



# Independence Generation: Perceptions of Family and Marriage

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- The Armenian family is one of the most important social constructs and institutions in Armenian society. It has been and continues to be patriarchal in structure, multi-generational and at the center of social life.
- In contemporary Armenian society, the family is undergoing certain transformations - young people waiting longer to get married, having fewer children and the custom of living together in extended families is beginning to wane as young people become economically independent.
- However, with the continued attachment of the youth to their families, parents continue to exert social control that includes decision-making, living within or outside the family and family planning.
- For the overriding majority of Armenian youth, their main aim in life is to please their parents, further underscoring the importance of family. There are more social controls by parents, brothers, and older relatives (including the “village”) on girls and young women than their male counterparts.

The family has been one of the most important social constructs and institutions in Armenian society. Through centuries of foreign domination, the absence of statehood and the 1915 Armenian Genocide that ruptured the nation, it was the family unit that maintained Armenian culture, identity, traditions and belonging.

The Armenian family has traditionally been patriarchal in structure, multi-generational (grandparents, including aunts and uncles) and at the center of social life. Historically, the role of representing the family in social and political interactions was ascribed to the eldest man in the family, while the eldest woman ruled domestic matters. Family clans aggressively protected each other against insult or threat and when challenged, banded together to defend themselves (Miller & Miller 1993).

A new report, "[Independence Generation Youth Study 2016 - Armenia](#)"<sup>1</sup> commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation found that in contemporary Armenian society, the family continues to be a powerful cultural symbol and is perceived as one of the most important institutions in the nation's collective narrative. The 'family factor' plays a role in everything from political affiliation to education, regulation of sexual behavior, marriage, aspirations and even leisure.

Families in virtually every society serve several social functions - from reproduction to economic arrangements, practical and emotional support to its members (food, clothing, shelter and love, comfort, and support) to rearing and socialization of children. According to the Independence Generation study, the patriarchal structure of families in Armenia persists - the father has the most influential role, while the youth consider the mother's role important but not the wife's (an important distinction). This traditional model of the family dates back to the 19th century traditions of the Armenian family (Raffi<sup>2</sup>, 1991).

This functionalist view of the family as the basic

1. [www.fes-caucasus.org/news-list/e/independence-generation-youth-study-2016-armenia/](http://www.fes-caucasus.org/news-list/e/independence-generation-youth-study-2016-armenia/)

2. "The Armenian Woman" Mshak newspaper (volumes 34-39 and 42-43, 1879)

building block of society and the one institution that underpins social order (traditions, rituals, obligations, etc.) and its emphasis on the family is perceived as the core strength of the nation. Thereby the family as a social institution helps make vibrant society possible. The Armenian saying, "Strong family, powerful homeland" gives credence to this notion. This understanding of the family in Armenian society and the extreme importance given to it also suggests that sudden or drastic changes in our understanding of the conventional family structure threatens not only the stability of the family but of society.

### 1.1 Transformation in Contemporary Society

While this traditional structure of the family continues to be strong in Armenia, it is nonetheless undergoing certain transformations. Young people are waiting longer to get married, couples are having fewer children and the custom (stemming from economic, social and cultural conditions) of living together with parents in extended families is beginning to wane as young people want - although aren't always able to - live separately from their parents as they get older and become more economically independent. Emigration from Armenia is splitting families apart and labor migration (primarily male migration) has left many women having to carry the burden of caring for the family alone. Almost 30 percent of [households](#)<sup>3</sup> in Armenia today are women-led and these families are almost always more vulnerable.

These factors have impacted the lifestyle and mentality of the youth in Armenia since independence. However, the study clearly shows the continued attachment of the youth to their families; it also explores the social control parents have over their children - controls that impact their decision-making, living within or outside the family and family planning, leading to dependency. The results also indicate that gender attitudes are clearly defined in families. Family supervision and control are more

3. [www.un.am/up/library/Gender\\_Agriculture\\_and\\_Rural\\_Development\\_in\\_Armenia\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.un.am/up/library/Gender_Agriculture_and_Rural_Development_in_Armenia_Eng.pdf)

tightly regulated for girls than boys. Women are primarily ascribed with marital-familial roles and responsibilities.

In almost every society in the world, it is the family that performs the crucial functions of socializing the youth and meeting the physical and emotional needs of its members. While in other societies, secondary socialization (education, media, peers) impacts the development of the youth, in Armenia, from the study, we see that the family continues that function well beyond adulthood.

According to the findings of the report, a “good family is considered to be a large one that displays mutual assistance and is harmonious, traditional, stable, with faithful members, represents the closed circle for Armenian youth, which is inviolable to social influence and cannot be changed by any ‘external’ danger.”

This particular finding reinforces the functionalist understanding of the family as being stable, harmonious and faithful. However, in light of severe economic pressures in the country leading to migration, families are being ripped apart, leaving women and children (in most cases) without a husband/father figure. Additionally, families can also be sources of conflict for its members - child abuse, domestic violence, emotional cruelty, deeply rooted custom of infidelity, etc. The ‘functional’ can easily become dysfunctional. Families and marriages can easily go from love and nurture to hate, cruelty and in some tragic cases, murder. Primary socialization takes place in the family and the functionalist form of the family is where the patriarchal ideology is transmitted to the children where the sexual division of labor is natural leading to the reproduction of rigid gender roles.

