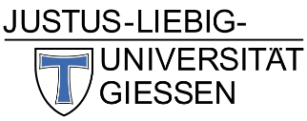
SHAPEDEM-EU

Gender Equality and Democracy Support in Armenia

Gender Equality Fellow Author: Lilit Hakobyan

PUBLICATION #11

Funded by the European Union



SHAPEDEM-EU Publications

Published by Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU). March 2025.

This publication is part of WP7 of the SHAPEDEM-EU project, led by the Justus Liebig University Giessen (JLU).

Authors: Lilit Hakobyan

Edited by: Lea Konrad, Fabian Schöppner (JLU)

To cite:

Hakobyan, Lilit. Gender Equality and Democracy Support in Armenia. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, 2025.

Design: EURICE GmbH

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Gender Equality and Democracy Support in Armenia

Gender Equality Fellow Author: Lilit Hakobyan

List of Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG-NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EED	European Parliament
EPD	European Partnership for Democracy
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-based violence
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEF	Near East Foundation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

About the Author

Lilit Hakobyan has an academic background in Gender Studies and ground-work experience in the non-governmental sector in Armenia. She has worked in various local and international programmes as an educator and programme manager. Lilit has been involved in designing and implementing non-formal education programmes on active citizenship and sustainable development with a focus on promoting democratic values, gender equality, and social justice among youth in rural Armenia. Her research interests include the intersection of gender and nationalism in Armenian public education.

Research Stay

I spent the duration of my SHAPEDEM-EU fellowship and my research stay in Brussels, Belgium hosted by Carnegie Europe Foundation. Throughout my one-month residency, with support and guidance from Carnegie Europe Foundation and the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, I connected with stakeholders and attended various relevant events. My main focus was on understanding the European Union (EU)'s Neighbourhood and Enlargement policies, as well as the collaborations between the EU and EU-funded institutions in Brussels and Armenian civil society organisations (CSOs). Discussions with representatives of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR) were helpful in learning about the EU's priorities and approaches in its Eastern Neighbourhood, with a focus on Armenia. Additionally, meetings with institutions such as the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD),

European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and Kvinna till Kvinna (Woman to Woman) provided valuable insights into the contributions of external stakeholders in democracy support and gender equality programmes in Armenia. In terms of events, highlights from my time included the panel discussion on EU's support for gender equality in its neighbourhoods held at the College of Europe and a lecture on decolonial feminism by Madina Tlostanova organised by Ghent University. Finally, for this report, interactions with Dr. Laura Luciani, postdoctoral researcher at Ghent University, and her work on the EU's human rights promotion in the South Caucasus were unique sources of inspiration.

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this report is to offer an analytical perspective on the EU's democracy support in Armenia, specifically emphasising gender equality policies and practices. The analysis draws from my meetings with institutions and actors in Brussels, two semi-structured interviews with local civil society organisations working in the gender equality sphere, and my personal experiences living and working in Armenia. Additionally, I conducted thorough desk research to bolster my analysis with insights from existing literature on this topic. The report delves into the state of gender equality in Armenia within the broader context of unfolding geopolitical and socio-political realities.

First, I offer a brief overview of the socio-political background wherein the CSOs were formed after Armenia gained independence in 1991. I illustrate how women's organisations were targeted due to their gender equality agendas funded by foreign sources. Second, I examine the influence of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the subsequent developments in CSOs and women's organisations. Here, I discuss the EU's political response to the conflict and its strategies for on-the-ground humanitarian support. Third, I reflect on several local gender equality programmes funded by the EU, focusing on their objectives and implementation plans. In this section, I identify the shortcomings of these programmes in terms of methodologies. I approach these programmes through a critical feminist lens, which advocates for profound systemic changes in gendered economic and political structures, rather than the mere inclusion of women in the existing system as the liberal approach would have it. Finally, in the last section, I provide recommendations on how the EU can enhance its support for gender equality in Armenia.

1.2 Background

The EU's democracy support policies and practices in Armenia need an examination within the larger geopolitical and historical context of the South Caucasus region. There is an extensive

body of literature which provides an analytical view of the emergence of the civil society sector in post-Soviet Armenia. Many scholars examined the role of foreign interventions in civil society development processes, including public backlashes against democracy and gender equality agendas promoted by Euro-American institutions[1].

