

**INSECURITY AND ENDURANCE IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA: A STUDY OF  
GENDER, GEOPOLITICS, AND DISPOSSESSION**

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Insecurity and Endurance in Post-Soviet Armenia: A Study of Gender, Geopolitics, and Dispossession

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Jennifer L. Fluri

This dissertation examines on-going crisis and endurance in the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia which has experienced a number of transformations and upheavals over the past 30 years. In Armenia, struggle and resilience are embedded in the textures of everyday life, and nationalist narratives celebrate Armenians' abilities to resist and endure in the face of constant threat. These narratives are not gender neutral, however. They are grounded in traditional notions of a patriarchal family and gendered divisions of labor. In the current context, these narratives are being challenged and redefined as economic liberalization and on-going geopolitical insecurities have led to new negotiations over family values, gender roles, and morality from the scale of the nation-state to the individual. Following a feminist framework that highlights the intimate and the global, I investigate the processes of neoliberalization and dispossession by looking at the intimate scale of the home and women's bodies, the financialization of social reproduction, and the role of affect and attachment for enduring. I first discursively example the public debate around two pieces of legislation—a gender rights law and a domestic violence prevention law. I show how gender is weaponized by conservative groups and women's daily lives are entangled in various geopolitical and economic contexts leading to both a loss of intuition and economic insecurity for women. Second, I examine economic insecurities and the transformation of economic practices among rural households, particularly the financialization of social reproduction. I ask how long the gendered and generational labor that supports social reproduction can be sustainable under conditions of dispossession. I conclude that not only are the existing practices of social reproduction being depleted by financialization, creating significant forms of depletion across generations, but that practices of resilience to crisis are, in fact, perpetuating the general trajectory of developments that necessitated the use of loans and credit in the first place. Finally, I consider how on-going crisis has led to a sense of disillusionment and displacement for young women, who feel a dizzying disconnection from older generations' strategies of endurance. Young women are both drawn to and alienated from opposing normative expectations for the good life—a traditional or nationalist ideology that expects women to be good mothers and domestic caretakers and a “modern” set of expectations that encourages women to pursue their individual interests. Attention to the affective transformations suggests that processes of dispossession produced by neoliberalization include, but also extend beyond, material forms. Throughout, specific attention to generational differences and intergenerational relations give complexity to analyses of the intimate and the global because they reveal shifts in the practices of endurance. More broadly, this dissertation demonstrates the ways that practices of social reproduction, attachment, affect, and the domestic are inseparable from the geopolitical and the economy as the commodification (or geopoliticization) of these areas of life (de)values them in ways that are conducive to capitalist accumulation.

## **DEDICATION**

For Sona and Shushan

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines ongoing crisis and the practices of those who endure. Where there is crisis, there is also resilience, and scholars have long grappled with how to understand the tensions between the two, including the resultant causes, impacts, (im)possibilities, and lessons that may be drawn from them. This particular attempt to understand an on-going crisis begins with the premise that crisis itself cannot necessarily be viewed as a lone event to be called out and addressed, or even a series of events, but rather is something ongoing, mundane, and deeply embedded into the texture of everyday life. Whether crisis has been produced through dispossession of political rights, economic opportunities, material resources, or even the dispossession of intuition, it has moved into nearly every nook and cranny of daily habit and attitude.

The following investigation of ongoing crisis and endurance is situated in a particular place: the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia, a small country in the Caucasus region. Most citizens in post-Soviet Armenia have been contending with economic and geopolitical struggle for at least 30 years, initially caused by the fall of state socialism and a war with nearby Azerbaijan. After near economic collapse, Armenia introduced neoliberal economic policies that have proceeded apace to privatize, marketize, and financialize many aspects of daily life. During

this same period, Armenians have celebrated their ability to resist and endure through the use of nationalist narratives permeating everyday discourse. In these narratives, Armenian characteristics of resilience and determination are grounded in traditional notions of a patriarchal family and gendered divisions of labor. Men are expected to be leaders and decision makers and women serve the supporting roles of wives, mothers, and bearers of tradition.

In the context of neoliberalism in the former Soviet Union, gender roles have shifted to meet new sociopolitical ideologies and differentiated economic practices. Namely, changes tied to the processes of marketization and the dissolution of social networks have placed increased and uneven pressure on both men and women to manage social reproduction; previous household strategies such as queuing, hoarding, and informal exchange have been replaced by social relations based on monetary exchange, shopping, and individual choice. Despite the ideological pressure for women to remain at home as caregivers, economic changes have made it necessary for women to enter the market place as consumers, often in ways that reinforce their role as caretakers.

Meanwhile, (geo)political tensions in Armenia surround these shifting gender roles. Conservative groups spread fear of the “westernization” of traditional family values, criticize economic liberalization, and argue for more rigid gender roles. At the same time, Western international development projects continue to promote women’s economic and political “empowerment.” Thus practices of domesticity, social reproduction, and the woman’s role in society have emerged as key sites of discursive debate between collective and individual identity, along with command in free market systems, tradition and modernity, nostalgia for the past and present economic need. The premise upon which Armenia’s national narrative of resilience was founded has consequently been up-ended, generating anxiety, confusion, and displacement.

In short, economic liberalization has resulted in a noticeable crisis in both Armenian political groups and families. This has led to new negotiations around family values, gender roles, and morality from the level of nation-state down to the individual (Gal and Kligman 2000; see also Hall 1997; Oza 2006; Ong 2006). Tensions around gender relations are particularly acute in post-Soviet Armenia where various actors are openly debating practices of domesticity and gender identity. The actors involved in these debates include international development programs; local gender rights NGOs advocating for women's participation in politics and wage labor; conservative political groups promoting traditional gender roles and family values; and citizens who must navigate the transition themselves. Economic shifts and changing roles gender have further required citizens to endure altered material worlds where previous social reproduction practices are no longer successful or meaningful (Katz 2004; Povinelli 2011). Citizens now face the need to find new strategies for provisioning, new skills for wage and domestic labor, and new means to sustain themselves in a rapidly changing context.

This dissertation thus examines the discursive, material, and affective contours of the ongoing crisis in Armenia through the intertwined phenomena of neoliberalization, international development intervention, and everyday practices of social reproduction and endurance.

While many scholars have thoroughly explored the effects of neoliberal economic restructuring on ethnicity, labor, and nationalism in post-Soviet regions (e.g. Dunn 2004; Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002; Verdery 1996; Platz 1996), few scholars have paid attention to the intimate scale of gender and social reproduction against the backdrop of geopolitical and economic change. This research contributes to geographical analysis of neoliberalization and international development interventions by examining the transcalar relations between social reproduction, gender roles, and economic restructuring (Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Nagar et al

2002; Pratt and Rosner 2013; Blunt 2005). Drawing on insights from feminist and critical geography scholarship, I investigate how gender roles are spatially produced through economic and political change. More specifically, I analyze how the processes of neoliberalism and nationalism have redefined gender roles in both complimentary and competing ways, while at the same time contributing to on-going process of dispossession. Because gender identities shifted as a direct result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the introduction of neoliberal policy, this dissertation also investigates the mechanisms by which these events occurred and their many consequences.

To analyze the contours of neoliberalization in Armenia, I engage with both feminist and political economic theory. These two strains facilitate the investigation of global economic transformation and how it affects everyday life, with particular attention to how Armenian gender roles and subjectivities are being reworked and negotiated. First, political economic theories of capitalism foreground the significance of human labor for the production of value. This study draws upon that concept to examine transformations within the value of human labor and specifically domestic practices and skills of social reproduction (Elson 1979; Harvey 1982; Wright 2006). Feminist analysis of global processes assume that everyday activities of men and women—the relations of work and play or of production and consumption—defy any fixed or given scale because they are simultaneously connected to global and local processes, along with real politics and people (Marston 2000; Herod and Wright 2002; Katz 2004). Feminist approaches thus analyze how feminine and masculine subjectivities are wound into the networks of material production occurring across scales from the most intimate bodily functions to flows of global capital (Pratt 2003). Following feminist approaches to the *global intimate* (Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Pratt and Rosner 2013, Dyck 2005), this dissertation considers the relationship

between the microscale of bodies, habits, attachments, and daily practice to the macroscale of global processes of geopolitics and economic crisis.

The research questions which guide this study approach the issues of ongoing crisis and endurance through both discursive and material/social perspectives. In Chapter 3, I ask what the symbolic significance of gender in geopolitical debates in Armenia is, and how gender and women's roles in the family have been used by various actors. This includes how the state, independent political groups, the media, and individuals either promote or resist neoliberal ideologies and practices. Chapter 4 then considers the impacts of financialization for practices of social reproduction and gendered and generational labor. It asks how the liberalization of the economy and processes of dispossession have produced gendered forms of insecurity related to the depletion of resources needed for social reproduction. Chapter 5 extends this investigation of depletion and dispossession to consider how have women negotiated, navigated, or endured these transformations.

## **Why Armenia, And a Brief Historical Introduction**

Before I turn to my investigation of Armenian crisis and endurance and their particular expressions in the Armenian political, economic, and social landscape, I would like to address a question that has often been asked of me: Why Armenia?

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War, and along with it the formal project of communism. As Fukuyama (1992) famously wrote, the end of the Soviet Union marked “the end of history.” As such, for many people the year 1991 was the *end* of a number of defining political and economic tensions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most notably the

struggle between communism and capitalism. For me, however, it marked the *discovery* of a world that until that point I had not even been aware of. I was intrigued to learn of the existence of places that were supposed to have been so alien from my own yet had seemingly been existing in parallel to it.

This childhood curiosity was fostered as an undergraduate student in anthropology when I took the course the “Peoples and Cultures of the Former Soviet Union.” I was assigned to read *Hadji Murat* (2011[1912]), Tolstoy’s final work, about a rebel leader in the north range of the Caucasus Mountains fighting against the onslaught of Russian imperialism. The narrator of Tolstoy’s novella opens and closes the story with the image of a beautiful thistle. This thistle is a crimson flower, prickly, tough, stubborn, and most importantly, unflinching in its desire to preserve a place atop the stem of thorns. It was Tolstoy’s metaphor for people of the Caucasus and their determination to maintain a sense of identity in the face of an expanding Russian empire. In short, the Caucasian thistle led me to questions of endurance during constant struggle.

Since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the South Caucasus has been at a geopolitical crossroads. Its geographic position made it a strategic territory for several competing empires, including the Ottoman, Persian and Russian, all of which have had a significant impact on cultural identities, political development, and practices of endurance in the region (Gachechiladze 2010). Among those empires vying for control of the region, the Russian Empire was the first to incorporate both the North and South Caucasus under its control with the intention of securing the region as a military base for further advancement toward the “warm seas.” At times the Russian Empire’s control over the region occurred with the consent of local rulers, but in most cases, there was significant ethnic conflict and violence. This is what Tolstoy’s novella reminds us of. Yet despite nearly constant clashes, the region’s rugged and mountainous terrain and dispersed



population are commonly cited as reasons that the region never fully fell under the control of a single empire, including the Russians (Panossian 2006; Suny 1993; Hovanissian 1997; Gachechiladze 2010).

Towards the end of World War I, several events transpired to dramatically reshape the politics of the region and Armenia in particular. Armenians living in what is now Eastern Turkey under the Ottoman Empire had rising nationalist ambitions and were directing their political aims towards greater independence from the two large empires that dominated the region, namely the Ottomans and the Russians (Kaufman 2001, 51). Yet, at the same time, discrimination and violence against minorities within the Ottoman Empire increased. After several pogroms and massacres against Armenian communities in Constantinople and among rural communities in Anatolia and Cilicia, the violence culminated in the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916 (Hovanissian 1998; 2011; van der Leeuw 2000:145). The Armenian Genocide refers to the massacre and forced migration of an estimated one to two million Armenian men, women, and children from their villages and homes across the Ottoman Empire (for detailed historical accounts of the Armenian Genocide see Dadrian 1995; 1999a; 1999b; Hovanissian 1992; 1998; 2011; Riggs 1997). The event continues to be historically and geopolitical significant not only for the dramatic loss of life and extreme hardship faced by those forced out of their homes, but because Armenia insists on the recognition of the genocide as a deliberate, state-sponsored act of genocide by Turkey (Gachechiladze 2010). Turkey and many other nations, including the United States, deny that the deportations resulted in genocide. This event and its aftermath continue to strain relations between Armenia and Turkey to this day.

