Interweaving Story and Theory: Confronting Anti-Feminism and Anti-Genderism in the NGOized Women's Movement in Armenia

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Abstract

Based on organizational autoethnography, this article provides a personal account of how the women's movement in Armenia has navigated the influx of democratization aid following the 2018 regime change. It examines how the overflow of development aid has transmuted the relationship between women's rights NGOs and the Armenian state, leading to the further bureaucratization, professionalization, and institutionalization of the women's movement. Drawing on the author's personal experiences within the NGOized movement, the article explores the specific ways in which the political economy of gender aid has facilitated anti-feminist and anti-class struggle agendas, showing how close collaboration with the state and donor organizations has shrunk spaces for feminist organizing, impeding critical knowledge production and public mobilization efforts. It also examines the anti-gender dynamics within the local movement, highlighting how the concept of gender has been stripped of its revolutionary essence and operationalized for grants in essentialist and rather conservative terms. The article concludes by advocating for a critical reassessment of the NGO form, arguing for the need to explore alternative forms of feminist organizing that resist and move beyond the limits posed by NGOization.

Keywords: Armenia; Gender Aid; Critical Development Studies; Women's Movements; NGOization

Background

As with the rest of the post-Soviet space, Armenia has been a destination for development interventions carried out by the global North. The collapse of the Soviet Armenian state resulted in rampant privatization, austerity, and free-marketization, which led to a dramatic decrease in standards of living (Platz 2000), economic and political crises, and turbulence for decades. Post-Soviet Armenia was born out of political violence—the First Nagorno Karabakh War that lasted from 1990 to 1994—which was brought back home. Therefore, the disintegration of women's welfare and labor rights and masculinized militarization became integral to the (neo)liberal democratization and economic restructuring of the country.

Successive governments in post-Soviet Armenia came to power through electoral fraud and political corruption (Broers and Ohanyan 2020). For decades, mass protests seemed ineffective against state repression and police brutality. Nevertheless, in the spring of 2018, nationwide anti-regime protests erupted in reaction to then-President Serzh Sargsyan's attempt to become Prime Minister (PM). After changing the governing system from presidential to parliamentary in 2015, Sargsyan essentially attempted to secure a third term in power. Since the public was highly dissatisfied with the regime and the oligarchical class it was associated with, this attempt to transition from president to PM served as an opening in the political opportunity structures (Broers 2020; Ohanyan 2020). Following month-long nationwide protests that successfully toppled the government in May, Armenia was described as an emerging democracy, having left behind "a corrupt and illiberal" government (Jennings 2019). In response, development aid increased to support local nongovernmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) and nonprofits in advancing "democratic values" such as the fight against corruption (Eastern Partnership 2017; Swedish Embassy in Yerevan 2019; USAID 2020).

Nevertheless, drawing on personal experience, oral history interviews, and personal communications within Armenia's civil society sector during and after the mass movement, I learned that global North countries were not enthusiastic about the 2018 mass protests and only supported the movement after its success. Within civil society circles, the explicitly anti-oligarch stance of the movement had reportedly been a major worry for Western embassies in Yerevan, which, during meetings with NGO representatives, expressed fears that a government opposed to the free market would come to power. These fears proved unfounded, much to their relief. After the regime change, the protest leadership who replaced the regime included individuals from civil society and NGO backgrounds. Thus, this regime change was widely popular and supported by NGOs and the broader civil society sphere.

Before 2018, women's rights NGOs were frequently targeted by both the state and anti-gender groups who labeled them as "grant-eaters" (*grantaker*). Their efforts to strengthen laws on domestic violence and violence against children faced anti-gender mobilizations. At the same time, their advocacy for the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict triggered an ethnonationalist backlash. However, the 2018 regime change shifted this dynamic, as the state welcomed the inpouring development aid and, by extension, work with local NGOs, opening doors for closer cooperation. While anti-gender groups persisted, often funded by the previous regime's actors, this close cooperation with the Armenian state transformed the women's movement by further institutionalizing and professionalizing it,

which resulted in heightened competition between NGOs and estrangement from street-level movement actors.

Since NGOs often emerge from contradictory political projects, their analysis requires localized examination of specific cases to avoid deterministic conclusions about their work and the subjects they produce and reproduce. In recent years, scholars such as Saida Hodžic (2014) and Sonia Alvarez (2014) have cautioned against categorically labeling all NGOs as agents of neoliberalism, instead advocating for nuanced analysis of work done by women's rights advocates, particularly in dangerous political contexts. Indeed, NGOs do not always produce (neo)liberal subjects, as evidenced by research done by Lauren Leve (2014) on Nepalese NGOs whose educational campaigns, despite being USAID-funded, resulted in a Maoist insurgency when educational materials drawn from revolutionary and anti-colonial thinkers such as Paulo Freire were utilized.

The Armenian case of NGOized civil society continues to evolve amid constant domestic and international challenges that reshape Armenia's status as a post-socialist, so-called developing country. Understanding the evolution since 2018 requires extensive research that locates the Armenian case within its broader geopolitical context, examining NGOs' institutional characteristics, their ability to mobilize mass support, and the ideology of actors who translate development agendas into the local context(s).

