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EMPOWERING WOMEN:
THE NARRATIVES OF TODAY AND TOMORROW



Gyumri Ceramics

Revival of Armenian ceramics in the 21st century

The Family Care Foundation and the Muscari Association are working together to improve the life conditions in Armenia. Their activities are concentrated especially in Gyumri, which has an invaluable historical, patrimonial and cultural wealth.

After the earthquake of 1988, which caused the death of tens of thousands of inhabitants, this city tries to get up and regain its once undeniable radiance.

Following this tragic event, the Family Care Foundation was created by the will of implementing projects for the economic and cultural development of Armenia in the fields of tourism, art, handicraft and restoration of traditional values with a strong ethical requirement.

Regarding Muscari, created in 2016, its purpose is to valorise Armenian culture and French-Armenian exchanges. It works for education in France and Armenia and it promotes a better knowledge of peoples, cultures and languages.

This complementarity gives life to projects such as the ceramics workshop in Gyumri, which allows currently many families to live with dignity, thanks to arts and crafts inspired by among others Armenian potters from Kütahya in the former Ottoman Empire, the golden age of their activity being in the 18th century. Always having the desire of revitalizing and valorisation of Armenian material and immaterial heritage, special energy is devoted to the architectural restoration of the city's historic buildings.

The ceramics of Gyumri's workshop are on sale in the following addresses in Armenia:

o Villa Delenda : 22 Yeznik Koghbatsi Str., Yerevan

o Villa Kars : 182 Abovyan Str., Gyumri

www.familycarearmenia.org / www.muscari.fr

With the support of :



DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Today, the landscape of women's empowerment in Armenia is complex and multifaceted, transcending traditional narratives and outdated approaches. While significant efforts have been made to advance women's rights and opportunities, challenges persist in a number of fields, and the journey remains ongoing.

Yet, where do we stand when it comes to women's empowerment in terms of economic participation and career advancement?

During AmCham Armenia's "Women Game-changers: A Broader Perspective on the Role of Women in Society" conference at Matenadaran, I had an enlightening conversation with some of the most exciting young Armenian female leaders and role models. We discussed the challenges women face in achieving true empowerment.

We delved into the barriers preventing women from entering and thriving in traditionally male-dominated fields such as business leadership, politics, and entrepreneurship.

What stood out was a common thread among today's most successful Armenian women.

While they acknowledged facing gender-specific challenges of various nature and intensity in their path to success, they didn't let it define or limit their careers. These women shared a profound belief in their own capabilities and an unwavering

conviction that they could achieve their goals.

A belief, which coupled with their hard work, skills, and professionalism, has ultimately redefined their reality and made their success possible.

This self-belief often stems from supportive families, sometimes nurturing work environments, or simply from a strong internal drive. However, not all women are fortunate enough to have this foundational support. Many find themselves in environments that undermine their confidence, leading to self-doubt, hesitancy, and ultimately — inaction.

What can we do? Of course, we should continue challenging the status quo and the problematic realities many Armenian women face on their path to self-fulfillment. We should also continue to amplify the success stories of women who have navigated these challenges and emerged triumphant.

With this special issue dedicated to Women's empowerment in Armenia, we not only desire to paint a realistic, sometimes complex picture of where we are regarding this crucial issue for our society, but we also want to use our platform to celebrate and highlight some of the many outstanding female success stories from across the board, hoping to inspire the young generations of Armenian women to be bold, to push forward and to liberate themselves from the shackles of self-doubt.

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Cover Photo: PMI Armenia

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ZARA OHANYAN: BREAKING GENDER BARRIERS VIA ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Regional Post met with Zara Ohanyan, Principal Manager of the SME Finance and Development Group at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Armenia, to learn about the organization's efforts and initiatives on gender equality internationally and within Armenia.

INTERVIEW : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : EBRD

Ms. Ohanyan, EBRD Women in Business programs are active in 24 countries worldwide. What is the fundamental idea behind it?

— The fundamental idea behind the program is to promote gender equality and empower women economically through various initiatives, such as providing women with access to finance, business advice, networks, and other resources necessary for growing any business. By supporting women entrepreneurs, we aim to address gender disparities through access to finance and opportunities for business development. This is done by targeted initiatives, such as mentoring, training, and networking events.

From your experience, what are the primary challenges women and women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) encounter in accessing finance and business advice in Armenia?



— The challenges are more or less the same globally and in Armenia. It starts with access to finance where women often have more difficulty accessing capital to start or grow their businesses compared to men. Then there are gender biases and stereotypes, which limit their access to opportunities, networks, and resources in entrepreneurship, and the struggle to manage a work-life balance. Other challenges include the lack of networking and mentorship programs compared to men, limited access to markets, and the absence of proper training due to limited educational opportunities, inadequate cultural norms, and societal expectations. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including policy reforms, investment in women's education and skills development, promotion of gender-sensitive business environments, and targeted support programs and resources for women entrepreneurs. We must also involve policymakers, financial institutions, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to create an enabling environment for women-led SMEs.

How do you see the relationship between gender equality and sustainable economic development in Armenia?

— Investing in women's empowerment can yield numerous long-term benefits for both individuals and society as a whole. Policies and initiatives that promote women's economic empowerment can contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous society. By investing in women's empowerment, Armenia can unlock the full potential of its human capital and build a more resilient and equitable economy for the future. When women have access to economic opportunities and resources as men do, they can better provide for themselves and their families. This breaks the cycle of poverty. It can stimulate business growth and innovation, as women are the innovators in all sectors. Hence, women-owned businesses can bring unique perspectives and solutions to



market challenges, leading to a more diverse and resilient economy. I definitely see an improvement. Back in 2014, when we had just started the Women in Business Program, we would pitch it to the banks with its two components. Many of these banks did not take it seriously, as they didn't see a reason they should separate women and men. Today, a decade later, these banks come back to us for various guidelines and support programs for women in business. This indicates that the banking industry also sees and employs the potential within its operations.

What are the main goals of the Women in Business program, particularly in Armenia? Please outline the key directions for its activities.

— Overall, the Women in Business program in Armenia aims to create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to thrive, contribute to economic growth, and achieve greater gender equality in the business sector. Its activities focus on addressing the barriers women face. It does so by providing the necessary support and resources and fostering an ecosystem that values and supports women's entrepreneurship. I believe the key

WHEN WOMEN HAVE ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES AS MEN DO, THEY CAN BETTER PROVIDE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES. THIS BREAKS THE CYCLE OF POVERTY. IT CAN STIMULATE BUSINESS GROWTH AND INNOVATION, AS WOMEN ARE THE INNOVATORS IN ALL SECTORS

directions are increasing access to finance, capacity building, and skills development, promoting networking and peer support, and measuring impact and sustainability.

Looking ahead, what are some of the key priorities and strategies that EBRD intends to pursue further to promote women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in Armenia?

— The program has proven successful across all countries where it operates, and Armenia is no exception. We have a track record and new donors

WHATEVER YOU ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE IS DOABLE AND MANAGEABLE. YOU NEED TO BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. DON'T BE AFRAID, BE MORE CONFIDENT, LET GO OF SOCIETAL BELIEFS, AND TAKE RISKS



^ v >
The joint launch of She's Next empowered by Visa initiative in Armenia



willing to join the program that proves it. EBRD collaborates with various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, business associations, and other development partners, to maximize its impact in promoting women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in Armenia. This may involve co-financing arrangements, joint initiatives, and partnerships to leverage resources and expertise.

You've worked with many women-led successful businesses. What examples do such businesses set for aspiring women entrepreneurs?

— Even though I have worked with various businesses, I would like to shed light on those that are not considered typical female sectors. Of course, the female-dominated sectors are HoReCa and services, and the majority of our beneficiaries are from those sectors. Yet we are now witnessing a trend for women in product manufacturing, the

tech industry, and even construction businesses such as glass manufacturing. These women serve as examples of innovation, leadership, and courage. Women entrepreneurs can learn from these examples by developing leadership skills, setting clear goals, and staying focused on their long-term vision despite challenges and setbacks. Successful businesses are often innovative and adaptable, constantly seeking new ways to meet customer needs and stay ahead of the competition.

Many women entrepreneurs navigate motherhood along with their careers. From your experience, how do you balance your time and energy between your role as a working mother and your professional commitments?

— First, we should remember that achieving work-life balance is a constant job that requires daily prioritization and time management skills. It's also always a challenge for me, but it's an ongoing process.

Make time for self-care activities to recharge and maintain your physical and mental well-being. Whether exercising, meditation, hobbies, or spending time with loved ones, prioritize activities that help you relax and rejuvenate. Also, establish clear boundaries between work and home life to avoid burnout and ensure you have time for professional and personal responsibilities. Armenian women tend to limit their boundaries and try to accommodate everyone, but we must realize that we need them.

Lastly, what advice would you give to young women who want to have it all?

— Whatever you are trying to achieve is doable and manageable. You need to believe in yourself. Don't be afraid, be more confident, let go of societal beliefs, and take risks. You don't need to get married in your 20s; you only need to get married when you're self-sustainable and financially independent. I even tell this to my 10-year-old daughter. ♦

WOMEN IN NUMBERS

WHEN POWER AND BUSINESS HAVE A FEMALE TOUCH

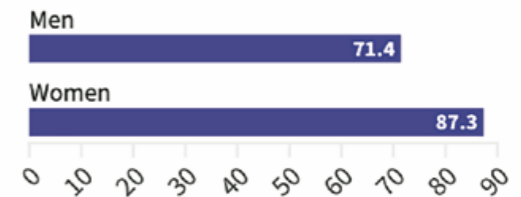
In 2024, gender studies are still an unexplored territory in Armenia. But now, experts and researchers are starting to delve into the subject, stressing to the government and society that women's issues affect us all and deserve attention. Let's examine some actual numbers and statistics.

TEXT : ANZHELA ALEKYAN

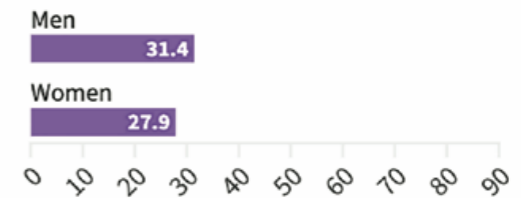


Over the past decade, Armenian population has declined, with figures dropping from 3,026,879 in 2013 to 2,977,130 in 2023. Data from the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia reveals that in 2013, men made up 48% of the population, while women accounted for 52%. However, by last year, these proportions shifted slightly, with men comprising 47% and women 53% of the population, respectively. Yet, birth rates show a notable contrast, with 112 boys born for every 100 girls. Shockingly, the International Center for Human Development reports that Armenia loses approximately 1,400 girls annually due to prenatal sex selection and gender-based abortions. This trend poses a significant demographic threat to the nation, emphasized by deeply rooted patriarchal norms within society. Hasmik Gevorgyan, a Sociology Professor at Yerevan State University and a Gender Specialist, explains that witnessing these abortions was one of the reasons she decided to study gender. Another motivation came from her time working at an emergency hotline in the '90s, where she saw the violence women faced firsthand. "The Soviet Union gave women de jure equality, allowing us to gain some tangible results de facto. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything it offered, including equality, was rejected since it was perceived as Russian influence. After that, Armenian women gradually drifted towards Western values, unlike men who preferred Eastern traditions. Women were more open to changes and evolved more rapidly," Hasmik Gevorgyan says. Returning to the statistics, in 2022, the life expectancy at birth for women was 87.3 years (compared to 77.4 in 2021), while for men, it was 71.4 years (a slight increase from 67.4 in 2021). As a result, women often find themselves widowed and alone after retirement. The retirement age for both men and women is set at 63. Additionally, the average pension for women in 2022 was 45,707 AMD, slightly lower than that for men, which stood at 48,037 AMD. However, it's not just in the event of their partner's passing that women may find themselves alone. Data from the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia indicates

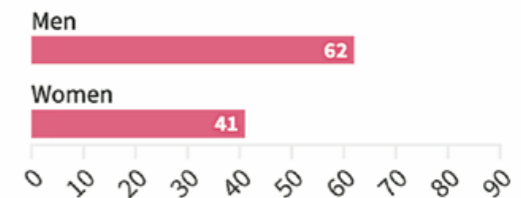
Life expectancy (years)



First marriage age



Employment rate (%)

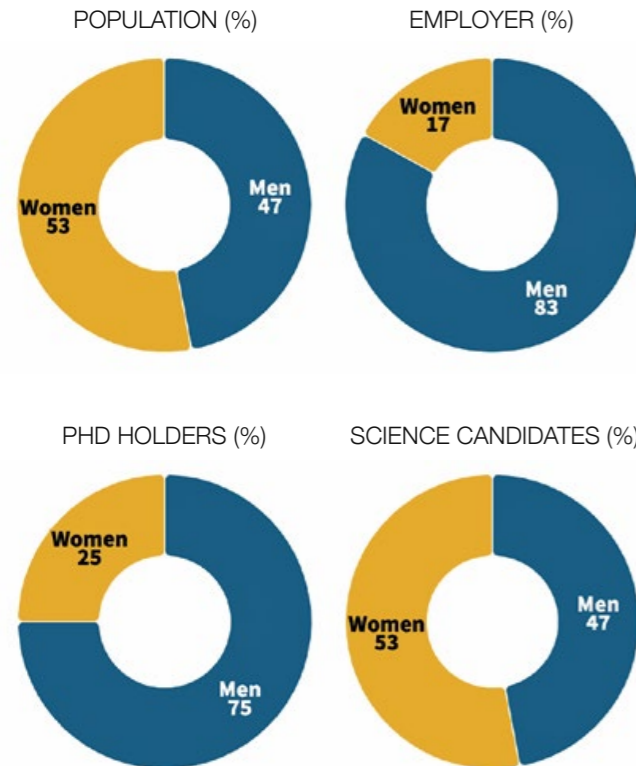


that women are more prone to remain divorced, whereas men show a greater tendency to remarry after divorce. Additionally, the average age at first marriage for women in 2022 was 27.9, while for men it was 31.4. Contrasting this with 2012 figures, women married at an average age of 25.3, and men at 28.8. This suggests that despite women traditionally marrying at a younger age than men, they are now opting to remain single for longer periods compared to previous years.

Since 1991, the average number of children born per woman has significantly declined, which is especially noticeable in rural areas. In 2020, the fertility rate in rural areas fell below that of urban areas. However, between 2021 and 2022, there was a notable improvement in the total fertility rate among the rural population, reaching 1.711 and 2.118 children per woman, respectively, compared to 1.7 and 1.489 children per woman in urban areas.

Professor Gevorgyan does not find this situation surprising. She notes that a few years ago, girls in villages were often considered too old for marriage while still in 8th grade. However, she observes that the situation is gradually changing.

"In 1999, while researching domestic violence, I realized that many women didn't even fully understand what violence is. Some would say, "If he hits me once a week, it's not a big deal, but if he starts to kick or beat up, then it is violence." Eventually, women started to question why such



only 41% of women were employed, with 52% out of the labor force. In comparison, 62% of men were employed, while 29% were unemployed. Another striking statistic from the Statistical Committee indicates that in 2022, 52% of women aged 15-74 – equivalent to 620,000 women – were neither employed nor actively seeking work, primarily occupied with housekeeping duties. In 2022, while many women and men were employees, most employers and own-account workers were men. Specifically, only 17% of employers were women, with 83% being men. Moreover, 61% of family-contributing workers who received no pay were women, compared to only 39% who were men.

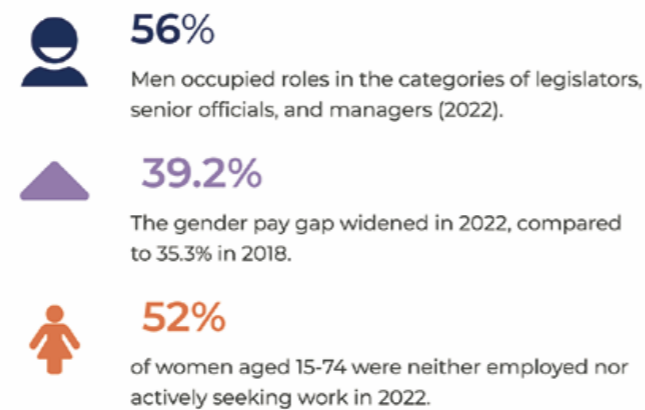
Insights from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation's youth study reveal concerning trends among young adults aged 19-29. Shockingly, only 1/4 of female young adults in this age group are financially independent. Additionally, just 1/3 of all young adults have a personal source of income, while 1/4 remain financially dependent on their fathers. The Women Entrepreneurship Study in Armenia, conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC), relies on Global Entrepreneurship Monitor survey data. This survey investigates individuals' steps to launch a business and its current status. According to the study, companies

behavior was tolerated. On the other hand, men often fail to grasp the severity of their actions. The prison mentality, particularly prevalent among young boys, hindered educational achievement; any boy excelling in school would be called names.

I'm not suggesting that men harm women; rather, they harm themselves first. Ultimately, they must learn to live independently because not only is the slave dependent on the master, but the master is also dependent on the slave," adds Professor Hasmik Gevorgyan.

The numbers paint a clear picture of the education gender gap. In 2022, girls outnumbered boys in earning bachelor's degrees, comprising 64.1% compared to 43.9%. Despite making up 53% of science candidates, women only represented 25% of those holding doctorate degrees.

Furthermore, in 2022, the working-age population aged 15-75 comprised 1,196,200 women and 1,032,300 men. However, the employment figures reveal a stark contrast:



led by women, as outlined in the report, tend to be smaller in scale, operate in different sectors, and have less growth potential than those led by men. Furthermore, self-employed women typically work fewer hours and earn less than their male counterparts. The report identifies several specific challenges to women's entrepreneurship, including an unsupportive cultural and societal environment, a perceived lack of entrepreneurial skills, greater difficulty in accessing financial resources compared to men, limited professional networks, and obstacles posed by family and tax policies.

According to the Statistical Committee's report, men held the majority of managerial positions. In 2022, men occupied 56% of roles in the categories of legislators, senior officials, and managers. Additionally, the gender pay gap, as reported by the Statistical Committee, widened from 35.3% to 39.2% between 2018 and 2022. Specifically, in 2022, women earned only 60.8% of what men earned, resulting in a gender pay gap of 39.2%.

"Today, women are better educated than ever before. Even in fields like IT, traditionally dominated by men, over 40% of employees are female. However, this doesn't necessarily translate to equal or fair pay. Additionally, women often find themselves gravitating towards front-end roles, which are typically perceived as more suitable for women, while back-end positions are viewed as male-dominated. Yet, recent research indicates that front-end tasks have become increasingly challenging despite salaries remaining unchanged," explains Professor Gevorgyan. The most significant pay gap is observed in financial and insurance activities, which is 52%. Following closely is the industry sector, with a pay gap of 44%, and in third place is healthcare and social work, where the pay gap reaches 40%.

"I believe women and their professionalism will soon be recognized and valued more highly. Eventually, people will realize the importance of having competent professionals handling management roles. There's a misconception that management doesn't require expertise, but the reality is different. Moreover, it's primarily women who are pursuing higher education nowadays, and, of course, educated women understandably don't want to settle for working under uneducated men," adds Hasmik Gevorgyan.

She highlights that even among university professors, women outnumber men; the same trend is seen among school staff. However, managerial roles often remain occupied by men.

This pattern extends to state leadership as well. Across various ministries, female staff are in the majority, with exceptions in the Ministry of Defense (45% female), Foreign Affairs (46% female), and the High Tech Industry (48% female). Notably, the Education, Science, Culture, and Sport Ministry boasts the highest percentage of female staff at 71%. Despite these figures, only 2 out of 12 ministers and 8 out of 47 deputy ministers in the Armenian government are women.

According to Hasmik Gevorgyan, women in positions of power in Armenia are not yet prepared to advocate for policies that protect women's rights. She believes that these issues are currently inadequately addressed.

"That's why I often say that we'll soon witness the rise of radical feminism. I believe the most radical feminist movements will emerge in the East, where women feel they have nothing to lose, and men will benefit, too. Interestingly, nearly 40% of feminist organizations in Egypt are led by men," notes the professor. ♦

LISTENING TO LEAD:

ID GROUP'S DIRECTOR AND SHAREHOLDER LALA BAKSHETSAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Regional Post interviewed Lala Bakhshetsyan, the Director and Shareholder of ID Group, about the nuances of female leadership and the company's long-term commitment to gender equality.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : ID GROUP

> Lala Bakhshetsyan,
Director and
Shareholder of
ID Group



Ms. Bakhshetsyan, what significance does being a female leader hold for you? What values does the company convey under your leadership today?