Following the end of World War I, Armenia was briefly an independent nation until the Bolsheviks invaded in 1921. The Sovietization of Armenia was not brought about due to popular

demand or uprising but was “a last resort by the defeated, discouraged, and disintegrating Dashnak government of independent Armenia” (Suny 1993, 138). Armenia, along with Georgia and Azerbaijan, were re-annexed by Soviet Russia and became independent republics within the Soviet Union.

Sovietization had a number of effects on Armenian society, including modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. Several policies were implemented to promote literacy, liberate women, and to transform Armenian society by abolishing private property. In the 1930s, Armenian industry and agriculture were collectivized and mechanized. Its key industries included copper, cement, chemicals, textiles, construction materials, processed foods and liquors (Matossian 1962:113). After socialism, higher education was increasingly available, with particular focus given to “polytechnic” institutes to match the needs of industrialization. By the 1970s, Armenia was one of the most densely populated and ethnically homogenous republics within the Soviet Union. Nearly half the population was employed in industry, a significant transformation from 1920s Armenia, where the majority of the population worked in agriculture (Suny 1993: 184). Despite having one of the highest standards of living in Soviet Republics, Armenians often experienced food and housing shortages. This led to greater reliance on kinship networks, informal economies, and other common practices necessary to navigate the shortage economy characterizing the late socialist period (Platz 2000; see also Verdery 1996; Ledeneva 1998).

Armenia remained a part of the Soviet Union until its break up in 1991. In the years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia and other Soviet Republics experienced a “reawakening” of nationalism. In Armenia, what began as an environmentalist movement to shut down the dilapidated nuclear power plant quickly turned into a nationalist movement

centered around the territorial and ethnic disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh (de Waal 2003). Nagorno-Karabagh (NK) was a semi-autonomous region within the borders of Azerbaijan predominantly populated by Armenians. In 1987, many Armenians participated in demonstrations in Yerevan and Stepanakert, the capital city of NK, demanding the reunification of NK with Armenia (Crossiant 1998:26). Scholars attribute the escalation of nationalist interest and ethnic violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis as the beginning of broader ethnic tensions in the Soviet Union that contributed to its eventual collapse. Ethnic tensions and intermittent violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis finally culminated in an ethnic war in 1991, once the two states gained independence from the Soviet Union. As a result of the war, Azerbaijan lost nearly one fifth of its territory, and more than one million Azerbaijanis and 300,000 Armenians were deported or killed (Gachechiladze 2010, Ismailzade 2005). Full-scale military hostilities ended with a cease fire in 1994 (though an escalation of military violence took place in April 2016, referred to as the Four-Day War).

For many Armenians, the events following independence in 1991, including the war with Azerbaijan, led to what many refer to as the “Dark Years.” The shift to a market economy left wallets and purses empty and devastated the infrastructure of the country. As the war with Azerbaijan escalated, both Azerbaijan and Turkey enforced an almost total economic blockade of Armenia by closing their borders. The economic blockade meant there was no available gas or other source of energy entering the country. This left Armenian citizens without electricity, heat, and other basic amenities. The economy of the country collapsed, and unemployment and inflation rose dramatically (Platz 2000; World Bank Report 1993).

Today, Armenia is a nation of 2.7 million people, having lost nearly a quarter of its population since 1988.<sup>1</sup> Most of the current population lives in urban areas, with one million people living in Yerevan city itself. Armenia has experienced some economic recovery following the “Dark Years” in the mid-1990s, though the global recession in 2008 affected the country harshly (World Bank Report 2014). Difficult economic conditions are all but apparent in the country’s 22% overall unemployment rate. Unemployment rates for women are higher than for men, at 24.6%. Additionally, unemployment has hit young people very hard. Those between the ages of 20-24 represent more than half of those without work. Among those under the age of 34 and unemployed, two of the most significant reasons given for their lack of employment are that they either plan to leave the country or they believe that finding a job is a hopeless pursuit. These difficult economic conditions can be attributed both to the slow recovery from recession and the country’s ongoing battles with corruption and a ruling oligarchy. The borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey remain militarized, cutting off trade and limiting mobility through the region. Meanwhile, Russia remains one of Armenia’s closest economic and political allies (Ismailzade 2005).

This brief summary of events in Armenia’s recent political history highlights the many struggles the nation has experienced. Subsequent chapters will introduce more detail on relevant historical points. These events, in broad strokes, have also played a key role in the narratives Armenians tell about themselves and their history. Within nationalist literature and discourse, there is an oft repeated theme emphasizing the survival of Armenian families and Armenia itself against unlikely odds. Such narratives often credit this survival to the ingenuity and

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<sup>1</sup> This information and the following statistics come from the Armenian National Statistical Service and are based on the 2011 national census.

resourcefulness of its citizens, a small and seemingly outnumbered group in the world (Bourtonian 1993/4a; 1993/4b; Sunny 1993; Dudwick 1994; Panossian 2006). Thus, Armenians see themselves as a group that has maintained its identity despite many attempts at invasion and obliteration. Through their resilience, they have struggled against imperialism, communism, and currently against the whims of the capitalist market, all despite limited resources. This nationalist narrative survival harkens back to Tolstoy's metaphor of the thistle and his characterization of individuals and groups in the region: beleaguered but determined.

Tolstoy's depiction of the Caucasian peoples and the region itself comes in the context of a story about loyalty and bravery, particularly in the face of the venal obsessions of the tsar Nicholas I. The warlord hero, Hadji Murat, is stubborn, proud, and fiercely independent, yet he allows love and loyalty to dominate his thinking. Hadji Murat's eventual end at the hands of a political traitor is bloody and gruesome, yet he keeps fighting until the very end. While a beautiful account of pathos, majesty, and resistance, Tolstoy's portrayal follows along familiar lines: the heroic in tandem with the masculine. Murat's struggles are meaningful because they are dramatic, and the hero, despite dying, prevails because his resistance is carried on into the future. In contemporary Armenia, however, the site of struggle is not in the heroic actions of men, but rather in the everyday practices of women.

Tolstoy's romantic representation of the Caucasus may have been what sparked my interest in the region. Yet in what follows I depart from anything resembling Tolstoy's technique of description. While I have remained interested in the experience of struggle and endurance, I instead pay close attention to the minutiae of women's daily lives. Armenia is an interesting site at which to examine the relationship between the intimate and geopolitical because it has long been a small but significant player in the "big game" of geopolitics. Yet, it is

the ways that geopolitics and other global processes are written at the microscale of the home and the body which will be the focus of this work.

### **Boundaries and Contributions: From the Masculine Hero to Everyday Endurance**

Endurance within the context of the mundane might be the opposite of the traditionally heroic; it is not focused on a particular event, but rather entails existing with prolonged suffering. As such, endurance is grounded in everyday material practices of what people do, where they go, and with whom they perform their daily tasks. Such a view of endurance must also consider the social, political, economic, and even affective contexts in which these activities are performed. In so doing, resilience reveals not only the ways that capitalism, imperialism, or patriarchy serve to organize the conditions of everyday life (Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991), but also the ways those processes *disorganize* everyday life. The dust from the last unsettling event cannot even settle before another one occurs. This notion of systemic crisis is what Lauren Berlant (2011) refers to as *crisis ordinariness*. Indeed, shifting the framework from understanding crisis as an event or even a series of events into the space of the on-going and mundane serves to ground analysis in a particularly slow space-time. This shift in focus avoids dehistoricization and allows for a multiplicity of perspectives, experiences, and histories (Massey 2005). Damaging forces do take shape in the zone of ordinary life, eventually becoming marked as events. However, a view of the ordinary sees these changes as they unfold and serves to show how forces both impact lives and are mediated through them. This dissertation approaches the uneventful, ordinariness of everyday life as a zone of convergence among many histories, where people manage the

incoherence of their lives and face off to threats against the lives they imagine for themselves (Massey 2005; Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2011).

With the aim of understanding endurance in this way, gender and generational differences emerge as useful markers for how people recognize, mediate, and navigate their worlds. The contributions of women's work and gender relations have been thoroughly established as significant to explanations of the impacts of economic processes and transformations. Attention to gendered dynamics have called into question many masculinist assumptions about the "economy" and economic restructuring (Hanson and Pratt 1995; Lawson 1995; Gibson-Graham 1996; True 2003; Nagar 2002; Katz 2004; Smith and Rochovska 2007; Bulyandelgeriyn 2008). Yet unlike gender relations, generational differences are may be taken for granted because it is easy to assume that disagreements between generations and change over time are inevitable. My claim is that just as gender relations are significant for understanding a range of processes, inter-generational relations also produce tangible effects for (in)security, vulnerability, opportunity, and affect.

Weston (2002, 93) argues that gender is constituted by time claims: gender constructs are developed in and through contrasts with people's understanding of the way relationships were "before." Contemporary circumstances are explained in reference to "previous" arrangements, such as the masculinities and femininities of the past. For Weston, gendered time claims are linked to narratives of modernity in which women in the present look back at previous gender relations in order to proclaim that "the world is better for women now." In post-Soviet Armenia, the demarcation of the past as separate from the present and future is particularly visible and also based on linear narratives of development towards "modernity" (if also problematic, as "Soviet" practices continue into the present). Subjects frequently reference life "before" and "after" the

Soviet Union. In this context, the female body, practices of social reproduction, and other modes of being are assigned to represent specific historical periods by citizens. These markers operate as a measure of distance or attachment to a particular view of the world and ways of living in that world. Building from Weston's (2002) propositions, I view gender and generation as always co-constituted. This perspective illustrates the very real implications that gender and generational relations have for understanding economic transformations. In this dissertation, I will explore the specific gendered and generational impacts of political, economic, and affective insecurity to understand the unequal burdens of enduring on Armenians.

Though I understand gender to refer to the symbolic construction and social relations that define categories of "man" or "woman" in ways that vary across space and time, I focus almost exclusively on women's daily lives. This decision was largely a pragmatic one. Men and definitions of masculinity in Armenia are also undergoing significant change and transformation as a result of economic transformations and on-going crisis. However, men's roles and masculinities remain relatively conservative, thereby creating a separation from women's such that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to enter that world. Furthermore, men and women's roles in Armenian society are patriarchal and strictly defined according to traditional expectations. As will be discussed further in Chapter 3, the very concept of "gender" and the notion that gender is a social construct is highly politicized in Armenia. Consequently, I trace the same categories of men, woman, and family as defined by the participants in the study. Though these reified categories are problematic, they reflect the viewpoints of those interviewed.

Gender roles in Armenia, and women's in particular, have been undergoing nearly constant transformation since the early Soviet period. Sovietization sought to reduce the significance of the family as a productive unit while individual farms and businesses were collectivized, and



individuals were entered into the industrial labor force. Consequently, early Soviet ideals for women in society meant shifting the work from the home to the public domain, linking their freedom to their participation in wage labor, and diminishing the ideological reverence of motherhood (Holland 1985; Goldman 1993). By the late 1980s, Armenian women participated in higher education in equal numbers to men and worked in nearly every profession—though not in management positions (Dudwick 1997). However, traditional Armenian gender roles and family ideologies persisted. According to traditional archetypes, women were expected to be caretakers and nurturers looking after all the domestic affairs and chores of social reproduction, including child care, cooking, and housework. Meanwhile, the men would be the protectors, defenders, and decision-makers of the family. Soviet gendered subjectivities thus saddled women with a double burden of labor: on the one hand, women had opportunities for education and work outside the home; on the other hand, they were also expected to perform all the same necessary domestic tasks (Gal and Kligman 2000; Pine 2003; Goldman 1993). Due in part to the continuity of these gendered divisions of labor, women largely found themselves relegated to the domestic sphere following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Einhorn 1993; Dudwick 1997; Platz 2000; True 2003).

The hardships experienced in Armenia during the “Dark Years” of the 1990s—the war with Azerbaijan, the near total economic blockade, devastating poverty, and other consequences of the Soviet state’s collapse—disrupted gender relations and significantly reduced women’s participation in (waged) economic and political activities. Despite women’s high participation in both education and the work force, women were quickly pushed out of paid labor positions. Growing nationalist sentiments returned to reinforce women’s roles as wives, mothers, and bearers of tradition (Dudwick 1997; Rudd 2000; True 2003; Gal and Kligman 2000). The

prevailing nationalist ideologies promoted “traditional families,” where “the category of ‘woman’ became a pivotal site where tradition and modernization [were] debated” (Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004, 3). In addition to increased nationalist sentiments, other factors that contributed to women’s exclusion included large-scale unemployment, the collapse of infrastructure, and the privatization of agriculture. Land privatization, for example, often put women in more precarious positions as land was awarded to families and subsequently to husbands in the case of divorce (Dudwick 1997, 240).