Taking into account the unique post-socialist materiality of Armenia and my work experience within the Armenian NGO sector, this article argues that due to their increasingly bureaucratized, professionalized, and institutionalized structures in the post-2018 era, Armenian women's rights NGOs have become disconnected from grassroots needs and estranged from street-level actors, focusing instead on political agendas shaped by larger geopolitical power structures and shifts. I argue that the promotion of liberal democratization and imposition of global gender agendas has shrunk the spaces for the women's and feminist movements in Armenia, as women's NGOs have become issue and policy-oriented, fiercely competing over grants and gender expert roles. The regime change and subsequent collaboration with the state have led NGOs toward complacent policy-making, curtailing the anti-state politics of past movements.

Continuing, this article argues that the NGOization of women's movements compels movement actors to operationalize gender to secure grants, while their collaboration with the masculinist and neoliberal state strips the concept of gender from its revolutionary essence. Gender, in this context, becomes a symbolic glue for NGOized civil society actors; however, its essentialization prevents it from serving as a uniting or revolutionary force. The

gender economics infused in development grants promotes neoliberal solutions to economic disparities, while state advocacy leads to censorship among NGO feminists with respect to the donors, the state, and the public.

Throughout this article, I refer to a "women's movement" in Armenia instead of a "feminist" movement. This distinction is deliberate, as most women's rights NGOs in Armenia do not identify with the term feminist. Their reasons range from ideological to practical: they view feminism as too radical an ideology, and/or they fear losing access to both state and donor resources if perceived as too "extreme." While feminism has different forms and manifestations, classifying all these groups under the label of "feminist movement" would be inaccurate. This logic aligns with the theorization that feminist movements are always part of women's movements, but not all women's movements are feminist (see Tong 2019 for more). Nonetheless, these women's NGOs remain vital stakeholders in the women's movement in Armenia. Therefore, I use "feminist NGOs" to highlight the ideological inclinations of the discussed subjects and "women's NGOs" as an umbrella term for organizations engaged in women's rights advocacy, including feminist NGOs.

I do not name the organizations where I have worked or the movement actors I analyze. This choice is made, first, to mitigate the potential harm to the organizations and their stakeholders, such as their staff members, volunteers, beneficiaries, and others. I also avoid mentioning critical personal communications within the sector, as the speakers could be identified and potentially reprimanded. Secondly, I aim to critically analyze the NGO institutional form and the analysis of gender it produces, rather than single out individuals who work in these organizations. The only time I directly cite movement actors is when statements were made in group discussions, the participants of which could attest to my recollection of these events.

Methodology

This article is based on organizational autoethnography: my work at local feminist NGOs from January 2018 to December 2023. I have worked at three different women's rights organizations, where my work has encompassed projects on feminist oral history, rights advocacy, reproductive justice, and sexual violence. More importantly, my work has focused on monitoring and documenting anti-gender mobilizations in Armenia. I have done media monitoring and conducted personal and group oral history interviews on anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilizations. Additionally, I have edited a storybook based on oral history

interviews with women human rights defenders, curated an exhibition for the International Day for Women Human Rights Defenders, and developed a feminist map of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, chronicling the relationship between women's NGOs and public spaces over the past two decades.

Organizational autoethnography has its roots in decolonial scholarship (see Herrmann 2020 for more). This is relevant in the case of NGOs in the global South because of the power dynamics at play in democracy promotion. As Andrew Herrmann (2020, 27) puts it, "organizational autoethnographers use personal experiences to comment on, critique, and imagine more liberating and empowering organizational beliefs and practices." I rely on my memory; research notes from May 2023 to February 2024; my two work notebooks from 2022 to 2023; a 2023 personal essay; and a group oral history interview from March 2024 to give "thick" descriptions of the organizations where I have worked.

I rely on feminist theory to elicit memories and put my lived experiences into context. Having read Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal's *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (2014) edited volume at the beginning of 2023, I have adopted a systematic approach to analyzing and critically reflecting on my experiences in the NGO sector in Armenia. From May 2023, I have notes in my research notebook comparing and contrasting my experiences to those described in *Theorizing NGOs*. Subsequently, between October and December 2023, I produced a 30-page unpublished manuscript on my experiences at women's NGOs in Armenia, and certain parts of this article were written as a part of that personal non-fiction essay.

I wish to clarify my *positionality* in writing this article: I make my arguments as a political theory researcher but also as a feminist, worker, and activist who is a direct participant in the feminist and women's movements in Armenia. By doing so, I am granting insider access to a sector that outsiders could not otherwise have access to because of the hegemonic structures and insular relationships that dominate it. Self-reflexivity and criticisms by other feminist activists inform my analysis about being a so-called gender expert in the NGOized women's movement in Armenia. As Elizabeth Ettorre (2016) begins her book, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method*, "Autoethnography is an ideal method to study the 'feminist I'. Through personal stories, the author reflects on how feminists negotiate agency and the effect this has on one's political sensibilities."

