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Where feminism is still a bad word...

The 20th century was the century of women's activism for access to education and for access to the public sphere, which were denied to them due to gender division of work. They fought for the right to vote, for control over their body, etc. Between both World Wars, the Soviet Union was a gigantic laboratory of social experimentation, and the case of Soviet woman was "exemplary". But after the Second World War, the USSR isolated itself and all the progress made after the Revolution was annihilated. Mixed classes were suppressed. Titles as "Heroic Mother" (more than 10 children) and the "Order of maternal Glory" (7 to 9 children) were created. Unmarried women had no right to claim paternity or to receive a pension. It was only in 1953 that Stalin's death interrupted this cycle of violence against women. Despite that, in the following years women were still mainly obliged to execute tasks with little possibilities to direct and even less to decide. The power was in the virile hands of the Politburo and of the Secretary of the Communist Party.

And today, after seventy years of Soviet power, what is the outcome of this period in the former soviet space? Let us just point to the cultural prejudices and the female and male role stereotypes still perceptible in Armenian society. When you speak of feminism, it is systematically perceived as a threat, as a foreign ideology incompatible with "national values". But Armenian women had already begun their emancipation before the Revolution: according to the figures mentioned by the historian Anahide Ter Minassian, 38 Armenian women graduated from the University of Geneva before World War I, whereas only 43 Swiss women graduated in the same periodⁱ. Moreover, the very first woman ambassador in the world was Diana Agabeg Apar, who represented the first Republic of Armenia in Japan from 1918 to 1920, even before the Soviet politician Alexandra Kollontai.ⁱⁱ In fact, our "national values" may be proud of those accomplishments. But today, there is no woman minister in Armenia. No woman has ever occupied the role of Prime Minister or Vice-Prime Minister since independence. There are only four women deputies in the National Assembly out of a total of 131. As long as one can call an exceptional woman a "Tghamard kin" ("a manly woman"), cultural division of sexes will go on. That's why it is essential to speak of feminism, to struggle against the clichés that surround the values of feminism in order to open up a space for the development of current Armenian social and creative imaginary. It is – this socio-symbolical context that we want to understand– where the imaginary spaces in which the steps forward turn back are giving space to violence, injustice and indifference. That's why we conceived and organized a project bringing together intellectuals, activists and artists in a country where "feminism" is still a bad word.

"One step forwards, two steps back", a project of Utopiana (www.utopiana.am) in cooperation with the Kanayq Hayots association, the Department of Sociology at Yerevan State University, and the café and exhibition space, The Club, was held in Yerevan last September.

Image1.- © Anna Krenz, Berlin

Image2.- © Joëlle Flumet, Geneva

Image2a.- © Tigran Khachatryan, Erevan.

Commentary on those images (1, 2, 2a):

"But what do they (still) want?" was a rhetorical question on posters, shown together with reproductions of the historical posters of the MLF Geneva dating from the seventies. On the one hand, these posters are ways of indicating the complexity of social and cultural processes, on the other, they offer a visual strategy underlining the political impact of representation and emancipation.

Image 3. – Kirsten Dufour, Copenhagen

“Let us speak now”, a collection of videos with a series of interviews, by Danish artist Kirsten Dufour. To date about 40 videos, mainly from the United States, map the voice of activist artist women who participated in the feminist movement in the seventies, and women of the following generations with a feminist approach either in their art work or in their activism. She did many interviews with Armenian women artists too.

Image 4 and 5. - Nancy Agabian, New York

The performance, “Water and Wine”, about the role of women in the Armenian Apostolic Church, is composed of narrative excerpts from Agabian's memoir *Me as her again* and monologues based on her family history, experiences in the church and conversations with members of the Armenian-American community.

Image6. - © Ursula Biemann, Zurich

WRITING DESIRE is a video essay by the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann on the new dream screen of the Internet and how it impacts on the global circulation of women's bodies from the third world to the first world. Although under-age Philippine 'pen pals' and post-Soviet mail-order brides had been part of the transnational exchange of sex in the post-colonial and post-Cold War marketplace of desire before the digital age, the Internet has accelerated these transactions. The video provides the viewers with a thoughtful meditation on the obvious political, economic and gender inequalities of these exchanges by simulating the gaze of the Internet shopper looking for the imagined docile, traditional, pre-feminist, but Web-savvy mate.

Image 7. - Anjalika Sagar, London, member of the OTOLITH GROUP presented the experimental documentary *OTOLITH*, which links three historical moments: the mutant future of the 22nd Century, the ambient fear of the early 21st Century and the post independence era of the mid 20th Century. The voiceover addresses the viewer from a dangerous future that positions the present as historical ruin. This mode of address allows Dr Usha Adebaran Sagar, the fictional narrator, to speculate on the evolution of humankind through an investigation of the archives of her ancestors- the 21st Century researcher Anjalika Sagar and Mrs. Anasuya Gyan Chand, grandmother of Anjalika Sagar and 20th Century feminist.

Image8. – Lectures by (from left to right) Michèle Riot-Sarcey (Paris), Biljana Kasic (Zagreb), with Anna Barseghian (Geneva-Yerevan)

Notes & References

ⁱ A. Ter Minassian, “ Elites arméniennes en Suisse”, in H-L Kieser (ed.), *La question arménienne et la Suisse (1896-1923)*, Zurich, Chronos Verlag, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ The history of the Soviet woman is outlined in F. Navailh, “ Le modèle soviétique”, in M. Perrot, G. Duby (eds) *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, vol. 5, Paris, Plon, 1991.