Ishkanian illustrates how post-Soviet transitions led to women's exclusion from the local politics and labour market in Central Asia and the Caucasus, including Armenia[2]. She explains this with not only the removal of the quota system of representation used in the Soviet Union, but also with the prevalent gendered division of labour in Armenian society[3]. The latter reserved politics, as an inherently corrupt and dirty domain, for men[4]. In addition, the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan (1988 - 1994), greatly contributed to the militarisation of the political landscape as former military leaders took over the political leadership in post-independence Armenia[5]. This further shrunk the political space for women. As a result, they directed their efforts toward the newly emerging civil society sector to contribute to democracy building through non-governmental organisations[6]. Thus, it is worth noting that the nascent civil society sector, which was meant to become a mediator between the general public and the government, was a feminised domain as opposed to the masculinised political space.

In the early 2000s, women-led organisations that centred their programmes around domestic violence encountered public backlash[7], later characterised as anti-gender movements fuelled by far-right nationalist ideologies. These organisations faced accusations of promoting 'foreign values', thereby endangering the traditional family unit, which was perceived as the 'guarantor of national security'[8]. Ishkanian attributes the early backlashes against women's organisations, including domestic violence prevention initiatives, to the dominant presence of Western donors in shaping and funding them. She argues that domestic violence was recognised and identified

[1] Ishkanian, 2003; 2007; Voskanyan, 2015; Jilozyan, 2017; Shahnazaryan, Hovhannisyan, 2019; Khalatyan, Manusyan, Margaryan, 2020; Shirinian, 2020.
[2] Ishkanian, Armine, "Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus", Perspectives on Global Development and Technology, Vol. 2, issue 3-4, pp. 475-495, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leide, 2003.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Panossian, Razmik, "Post-Soviet Armenia. Nationalism and its (Dis)contents", After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcommunist States, Lowell W. Barrington, Ed., 2006, pp. 225-247.
[6] Ishkanian, Armine, "Gendered Transitions: The Impact of the Post-Soviet Transition on Women in Central Asia and the Caucasus", Perspectives on Global Development and Technology, Vol. 2, issue 3-4, pp. 475-495, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leide, 2003.
[7] Ishkanian, Armine, "En-Gendering Civil Society and Democracy Building: The Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign in Armenia", Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society, Vol. 14, pp. 488-525, Oxford University Press, 2007.
[8] Jilozyan, 2017; Shahnazaryan, Hovhannisyan, 2019; Shirinian, 2020.

as a public issue in Armenia only through the guidance of Western organisations and experts. Therefore, the conceptualisation of the problem and the proposed solutions were seen as artificial and exogenous to Armenian society [9].

In this environment, gender equality policies and practices initiated locally and with the financial and professional assistance of foreign institutions, were largely misinterpreted and instrumentalised by ultranationalist groups opposed to equality and democracy agendas. In right-wing nationalist narratives, the understanding of 'gender equality' was reduced to 'propaganda for homosexuality' and described as a Western project to corrupt states in the East. Despite the fact that the government of Serge Sargsyan (2008 - 2018) was making reluctant attempts to address gender equality issues in state legislation and policies, it failed to adopt a comprehensive national law or develop a strategic plan for its implementation[10]. For example, in 2013, under the pressure of anti-gender movements, the government changed the name of the national law on Gender Equality to a 'Law of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women[11]. Since then, there has been a 'non-formal agreement around state officials in Armenia, not to use the 'G' word in public documentation'[12]. Instead of educating the public and raising awareness about the term gender, the government decided to conform to these silencing practices[13]. According to some CSO actors, Sargsyan's government not only failed to address manipulations and anxiety around the term gender properly, but it also instrumentalised them to maintain its political power[14].

The surge of anti-gender movements in Armenia is intricately linked to Russian influence, in contrast to the burgeoning Western presence[15]. Anti-gender (hence, anti-democracy) notions coupled with anti-West ideologies were evolving in the context of a major geopolitical development, with the Armenian government joining the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia, instead of processing an Association Agreement with the European Union[16]. Amidst the East (associated with Russia) versus West dichotomy, Western-funded organisations have faced institutional and mundane forms of violence, scrutiny and suppression from political authorities and informal nationalist groups. Between 2012 and 2020, various cases of verbal and physical

[9] Ibid.
[10] Jilozyan, Ani, Gender Politics in Armenia, Yerevan, 2017.
[11] Hovhannisyan, Siran, Anti-Genderism in the Non-West: Looking from the Other Side, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Jilozyan, Ani, Gender Politics in Armenia, Yerevan, 2017.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Khalatyan, Mariam, Arpi Manusyan, Nvard Margaryan, Anna Zhamakochyan, "Anti-Gender Campaigns, Rhetorics and Objectives in Post-Revolutionary Armenia", Women's Fund Armenia, 2020.
[16] Jilozyan, Ani, Gender Politics in Armenia, Yerevan, 2017.

violence against LGBTI persons, women's organisations and feminist activists were recorded[17]. Anti-gender campaigns were orchestrated to thwart the passage of the national legislation against domestic violence, and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence and Lanzarote Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse [18].