I aim for this article to be not an indictment of the NGOized women's movement in Armenia but a testimony and starting point for further discussions and debates on issues that have been less problematized due to the aggravated preoccupation with liberal

democracy promotion. Despite conducting nine personal and three group oral history interviews since 2020, I have chosen not to cite my previous fieldwork for this article. I only cite one instance from my most recent group interview, as my specific analysis is informed by a participant's observation, which was so graciously shared with me.

With this, I acknowledge that autoethnography has limitations and is often criticized for being less rigorous than other qualitative methods (Herrmann 2020). I understand that by concentrating on my own memories and experiences, I am depriving the subjects that I have discussed of the opportunity to correct the accounts I have produced here. However, considering this article critically accounts for institutional power and unequal personal dynamics in the workplace, I must let my story and critical reflections stand alone *for the time being*. In writing this article, I aimed to enable myself to articulate my truth on my own terms. I do not claim to be an authority on the Armenian women's movement, and I acknowledge that my experiences exist in the "web of human relationships," (Chapola and Datta 2023), and thus they are those of many. However, I believe that:

> Speaking one's truth or truths, through an autoethnographic lens, allows us to address the tensions between truths, whether personal or epistemological, in a political and hopeful act. It is political because it opens others' eyes to new realities of oppression and traumas; it is hopeful because it offers a chance for change (Giorgio 2009, 165–66).

I also understand that this article is, at times, theory-heavy. Reading and making sense of these theoretical debates has been essential to overcoming the alienation and burnout I experienced due to my work. This article is theory-heavy because it is an attempt at sensemaking, which has been crucial in healing my epistemological wounds. As bell hooks has so poignantly put it,

> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (hooks 1994, 59).

The Anti-Feminism of the Gender Aid Regime

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet space was theorized to have weak civil societies, accompanied by a fervent promotion of liberal democratization (Ishkanian 2008; Stefes and Paturyan 2021; Timmer and Wirtz 2022). During a period of economic deprivation and precarity, the development agenda emerged to take on the responsibilities of the retreating state. In the early 1990s, new liberal elites did not capitalize on the gender equality legacy left by the Soviet Union (Pollert 2003). As women's political

participation declined, through the human rights-based development approach, women's rights issues were identified as critical social issues to invest in (Hemment 2007; Ishkanian 2008). The American government was the largest donor of the NGO sector in Armenia through USAID (Ishkanian 2008). Foreign donors engaged in civil society building, which Armine Ishkanian (2008) labels as "genetically engineered civil society" that subsequently enjoyed low trust with the Armenian public (Paturyan 2020).

Feminist scholars and activists alike have long been critical of development approaches and how aid transforms women's movements, especially in the global South. As the NGO form requires professionalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization (Lang 2022), critics argue that with the rise of neoliberalism, development aid in the form of NGOization has "[…] reformulated feminist goals, replacing sociopolitical transformation with complacent policy making" (Hodžic 2014, 225). State and donor-imposed agendas limit political imaginations as "neoliberalism becomes the condition of possibility for most NGO work" while requiring "production of knowledge through development frameworks and neoliberal assumptions" (Bernal and Grewal 2014b, 115–16). For instance, Julie Hemment's (2014; 2007) ethnographic work on women's NGOs right after the collapse of the Soviet Union shows the social and economic dislocation experienced by Russian women due to shock therapy policies and their struggles with the new development aid regime that depoliticized economic issues.

Sonia Alvarez (1999), a pioneer in this field who coined the term "NGOization," critically analyzed the NGO sector in Latin America in the 1990s, arguing that the NGO boom had resulted in the state seeing feminists as "gender experts" on whom it could offload women's programs for implementation. Thus, Alvarez (1999) argued that NGOization had forced feminists into formal roles limited to tending to culturally and politically appropriate social issues. As Robyn Wiegman puts it, "critiquing the state as the end logic of political reform" (as quoted in Hodžic 2014, 226) is promoted as the only way to enact political change. Similarly, Choudry (2010, 20) argues that "critics reluctant to name capitalism as the problem typically advocate building a citizen's lobby to urge reforms within a capitalist framework."

After 2018, women's NGOs also took advantage of the democratization aid coming to Armenia. These NGOs had previously mobilized for campaigns against violence against women and girls and made efforts to translate transnational campaigns into the Armenian context. After the 2018 regime change, the gradual split between women's NGOs and street-level actors has significantly weakened the women's movement in Armenia despite the

increase in funding and resources. I recall frequently hearing from colleagues that "The feminist movement in Armenia is divided" or "There is no feminist movement in Armenia." The reasons they cited ranged from personal grievances to political differences that took over the movement over time.

My colleagues were often nostalgic about the "sisterhood" that existed during past protests and grassroots organizing events, where street-level actors and NGO staff could cooperate in what Glasius and Ishkanian (2015, 2633) call "surreptitious symbiosis"—"in the context of growing government repression, it [was] only the human rights NGOs that [were] providing support to activists." They often looked at the past with nostalgia for the solidarity and the diversity of protest actions they had organized with various groups of women, taking up public spaces and disturbing the patriarchal order of the public sphere, culminating in the mass movement in 2018, when women's participation reached unprecedented numbers.