— When people think of a leader, they often picture a man, overlooking the possibility of a woman being just as successful in that role. Fortunately, I'm seeing more and more women in our country stepping into fields previously dominated by men. The companies within ID Group have a flexible management system, where women have a significant role and active participation. We have female colleagues within IDBank's Council and Management Board, and over half of Idram's management team are women. In fact, around 60% of our workforce are women. We take pride in the fact that companies within ID Group managed to create an environment and working conditions where both women and men have equal opportunities to make decisions and participate in various aspects of our operations. It's

important to note that our commitment extends beyond just ensuring equal rights. In all our business activities, decision-making is a chain flowing not only from top-level management but also from lower levels up to the top. We all know that men and women view the same issues and challenges from different angles. That's why involving both genders in the chain mentioned above is crucial to ensure balanced decision-making. As a dynamic group of companies, ID Group is committed to providing innovative services to our customers. Our fintech platform, the Idram&IDBank application, strives to lead the way in this field by offering a comprehensive range of services. Setting such a benchmark obliges us to excel as employers as well. We aim to lead not only in our services but also in our management system and approaches to employees, ensuring equal opportunities for both women and men to thrive and express themselves fully. >

WE TAKE PRIDE IN THE FACT THAT COMPANIES WITHIN ID GROUP MANAGED TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS WHERE BOTH WOMEN AND MEN HAVE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE DECISIONS AND PARTICIPATE IN VARIOUS ASPECTS OF OUR OPERATIONS

What is ID Group's approach to female empowerment, and what specific actions or initiatives are being implemented in this context?

— As I mentioned earlier, we implement policies to ensure equal opportunities for both women and men at ID Group. Regardless of gender, we prioritize all our employees' development and growth. We heavily invest in their training and development while providing the necessary conditions for personal and professional advancement. Indeed, in this context, we realize the significance of aligning our group of companies with global standards. One of our first steps in this direction was joining the UN Women Empowerment Principles program. We have already implemented various measures to empower women, such as training, workshops, and events. These initiatives are designed to broaden the opportunities available to women within our organization. More-

over, we remain open and flexible in adopting approaches corresponding to international standards.

You are one of the initiators of IDBank's and Idram's "The Power of One Dram" project. What was the driving force behind the idea, and why are such projects important to you?

— "The Power of One Dram" revolves around the concept that even a small investment can create significant change. In the context of our program, which has been running for four years, the only contribution we ask from our clients is to make payments using the platforms of Idram and IDBank platforms. In other words, our clients make their daily payments as usual without spending any extra money. However, every time they pay using Idram and IDBank platforms, we transfer "one dram" to "The Power of One Dram" initiative. Some may argue that this "one dram" is too insignificant to tackle the challenges our

REGARDLESS OF GENDER, WE PRIORITIZE ALL OUR EMPLOYEES' DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH. WE HEAVILY INVEST IN THEIR TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT WHILE PROVIDING THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT

country faces. However, it's important to note that with these "one drams," we've already allocated approximately 165 million drams to various foundations and their beneficiaries, and the community of beneficiaries formed through this initiative agrees with us. If everyone believes they lack significant resources and therefore cannot contribute meaningfully, as they say, "the cart will not move". However, if many people make small contributions to various fields simultaneously, it will eventually lead to positive results. And by positive outcomes, I mean fostering a culture of helping in our society, regardless of the form or size of the assistance. It's heartwarming when a child encourages their parent to use Idram, knowing about "The Power of One Dram." There's much work to be done in this area, starting from families and ending with the private sector and the government.

What specific skills or perspectives do women bring to the table, and how do they contribute to innovation and growth in the financial sector?

— I believe that the professional skills required for the development of any field don't differ significantly from one another. What's crucial for both women and men is professionalism. Dedication and passion for work are equally important. Here's where women possess a remarkable quality: when they love something, they give it their all, whether it's their family or their career; the context doesn't matter. A woman has the same potential as a man if she isn't burdened with other responsibilities. In reality, women often shoulder the responsibility of caring for their families; thus, they cannot devote their whole minds to work. From this perspective, providing women with broader business and workplace opportunities is essential to fully realize their professional potential. Otherwise, it's unfair to grant advantages to someone solely because they are a woman.

What changes would you like to see within the industry, in general, and concerning gender equality?

— Armenia has moved past the stage where women's rights are overlooked in the professional field. Thankfully, we're steadily progressing towards full inclusion of women in all areas. As I mentioned earlier, women hold significant positions in the management team and the general staff of ID Group companies. We firmly believe their participation at various company levels is vital for our continued growth. Indeed, there's still much to be done in our country and across multiple fields. It's unacceptable to see job announcements specifying gender or age preferences, and it's also unjustifiable for men to be paid more than women in certain positions. These issues must be addressed quickly, as they shouldn't limit anyone's right to work or access equal opportunities.

What advice would you give young women considering career advancement in the financial industry?

— I might be repeating myself, but there are other key factors besides the industry that can help you build a successful



career. What truly counts is knowing how to listen. If you want to advance, you must first listen to your colleagues, friends, superiors, and, what is extremely important in our business, to your client. It's not only about understanding the assigned task; it's also about absorbing all the insights that can help you accomplish that task and more. If you're new to a particular field, pay attention and gather as much information as possible from the professionals working with you or in the same industry. Learn actively, and don't hesitate to learn from the experiences of others. Professional growth and training are also crucial from this perspective. In universities, we're taught theory, which often differs from practical work. Professionalism is ultimately a skill that's developed over time. For women to succeed, especially in the workplace, they must have the opportunity and ability to set aside other issues and focus solely on their work, as this is what brings positive results. Taking responsibility is also vital, particularly for young professionals. It's essential

to take ownership of both successes and failures. Only then will you be able to evaluate your work and be open to feedback from colleagues.

How do you envision the future of fintech in Armenia?

— Armenia has immense potential in fintech development. We've got pioneering solutions that stand out in the region and even globally. Our Idram&IDBank platform, for instance, stands as Armenia's leading fintech application in terms of the variety of services offered. It is a national payment method widely used across various points of sale and payment methods. As a proudly "Made in Armenia" fintech application, we focus on expanding remote services and enhancing user comfort, aiming to simplify daily tasks for our users. We already have solutions that can thrive internationally and actively pursue opportunities in that direction. Ultimately, our goal remains to provide even more customer-centric service. ♦



“KARAS WINES IS ABOUT CONSISTENCY, QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY”

An Exclusive Interview with Juliana Del Aguila Eurnekian, the Owner and President of Karas Wines

As one of the pioneers of the Armenian winemaking industry, Karas Wines has significantly influenced the development of the country's wine culture. Regional Post talked to Juliana Del Aguila Eurnekian, the company's Owner and President, about women's role in the industry, her personal story with Karas and Armenia, and the company's latest developments.

INTERVIEW : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : KARAS WINES

What is the story behind the inception of Karas Wines?

— I'm an Armenian born and raised in Argentina. My family's story goes way back; my great-grandparents escaped the genocide and settled in Argentina, yet my grandfather and his brother always traveled to Armenia during the Soviet times to visit family and see if they could contribute somehow. After the collapse of the USSR, my great-uncle, Eduardo Eurnekian, an established businessman in Argentina, came to Armenia to build his own business and contribute to the re-establishment of our country. He was in the airport business but bought several pieces of land, yet not sure how to use them. He wanted to do something related to agriculture that would bring sustainability and create jobs for the locals. One of those lands he bought was in the Ararat Valley. When he first visited the place and saw the view of magnificent Ararat, he remembered the biblical story of Noah, which he had been taught as a kid. Legend has it that after the Great Flood, Noah's ark found soil on the top of Mount Ararat, and the very first thing he did upon stepping onto the solid ground was to plant a grapevine. Eduardo started thinking to himself, "Why not make wine?"



At that time, he was not in the wine business yet; the industry wasn't significantly developed in Armenia, and there was no interest, export, or active production. However, he wanted to give it a shot. He started working in 2004, and the vineyard was planted by 2006-2008. My uncle brought in lots of international grape varieties, as we were not very familiar with the local assortment at that time.

In 2007, the Areni Cave 1 was discovered; this was an extraordinary coincidence. Without knowing about Areni Cave 1, we named the brand Karas because it was related to ancient winemaking traditions. In 2010, we had our first wine released, and that was a huge success, the beginning of something unknown. My uncle mainly started on his own by bringing specialists from all over the world to maintain the best practices and standards. He wanted Karas to be as successful and sustainable as possible. He has always had a great love and respect for this land and a desire to make it greater than it is.

Karas has also been a social project for him, creating quality jobs for the locals and empowering the community. The same objectives remain to this day, and all our decisions, how we employ, teach, work, and choose providers and products, create a domino effect in Armenia.

What sparked your interest in winemaking, and what aspects of it do you find most fulfilling?



THE SAME OBJECTIVES REMAIN TO THIS DAY, AND ALL OUR DECISIONS, HOW WE EMPLOY, TEACH, WORK, AND CHOOSE PROVIDERS AND PRODUCTS, **CREATE A DOMINO EFFECT IN ARMENIA**

— My journey with wine and Karas is very intimate. I was a psychology student at the university when my uncle invited me and my cousins to visit Armenia. That was my first time here. It was 2011, and Eduardo was just starting with Karas, bottling the second vintage. I traveled here during the harvest season and knew nothing about wine. On the way here, my uncle said with a smile, "The people. I love the people here."

My uncle also told me he loved the views, the lands, and the roads in the mountains. We truly have a magical landscape.

I felt at home the moment I touched the ground, and nothing has changed since then. Although our trip lasted only three days, it completely changed my life. I fell in love with Armenia. When I returned to Argentina, I started learning Armenian and learning about the wine business. Then, I took a sommelier course to become more involved and understand the industry.

I studied Armenian for a year and wanted to come back. I decided to spend my whole summer here and did an internship at the company. Then, I went back and started working for the company remotely. First, I did the accounting, which is how I joined the business. I never thought about it. I was just immersing myself in the wine industry and Armenia, simultaneously growing within the company. Then, one thing led me to another, and now, I feel a great sense of responsibility. I have to take it to another level. ➤



◀
Sunset at Karas
vineyards

Beyond traditions and family values, what other elements do you believe are an integral part of Karas Wines?

— I learned through wine that you need a lot of time to make things the right way, and we have to respect that time when it comes to nature and people. That is something we never take for granted, so if we're not ready to release a product or if it's not ready, we handle it gracefully and with patience. We take our time to do things the right way, and that gives us consistency with what we deliver. Quality is our top priority, and we have always set the bar high for ourselves. We want more people to drink wine, and that's why we want our products to be accessible through different wines and different budgets. Our respect for the product, people, and Armenia is central to our actions—consistency, quality, and sustainability.

As you mentioned, Karas Wines has strongly emphasized the social aspect of its activities since its establishment. Why is this element so important for the company and you personally?

— It's not just about hiring people from the region to work in the vineyard. It's more than that. It's about the bottles we

LEARNED THROUGH WINE THAT YOU NEED A LOT OF TIME TO MAKE THINGS THE RIGHT WAY, AND WE HAVE TO RESPECT THAT TIME WHEN IT COMES TO NATURE AND PEOPLE

buy, the designers we choose, the consultants, the capsules, labels, and barrels. Everything is Armenian, and it's the only way to impact the country beyond the company. So that's what we did; it's the domino effect we want to create.

Armenian land is home to a wide array of grape varieties. Why do you believe it's crucial to maintain this diversity within the industry, and how does Karas Wines contribute to that?

— When we first started, we wanted to learn about local grapes, and more than 130 varieties have been discovered. Once we learned about them, we began sourcing and planting them in our own vineyards. Initially, our primary focus was planting vineyards in Armenia and supporting grape-growing efforts in Artsakh. We started by working with Sireni grapes and collaborating closely with local farmers to help improve their grape-growing techniques. We provided them with

the necessary tools and knowledge to enhance production. We even brought some Sireni grapes to Armenia to kick-start the process here. Sadly, due to the loss of many vineyards in the region, we're now the only ones producing Sireni. Our partnership with the Artsakh community has been incredibly rewarding. We've learned a lot from each other, exploring different grape varieties and how to grow them effectively. This led us to expand our grape selection, which now includes three types of Areni, Kangun, Voskehat, and more. We also set up an experimental vineyard to try out new ideas, which has become an integral part of our activities. Through replanting efforts, our vineyard continues to grow and evolve, reflecting our dedication to innovation and quality winemaking.

You are producing wine in both Armenia and Argentina. How do these experiences differ, and in what ways does Karas Wines distinguish itself?

— The land is different in Armenia. It's more organic. We have high elevation and extreme weather conditions here. It's unique and different from other parts of the world and kind of isolated in a way.

Patagonia, Argentina, where we produce wine, is also very isolated, but it's also continental; there's no elevation. It's very low in latitude. It's very dry, but the conditions are not as extreme as in Armenia. However, what I find most interesting is both places are unique in different senses; here in Armenia, we started the renaissance of Armenian winemaking, we were a part of the rebirth of the wine culture, the creators of wine, and all the historical elements. But in Argentina, it's the modern side of the wine world; it's more developed and needs to be kept that way because Patagonia wasn't the most developed wine region in Argentina. So it's fun to see both sides, the beginning and end of the wine world, and be able to go back and forth between them.

In your opinion, what specific skills or perspectives do women bring to the table in the wine-making industry or business in general?

— I honestly don't think we have a different set of skills because we are men or women. People are so different, and the only thing good about having more women in the business is the diversity of minds. All women have faced various challenges and choices that men don't get to experience, but I also think women in power can make room for more

women and help them move forward in their careers. By the way, almost 55% of our employees are women. It is a coincidence, but many factors contribute to it. The amazing thing about this is that these women are so hardworking. You can never tell the difference between a man's work and a woman's. The women here have such strong willpower.

What advice would you give to women who aspire to pursue a winemaking career?

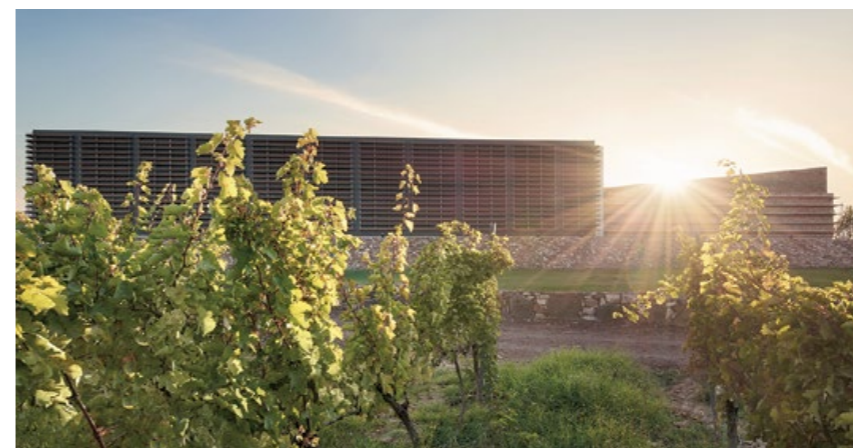
— From my personal experience, I didn't know any women who were working or had powerful positions when I was growing up. When I started working, I didn't know how I should be. But I had men in my life who encouraged me, such as my uncle. He motivated me and wanted me to work with him. I was young and clueless back then. I know now that you just have to be yourself, and that is all it takes. My advice is to be yourself and just go for it, regardless of the industry. You don't need to be like anyone else or have a role model, just be yourself, try your best, and be the best version of yourself.

Looking ahead two decades, where do you envision yourself, Karas Wines, and the Armenian winemaking industry?

— I'm very excited about what is to come. I want to make Armenian wines, especially Karas, more accessible to the rest of the world. In more countries, restaurants and houses. We need to grow our networks and presence



abroad and educate people on what we are doing here in Armenia. That's our primary goal. Wine is a way to make people know and connect with our country. It's not just about wine, and that's the main thing that drives us. Wine is a bridge between Armenia and the world. In 20 years, the industry will be bigger; you see it by the level of the restaurants and wines that we have now in the city. For example, our wines have been awarded by James Suckling, the famous American wine critic, to have the highest scores in Armenia. That is not a coincidence, as we're doing the proper work. The wine industry is very competitive, and there are so many brands from different parts of the world, but Armenia has something very unique: its history, weather, conditions, grapes, and so many other vital factors that make it completely different from everything else in the market. Today, I feel even more excited than when I first started. I see people's interest and how we're growing and helping others to grow. I'm very enthusiastic and can't wait for what the future has in store for us. I'm eager to move forward. I also witnessed what we did with my uncle's vision, which everyone thought was crazy at first. He did it the right way, and I feel very proud and humbled to be a part of this. I also feel responsible for the people who work with us, for our brand, and for Armenia. I feel a great sense of responsibility, and it's fascinating. ♦



CREATIVITY IN PRACTICE

How CRELABs Transform the Lives of Women in the Regions of Armenia

In April 2023, Impact Hub Yerevan Social Innovation Development Foundation officially launched the “Labs for Change: Empowering Women for Social Innovation & Creativity in Regions” project. It is funded with UK aid from the British people and implemented in collaboration with the Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia and the Dilijan-based artisanal platform, Made-vel-e. Regional Post interviewed the organizers and beneficiaries of the project, to learn more about its activities and the added value it creates.

TEXT : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : LABS FOR CHANGE



THE ECOSYSTEM OF SOCIAL CHANGE

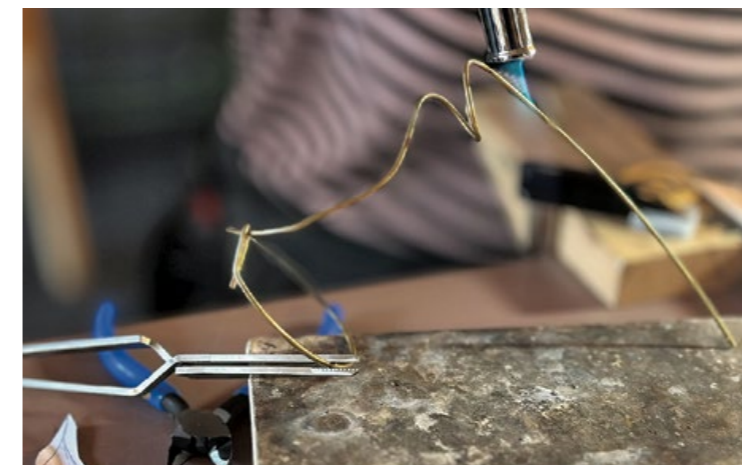
Just a two-minute walk from the Sasuntsi Davit metro station, you are standing in front of Impact Hub Yerevan – Armenia’s first community-based co-working space dedicated to fostering social change and innovation. “We wanted to create an ecosystem that promotes social entrepreneurship and innovation and also build a community of impactful people (changemakers),” explains Gevorg Poghosyan, the CEO of Impact Hub Yerevan.

Today, Impact Hub Yerevan operates 15-16 programs simultaneously, several of which support women. Since its establishment in 2015, female empowerment has been a critical focus for Impact Hub Yerevan as it strives to advance society. In many regions of Armenia, women face limited opportunities in education, employment, and decision-making processes. Impact Hub Yerevan has taken on the challenge of addressing these issues, encouraging and supporting women as they launch their initiatives. This support includes

➤ Needle lace workshop at CRELAB Tavush



OFFERING MORE THAN CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION, THE MAIN GOAL OF CREATING CRELABS IS TO ESTABLISH SUSTAINABLE INSTITUTIONS THAT WILL CONTINUE EMPOWERING WOMEN EVEN AFTER THE PROJECT ENDS



building soft and technical skills, providing access to networks, and offering personalized mentorship programs tailored to their industries. “We want to change stereotypical mindsets. Thus, we have numerous women-empowering programs, events, and activities. This mindset change isn’t something you can achieve in a single workshop. It’s an ongoing process in everything we do,” says Gevorg Poghosyan, adding, “Labs for Change project is an illustration of this approach, realizing these objectives through three CRELAB centers.” The project’s implementing parties established centers in three regions. Impact Hub launched the CRELAB in the Shirak region (Gyumri). The Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia set up a center in the Kotayk region (Dzoraghbyur). Meanwhile, Made-vel-e opened a center in the Tavush (Dilijan). By establishing CRELABs as future social enterprises in these three regions, the project engages many women from small communities, equipping them with essential skills and support for effective management and community building. CRELABs provide training, skills, and knowledge to participants, supporting them in creating marketable products. The project aims to ensure the full cycle, starting from the skills, knowledge, product design, promotion of the products, and so on. Offering more than conventional education, the main goal of creating CRELABs is to establish sustainable institutions that will continue empowering women even after the project ends. ➤



CREATIVITY IN PRACTICE

According to the UK Ambassador to Armenia, John Gallagher, “The establishment of CRELABs holds significant potential for catalyzing social progress, economic growth, and sustainable development in the supported regions. By fostering a vibrant creative sector and empowering women through entrepreneurship, the project aims to significantly reduce poverty and social/gender inequality.” He further explains that UK assistance seeks to bolster Armenia’s resilience and stability while fostering a transition toward transparent, democratic governance and inclusive economic development. “Armenia can only succeed if its citizens believe they have opportunities to achieve their personal aspirations and participate in initiatives to support the country. The CRELAB centers are designed to create a nurturing and empowering environment.” The main idea behind the project’s concept is “Creativity in practice.” CRELABs empower participants to be creative and teach them to bring their innovative ideas to life practically while ensuring high quality. CRELABs cater to women committed to building new lives and careers. While each center has a core focus (digital design in Shirak, fashion textiles in Kotayk, and sustainable handicrafts in Tavush) they remain flexible, adapting training to meet individual needs. Recently, CRELABs introduced a tailored curriculum focused on rapid skills acquisition and knowledge building for people displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. The project adapted its activities and workshops to align with their backgrounds and the market demands. While these women can still participate in the existing design, marketing, and other workshops, CRELAB has also curated special offerings like catering and sewing courses. These workshops equip them with the immediate technical skills needed to support their business endeavors.