In summary, women faced exclusion from local politics and were pushed to the non-governmental sector during the first decade of independence. The latter, however, did not prove to be a 'safe space' for women's activism either. Soon after their formation, civil society organisations (especially those led by women), as well as feminist activists and LGBTQI persons, were targeted for their gender equality and democracy support agendas financed by Euro-American funds. It is worth noting that women's and feminist organisations in Armenia get most of their financial resources from foreign funds and donors[19]. Moreover, there are hierarchies between the organisations located in Yerevan and those in more peripheral regions. Often the latter gets access to foreign grants through the former. On one hand, women's and feminist organisations face a shortage of local funding, on the other hand, their efforts are discredited by the general public due to the foreign sources of financing.

1.3 EU Gender Equality Support in the Context of Nagorno-Karabakh War

In light of the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) in 2020, continuous escalations on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border over the last three and half years, and the forced displacement of Karabakh-Armenians by the Azerbaijani regime in September 2023[20], gendered nationalist discourses and practices have exacerbated. As Armenia lost control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the Pashinyan government, along with CSOs (including women's rights organisations) and activists (including environmentalists) were accused of liberal, allegedly 'anti-national' and destructive politics and ideologies. Former government officials, now positioning themselves as the opposition, used this momentum to further damage the current leadership's reputation. The two former presidents Kocharyan and Sargsyan, having lost power in Armenia, invested resources in media to 'discredit the new government', the Velvet Revolution[21], and its values, often promoting narratives that portrayed the My Step party (the ruling party since 2018, now

[17] Nikoghosyan, 2015, 2016; Amnesty International, 2013; Khalatyan, Manusyan, Margaryan, 2020.
[18] Barseghyan, Arshaluys, "Social and Cultural Issues", Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the power of false narratives, Freedom House, 2021, pp. 31-36.
[19] Where is the Money for Women's and Feminist Organizations in Armenia, Women's Fund Armenia, Yerevan, 2023.
[20] Nagorno-Karabakh Profile, BBC News, 2024.
[21] The change of the Armenian government through peaceful resistance in 2018, led by the current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, is referred to as the Velvet Revolution.

called Civic Contract) and its ideas as 'foreign' and destructive for the Armenian state"[22]. Anti-gender notions occupy much space in these narratives, devaluing and silencing gender equality agendas as anti-national initiatives. Women's rights organisations, feminist groups and scholars are frequently targeted on social media for their connections to foreign institutions, their publications, or former initiatives.

In addition to these silencing practices, the gender equality initiatives changed their target, due to the urgent need to support those affected by war. After the Second NK War and the ensuing mass displacement of over 100,000 Karabakh-Armenians[23], similar to other CSOs, women's organisations have shifted their priorities to accommodate displaced persons and provide humanitarian support. However, as illustrated by Luciani, local organisations faced challenges negotiating this shift with donor institutions[24]. This was the case for the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, which had to engage in lengthy negotiations with the EU Delegation in Armenia for over a year after the war to reallocate funds[25]. Instead, the European Commission funded humanitarian aid to the affected people through other grassroots organisations that were not experienced in providing gender-sensitive responses. Since the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the European Commission has allocated 32.9 million EUR for emergency support to those affected[26]. However, it has failed to recognise and adequately address the gendered aspects of displacement by applying a 'one size fits all' approach. As Luciani argues, the top-down approach in setting priorities for funding is one of the shortcomings of the EU's democracy support in Eastern Partnership countries[27].