However, these were examples of romanticizing a past that was more complex than it was being remembered. Before 2018, less professionalized NGOs allowed multiple crossings of people, practices, and ideas. After 2018, with the deepening cooperation between foreign donor organizations and the Armenian state, local NGOs were forced to cooperate with the state, and these spatial and temporal diversities became rare. Fragmentation in the women's movement and divisions between street-level feminists, NGO staff members, and different NGOs had always been present in the women's movement, as discussed by Tamar Shirinian (2022), who cites independent movement actors as being extremely dismissive of women's NGO work. These divisions only deepened after 2018 as a result of the further professionalization of the movement, which disempowered non-professional activists while increasingly privileging the voices of professional advocates.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say women's NGOs were "forced" to cooperate with the Armenian state as it implies there was structural pressure against unwilling agents when, in fact, most women's NGO staff members were satisfied with the regime change because they would be able to do "real advocacy work" on the state level—a phenomenon I have observed not only through my work and research but also during conferences and workshops. This trend was especially highlighted by the increased number of capacity-building workshops organized by women's NGOs in the past seven years. Most actors in the NGO sector, the majority of whom are women, do not see a problem with the professionalization of the women's movement and instead welcome the opportunity to emulate Western-style advocacy. The resources of women's NGOs are no longer used for marches and street actions but for conferences and networking events with the state.

As the NGOs became further professionalized, radical and critical voices became marginalized again—this time within the women's movement itself. As more professionalized staff took over, expert knowledge replaced life experience. This professionalized form of women's rights advocacy, referred to by some as "femocracy" (Hodžic 2014), paves the way for stripping gender of its radical contents to cooperate with the conservative Armenian state and creates a middle class of affluent women whose role is providing expert, rather than experience-based, knowledge about Armenian women as a stable category (more on this in the following section).

The further professionalization of women's initiatives and their cooperation with the state has led to bitter debates among Armenian feminists regarding what constitutes political change in Armenia. Independent and street-level movement actors often criticized feminists working in NGOs for taking a less antagonistic stance against the masculinist state and cozying up to donors by supporting their "neocolonial and neoliberal agendas"—a criticism also directed at my work. The political struggle between street-level feminist activists and NGOs constantly contests what it means to be a feminist in Armenia, with feminist identity being subject to constant reappropriation through continuously contested languages and worldviews.

These contentious debates also happen within feminist NGOs. Where I worked, there was an unspoken acknowledgment that a major part of our jobs included bureaucratic paperwork. We even read critical feminist works, from bell hooks to Sara Ahmed, and engaged in debates around topics pertaining to our work (debates from which street-level actors were always absent). However, as the organizations became more professionalized due to increased funding, we had less time for these debates and discussions. As the office space grew, the distance between employees and management also widened. With each new floor, the hierarchies grew and were enforced rigorously. The spatial choreography of the staff members was tightly supervised, even by security cameras, and spatial disciplining was performed to ensure efficiency.

I recall the first staff meeting at the new, much bigger office in January 2022. Employees were introduced to the new administrative and organizational structure. We were informed that the new donor required full-time staff not to work at other organizations. The rationale was that juggling multiple jobs could lead to burnout, making it harder for everyone to focus on their roles. However, this did not account for other forms of grassroots organizing staff members might have been engaged in. When I inquired about joining an ongoing protest against the Amulsar mountain being turned into a goldmine with streel-level

feminist activists who were part of the leadership of the protests, the room fell silent, and the topic was never addressed again. This memory was evoked as I read Tamar Shirinian's ethnography of Armenian feminists protesting at the Amulsar mountain, in which she references the participants labeling NGO feminism as "a brand of liberal feminism that omits class critique." (Shirinian 2023, 736).

Being conscious of critical discourses about NGOs and the NGOization of social movements can result in guilt and self-blame among NGO feminists. I remember committed colleagues frequently experiencing burnout as their strong ideological and political dedication drove them to overcorrect and overextend themselves. Alexandra Ana (2023, 53) writes similarly about the Romanian experience: "High commitment to the cause, the sense of responsibility but also the guilt for earning money out of a social cause, favour self-precarization and overwork that lay the ground for burnout." Something that was frequently said to me by the NGO management was that I "needed to do the neoliberal and bureaucratic work first to bring in funding for my passion projects next." However, this approach resulted in exhaustion and burnout as I would spend my weekends working on passion projects because I did not have time for them during the weekdays.

The employment situation of feminists working in NGOs hinders their ability to produce knowledge that is critical of their working conditions. Moreover, the idea of feminist sisterhood obfuscates the class and hierarchical dimensions of these formal institutions. In these workplaces, knowledge of and commitment to feminist agendas are secondary to technical and bureaucratic skills, such as legal analysis, grant proposal and report writing, networking abilities, and advanced English proficiency. The official hierarchies in these workplaces make them highly unequal and result in decision-making processes that are not participatory. After my colleagues and I voiced concerns about organizational direction, our superiors repeatedly responded: "If you do not like it, leave. Nobody is irreplaceable." This dismissive response undermined my financial security and sense of belonging, and the possibility of redundancy fostered a sense of disposability contradictory to feminist principles of organizing.

