



# Results of NDI Focus Groups on Political Barriers and Opportunities

May 2010

This focus group research was carried out for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) and is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

# Methodology

- 14 focus groups conducted in May 2010:
  - Four in Yerevan
  - Five in Shirak region (three in Gyumri and two in Kaps)
  - Five in Vayots-Dzor region (three in Yeghegnadzor and two in Areni)
- Of the 14 focus groups, seven included women only and seven included youth (men and women between the ages of 18 and 30)
- Focus group participants:
  1. Socially active youth and women (managers of civic organizations, community leaders, active participants in civic initiatives and campaigns)
  2. Socially non-active youth and women (the unemployed, employees with low salaries, students, etc.)
  3. Youth and women involved in political processes (active members of political parties, medium or high-level officials in the state political system)
  4. Women who are heads of households
- NOTE: The opinions in the following slides reflect those of the focus group participants and not those of NDI or CRRC

# **Issues Confronting Youth in Armenia**

# Education – Part 1

*Youth want quality, affordable education without corruption*

- Higher education is not affordable, especially for youth in the regions
  - “One of my classmates was left out of the university as he was not able to pay for his education.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)
  - “My daughter was an excellent pupil, but we did not have the money to help her get a higher education.” (30-year-old woman from Kaps)
  - “As a rule, students should not be absent from their classes. But many students are absent as they go to other countries to work in order to earn money and take care of their families.” (19-year-old man from Gyumri)
- Youth are dissatisfied with the quality of education
  - “No one gets an education which would comply with the diploma...I want to study, but they don't give me an education.” (18-year-old woman from Yerevan)

# Education – Part 2

*Youth want quality, affordable education without corruption*

- Universities don't have proper equipment and facilities are in poor condition
  - “In universities there are no laboratories, no modern technologies.” (20-year-old man from Yerevan)
  - “I study at the Polytechnic University. I am in touch with many other universities as well. There are no reconstructed classrooms... This situation is uncomfortable and people don't want to study there.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)
- Corruption in universities is widespread
  - “In addition to students who study hard and well, there are students who say that their fathers will pay for their diplomas. As a result they spoil the environment for other students too.” (20-year-old man from Gyumri)
  - “The relations between students and lecturers have become like market traders' relations. My lecturer collected 3,000 drams. I was ashamed to pay that money. But he did not feel shame. Even if you pay less, he will argue with you.” (25-year-old woman from Gyumri)

# Employment – Part 1

*Higher education degrees do not provide graduates with adequate employment opportunities*

- Recent graduates cannot find work because employers demand work experience
  - The employer “demands work experience. In order to get this experience one should work. They don’t give an opportunity to get this experience.” (20-year-old man from Gyumri)
- Unable to find jobs after graduation, youth lose the specialized knowledge and skills they acquired in school
  - “After graduating even with excellent marks, the knowledge will be lost if they don’t use it. In about three years even if they find a job, they will not be ready to work as their knowledge will not be sufficient...I can no longer work within my specialization as three years have passed and a lot of things have changed.” (31-year-old woman from Gyumri)
- Youth are forced to work outside of their specialization in order to find jobs
  - “I know someone who studied very well [in the medical university] but now she works as a secretary and answers phone calls.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)
- Employees feel vulnerable in the workplace because employers often violate labor rights laws
  - “As there is a big demand for work, people have to work as their employers demand from them. Workers are not protected.” (24-year-old man from Yeghegnadzor)

# Employment – Part 2

*Higher education degrees do not provide graduates with adequate employment opportunities*

- The lack of employment opportunities in the regions in particular causes those youth to move to Yerevan or leave the country in search of jobs. Agriculture, the main source of employment in the regions, is considered unprofitable and risky
  - “There are jobs in Yerevan. One can work at least as a delivery man but it is impossible in the regions.” (21-year-old man from Areni)
  - “Eighty percent of young people finish their army service and go to other countries to work.” (22-year-old man from Kaps)
  - “My goal is to leave Armenia. I don’t live badly; my standard of living is higher than the average standard. But I am not satisfied with that. I should be able to take care of myself and make a family.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)
  - “The natural conditions are not good for agriculture...there are acts of God, which harm the harvest.” (22-year-old woman from Kaps)
- Youth believe that they need money and good contacts in order to find a well-paid job
  - “I did not have money, that is why I did not look for a job...I know it from the people who found jobs...you can find a job and be hired if you have money.” (22-year-old man from Kaps)
  - “If you give money, they will fire their staff and hire you.” (22-year-old man from Kaps)