Visualization course within Graphic Design training series at CRELAB Shirak

Business canvas modeling session at CRELAB Shirak



REGIONS FOR CHANGE

When speaking of CRELAB Kotayk, Vahan Khachatryan, the President of the Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia NGO, describes it as a “Hub where girls and women explore textiles and fashion, learning new skills and embracing exciting opportunities to showcase their talents. With over 80 participants, each departing with high satisfaction, it truly embodies a fulfilling experience.” Lusine Machkalyan, a local participant from Abovyan City who participates in CRELAB Kotayk’s training sessions, has a small clothing store where she would like to have a local production. “I always prioritized self-education, and when I learned about the project, I needed to give it a shot,” says Lusine, “I needed to understand how the system works, learn how to sew, etc. Thus, I decided to participate in the sewing course.” Before the project, she never sat before a sewing machine, but now she feels much more confident.” When it comes to CRELAB Tavush, Natacha Kalfayan, the founder of “Made-Vel-e” artisanal platform defines its primary goal as “To nurture inclusivity and foster a self-reliant community. We aim to craft premium handmade goods and spotlight the expertise of artisans we mentor, support, and collaborate with.” She further continues that amidst the digital era, they emphasize

the significance of reclaiming and safeguarding artisanal skills, occasionally infusing them with contemporary techniques. This approach facilitates the seamless transfer of historical traditions, cultural heritage, and invaluable expertise to future generations. “Our exploration of artisanal avenues knows no bounds – if it can be crafted by hand, we pursue it passionately,” says Natacha. Arpine Israelyan, attending the workshops at CRELAB Tavush, says “The most interesting moment is the direct contact with the trainers and the other participants. We feel at home and enjoy coming to all the classes. It is a wonderful experience, allowing us to express our thoughts and skills freely.” The Regional Coordinator of CRELAB Shirak, Mariam Zakarian, in turn, says that their focus is cultivating uniqueness through a creative approach to foster a shift in mindset. “We aim to nurture problem-solving abilities, encourage individual approaches, and empower participants to utilize their skills for personal development and enhancement. Moreover, we strive to address their weaknesses and provide tailored guidance based on their unique skill sets.” Narine Galstyan, a painter and a single mother of two displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, paints on tableware and eco bags and makes textile products. CRELAB Shirak is where she managed to fulfill her passion for photography. “I learned how to use the natural light better, and now I can



Mood board review session at CRELAB Kotayk



make beautiful photos of my own products. I’m sure that if I continue participating in similar projects, my business will definitely benefit.”

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Impact Hub Yerevan takes a broader view with “Labs for Change,” using the project to equip women with skills and help them understand and address the systemic challenges hindering their economic participation across the three regions. “One of the key outcomes of this project is the identification of needs and the development of appropriate solutions,” states Mr. Poghosyan. According to Mr. Gallagher, this data-driven approach allows the development of efficient solutions for female beneficiaries. The analysis involves a comprehensive research methodology, incorporating focus groups, meetings, and interviews with women in each region. The research has revealed that while all three regions face challenges, there are also distinct gaps and obstacles specific to each community. Through its research findings, Impact Hub Yerevan will leverage the data and tailor recommendations for policy improvement to serve as powerful advocacy tools for regional and national change. ♦

Sewing workshop at CRELAB Kotayk



BY FOSTERING A VIBRANT CREATIVE SECTOR AND EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP, THE PROJECT AIMS TO SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE POVERTY AND SOCIAL/GENDER INEQUALITY

* This project was funded with UK aid from the British people. This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.

FROM CULTURAL HERITAGE TO MODERN SOLUTIONS

Green Rock Management Group's Vision For the Sustainable Future of Dilijan

Regional Post met with Mareta Gevorkyan, the Founder of Green Rock Management Group, to discuss the company's transformative projects in Dilijan and her vision for its sustainable future.

PHOTO : GREEN ROCK MANAGEMENT GROUP



Let us speak about Green Rock Management Group. What are the key areas of the company's activities?

— Green Rock Management Group is a global company that implements a range of large-scale business and social projects aimed at development. As a socially responsible business, Green Rock implements projects aimed at fostering economic growth, enhancing social well-being, and promoting environmental development in Armenia. Armenia is open to innovative solutions, boasting tremendous potential for implementing projects of any magnitude. Our activities aim to showcase a fresh image of Armenia

to the world, revealing the country's unfamiliar facets. We envision Armenia as a place where one desires to live, where visitors arrive with delight, and where individuals continually seek new impressions and perspectives.

What projects does the company implement in Dilijan, and what is their purpose?

— The main and most significant project is the construction of a multifunctional complex in Dilijan. The multifunctional complex, spanning approximately 43,000 m², will blend cultural enrichment and entertainment, demonstrating exceptional hospitality. The complex will encompass

OUR ACTIVITIES AIM TO SHOWCASE A FRESH IMAGE OF ARMENIA TO THE WORLD, REVEALING THE COUNTRY'S UNFAMILIAR FACETS. WE ENVISION ARMENIA AS A PLACE WHERE ONE DESIRES TO LIVE, WHERE VISITORS ARRIVE WITH DELIGHT, AND WHERE INDIVIDUALS CONTINUALLY SEEK NEW IMPRESSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

a 180-room hotel and various business establishments, filling the existing gaps in the city (a shopping center, cinema, spa center, etc.). Additionally, it will feature a glass elevator leading to an observation deck, allowing both tourists and locals to enjoy the magnificent panorama of Dilijan. Our multifunctional complex will be instrumental in creating 300 new jobs in Dilijan, thereby generating new opportunities for both residents and visitors of the country. This initiative will also activate urban life and stimulate growth in the local labor market. We've initiated research efforts to restore Aghasi Khanjyan's villa. Expert assessments are set to be finalized this autumn, at which point the future of the building will be determined. We're renovating the brick house adjacent to Khanjyan's villa this year. We aim to transform the building into a unique entertainment center.

Recently, wooden corn kiosks located along the curves of Dilijan started operating. Tell us about this project. What other social projects has Green Rock implemented in Dilijan?

— In addition to the company's business projects, we are implementing several social projects to enhance the overall image of Dilijan city. In December 2023, the only sports school in Dilijan reopened its doors. We fully renovated



and refurbished it, fostering a sports culture and encouraging a healthy lifestyle in the city. At present, approximately 500 children participate in sports activities at the sports school. Launching environmentally friendly "Green Cab" cars also aims to enhance the city's image. Adhering to the company's principles of sustainable development, we have donated to Dilijan brand-new Toyota Corolla Hybrid 2023 vehicles (hybrid vehicles use two types of energy: electric and thermal, significantly reducing CO₂ emissions). The "Green Cab" launch in Dilijan aims to improve transportation for both local residents and visitors, enhancing mobility within the city and to other destinations.

Continuing our plans to enhance the city's appearance, attractiveness, and quality of life, our next social project focused on improving the existing attitude of residents and visitors who enjoy tasting corn on the go, we partnered with the Dilijan municipality to upgrade the service conditions. We replaced the old booths with aesthetically pleasing and presentable options. As a result, we purchased and branded 25 wooden kiosks equipped with all the necessary facilities. These new kiosks replaced the existing corn stalls, offering visitors a more attractive and comfortable gastronomic experience when entering the city. ➤

AT GREEN ROCK MANAGEMENT GROUP, WE FIRMLY UPHOLD THE PRINCIPLES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. WITHIN THE SCOPE OF OUR PROJECTS, WE PAY PRIMARY ATTENTION TO THE ECOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES AND STRIVE TO MINIMIZE THE CONSUMPTION OF ENERGY AND RESOURCES



Why did you choose Dilijan as the destination for implementing your projects?

— We have selected Dilijan as the location to implement our ideas due to its unique cultural heritage, warm and welcoming atmosphere, and, of course, its breathtaking nature. Additionally, Dilijan holds a special place in

my heart as it is my hometown, and I cherish many fond memories of this city. Our projects in Dilijan are based on the city's natural beauty and cultural values and on promoting the community's development and improvement.

Green Rock positions itself as a company committed to the principles of sustainable develop-

ment. How do you ensure the sustainability and environmental protection of your projects?

— At Green Rock Management Group, we firmly uphold the principles of sustainable development. Within the scope of our projects, we pay primary attention to the ecological consequences and strive to minimize the



consumption of energy and resources. As an example, two members of our team currently pass EDGE certification, highlighting our dedication to environmental preservation. EDGE, the innovation developed by the International Finance Corporation, advocates for constructing resource-efficient and zero-carbon buildings. Currently, Armenia has only one certified EDGE specialist, emphasizing the demand for more professionals among us to attain this certification and contribute to sustainable development within their professional fields. By obtaining EDGE certification, our team members will become EDGE professionals and disseminate this expertise in Armenia, advancing sustainable construction practices across the country.

At Green Rock Management Group, 68% of employees are women, and a significant portion of the management team is comprised of women. How did you ensure equal working conditions?

— Green Rock Management Group has become a member of the United Nations Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) program, joining 20 companies operating in Armenia. Through this initiative, we emphasize our commitment to promoting gender equality within our organization and beyond. We adhere closely to the



principles outlined by WEPs and actively contribute to advancing gender equality and inclusiveness in Armenia. Some examples highlight our success story. For instance, Katerina Danekina, who began as a Project Manager, has been promoted to the Head of Dilijan projects due to her professionalism and dedication. Following the renovation of the sports school in Dilijan, we initiated the establishment of a gymnastics club. Previously, the school primarily focused on strength sports, attracting only boys. Presently, 27 girls are actively participating in gymnastics at the Dilijan Sports School.

What projects does Green Rock plan to implement in the future?

— We plan to organize a series of educational, cultural, and sporting events in Dilijan to activate urban life. For instance, Dilijan will host a puppet theater twice a month, presenting performances for children aged 2 to 8. Additionally, free English language courses will be offered to the youngest residents of Dilijan. We aim to execute this program with the participation of English teachers from Dilijan. Training courses will be conducted for them at prestigious educational centers in Yerevan if necessary. Additionally, we will organize mental arithmetic courses, sessions with leading experts in diverse fields, professional orientation events, and outdoor yoga classes for both residents and visitors of the city. ♦

EMPOWERING THROUGH BALANCE

From her early days in corporate affairs to her current leadership role, PMI Armenia's General Manager Aneta Serbusca shared with Regional Post how she balances career, family, and the commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment at PMI Armenia.

INTERVIEW : ARSHAK TOVMASYAN / PHOTO : PMI ARMENIA



As a woman who has built a successful career, in your opinion, why is it important to support women and celebrate their achievements in this context?

— That is a very nice starting point. Let me step back and go to the childhood of any woman and individual, as everything begins way before we start our professional careers. It is important to foster an inclusive and equitable society from a young age. As a mother of two boys, Aleksander and Christian, I first work on being a role model, demonstrating inclusive behavior, and treating everyone with respect and equality. My boys know the importance of consent, boundaries, and respect in all relationships, whether it's friendship, family, personal or other.

Supporting women and celebrating their achievements is essential because it creates a more equitable and inclusive society. Historically, women have faced numerous barriers to success and have been underrepresented in various fields. By supporting women and celebrating their accomplishments, we not only recognize their talents and contributions but also send a powerful message about the value of gender equality. When women are empowered and given equal opportunities, it benefits everyone by fostering diverse perspectives, driving innovation, and promoting economic growth.

Additionally, celebrating women's achievements inspires and encourages future generations, showing them that gender should never be a barrier to reaching their full potential. Ultimately, supporting women is not just the right thing to do morally; it's also a wise investment in building a better future for all.

How did you start your career with Philip Morris International?

FINDING WAYS TO BALANCE YOUR CAREER AND MOTHERHOOD WITHOUT GETTING BURNED OUT OR OVERWHELMED IS POSSIBLE. OF COURSE, FINDING BALANCE REQUIRES SOME WORK IN AND OF ITSELF, BUT IT IS WELL WORTH THE EFFORT

— I started my career at PMI 11 years ago as Manager of Corporate Affairs – responsible for relations with government institutions, NGOs, and media. I loved the job, but eventually moved to the commercial function and general management. I could never have envisioned the enduring commitment and the wealth of experiences that would unfold over this significant period. During my career at Philip Morris, I have gained tremendous expertise & responsibility across various geographies: Eastern Europe, European Union, Middle East, South and South East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Throughout my journey with the company, I have watched the company evolve, adapt, and transform significantly. When I joined the company, its main business was the production and sale of cigarettes, and I could not even imagine how seriously the direction of our development would change. PMI has transformed into a company committed to building a future without cigarettes. Suffice it to say that our heated tobacco product has overtaken our leading cigarette in terms of net revenues for the first time. I am excited by this shift and proud to be part of it. We are changing the future of the world.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

— Oh, I can't say I have a "typical" working day. Working in a multinational company has the perfect advantage: every day is different. In my ideal

working day, I spend time with my team, helping to achieve our collective goals. I love the dynamic nature of my work, where each day presents new challenges and opportunities for innovation and growth.

I sincerely enjoy mentoring and developing my team members witnessing their growth and success.

Overall, what I love most about my workday is the opportunity to make a meaningful impact, both within our organization and in the broader community. Each day presents a chance to drive positive change, foster innovation, and contribute to our company's mission of transforming the smoke-free future.

What fundamental factors allow women to balance motherhood and a career? Can you provide tips on how you've managed to distribute your time and energy personally and professionally as a working mother?

— Finding ways to balance your career and motherhood without getting burned out or overwhelmed is possible. Of course, finding balance requires some work in and of itself, but it is well worth the effort.

First, the environment where you work and live has to be supportive. A supportive workplace culture and policies that accommodate working mothers, such as flexible work hours, parental leave, and childcare support, can significantly ease the balancing act. The support of the family or people surrounding you is equally

I CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY THAT WOMEN'S SKILLS, PERSPECTIVES, AND EXPERIENCES ARE NECESSARY FOR DRIVING INNOVATION, FOSTERING CREATIVITY, AND DRIVING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH IN ANY SECTOR

important, especially in the initial period: assisting with childcare responsibilities and emotional support. In my case, my husband has always been the biggest support for me! You also need to set and keep boundaries. You need to be open and honest with employers, colleagues, and family members about your needs, boundaries, and challenges. You should also combine your work and personal calendars to avoid conflicts. I believe this is key to effectively navigating the balancing act. Finally, remember to set aside time for yourself. Learn to give yourself a break and find opportunities to recharge in the chaos of managing work and motherhood because it's not just for you; this is essential for maintaining physical and mental well-being amidst the demands of motherhood and a career. Remember, you need to be a powerful example for your children!

What specific skills or perspectives do women bring to the table, and how do they contribute to innovation and growth in any sector?

— Oh, that's a great question. The skills and approaches women show are very diverse and specific. I believe that women bring unique perspectives, skills, and experiences to the table, and their representation in leadership positions is crucial for fostering innovation, creativity, and sustainable growth. Women often excel in building relationships, fostering teamwork, and facilitating effective communication. Their collaborative nature helps create inclusive environments

where diverse ideas flourish, leading to innovative solutions and better decision-making. Women tend to have strong emotional intelligence, allowing them to understand and empathize with others' perspectives, emotions, and needs. We are more empathetic, enabling us to understand team members' feelings, anticipate customer preferences, identify market trends, and develop products and services that resonate with diverse audiences. Women are adept at approaching problems from multiple angles, thinking creatively, and finding innovative solutions. Our ability to navigate change, overcome obstacles, and learn from failure is essential for driving innovation and organizational agility in rapidly evolving industries. I can confidently say that women's skills, perspectives, and experiences are necessary for driving innovation, fostering creativity, and driving sustainable growth in any sector.

How does Philip Morris International endorse an inclusive environment for women, and what specific programs does the company provide to support female employees' professional development?

— We're focused, as a company, on leveraging the full talents of both our women and men and achieving gender balance. Fostering a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace is not only the right thing to do. On our way to complete transformation, we must attract and retain a diverse community of innovators who can help deliver our smoke-free vision. We're proud that



women now comprise 42 percent of our workforce and more than 40 percent of our management positions globally. Meanwhile, in Armenia, this number of women in management is even higher, reaching 55 percent. At PMI, we see diversity as our greatest strength and are committed to building an inclusive culture and workplace that reflects the world's diversity. Our focus is on creating an environment where our employees from across the globe can be their authentic selves at work, contribute their best, support each other, and drive



the innovation and consumer-centricity needed to help us achieve our vision of a smoke-free future. At PMI, we see equal pay for equal work between men and women as the baseline standard for equality. We have confirmed that our actual pay practices match our good intentions with the Global EQUAL-SALARY Certification. PM Armenia was the first and only company in Armenia to be certified with Equal Salary Certification. This proves that the organization fosters a genuinely diverse, equal, and inclusive environment.

If you had to give one piece of advice to working mothers, what would it be?

— I don't think one piece of advice will help a lot, but I'll do my best! I would say the best thing to do is to prioritize self-compassion and sometimes embrace the concept of "good enough" rather than striving for perfection in every aspect of your life. Working mothers often juggle multiple responsibilities and face immense pressure to excel both personally and professionally. In the pursuit of balancing career aspirations

with family commitments, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and guilty about not meeting unrealistic standards. Therefore, it's essential to practice self-compassion and recognize that it's okay to make mistakes, ask for help, and prioritize your well-being. Give yourself permission to let go of being perfect and instead focus on doing your best in each moment. Remember that you are doing an incredible job balancing work and family, and it's okay to prioritize self-care, set boundaries, and ask for support when needed. ♦

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES:

ARMENIAN PERSPECTIVE

Since 2010, the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) have operated as a joint initiative of UN Women and the UN Global Compact with an aim to advance women's empowerment in various spheres, such as community, business, and the workplace. By incorporating WEPs throughout their operations, enterprises prioritize practices sensitive to gender equality. This is amplified through seven fundamental principles, all promoting gender equality and women's growth in the business sector. WEPs serve as a critical point for businesses in developing strategies and specific programs for women's involvement in leadership roles or decision-making positions.

Last year, during the "Ring the Bell for Gender Equality" event on WEPs organized by UNDP Armenia and the Armenian Securities Exchange (AMX), 15 Armenian businesses signed a joint statement expressing their commitment to integrate WEPs approaches within their corporate culture and operations. This year, the event was held for the fourth time, and another five companies joined the list, making the total number of signatory companies in Armenia 31.

Regional Post attended the event and talked to the organizers and beneficiaries about the significance of integrating WEP's principles into business practices and the importance of such events.



ZHANNA HARUTYUNYAN
Gender Equality Portfolio Manager, UNDP Armenia

The bell-ringing ceremony symbolizes dedication and accountability, reminding us that the private sector is committed to upholding gender equality. By ringing the bell, organizations declare their readiness to adhere to established guidelines and champion the WEPs. These principles serve as a blueprint for fostering inclusive corporate cultures where women thrive in leadership roles. They guide organizations in implementing policies and practices that ensure equal treatment for all employees, regardless of gender. Moreover, by actively participating in community initiatives and advocacy efforts, companies demonstrate their commitment to societal progress beyond their own walls. Additionally, they foster work-life balance by introducing more family-friendly practices. Through these efforts, organizations fulfill their social responsibilities and drive meaningful change toward gender equality and work-life balance.



IRINA CHALTIKYAN
Deputy CEO at McCann Yerevan

McCann Yerevan was one of the first companies to join the WEPs initiative. Women's Empowerment is about fostering progress and prosperity for all. Experience at our group of companies has shown that investing in women and girls yields tremendous returns for communities, economies, and societies at large. By signing WEPs, we also have our impact on creating a working environment where gender is not a limitation but a source of strength, where opportunities are not constrained by stereotypes.



PETROS PETOIAN
CEO and Founder at IMR -
International Marketing Research

Joining WEPs was crucial for us. From day one, our organization has valued women's contribution to business and recognized their significance. Thus, it was a logical move for us. It reinforced our belief in women's strength and their untapped potential. While many of the principles were already practiced within our company, our involvement with WEPs has amplified our focus on ensuring women's rights and freedom in the workplace.



HAYK YEGANYAN
General Manager at AMX

The practice of WEP's principles in Armenia demonstrates the enduring tradition of equality between men and women in Armenian society. It reflects that this 5000-year-old society continues to treat its members equally. By successfully implementing these principles, we've also shown that our country possesses a strong economy, efficiently utilizing its human capital. WEPs serve as a framework guiding employers in fostering these approaches and send a clear signal to Western countries that Armenia is committed to democracy.