In 2024, months after leaving my position as project manager of a research group, I conducted a group oral history interview with four of the researchers I had supervised. This interview ultimately turned into an autopsy of the project I designed and managed for two years. In an environment where I no longer held institutional power over them, one of the researchers made a striking observation that took me years as an NGO feminist to understand: "These NGOs mistake form for content." These words reminded me of all the

events we had organized simply because they were allocated in the budget, without much consideration for content or presentation methods. Creative cultural interventions – performance, visual arts, street action to name a few – were constantly in tension with our work. The ultimate goal was to get the event registration forms filled; the ultimate presentation was for the donors. Moreover, any attempt by individual staff members to produce interventions using the NGO's resources, as I learned the hard way, risked being turned into a mass-produced shell of its intended political form, taken out of historical context and without any references to its initiators. "Form, not content." These words made me think of the disappointed feminists in the audience of these events. However, discussing this issue was strenuous as it risked implying that the employees responsible for these events were either not competent or not committed feminists. Eventually, with more professionalization, these discussions ceased altogether as even long-time staff members became disillusioned with their ability to influence organizational decision-making.

Fractured relationships persist throughout the NGOized women's movement in Armenia. The women's movement is divided not only across the fault lines of street-level actors and NGO staffers (which are not always clear-cut) but also across organizational boundaries. The increased professionalization and specialization of the movement have come with the cost of mutual alienation. As organizations' agendas are often demarcated by foreign donors, NGOization comes with a sense of entitlement to the NGO's specialization. If one women's NGO works on violence against women and girls, it views others working on the same issue not as partners but as competitors—both for grants and expert authority in the field. This issue-oriented and narrow-focused approach discussed in *Theorizing NGOs* (2014) creates animosity within the sector and stifles cooperation and coordination within the women's movement. Since 2018, women's NGOs have become even more disconnected and specialized, and their interactions only occasionally occur at the highest levels. The ideological glue that keeps them together is donor agendas that require cooperation on a certain level as a predicament of a "vibrant civil society," for which NGOs are convenient surrogates. Consequently, women's NGOs do not have robust networks to counter anti-gender groups that target them indiscriminately.

In recent decades, feminist scholars have observed how right-wing governments position themselves as fighters of neoliberalism by being anti-gender (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Graff 2021; Rawłuszko 2021). The rise of the gender aid regime that promotes neoliberal governmentality gives footing to anti-gender groups to position themselves through pro-natalist policies as the saviors of family values and fighters against individualism.

As Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk argue, the success of anti-gender rhetoric is "at least partly due to the rise of neoliberal feminism, which abandoned the realm of care and economic justice, thus leaving these issues vulnerable to right-wing exploitation" (2022, 28). The pro-natalist welfare chauvinist policies of the ruling elites in the global South are only anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal in name. On Armenian right wing mobilizations, Shirinian (2021, 961) writes, "Within this framework, right-wing nationalists advocate for an anti-imperialism against Western-domination, but frame this domination culturally even if with intonations of effects on political and economic sovereignty and inequality." In this context, Graff argues, "anti-genderism should be interpreted as a response to a vacuum created by a receding welfare state and lack of alternatives on the left" (2021, 272).

In Armenia, NGO politics and public relations have replaced grassroots organizing and public mobilization. Most NGOs lack a dedicated base that would mobilize in case they are attacked by anti-gender groups and/or by the state. They have beneficiaries but have failed to build constituencies. Innovative cultural interventions are incompatible with the NGO form. Their online presence continues to be for donor reports rather than awareness raising and movement building, while their in-person work is constrained by their professionalized commitments.

Operationalization of Gender: Genderist Not a Feminist

Neoliberal ruling elites are not the only ones depoliticizing economic issues and engaging in anti-politics, NGOs, by virtue of their developmentalist design, also operate in such ways. The lack of public mobilization work done by women's NGOs depoliticizes class and feminist issues and turns them into individualized social and cultural issues under the guise of gender mainstreaming and empowerment, catalyzing an appropriate face of domesticated feminism. As the worldwide NGO sector is highly gendered and feminized, it has led some scholars to argue that, in the private vs. public sphere dichotomy—where the state is masculinist while the NGO is feminized—the NGO functions as the private sphere (Bernal and Grewal 2014a).

In my opinion, the NGO not only replaces the retreating welfare state in the post-socialist context—the women's NGOs also replace the private sphere, operating according to the logic of neoclassical economics, where the *homo economicus* reigns supreme. Programs promoting women's entrepreneurship (especially among displaced populations), financial responsibility, and employability are proclaimed as ways to overcome economic precarity, while "healing the self" through therapy, yoga, and other self-care treatments are positioned

to be the same as changing the system. Furthermore, the supposed safety of this private sphere is weaponized to halt critical feminist discussions, framing them as full of conflict and, therefore, unsafe.