# Reasons for Political Involvement

*Many youth and women become political party members for social and personal reasons and not necessarily political ones*

- Many youth and women do not want to be involved in politics
  - “I hate politics as I know well what is happening. Personally I am an active person [party member] but I don’t want to deal with politics.” (45-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Political party membership ensures job and personal security
  - “I am a member of a party whether I want to be or not, otherwise they will fire me.” (45-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
  - “When my situation is very bad, I ask my party to help me.” (48-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Some youth and women become involved in politics in hopes of reforming the political sector and the country
  - “We want to do something good for our future. It is very important. That is why we should be involved in politics.” (20-year-old woman from Yerevan)
  - “I would like to be involved in politics to deal with corruption and bribe-taking.” (20-year-old man from Yerevan)

# Obstacles to Political Involvement

## Part 1

*Youth are opposed to the widespread corruption in Armenian politics*

- Many youth view politics as corrupt; they say that political involvement is a vehicle for making contacts and money
  - “I would like to be involved in politics only for making money.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)
  - “When I was 16, I didn’t understand much and I didn’t understand what was happening. When I returned from my army service, I got a job, which gave me an opportunity to join some political party. But I see what is happening; there is too much corruption.” (24-year-old man from Yerevan)
  - “If you are not backed, if you are not with a party, if you don’t flatter an official, you don’t have a future.” (32-year-old man from Yerevan)
- Most youth believe that contacts and money are necessary for entry into the political sector
  - “Who will let young people be involved in politics in Armenia? If one does not have an influential contact, he/she cannot be involved in politics. In Armenia, it is about being rich and having influential contacts, and not about knowledge or professional background.” (21-year-old man from Yerevan)

# Obstacles to Political Involvement

## Part 2

*Youth believe that their generation has few opportunities to become politically involved*

- Parties take advantage of youth, using them as a resource for, among other things, intimidation and bribery during elections
  - “[Parties] are telling them to go and threaten people that there is a camera in the pen, that they will beat them, go give 5,000 dram to the old women in the neighborhood and take their passport details. Such things are done by young people.” (25-year-old woman from Yerevan)
- Young aspiring politicians do not have the resources to run for office
  - “The first obstacle to involvement in politics is the money problem. Young people are not successful because they don’t have enough financial resources. Let’s imagine that a young man is running for office; he must have money to run the campaign. You can’t win elections if you don’t organize your campaign.” (26-year-old man from Yerevan)
- The older generation is not willing to allow the younger generation to succeed them
  - “The elder generations are trying to keep their places, and they do it. Because over many years, they got influential contacts and strengthened their positions, and when a young man tries to go through these phases, they don’t let him.” (25-year-old man from Yerevan)

# Other Issues

- Youth from the regions complain about the lack of extra-curricular activities
  - “We don’t have anything to do here. Young people don’t study in villages, they just hang out...If there are playing halls such as tennis rooms, they will at least have something to do.” (22-year-old man from Kaps)
  - “There are almost no entertainment centers. There are no cafes where you can go and socialize.” (30-year-old man from Yeghegnadzor)
- Some youth, particularly those who do not support the current administration, feel that their right to free speech is restricted
  - “A student cannot tell his/her professor what he/she thinks. If something is unfair, he/she will ignore it and will not dare to say that the professor was wrong. He/she could lose his/her status of a student.” (22-year-old man from Gyumri)
  - “I want very much to say to the authorities what I think about them...You can’t say anything in the family either.” (45-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Some youth from Yerevan believe that youth from the regions are more traditional and less tolerant
  - “Most of the youth are keeping to the traditions, which is an obstacle for many issues. For example, it prevents them from visiting leisure places, living normally and having fun.” (22-year-old woman from Gyumri)

# Issues Confronting Women in Armenia

Note: Many of the problems described in the previous section apply to women as well. The problems listed in this section are specific to women in Armenia.