VANANE ARARKTSYAN
Executive Director
at Keron Foundation

As the UNDP expert leading the introduction of WEPs in Armenia together with the team, we enabled Armenian companies to adopt WEPs, marking the beginning of this journey. This was a complex process due to challenges like COVID-19 and the 2020 war. But today, we have 31 leading companies in Armenia committed to WEPs' seven principles for empowering women. I firmly believe these principles will initiate significant progress within these organizations. It all begins with one person, one family, one organization. If one company shifts its culture towards gender equality, we'll witness broader societal change, elevating the country's standing globally. ♦

RING THE BELL FOR GENDER EQUALITY

On April 4th, the “Ring the Bell for Gender Equality” event, which focused on Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs), took place at the Alexander Luxury Collection Hotel in Yerevan. It was a joint effort by the UNDP in Armenia and the Armenian Securities Exchange (AMX). Similar bell-ringing ceremonies worldwide highlight the critical role of the private sector in advancing UN Sustainable Development Goal #5 on gender equality and female empowerment.

The event was a part of the “Women Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus” phase II project supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Austrian Development Agency.

This was the fourth time this event took place, and this year, five new companies, Idram, IDbank, Sunny Food, GreenRock Management Group, Tufenkian, and Smart Choice, joined the initiative and signed the agreement to adopt WEPs principles within their organizations.

The event included networking, keynote speeches, panel discussions, and even an interactive educational game for the attendees.



A photo story from the “Ring the Bell for Gender Equality” joint event of UNDP in Armenia and the Armenian Securities Exchange (AMX) on Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs).

ARARATBANK FOSTERING GENDER EQUALITY:

Stories of Female Leadership Rising

Regional Post sat down with three exceptional women driving change within AraratBank. We introduce the unique stories of Executive Board member Zaruhi Melkonyan, heading the International Operations Department; Gayane Stepanyan, leading Digital Banking Services; and Executive Board member Anahit Vardanyan, serving as the Chief Accountant of AraratBank.

INTERVIEW : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : ARARATBANK



Since the emergence of the banking system, women have been active in the industry world-wide. Although their involvement was often overlooked and limited to administrative positions, that changed throughout the years, especially during times of war or economic crisis when they stepped in to fill in the vacancies left by men. Now, women's active presence in the banking industry not only promotes gender equality but also brings a more profound array of perspectives, organizational skills, and broader insights. Since 1991, with an impressive number of female employees, AraratBank has diligently worked to ensure customer satisfaction and foster an inclusive corporate culture that sustains equality and enhances the welfare of all its employees. In 2022, AraratBank reiterated its dedication to female empowerment, joining the UN Women Empowerment Program (WEPs). Since AraratBank has already been guided by these principles, they did not have to assume commitment to follow the project values: they have joined the project and are developing an effective cooperation. The latter initiative advances women's empowerment across the community, business sector, and workplace. As of March 31, 2023, with 50 branches and an average workforce of 1058, 66% of AraratBank's employees are women, holding 1/3 leadership positions.

THE FIRST STEPS

Zaruhi Melkonyan is a member of the Executive Board and the Head of the International

Transactions Department at AraratBank. She started her career in banking at the beginning of the nineties and made her way from an entry-level position at an Armenian commercial bank to her current executive position. She joined AraratBank in January 2006 as the Head of the International Division. She built a solid female team of knowledgeable and ambitious professionals, constantly working on their professional development and keeping up-to-date with the latest international standards and practices. Under her leadership, the small division has grown into a complex multifunctional department for international transactions, responsible for a wide range of international operations, with an efficient correspondent network and partnerships worldwide. Over the same period, the Bank transformed from a small local bank with a few customers into one of the leading financial institutions in Armenia, with international recognition and achievements. "Both my parents worked in the financial sector, so I was no stranger to the environment. Yet we had a role to fulfill in our society, and that's why we always valued our customers, especially women," Ms. Melkonyan recalls. One of the Bank's newer members with solid math and programming knowledge, Gayane Stepanyan, is the former Head of Haypost's Banking Services and Money Transfers Department and has been the Director of Armenia's largest fintech company, IDram, for 11 years. She significantly contributed to the establishment of the e-money sector and joined AraratBank in 2018 as the

Head of the Digital Banking Department. Once she joined the team, they created the mobile banking app. "It is considered one of the best and most user-friendly mobile banking solutions in Armenia in terms of UX, services, simplicity, and safety," Gayane proudly admits. Our third speaker, Anahit Vardanyan, began her journey as an intern in the AraratBank's Accounting department after graduating from the Armenian State University of Economics in 2008. Fast-forward to 2012, she became the Head of the Reporting Division. In 2023, she was assigned as the Chief Accountant and eventually Executive Board member.

BALANCE AND DETAILS

Although many of the Bank's employees are women, Ms. Melkonyan and her team continuously work to make the Bank an even more appealing workplace for women. "If our female team members are on maternity leave, we send them webinar offers and recordings and keep updating them on the latest developments so that they don't fall behind. Upon their return, we provide a flexible working schedule to support them in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. I managed to prove to the Bank's management the effectiveness of flexible work hours in



◀ Gayane Stepanyan, Head of Digital Banking Services



▶ Zaruhi Melkonyan, Executive Board Member, Head of International Operations Department

specific situations. This was a notable challenge within corporate practices, but now the Bank is more open to considering such schemes for future employees, recognizing the potential advantages of attracting and retaining qualified team members," Ms. Melkonyan explains. Ms. Vardanyan reiterates this idea, highlighting the great opportunities the Bank has offered its employees in recent years, such as funding and supporting different educational programs for women employees and business development and growth.

Although a prominent part of the Bank's employees are now women, that wasn't always the case. "For some time, I was the only female member of the Executive Board. Still, I never felt like the other co-workers disagreed or under-appreciated any of my opinions or suggestions. Actually, it was quite the opposite. Furthermore, my male colleagues always encouraged me and never put barriers between the two genders. As a member of the Executive Board, I constantly advocated and promoted better working conditions, more training, and career opportunities for women, making AraratBank a better place to work, grow, and develop professionally. All these, of course, with the support of my male colleagues," explains Ms. Melkonyan.

Ms. Stepanyan believes, "Although historically, mostly men have dominated the financial sector, I believe women are better at managing finances and budgeting. They assess risks better and hence get better results. A woman leader takes a more balanced approach, regardless of the industry." Ms. Vardanyan agrees as she believes there is an apparent distinction between male and

female leaders, as "women are quite hard-working, putting more emphasis on the details." When it comes to their secret of succeeding up the career ladder, all three women mention balance and support. Ms. Melkonyan says, "One must balance work and family life. Firstly, I am grateful to my parents, who, by their example, helped me choose my favorite profession. Then, indeed, I was lucky to have my husband and his family support me. A woman can never fulfill her professional goals if her family doesn't support her. Their encouragement is essential."

Ms. Stepanyan's key is to "never bring your domestic issues to the workplace and vice versa. You are two different people in each space, and you need to separate them. Also, it is important to have a supportive family."

Ms. Vardanyan's secret is "keeping a balance between a personal and professional life, which I believe is very doable, and all the women working here are living proof of that."

KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Despite difficulties, all three women have focused on the positive instead of dwelling on the negative throughout their careers. Ms. Melkonyan explains that many of the employees in banks in Armenia are women and that she has never witnessed discrimination or neglectfulness of women's opinions from men throughout her career. "Ever since the Soviet Union, women in Armenia have occupied many top roles. Women here were no strangers to filling leading positions. And this has been passing on for generations now," adds Ms. Melkonyan. All three of our female interviewees admit that knowledge and constant self-development are the secrets to success. Ms. Melkonyan expresses, "I always loved education, and through learning and striving for achievement, all those years of hard work paid off. It goes without saying that all my supervisors were well-educated people and leaders, and their contribution to my achievements was significant. Undoubtedly, they were pleased with the successes and achievements of their employees and always valued their employees' learning and growing."

Ms. Stepanyan believes, "It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman; as a human being, one should always acquire new knowledge, work on themselves, and keep moving forward."

Education and hard work are critical factors for one's professional development, according to Ms. Vardanyan as well. She adds, "My journey is a perfect example to demonstrate that you can rapidly grow in one space, as long as your

▶ Anahit Vardanyan, Executive Board Member, Chief Accountant



managers and colleagues are supportive. As the years went by, I worked hard on myself, leading myself to the position I hold today."

PAVING THE ROAD

Ms. Melkonyan's advice to women new to the industry is again about self-exploration and development: "Always work on yourself, your education, and your skills. Don't back down, and always present yourself as you are. Don't minimize yourself. Struggle to make a place for yourself. There's always room for growth; always remember that. Be courageous and get educated."

Ms. Stepanyan's take is relatively similar. She believes the most important thing to remember is "to educate yourself constantly. When you're strong and knowledgeable, you move forward. The most important thing in this industry is to have the knowledge and proper education, as this industry requires you to be strong, for thousands of people's finances are trusted to you. It's an immense responsibility that requires strength and knowledge. Strong women will pave their way in this industry."

Ms. Vardanyan agrees with all stated above and adds, "I credit my success to my education and hard work. This is the key to my success, and it can work for anyone else." ♦

THE ART OF COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

On the occasion of Women's Month, Dalma Garden Mall launched an extensive breast cancer awareness campaign under the slogan "Better prevent than treat." Regional Post interviewed Mariam Chakarqan, the Mall's Deputy Director for Internal and External Relations, to learn more about the campaign and the integration of healthcare into its corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy.

INTERVIEW : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : DALMA GARDEN MALL

In 2022, Dalma Garden Mall introduced its CSR strategy and announced the launch of several collaborative projects. What was the motivation behind your latest campaign on breast cancer and thyroid gland awareness?

— Dalma Garden Mall is committed to prioritizing the human element in all its activities, including our latest campaign. Our CSR strategy initially did not include healthcare, but then I coincidentally met with the Director of the Armenian American Health Center, and when Ms. Khachanush shared statistics on breast cancer diagnosis rates in Armenia, I was shocked since the numbers were alarming. We have this national trait of not seeing a doctor until things get as bad as possible, yet late detection greatly affects the survival rate. If a person undergoes a yearly check-up, they can avoid further complications. As our campaign's slogan says, "It's better to prevent than to treat." Diving deeper into the issue, we realized there was a severe gap in awareness and felt compelled to

take action. With millions visiting our mall yearly, we saw an opportunity to inform a large audience.

What were the key elements of this campaign?

— In collaboration with the Armenian-American Health Center, we offered our customers free breast and thyroid gland sonography. Initially, we were unsure about the response, but once we began promoting the initiative, the demand was overwhelming. Originally planning for around 300 participants, we quickly adjusted to accommodate the high demand, increasing the number to 1000. Additionally, over 4000 visitors who purchased a Dalma Gift Card received a 25% discount voucher for diagnostics. In order to promote regular check-ups, turning them into a habit, a ritual, registered participants also received discount vouchers after their first diagnostics for subsequent check-ups. This expansion required significant efforts from both the mall and the medical center. However, we jointly agreed

that if we were going to undertake this initiative, we should do it properly. As they say, go big or go home.

The promotional part of the campaign itself was interesting. How did this idea come to be?

— Inspired by British Vogue's celebration of 40 iconic women for their March cover, we drew inspiration to gather Armenian women who have succeeded in diverse fields. For us, success took various forms—whether it was having many children, driving change within the community, or having a thriving career. Regardless of their audience size, these women had unique paths and could effectively share our message. We organized a themed photoshoot with these extraordinary women and created a video where they shared their thoughts on the importance of health. At the heart of the campaign was the message that loving and caring for yourself is also about taking care of your health. Understanding that fear



Dalma Garden Mall launched an awareness campaign on breast cancer and thyroid gland illness prevention in celebration of Women's Month. It was driven by alarming statistics on the high rates of breast cancer and thyroid issues in Armenia, coupled with low rates of regular check-ups. Collaborating with the Armenian American Health Center, the campaign aimed to promote early detection and preventive health measures. It consisted of two key components. The first was free breast and thyroid sonography, with participants receiving discount vouchers for future check-ups to encourage regular health monitoring. The second component provided each person buying a Dalma Gift Card a similar discount voucher, valid for a year. As a result, over 1,000 people underwent free check-ups, and over 4,000 received discount vouchers. The campaign also featured a themed photoshoot with Armenian female opinion makers and an informative video where they encouraged their peers to support each other, love themselves, and undergo frequent check-ups.

often prevents people from going for check-ups, instead of focusing on the negative, we highlighted the positive outcomes, stating, "Around 80% of the cases were prevented thanks to early-stage diagnostics."

Why was it essential for this campaign to convey its messages through female voices?

— Women have been central to many vital initiatives I've seen over the years.

Uniting women for a project that benefits other women fosters a sense of community and solidarity. We chose women who could share their honest experiences, making the campaign more relatable and impactful. It's different when a woman tells you, "I got checked up. Now it's your turn!" compared to men who haven't experienced it. Hearing it from someone you can click to makes all the difference. Each story or message we communicated

within this project was deeply personal and relatable for our participants. Bringing these women together was about teaming up for a good cause and creating a community of women who can voice important ideas. The campaign even inspired similar trends among other companies and banks, proving that a good example is contagious.

Ms. Chakarqan, how do you see the future of this initiative?

— We are committed to tracking the progress of those who participated in the free diagnostics and received vouchers. In a year's time, we'll evaluate the impact—how many women underwent check-ups, how many were diagnosed and prevented difficulties, and ultimately, how many lives were saved. We envision this as an ongoing effort. The core idea of our campaign is "Every day is Women's Day." We plan to continue implementing similar campaigns within this framework, as we already have numerous ideas in the pipeline. The overwhelmingly positive feedback we've received reinforces our belief that we're on the right path. It motivates us to persist and expand our efforts in the future. Our CSR message is clear: significant goals can be accomplished through small inputs and collective efforts. CSR isn't something one can do alone all the time; it requires collaboration with like-minded organizations. We extend our gratitude to the Armenian American Health Center for their cooperation and believe that we can achieve remarkable results with shared values. ♦



THE TWO WOMEN WHO REDEFINED ARMENIA'S WINE TOURISM

Regional Post met with Mary Badalyan and Nune Manukyan, the women behind Yerevan Wine Days and the Founders of EventToura agency, to learn about the path they took to establish one of the largest wine festivals in the region.

TEXT : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : EVENTTOURA



> The team of EventToura Agency



Before the Yerevan Wine Days festival, Armenia, renowned for its rich wine heritage, had already had the Areni Wine Festival for 15 years, established by Nune Manukyan herself. However, she saw the demand for a larger platform at some point: "I wanted to showcase Armenia as a wine region with a rich legacy." After getting acquainted with her soon-to-be busi-

ness partner, Mary Badalyan, they decided to team up and make it happen. "Since 2008, the Areni Wine Festival has attracted tourists to Armenia. However, by 2016, the wine industry had developed, and we had around 50-70 local Armenian winemakers. As successful as the Areni Wine Festival was, it had a different format and, thus, was not enough to represent the whole Armenian wine industry. Seeing the niche was important, and Nune saw that and brought the idea to life," explained Mary Badalyan. While Mary's expertise lay in business, and she was never involved in the tourism/festival industries before, something captivated her about Yerevan's very own Wine Festival. From her own experiences as a tourist abroad, she knew that all tourists appreciate such festivals, and such events have the power to bring them closer to a country's culture.

< The Founders of EventToura agency, Nune Manukyan and Mary Badalyan



When establishing Yerevan Wine Days, Mary and Nune aimed to create not just a festival but a long-lasting Armenian product. With the tourism industry evolving and the world rapidly changing, they knew Armenia had to keep up. "We wanted people to come to Yerevan, learn about Armenia, and remember our city's name," Mary emphasized.

To everyone's surprise, the very first Yerevan Wine Days was a smash hit, with 10,000 people attending it that year. "Something new was created; it was the messiest one of our festivals, but it's also everyone's favorite," Nune fondly recalled. >



After the festival's triumph, both founders looked ahead, envisioning where it might be in 10, 20, or even 30 years. Mary's priority was clear: crafting a business model that could stand independently working with various sponsors rather than relying on grants or similar funding. Thanks to Yerevan Wine Days and EventToura, Armenia now boasts over 40 community festivals, all established based on their business model. As two strategic-minded women, Nune and Mary spotted new opportunities within the events landscape. They explain that people's perceptions of festivals have changed. "Yerevan's

Wine Days established a blue ocean that brought a niche for festivals and created space for them to grow and approach sponsors." "In short, Yerevan Wine Days built upon the foundation of the Areni Wine Festival. But as the industry grew, it needed something bigger—a festival for the city," Mary said. Today, EventToura's core mission and vision revolve around fostering Armenia's authentic tourism, ensuring the enduring life of its festivals, and promoting Armenia as not only a wine hub but also a peaceful and attractive tourist destination. "These festivals



◀
Mary Badalyan



◀
Nune Manukyan

▼
Tumanyan street during Yerevan Wine Days

contribute to the country's economy by drawing many tourists to these three-day events. Our mission is to put Armenia on the global stage through various means," explained Nune. Additionally, EventToura doesn't just focus on its own success; it also aims to empower other Armenian organizations, encouraging collaboration rather than competition. One of the major challenges they faced during the festival's initial setup was proving that the country needed this festival. "One example is back in 2020, after the war, when we decided to hold the 2021 Yerevan Wine Days, we knew we would receive backlash for holding the festival amidst these horrific events.

But with our forward-thinking approach, we aimed to attract many tourists and show them that although the country had just experienced a war, it was now safe and still operating like before," remembered Mary. According to both founders, the festival needs to be valued, appreciated, and safeguarded, not just by locals but also by the government. Before Yerevan Wine Days, no country had used the term "wine days"; now, many are adopting it. While one of their primary goals is to inspire other festivals, such imitations can undermine their uniqueness and impact.

They stress the need for government involvement and support to address such challenges. Today, having firmly established their presence, they are gearing up for larger-scale initiatives and believe that collaborating with neighboring countries in the region, such as Georgia, would be highly advantageous. "We want our neighboring countries to see us as business partners and work together to attract more tourists to the region. As two female entrepreneurs, we aim to cultivate successful business relationships with organizers from all our neighboring countries," they explained. Nune also revealed that one of her early inspirations for launching Yerevan Wine Days came after attending Tbilisi's Wine Festival. "Theirs was held in May, and after bringing my project to life, I envisioned ours a week earlier so that both festivals could complement each other, encouraging tourists to visit both countries," she added. While Nune fondly recalls the very first Yerevan Wine Days as her favorite, Mary points to 2019 as hers. It was the year she realized the festival had indeed come into its own, with all aspects meticulously planned out. "As an organizer, I view it from a business perspective,

▶
Newlyweds at Yerevan Wine Days



focusing on the logistics, issues, and overall outcome," Mary explained. Looking back at the challenges of 2020, when the pandemic hit, both Nune and Mary were impressed by their team's flexibility. Within just ten days, they pivoted to organize an online event. "It wasn't Yerevan Wine Days per se; it was a different product. But it showcased our team's adaptability and flexibility skills. As a woman leader, it was a test for me as well, but it was an interesting experience—an adaptation test," Nune reflected.

As two individuals who embrace innovation, both Mary and Nune acknowledge the importance of being open to making mistakes. "Making the right

decisions is easy and doesn't make you a leader. It's the tough decisions that have a lasting impact. I believe we proved our leadership by making such tough calls and sticking by them," Mary concluded. Through their challenging journey, Nune and Mary have gathered insights they're eager to share with women considering entrepreneurship. They've noticed a significant change in the mindset and work ethic of Armenian women over the past seven years, with more women taking on roles as small business owners and community leaders. However, they emphasize the importance of gender equality and collaboration, recognizing that both are essential for success. ♦



WE CLUB: A Catalyst For Action

Women Empowerment Club (WE CLUB), implemented within GIZ's Good Governance for Local Development South Caucasus programme, is currently transforming the local governance landscape in Armenia. Regional Post interviewed Lika Mkrtchyan, Adviser to the programme, about the core idea behind the WE CLUB and the objectives it pursues.

TEXT : ARSHAK TOVMASYAN / PHOTO : GIZ



Transparent and accountable local self-governments are crucial for fostering democracy and building citizens' trust in public administration. The local community is the root of any democratic development. Participation of women in local democracy empowers them to take ownership of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and ensures diverse perspectives in decision-making processes; through community organizing, political activism, and leadership roles, women can challenge traditional gender norms and contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive societies. When women hold positions of power in local councils, local administration, or community organizations, they can advocate for policies that address the needs and concerns of not only women, thereby promoting gender equality. Society is changing, and perceptions are different. Still, the true meaning of women's empowerment can be achieved only when the barriers to gender inequality are eliminated, and women and men are given equal opportunities for decision-making. "Women leaders in local self-government serve as role models for future generations, inspiring young girls and women to pursue careers in politics and public service. By seeing women in positions of authority, individuals are more likely to believe in their own potential to effect positive change in their communities," says Ms. Mkrtchyan. The Women Empowerment Club (WE CLUB) is an informal platform established by GIZ that incentivizes women's active involvement in decision-making processes in Armenian municipalities, strengthens their capacities in local administrations through establishing strong links and networks among



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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

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and Cooperation SDC

Women Empowerment Club (WE CLUB) is carried out in the frames of the Good Governance for Local Development South Caucasus Programme implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and co-funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC). The Programme is implemented in close cooperation with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of the Republic of Armenia.



representatives of different sectors, and stipulates equal participation of women and men in political life, public and social spheres. The WE Club allows participants to hold informal meetings and discussions, stipulate a dialogue among local self-governments and citizens, foster collaboration among municipalities, and discuss best practices and ways to further apply them in the context of inter-municipal cooperation. It is quite challenging for women being in politics, especially in patriarchal societies, nevertheless, women's role is pivotal in shaping lives, values, and making decisions affecting the society. Women's political participation is crucial, as the political representation of at least half of the population provides for more impact, added value, and equality in decision-making for society as a whole. "In Women Empowerment Club, voices are heard, ideas flourish, and change begins. We believe in the power of inclusivity, where women and men come together at the local level to exchange thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Our platform serves as a springboard for discussions on crucial issues, paving the way for solutions that can ripple up to policy levels. Here, every voice matters, every perspective is valued, and every individual is empowered to make a difference. Here, individuals from all walks of life come together, bound by a shared vision: to uplift, inspire, and advocate for gender equality," adds Ms. Mkrtchyan. The WE Club strives to create a nurturing environment where empowerment thrives. Through collaboration, education, and advocacy, WE Club aims to break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and build a more equitable society for all.