In the political economy of gender aid, local actors—both state and non-state—operationalize gender in alignment with gender economics. As opposed to feminist economics, which criticizes neoclassical economics, gender economics actively promotes it (see Becchio 2019 for more). Done through managerialism, the operationalization of socioeconomic issues breaks them into measurable segments for measurable solutions (Lewis, Kanji, and Themudo 2020). The NGOization of women's and queer movements creates a class of gender managers who work in an elitist, exclusionary, and technocratic manner with the state (Rawłuszko 2021; Bernal and Grewal 2014b). These gender experts, or "genderists" as characterized by some feminist scholars, theorize women as stable subjects with shared experiences of the patriarchy (Bernal and Grewal 2014b; Wilson 2015). As a result of state advocacy, the gendering of governmentality is often concocted through heteronormative, binary, and cis-centric definitions while sidelining, if not completely erasing, and depoliticizing class issues.

This gendering of governmentality fosters classist dynamics and social stratification in NGO work. In 2020, during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, thousands of displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians arrived in Armenia, prompting women's NGOs to shift their focus to humanitarian aid (a shift mandated by donors, to be clear). In December, my colleagues and I visited a shelter where multiple families, each occupying a single room in a former Soviet boarding school, lived under challenging conditions, sharing common bathrooms. During a needs assessment with a woman in her mid-50s, whose husband and two daughters were present, her husband approached us with a kind request: "Could you help me find a winter coat? The one I have is too old." Requests like his were common in the shelters, where everyone—women, men, and children—turned to aid workers for help. I responded, "I will see what I can do," but my colleague quickly turned to him and said, "We *only* work with women." This moment filled me with guilt and made me reflect on the power dynamics between aid workers and displaced populations. Later, I shared my unease with my colleagues about focusing exclusively on women and girls in the context of widespread dispossession and economic precarity and how that would be against the do-no-harm principle. One colleague, though sympathetic, explained that donor budget lines dictated our aid distribution.

One of the biggest foreign aid donors in the world is the EU, whose gender equality and mainstreaming policies have long been analyzed by scholars interested in the biopolitics of the organization. Jemima Repo (2015, 134) writes on this, "Gender equality was deployed in EU policy as a new modality for the reoptimization of population and productivity, especially in the context of the reconciliation of work and family life, which is at the core of EU gender equality policy." Unsurprisingly, EU policies have been translated into the local contexts in terms of increasing women's productive labor, while state policies on reproductive labor have undergone little to no change. Repo (2015, 134) continues by writing about how the EU constructs the "female" subject through its policies:

> The accompanying attempt to induce female subjects to 'make choices' that allow them to 'free' themselves from the antiquated baggage of gender roles to both reproduce the species and create capital only makes sense in the context of neoliberal governmentality.

As a donor organization, the EU imposes its technocratic policies on the local grantee organizations. International agreements on trade and social cooperation policies also impose these agendas on the Armenian government. Under these conditions, NGO work is not about addressing grassroots concerns but identifying policy gaps which can be deemed appropriate for the state and the EU to work on. As a result, grassroots organizing around gender issues becomes secondary or even irrelevant to technical policy-making work.

The feminist NGOs I worked for did not apply for EU grants on the premise that the EU forces too many pointless bureaucratic measures on the grantees, which do not leave room for agency. However, as long as we were required to work on state advocacy by other donors, regardless of being EU grantees, these interstate agreements were the context in which our work transpired. For instance, if the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) required legislative approximation, then as women's rights advocates, we identified the directives that could become directions for policy advocacy. This meant that geopolitical power structures mandated the scope of our agendas. The options and channels through which NGOs advocate for change are limited by the structures supposedly supporting reform and change.

In 2017, the EU was one of the international actors pushing for the passage of the law on domestic violence. This is also when I, as a junior college student, first became familiar with anti-NGO discourses through the campaign anti-gender groups were waging against the law. They were accusing women's rights advocates of promoting "Western norms and values," often through misogynist and homophobic language and imagery. That year, a public hearing on the matter —which was attended by the Justice Minister, the Human Rights

Defender, clergymen, and various human rights NGOs—was disrupted by right-wing groups who accused the government of giving in to the demands made by the EU. The then-Justice Minister stood his ground, claiming that he would not want his "grandchildren and children to experience violence in *any* family," which is why the law should be passed (Lazarian 2017). Ironically, after the government was overthrown in anti-regime protests the following year, the then-Justice Minister's party shifted its rhetoric, accusing the new government of the same dealings they themselves had been accused of in 2017. Geopolitical calculations were evident in 2017 as Armenia was balancing between the EU and Russia with its "complementary foreign policy"—sometimes making concessions to Russia, other times to the EU (Broers and Ohanyan 2020). In this case, passing the domestic violence law with a less "controversial name"—violence in the family—was a concession to the EU.

Writing about the Polish experience with anti-gender groups, Marta Rawłuszko (2021, 3) argues that "if gender equality measures are promoted because of international commitments and are left mainly in the hands of bureaucrats, they unintentionally provide the impetus for antigender mobilization." The absence of grassroots organizing around gender-related issues, such as reproductive rights, sexuality education, and other issues stemming from gender and sexuality, concedes ground to right-wing conspiracy-making about the cloistered advocacy done by NGOs. On these technocratic and closed-loop processes, Sangeeta Kamat writes, "NGOs are being re-inscribed in the current policy discourse in ways that strengthen liberalism and undermine democracy" (as quoted in Choudry 2010, 20).