This dissertation examines how the processes of neoliberalization, dispossession, and crisis produce gendered and generational insecurities. Viewing these processes from the perspective of the mundane and ordinary, my study explores the daily material, social, and affective practices of enduring. It elucidates these issues by stepping outside mainstream capitalism to a region that is still grappling with its non-capitalist history. In doing so, it provides an empirical account of post-socialist economic restructuring and the ways Armenian households negotiate these changes. In general, this work documents the gendered and generational dislocations and exclusions experienced by citizens in societies undergoing neoliberal economic restructuring. I hope to draw attention to the ways in which neoliberal technologies are used to justify and legitimate those exclusions (Povinelli 2011, Ong 2006). Theoretically, this study examines post-socialist neoliberalism by considering how it is produced, reproduced, and contested from the nation to the household; it examines the ways that capitalism itself operates by relying on non-capitalist practices and gendered and generational forms of insecurity (Hartsock 2006, Gibson-Graham 1996; Mitchell 2002).

## **From Development and Dispossession to Social Reproduction and Endurance**

### *d/Development: Neoliberalism and International Development in Armenia*

Political and economic transformation and the sense of ongoing crisis in post-Soviet Armenia arose in part from the dual tensions that Hart (2001) identifies as constitutive of development. Hart (2001, 650) makes a distinction between big “D” Development, which refers to intentional interventions from political and financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and NGOs, and little “d” development, which refers to the more or less open, or “unscripted” (Lawson 2007, 5) changes in economies and societies as the result of the uneven development of capitalism. Big “D” Development started as a post-World War II project of intervention in the ‘third world’ in the context of decolonization and the Cold War. It often seeks to affect societies through the commercialization of agriculture or the building of industries (Lawson 2007). Little “d” development, meanwhile, has been primarily investigated by Marxist and feminist scholars interested in investigating the multiple forms and effects of capitalist social relations and patterns of accumulation (Harvey 2003, Katz 2001a, for example). Following Polanyi (1944), Hart (2001, 650) asserts that these two opposing tendencies are contained within capitalism, not separate from or outside of it.

In Armenia, the dialectical tension between these two forces of development emerged in the 1990s as the formerly centrally planned economy became neoliberalized through policies of privatization, marketization, and a reduction in the role of the welfare state. Neoliberalism, as it was implemented in the former Soviet Union, refers to the bundle of policies, institutional formations, and emergent forms of subjectivity (atomization and individualism) reflective of realigned hegemonic interests. Harvey (2005, 5) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political

economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (deregulation of trade).” Neoliberal policies were implemented across formerly socialist states to varying degrees. Under Jeffrey Sach’s “shock therapy” theory of economic restructuring (Wedel 2001), these policies produced pronounced income inequality, high rates of unemployment, and new forms of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003). These resulted in many forms of economic and political insecurity (Hann 2002). In addition to the neoliberalization of the economy, international development actors sought to implement various democracy-building projects to alleviate these insecurities (Hemment 2004; Mandel and Humphrey 2002). Yet these projects, discussed more fully in Chapter 3, often had the effect of obscuring, rather than addressing, economic insecurities in the post-Soviet context.

As the predominant economic policy in the post-Soviet region and around the world, neoliberalism is primarily understood in three ways. First, Marxist thinkers see neoliberalism as a global hegemonic project which has become “common sense” to politicians, policy makers, and the public” and one that necessarily produces violent structural inequalities (Harvey 2005; N. Smith 2000, Zizek 2008). Second, scholars informed by post-structuralist theories conceive of neoliberalism as a technique of governance where the “shrinking” of the state is accompanied by the growth of a number of new techniques for remaking citizen-subjects as free, self-managing, and enterprising. In this sense, neoliberalism is an array of techniques for optimizing life in various forms that cannot be reduced to a “uniform global condition” (Ong 2006, 14; see also Larner 2003). Third, neoliberalism is conceptualized as an “unruly and unpatterned” process

(Brenner et al. 2010, 36) that is geographically and historically differentiated, locally complex, and never truly independent.

In what follows, I approach neoliberalism as a process that is geographically, culturally, and historically differentiated. When viewed as an uneven process, it is possible to investigate the ways that neoliberalism is perceived, experienced, and lived by “ordinary” citizens whose rights, roles, and responsibilities are reshaped in the process. In other words, this approach emphasizes the ways that neoliberalism is *domesticated*—how it is “negotiated, constituted, and made possible through the practices of everyday life and social reproduction” (Stenning et al 2010, 3; see also Creed 1998, Gibson-Graham 1996)—in order to evaluate both the inequalities that it produces and the new modes of social organization it engenders. Keeping both the ideological and “unruly” notions of neoliberalism at the center of this analysis has enabled me to ask how new gender relations are produced, negotiated, and navigated by participants. It also provides leverage for understanding how economic restructuring and processes of accumulation by dispossession have transformed the relations of gendered and generational labor in Armenia.

### *Dispossession*

Recent attention to the processes of “accumulation by dispossession” have been effectively used to explain how neoliberal pathways of capital accumulation actively dispossess people of access to and control over a range of resources (Harvey 2003; Hart 2006; de Angelis 2004; Fernandez 2017; Elychar 2004). Harvey (2003) derived his concept of accumulation by dispossession from Marx’s (1976) theory of primitive accumulation. Primitive accumulation identifies the violent historical process that dispossessed producers from the means of production and created the original surplus that made capitalist accumulation possible. Though Marx’s

analysis made primitive accumulation appear as a distinct historical process, Luxemburg (1951) challenged this position in her recognition that capitalism always requires something outside itself in order to stave off crisis, namely a relation between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production through which capitalism itself can access resources or opportunities for investment that were previously unavailable. Harvey (2003), drawing on Luxemburg, recognized that the latest round of capital accumulation required similarly violent processes, and he reformulated the concept as “accumulation by dispossession” to describe the *new* mechanisms by which the global commons continue to be enclosed.

In Harvey’s view, accumulation by dispossession grew in importance beginning around 1973 with the shift to a post-Fordist economic restructuring. And the same was true of “financialization,” or the growing reach and depth of financial capital into new areas of the globe and social life. In addition to the rise of finance, Harvey identifies the commoditization and corporatization of formerly public goods and institutions such as universities, health care, and entitlement as key to the current round of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003:147-148). Other mechanisms of dispossession include land seizures, local (Li 2009), dispossession from exposure to global markets (Elyachar 2005) and legally enforced debt repayment (Glassman 2006). Thus, Marxist development scholars have increasingly come to see accumulation, not as a single moment of accumulation, but continuous within capitalist social formations. They also recognize that the co-existence of capitalist and non-capitalist economies is key to an analysis of political economy, as non-capitalist activities subsidize capital itself (Sanyal 2007; Perelman 2000; de Angelis 2004).

Harvey’s (2003) focus is on the role of the state as the primary agent of dispossession through top-down coercive force. However, there are emerging forms of dispossession that

create conditions for communities to be enrolled as both producers and stakeholders in the process of accumulation, in effect shifting both the temporality and spatiality of dispossession (Paudel 2016; Li 2014; Elychar 2004). I follow Elychar (2005) in identifying practices carried out by diverse institutions such as the state, international development programs, and NGOs, which produce a diverse field of power relations and complicate the notion of top-down coercion. In many community-based development projects, for instance, commercialization and financialization are promoted as “desirable” and profitable for individuals within the community. This project involves a process of producing subjects as new entrepreneurs, making of them both owners and stakeholders in the development of their community. In what follows, I show how new forms of credit and debt within this process, along with the production of new gendered subjectivities in Armenia, are also part of processes of dispossession (see Chapter 4). The collapse of the Soviet industrial economy, driven by economic restructuring imposed by the IMF and World Bank, created wide spread unemployment in former Soviet states. In Armenia, this bolstered an informal economy where individuals were “freed” from state-owned industries. At the same time, community development programs to support the informal economy, such as microfinance, have had a paradoxical effect on those they purport to help, serving in many cases to deplete needed resources (Keating et al 2010; Elyachar 2003; Roy 2010; Rankin 2002; 2013; for reference to “depletion” see Elson 2000; Rai et al 2014; and Fernandez 2017).

Dispossession is often treated as an “event” or series of events in which a “new site of accumulation” in the form of an enclosure is established (Blomley 2008; Levien 2012). As such, significant attention has been paid to land grabbing and other forms of material dispossession (Fernandez 2017; Li 2010). As noted above, however, I aim to shift attention away from specific events to look at accumulation by dispossession as an on-going process that can deplete

individual, household, and community resources needed for long-term endurance. Attention to specific events tends to present them as disruptions to a world that has otherwise been “normal,” whereas a view that looks at dispossession as continuous process shifts the temporal framework to account for long-term consequences. Rai et al. (2014), for example, use the concept of depletion to identify the increasing gap between the resources needed for social reproduction—domestic, affective, and reproductive—and available resources for health and well-being. This perspective—looking at the dynamic flow of resources and their depletion over time—enables a different temporal view of dispossession from one that focuses on a single event to a process that is ongoing. In Chapters 4 and 5, I explore the generational and gendered consequences of dispossession through this shifted temporal framework to show how the phenomenon affects not only the immediate present but the *longue duree*.

Finally, accumulation by dispossession calls attention to the ways in which capital accumulation relies on non-capitalist practices to subsidize labor costs, thereby increasing the rate of surplus accumulation while subordinating non-capitalist practices to a less meaningful position. Yet, such a theory may not be sufficiently attentive to the ways that difference—gender, caste, race, generation, and other subject positions—create the conditions for accumulation (Wright 2014; Mollet 2014). Hartsock (2006) and others have noted that theories of dispossession fail to substantively account for the role of gender and the practices of social reproduction that often serve to prop up capital accumulation. In Chapter 4, I explore the ways that dispossession by financialization relies on non-capitalist practices defined by gendered and generational divisions of labor, producing not an immediate crisis, but an on-going depletion of resources and a wearing-out of subjects. Chapter 5 builds upon this understanding of dispossession to consider how it has produced new affective modes of being, new subjects, and



new practices of social reproduction.

### *Social Reproduction and Endurance*

Following Hartsock (2006) and others, I focus on the social, material, and affective practices of social reproduction in order to examine the ongoing effects of dispossession and the subsequent disruptions of everyday life. Social reproduction refers to the “broad range of practices and social relations that maintain and reproduce particular relations of production along with the material social grounds in which they take place” (Katz 2004, x). It includes practices such as shopping, caring, gardening, or cooking through which social and biological lives are reproduced both on a daily basis and over a lifetime. Social reproduction encapsulates the “indeterminate” practices of everyday life as well those more structured practices that develop or evolve in relation to systems of production (Katz 2001b, 711; see also Marston 2003; Bakker and Gill 2003).

Studies of social reproduction have a long, though often subordinate, history within economic studies. Marx (1978[1845]) and Engels (1978[1884]) were the first to draw attention to the ways that capitalism creates a “double burden” for women, first through class oppression and then through gender inequalities. Despite this early awareness of gendered issues, women’s issues were often overlooked or ignored in conventional economic studies which emphasized the economic “base” and formal spheres of production. Feminists of the 1970s and 1980s drew on Marx and Engels’s work to argue that women’s lives and the “sphere of reproduction” was equally important for understanding of capital as the labor performed in factories or formal sites (e.g. Monk and Hanson 1982). Their intention was to highlight the significance of women’s reproductive activities to the daily and generational reproduction of the labor force, and thus its

role in capital accumulation.

Practices of social reproduction are, therefore, necessary to understanding economic transformation. They indicate how state and market driven policies are challenged or contested through the rhythms and “tactics” of everyday life (Lefebvre 2004; Certeau 1984). If social reproduction involves “intelligent embodied experience and knowledge, networks, power and resources, and inherited ways of being,” and these are historically, culturally, and geographically variable (Stenning et al, 2010, 61; see also Bourdieu 1977), then it is possible to see how economic transformations are negotiated, opposed, or produced through everyday reproductive practices (Povinelli 2011). In the former Soviet Union, for example, previous scholarship has examined the practices of “making do.” This includes the re-using, re-making, or other negotiations of products, representations, and activities in the established status-quo (Caldwell 2004; Clarke 2002; A. Smith 2000 Berdahl 1999; Fertaly 2012).