"Empowerment isn't about giving people power. It's about helping them realize they already have it within themselves." Dialogue is vital at the Women Empowerment Club. Through vibrant discussions and thought-provoking exchanges, members delve into pressing issues facing women, vulnerable groups, and society as a whole. Yet, the Club is not just a platform for constructive conversation — it's a catalyst for action. Armed with newfound insights and shared experiences, members channel their collective energy toward tangible change in their communities. From community initiatives to advocacy campaigns, they champion causes that resonate with their values and beliefs, establishing a good dialogue among different actors at the community level. One of the Club's core missions is to bridge the gap between local voices, local authorities, and public and private actors advocating for systemic change and influencing policies that shape the lives of women and marginalized communities. Through engagement with policymakers and community leaders, the Club seeks to dismantle barriers and build a more inclusive society. However, the most profound impact of the Women Empowerment Club lies in its ability to inspire. As members share their stories, triumphs, and struggles, they cultivate a culture of resilience and empowerment. Each voice adds a unique hue to the vibrant tapestry of their shared journey, reminding others of the power that lies within. Through initiatives like WE Club and WE Talks, GIZ reaffirms its commitment to fostering inclusive development and gender equality in Armenia, catalyzing positive change, and nurturing a more equitable society for all. ♦

“THE GOAL HAS BEEN AND WILL REMAIN TO HELP PEOPLE LIVE THEIR BEST LIVES!”

NINA KANDELAKI

As a global health and wellness community, Herbalife has been around for over 40 years and operates in more than 90 countries. Through its scientifically supported products, coach guidance, and flexible business opportunities, millions of individuals can enact tangible improvements in their lives. Regional Post met with Nina Kandelaki, Regional Vice President of Herbalife, to learn more about the company, what it has to offer, and the influential role women play in its development.

INTERVIEW : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : HERBALIFE



Ms. Kandelaki, where does the story of Herbalife begin? What were its initial objectives?

— The company was founded in 1980 by Mark Hughes (1956-2000), an American entrepreneur and later founder and the first Herbalife Independent Member. He initially started working on creating balanced nutrition and products, and he wanted them to be accessible everywhere.

He followed the direct sales model, and we still have the same vision to this day. The goal has been and will remain to help people live their best lives!

With Herbalife's global presence spanning more than four decades and its presence in Armenia for more than ten years, how successful has the company been in Armenia over the past decade?



> Nina Kandelaki, Regional Vice President of Herbalife



— We have great female Independent Members in Armenia, which is the core of the organization. We are constantly adding new tastes to our legendary product, the protein shake Formula 1, and providing them in the Armenian market. Throughout the years, we have witnessed significant growth in the Armenian market as more people follow and promote healthy lifestyles in Armenia. Last year, we also received a prestigious Armenian award, 'The Leader' for the first time in a 'balanced nutrition' nomination. The brightness and growth of Armenia are helping the company's growth, first through the products and then with the business.

Herbalife enables individuals to become Independent Members and venture into entrepreneurship. In your perspective, what makes this opportunity so appealing, and how does it contribute to the company's success?

— Our model is quite flexible and offers people the freedom to run their business however they see fit. I would say that it goes as "You get as much as you put in." Each member gets to decide whether to work from home or an office. If you are a mom with a kid, you can do it part-time or full-time with your partner as a full business. We believe this aspect attracts people the most. Even young people love the flexibility and need it in their everyday lives.

You may have heard that from March 8th to April 7th, Armenia celebrates Women's Month. As a woman who has built a successful career path, why is it so important to support women and celebrate their achievements in this context?

— As a Caucasian woman, we are naturally powerful and dominant figures, but support is always an essential thing. It's important to have a mentor to help you in your business, someone to show you how to be successful. For us women, being surrounded by a community of successful women is essential. That's what we have at Herbalife. 75% of our Independent Members are vigorously working women building their own businesses. Through it all, I believe it's rewarding to see other women willing to help and guide you.



In your opinion, what unique skills do women possess that can drive innovation and advancement in this business sector?

— Herbalife is all about showing people that everything is possible. A woman possesses the emotional intelligence and patience to guide a large number of people. These skills are extremely helpful and advantageous in any business. A woman also has much more discipline and

multitasking abilities. Women should not try to be like men when running a business; on the contrary, we need to embrace our womanhood and identity.

What changes would you like to see in the industry, including in the context of gender equality?

— I would love to see more women in more businesses. At Herbalife, we already offer lots of opportunities for women. We want to support all women, moms, and young women, regardless of their ages and roles. A woman can combine her personal and professional lives. They can maintain that balance. We at Herbalife exist as a motivating community that supports all women in all phases of their lives.

Do you think that women's entrepreneurship is a global trend? In what areas are women entrepreneurs the most successful? What determines their motivation?

— Entrepreneurship is a global trend now, and we see that as a company with 80% women among Herbalife Independent Members. More women strive for it now rather than moving towards an ordinary career. As different research suggests, women dominate the areas involving lifestyle and beauty, and direct selling plays a big role in this.



Creating your own business requires significant material investments, and not everyone has the opportunity for this. Surely, start-up capital is not the only barrier that stops a woman from taking the path of entrepreneurship. What do you encounter in practice, and how does Herbalife help to overcome such difficulties?

— One of the benefits of starting your business with Herbalife is the fact that it only requires your time and a lot of desire to learn and communicate with people. You don't need to invest in a lot to get started. Many of our women Independent Members devel-

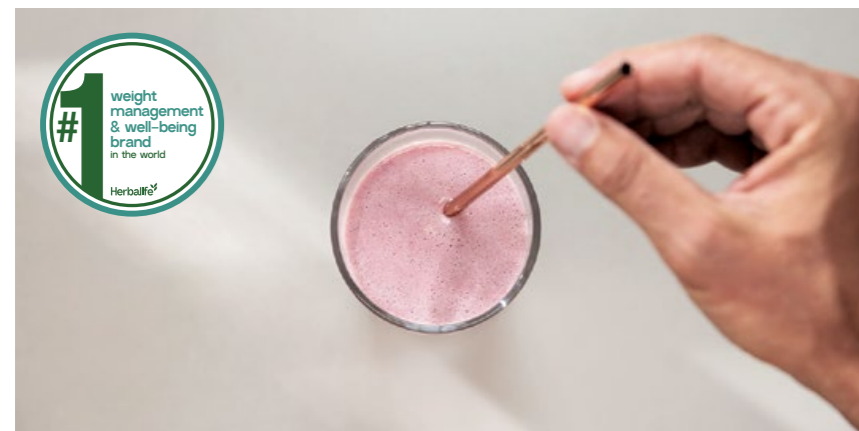
op their businesses online (such as weight loss marathon coaches). Herbalife gives you all the infrastructure for a good start. All you need to do is invest your time and energy, and the rest will follow*.

Finally, what advice would you give to women thinking about starting their own business but still having doubts?

— I would encourage them to pursue what they like and enjoy and, most importantly, to follow their hearts. Start small, try the concept as a start-up (which is how all our Independent Members start their businesses). It's also extremely important to start with a community. Do what you like, do what you know, and see if the infrastructure will help and support you grow, and that is exactly what Herbalife offers to its community. ♦

* Atypical achievements come from hard work. Most distributors earn some extra money. For more, see hrbl.me/SAGC_WW.

All references to weight management relate to the Herbalife weight management programme which includes, amongst other things, a balanced diet, regular exercise, an adequate daily fluid intake, nutritional supplementation where required and appropriate rest, individual results will vary.



CRISTIANO RONALDO CHOOSES HERBALIFE

More than 10 years

the famous athlete prefers **Herbalife products** for balanced nutrition and healthy lifestyle



Herbalife

EMPOWERING WOMEN: A CEO'S VISION FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY

Interview with Armine Zakaryan, CEO at Deem Communications

In the dynamic world of marketing and communications, Armine Zakaryan has risen to the position of CEO at Deem Communications since 2014. Starting as a Brand Manager, she climbed the career ladder through her commitment and hard work. In this interview with Regional Post, Armine discusses her experiences and sheds light on the evolving landscape of gender roles within the industry.

INTERVIEW : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : DEEM COMMUNICATIONS

What specific skills or perspectives do women bring to the table, and how do they contribute to innovation and growth in any sector?

— Men and women have different ways of thinking. To get good results, I believe a company should make the most of both perspectives. In the beginning, Deem was run by the owner, Raffi



Nizibian, for eight years. He eventually decided to share the leadership role and handed me the baton while remaining the Creative Director. Since then, our ideas have often collided, but those differing points of view have led to better solutions. Therefore, including women in lead positions or the high-level decision-making processes only enriches the approach models and final solutions.

Compared to other fields, do you perceive Armenia's PR industry as more male or female-dominated?

— In recent decades, we've noticed more women entering the PR field. However, categorizing a field as predominantly male or female might be a stereotypical misperception. Communication is built on empathy, active listening, and relationship-building, qualities that are often associated with women. This might explain why wom-

COMMUNICATION IS BUILT ON EMPATHY, ACTIVE LISTENING, AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING, QUALITIES THAT ARE OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN

en excel in this field. However, these stereotypes don't reflect individuals' abilities or interests. Men can be just as talented and accomplished in communication roles as well.

Did you face any particular challenges as a woman?

— Since my tenure as head of an Agency, I've noticed a significant shift in the field and beyond. There were instances where clients disregarded me in meetings, but imagine their surprise when they had to turn to me when decisions needed to be made. In some cases of idea pitches, some men seemed to grasp ideas better when another man presented them. I'm pleased to see significant improvements with more women in leadership roles today, and that way of thinking has decreased intensively.

What changes would you like to see within the industry, in general, and concerning gender equality?

I'd like to see more women leaders in the corporate world and private sector, not just in NGOs or SMEs. I want to see a more accepting and appreciative society as women make their voices heard as decision-makers, not only in business but also in politics. Why not have a female Prime Minister in our country? As a mother of two daughters, I think it's crucial to foster an environment at home that encourages women to grow and succeed on both local and global scales. Although, over the past years, I have seen a fundamental shift, outdated stereotypes still hold many women back from reaching their full potential.

What aspects of company culture do you prioritize, and what strategies do you aim to cultivate within your team?

My primary values are honesty, loyalty, and respect. These are also the pillars of Deem. Over the years, we've been considered a school, having shaped over 120 professionals and cultivating such values. These acquired skills and values are used by most in our professional and personal lives. Today, Deemers, as we call ourselves, live and work worldwide in various managerial and creative positions.

In today's landscape, women have numerous responsibilities. What helps and enables you to pursue your career consistently?

While some may think running an organization is easy, actually, it's pretty challenging. It means ensuring employees' well-being at the workplace, supporting their career development, using business opportunities, and

keeping the company financially stable – all while meeting shareholders' objectives. As a woman, I also have to take care of my family. Balancing these two equally important parts of my life is my daily challenge. But I genuinely enjoy every part of my work, from communicating with people to creating products I can later feel proud of. I then feed off that energy and invest it in my family and vice versa.

How do you envision the future of Marketing & Communication in Armenia?

Like the rest of the world, our industry is changing rapidly, especially following digital transformations. To stay relevant, we keep a close eye on current trends and set out our approaches by understanding new technologies and their effects on our field to avoid becoming redundant or obsolete. For instance, our latest thought leadership initiative launched in 2022, focusing on the notion of Gen N. Amplifying the concept, we targeted the tech sector and inaugurated an event highlighting topics of communications in crisis situations, hope-based communications, and web3. We invited international and local speakers to speak to an audience of 90+ C-level professionals. Last year, we packaged the discussions into articles in collaboration with Life in Armenia magazine. Once again, this year, we plan to continue with the format of an event.

What advice would you give young women considering career advancement in the industry?

Our company offers the younger generation an opportunity to learn, develop, and grow in order to become a full member of our team. My advice to them is not to be afraid of their aspirations and ideas as they progress. This field is diverse and covers many areas, so there's never just one correct approach. Personally, I find that I'm always learning something new from each project I undertake. ♦

SAVAR WINES

Yielding Quality, Diversity and Transformation

In a country renowned for its wine heritage, Armenia's wine industry has experienced even more significant growth over the past decade. Regional Post caught up with Savar Wines to delve into their wines, learn their story and find out the key values behind the brand.

TEXT : HENNA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : ASHKHEN DAVTYAN



Born and raised in the old village of Rind, Vayots Dzor, Vardan Sahakyan knew he wanted to put his little village on the global map. Later in life, he moved to abroad and gained business expertise, which paved the way for his return to his native land with a groundbreaking concept: Savar. Ever since he was young, Vardan remembers how his grandmother would work in the vineyards and make home-made wine for the family. It's no surprise that wine had significance for him from a young age, considering that Vayots Dzor, the province where Rind is located, is home to the world's oldest known winery and is the site of some of the country's most prominent contemporary vineyards. The initial goal with Savar was to come back to where it all started and provide business opportunities for the local villagers. It was back in 2018 when Vardan first purchased old vineyards and began working with autochthonous. All these years later, they have a much larger grape variety, including Areni, Khatoun Kharji, Voskehat, Tozot, Milagh, and more. Since its establishment, Savar has provided job opportunities for more than 30 families in the village. However, they emphasize that Savar was not the pioneer in this matter, as other renowned Armenian Wines such as Zorah, Noah, and Trinity and others have brought attention to the villages. As they laid the foundation, Savar joined them and emphasized women's employment both in the field and in their Yerevan office. In fact, most of Savar's employees are women, occupying 90% of the job positions. The reason why they emphasize women's rights is that they know for a fact that men are not the only ones who are running the industry, as lots of women have worked and are currently working and developing the field. "We still use old-fashioned methods; one example is how we still pick the grapes by hand, and the love and dedication of our women workers make our wines more valuable," says Ani Hovsepyan, Savar's Export Manager. In fact, the person in charge of cultivating and reviving the lands is Tikin Siran. With more than 20 years of experience in gardening and growing grapes, Tikin Siran, who's a local



lady from Rind, is the one who's growing Savar's lands through her new standards. She became the brand's leading adviser, or as everyone else calls her, "The queen of the vineyard."

They are currently working on establishing their winery with a tasting room. Another of Savar's goals is to improve and contribute to the development of tourism in Armenia, so they plan to host international guests here in their winery. Savar has also been participating in expos and international wine competitions outside of Armenia, implementing alternative measures to approach their objective. Why should people choose Savar wines over other international wine labels? Ani Hovsepyan, the Export Manager of Savar Wines and Arpine Aleksanyan, the Brand's Ambassador explained that, in Armenia, grapes are grown differently. Whether through the territories, the minerals, or the ambient, each element plays a distinct role, contributing to the individuality of grapes from every region. On a broader scale, they are trying to tackle two main issues: bringing more awareness to Armenia's wine industry and offering high-quality wines. As the wine industry is separated into two parts, the new world, and the old world, Armenia falls

under the antic world category, and most people tend to forget and overlook it. "We are contributing in that sense as we're bringing Armenia's name to the global wine industry. Through our participation and efforts in getting Savar Wines distributed abroad, we are addressing this important issue," adds Arpine. Then there is the issue with the wine quality, and one of Savar's main priorities is to maintain high quality, as they believe that it reflects not only them but also the country as a whole. "It's not only about us, but we care about our country's name and how it is represented on a larger scale." Although it has a nice ring to it, it requires time to grasp the idea behind the name Savar. However, we learned that the location inspired it; the main lands are in Aghavnadzor, and the winery is in Rind, and these two are separated by a small captivating valley, making you want to soar from the winery to the lands. Savar is the same as soaring — looking down from the height of a bird's flight through mountains and gardens. The fresh air, mountains, and the high sky are all part of the experience. The location itself invites the visitors to free their minds, drink wine, and soar. "The desire to soar through a bottle of wine. That's how the name Savar was born," explains Arpine. ♦

Breaking Stereotypes and Restoring Order: *Women in the Army*

What do women think about the introduction of the law on voluntary military service?

Armenian society has long been marked by a clear division of gender roles. Traditionally, women have been associated with qualities like gentleness, sensuality, and nurturing, while men have been linked with traits such as efficiency, pragmatism, independence, and strength. Women have typically been tasked with caring for the family and managing the household, while men have been expected to work outside the home and maintain dominance within the family. While military service has been widely viewed as a standard path for men, there has always been skepticism surrounding women's involvement in the military. Despite this skepticism, experts acknowledge several positive aspects of women serving in the armed forces. Since the establishment of the Armenian army, women have volunteered for military service, though the majority served in administrative roles. In July 2023, a new law was passed allowing women to serve in the military voluntarily.

TEXT : ARMINE MARTIROSYAN / PHOTO : RA MINISTRY OF DEFENSE



WHO FITS INTO A MILITARY UNIFORM?

Women aged 18 to 27 are eligible to apply for military service in Armenia. The service is voluntary and lasts six months. Upon completion, women receive a one-time payment of 1 million drams. In case of early discharge due to health reasons, this amount is prorated according to the months served. During their service, women are also paid a regular salary. Women are assigned to a specific military unit without drawing lots or the possibility of subsequent transfer. Special conditions are arranged for them in the barracks, where a separate room in one of the training units is designated for women, which will eventually evolve into a women's battalion, with the prospect of creating a women's regiment. The command staff for these units will also consist of women. Women who complete their military service will be enrolled in the reserves and can be called upon if needed. There's precedent for all-female military formations in Armenia. According to the RA Ministry of Defense, in 2017, an all-female platoon was formed to participate in NATO peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Additionally, Armenia deployed an all-female peacekeeping battalion as part of the UN mission in Lebanon.



ISRAELI EXPERIENCE

Conscripting women for military service is common in several countries, such as Israel, North Korea, Taiwan, Greece, Myanmar, Malaysia, Eritrea, Norway, and Sweden. Unlike in Armenia, where women's military service is voluntary, these countries mandate military service for women. However, even in these nations, there are several exceptions. For example, although women in Israel are required to serve, about two-thirds receive deferments or exemptions from military service due to pregnancy or religious reasons. Additionally, after completing their military service, most women in Israel are not required to undergo annual military training. Women's involvement in the Israeli army dates back to the War of Independence in 1948, when the country faced significant threats, and women played a crucial role in defending Israel. However, after the war ended, women largely ceased participating in combat operations. Today, most women in the Israeli military serve in non-combat units. While mandatory military service for women exists in many countries, their roles and levels of engagement in direct combat vary widely.

THE DOORS OF MILITARY UNIVERSITIES ARE OPEN TO WOMEN.

According to the former press secretary of the Ministry of Defense, Artsrun Hovhannisyanyan, in 2014, the number of female contract workers in the Armenian Armed Forces exceeded 20%. Women comprised 35-40% of administrative staff, communications personnel, and medical professionals. In 2012, the Armenian army had 1,400 women in service, which increased to 2,000 by 2017. Armenian women could enroll in military educational institutions only in 2013 when the Vazgen Sargsyan Military University and the Military Aviation Institute opened their doors to women for the first time. According to official statistics, the participation of women in the Armed Forces rose from 2013 to 2016. In 2013, only three women entered military universities, but by 2016, this number had increased to 12. However, from 2017 to 2019, a decline was observed: six women entered military universities in 2017, four in 2018, and only three in 2019. Following this downturn, there has been a comparative increase in women's participation in military institutions in 2020 as four women entered military universities, and in 2021, the number rose to five.

A WOMAN IN THE ARMY — TO ORDER

Reserve Colonel Grigory Sahakyan acknowledges that the newly implemented system for integration has its positive aspects, though many details still require careful consideration and refinement. According to Sahakyan, if a woman wants to contribute to building the army, she should be able to do so. This would facilitate the full integration of women into all spheres of the country's life. Sahakyan believes attracting women into the military and promoting their inclusion could positively impact the army. "Women are more efficient; they are usually workaholics. In several specialized areas, they are easily trained, attentive, and disciplined, which is crucial," he said. Sahakyan noted that women in the Armenian



Armed Forces serve in branches like air defense and communications, where precision when transmitting information and attention to detail are highly valued, qualities that women tend to demonstrate. Women have recently begun joining the artillery ranks, though their numbers are still relatively low in infantry units. Accommodating women in the military poses some challenges. Here, the responsibility for creating conditions lies with the command staff. According to Sahakyan, there's a need to address specific issues related to military training and field operations, including providing separate facilities for women during exercises. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the marital status of female servicemen. "Regarding physical activity, Sahakyan stated that there should be no significant issues, as specialized standards for women are quite achievable. Physical exercise is essential to ensure endurance and the capability to perform various functional tasks," Sahakyan concluded.