# Employment

*Women face discrimination in the hiring process and the workplace*

- Certain jobs are not open to women
  - “I really want to become an officer in the department of mandatory fulfillment of judicial acts. I like this job. But in our city, Gyumri, the officer of this department should be male. They say that these officers have to visit homes of different people, and this should be done by men. They will not let me do this job.” (25-year-old woman from Gyumri)
- High-paying jobs are reserved for men, and women get paid less than men for the same work
  - “Women get less money for the same job men do. Everywhere employers try to hire men. They had to hire me because no man would agree to work for them at my salary.” (21-year-old woman from Yerevan)
- Finding jobs in the regions, where unemployment is worst, is particularly hard for women
  - “I will work even as a cleaning woman, I am not ashamed. The only thing I want is to help my children. But I can’t even find this job.” (44-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Employers resist hiring young women for fear that they will become pregnant. Maternity leave is not offered; instead, pregnancy is reason for dismissal
- Women who are widows have an especially hard time supporting their families
  - “My salary is very low. I am not able to buy food or clothing. My money is enough for communal expenses only.” (34-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)

# Health and Healthcare

- With absent husbands looking for jobs elsewhere, women are left to do the heavy lifting and manual labor required to run a household
  - “I have problems with my spine...It is a result of heavy work. Women should not take loads heavier than 10 kilos. But we have no other way.” (51-year-old woman from Kaps)
- Women cannot afford proper health care
  - “All women have sickness...They don't visit a doctor unless their situation becomes critical.” (30-year-old woman from Kaps)
- In addition to financial reasons, cultural and gender norms prevent women from visiting doctors when their husbands cannot accompany them
  - “You can tell [your husband] about your sickness and he will take you to a doctor. You can't tell the parents of your husband about this like you would tell your husband.” (30-year-old woman from Kaps)
- Women feel poorly treated by health care providers
  - “When you call an ambulance service, they answer your call so rudely that after hanging up the phone you are not sure whether they have heard the address, did not get it wrong, heard it until the end, or what.” (41-year-old woman from Kaps)

# Politics – Part 1

*The World Economic Forum ranks Armenia 106<sup>th</sup> out of 131 countries on women's political representation and empowerment<sup>1</sup>*

- In Armenia's traditional society, many believe that the woman's role is incompatible with civic or political involvement
  - “There is a stereotype among men that if women are given an opportunity to be involved in politics, they will give up on their families.” (23-year-old woman from Yerevan)
  - “You have a choice to be either a good mother or a good politician. For being a good mother, life will return your efforts to you, but will life be thankful to you for being a good politician?” (46-year-old woman from Yerevan)
  - “Girls are very passive in our city. It is a result of how they were brought up; they say it is shameful to take part in such events. Girls don't have an opportunity to be free. They have to go home as soon as the bell rings. For example, if they want to go to the birthday of a classmate, they have to inform their parents one month before that on that day they will be late for two hours.” (19-year-old man from Gyumri)
- Women believe that even if they can participate in political or civic processes, men are ultimately the decision-makers
  - “Ultimately, the last word is up to the man, who is the leader. Woman attend the meetings but have no word to say.” (34-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Many women do not want to be involved in politics because they do not think change is possible or they view politics as corrupt

<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2010*, The World Economic Forum



# Politics – Part 2

*The World Economic Forum ranks Armenia 106<sup>th</sup> out of 131 countries on women's political representation and empowerment<sup>1</sup>*