Practices of social reproduction are significant to my study for two reasons. First, they are necessary to understand macro-scale or national-scale political and economic processes because of the ways that social reproduction both shapes and is shaped by larger political economic structures (Katz 2004; Marston 2003; Kofman 2006; Bakker 2007). In other words, through documenting and understanding the practices of social reproduction, it is possible to see how economic transformations are made, negotiated, or contested through everyday activities taking place within domestic spaces. Secondly, focus on social reproduction makes it possible to document depletions caused by processes of dispossession such as reduced state support, reduced economic opportunities, and increased time-to-labor burdens (see Chapter 4). These social, economic, and political changes have led to a growing cultural backlash against liberal gender roles and family values (Chapter 3). They have also led to anxiety and confusion regarding what

might be expected from “the good life” (Chapter 5). Some feminist theories have begun to address the “exclusion of feeling and affect and attachments to friends, communities, and families” (Wright 2010; Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2006; 2011; Pratt and Rosner 2013). Following these scholars, I investigate affective attachments among young women in Armenia to show the constitutive role of the intimate in the production and dissolution of existing practices of social reproduction. To do so, I expand the concept of social reproduction to address the role of affective endurance for sustaining oneself in a world of ongoing crisis.

### **Methods, Methodology, and Issues Encountered**

The following section describes the methodological approaches used in this study. A description of research methods is included here because, in lieu of a formal methods chapter, Chapter 2 serves as an intervention into theoretical questions of how and with whom knowledge is produced during fieldwork. This section thus serves as an overview of the research design and methods used; each chapter will also include a short methods section detailing what data was used and how it was collected.

Fieldwork research for this project primarily took place in two areas in Armenia—small towns and villages in the southern region of Sunik, and Yerevan, the capital city. Using data from both urban and rural sites allowed me to understand how economic restructuring produces uneven, yet spatially interconnected, social and material practices (Hart 2001; Smith 1984). Women in rural and urban areas have very different economic opportunities and face very different ideologies concerning their roles in society. Conservative values are more deeply entrenched in rural areas where women’s movements are more regulated, while greater

opportunities to participate in wage labor in Yerevan give women more freedom to leave the home. Importantly, however, political protests over social values and gender roles are primarily taking place in Yerevan, making it a key site for investigating contemporary debates. Data from the two sites were compared to analyze the disparate manifestations of economic transformations and their differential effects on women's daily lives.

I relied on an ethnographic approach that allowed for nuanced understanding of how neoliberal transformations are experienced within the household and how participants respond to those changes through their everyday, material practices (Berg 2004; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; DeLyser et al 2010). I triangulated data gathered from interviews, focus groups, participant-observation, and a news database to understand how the gender roles and social reproduction have been renegotiated as a result of economic restructuring and growing social conservatism. This research method was necessary to examine the nuances of daily practices and the social and material relations that can be obscured in questionnaires, surveys, and heavily structured interviews (Meah 2013; Christie 2006; Gregson and Rose 2000). The research methods used here were also informed by feminist epistemologies, which emphasize the importance of including the "everyday" and gendered sites such as the home into macro-scale, and at times, masculinist theoretical and empirical approaches (Nast 2004; Sharp 2005; Doucet and Mauthner 2006). More specifically, feminist epistemologies guided my decision to use participant-observation, open interview structures, and time-space diaries as these methods allow more space for participants' opinions to be heard. To ensure participants' voices were included in all aspects of data collection and analysis, selected participants were asked to give feedback on preliminary analysis and on early drafts of written work (e.g. Nagar 2002; Staeheli and Nagar 2002).

### *Participant Criterion, Sampling, and Basic Analysis Procedures*

I examined crisis and transformation in Armenian society through the perspectives of ordinary citizens and NGOs. I did solicit interviews with government officials in of Ministry of Social Affairs though these were declined. Citizens selected for participant-observation, oral-history interviews, or semi-structured interviews came from diverse backgrounds including various income levels, family structures (nuclear, multi-generational, single-parent, etc.), and work histories (involvement in different types of paid and unpaid labor including government work, local business, informal networks, etc.) (Bradshaw and Stratford 2010). I relied on criterion and chain sampling as methods for locating subjects from across these different backgrounds (Cresswell 2013; Russell 1998). My research assistants played particularly key roles in finding interview participants. All established IRB guidelines for receiving consent from participants and protecting their identities and personal information were followed.

Data collected from magazines, interviews, field notes, and other sources were translated and transcribed as necessary, then analyzed using NVivo11 software (Rubin and Rubin 2011; Waitt 2010). The categories for analysis indicated the context of that data (who, where, and when), practices and interactions (an event, who influenced the event, and actions performed at the event), attitudes (statements of judgment made about an action or event), and experiences (statements of feelings about the action or event). These categories were developed into codes useful for organizing data along lines of similarity or relationships (Cope 2010). Using this method, transcripts and notes were analyzed to find repeated codes and relationships (Peace and van Hoven 2010). More specifically, I looked for relationships in the data that reflect how new narratives for gender roles and expectations are developed in popular news and media sources by looking for similarities across age, gender, employment, family roles, etc. Similar patterns were

analyzed from data collected via participant-observation and interviews to assess how new discourses are affecting material practices. Preliminary data analysis was used to inform hypothesizes, adjust interview questions, and refine observations in an iterative feedback process.

*Methods for Investigating Public Discourse Regarding Gender, Domestic Violence, and Women's Roles in Society*

Semi-structured interviews with representatives from NGO groups were analyzed to address how various actors are currently using the symbolic and material importance of the concept of “gender” to promote social and economic agendas. Interview data was compared to news and magazine particles pertaining to gender policies and popular forms of gender identity. I relied on discourse analysis to assess they ways that dominant narratives or forms of knowledge become privileged over others.

Semi-structured interviews with participants from selected institutions investigated the goals of the organization as they relate to gender issues, policies, or debates (K. Dunn 2010). Participants who were NGO representatives were selected based on their involvement in development projects or policy making that directly or indirectly target women. Such institutions included the Women's Rights Center, Women's Resource Center, the Women's Support Center, PINKArmenia, Helsiniki Citizen's Committee, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation, and USAID-supported Gender Studies and Leadership Program at Yerevan State University (see Appendix 1 for a more complete list and description of the NGO landscape in Yerevan in 2016).

I also collected a database of news and magazine articles pertaining to the current debates around gender policies, social values, and women's transforming role in the home, politics, and the economy from the last 5 years. The articles came from popular on-line news sources like *Yerevan*, *Orer*, and *EurasiaNet*, *DemocracyNow*, and from news sources such as *Tert News* and *Armenia Now* (independent news sources) and *Armenpress*, the state-run news source. Articles were entered into NVivo11, translated as needed, and coded according to topic, actors involved, and opinion on the debated gender policy or issue. Data from magazines and news sources was used to understand how contemporary debates around gender issues are discursively framed and contested by various groups. Analysis of this material addressed who made the text, who commissioned it, who the intended audience is, if (or where) the narratives appear elsewhere, what the (intended) relationship between the text and the reader is, and other categories or relationships as they become meaningful (Waitt 2010).

*Methods for Investigating Gendered, Everyday Practices of Social Reproduction and Endurance*

Semi-structured interviews, time-space budget diaries, and participant-observation were used to address how economic restructuring has influenced practices of domesticity and encouraged new gender roles, relations, and disciplinary practices. Using these methods, I was able to assess the practical, material means through which gendered practices of social reproduction have been affected by neoliberal economic policies and practices (Meah 2013; Kearns 2010).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ordinary citizens divided between participants in each Yerevan and Sisian. These interviews were used to understand how households and individuals perceive and experience changes associated with economic restructuring. Interview questions explored the participants' current economic situation, their

current and past practices of economic survival, the ideological value of their paid and unpaid work, and the social climate surrounding gender roles and responsibilities in their community. I conducted 68 formal semi-structured interviews. Data was collected in the form of interview notes, digital audio recordings, and photographs (with consent). Interviews were summarized, translated, transcribed, and coded. Content analysis was based on the types of work performed, participation in formal and informal economic practices, the value ascribed to different types of labor, and views on gender roles and economic opportunities. Follow-up interviews were conducted with selected individuals and will be used to clarify previous responses, to ask for additional information, and to engage select participants in preliminary data analysis.

After several initial semi-structured interviews, it became clear that group discussions regarding current gender roles, expectations, and opportunities for (young) women would be useful for exploring the multiple points of view. Focus groups are ideal research tools for exploring the multiple meanings that people to various processes, events, and values as well as the ways those processes were understood, expressed, and negotiated (Cameron 2010). Focus groups discussions explored the discourses of gender, women's roles, and how those discourses shape the practices of everyday life and the ways those meanings were reworked, subverted, or refused (see also Lunt and Livingstone 1996). During fieldwork, I conducted 12 focus groups with women a total of ranging in age from 17 to 64. Each focus group included between 4 and 6 women; a total of 60 women participated. Focus group discussions were audio recorded, transcribed with the help of research assistants, and coded and analyzed using NVivo11.

Participant observation was the primary methods for addressing the ways neoliberalization has disciplined gendered domestic practices in new ways and for identifying possible forms of resistance to neoliberal economic ideologies. Participant observation provided



information on actual (not perceived) gendered divisions of labor, potentially revealing contradictions between ideological values and everyday practices. It also served as a comparative tool for creating and revising interview questions in an iterative feedback loop (Berg 2004).

Participant-observation took place with 11 households. Participant-observation took place with participants, all women, for several hours a day and at various times (morning, afternoon, evening) working with them as they perform daily chores including gardening, animal care, food provisioning, care work and other household activities. To document these household activities, I relied on field notes, videos, and audio recordings (Creswell 2013; Bernard 2006). Data collected from participant-observation was compared with data collected in semi-structured interviews.

After several months of conducting participant-observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups discussions, the role of generational differences had become increasingly relevant to the broader research project. Therefore, I decided to conduct several life history interviews. Three life history interviews were conducted with women above the age of 50, and three life history interviews were conducted with women aged 27, 29, and 32. Life history interviews were used to collect accounts of participants' lives in their own words with an emphasis on the changes that have occurred within their living memory (Geertz 1973; Jackson and Russell 2010). Life stories help to define the range of possible roles and standards that have existed in a community, an individual's place in the social order of things, and a community's shared cultural meanings (Atkinson 2001). These are key aspects for determining the social and ideological value of women's roles in society as it has changed over time.

### *Fieldwork Limitations and Problems Encountered*

During fieldwork, I encountered a number of issues and obstacles that influenced research design decisions and, ultimately, the type of data collected and reported. I will only briefly introduce two of the most relevant concerns here as these issues are addressed more fully Chapter 2, *Thoughts on Being a Terrible Spy: Reflections on “the Field,” Research Assistants, and Vulnerability*.

Though I speak Armenian at an advanced level, I nearly always conducted interviews with a research assistant or translator for a number of reasons. Many interview participants found my knowledge of Armenian to be a sign of my dedication to understanding Armenian society and culture and this often quickly led to a more relaxed interview. However, there were several instances where this was not the case. Working with a research assistant and translator often helped to address issues of understanding and communication for both myself and the research participants. The help of a research assistant and translator was particularly necessary during focus groups as discussions could often move beyond my ability to fully follow the conversation. Translation assistance was also needed during interviews conducted in the Syunik region as there were many local dialects that I could not fully understand.

Language and translation were perhaps the most persistent issues during fieldwork research, though also the most easily addressed. The issue of geopolitics and the question of my research intentions, however, were not as easy to remedy. As a result of many factors, including a highly (geo)politicized debate over of the concept of “gender” that discursively pitted the “East” against the “West” (see Chapter 3), I found myself in a highly suspicious position, namely that of an American woman with an unusual degree of knowledge about Armenian society asking questions about a sensitive and politicized topic such as gender roles. On more than one

occasion, participants would refuse to answer my questions having concluded that I was an American spy sent to gather information about Armenian families that would then be used to destroy those families. While one particularly dramatic incident is discussed in Chapter 2, my research was more frequently met with subtle forms of suspicion, evasion, and misdirection. It is important to note here that both my research and I were more often than not addressed with warmth, interest, and hospitality. Nevertheless, the accumulation of numerous incidences of suspicion, gate-keeping, and monitoring ultimately had an impact on whom I felt comfortable approaching for interviews and reinforced the need for working with local research assistants who were indispensable in helping me to navigate such situations.