PATRIARCHAL STEREOTYPES

Military psychologist Khachatur Gasparyan views women's service in the

army as a natural progression and believes that, in many situations, women can be irreplaceable. "The idea of a "female soldier" hasn't yet taken root in our national consciousness due to patriarchal stereotypes, cultural, national, and ethno-psychological characteristics of our society. We should look at it from a broader perspective. Don't think that a female soldier defends the border from dusk till dawn with a machine gun in her hand. There are many other roles in the army where a woman can be precious," Gasparyan noted. Gasparyan suggests that times are changing, stereotypes are being broken, and women themselves want to be equal with men in all areas of life. While society may initially be skeptical about women's military service, he believes it will eventually become a norm. However, he thinks it is too soon to consider compulsory military service for women. "There are processes that take time," he noted. Gasparyan believes it's wrong to determine someone's abilities based on gender, emphasizing that individuals have varying levels of responsibility. Although some

studies suggest that women are more pragmatic than men, it's wrong to say that women are more responsible than men just because they are women.

MEN PULLING UP NEXT TO WOMEN

It's often believed that a woman can feel secure near a man in military uniform due to the perceived illusion of complete protection. But what impact do women in uniform have on the men serving alongside them? Narine Aghajanyan, a 33-year-old veteran of three wars in Artsakh, asserts that men tend to feel more successful and responsible when serving with women in the army. Narine has been with the Artsakh Defense Army since 2015. Initially, she served in an air defense unit in Shushi and later moved to posts near the village of Shosh, where she faced the 2020 war. After the war, Narine attended specializ-



ed courses and transitioned to artillery, eventually becoming a platoon commander and a gun commander with the rank of lieutenant. "When the war started in September 2023, I was the only woman at our combat post, and everyone knew how skillfully I handled the gun. We did our job 100 percent," she recalls. Narine acknowledges that not all women are suited for military service, as army rules are not for everyone. Her role, responsibilities, and workload were no different from those of her male counterparts. She notes that there were only four women like her in the entire army, and many women couldn't handle the demands of traveling to combat positions (sometimes staying in the same position for months) or enduring combat alerts. Thus, they were transferred to easier positions. "A person's character is largely shaped by their love for their country and military service, and by how much courage they possess. People often tell me that I alone am worth 100 men," Narine shares. "Women in the military, especially those on the front lines, are always treated with respect by their fellow soldiers. This is a special honor in the eyes of the men," Narine



adds. Everyone strives to create the necessary conditions for a woman and support her, and the men take on a special responsibility for her. "I have never seen anyone look askance at a woman taking a position."

WOMEN ARE MORE RESPONSIBLE

Narine asserts that women generally have a greater sense of responsibility than men. They deal with the same task more meticulously and efficiently, complete it more promptly, and assist male colleagues with things like record-keeping, journal writing, and note-taking. "When it comes to keeping records, no man can compare with a woman. And this is one of the most important duties in the army. That is why women can be specifically appointed to relevant positions," she explains. However, when it comes to moving out to the positions, men are ahead of women, often assisting women with the duffel bags. "Somewhere, this is an extra burden for men," says Narine.

"In my platoon, during the war of 2023, there were two signalmen who not only performed their primary duties but also handled secondary tasks, including

those of an economic nature. Where there is a woman, there is always perfect order. We always had breakfast, lunch, and dinner on time, while in other units without women, the men often made do with canned food," Narine points out.

LOVE OF UNIFORMS SHOULD BE VOLUNTARY

Narine's family was always against her serving in the army, especially when she switched to artillery, which she describes as "a bit more serious, with constant trips to combat positions." However, her attachment to the army was stronger, and her parents had to come to terms with her decision. Despite her commitment to the military, Narine opposes compulsory military service for women. She believes that service should be voluntary, noting that when given a choice, many women are more likely to express a genuine desire to serve their country. "Forced service can't yield effective results, especially for women."

THE 2020 WAR HAS CHANGED ATTITUDES

Goar Babayan has spent 28 years in the rear service. As a military doctor, she usually encounters the everyday life

of the army only during business trips. "I'm used to seeing female servicemen in military units—not just logisticians—but it's still a bit strange for me," she says. The working hours are irregular, most communication is with men, there's the need to endure a commanding tone, and the rules are rigid. "I find many things about this service, like marching on the parade ground and other regulations, not very rational. Maybe it's because I'm not a military person at heart, and I still can't quite get past this psychological barrier," Goar admits. However, the Artsakh war, with its consequences of lost territories and the ethnic cleansing of Armenians, has shifted her perspective, especially when it comes to introducing voluntary military service for women in the army. "If you'd asked me before 2020 whether women should join the army, I would have categorically said no. But now, with Armenia facing the threat of destruction, if this law isn't a fraud or a show, then I will say that women should also serve in the army. This is about preserving the nation, and in this case, I think there's no need to set gender restrictions. We have no other choice," Goar Babayan notes. ♦

UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PEOPLE OF ARTSAKH

After the displacement of more than 100,000 people from Artsakh in late 2023, the Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia took responsibility upon itself and started a capacity-building and mentorship programs for displaced women and youth from Artsakh in Kotayk region. The Regional Post interviewed Elen Manukyan, co-founder of FDC, and the participants to gain insights into the valuable experiences they offer.

TEXT : HENA APOSHIAN / PHOTO : FDC



Established in 2017 to support and enrich the Armenian fashion industry, the Fashion and Design Chamber of Armenia (FDC) has been serving as a creative platform that unites designers, brands, and startups from fashion and other related sectors in Armenia. Having established these core beliefs since day one, FDC took it upon itself to launch two initiatives to help the displaced women and youth from Artsakh who had been engaged in fashion, textile, and other design-related sectors.

While receiving support from GIZ within the Private Sector Development TVET South Caucasus Programme, the first project was long-term technical courses for women who had clothing ateliers, shops, and handmade businesses back in Artsakh. CRELAB Kotayk, established in the framework of "Labs for Change" project funded with UK aid from the British people, became the primary location for this project,



operating as a networking platform with several running workshops such as textile, fashion, design, digital marketing, and similar other fields. For several months now, FDC has been providing short-term technical and business courses and start-up and mentorship programs with local fashion experts and designers. The main focus is to enhance the knowledge and skills of the participants, create employment opportunities, and unlock the full potential of human capital. All the activities have been organized in the newly created laboratory of FDC premises, which was established in the framework of CRELAB project funded with UK aid from the British people. Christina Hasratyan, one of the participants of the program, simultaneously participated in both the business management course and the sewing construction course, during which she gained enough knowledge to establish her own business properly. "I am a lawyer by profession, and since I am still a beginner in this field, I am taking my first steps. At first, I was a little afraid of whether it would work for me, but the people at CRELAB were supportive and made me more confident. Now, I have already started sewing kitchen towels, table covers, table mats, napkins, and decorative pillows." >

The second project entailed working with youth from Artsakh. Before the war, the FDC worked with these students, hosting them at the FDC's offices and introducing them to their team and designers. When the blockade happened, they switched to an online platform and held online masterclasses once a week. "After the war, these young people didn't go to any institutions, so we stepped in and hosted them in CRELAB with their teachers three times a week," explains Elen Manukyan. After the government assigned these students to institutions in Armenia, the program schedules were adjusted to accommodate their attendance, and new courses such as Photoshop, marketing, collection development, and sewing were added.

Ani Gayamyan, one of the students from Artsakh, says, "CRELAB created a very warm and lovely environment for us. While studying there, we got



to know the designers, interacted with them, and learned about their experiences. The program gave me a lot of experience, ideas, and precious knowledge."

FDC later developed a new curriculum for these students with the help of their designers. This was done while also retaining their original teachers from Artsakh within the team and engaging them to work alongside FDC. Lusine Mirzadjanyan, one of the teachers from Artsakh, learned about FDC's courses when she had to move to Kotayk after the situation in Artsakh. "Although the workshop was for five months,



I managed to develop some essential technical skills and business decision practices." She explained that CRELAB's ambiance is very warm, and once you finish a course, you want to come back and learn something new. "Since December, I have participated in 4 workshops while working there with our students. They're doing lots of work to help the people of Artsakh to integrate here. These classes are very helpful, and we surely needed this."

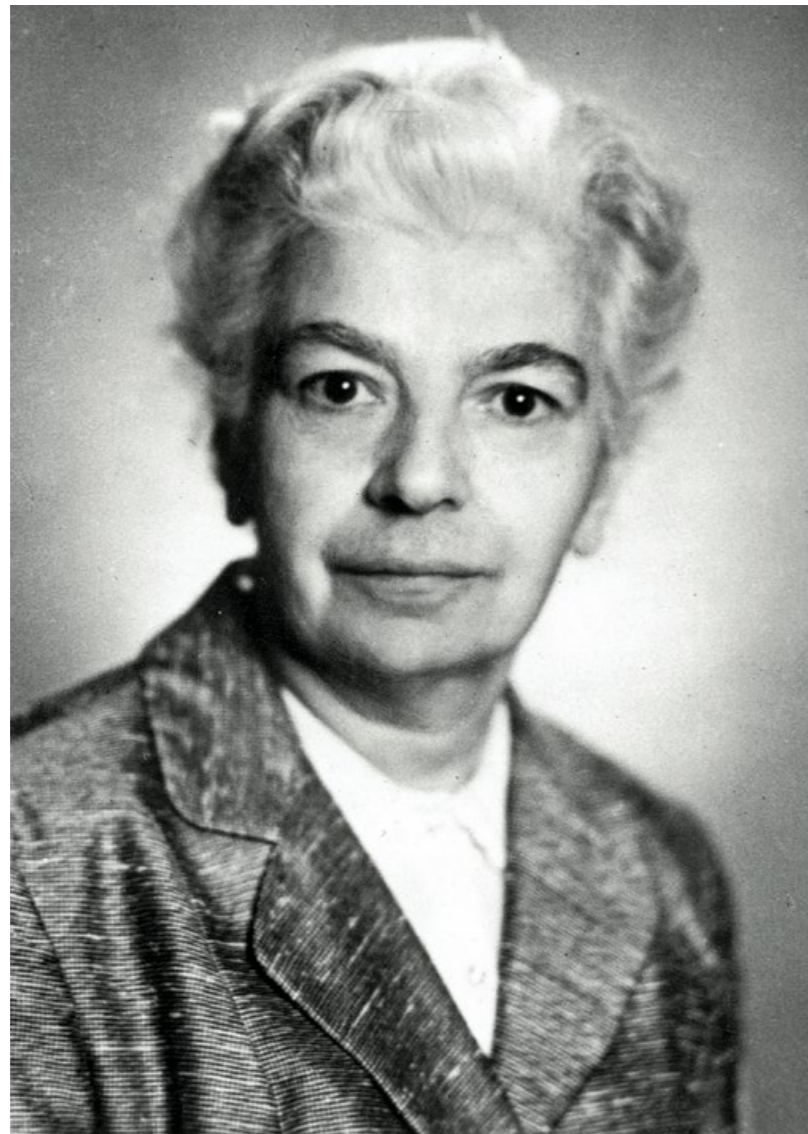
Through these past two programs, FDC has worked with more than 70-80 people from Artsakh. As for students, they have made their very own "Artsakh Collection," which the students have created with the help of designers. The collection comprises 8-10 looks, each representing a student's depiction of Artsakh, which entails

churches, backyards, statues, and more. The FDC is planning to showcase the end results in June. The programs also aimed to provide the participants with a network, as they must acquaint themselves with clients and competitors and understand market dynamics if they intend to sustain their work in Armenia. Although new people can join their programs, Elen explained that their primary focus is not quantity but quality. For example, several of their students attending the startup classes also engage in additional programs such as sewing, corset making, photoshop, marketing, and more. "We strive to support them in every conceivable manner and ensure accessibility to all our programs." Moving forward, FDC intends to develop new courses tailored to the needs of both the market and the participants. ♦

THE STORY OF SIRARPIE DER NERSESSIAN

THE WOMAN WHO DID MORE FOR ARMENIAN ART THAN AN INSTITUTION

TEXT : EMMA HARUTYUNYAN



Emma Harutyunyan
Art Historian, Curator

> The group of students at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, with Professor Gabriel Millet, 1929



Sirarpie Der Nersessian is one of the most renowned Armenian art historians of all time – the feminist before feminism, the woman with sharp humor and an unbreakable sense of responsibility and devotion. Der Nersessian was one of the world's most accomplished early female Byzantinists. A distinguished scholar, her research primarily focused on illuminated manuscripts. She meticulously studied and cataloged 750 Armenian manuscripts preserved and exhibited in libraries and museums across various cities in the United States, Yerevan, Jerusalem, Paris, Vienna, Venice, Rome, Berlin, Beirut, Antelias, London, Munich, Tabriz, and Istanbul. Sirarpie also studied Christian monuments in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Throughout her seventy years of research, she delved deeply into her subjects, avoiding guesswork or superficial analysis. Her investigations were not limited to a singular field; instead, they encompassed various facets of medieval civilization, drawing from her profound understanding of historical, liturgical, and religious texts, as well as a comprehensive grasp of material culture. She pioneered Armenian studies in the United States, significantly advancing them in the West and Armenia. From their origins as obscure subspecialties within medieval studies, taught at only a handful of institutions in America, the fields of Armenian and Byzantine Art blossomed into thriving areas of study. In 1960, Sirarpie became the first woman to be honored with the Order of Saint Gregory the Illuminator medal by His Holiness the Catholicos Vazgen I, Supreme Patriarch-Catholicos of All Armenians. She also received Viktor Hambartsumyan's invitation to join the Armenian Academy of Sciences.

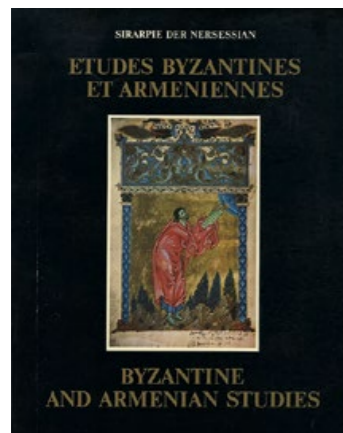
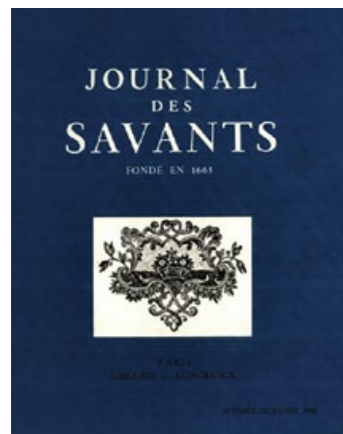
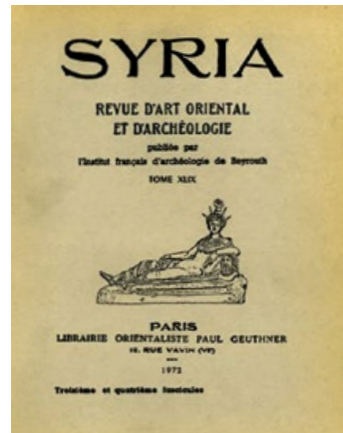
EARLY YEARS

Sirarpie Véronique Der Nersessian was born on September 5, 1896, in Constantinople. Her father, Mihran Der Nersessian, was a businessman from a distinguished family in Karin. Her mother, Agapie Ormanian, was the daughter of Anton and

Elisabeth Ormanian. Among her siblings were the notable priest and scholar Malachi Ormanian, a Patriarch of the Armenians of Constantinople. Like many intelligent families in Constantinople, the Der Nersessians were quite knowledgeable and well-educated. Besides their native Armenian, they spoke French and English languages, played musical instruments, and loved poetry. Sirarpie enjoyed a blissful childhood, yet it was marred by her mother's untimely passing in 1905. When their father, Mihran Der Nersessian, died in 1914, Sirarpie and her siblings became orphans just before the Armenian massacres in Constantinople and across the Ottoman Empire. On April 24, 1915, when six hundred Armenian intellectuals were arrested in Constantinople, their aunt Evkiné Ormanian decided to take Sirarpie and her sister to Bulgaria, where they planned to stay for a few weeks. However, those few weeks turned into a lifetime of moving from one country to another. The two sisters, Arax and Sirarpie, remained each other's strongest support throughout their lives. Arax became Sirarpie's closest collaborator, translating her articles while also continuing her painting. She accompanied Sirarpie on her travels and photographed monuments and manuscripts necessary for the studies.

FRANCE

From Sofia, Sirarpie fled to Geneva, where she attended college and obtained her maturity diploma in 1917. Later, she moved to Paris to continue her education at the Sorbonne, studying under Gabriel Millet, a widely recognized scholar of Byzantine art. Encouraged by Millet, in 1927, she decided to expand her focus to Armenian manuscripts. At that time, despite dozens of publications, Armenian manuscripts remained relatively unexplored and lacking comprehensive study. Her research journey on Armenian manuscripts began in Venice, at the Library of the Mekhitarist Fathers of Saint-Lazare, where she started her pioneering work in this field. >



Speakers at the 1951 "Iconoclasm" Byzantine symposium, André Grabar, Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Paul Alexander, Francis Dvornik, Albert M. Friend Jr. (seated), Milton Anastos, and Gerhart Ladner (left to right).

USA

1930 brought a significant change to Sirarpie Der Nersessian's life, marking the start of her American career that lasted until 1963. While she was finishing her studies in France, Wellesley College sought experienced scholars to teach Byzantine Art courses but couldn't find suitable candidates within the United States.

After her colleagues' recommendations, the Chairman of the Department of Arts at Wellesley, Myrtila Avery, met Sirarpie in Paris. She was impressed by Der-Nersessian's unique professional abilities and invited her to read the course at the college.

So, in 1930/31, Der Nersessian traveled to Wellesley to teach the first Byzantine art courses ever offered in a women's college. An article in the New York University Press highlighted Sirarpie Der Nersessian's appointment, describing her as a scholar who has a deep interest in the world. "Miss Der Nersessian has small, dark, vivacious, and amiable eyes and speaks excellent English with a quaint foreign twist. She is cautious of interviewers. In reply to questions such as how she likes America, she is non-committal, remarking instead, "I do not wish to be like the gentleman who came to France prepared to write a book about the French, and who, on disembarking, saw a woman with red hair and promptly took out his notebook, jotting down 'All French women have red hair!' "She did confess, however, that she liked New England weather!"

In 1936, she defended her two theses at the Sorbonne. Her thesis focused on illustrating the Roman of Barlaam and Joasaph studied in Greek manuscripts, Russian, and Arabic. The complementary dissertation was devoted to Armenian



Miss S. Der Nersessian at Dumbarton Oaks after a symposium with Prof. Milton Anastos, Prof. Glanville Downey, Prof. A. Friend, Prof. Francis Dvornik, and Prof.

manuscripts from the 12th to 14th centuries from the Mekhitarist Library of Venice.

If there are rock stars in art history, Sirarpie Der Nersessian was certainly a headliner throughout her life. Her doctoral degree was awarded with the highest commendation, "Mention très honorable." Her two theses were published in 1936 and 1937 across two volumes, each receiving an award. One can experience the atmosphere of her lengthy defense session, which lasted from 1:30 p.m. until 6 p.m., reading the descriptions of letters and testimonials. The French, Armenian, and American press all echoed the success of her study. In his letter, André Grabar expressed his joy: "I was truly happy to hear from the mouths of the greatest masters of our studies about the extent to which they appreciate and admire your remarkable work." Her colleagues at Wellesley sent letters filled with phrases like "Bursting with pride" and "You are a winner."

SEPARATION

She served as the head of the department at Wellesley College during the war years, when many scholars arrived in the United States, including friends and colleagues of Sirarpie, which greatly benefited medieval and Byzantine studies. However, these years were also filled with worry and anguish as the war separated siblings Zareh, Arax, and Sirarpie Der Nersessian from each other.

Despite her personal worries, she remained dedicated to overseeing the entire department and prioritized her students, who were always at the forefront of her mind. She was recognized as an exceptional scholar by her students and embodied the department's essence for them. Her

charming demeanor, sense of humor, and approachability made her popular among students, yet she maintained high academic standards.

