiram political party
- 4 Gulnara Shahinian, IOM
- 5 Heghine Manassian, TACIS
- 6 Jackie McPherson, AUA Center for Public Health
- 7 Jemma Hasratian, Association of Women with Higher Education, NGO
- 8 John Irons, UMCOR
- 9 Ludmilla Haroutunian, YSU Sociology Department
- 10 Nora Hakopian, Republican Women’s Council, NGO
- 11 Nune Yeghiazarian, UNDP
- 12 Ofelia Petrossian, Ministry of Social Welfare (GID Unit)
- 13 Paryur Hairikian, Head of Presidential Human Rights Commission
- 14 Father Sarkissian, Priest at St Sarkis Church
- 15 Samvel Jeshmaridyan, Social Psychologist
- 16 Sophie Babayan et al Center for Gender Studies, Vanadzor
- 17 Vazgen Manougian, AZhM political party
- 18 Vladimir Karmirshalyan, Center for Democracy and Human Rights

Appendix C – Case Studies

What follows is two brief sketches of Armenian women and their families, compiled by project assistant Lusine Muradian. Though by no means representative of all Armenian women, they nevertheless offer interesting examples of some of the problems and issues discussed in the report.

Case Study #1

“Ani” is 38 years old. She currently lives with her daughter, and holds a responsible position with an international organization.

Annie married when she was 24. However, she was not especially well acquainted with her husband when they got married, as they were surrounded by their relatives during almost all their meetings. A month after their wedding, Ani realized that her husband was a terrible alcoholic and, as a result, was suffering from bouts of schizophrenia (though only when drunk). Eventually, she began to suggest that he seek help from a doctor, but he resisted the idea and became increasingly angry and aggressive after every such suggestion.

Some time later, Ani gave birth to a daughter. However, this became a new reason for her husband to keep her at home all the time, to disconnect her from all life outside the home. And, unfortunately, the child became a new object of his jealousy.

Several times, Ani tried to return to her parents, but it seemed impossible to her, as she couldn't even collect the necessary things and didn't have any financial means to buy new things. Furthermore, her parents were unaware of the difficult relations with her husband and she was scared that they would not look kindly on her leaving him.

After 6 years, in spite of disagreement from her parents, Ani returned to live with her parents. Since she was not allowed to take her belongings with her, she was forced to start from scratch. With a child but without any significant help, she started to work day and night. She worked as a translator in an enterprise that was making new computer programs, while simultaneously teaching students English language and literature by candlelight. The economic conditions of the time (1991) made things especially difficult.

Two years later, Ani was able to buy a new apartment and her parents helped to buy furniture. She also became the office manager of an international organization (newly established in Yerevan), where she still works today.

Case Study # 2

“Armine” is 29 years old. She lives together with her three boys and her husband.

Armine married when she was 20. “Ashot,” her husband, was attentive to her, and she was happy with her marital situation. Soon their first child was born. After two years their second child brought new financial problems to the family, but they were not impossible to overcome. Two years later, Armine gave a birth to the third boy, concurrent with the collapse of the Armenian economy in 1991. Ashot left the family for Moscow. He stayed there almost a year sending little amounts of money to his family. Armine was taking care of herself and the three boys. However, after a year Armine went to Moscow.

“It seemed to me that he wasn’t very happy with our arrival. He was nervous, he was shouting at the children, trying to find a reason to insult me.” Soon Armine noticed that Ashot was spending too much time outside of the home. He was “busy” even at nights. Armine was trying to keep the image of the loving wife and was trying to find explanations for children about the frequent absences of their father. However, she was unable to imagine her and her children’s existence without Ashot’s support. She didn’t even allow the idea of divorce to creep into her mind. The “happy family” existed for 5 years in Moscow, but nothing changed Ashot to bring him back to his family. Armine returned to Yerevan with the children. By the time she returned to Yerevan, she admits, Armine had had an amazing 13 abortions during her marriage.

In Yerevan, Armine fell in love with another man – also married at the time with two children. They spent time together, and he was extremely attentive towards Armine’s children, while also supporting Armine, her children, and her parents financially. Rumors about the happy situation of Armine reached her husband in Moscow, and he returned.

After a series of fights and arguments between Armine and Ashot, Armine initiated a divorce. “Until the last moment Ashot didn’t believe in the seriousness of my decision. He was thinking that it is impossible for me to take three children and make a divorce. I present a number of requirements!”

It is difficult to tell what exactly changed Ashot: the threat that his wife would demand the greatest part of his property, or the idea of seeing her happy with another husband, but he appeared to change. Today Armine and Ashot are living together, their children are indeed happy within this family structure. Ashot stayed in Yerevan and is working in at a small business, while Armine takes care of children.