The geopolitical suspicions surrounding me and my research agenda led to a number of specific limitations. Firstly, I believe that government ministries avoided, delayed, or declined interview invitations as a result of this (geo)political context. Thus, I was unable to gather information regarding their government representatives' viewpoints on several gender-related policies and laws. Secondly, the accumulated suspicions impacted what questions I felt comfortable asking, to whom I felt comfortable asking them, and even the data I have chosen to disclose in the following chapters. For instance, while I conducted a number of interviews with women's NGOs and independent women's and LGBT rights activists, I have chosen to work only with published materials to avoid inadvertently exposing viewpoints or information that could put those individuals at greater risk (see Koopman 2016). Finally, the names and other identifying biographical details of my research participants have been changed to avoid exposing their identities.

## Overview of Chapters

Chapter 2 serves as a critical reflection on my fieldwork experiences and methods through an exploration of the significance of vulnerability and dependence. I argue that research assistants are important but overlooked actors in the production of knowledge through research. Engaging both epistemology and ethics, I explore the relationships between researchers and research assistants to mark new ways of understanding ethnographic inquiry, methods, and practices. Ethnographers have long grappled with questions of reflexivity and the power dynamics of fieldwork (Nagar and Geiger 2007; Rose 1997; Behar 1996). I offer a new way to understand fieldwork relationships through a discussion of vulnerability (Butler 2016; Nagar 2014). To do so, I explore the uneven and mutually constituted vulnerability experienced between me and my research assistants. Drawing on Nagar's (2014) concept of radical vulnerability, I discuss how our bodies differentially experience privilege and the effects of geopolitics. Theorizing vulnerability in fieldwork draws attention to the embodied and experiential components of research that are foundational to the production of knowledge. I argue that by attending to that embodiment—i.e., whose bodies are recognized as vulnerable and whose are not—we can challenge existing norms of recognition that serve to justify certain inclusions and exclusions in ethnographic writing. A version of this chapter, co-authored with Jennifer Fluri, has been published in *The Professional Geographer* (2018).

Chapter 3 investigates what locals refer to as “gender hysteria,” a dramatic public debate and backlash against women's and LGBT rights that has led to the removal of the word “gender” from legislative and educational documents and a re-entrenchment of patriarchal family values. Investigating this topic led me to engage with feminist geopolitical frameworks (Hyndman 2001; Smith 2009; Dowler and Sharp 2010; Massaro and Williams 2013) in order to understand the

competing roles of international interventions into Armenian politics and legislation regarding “gender rights” and “domestic violence.” I found that Euro-American international development programs in Armenia focus on the prevention of domestic violence and legislating equal rights policies. International funding for these issues pushed them to the top of the list of concerns for local NGOs, despite their own concerns with women's economic and political marginalization. Russia exploited this disconnect between the international agenda and local concerns to serve as a pretext for further exerting its own influence in the region. Conservative, nationalist groups with the support of Russia accuse local women’s organizations of importing and imposing foreign values onto Armenian families. They insist that accepting the concept of “gender” or any legal domestic violence protection mechanisms must result in an incursion of unwanted “European” values that will lead to the dissolution of the patriarchal Armenian family. Conservatives purport to protect “traditional” Armenian families from the “perversions” of western influence. Meanwhile, Euro-American anti-domestic violence projects claim to “protect” Armenian women from Armenian men/culture. Though both groups assert their interest in protecting Armenian women and families, I demonstrated that their divergent discourses use women’s bodies and the concepts of home and family to further larger geopolitical and economic interests in the region while making women’s lives more insecure.

In addition to engaging with the geopolitics of gender and international development in Armenia, I conducted an ethnographic examination of the generational and gendered effects of financialization and dispossession for the practices of social reproduction (Harvey 2003; Stenning et al 2010, Pollard 2013). In Chapter 4, I focus on the increased access to credit and private debt used to finance the needs of everyday life. Post-socialist Armenia offers an interesting context through which to study changes in social reproduction simply because of the

dramatic shift incurred by the collapse of state socialism and the withdrawal of state welfare support. Such major economic shifts have required citizens to endure altered material worlds where previous social reproduction practices are no longer as successful or meaningful. For example, rural and cash-poor Armenian citizens now find themselves living through debt, using their home, family gold (often women's jewelry), and agricultural resources as collateral for financing their basic needs. Individuals often must decide to use loans either to meet daily household needs, to support their current means of production (agriculture and animal husbandry), to invest in opportunities for their children, or to purchase consumer goods that would make their daily lives easier. The increase use of high-interest loans and the choice for individuals on how to use those funds raises questions about where and when social reproduction can happen. I examine what practices constitute current forms of social reproduction and how a trend toward borrowing at high interest rates raises questions of depletion as a form of dispossession (Elson 2000; Rai et al 2013; Fernandez 2017).

Chapter 5 follows my investigation of social reproduction and dispossession by financialization to questions of affect and endurance. Social reproduction draws attention to the skills and resources necessary for individuals or households to reproduce themselves often through practices of reworking, resilience, and resistance (Katz 2001b; Bakker and Gill 2003; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2003). Looking into the financialization of social reproduction, however, led me to identify an aspect of endurance that was less tangible—not immediately related to social, material, or financial resources—yet no less meaningful to the navigating everyday life. For young women in particular, their sense of what to expect from the world and what was expected from them has become extremely muddled, making the conditions of daily life exceptionally difficult for them to withstand. Consequently, I became interested in what forms of endurance

these young women turn to and what practices they rely on when stable ideological frameworks for understanding the world have been eroded due to the processes of dispossession. To explain this phenomenon, I posit an expanded notion of endurance that encapsulates affect, or a bodily intuition that serves to guide individuals through the world. Endurance, unlike social reproduction, draws attention to a mode of being that withstands suffering, often patiently and through unpleasant or difficult processes, and highlights the “cruddiness” of everyday pain (Povinelli 2011), rather than the potential for resistance often identified in studies of everyday life. To address affect and endurance in relation to dispossession and social reproduction in Armenia, I consider how young women’s experiences of dispossession have transformed their ability to affectively or intuitively navigate their world. I explore how they define, negotiate, and sustain themselves in a time where the fantasy of “the good life” is shifting, dissolving, and constantly out of reach (Berlant 2011).

## CHAPTER 2

### THOUGHTS ON BEING A TERRIBLE SPY: REFLECTIONS ON “THE FIELD,” RESEARCH ASSISTANTS, AND VULNERABILITY

#### Introduction

Behar (1996, 3) wrote that ethnography is an entanglement of “loss, mourning, longing for memory, desire to enter the world around you and having no idea how to do it, fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that comes too late, a sense of uselessness in writing anything but desire to write something.” Behar’s language of loss and desire, openness and retreat emphasizes the point that ethnography is not just about an individual “working on” an inanimate object or field. Instead, her language reveals ethnography to be about the relationships through which the researcher’s identity is made and unmade and highlights the role of emotion, dependency, and vulnerability as constitutive of fieldwork experiences. These complexities are not only inherent in fieldwork, but as I argue here, they are necessary for putting feminist methodologies into action and engaging in ethical fieldwork relationships. In this chapter, I grapple with the complexities of insecurity and vulnerability during fieldwork in order to consider how we might better put into practice the critiques of power and representation raised by Behar and others in the 1980s and 1990s (Clifford 1986; Rosaldo 1989; Sanjek 1993; Wolf 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Pile 1991; McDowell 1992;



Rose 1993). I push for fieldwork methods and feminist methodologies which take seriously the mutual vulnerabilities of fieldworkers and those with whom we work.

A critical, yet overlooked actor in the production of knowledge is the research assistant. Politically, research assistants use their subject positions to leverage connections and “insider” knowledge, thereby enabling or disabling certain kinds of inquiries, explorations, and results (Middleton and Cons 2014). Yet, working with others during fieldwork—whether they are paid assistants, spouses, or collaborators—raises issues which go beyond the epistemological question of the role of research assistant in the production of ethnographic knowledge. Working with research assistants entails navigating complex social relations, dynamics, and hierarchies that involve various forms and degrees of risk and vulnerability. Research assistants are, therefore, a key prism through which to analyze vulnerability and dependency in fieldwork. How might theorizing vulnerability and dependency with research assistants and other collaborators contribute to understandings of fieldwork and ethnography? What possibilities exist for engaging with vulnerability as a fieldwork method and for using vulnerability as the basis for more engaged research and political action?

This chapter furthers efforts to 1) destabilize the aura of “expertise” in the doing and writing of ethnographic research by challenging normative expectations and neatly defined categories and subject positions, 2) closely examine co-constituted relationships between international researchers and local research assistants (fixer, collaborator, etc) and their roles in the production of knowledge by confronting the messiness of collaboration, and 3) link scholarly questions about insecurity and vulnerability as objects for study with their possibilities for use in generating political action that redresses historical exclusions. It contributes to these theoretical and methodological goals by positing vulnerability not just as a phenomenon to be investigated,

but also as a method. I maintain a personal and vulnerable voice in writing this article as a strategy that allows me to reveal and challenge claims of critical authority. As such, vulnerability is a method for disrupting power structures that present themselves as impersonal and objective (Pratt and Rosner 2013; Miller 1991). This chapter does the epistemological work of demonstrating the partiality and situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988), attempting to follow Katz's (2001) critical warning against reducing situated knowledge into standard, reductive categories. By looking at the messy constitution of knowledge through the intertwining of vulnerable bodies and geopolitical hierarchies, I argue for an approach to ethical fieldwork practices on the meaningful grounds of feminist solidarity.

In this chapter, I first revisit the colonial roots of fieldwork and fieldwork methods in anthropology and geography to explore the extent to which problematic conceptualizations of "the field" persist despite a number of critical interventions. In particular, I consider how the myth of fieldwork as a rite of passage and fieldworkers as heroic adventurers perpetuates certain exclusions, particularly regarding vulnerability, emotion, and insecurity. Second, I consider how acknowledging and addressing mutual vulnerabilities raises the stakes ethical field research (Nagar 2014; Koopman 2011). Drawing from my personal reflections during fieldwork, I attend to the mutual vulnerabilities of bodies in fieldwork to evaluate and challenge the ways that some lives, labor, and stories are deemed more valuable than others. I ask if these 'polluting' factors might actually be useful tools for re-imagining or reworking relationships in the field in ways that both acknowledge and address insecurity.

## **Assistants and Assistance in Fieldwork**

Conceptualizations of “the field” and the practices of fieldwork in geography and anthropology, which have historically made writing vulnerably and writing about vulnerability challenging, are rooted in colonial and imperial projects. For geography, fieldwork was part of the discipline’s mission to discover and map new lands, catalogue natural resources, and capture or control new regions for European governments (Livingstone 1992; Godlewska and Smith 1994; Katz 1996; Sharp and Dowler 2011). Similarly, in anthropology, “the field” was a colonial construct where researchers went to study “primitive peoples” in their natural environments (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Historically, “the field” was imagined as a fixed and bounded site awaiting discovery (Katz 1996). It came to stand for a place marked off from Europe and from the urban; it was a place “over there.” Knowledge in both geography and anthropology thus produced cultural “regions” and made “regional expertise” fundamental to disciplinary knowledge, over time naturalizing cultural differences based on place (Sharp and Dowler 2011; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The production of the field as a site “over there” served (and continues to serve) the state’s geopolitical interests and assumptions of “otherness” by marking local places as bearers of specific cultural attributes (Katz 1994; Sharp and Dowler 2011).

In addition to these conceptualizations of “the field,” fieldwork has often been viewed as a rite of passage for junior scholars and a path towards professional maturity through hardship in unfamiliar places (Sauer 1956:296; Watts 2001:1; Jackson 2012). As Watts described it, fieldwork has the “aura” of a “Darwin learning-by-doing ordeal...those who succeed return, those who don’t are never seen again” (2001,1). This trope can serve to produce a specific kind of subject—the fieldworker—informed by narratives of ritual and hardship. Historically, this fieldworker was almost always (imagined to be) a lone, white, middle-class male living for a

long period among “natives.” In geography, the ‘founding fathers’ were often represented as “heroic explorers struggling against the elements and natives;” they were “solid hunks of British manhood” (Stoddart 1986,143 *in* Sharp and Dowler 2011,147; see also Katz 1996). Though historical exceptions that challenge this image of the fieldworker exist—Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict as pioneering women in the field or anthropological couples such as Margery and Author Wolf or Victor and Edith Turner—the conception that fieldworkers as alone (unattached to family, spouses, or other relations), foreign (white), and mobile (masculine) reified the idea that going into “the field” was supposed to be a heroic struggle eventually leading to a victorious collection of data alongside personal and professional development.