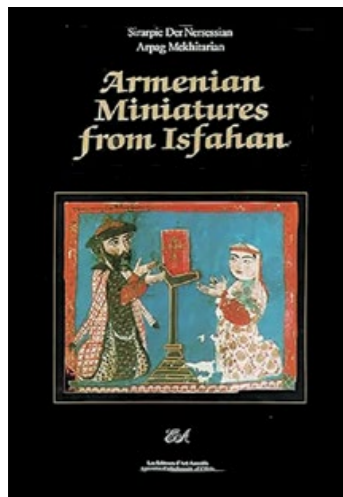
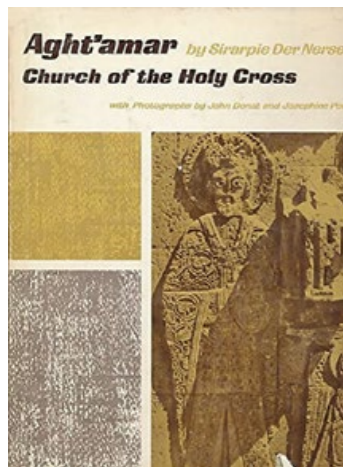
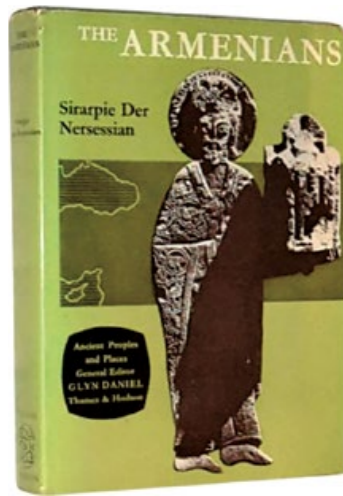
"I remember Miss Der Nersessian vividly, but no anecdotes! ... So what enchanted and fascinated me? I suspect it was clarity, clarity in the way she spoke, in the way she taught art history. I remember that somewhere about that time, she had word that her sister was alive in Paris, having heard nothing for the years of the war. There was an extra lightness in her face, but otherwise, she was a very private person," one of her students remembers.

It remains unclear whether she enjoyed sharing anecdotes, but she always responded sharply and witty. When asked, "Where is your husband, Professor Der Nersessian?" she quipped, "I am the husband."

DUMBARTON OAKS

Sirarpie Der Nersessian was the first woman of her era to achieve a full professorship at Harvard. She held positions at the Harvard University Research Institute of Dumbarton Oaks during a crucial period when the institute aimed to establish itself as a prominent research center nationally. She became a Professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology in 1946 and later held the Henri Focillon Professorship of Byzantine Art and Archaeology at Harvard University in 1953.

While residing at Dumbarton Oaks with her sister, their home became a welcoming space for visiting scholars from around the world. Their dinners were fondly remembered not just for the delicious food but also for the engaging company, where young individuals had the opportunity to



^ Sirarpie Der Nersessian and Martiros Saryan

interact with distinguished scholars in a relaxed setting. Just imagine being at a home party with renowned professionals in your field asking hundreds of questions and simultaneously discussing the vineyards of the Mosel. During years of research at Dumbarton Oaks, Sirarpie gained a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of Armenian art and its influence on Byzantine and Western Art. She maintained a lifelong dedication to studying Cilician manuscripts from the 12th to 14th centuries, meticulously analyzing them in her monographs. A significant portion of her book, "Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia," was devoted to a singular individual whom Der Nersessian repeatedly highlighted—she emphasized that Toros Roslin's artistic prowess surpassed that of contemporary Byzantine examples in terms of quality. This significant period of illuminated manuscripts in Cilicia profoundly influenced neighboring Byzantium and is regarded as one of the finest examples of book illuminations from the Middle Ages.

^ Sirarpie Der Nersessian in Armenia in 1970s with fellow scholars from Matenadaran



^ Sirarpie Der Nersessian and her sister, Arax Der Nersessian, 1962

One of Sirarpie's most significant works, "L'art Armenien," is a monumental folio comprising 270 pages with 185 illustrations. This comprehensive book synthesizes her research spanning over half a century, shedding light on Armenia's rich artistic heritage in sculpture, painting, minor arts, architecture, and illuminated manuscripts.

RETIREMENT

As a retired Professor Emerita at Harvard University, Der Nersessian would say, "Twelve months are not long enough, and certainly twenty-four hours per day are too short even when one is so-called retired." After retiring, she returned to Paris and took residence at Avenue de Versailles 120. Without delay, she began a close collaboration with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, laying the groundwork for a long-term project that would occupy her for years: creating a collection of microfilms of ancient Armenian manuscripts preserved in the repositories of major libraries. She continued her personal work initiated in the United States, focusing on the Holy Cross Church in Aghtamar (including sculptures, paintings, and tombstones), Armenian manuscripts from the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, and miniatures from Cilicia dating from the 12th to the 14th century. She also began collaborating with Thames and Hudson on "The Armenians" – a new book in the Ancient People and Places series. Additionally, she reconnected with the École Pratique des Hautes Études, teaching courses focused on "Armenian religious art from the 4th to the 11th century" in 1963-1964 and on "The Art of the Christian East during the Middle Ages" in 1964-1965. In 1969, she conducted research at the Maténadaran in Yerevan, where she met and encouraged young art his-

torians in their work. She also visited Martiros Saryan's workshop and explored various sites and monuments. Before her departure, Levon Khatchikian, the director of the Mashtots Matenadaran, presented her with the Medal of Saint Mesrop Mashtots in recognition of her contributions.

LAST YEARS

Sirarpie Der Nersessian always supported new scholars, generously sharing her knowledge and experience. In her later years in Paris, her apartment welcomed old colleagues and students, where she often hosted afternoon tea with Armenian coffee. Even in her nineties, she remained active and enjoyed occasional indulgences like cigarettes and chocolate while discussing current events. However, beyond her close circle, Sirarpie Der Nersessian will be remembered most for her timeless books and articles, esteemed for their methodical approach and credible data, serving as models for future art scholars. Sirarpie Der Nersessian worked tirelessly until her final days, reaching the age of 93. She was in the process of preparing for the publication of her book titled "The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia from the Twelfth Century to the Fourteenth" and also attended to the arrangements for posthumous ceremonies. Unfortunately, she decided to destroy a significant portion of her correspondence and arranged for a strictly private funeral, with the death announcement appearing in three newspapers after the funeral: Le Monde, Le Figaro, and the Armenian Daily Haratch. After her passing, her books and manuscript files were sent to Armenia. Among the items found on her night table were a collection of poems by Armen Lubin, the latest book by Yves Terson, and "Eternity" by Marguerite Yourcenar. ♦



THE INVISIBLE HAND

In this op-ed article, Margarit Mirzoyan, the Media Projects Manager at Regional Post Media, looks at the environment as one of the decisive factors determining the future of women.

TEXT : MARGARIT MIRZOYAN

TWO STORIES

One of my male colleagues once told me that if you ask any woman who has achieved success, she will share one of two stories. She either grew up or worked in a supportive environment where her family and colleagues encouraged

her to pursue her dreams, or she found her motivation and resilience in a dysfunctional setting where her achievements and goals were undermined, even by those closest to her. In both cases, the decisive factor is the environment.

James Clear, the author of Atomic Habits, says, “Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behavior. We tend to believe our habits are a product of our motivation, talent, and effort. Certainly, these qualities matter. But the surprising thing is that your personal characteristics tend to get overpowered by your environment over a long period.” Here, Clear refers to the physical environment you build around yourself that makes succeeding easier. However, I believe that the people in your life are the building blocks of your environment.

THE VINYL COLLECTION

My mom started her career as a biology teacher at a Waldorf school in the mid-90s. While she loved her work, she always knew something else was out there. After a while, she discovered curative pedagogy and realized that it was something she would like to pursue. She began educating herself, attending various courses and workshops abroad. By 2012, she was already working with special children as a curative pedagogue in the same school. One thing led to another, and in 2020, at the age of 52, she finally realized her dream and opened a curative pedagogy center in Yerevan, simultaneously fulfilling her role as a full-time mother of two. My father, a diplomat, was frequently traveling, which would make things a bit harder for her, but if, for someone, this would be an excuse to slow down, my mom would always make time for her passion.

One of my most distinctive memories is of my mom leaving for Moscow to participate in a seminar. It’s my brother, my aunt, and I standing at the departure zone, watching her leave. One might say that for a child, it could be a stressful experience, but for me, it’s one of the most important memories. My brother was cheering that we would spend a whole week with our aunt since our dad was also on a work trip, while for me, it was a moment of immense pride. I imagined my future self in the same position as my mom—traveling, learning, and discovering.

At first, I would give the whole credit to my mother, admiring her dedication and hard-working nature.

But with time, I noticed one more element – the environment she lived in – it was full of people continuously encouraging her.

My grandfather, a quite complex figure of wisdom, nurtured a culture of learning within his family. He always encouraged his daughters to read, educate themselves, play chess, and express their interest in the world. My mom would always mention discipline and dedication as something she learned from her dad. She would always remember how he made her and her sister dig through his huge vinyl collection, listen to various compositions, and guess the authors. This was their little game, probably replicating the competitiveness they would possibly need in adult life.

My father, the person who contributed to the next environment my mom discovered already as an adult, never imposed traditional gender roles on her. It’s not that he would always get and agree with the ideas and aspirations of my mom, but still, he would give constructive advice and encourage her to act and grow.

CULTIVATING

Fortunately, I also became the lucky recipient of these supportive family dynamics. “Do whatever you want, but make sure you do it in the best possible way,” my dad always says. These words have stuck with me for many years, becoming the lens through which I try to look at everything I do. My mom’s version of this saying is, “Do whatever you want as long as it makes you happy.”

Notably, these words of encouragement were never confined to specific career paths but encompassed personal growth and fulfillment in all aspects of life. Apparently, my family always viewed success as fulfilling one’s potential as a person, whether it means climbing high up the career ladder, becoming a parent, traveling, or pursuing other passions. The only requirement was and still is – to do your best.

The same advice was given to my brother, and as I reflect on my experience, I see the immense importance of an environment built on a gender-neutral support system. It nurtures a reality where equality is not a simple cliché and where outright discouragement within our families or at work is not appreciated.



SHARP AND ACCURATE

Throughout our lives, we move from one environment to another, eventually creating our own. The environment built within our families prepares us to enter the bigger world, where the choice and responsibility for the environment are already ours.

When I first joined our team, the key pillar of the environment my colleagues built was simply trust, meaning trust towards my writing, my intuition, and the way I saw the magazine.

When I first started working here as a journalist, the only gender bias I received was from some of the people I interviewed, who were way out of my ecosystem. But at the end of the day, I would be back to the office, where I could take deep breath and continue working.

For this issue of Regional Post magazine, we’ve interviewed many women across diverse industries. From banking professionals to entrepreneurs, each woman would name the environment as a critical factor that enabled them to be where they are today. If appearing in a positive family environment is a matter of luck, later in life, we take the lead, and considering the life-changing effect an environment can have on us, we should make our choices sharp and accurate to lead the lives we want whether it’s career or personal life. ♦



QR to BBC film

A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Tamuna Museridze's Fight Against Child Trafficking in Georgia

A documentary about twin sisters Amy and Ano, who were reunited after being separated at birth due to child trafficking in Georgia, was published on the BBC in early 2024. The film centers on journalist Tamuna Museridze, who became known for her research into thousands of similar stories. The movie brought the case to the attention of a global audience. Today, Tamuna receives letters with similar stories from all over the world. She intends to take the victims' cases to Georgian courts, hoping to gain access to their birth documents and free them from the ghosts of the past.

TEXT : GAYANE MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : TAMUNA MUSERIDZE'S PERSONAL ARCHIVE

Tamuna Museridze's life changed forever when, in 2016, she discovered a second birth certificate among her late mother's belongings. The tattered document revealed a shocking truth - Museridze was not her parents' biological child. She had been illegally adopted as a baby, caught up in a vast

underground network of baby trafficking that had operated in Soviet Georgia for decades. "I always felt that I didn't belong where I was, even though I grew up in a very good family," Museridze recalls, "but I could never explain this feeling until I found my real birth certificate."

After spending time finding the maternity hospital where she was born (which no longer exists) and then requesting information from the archives, she received information that her mother had never given birth in 1984.

"I still could not believe that I was an adopted child. I started calling my relatives and close friends of my parents, but they refused to talk about it and sometimes became very aggressive," said Tamuna. By chance, she found out about her adoption from the daughter of her mother's best friend after Tamuna's relatives admitted that they had "bought" her at the maternity hospital but didn't provide any details.

Yet, Museridze was certainly not alone in her experience. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other Georgian adults had lived their whole lives unaware that they were not the biological children of their parents.

Determined to help others impacted by this injustice, Museridze created a Facebook group called "Vedzeb" (Looking For) in 2017 to connect those searching for lost relatives. What started as a small online community has exploded into a movement, with over 245,000 members united in the quest to uncover their roots and reunite divided families.

Her subsequent investigation uncovered an incredibly tragic chapter in Georgia's history. According to Museridze's findings, between the 1950s and 2005, up to 100,000 babies were sold by organized criminals through a trafficking scheme that involved players at multiple

levels of society, ranging from taxi drivers to government officials. Families were cruelly deceived, being told their children had died, while corrupt officials faked adoption documents needed for the illegal adoptions. 1000 and boys for 1500 soviet rubles, while abroad, they were sold for 20 000\$ - 29 000\$.

Tamuna explained, "At that time, it was a substantial amount, as they could have bought a house or a good car with that money."

STORIES OF HEARTBREAK AND HOPE

The testimonies shared within Vedzeb are both heart-wrenching and inspirational. There are accounts of mothers who delivered babies only to have them taken away, never to be seen again. And tales of children who grew up loved by their adoptive families but still longing to know their biological origins. Reuniting those families is incredibly difficult because of the lack of official documentation or remaining hospital records. Museridze has become a master at piecing together fragmented ancestral clues from DNA tests, hazy witness accounts, and purported anecdotes about black market handoffs from decades past. The logistics and personal costs involved in Tamuna's relentless quest for answers have been staggering. In addition to countless hours of research, outreach, and facilitating reunions, Museridze has invested a significant amount of her own money into DNA testing services in



hopes of generating new leads. She believes it's crucial for DNA tests to be done by those who know for sure that their parents never adopted them and that they know their relatives. When someone has already taken this DNA test, and a second or third sibling appears, this person will definitely know their origin, making it easier for the child to find out their roots.

Thanks to Tamuna's initiative, 30 tests have already been done, costing \$100 each. However, at the start, at least 500 tests are needed to cover all of Georgia. Regarding her own story, Tamuna is not very optimistic, as she feels she has tried everything and there is no way out. "I hope one day one of my relatives will take a DNA test, and I will find out my origins," she admits.

UNDETERRED BY APATHY AND INACTION

Despite the revelations about systemic child trafficking of historic proportions, Museridze has been dismayed by the lack of official response or accountability from authorities. "They promised me that there would be an initiative, but nothing has happened yet. Can you imagine that the state, which seems to be conducting this investigation, tells us that they interrogated 40 people, but they have no victims? No, they have victims, but they have no evidence. They are just dismissing their stories. Officially, no one was declared a victim." Museridze provided evidence from many reunited families but says, "they just do not want to

take action" in holding the remaining traffickers and cooperating officials accountable so many years later. Proposed legislation to prevent future custody trafficking has similarly stalled amid bureaucratic indifference. However, Museridze remains undeterred, driven by the importance of uncovering the truth and validating the victims, even if formal justice remains elusive.

Thanks to Tamuna, the issue was raised in many publications in Georgia and became the focus of the BBC. The documentary "Georgia's Stolen Children" is the story of the reunion of identical twins, Amy and Ano, who were separated and sold to different families after being born in Kirtskhi maternity hospital in western Georgia. They discovered each other through a TV talent show and a TikTok video, and their journey led them to a Vedzeb Facebook group. The twins' search for answers revealed that organized criminals had run a baby trafficking ring, with corrupt officials falsifying documents to facilitate illegal adoptions. Nino Shonia, a documentary producer from the filming crew's Georgian team, said there was no problem reaching people, and everyone was willing to share the story. However, it was challenging to work with facts.

"We checked even the smallest information to make sure everything was correct. That's why we checked every document. Tamuna, of course, helped a lot. I always told Tamuna that she was a co-producer; without her, we wouldn't have been able to shoot anything", – Nino admits.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Museridze's courageous efforts have earned her considerable international acclaim, including being named one of the BBC's 100 Women of 2023. After gaining global attention, Tamuna's initiative became international.

"Journalists from all over the world began calling me and telling stories about kidnapped children in Guatemala, Serbia, Czechia, Korea, Romania, and many others," she said. This is how the idea of an international non-governmental organization was born: to reveal the large-scale scheme of child trafficking, as in many countries, governments continue to ignore this issue. And there are cases where it not only happened in the past, but in some countries, it continues today. Tamuna is already working on a memorandum for a future global organization that could join interested activists and experts worldwide. "We have a very big initiative to make a film in other countries as well," she shared her next step.

P.S. ARMENIAN CASE

Meanwhile, in Armenia, on another Facebook page – "Armenian mothers" – hundreds of people are trying to find their relatives. The cases vary: some want to find their biological parents after losing their adoptive ones, while others, like in Georgia, are trying to find their children and siblings who disappeared from maternity hospitals.

Tatev Hovhannisyan, an Armenian journalist, worked on an investigation with Italian colleagues about an illegal adop-

tion gang in Armenia that sold babies to Italian couples. The alleged ringleader of the gang, Anush Garsantsyan, is still working in adoption while on trial, and many of her co-defendants, including key government officials, continue to hold senior positions in maternal healthcare and the government. The investigation, published on openDemocracy and the Italian investigative website IripMedia, found that the group caused some children to be born with health conditions that would make their parents more likely to give them up for adoption and used false medical records and doctored administrative paperwork to fake such conditions in other cases. The Italian Commission for International Adoptions (CAI) suspended the opening of new adoption cases in Armenia as a precautionary measure, but three adoptions were completed in Italy last year. The authorities in both Armenia and Italy confirmed this to the reporters. "Our findings have raised concerns among rights campaigners that Armenian women are still at risk of potential abuses, especially considering that international adoptions from Armenia to other countries have not been halted," said Hovhannisyan. The Prosecutor General's Office announced in March 2023 that it believes at least 437 other Armenian children have been sold for at least €25,000 each to both foreigners and ethnic Armenians living in foreign countries, including Italy, the United States, France, Russia, and Switzerland. The two countries have yet to address a legal grey area highlighted by the investigation. ♦

TURNING CLICHÉ TO ART:

Yerevan – the Regional Center For Graphic Printing



➤ The founder and chairperson of Dialogue of Cultures Foundation at FIPBY 2023



Armenia might not be the first place that comes to mind when thinking of major cultural hubs across the globe. Yet, there are a few remarkable events that challenge this notion. One such event is the Yerevan International Biennale of Printed Graphics. To learn more about this unique event, the art of printed graphics, and the role of local artists in this vibrant field, Regional Post sat down with Sona Harutyunyan, founder and chairperson of the Dialogue of Cultures Foundation, and the founder of Yerevan Biennale of Printed Graphics.

INTERVIEW : GAYANE MIRZOYAN / PHOTO : SONA HARUTYUNYAN'S ARCHIVE



Ms. Harutyunyan, how did you decide to start something of this scale in Armenia?

— The idea to create the Yerevan International Biennale of Printed Graphics came about in 2015. Since 2012, when the Dialogue of Cultures Foundation was founded, we've been collaborating with Arman Vahanyan and Tigran Sahakyan, two of Armenia's best graphic artists in the field of printing art. It was Arman Vahanyan's dream to have a biennale dedicated to printed graphics in Armenia, and the Dialogue of Cultures decided to turn this dream into reality. The five of us discussed whether we were ready to launch such a large-scale project in Armenia, and eventually, everyone agreed to do it. In 2017, the first Yerevan International Biennale of Printed Graphics was announced, and to our delight, more than a thousand graphic artists from 76 countries registered to participate. We soon realized that one of the main reasons for the success of the first Yerevan Biennale was, in fact, Armenia itself — it was an exciting novelty for many artists. We were also thrilled to

see so many well-known artists among those who registered for the Biennale. The Grand Prix winner of the first Yerevan Biennale was Ichiro Tsubaki from Japan, with his piece "Night Market." The first prize was awarded to Agnieszka Lech-Binczycka from Poland for her intaglio work titled "Onna II." The second prize went to Paweł Delekta, also from Poland, for his work "Chess IV." The third prize was awarded to Todorov Alexander from France for his series "Strasse E 1," "Strasse E 2," and "Strasse E 3."

The fourth Biennale was held this year. Can you describe the journey that led you to this moment?

— The first Yerevan International Biennale of Printed Graphics took place at the NPAC (Center for Contemporary Experimental Art) in 2017. Around 400 artists from 75 countries exhibited more than 500 prints. An international panel of judges was assembled to choose the winners. Since then, the Biennale has been held at different locations: the Hayart Center for the Arts in 2019, the National Center for Aesthetics in 2021, and the Aznavour Cultural Center in 2023. Each venue had its own distinct atmosphere and layout, giving the Biennale a unique feel each time. One of our goals in choosing different venues was to create a new and surprising environment with each Biennale, challenging visitors' expectations of these familiar spaces.