A similar approach is evident in the long-term EU-funded programme addressing gender issues in its Eastern Partnership countries. The programme, titled EU4Gender Equality, was implemented with financial support from the EU, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova from March 2020 to February 2023. Throughout the implementation period of the programme, two armed conflicts escalated in the region: the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Like any other armed conflict, these wars are/were highly

[22] Grigoryan, Lusine, "General Assessment" in Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the power of false narratives, Freedom House, 2021, pp. 7-11.
[23] Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Global Conflict Tracker, 2024.
[24] Luciani, L, Decentering EU Human Rights Promotion, PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2023.
[25] Ibid.
[26] European Commission, 2023: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/armenia-and-azerbaijan_en.
[27] Luciani, L., Decentering EU Human Rights Promotion, PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2023.

gendered[28]. War perpetuates certain gender roles and expectations by increasing the risk of gender injustice in society. Yet the report on key results of the EU4gender programme [29] does not illustrate any adjustments in the programme components, despite the dire shift in social, political and economic realities in Armenia following the NK war and its aftermath[30]. It is safe to argue that the EU and its implementing partners did not re-evaluate the needs on the ground and adapt the programme for the changing gender landscape. While the NK war affected every aspect of life in the country, it remained almost invisible within the EU's support for gender equality.

The impact of the NK war and its geopolitical consequences were also disregarded in the EU's economic relations. In 2022, after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, the EU Commission entered into a long-term energy contract with Azerbaijan as an alternative to Russian gas[31]. This move was in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russian fossil fuel exports. While the EU expresses disapproval of the Russian authoritarian regime for its war against Ukraine, the Azerbaijan regime has gained legitimacy (and financial benefits) through its partnership with the EU Commission, despite its continuous aggression towards the Karabakh population and Armenian sovereign territory[32]. This partnership not only exacerbates the significant power imbalance favouring Azerbaijan, it also provides a platform for the authoritarian Azerbaijani regime to suppress local voices advocating for human rights[33]. By engaging in deals with authoritarian regimes, including those in the Southern Neighbourhood [34], while simultaneously supporting democracy and gender equality agendas, the EU raises concerns about its true intentions and ultimate goals in its neighbourhood. The discrepancy of the EU's global politics and the values it seeks to promote through support for gender equality suggests a depoliticised perspective on gender issues. The latter is treated as a localised issue isolated from global political and economic configurations. This is also evident in examples of EU funded programmes in Armenia discussed below.

---

[28] About the NK war see the following sources: Walsh, Sinéad, "Gender, conflict, and social change in Armenia and Azerbaijan" in The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia, 1st edition, Routledge, 2021, pp. 426-434. Shahnazaryan, Nona; Ulrike Ziemer, "The Politics of Widowhood in Nagorny Karabakh" in Women's Everyday Lives in War and Peace in the South Caucasus, ed. Ulrike Ziemer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 179-201.

[29] Highlights of Key Results, eu4gender, UN Women and UNFPA, 2023.

[30] The objectives of the programme and its key results are discussed in the following section of this report.

[31] Geybullayeva, Arzu, Azerbaijan and EU energy deal prioritizes energy over human rights, globalvoices.org, 2023.

[32] Azerbaijan Launches Large-Scale Attack Against Armenia, EVN Report, 2022.

[33] Luciani, Laura, The EU needs to rethink its human rights promotion in the South Caucasus, theloop.ecpr.eu, 2023.

[34] Pace, M., Ch. Achrainer, "EU Democracy Support in the Southern Neighborhood: How the EU Contradicts its Own Practices", blog.prif.org, 2023.

1.4 The EU's Support for Gender Equality

In this section, I discuss in more detail several EU-funded programmes for gender equality support in Armenia. My primary focus centres on two specific programmes, EU4Women and EU4GenderEquality, implemented from 2017 to 2023. In both cases, I conduct an analysis of their objectives and the key strategies employed for their achievement. I argue that both programmes, having at the core either economic productivity or the improvement of people's behaviours, reinforce the neoliberal concept of individual responsibility rather than acknowledging the imperative for profound systemic change. I illustrate how these programmes often inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal support structures, diverging from feminist practices essential for achieving gender justice. Additionally, I briefly touch upon the ongoing EQUAL programme, spearheaded by the OxyGen Foundation and spanning from 2022 to 2025, with a specific emphasis on labour division between the local implementers and international experts involved in the programme. This discussion aims to uncover the interconnections or disparities among these three programmes.