The colonial roots of fieldwork have had a number of problematic yet lasting effects (Sharp and Dowler 2011; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Middleton and Cons 2014; Carretta and Jokinen 2017; Sanjek 1993). Fieldwork myths have both bounded and normalized certain objects of study, maintaining some ethnographic methods while excluding others. Knowledge produced through this narrative frame, for instance, is primarily dependent on the presence and experience of the fieldworker; it emphasizes the researcher’s knowledge, expertise, and experience over all others involved (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Sauer, for example, firmly believed in the apprenticeship method of teaching students to “see” certain aspects of the landscape through visual training (Sauer 1956; cited in Sharp and Dowler 2011, 147). The researcher’s trained vision was thus the pivotal skill upon which knowledge production was based. Yet, the dominance of the ethnographer’s perspective serves to exclude multiple people and processes which serve the research process (Rose 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Katz 1996). The separation between field and home also serves to minimize or obscure the way places and communities are connected by structures of violence and oppression, including capitalism,

colonialism, global cultural flows, etc. (Katz 1994; Nast 1994; Nagar 2014). Therefore, challenging conventional representations of “the field” and how we discuss fieldwork in seminar rooms or among peers remains critical for exploring the politics of producing knowledge, (how and to whom we represent our work, ourselves, and others), in the field.

Despite a number of interventions by feminist and critical scholars addressing the colonial roots of fieldwork, it is worth asking to what extent the normative imaginations of fieldwork persist (Katz 1996; Nast 1994; Sharp and Dowler 2011; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Rosaldo 1989). Gupta and Ferguson (1997) noted that conventional images of “the field” have endured, aided by the deceptive transparency of the term itself. If the field is treated as a preexisting, stable place awaiting discovery, then fieldwork is marked as act of exploration marked by masculine adventure and romanticization of faraway places, exotic peoples, and landscapes (Katz 1994). Consequently, “doing fieldwork” continues to elicit an image of a place that is far from home, rich with all manner of differences (people, food, habits, etc.), and filled with romantic adventure and daily difficulties.

Conventional images of “the field” and normative expectations of the fieldworker are certainly challenged in scholarship and thoroughly discussed in graduate seminar rooms; but despite these critiques, normative fieldwork expectations continue to persist (Middleton and Cons 2014; Gupta 2014). University or institutional culture and bureaucracy have prolonged these expectations when we consider, for example, the informal “entry” and “exit” stories that demarcate academic calendars (grant-writing, summer fieldwork seasons, etc.) or indicate academic standing among graduate students (post-fieldwork status often means advanced positions in graduate programs). Meanwhile, the recent use of social media provides a new platform for presenting a public image of what fieldwork is and what fieldworkers do. Today,

carefully curated images of fieldwork appear on social media sites such as Instagram (#fieldwork) or Facebook, presenting a ubiquitous vehicle through which familiar myths about “the field” can be read into images of researchers traversing beautiful landscapes, playing with children, conducting interviews, or scribbling in notebooks. These examples, though anecdotal, suggest that despite the theoretical interventions of the 1980s and 1990s, normative conceptualizations of fieldwork persist.

Opening up conceptions of what constitutes “the field” and fieldwork creates a space to talk about those who assist, collaborate, and shape fieldwork research itself. It provides a space to consider the multiple and complex forms of insecurity and dependency that play out during these studies. Indeed, there is a growing abundance of recent scholarship that has raised the issue of graduate student social, economic, and emotional vulnerability (Carretta and Jokinen 2017; Ballamingie and Johnson 2011), cultural and geopolitical entanglements (Fertaly and Fluri 2018; Guevarra 2006), and sexual harassment during dissertation fieldwork (Kloß 2017) as key issues which demand further ethical and pedagogical attention. If “the field” is a set of practices and relations rather than a predetermined site, we must give attention to the actors (and their labor) which produce the field itself.

Feminist scholarship has specifically challenged conventional conceptions of field research. Feminist scholars have pushed for more collaborative and inclusive research attentive to power relations in the process of fieldwork, as well as a recognition of problems within one's own research community and in the writing and dissemination of knowledge (Wolf 1996; Staeheli and Lawson 1995). Feminist methodologies attend to the relationship between the researcher and the researched. They acknowledge that ideas are produced in a context of power relations (Nast 1994; Ekinsmyth 2002). Therefore, feminist scholars call for the dismantling of

power relations between researchers and researched through methods such as participatory action research, scholar activism, and viewing/identifying research participants and assistance, all of which are central to the production of knowledge in fieldwork (Fertaly and Fluri 2018).

Similarly, feminist scholars have deconstructed “the field” as a fixed and stable place. They argue that the field should instead be understood as a set of practices and relationships (see *The Professional Geographer 1994, Geographical Review 2001*). Nast (1994), for example, argues that “‘the field’ is always politically situated, contextualized, and defined, that its social, political, and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts. “‘The field’ is always a place in between that which is familiar and recognizable and that which is foreign” (Nast 1994, 60). This approach highlights issues of power and representation and creates an analytical space for challenging ideas about where “the field” is, who and what can be counted as part of fieldwork, and how we as scholars engage with it (Sharp and Dowler 2011).

Feminist scholarship insists on a recognition and engagement with difference in order to build a politics of resistance to structural forms of violence and oppression. Katz (1994), for example, draws attention to issues of power by using the concept of *betweenness*. Emphasizing the space of betweenness reminds us that we are always displaced—whether “at home” in the academy or “in the field”—because difference is an unavoidable component of all social relationships. Nagar and Gieger (2007) developed a similarly useful concept, “situated solidarities,” to argue for a means of producing knowledges that “abide” by the struggles of marginalized communities in ways that reject but do not ignore violent imperialist histories. Both concepts, *betweenness* and *situated solidarities*, seek to embrace difference *and* the “others” with whom we work. The goal is to engage in politics that can identify and overcome

shared experiences of oppression. Furthermore, both concepts challenge a reified notion of “the field” by deconstructing the notion that it is a place we enter and exit at will. Instead, we are “always already in the field” (Katz 1994, 67) and therefore always positioned to take on the challenge of recognizing difference while working towards productive collaboration.

Other critical scholarship on methodologies, including “the cultural turn” and post-colonialism have also established that attention to power dynamics and hierarchies in fieldwork is necessary. The challenge, it seems, is to put all these critiques into practice in the “doing” of fieldwork and the writing up of it later. One immediate opportunity for putting these critiques into practice, at least in part, is through the often-immediate relationship that fieldworkers have with research assistants. The title “research assistant” generally refers to individuals whose work facilitates not just the collection of data but the fieldwork experience itself (Middleton and Cons 2014, 281). Though there may often be an assumed hierarchy between researcher and research assistant—one where the researcher is an independent expert—in some cases, like my own, research assistants are far more than paid employees simply providing professional assistance. Local research assistants often take on the role of helpers, drivers, key informants, gatekeepers, fixers, archivists, and handlers. They also provide language and cultural translation, help to negotiate spaces and situations, solve problems, and provide care when physical bodies fail (Fertaly and Fluri 2018). They help to navigate the personal difficulties faced in the field from loneliness and harassment to everyday life struggles (e.g. Middleton 2014; Hapke and Ayyanketil 2001).

Research assistants have complicated roles and influences on the collection and interpretation of research data as well. Their work often reveals the politics and power dynamics of relationships that we as researchers inhabit for much shorter periods of time. These multiple



roles, however, are often obscured by the term “assistant,” which invokes a paid employee involved in busywork rather than a co-contributor. In fact, the position of research assistant requires its own flexibility and skills, and often demands that an individual endure risks in the process of research.

By following the feminist interventions discussed above, it is necessary to start by acknowledging problematic hierarchies. However, to go beyond mere acknowledgment that we transform the labor of research assistants into our own intellectual capital, we must grapple with the complexities of vulnerability and insecurity and how they might be mobilized to resist problematic normative hierarchies and representations. Writing vulnerably can serve to challenge the archetypal narratives and representations of fieldworkers and fieldwork so often characterized by individualism and the masculine, explorer-researcher mythos. My body as a fieldworker and my success as an academic are dependent on the lives and labor of other people. By writing about those dependencies and vulnerabilities, we can show how we, as individuals, are mutually constituted by our relations with others. This move can have methodological benefits if it changes the practices of how we do fieldwork and write about it later.

### **Writing Vulnerably, Vulnerabilities, and the Possibility of Collaboration**

By “writing vulnerably” I mean the act of writing risk, dependency, and exposure into the story to explore the possibilities (or limits) of building trust and accountability in research practice. Vulnerability entails the intimate details of physical and emotional weakness or exposure to others. When writing with vulnerability, we can go beyond listing identity

categories and instead attempt to grapple with the messy but mutual constitution of ourselves through our relationships with others<sup>2</sup> (Nagar 2014; Rose 1997; Nagar and Gieger 2007).

Drawing from established feminist interventions into fieldwork methodologies (Nagar 2002; 2006; Nast 1994; Katz 1994; Sharp 2004; Jones, Nast, and Roberts 1997), it remains a useful practice to consider how researchers are produced through social relations, gained or lost, during fieldwork. The implication of recognizing mutual vulnerability is that we can start to change the problematic hierarchies within the practices of fieldwork. It may be one effective, albeit imperfect, strategy that we can use to grapple with the more experiential, ontological vulnerability of our bodies and the bodies of others, and to use that vulnerability as a basis for re-imagining political community and collaboration. Butler (2016, 20) argues that conventional discourses which imagine the body to be a discrete, contained entity fail to capture the vulnerability that feminist theories insist upon. She further argues:

If we accept that part of what a body is, is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support, then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another...the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those boundaries, is defined by the relations that makes its own life and action possible (Butler 2016, 4).

In this view, bodies must be conceptualized as vulnerable to being acted upon as well as having the ability to act in ways that remain dependent on others, institutional structures, and broader social worlds. Our bodies are our own, but not entirely our own, and therefore vulnerability to others is part of bodily life. Our daily, physical existence, for example, is dependent on the labor

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<sup>2</sup> While writing vulnerably entails a risk of accusations of navel-gazing, I suggest that we cannot write about fieldwork—a process inherently wrought with embodied and emotional vulnerability and dependency—without writing these experiences into academic texts. Writing vulnerably makes us open to critique from others and in doing so includes the possibility of transformation and collaboration (Butler 2004, 2009; Nagar 2014). Vulnerability is inherent embodied exposure to risk and this kind of exposure is constitutive of our bodies and subjectivities. The exposure of oneself to others is a necessary, if necessarily inadequate, way to relate to others for the purpose of imagining community and collaboration across difference.

of others to produce our food and other material needs, and our political existence is also dependent on the recognition of our rights and needs by those in power to enforce them. We are constituted by our relations to others but undone and dispossessed by them as well. If we take the vulnerable body as both an epistemological and ontological starting point, we can see that the narratives and normative representations of fieldwork and research are based on an illusion of autonomy; the individuality of the fieldworker and author is a fiction that serves to reinforce hierarchies of difference between the researcher and their research communities.

Yet during ethnographic fieldwork, particularly the practice participant-observation, a tension is revealed between the experience of being or wanting to be a part of the world through openness and vulnerability and a longing to be apart from it (Jackson 2012). While Butler's (2016) argument posits an ontological vulnerability, fieldwork often elicits both a longing to be a part of something and the experience of being separate from and alone (Behar 1996). Participant-observation captures this tension perfectly as the concept itself describes the oxymoronic distinction that one cannot be at the same time both engaged in the moment but observing from a distance. For Jackson (2012), this tension between "turning toward the world and turning away" is an expression of the deeper dialectical tension between being acted upon and being an actor in the world that has consequences for the production of knowledge through fieldwork and for forms of political action that challenge problematic hierarchies and exclusions. Although we sometimes experience ourselves as singular, that experience is always predicated upon a sense of what it means to be with another. Recognizing the dialectical tension between openness and singularity serves to further interest in knowledge that may contribute to more tolerant coexistence in a world of hardened divisions and inescapable differences.