We also provided a variety of printed merchandise, such as postcards, flyers, posters, albums, shopping bags, and badges. These products offered visitors a way to take home a piece of the Biennale, even if they couldn't buy the actual artwork. The postcards, in particular, allowed people to purchase replicas of their favorite pieces, which proved immensely popular. For the Fourth Biennale, we were fortunate to have Sarkis Antonyan, a talented artist, designer, and graphic artist, join our team. He created an entire marketing campaign, and his design became the visual identity for the Biennale, both within Armenia and internationally. Antonyan designed the Biennale logo and the overall look of the Aznavour Cultural Center, which significantly boosted our visibility. Additionally, we collaborated with Snkhchyan Architectural Studio for the Fourth Biennale, led by Armine and Ashot Snkhchyan. Their innovative ideas at the Aznavour Center helped us develop a striking architectural solution for the exhibition space, adding to the event's distinctive character and enhancing the overall experience for visitors. Using scaffolding and an unconventional lighting system, we were able to preserve the industrial feel of the printing press through the metal tube. We tried to convert the horizontal setup of a printing press and change it into a vertical configuration. Then, we built an "art labyrinth" by attaching transparent plexiglass panels

to the scaffolding. The result was an environment where visitors could move freely through the exhibition instead of walking in a straight line. I'm pleased to say that this year's partners of the Yerevan Biennial are the Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, the Yerevan City Council, and the All-Armenian Fund. Diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia were also involved in all four Biennales.

Do you choose a theme for each event, and are there any technique limitations?

— We don't do themes to give artists complete creative freedom. Experience has shown that any work can fit under a theme, even if one has been announced. We only have two requirements: the works must be created within the three years leading up to the Biennale. Additionally, we only accept works up to two meters in size so they can be sent via email. We have no restrictions on the techniques artists use. We wanted digital prints to be part of the traditional techniques, as many artists today use digital printing. Traditional techniques are equally welcome, including woodcut etchings, stone engraving lithography, metal engraving etching, and cyanotype, a silverless photographic process that has gained popularity. During each Biennale, it's crucial to provide opportunities to all kinds of artists, regardless of the methods and styles they practice. ➤

In your opinion, why do artists push beyond the canvas and put in so much extra effort?

— Many famous figures, from Picasso to our own Khanjian and Hakob Kodjonyan, have pursued printmaking. Diasporan artist Edgar Shagin is also an outstanding contributor to print graphics. Printed graphics and book printing have evolved together since the Middle Ages. Today, they are particularly popular in Scandinavia, Northern Europe, Holland, Germany, and Belgium. One of the leading countries in this field is Poland. It's also important to mention that China plays a significant role, with many Chinese artists participating in our Biennale. The choice of materials is crucial in fine art. Various methods, such as letterpress and gravure, produce prints with different textures. Graphic printing changes the texture of the paper, allowing artists to create multiple original copies from a single design. This unique quality makes it an interesting medium, enabling artists to share their work with a broader audience. Many groups unite graphic artists, providing a platform to share experiences and learn from each other. The craft of printmaking involves skillful creation, requiring the artist to be patient and persistent. The process challenges artists to develop these qualities while encouraging broader thinking and experimentation with different tools and materials. Ultimately, printmaking is a form of art that promotes creativity and collaboration.

How has the Biennale affected the direction of graphic printmaking in Armenia?

— Five years have passed since the first Yerevan Biennale, and during the fourth Biennale, Armenian participants held the second-largest presence, just behind Poland. The initial Biennale sparked a rapid increase in interest in graphic printing among Armenian artists, with a noticeable shift in their approach. After the first Biennale, artists in Armenia realized they weren't confined to printing in A4 format; instead, they could create works on much larger canvases, up to



▲ The judging process of the international jury at FIPBY 2023

◀ FIPBY 2023 Award Ceremony

two or three meters. Additionally, after the first Biennale, "Dialogue of Cultures" started actively organizing international artist exchange programs. Through these programs, Armenian artists have had opportunities to travel to Switzerland and Germany, work in specialized workshops, gain valuable experience, and return to Armenia. This initiative had a ripple effect, inspiring more students to study graphic printing at the Academy. The Union of Artists also began holding a special exhibition of etchings at the National Center of Aesthetics, marking a significant development in this field. During the fourth Biennale, the printing press at Terlemezian State College of Art was activated, allowing students to print their own works. All this makes us very happy. In May, the National Center of Aesthetics hosted an exhibition featuring German artist Otto Dix, one of the most renowned figures in graphic printing. Dialogue of Cultures organized this

event in collaboration with the Goethe Center and IFA Gallery in Germany. During our first Biennale, we invited Tumo Studios to set up graphic print studio and organize the first print graphics master class there, for which we invited Swiss artist Marcel Mayer. Since 2017, the Tumo Centre has continuously hosted graphic printing workshops. While preparing for the fourth Biennale, we organized the first printmaking symposium in the region, titled "Armenia — the Center of Printmaking in the Region," hosting 21 experts from 32 countries, each offering master classes in their specific techniques. For example, Henryk Krolikowski, the Polish printmaker, photographer, and digital artist, gave master classes on dot linocutting for Armenian artists. During the fourth Biennale, we realized that nothing as influential and large-scale as the Biennale exists in the region anymore. Slowly but rapidly, Armenia is becoming a place in the region where

many world celebrities come to visit. Many of this year's participants and artists admitted that it was thanks to the Yerevan Biennale that they saw and met each other in person for the first time. For years, they had been communicating with each other, but only virtually, and it was Armenia where they met face to face. Among them was Victor Manuel Hernandez Castillo, who won second place at our fourth Biennale. Another noteworthy visitor this year was Jean-Pierre Tanguy, the founder of the Paris Biennale of Graphic Prints. During this year's Biennale, Armenia was invited for the first time to participate in the International Print Biennale in Sarsel with a separate pavilion. The International Print Biennale in Sarcelles opened on November 25, and the representatives of "Dialogue of Cultures" — project manager Sona Hovhannisyanyan and public relations officer Marianna Achemyan — traveled to Paris.

Did you foresee such results? Does the Yerevan Biennale already have gained its place among similar projects?

— We never expected things to turn out this way. It wasn't that we doubted our efforts, but we weren't sure whether a Biennale from Armenia would attract this much attention from artists worldwide. As it turned out, the Armenian aspect was critical to our success. It's one thing to put in the work, but it's another to hear international jury members, with all their experience in this field, say they are surprised that we could achieve such results at the third Biennale. Many high-profile celebrities were among our participants. At the fourth Biennale, Mateusz Otreba from Poland, President of the International Jury, even joked that we might need to organize the next Biennale on another planet (laughs). It's always a pleasure to hear that kind of feedback. Participants from other countries often mention that we're not just organizing a Biennale, but something more significant, with great attention to detail—from the color of the walls to the design of the space



to the organization to the choice of location. Another unique aspect of the Yerevan Biennale is that many seasoned experts in the field come here to share their experiences because they see it as their mission. For example, it might be hard for an Italian to share their experience in France, where this field has long been established. Conversely, Armenia is considered a new place where professionals can share their knowledge and mentor young artists. So, Armenia has unintentionally become a magnet for many artists, providing local artists the chance to benefit from world-renowned masters and their expertise. In places like France or China, it might be more challenging to do the same thing because the field is already well-established with its own professionals. However, this wasn't the case in Armenia for a long time. I'm not exaggerating when I say that, for many years, the only significant names in the field were Arman Vahanyan and Tigran Sahakyan. During Soviet times, the state dictated art policy. Still, now we can say that "Dialogue of Cultures" has taken on that role, consistently guiding and supporting the development of the art scene for several years. It's also worth noting that we greatly appreciate the support from the state. It's been encouraging to see that our efforts have been recognized and backed by the government, which has been instrumental in helping us achieve what we have so far.

What do you think is needed for the future development of the sphere?

— Despite all the challenges, the fact remains that large-scale international projects, such as the Biennale, allow society to develop and form artistic taste. Our experience shows that these days, advertising plays a critical role in every sphere, and it's the only way we can make our Biennale more accessible to the public. During our fourth Biennale, we realized that sufficient funding is crucial for broad awareness of the Yerevan Biennale. It's remarkable that people buy plane tickets and travel from distant countries to see such a unique exhibition, while those living in Armenia often don't even know it exists. I wish there were more state support, for example, from the Ministry and the Municipality, since our graphic print Biennale is not only the only one in Armenia but also the entire region. Unfortunately, the private sector in Armenia seems to lack an understanding of the importance of fine art and graphic printing. It's a little different with movies—everyone has seen at least one film and has a basic grasp of this art form. However, graphic printing, and fine art in general, can be challenging for businesses to appreciate, and it often takes years to demonstrate its significance. Despite these challenges, it's clear that large-scale international projects like the Biennale contribute to societal development and help cultivate a taste for art. ♦

ETERNAL ECHOES: A Journey Through Sin and Spirit

The 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia proudly welcomed Armenia's National Pavilion, a testament to the nation's rich cultural heritage and contemporary artistic innovation. Funded by the Cafesjian Center for the Arts and curated by Armen Yesayants, the pavilion showcased "Echo," a mesmerizing multimedia installation by Paris-based Armenian artist Nina Khemchyan. Set within the historic Magazzino del Sale 3, Khemchyan's work explored universal themes of sin, redemption, and human perfection.

PHOTO : CAFESJIAN CENTER FOR THE ARTS

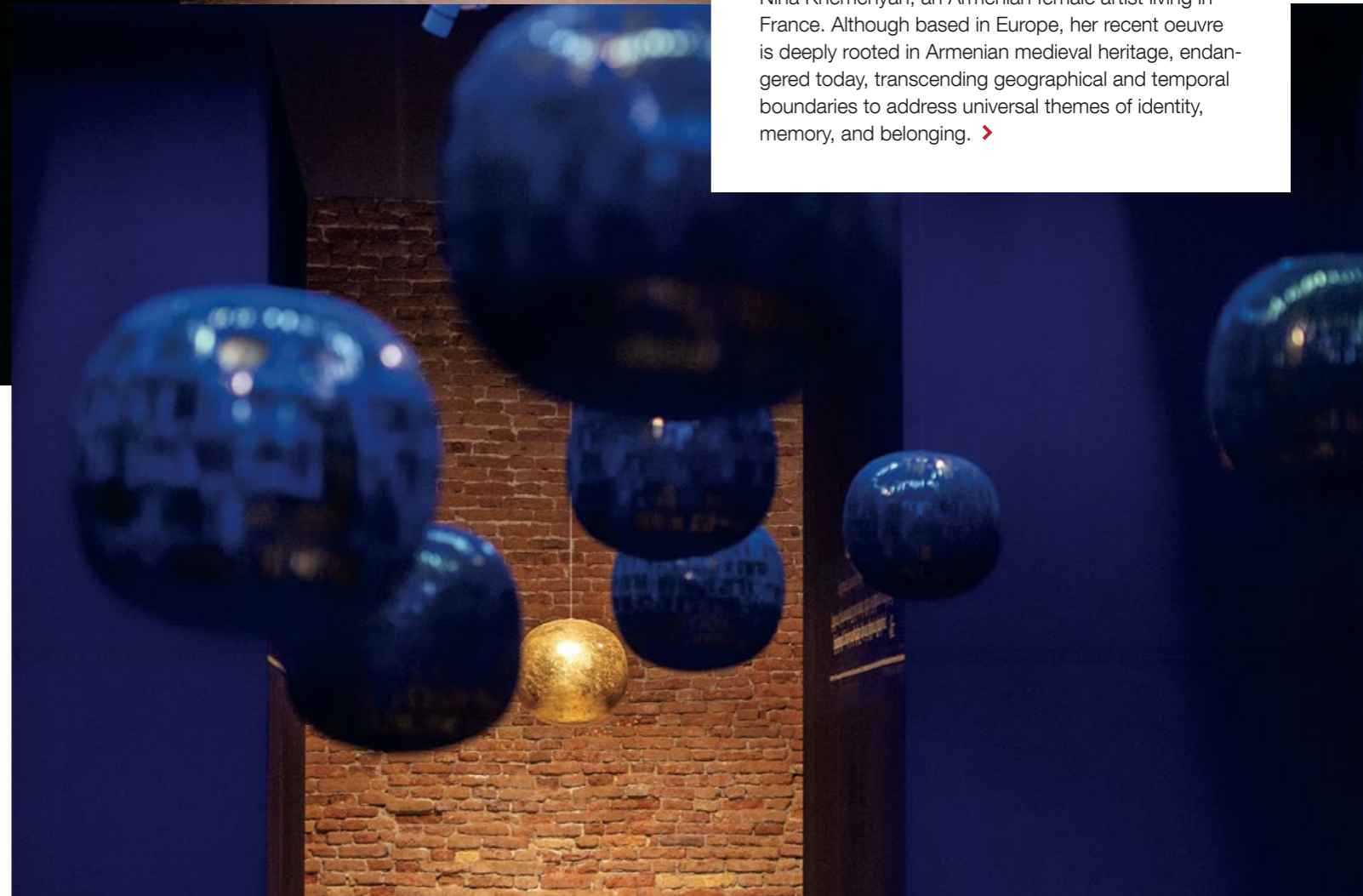
ARMENIA'S PRESENCE AT LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

The National Pavilion of the Republic of Armenia at the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia is presented and funded by the Cafesjian Center for the Arts (CCA), a prominent Armenian art institution that has taken on the role of patron for the Armenian Pavilion in 2024. The pavilion curator is Armen Yesayants, the Director of Exhibitions at CCA, and the Commissioner is the RA Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport.

Located in Magazzino del Sale 3 in 2024, in a historical salt warehouse dating back to the 14th century, currently supervised by the Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, the National Pavilion represented the Echo project, a multidimensional multi-media installation by Paris-based Armenian artist Nina Khemchyan.

This year's pavilion encapsulates concepts drawn from medieval Armenian cultural heritage and diverse spiritual universal principles reimagined in the realm of nowness. The central feature of "Echo" includes two significant installations that complement each other: "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Echo." The overarching theme speaks to the journey toward human perfection, with an endpoint that could also mark a new beginning.

The National Pavilion invites a dialogue with the title of the Biennale in 2024, *Foreigners Everywhere*, featuring Nina Khemchyan, an Armenian female artist living in France. Although based in Europe, her recent oeuvre is deeply rooted in Armenian medieval heritage, endangered today, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries to address universal themes of identity, memory, and belonging. >





ABOUT LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

La Biennale di Venezia has a 130-year legacy as one of the most esteemed cultural institutions in the world. Its journey began with the first International art exhibition in 1895, and by the 1930s, it had expanded to include new music, cinema, and theatre festivals. The Venice Film Festival, founded in 1932, became the first film festival in history. In 1980, La Biennale held its first international architecture exhibition, and in 1999, dance joined its diverse lineup. The Art Biennale, officially known as La Biennale d'Arte di Venezia, is among the world's largest and most influential contemporary visual art exhibitions. Spanning over 7,000 square meters, the exhibition features artists from around 90 countries displaying their work in collective exhibition spaces and national pavilions. In 2022, over 800,000 people attended the art exhibition. The 60th International Art Exhibition, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, took place from Saturday, April 20, to Sunday, November 24, 2024, with pre-opening events on April 17, 18, and 19.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nina Khemchyan (1964, Yerevan) is an Armenian artist based in Paris. After graduating from the Department of Industrial Design at the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Fine Arts, she began exhibiting her works in various galleries across Armenia in the early 1990s. In 1996, Nina moved to France to continue her education at the National School of Applied Arts and Crafts in Paris, where she studied from 1996 to 1998. With over 30 years of experience, Nina has worked as a sculptor and graphic artist. She has participated in numerous group shows, art fairs, and festivals and has held solo exhibitions not only in Armenia but in many cities in France, the USA, Italy, and Lebanon. Nina's works are included in many private collections in Armenia and beyond. Additionally, her art is part of the permanent collections of the Yerevan Modern Art Museum and the Sergei Parajanov Museum.



THE ARTWORKS

The Armenian National Pavilion's exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia centers on the project "Seven Deadly Sins" by artist Nina Khemchyan. This artwork is a 50-meter single-piece paper roll split into seven sections, each representing one of the classic sins: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. Khemchyan's choice to use black ink on white paper creates a bold, graphic aesthetic, highlighting the contrast between morality and immorality—themes deeply intertwined with the concept of sin. Each section is rich in symbolism and intricate imagery, crafted with a graphic and grotesque, engaging, and thought-provoking style. The "Echo" project in the National Pavilion features eleven blue ceramic sphere sculptures made of clay. Each sphere is decorated with golden incrustations, representing a specific selection of Armenian sharakans, which are eleven chants of repentance written by Mesrop Mashtots (4th-5th century AD). He was the





inventor of the Armenian alphabet, a philosopher, theologian, priest, and poet. Mashtots is a key figure in his country's history and culture: a spiritual leader, founder of Armenian sacred music, and a true enlightener.

Nina Khemchyan had long been immersed in the works of Mesrop Mashtots. Her artistic vision was renewed by a unique encounter with the enigmatic voice of singer Hasmik Baghdasaryan-Dolukhanyan, who performs Mashtots' sharakans, composed in the 5th century. This discovery inspired the "Echo" project, which became the title of the Armenian National Pavilion exhibition. It offers a delicate and contemporary interpretation of a crucial part of Armenian identity that extends beyond Armenian culture. This physical installation is enhanced by an a cappella performance of the hymns by Hasmik Baghdasaryan-Dolukhanyan, creating an artistic fusion of physical sculpture and music, combining the tangible and auditory to represent Armenian sacred music in a new and evocative way.

The words, particularly the letters forming these words that transform into chants, are significant elements in these pieces. Words are translated into visual codes, creating a meditative environment: the words are in Armenian, and the ideas they convey are of cosmic proportions. Mashtots' legacy revolves around universal ideas and values that resonate with every soul.

The two projects, "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Echo," complement and amplify each other, intertwining themes of human sinfulness with the search for spiritual redemption, a topic that is increasingly relevant today. In "Seven Deadly Sins," sins are depicted as visual texts filled with imagery. Meanwhile, "Echo" transforms Mashtots' literal text (the sharakans) into visual codes on the spheres. This interplay creates a compelling narrative in which visual codes and textual elements enrich one another's meanings. The exhibition embodies an intersemiotic concept, where images are translated into texts and texts into images.

However, the exhibition doesn't focus solely on the themes of sin and redemption. It also offers a space for contemplation, allowing visitors to reflect in solitude. To reach this reflective space, one must navigate through a serpentine path of sins, leading to a zone of meditative self-reflection and forgiveness. Here, the setting resonates with medieval spiritual hymns and ultimately connects visitors to the essence of existence.

This journey reflects a profound spiritual trilogy, bridging Earth and Heaven, uniting self, universe, and essence, and guiding toward deep insight. The golden sphere symbolizes purification, light, and eternity, ultimately signifying perfection.

The Cafesjian Center for the Arts has released a limited-edition vinyl record featuring a selection of 11 Armenian sharakans, performed a cappella by Hasmik Baghdasaryan Dolukhanyan, a renowned artist specializing in Armenian spiritual and folk music.

At the Biennale Arte 2024, the Armenian National Pavilion debuts an immersive educational program created by CCA to explore the various layers of the "Echo" project. Additionally, from April 19 to 23, during the first week of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, the pavilion hosted meetings with the artist and the curator. ♦



THE FIRST FEMALE MPs IN THE PARLIAMENT OF THE FIRST REPUBLIC

In 1919, Armenian women earned the right to vote and be elected, a milestone achieved while many European nations were still entrenched in battles for women's voting, some of which would continue for decades. Three of the 80 deputies elected in the 1919 parliamentary elections were women.



Perchuhi Partizpanyan-Barseghyan (1886-1940) began her education in the Bulgarian city of Filippe (Plovdiv). She was married to Sargis Barseghyan, a notable figure in the revolutionary and Fidayan movements, who was arrested and killed in 1915. Following the establishment of the Republic of Armenia in 1918, Perchuhi relocated to Yerevan and secured a seat in parliament. Beyond her legislative duties, Partizpanyan was also an accomplished writer, with her short stories, including "Arpik" and "A Ring of a Chain," translated into French and English.

Varvare Rotinyan-Sahakyan (birth date unknown – 1934) was married to Avetik Sahakyan, the Speaker of the Parliament of the First Republic of Armenia. Her contributions to legislative activities remain largely undocumented, but it is known that she focused on refugee and homelessness issues resulting from the Genocide. Her life was marked by hardship and loss; her child died, and after the Sovietization of Armenia, her husband was imprisoned. During the February incidents, the family fled to Tabriz, later moving to South Iran, Iraq, and eventually Lebanon. Throughout these upheavals, she remained active in aid centers across various Armenian communities, contributing significantly to the Aid Cross organization in Beirut.



Katharine Zalyan-Manukyan (birth date unknown – 1965) was a devoted doctor committed to aiding Armenian orphans and refugees in the aftermath of the Genocide. In 1917, she married Aram Manukyan, a founding figure of the first Republic of Armenia. Besides being his wife, Katarine was actively involved in the Medical and Sanitary Commission within the legislative body, addressing the pressing issues of migrants. Following the Sovietization of Armenia and the death of her husband, she moved to Krasnodar with her young daughter to live with Aram's relatives. In 1927, she returned to Yerevan, resuming her work in medicine and social services.



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