4.1 The EU4Women Programme

The EU4Women programme was enacted from 2017 to 2019 by the Near East Foundation (NEF) and the Women's Development Resource Center Foundation (WDRCF)[35]. Of the total programme budget of 446,797 EUR, the EU contributed 400,000 EUR[36]. The stated primary aim of the programme was to economically empower women from socially vulnerable backgrounds through social enterprise initiatives. To achieve this, 12 civil society organisations underwent capacity-building training and coaching, enabling them to offer assistance in developing and implementing social business projects for women, especially those facing domestic violence[37]. The programme's underlying notion of women's empowerment, achieved through enhancing their economic productivity, implies that social reproduction predominantly carried out by women is undervalued in society compared to the accumulation of capital. Consequently, women are encouraged to conform to neoliberal ideals by simultaneously contributing to both social reproduction and economic production[38].

Furthermore, rather than challenging gendered labour division practices, the EU4Women programme perpetuates gender stereotypes by endorsing social enterprises traditionally associated with female domains, such as sewing, cooking, or carpet-weaving[39]. Luciani's

[35] Source: eeas.europa.eu
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Fraser, N., Contradictions of Capital and Care, New Left Review 100, 2016.
[39] Luciani, L., Decentering EU Human Rights Promotion, PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2023.

interviews with civil society organisation representatives in Armenia reveal that this approach to women's economic sustainability overlooks structural issues in the market economy, placing the burden of overcoming these issues disproportionately on women from disadvantaged backgrounds[40]. This critique does not intend to undermine the significance of women's economic independence in gender equality programmes. Rather, it questions the approaches employed within EU-funded programmes that often neglect structural issues. In the prevailing political and economic landscape, social reproduction is mostly performed by women[41], hence it is not valued. Women's political participation is at an extremely low level[42]. Moreover, 40% of women do not earn money for their labour [43]. Women, especially those with disadvantaged backgrounds, are at risk of labour exploitation even when they are self-employed. Therefore, I argue that ensuring women's economic independence should primarily stem from state social security policies and practices rather than emphasising women's economic productivity.

4.2 The EU4GenderEquality Programme

The EU4GenderEquality programme was implemented from 2020 to 2023, funded by the EU and implemented by UN Women and UNFPA in the 6 Eastern Partnership countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The overall budget of the programme was €7,875,000 for the six countries. The stated main objectives of the programme were:[44]

1. To shift perceptions around gender stereotypes and the role of women and men in the family, thus challenging patriarchal norms that limit women's rights and opportunities;
2. To improve men's involvement in household and caretaking responsibilities and increase their participation in programmes that promote active fatherhood; and
3. To spur the adoption of best practices in programmes working with perpetrators of violence against women and improve prevention interventions.

According to the annual reports of the programme, the primary actions aimed at achieving the first two objectives were focused on raising awareness about women's rights and emphasising the importance of equal division of care work between men and women[45]. For instance, a 'Fathers' School' was launched in Vanadzor, Lori region, with the purpose of promoting men's

[40] Ibid.
[41] Analysis of the Gender Pay Gap and Gender Inequality in the Labour Market in Armenia, UN Women, Tbilisi, 2020.
[42] Women's Political Participation in the Republic of Armenia. Analysis, OxyGen, 2020.
[43] Luciani, L., Decentering EU Human Rights Promotion, PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2023.
[44] Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence, #eu4genderequality.
[45] Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence, eu4genderequality, Key Results of the 3rd Implementation Year.

engagement in childbirth and child care through training sessions[46]. While this approach strives to enhance men's individual behaviour by improving their parenting skills and advocating for increased involvement in care work, it falls short of addressing the institutional responsibility required for a more systemic and holistic approach to the issue. Although the National Labour Code guarantees up to 3 years of parental leave for both men and women[47], it is predominantly utilised by women in two-parent households. Notably, this type of leave is often colloquially referred to as 'maternity leave,' a term absent from the Labour Code. Beyond the gender stereotypes and expectations ingrained in Armenian society, an economic factor contributes to this trend. Given the 34.7% gender pay gap in Armenia in 2020[48], it is reasonable to argue that the division of labour between male and female parents is often influenced by financial considerations. Therefore, in this context, addressing individual behaviours of men rather than tackling systemic issues perpetuates the neoliberal notion of personal responsibility as opposed to improving the institutional and cultural gender equity policies and practices.