In the following section, I analyze and reflect on two journal entries written in the second month of a year-long fieldwork trip in Armenia. They are presented here in slightly edited form. They are included because they are reflections of my thoughts, given in a particular moment, on my own dependency, vulnerability, and risky collaborations in the production of this work. More than simple stories, the following texts reveal my initial attempts to understand and make sense of early experiences that seemed so far off from the normative mythos of fieldwork. They capture the experience of being both drawn to the world I was studying and the need to be apart from it. As a result, there are many incidents and details that are unflattering to a conventional image of a “heroic” fieldworker. Including these stories is intended to undermine fieldwork myths and to provide an example of writing vulnerably about the complex dependencies and privileges that emerged from working closely with a research assistant during my fieldwork experience. As Nagar wrote (2014), storytelling is “an invitation to explore the ways of building trust and accountability by becoming radically vulnerable” (11).

### **Getting Through the Day**

*It was already 9 o'clock in the morning in Yerevan when my phone started buzzing. The sun had been up for just over an hour but I was still untangling myself from a deep sleep. My research assistant, Shushan,<sup>3</sup> sent me a greeting over a messenger app, “Good morning.” I rubbed my eyes, sat up in bed and pretended that I hadn't slept past my alarm, again. Even though I was only typing a reply, I felt I had to*

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<sup>3</sup> Shushan and Sona chose to use their real names in this article. We discussed the idea that they would co-author this paper with me or that I would write about them using pseudonyms. They declined in both cases - citing the problems co-authoring this article might entail for their own work, but also insisting that their real names be used.

*pretend that I'd been awake for hours already. "Good morning!" The exclamation point made a convincing difference.*

*"What are your plans for the day?" she wrote.*

*I struggled with this question because I knew that any plans I had for any given day depended on her ability to find participants and organize an interview schedule. Beyond that, my list of things to do was always already a mile long and growing. I had interview summaries or transcripts to code, academic articles I was convinced I was going to read, and hours to waste on social media news sites keeping my finger on the pulse of the city. I replied, "I'm pretty much free." I was really hoping she would say she had a meeting or other work to do so I could indulge in my instinct to hide in my apartment.*

*"Let's do an interview at 12, ok? It's an interesting woman who is 72 and very active. She lives near you. Then, if you won't be too tired, we can do another one at 3."*

*If I wasn't too tired? I was always tired despite what seemed like the buckets of coffee I regularly consumed and the long hours of sleep I got every night. Maybe it was still the jet lag, but after a month in the country, it was getting harder to fool even myself with this excuse. I had to go. Someday I was going to have a dissertation to write, and that required data. "Of course! Let's do it!!!!" (The exclamation points really did help.)*

*Innumerable mornings followed this routine. Shushan was relentless in her efforts to track down people for interviews, organize a time and place, and then translate so the participant would not feel required to "talk down" to my proficient but clunky Armenian.*

*On days when we did not have interviews, we sat together and reviewed interview questions. Did they make sense in Armenian? Did they help me to address the larger research questions? Shushan played the role of future interview participant and practiced giving me answers. Together, we adjusted and tweaked my methodological tools. All the while, she was working on her own dissertation topic.*

*After a day of dragging myself from interview to interview, another friend and research assistant, Sona, called. "Kate, jan. What are you doing this evening? I have prepared the last focus group transcript.*

*Come, let's look at it together. I think there will be things you don't understand." My first instinct was to tell her that one evening was definitely not enough time to explain all the things that I did not understand. Fieldwork had started to feel like an elaborate board game with rules for "winning" that everyone had conveniently forgotten to explain to me. That sounded like the jet lag talking, so instead I answered affirmatively and used the exclamation points with her too.*

*Sona and I sat down with transcripts of focus groups at her rented apartment in Yerevan, where she lived with her sister and mom. The living room was located in a windowless interior of the un-renovated Soviet-era apartment, lit by a single bare bulb in an old chandelier. I felt tired as soon as I walked in and I resented that we would go through the usual but minimal steps of hospitality customs—making tea and laying a table with some jams and cakes—instead of just getting straight to work. Eventually, we turned to the transcripts, and she started with a lesson in Armenian idioms. For example, *մնւշէն* or "house-builder" actually means someone who is constantly making poor decisions and undermining themselves so that they will never actually get ahead in life. In another example, I learned that *լավ էլի* (*lav eli*) could never really be translated. It's almost the equivalent of "it's fine," a phrase so versatile that depending on the tone of voice and context, it could mean a dozen different things. A few times I asked a simple question about one interviewee's particular opinion and Sona ended up explaining the much broader context. For instance, one interview question asked if women have more "freedom" now than before. Sona explained that most people thought the real question was whether or not women have started sleeping around more. This explained a lot about the responses I had heard in some interviews—the raised eyebrows and questioning faces of women who immediately responded with negative responses to the question (despite the fact that women's mobility has expanded, if in limited ways). Sona's transcripts would sometimes be dotted with smiley emoticon faces "☺" where someone said something that made Sona laugh.*

*For me and Sona, the point of reviewing the transcripts together was not to improve my language skills. Instead, it was an opportunity for Sona to try to situate my understanding of the statements within a broader social context that she felt was necessary. Our relationship was always informed by a tension between my persistent questioning and her sense of authority to provide a single explanation for a particular*

*scenario. Going beyond simple translation, she often drew my attention to certain examples and moments of interviews that resonated with her own particular feelings and experience. By doing so, she was already shaping my understanding of the information I was collecting.*

*I, quite naively, came to Armenia thinking that I was going to be the authority on interviewing techniques and qualitative methods more generally. In reality, during most of my early interviews I was little more than luggage carted around for show. “Look at the American girl speaking Armenian. Isn’t it cute?” I contributed to the work at the beginning and the end—writing the questions and analyzing the answers—but for everything in the middle I was dead weight that paid for the coffee. My dissertation was going to be just another commodity, the production of which was being outsourced to those whose labor costs are even cheaper than my own.*

*Not only did my research assistants help produce the data for my dissertation, they were also involved in my own social reproduction—getting medicine when I was too ill to leave the apartment, reassuring my landlord that the utility bills had been paid, keeping me company when I was feeling homesick, and many other mundane acts of help and comfort. Despite my previous fieldwork experiences, for some inexplicable reasons I anticipated that my dissertation fieldwork would be like the Instagram shots of my colleagues in the field striking “casual-yet-conquering” poses in beautiful landscapes, riding through winding streets on motorcycles, drinking with locals, or playing with children. These images seemed to hide the sexual harassment on the street, the traveler’s diarrhea, the loneliness (and boredom), and the fatigue of constantly “putting yourself out there” when asking complete strangers for interviews. In addition to grossly misrepresenting long-term fieldwork, these images ignore the work of those who help us succeed. The impact of their help, guidance, and influence raises a number of important questions for researchers and theorists of qualitative methods: What are our responsibilities to the trusted “insiders” without whose assistance we couldn’t continue? And how can we do a better job of representing and valuing their labor and assistance in our own work?*

More than one person who has read this journal entry asked if it worth the risk to my professional standing to share it with a broader audience. It is, after all, an unflattering portrait of

my job performance and authority over my research project. The reason I have decided to keep it, however, is because those unflattering details are precisely what muddy the narrative frame around what fieldwork is and who researchers are. This story captures the dissonance between what I expected from myself as a field researcher (what they do and how they might talk about it afterward) based on normative values and what field experiences actually feel like in the moment. Picking apart this dissonance provides an opportunity to show how writing that includes vulnerability and dependency can reveal more than expected about the fieldwork experience. The interesting revelations from this journal entry relate to the production of my identity as a researcher and the production of knowledge for my dissertation. More broadly, they inform how we may approach fieldwork and qualitative methods differently such as to grapple with the messiness of insecurities and vulnerabilities.

Most obviously, the journal entry touches on the physical and mental challenges of fieldwork, particularly the exhaustion of poor sleep and long working days. It also shows my muddled and stumbling research practice in the field: I was barely getting out of bed in the morning, I was pretending to have an interest in the work I needed to do, and I was desperately relying on others to help me accomplish my most basic daily tasks. Though I believed myself to be the “expert” on my research topic, what I was experiencing was indeed the opposite. I was perhaps the least authoritative (and awake) member of my three-person research team. My research assistants were not only helping me to take care of my physical body, but they were doing a bulk of the work. Most succinctly, this reflection captures the reversal of expected roles for researchers and research assistants. I am certainly not a valiant researcher overcoming hardships and attaining personal growth in an exotic land. I am the least heroic character relying on others to do my work for me, from crafting interview questions to analyzing them.



Re-considering this journal entry months after it was written led me to reflect on how embracing insecurity/vulnerability might lead to both more ethical research relationships and more interesting data. Part of (insecurity in) fieldwork is not knowing what's happening or how to get where we want to go. Through numerous institutional practices (foremost among them is proposal writing), however, I came to believe that properly prepared researchers *should* know what they are doing and how to go about it. I believed that I should come to the field with carefully prepared questions investigating a specific, neatly contained topic. However, once in the field, I found myself incapable of maintaining the assumptions with which I had started—I abandoned pre-conceived expectations about myself, about my research, and about what “doing” dissertation research looked like.

By embracing my insecurity and embracing the contributions of my research assistants, I was able to better understand the multiple kinds of insecurity faced by Armenian women that the rest of this dissertation explores. Rather than experiencing my insecurity as a rite of passage to be overcome, I found myself in a process of engaged (or even radical) vulnerability (as discussed by Nagar 2014). The process of realizing the limitations of my own knowledge and the expertise of those around me exemplifies feminist methodological interventions that critique problematic hierarchies and exclusions (Nast 1994; Katz 1994; 1996; McDowell 1993, Pratt 2002, Routledge 2001; Routledge, Derickson, and Driscoll 2015). I was presented with an opportunity to explore the vulnerability of researchers and the co-production of knowledge by research assistants; it was an opportunity to engage in practices that had previously been abstract considerations talked about in seminar rooms. By being at times utterly clueless—but all the same embracing that position—I explored new ideas and questions that I might not have considered otherwise. For example, as Sona pointed out, participants had interpreted interview question about freedom (in

my mind glossed as mobility, opportunity, etc.) as sexual promiscuity.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, such questions were quickly abandoned, and I instead focused on listening to the patterns and phenomena that my research assistants and participants directed me to. As a result, I was better able to hear participants' own interpretations of their life stories. The following chapters of this dissertation are themselves a collection of data where my cluelessness inadvertently allows for the foregrounding of those moments when the participants do the theorizing about their own lives.

The following section presents another diary entry from the same day as the first. It further elaborates on the issue of vulnerability, but in this case, not my own vulnerability, but that of one of my research assistants.

### **On Being a Terrible Spy**

*I did not come to these questions [those posed at the end of the last journal entry regarding responsibility for and collaboration with research assistants] strictly because of my generous nature, or my sharp, critical eye for deconstructing the research process. They came about rather circuitously during a focus group discussion during which I was accused of being an American spy sent to destroy Armenian families.*

*The focus group started with five women between the ages of 25-35 taking a seat around a makeshift table comprised of desks of varying heights pushed together, on which I balanced a plate of cookies and a few juice drinks. A woman I had never met before came in and sat next*

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<sup>4</sup> Part of the reason that questions about ազատություն, or “freedom,” were interpreted as “sexual promiscuity” is because Americans, and American women in particular, are often stereotyped by Armenians as more sexually open than Armenian women. As an American woman asking about women’s roles in the family and their “freedom,” many women assumed I was asking about sexual freedom.

to me. She asked me a few questions about my research. For example, she asked if I had done research on families in other countries. I replied, “No, I haven’t conducted fieldwork in other countries, but like any good student of anthropology and geography, I’ve read the literature on kinship with a focus on post-socialist states.” I didn’t understand her response at the time. I didn’t know the word she used when she said “հայրն անկոն լիքոն” or “100 percent a spy.” I smiled uncertainly and made some small talk with the rest of the group.

As I sat there politely engaged in the usual introductions, the woman followed Shushan, who was searching for more chairs, out of the room. Then she accused her of being a traitor to her country. How dare Shushan work with an American and help them undermine Armenian values? Did she realize what she was doing?

Let’s call this woman Azganush (lit. “Darling of the Nation”). I, of course, had no idea that Azganush harbored such suspicions about me or the focus group event. Until the group introductions, I also did not know that she held a doctorate degree and worked at the very same institute where Shushan was a PhD student/researcher – the same institution of my own primary research affiliation.