Rawłuszko's (2021) argument about out-of-touch policymaking is pertinent as anti-gender mobilizations also affect how lawmakers approach gender-related issues in Armenia. The ruling party and its lawmakers have consistently embraced political stances perceived as less controversial over the past seven years to avoid public backlash. As a case in point, after anti-gender groups mobilized against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2019, the government dropped its initiative to ratify it. Additionally, it has selectively adopted the less controversial articles of the convention into law, discouraging NGOs from conducting their own public advocacy in an effort to avoid the public backlash often associated with NGO involvement. Hence, the degendering happens on multiple levels at the hands of foreign and local bureaucrats who negotiate the terms of agreements with each other.

NGOs use these commitments Armenia makes through bilateral agreements as leverage in their advocacy work. I have seen how local NGOs pressure the Armenian government by referring to foreign donors if the government refuses to cooperate on a

specific advocacy issue. This appeal to foreign donors is based on the premise that the implementation would benefit the donor state or organization. In this framework, women's rights advocates are reduced to watchdogs for the successful implementation of interstate agreements. However, a donor's willingness to take action on NGO concerns depends entirely on its diplomatic relationship with Armenia—and currently, donors view Armenia as a reliable partner. On the other hand, the Armenian state has exploited a loophole in its unequal relationship with the EU: while it complies with legislative approximation, there is no state funding for enforcing most of these laws related to women's rights. Such was the case of the 2023 law on workplace sexual harassment, which lacked the institutional capacity for state-wide implementation.

In the previous section, I discussed how NGOization results in competition and division among women's NGOs in Armenia. Each women's NGO works with a specific type of woman it constructs through its specialization - domestic violence, sexual violence, rights advocacy, poverty relief, disability rights, lesbian and trans rights, sex worker rights, and more. In this case, each one is specialized in the woman it represents and presents itself as an authority on the group. Resulting from this is a bastardized version of identity politics: representation politics—a form of identity reductionism that leads each NGO to map its sphere of responsibilities through often essentialized terms and conditions.

This schism between women's NGOs brings us to the question of alliances between women's and queer movements. These specializations give an excuse to non-queer rights women's NGOs not to take queer issues seriously under the pretense of not overstepping their sphere of responsibilities. It is a strategic fault to assume Armenian women's NGOs are open to queer issues and see it as a part of their struggle, in fact, homophobia and transphobia are a covert part of the everyday workings of most women's NGOs, even the feminist ones. Unfortunately, this is not limited to Armenia, as elsewhere, some advocates have even suggested stopping the use of the term gender altogether and using women instead (Paternotte 2020).

Tamar Shirinian's (2020; 2021; 2022) ethnography of the Armenian women's movement from 2012 to 2013 captures the frustration of non-NGO movement actors who critiqued NGO efforts on domestic violence for focusing on reforming—rather than challenging—heterosexuality and the traditional family model (Shirinian 2022). Shirinian (2022) analyzes the heterosexual desire that is dominant in women's NGO work in Armenia, arguing that lesbian women are often marginalized in women's and queer rights organizations. While her ethnography covers the early 2010s and despite certain

improvements in this area over the past decade—mostly resulting from donor agendas requiring representative (intersectional) cooperation—lesbian and queer women, especially those who are non-professional, are still marginalized in women's NGO spaces.

In Armenia, it is primarily donor organizations that fund knowledge production on anti-gender mobilizations. This hinders the researcher's ability to produce knowledge critical of the donors and their politics, while, as Choudry (2010, 23) has put it, "texts are sites of real struggles." This is especially problematic when these donors are often the only ones supporting scarcely funded programs such as those related to reproductive justice. Research conducted by femocrats on anti-gender movements is often done to vindicate the donors against right-wing conspiratorial rhetoric without any critical reflections on the donor's political and ideological stances. To borrow David Paternotte's (2020) observation, this "narrow focus on the scope of destruction" hinders the ability of progressive groups to view the whole battlefield.

Patternotte (2020) observes that if activists believe that anti-gender backlash follows progressive campaigns, they will engage in self-censorship to avoid confrontation that will hinder their work. This has already been a recurring reality in Armenia for the past 15 years, since at least 2009, when the first mass anti-gender attacks happened. Since 2018, with the worst anti-gender attacks taking place in 2019, women's rights advocacy has become less about awareness raising and more about state-level advocacy. In my experience, for many, the issue of anti-gender counteraction is a convenient excuse not to engage in public mobilization campaigns and form constituencies because it would not be a respectable function for a professional advocate. Admittedly, most also lack these skills because public relations not mobilization is prioritized during capacity-building workshops. However, forming a critical mass around feminist issues should be paramount in volatile times such as the one Armenia is currently experiencing, where the threat of war and the rise of an extreme right-wing government persists.