According to the Asian Development Bank’s July 2015 [Armenia Gender Assessment](#)<sup>4</sup> report, gender-based violence, especially domestic violence, was one of the most critical problems faced by women in Armenia. Depending on how broad the definition of domestic violence is, surveys by

the government and women’s organizations confirmed that domestic violence was widespread, affecting between 25 to 66 percent of women. While cases of child abuse in Armenia seem to be decreasing, in the first four months of 2017, there were 59 [reported](#)<sup>5</sup> cases of child abuse compared to 71 cases in the previous year. However, these numbers and percentages may not reflect the true picture because of underreporting due to social stigma.

## 1.2 Main Findings of the Report

Nearly 88 percent of the youth unequivocally note that the main aim of their life is to make their parents proud. The notion of making their parents proud and not bringing shame (amot) to the family, factor high on decisions taken by the youth. This result needs to be viewed in its proper context. The majority of respondents (72 percent) have lived with their parents within the last year; only 7.5 percent have lived separately with their spouse/children; only 2.2 percent have lived alone (no spouse/children). Respondents note the main reason for living with their parents is socio-domestic, financial-economic and that this solution is the ‘correct’ one for their families. ‘Correct’ in this case may stem from financial dependence. Only 15.8 percent of youth want to live alone if the opportunity arises, however, that desire increases with age (probably after living several years with in-laws, they understand the complexities and challenges of multi-generational living in the 21st century).

More than half of the respondents live in families consisting of five or more members.

Only 28.2 percent live in four-member families, what is considered the nuclear family - two parents plus children. Over 24 percent live in five-member families and 14.9 percent live in families with six member households. The number of seven-member and eight-member households is relatively high (7.1 and 3.4 percent respectively). In urban families, only 8.8 percent consist of eight or more

4. [www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/162152/arm-country-gender-assessment.pdf](http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/162152/arm-country-gender-assessment.pdf)

5. [www.armenpress.am/eng/news/892710/child-abuse-cases-decrease-in-armenia.html](http://www.armenpress.am/eng/news/892710/child-abuse-cases-decrease-in-armenia.html)

members, while 20.6 percent of respondents in rural areas live in such families. With large extended families in the rural regions of the country, the older generation in villages play a big role in the socialization of the youth - preserving and transferring traditions. It is not surprising, therefore, that just over 60 percent of the youth said that in their opinion, the village is the preserver of national values and traditions.

According to the report, the most influential member of the family is the father (51.2 percent); the mother is influential for 18.8 percent of the respondents; the husband (15.8 percent) and the brother (2.1 percent). The result of this response shows the patriarchal structure and nature of the contemporary family in Armenian society-collegial decision-making (when everyone is given the same importance) works only in 2.6 percent of the respondents' families. While the mother is noted as influential for almost 19 percent of the respondents, the wife is not.

A World Bank [study](#)<sup>6</sup> concluded that Armenian society continues to be predominantly patriarchal and "gender relations within the household continue to reflect a strong 'male breadwinner' model... while women continued to be seen predominantly as mothers and wives primarily responsible for nurturing the family." Another gender assessment [study](#)<sup>7</sup> by E. Duban states: "Significant differences persist in the roles and status of women and men in Armenia, influenced by patriarchal culture and traditions. Cultural norms and stereotypes are quite rigid and account for a number of the obstacles facing women, such as societal notions that women are generally not decision-makers in the public sphere and women's own lack of confidence and perceptions of their dependence on men."

Depending on the gender, age, residence and marital status, the answers to the question about the most influential players in decision-making also changes. The role of the husband is influential in

decision-making for 84.5 percent of married women in the rural regions and 77 percent of married women in urban areas, but while only 13 percent of husbands in rural areas stress the influence of their wives, married men in urban areas do not stress it at all. This could be conditioned by the fact that women in rural areas carry out many functions in rural life - planting, harvesting, taking care of livestock. A study conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, "[Migration and Skills in Armenia](#),"<sup>8</sup> noted that the majority of labor migrants to Russia come from villages and rural areas of the country where there is an excess supply of labor. The rural population does not seek local employment, which is largely non-existent, but is rather predominantly engaged in low productivity, labour-intensive subsistence farming.

While the average age of marriage has increased slightly over the last decade, the responses to the best age for marriage still remain quite young. Almost 58 percent of respondents note that the best age for marriage for men is 25-27, while 20.4 percent consider the noted age best for females, and 47.1 percent consider the best age for women to be married is between 22 and 24. In rural areas, young people, however, are more inclined to note earlier ages for both men and women than those in urban areas.