The third objective of the EU4GenderEquality programme aimed to enhance the prevention of violence against women through the adoption of best practices in dealing with perpetrators. According to the third-year key results report of the programme, 'Armenia laid the foundation for the successful development of a pilot programme targeting perpetrators by establishing a partnership with the Probation Service under the Ministry of Justice of Armenia [49].' In spring 2023, the Armenian Parliament passed a programme to monitor the movement of domestic violence perpetrators using electronic bracelets[50]. This programme aims to control the behaviour of perpetrators after a case of domestic violence is reported to the police. However, unreported cases of domestic violence remain unaddressed by this regulation. Moreover, the monitoring system does not fully prevent domestic violence; it only provides some degree of control over the situation after a case of violence has been identified.

In line with the programme component addressing the equal division of care work, a similar emphasis on individual behaviour reform persists in the approach to preventing domestic violence. The efforts aimed at working with perpetrators were discussed more concretely in an interview with a representative from a local CSO collaborating with state institutions to support domestic violence survivors in Armenia. While the interviewee acknowledged the importance of

[46] EU 4 Gender Equality, Together against gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, Key results of the second implementation year.
[47] Labor Code of the Republic of Armenia, Article 173.
[48] Country Gender Profile - Armenia, EU4GenderEquality Reform Helpdesk, 2021.
[49] Together Against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-Based Violence, eu4genderequality, Key Results of the 3rd Implementation Year.
[50] Source: epress.am, 2023.

perpetrator interventions, she noted that they do not cover it in their work, primarily focusing on providing assistance to the survivors of domestic violence. Consequently, the provided approach of working with perpetrators remains limited to monitoring their movements, rather than offering comprehensive psychosocial assistance, for instance. Even in instances where the programme's objective is addressed in collaboration with state institutions, the emphasis on personal responsibility prevails, overshadowing the political aspect and the potential for a more comprehensive solution to the issue.

4.3 The EQUAL Programme

The EQUAL programme is an ongoing EU-funded initiative for gender equality support in Armenia, extending its implementation until the year 2025. OxYGen Armenia leads the programme's execution in collaboration with international and local partners. The total budget allocated for the programme amounts to 1,111,111 EUR, including a 1,000,000 EUR contribution from the EU. The programme emphasises three primary components[51]:

- Freedom from gender-based violence (GBV)
- Economic empowerment and social rights
- Leadership, participation and dialogue

Centred around similar objectives as the preceding two programmes discussed, EQUAL places a greater emphasis on establishing a sustainable collaboration with state institutions. The political landscape, shifting after the government change in 2018, has fostered a conducive environment for civil society organisations to forge partnerships with governmental bodies. OxYGen, the leading implementer, formalised this commitment through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the National Assembly of Armenia, with the shared goal of bolstering gender equality policies and practices in the country. The programme's collaboration with state institutions stands out as a notable strength compared to the other two initiatives, offering broader opportunities to address various issues not only at the individual level but also within the framework of state policies.

As the programme is still in the implementation phase, and evaluation results are pending, I will focus on the partnership dynamics applied in this programme. The programme's components can be categorised into two primary clusters: advocacy for policy development and on-the-ground implementation of programme objectives. While on-the-ground work is performed by the local CSOs, the expertise for the policy advocacy is provided by the Europe-based

[51] Source: oxygen.org.

international partners[52]. The local feminist activists and scholars are not always engaged or consulted in these processes despite their extensive experience in the field. In my conversation with a representative from OxYGen I learned that they do not define the programme as a feminist programme, and are not actively seeking contributions from local feminist groups. However, they would be open to a collaboration with them. The detachment of the institutionalised gender equality agendas from the local (often marginal) feminist movement is one of the gaps in this programme. I explain this gap with the practices of depoliticisation of gender issues by the EU institutions as discussed above.

Several feminist scholars from the Global South have addressed the division of labour between international experts (referred to as 'knowers') and local on-the-ground implementers (referred to as 'learners') in their writings. For instance, Nnaemeka, discussing African countries, introduces two concepts, 'learning about' and 'learning from', to illustrate the relationships between the (organisations from) the Global North and the Global South[53]. By characterising the first as the coloniser and the second, the colonised, she suggests that coloniser always 'learns about' the colonised, whereas the latter is put in the position to 'learn from'[54]. According to Nnaemeka, 'learning about' implies the superiority of the learner, while 'learning from' requires humble listeners[55].