- Armenia's patriarchal society discourages women's civic activism
  - “In the place where I live, women are not encouraged to be in first place. Even if you reach a goal, they think you have done it through certain ways.” (23-year-old woman from Yerevan)
- Women are not given the resources or opportunities to develop their political skills
  - “In order to deal with politics, one should be experienced... You must read a lot to not be confused when you are asked a question. Armenian women cannot read that much as they don't have time for that.” (46-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Women cannot fully participate in elections because their votes are “bought”
  - “We can participate in elections, but we are employees only and our opinion is not respected.” (34-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
  - “On the threshold of elections, political parties support people, but after elections, they disappear.” (37-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
  - “[Parties] give 5,000 dram before the elections, and that's all.” (58-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)

<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson, Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2010*, The World Economic Forum

# Family – Part 1

## *Women face cultural and social barriers in their personal lives*

- A very patriarchal society dictates familial relations. Husbands are the decision makers and wives are required to obey them
  - “If a woman does not have anyone to stand by her, or does not have some powers to support her, she cannot have any rights as a person.” (25-year-old woman from Gyumri)
  - “You see a woman returning from the market with bags in her hands but the man walks near her and smokes a cigarette... The woman has to do everything; she has to go to the market, clean, and if she delays the food, there will be a conflict.” (31-year-old woman from Gyumri)
- To fulfill expectations of them, women believe they are required to work harder than men
  - “The women’s problem is to take care of their families, their children. Mainly the heavy loads in families are on them. In parallel with that, they also work. From this point of view, the women’s load is bigger.” (33-year-old woman from Yerevan)
- The lack of local employment opportunities forces men to work abroad, placing strain on marriages and families
  - “It is 24 years that I am married; it is 18 years that my husband is abroad. There have been cases when he came back and his sons did not recognize him. Now my son is married and his wife has the same destiny.” (43-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Cultural norms discourage divorce
  - “If a woman wants to get divorced, they say that it is her fault and she is immoral.” (31-year-old woman from Gyumri)
  - “There is a very small possibility that you may even get married again. There are a lot of single women. There are no chances that they may get married with a divorced woman, especially if she has a child.” (25-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)

# Family – Part 2

*Women face cultural and social barriers in their personal lives*

- Many women are subjected to domestic violence and are sexually abused by their husbands but feel that they have no recourse because of the societal taboo against divorce and because they are financially reliant on their husbands
  - “She was in a very bad situation; she had been beaten black and blue, she even had bodily injuries. The police came, arrested the man and tried to take him to the police station, and the woman started screaming, ‘You are taking my husband, who will take care of my children? My neighbors will say that I have asked the police to arrest my husband.’” (26-year-old woman from Gyumri)
  - “At night when you come home, your husband rapes you.” (45-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- Widowed and divorced women rely on their relatives because they receive no government support
- Because the quality of education and condition of schools is poor, families hire private teachers if they want their children to attend university. This expense creates additional hardships for families already struggling to make ends meet
  - “Our school may collapse one day. We do not have a playground. Children have nothing to do and they are breaking the windows of the school.” (30-year-old woman from Kaps)
  - “We have the building [for a kindergarten], we have the staff as well, but there is no financial support.” (22-year-old woman from Kaps)

# **Mobilizing Youth and Women**

# Obstacles to Mobilizing Youth and Women

- Although they have little trust in government, the participants believe that their problems will be solved at the higher levels, rather than by individuals or grassroots civil society organizations
  - “There is a will to solve [these problems], but we are not able to do that. The parliament, government should do that. It doesn’t matter how much we want it; we cannot reconstruct classrooms.” (20-year-old man from Yerevan)
- People have the time and resources to focus on their personal problems only, rather than broader societal issues
  - “If [young people] have jobs, they will be interested in issues other than their personal issues only. They will see what is happening in the country, what they can change. If you don’t have a job, you don’t think about anything else.” (27-year-old woman from Yerevan)
- Cultural norms and fear of retaliation prevent people from publicly speaking about their problems
  - “You can try to unite even 100 women to oppose men’s violence. No one will come and join you. They will not open their inner kitchen to others and show what is happening within the family.” (31-year-old woman from Gyumri)
  - “You can’t tell the mayor that he is doing something wrong.” (22-year-old man from Gyumri)
  - “You can’t say anything to your boss because he may fire you and say that they don’t need you anymore. He can simply fire you.” (21-year-old woman from Gyumri)