The biggest reason women's NGOs self-censor is, of course, the state, namely, national security. Both for not sabotaging their relationship with the state but also as a result of buying into state-sanctioned security narratives. National security and militarization are male-centric and masculinized concepts. The relationship between the state and NGOs is why the issue of women's empowerment in the global South is often discussed in the context of nationalist interests: women performing more productive labor, thus enhancing the country's economic capabilities. This makes it inevitable for women's NGOs to have a reckoning about, as the editors of *Theorizing NGOs* put it, the nationalist factors that make

their existence possible but may also hinder their advancement (Bernal and Grewal 2014a). In Armenia, regressive nationalism was resurgent after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the political restructuring, such as rampant privatization and austerity measures enacted by right-wing governments, made room for the development agenda and the NGO sector. Ironically, these same nationalist ruling elites tightly constrained women's NGO work for so many years, aiding and abetting anti-gender and anti-feminist groups.

The logic behind national security concerns becomes more evident with programs and projects specifically focused on peacebuilding. One is the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, credited for mainstreaming the "Women, Peace and Security" agenda and often criticized for essentializing women's role in peacebuilding initiatives (see Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011 for more). The Armenian state's attempts at localizing the agenda have mostly been to empower the military, such as by increasing the number of women in military service. In 2023, the government proposed a law on women's voluntary conscription into the armed forces. During preliminary meetings, women's NGOs were divided on whether this was a progressive or exploitative move, particularly since many had worked with the government as gender experts to make this reform a reality.

One of the organizations I worked at did not view the widespread integration of women in the armed forces as a progressive reform. The committee discussion at the National Assembly showed that the government did not consider it as such either as it was simply trying to recover from the major losses suffered in 2020. I was part of a team that produced criticism of the proposed law, and it mostly addressed the technical issues that other government bodies had already voiced. We also mentioned the reproductive-productive labor dichotomy, highlighting that this would only increase women's workload in the formal economy without proper compensation for reproductive labor. This knowledge was produced for the state, which meant we had to be "rational, not overly emotional" and legal in our phrasing of the issue. Hence, the reliance on the arguments already presented by different government bodies. The criticism did not include queer issues or critical feminist reflections on the state security apparatus, even though, during discussions when the document was drafted, queer rights NGOs had voiced their concerns. This tame critique did not stop the state from ultimately ignoring us, as even the modest criticisms of women's role in the Armenian patriarchal society were subordinated to "national security interests," and the law was passed. The respectable language of public relations did not result in an outcome the way perhaps street action and public mobilization would (see Baldrian 2024 for more).

This ideology of pragmatism is often dominant in NGO work, resulting in inclusion without influence (Choudry 2010). Women's NGOs in Armenia neither significantly influence the government nor their foreign donors despite their continuous concessions to both. The resulting degendering of gender is only logical in the neoliberal governmentality game that NGOs play. An overreliance on an NGO-friendly government will eventually backfire when there is no popular support for social justice issues in the long term. Who is to say that the next government will not reverse the laws NGOs managed to pass by cooperating with the current government? And if this happens, will there be a critical mass around feminist and gender-related issues to resist reactionary and conservative attacks?

Conclusion

The anti-feminism the neoliberal aid regime promotes is a threat to feminists, feminist movement building and knowledge production. It fails to offer a viable alternative to right-wing supposedly anti-neoliberal policies. Disenfranchised masses find solace in the right-wing rhetoric because of its populist nature that entices them into blaming different minorities and oppressed groups for the fallout from capitalist and exploitative material conditions. As NGOization is a historical process, for feminists in Armenia, it is crucial to learn from the experiences and developments of contexts with more advanced and complex manifestations to avoid making similar mistakes.

In a recent article, Sabine Lang (2023, 40) states that "resisting NGOization as well as producing alternative mobilization strategies has become a central modality of gender activism today." Globally, there are increasing numbers of funding opportunities for feminist organizers and groups committed to feminist movement building. This helps local groups worldwide move away from funding that promotes neoliberal governmentality. However, it is also vital to move beyond these foreign-funded organizing structures and start financing social movements locally through fundraising efforts and mutual aid. It is paramount to be critical of development projects and the imposition of their ideas and practices that promote hegemonic common-sense solutions.

This article is, first and foremost, driven by my desire to produce feminist knowledge about Armenia. I wrote this article to grieve and let go of the idealist and *naïve* feminist in me, even if to the detriment of my career in the NGO sector. I have witnessed firsthand how former employees can be blacklisted from the human rights sector—locally and globally—over their critical views. I am well aware of how anti-feminist and misogynistic these difficult discussions can become and the type of vitriol that critical feminists can face from various

human rights NGOs. I have seen the vile competition that local NGO feminists engage in before foreign donors, which once again establishes the latter's hegemony and control over us.

While I believe in and am fully committed to debates around the issues I have raised here, I do not believe those debates should be happening behind closed doors in small NGO circles or exclusionary email chains with donors. I aimed to provide a personal snapshot and publicly document the women's movement within this specific temporality and spatiality, at a moment when Armenian feminist NGOs internally contemplate renouncing their feminist affinities to evade the persistent critiques that such declarations provoke. I welcome all engagement and criticism of my testimony from Armenian feminists and feminist theorists, as I strongly believe that feminist theory and organizing are born out of public debates and contestations.

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