Even though Armenia does not have a history of traditional colonial relationships with the West, Nnaemeka's conceptualisation of organisations from the Global North and Global South provides a useful analytical framework for understanding EU-funded NGO economy in Armenia. Luciani further describes the political position of the Caucasus through the concept of 'double colonial difference' suggested by Tlostanova (2015)[56]. According to Luciani, despite the fact that the countries of Caucasus have not been directly colonised by the Western empires, they experienced colonisation by a "subaltern empire," - Soviet Russia, which was itself epistemically and culturally colonised by the West[57]. The exploration of the division of labour between international experts and local implementers in the context of gender equality programmes in Armenia sheds light on power dynamics and resonates with concerns about colonial legacies in knowledge production.

[52] The international partners of the programme are European Partnership for Democracy NGO, Netherlands Helsinki Committee NGO, Winnet Sweden NGO.
[53] Nnaemeka Obioma, Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way, Signs, Vol. 29, No. 2, Development Cultures: New Environments, New Realities, New Strategies, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 357-385.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Luciani, L., Decentering EU Human Rights Promotion, PhD Dissertation, Ghent University, 2023.
[57] Ibid.

The analysis of EU-funded gender equality programmes in Armenia over the last three years reveals a complex landscape where initiatives such as EU4Women and EU4Gender Equality while addressing critical issues, tend to fall short of challenging systemic inequalities. The emphasis on individual responsibility and behavioural change, rather than advocating for comprehensive systemic reforms, provides a depoliticised view on gender issues and reflects a neoliberal approach. The ongoing EQUAL programme, with its focus on collaboration with state institutions, holds promise for addressing issues at both individual and policy levels. However, the detachment of institutionalised gender equality agendas from the local feminist activism raises concerns about the effectiveness of these programmes in truly fostering transformative change. The analysis underscores the importance of not only recognising the unique socio-political context of Armenia but also fostering genuine collaboration between international and local stakeholders to ensure more inclusive and effective gender equality initiatives in the future.

5. Recommendations

In response to the evolving challenges posed by the second Nagorno-Karabakh war and to the shortcomings in EU-funded programmes identified above, it is imperative for the European Union to reshape its gender equality policies to effectively address the unique complexities of the region. The following policy recommendations are structured to tackle the raised issues in a comprehensive manner.

1. Apply a holistic approach

- Treat gender injustice as a political issue in relation with the local and global geopolitical and economic developments. The EU needs to ensure synergy and consistency between its global politics and the values it promotes through democracy support strategies. It has to establish guidelines for its global politics that require adherence to gender equality principles, ensuring the EU does not compromise its values.
- Recognise the complexity of gender issues as well as specific challenges and opportunities for gender equality in Armenia, which are shaped by its history, culture, and political landscape. This includes considering the Russian influence in the post-independence period, and the gendered implication of armed conflict in the region.

2. Adopt bottom-up approach in identifying and addressing the needs on the ground

- Acknowledge the wealth of experiences of local CSOs and value their contributions in re-evaluating the needs on the ground, and reshaping their agendas based on it.
- Encourage first time applicants through providing supervision and guidance by more experienced CSOs in the field. Prioritise direct funding of the actors located in rural

Armenia instead of having them access funds through Yerevan-based organisations. This will bring more voices to the table.

- Establish a flexible funding mechanism that allows CSOs to review their priorities and quickly respond to crises.

3. Address systemic issues instead of focusing on individual behaviour

- The EU needs to ensure more efficient collaborations with the state institutions in addressing systemic gender issues such as equal division of unpaid care work, gender pay gap, preventing domestic violence, etc.
- Neoliberal approaches to women's economic empowerment need to be reviewed. Instead of promoting women's economic productivity through encouraging women-led social businesses, the EU-funded programmes need to focus on advocating for gender-sensitive social-economic policies and practices which will ensure gender justice in education, social services and the labour market.
- In preventing gender-based domestic violence, develop holistic strategies that address systemic issues rather than concentrating solely on controlling perpetrators' movements. The input of a comprehensive scheme of social services for the domestic violence survivors need to be prioritised. Domestic violence prevention programmes should enhance unreported case interventions by collaborating with the community social workers and leveraging technology for outreach.

4. The division of labour in EU-funded programmes

- The division of labour between the local implementers and international partners needs to be analysed in terms of the hierarchies in programmatic work and knowledge production. EU-funded programmes should promote initiatives that prioritise mutual learning, emphasising the value of local knowledge in designing and implementing effective gender equality programmes.

5. Adopting a feminist approach in gender equality support programmes

- Encourage EU-funded programmes to adopt a feminist framework, fostering collaboration with local feminist collectives. Incorporate feminist perspectives in programme design and implementation, acknowledging the importance of collective societal transformation.