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When choosing a spouse, the family once again plays a large role - over 80 percent of respondents said that the family's approval is a deciding factor. Other factors include personality (92.7 percent),

6. [www.documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/892681468751807453/pdf/multi0page.pdf](http://www.documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/892681468751807453/pdf/multi0page.pdf)

7. [www.pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/Pdacr978.pdf](http://www.pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdacr978.pdf)

8. [www.crrc.am/hosting/file/\\_static\\_content/projects/Migration\\_and\\_skills\\_2011/Migration\\_and\\_skills\\_Armenia.pdf](http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/_static_content/projects/Migration_and_skills_2011/Migration_and_skills_Armenia.pdf)

social circle (81.1 percent) and virginity (73.6) underscoring prevailing gender attitudes.

### 1.3 More Social Control for Girls

With respect to influence, decision-making, etc., findings of focus groups conducted as part of the study further emphasized or underscored the demands and social control of the parents - in particular, concerning the lifestyle of adolescent girls. Beyond the parents, the supervision of an older brother or the image of an older brother is palpable.

The oversight, restrictions and limitations placed on young women is based on current gender stereotypes in the country: "Family supervision and intervention is more noticeable in the lives of girls than boys. In general, coming home late in the evening is unacceptable for females of all ages."

"It is important for my brother that his sister acts in such a way that they don't say, 'your sister is such and such a girl,' so that he doesn't walk with his head hung low" (14 year-old female, village community).

"My brother can come home at 1 [a.m.]...but my mother has never once asked him where he was. My brother is already a man. He has his responsibilities. But if I come home late...my brother won't allow it" (17 year-old female, Yerevan).

"You come home at 11 [p.m.] and they say, 'How shameful, coming home at this hour! What will the neighbors think?' There is such a thing among Armenians" (20 year-old female, Yerevan).

Additionally, the 'supervision of the community' in the lives of girls and young women through gossip and advice from neighbors is particularly strong in village communities and regional towns. Girls are expected to follow accepted rules of 'moral behavior' while parental control/supervision over boys mainly concerns issues of education.

"Well, it's a village. Even if you make one mistake... come home late or seen with a boy, then...the end..." (24 year-old female, village community).

Another interesting result - 61.7 percent of the respondents make decisions together with their parents and 26.1 percent decide for themselves; 9.3 percent said that someone else decides for them, while 2.9 percent said that their parents make all the decisions for them. According to the study, it is noteworthy that the gender, age, residence and marital status of the youth are also significant - while the 'someone else takes all the decision' option is generally noted by married women, underscoring the role of the husband.

## 2. The Family Beyond the Family

During focus groups, researchers of the study noticed an interesting trend - the word 'family' was mentioned at least 35 times during each focus group. A neighborhood or class, if it is a good one, is defined as family. Being a good friend is characterized by the statement, "How you would behave towards your brother or sister." Further evidence, that the youth in Armenia attach great importance to their family as a social value and link their concerns and ideas to the concept of family.

Moving beyond the child-parent relationship and to ideas and notions about marriage, 93.5 percent of respondents saw themselves as married with a family; only six percent saw themselves single. Those who wished to remain unmarried, but in a relationship with a partner list advantages of unmarried relationships: that is the possibility of focusing on their career; fewer chances for conflicts and easier for partners to solve disagreements; greater level of freedom between partners and the ease of separating.

What is the main advantage of marriage? Greater level of responsibility. The study notes that being responsible is a very fashionable value for 56.8 percent of the youth.

## 3. Final Thoughts

While it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from this study due to the diverse nature of the youth in Armenia, several trends are worth

noting based on the results, some of which are discussed above.

The concept and notion of family is very strong; for the overriding majority of youth, their main aim in life is to please their parents and most see themselves married at a relatively young age.

Multi-generational families, especially in the regions continue to exist, mostly for economic reasons but also due to strongly rooted traditions and expectations by the older generation.

The patriarchal nature of the Armenian family persists. Men, as husbands and fathers, continue to wield significant influence in the lives of the youth within the family structure.

There are more social controls by parents and older relatives (including the 'village') on girls and young women than their male counterparts

The functionalist view sees the family as the key unit in creating well-integrated members of society by instilling the social culture into children. And with more social controls on women, it's not surprising therefore that women are less inclined to be politically and socially active. As the Independence Generation study revealed, social and political activity is more typical in males than females. This is detrimental to the development of Armenian society.

There is little doubt that the family in the collective consciousness of the Armenian nation is one of the most important institutions in society. It has banded together against foreign or external threats, it has been the crucible of identity, national values, belonging, etc., it has served the nation in times of upheaval, genocide.... However, as the world is living in the Fourth Industrial Revolution with potential disruptions to the labor market, as ability of movement has increased over the last century, as labor migration has increased since independence ripping families apart, as the Internet has given the youth access to other global trends and values, as younger women become more empowered and begin to balk at rigid gender roles, the nature and construction of the family will undergo changes.

Change is not a bad thing. While maintaining the virtue, value and importance of the Armenian family in society, it must be done without ignoring issues of conflict and abuse that exist in families, the prevailing and persisting gender inequality and be accepting of diversity and the potentially different forms of family (nuclear, multi-generational, single-parent). Armenian society needs to acknowledge the challenges that face families - from the economic to the emotional - and find ways to address them to create the conditions necessary for healthy, harmonious and stable family life, indeed, a key factor for the empowerment of the nation.

## About the Author

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