# Activities that May Mobilize Youth and Women

- **Cultural events**
  - Cultural events would provide youth with interesting ways to spend their free time. The organizations that put on the cultural events also could employ a small staff
- **Classes to teach computer skills, music, sports, painting, etc.**
  - “Our life is not interesting...There are young people who can use computers here, who are ready to share this knowledge with younger people.” (22-year-old woman from Kaps)
- **Protection of monuments and the environment**
  - “We have a project, which is called Hope, Faith and Love. Our volunteers have already cleaned up the areas of 12 churches.” (19-year-old man from Gyumri)
- **Reconstruction of kindergartens**
  - “The kindergarten can employ about 10 young people, such as a nanny, nurse, accountant, cook...[Villagers] will come and [restore] it, especially when they know that they are doing it for their children.” (22-year-old woman from Kaps)
- **Talks and discussion groups**
  - Women and youth, especially in the regions, desire an outlet for self-expression. The focus group participants said that these groups also could provide an opportunity for conflict resolution
- **An advisory center**
  - Yeghegnadzor residents believe that an advisory center could provide villagers with legal and economic advice
- **A center for abused women**
  - A few women mentioned the need for a center to prevent violence against women and support women who have been abused or harassed

# Conditions that Currently Exist for Implementation of Activities

- Regional youth have free time
- Desire of youth to spend this free time productively
- Youth enthusiasm and zeal
- People with the skills and knowledge necessary for the desired activities
- Volunteers willing to assist with these activities
- Some existing infrastructure that could be used for these activities
  - E.g., kindergarten buildings, culture houses, student councils, and youth unions

# Additional Conditions Necessary for Implementation of Activities

- **Financial support**
  - Youth say that the necessary financial resources are not readily available and they lack fundraising skills
    - “I am an artist. I can organize a performance and we can have actors too. But we cannot do it for free because we have to take money home too... Villagers don't have the money to pay.” (21-year-old man from Areni)
- **Adequate infrastructure/access to facilities**
  - There are few communal spaces for events and organized activities to be held in some locations
- **Information**
  - Activists lack information about foundations, donors and other potential sponsors
  - Events are not publicized adequately or effectively
    - “We did not know that there was a film-watching initiative. If people knew about it, they would come, but we were not informed.” (19-year-old woman from Yeghegnadzor)
- **Leaders/Initiators**
  - Focus group participants said that they would participate in activities and events if someone took the initiative to organize them
    - “There is a willingness, but everyone is waiting for others to do the first step.” (22-year-old woman from Gyumri)



# Recommendations

# Recommendations

- Conduct a comprehensive study on the socio-demographic characteristics and needs of women and youth
- Develop, based on the results of this study, social and economic policies targeting women and youth

# Recommendations for Assisting Women

- Rehabilitation of social services, including kindergartens and after-school programs, that would lighten women's workload at home and allow them to pursue employment opportunities
- Organize free study groups on women in politics to encourage women's participation in the political process. These meetings would occur on the neighborhood level and would be led by respected and knowledgeable women from Yerevan and the regions
- Adjust aid priorities by channeling more funding to grassroots projects—as opposed to large-scale, institutional initiatives—that address the concerns of women at the local level
- Encourage the government to incorporate policies on women as a distinct component of its agenda
- Support efforts to establish small health clinics in select communities

# Recommendations for Assisting Youth

- Create youth-oriented electronic and print media
- Provide greater resources for sport and leisure facilities for youth, focusing on low-cost, local initiatives
- Support efforts to establish youth groups, clubs, and NGOs
- Organize cultural events and volunteer programs in the regions in order to mobilize local residents and engage them in the improvement of their own communities
- Allow greater access to community budgets and organize more frequent town hall meetings to keep residents involved in and informed of community plans and priorities
- Improve basic school infrastructures, such as building, heating and power, particularly in the the rural areas
- Place a greater emphasis on training teachers, and increase the use of new and innovative teaching methodologies