The focus group went surprisingly well, considering that Azganush did not answer a single question. At one point, she protested to the recording of the conversation. I was following along with the participants while Azganoush insisted that America was trying to destroy traditional Armenian family values “while smiling.” But, when Shushan, who normally focused on drawing out answers and subtleties during these events, launched into a noticeably long and pointed reply, I could not follow the nuance of the discussion. When the focus group finally ended and the participants left the room, I immediately recognized that Shushan was heavily affected. Her outrage was thinly veiled; her sense of disbelief eventually flooded out of her. She questioned how it was possible that a woman as young and educated would believe such things. She was shocked because it seemed to her that Azganoush’s attitude was more suited to someone stuck in the Soviet past, not to a young woman building her academic career. Shushan couldn’t understand how, even if Azganush felt that way, she behaved so unprofessionally. Azganoush did not have to attend the focus group.

*I thought the encounter verged on the comedic because I could light-heartedly imagine the benefits of being a spy, and the impossibility of my actually being one. My Armenian language skills would probably be impeccable and I would not have worried so much about securing funding. Furthermore, I am not the first American, “Westerner,” or even “white” foreigner to be accused of being a spy in the former Soviet world. It is practically a rite of passage for young graduate students. Did the accusation mean I had finally made it as a “real” fieldworker? The ubiquity of the accusations and Western, Hollywood-inspired romanticization of spies, however, does not mean that they should be so easily laughed off as I was prepared to do. There were good reasons for me to take her accusations seriously and consider the implications of her suspicions for doing ethical research (i.e. Price 2016).*

*The practices of ethnographers are really not all that different from those of spies if we look closely at the means used to produce knowledge about a subject and even the language used to describe it (Verdery 2014). Both spies and ethnographers “recruit” participants. The word “recruit” has clear military connotations referring to conscription into armed forces. It is still accepted to informally describe these participants as “informants” or “sources”—terms used historically in police and intelligence work to describe individuals who provide special or privileged information about others. And we “enlist” the help of research assistants whose actions could be interpreted, as in the case I’m describing, as traitorous to their own communities. If ethnography means always keeping one’s ears and eyes open to the possibility of “data” in daily interactions, and then running to the bathroom to surreptitiously write down some notes before they are forgotten, then the accusation of “spy” is not far from the truth.*

*Not only do our practices and language of producing knowledge resemble those of foreign agents, but so do our funding sources. My own research is supported by not one but two U.S. government agencies—Fulbright IIE and the National Science Foundation. I am certainly not suggesting that by receiving funding from the U.S. Government agencies, we become puppets for the policies and agendas du jour. Nor do we act on behalf of these agencies. Nevertheless, the sources of our research funds may be enough on their own to prompt suspicion.*

*I have no intention of destroying Armenian families, traditional or otherwise. However, as a researcher I should pause to consider how the data I collect may be used and manipulated by others, especially those in power. Ethnographic work can (inadvertently) endanger oppressed or marginalized groups by making their practices of survival visible to those who dominate (Katz 1994; 2004). My research project is designed to understand how mundane and daily practices can be used to either resist or reinforce the processes of neoliberalization. This research could easily be useful to those who seek to maintain the status quo by creating social, political, or economic policies that undermine the strategies and tactics used by my research participants living under difficult conditions of existence (Koopman 2016).*

*Shushan once told me of a professor working at an important archive who stated that he never gave foreign researchers everything because he assumed they were foreign agents, or at very least they did not have the interests of the Armenian people in mind when they published their research. He thought local Armenian scholars must always hold back something so that their own information could not be used against them. Was this silence and withdrawal—or in Azganush’s case, explicit refusal to speak—a form of resistance? And if so, against what, exactly?*

*These examples illustrate that no matter our best intentions, both past and present geopolitics are carried into the field on our bodies, and our actions are often interpreted through the prism of these same geopolitics. When people in the field accuse researchers of being spies or foreign agents, it may seem laughable, frustrating, or be a painful violation of trust, but these accusations are not exactly unwarranted. Moreover, such accusations affect not only the ethnographer’s body, but also those with whom we work.*

*Among the many things that did not immediately occur to me after the focus group incident were the long-term consequences that Shushan’s involvement with me might have for her own career. Simply by association, Shushan was cast into the role of my co-conspirator or “asset.” Azganush, it turns out, not only works in the same institute as Shushan, but in the same room. Weeks after the focus group, she continued to harass Shushan about working with an American spy. As far as I can tell, Shushan has stopped using her office space. Some of her close friendships have turned cold; people she once saw regularly are no longer on speaking terms with her. Furthermore, as the story*

*spread throughout the institute, even the professors who did not think I was a spy questioned Shushan's judgement regarding working with foreigners. I recently asked Shushan how things were going at the institute. She replied, "There's a new Cold War."*

*I can laugh off the accusations of being a spy, and when I finish with my research I can collect my interview data and field notes (all of which would have been impossible to gather without Shushan's help) and head back to my university to start working on my single-authored dissertation. And even though the harassment Shushan faced didn't immediately threaten her career (only her comfort), there's the persistent point that I will leave the field whereas she cannot. How will her affiliation with me and my work affect her own ambitions for a distinguished career in academia? This is not just geopolitics, it is power geometry. Massey's (1994) concept of power geometry explains how different social groups have uneven relationships to globalization, as characterized by the flows, connections, and mobility of people, goods, and services. However, according to Massey, all mobility and access is differentiated. "Some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (1994,150). Access to and control over mobility reflects and reinforces hierarchical power relations. Not only do we carry geopolitics with us to the field, we are constantly re-inscribing the complexities of these power dynamics onto our relationships in and outside of the field. In my particular case, I was dependent on Shushan for everything from organizing my daily schedule to providing friendship and moral support. In reality, however, I was often perceived as the one with privilege, power, and access because of the global system of geopolitical hierarchies where an "American" identity is assumed to supersede local ones.*

This reflection stands in contrast to the first in a number of interesting ways. The first journal entry speaks to the ways that researchers can find themselves in situations of powerlessness and reliance on others in ways that require humility, vulnerability, and care. The first journal entry also challenged conventional notions of expertise and illustrated the ways that

embracing mutual vulnerability, both personally and professionally, can challenge power hierarchies and normative representations of fieldwork.

In the second reflection, however, both the tone and the use of citations serve to shift the focus away from my own insecurity to present a more distanced, less (personally) vulnerable narrative. The second reflection draws attention to (geo)political dynamics and to Shushan's vulnerability at the expense of those dynamics. In so doing it reveals what was at stake in my fieldwork relationships—what happened when, despite my best intentions, I inflicted harm by virtue of my presence and my (geopolitical) subject position, on a person who had done so much to take care of me. It shows the ways that our bodies are marked by geopolitics, and how the bodies that are near to ours can become marked, putting them at greater risk despite, or because of, their interest in helping us.

The reflection above considers the ways that mobility and the control over one's mobility can reinforce hierarchical (geo)political relations (Massey 1994). In other instances outside of the one recounted here, Shushan's mobility within Yerevan and the rest of Armenia was far greater than mine and derived from her knowledge, ability, and experience to navigate unfamiliar spaces (Massey 1994). While my ability to move within Armenia often rendered me vulnerable as an obvious outsider, I had freely traveled to Armenia with the geopolitics of my citizenship and the state policies, procedures, and processes of economic, political and military intervention. In this context, the power (im)balances between me and Shushan shifted constantly according to scalar and spatial viewpoints. More than simply shifting dynamics, however, such complexities raise questions about the ethics of (trying to do) better fieldwork.

As Butler (2016) and Nagar (2014) have separately argued, practicing mutual vulnerabilities and acknowledging the ways we are entangled in various kinds of relationships—

personal and geopolitical—may be one way to resist existing power hierarchies that define certain kinds of work, or even certain kinds of lives, as more valuable than others. To engage with vulnerability as a form of resistance to these geopolitical hierarchies and difference, I must be willing to acknowledge my place within a cadre of associates and influences, rather than remaining in a hierarchal position as sole author or lone researcher. This means pushing back against mainstream academic metrics that position our “words” or our research goals as counting more than others’ security (see Koopman 2011, 280). Following this incident and numerous less dramatic ones, I started to rely, even more than I had been, on my research assistants to find participants with whom *they* would feel comfortable despite my (geopolitical) presence. I trusted their advice, and sometimes their warnings, regarding interviewees. I also minimized my use of institutional resources that were facilitated through the Fulbright fellowship—such as meeting rooms for focus groups or contacts made via state department introductions.

Acknowledging the inherent and at times insidious geopolitics of research requires a continual and iterative ethical process toward research integrity, the protection and care of our research associates and participants, as well as our critical reflection (Koopman 2011). It requires careful decision-making about what is written or not. Sometimes this might require alternating between clamoring for justice or using purposeful silences to avoid the misuse of our research results/analyses (Coddington 2017). Even if our research remains staunchly critical of the military or multinational institutions/corporations, Koopman (2016) reminds us that it can be weaponized without our knowledge or consent (also see Katz 1994). The diary reflection above shows how we ourselves may be weaponized without our knowledge or consent, imposing harm on those with whom we work. We are already engaged in a difficult dance between contributing to the production of knowledge in the academy and protecting our research data, associates, and



participants particularly when militarized geopolitical actions and discourses are generated from our home country. Ethical fieldwork should involve not just acknowledging our own insecurities and dependencies, but those with whom we work as well so that we can continue to address or mitigate them.

### **These Messy Entanglements**

Nagar (2014, 2) set out a number of goals for pushing forward feminist interventions into theory and methods of research practice. They include: 1) confronting and embracing the messiness of responsible collaboration and solidarity, 2) linking scholarly questions with political actions, and 3) challenging the use and logic of neatly defined categories and subject positions.

This chapter has, in many ways followed Nagar's work. First, it grapples with the messiness of collaboration in the field, in part by revealing some of the unflattering details of my own experiences there. This "messiness" includes recognizing the stakes of being in simultaneous positions of dependence on and power over those with whom I worked. As Koopman (2011) warns, our presence and our research may be weaponized and used against us or others without our intention. These journal entries illustrate that at stake is not only representation and positionality but real, physical bodies of researchers and assistants and how those bodies make the existence of the other both possible and vulnerable. At some stages of my fieldwork I was barely able to look after my own daily needs without a lot of help from others. And yet, just by associating themselves with my geopolitically marked body (not to mention all the other ways my body is marked by identity politics), those others put themselves at risk. We

are, in fact, all vulnerable, yet differentially positioned by our geopolitical bodies. By first acknowledging and then facing the complex relationships of intimacy and hierarchy that are hidden in the production of knowledge through fieldwork, we can work to find more responsible ways of collaborating.

Second, this chapter has linked scholarly questions regarding feminist theoretical interventions into field research methods with a politics of resistance. Writing vulnerably and engaging with dependencies and vulnerabilities in fieldwork must be more than just a way to “get in touch with our feelings, or bare our faultlines as if that might launch a new mode of authenticity” (Butler 2016, 14). It should be a political act of resistance, a way of challenging norms of recognition, and a practice of engagement across difference (Nagar 2014). Carretta and Jokinen (2017), for instance, argued that a culture of silence exists within geography surrounding fieldwork difficulties and vulnerabilities due to loneliness, violence or threats of violence, insistent questioning, and commitment to research. This culture of silence is in part a legacy of colonialism within geography and perpetuates the idea that dissertation fieldwork is a rite of passage that only the heroic will survive. In this context, I view the act of writing vulnerably and writing about vulnerabilities as political action that challenges those colonial legacies and existing norms of silence within the discipline of fieldwork practice. It does so by speaking back to the exclusion of emotion and insecurity in narratives of fieldwork and by opening a conceptual space for exploring (unequal) collaborations and relationships in the field.

Third, through the descriptions and analysis of my fieldwork relationships, I have attempted to challenge the neatly defined categories of “researcher” and “research assistant.” The production of knowledge in the field is certainly messy. From writing the proposal that will get you to the field (Watts 2001), to making decisions about when and how to change your research

(Billo and Hiemstra 2013), to the ethics of engagement, reflexivity, and reciprocity (Rose 1997; Pratt 2002; Nagar 2014), the process is a whirl-wind of intellectual stimulation and exhaustion, excitement and anxiety, overwhelming empirical data (or lack thereof), and social awkwardness. But no one navigates the treacherous path entirely on their own. Especially while “doing fieldwork” we rely heavily on trusted “insiders” who become our collaborators to help make sense of what we hear and see. However, the significance of how these collaborators—and our relative geopolitical positions—help to shape our own analysis is often erased or confined in neat categories of “researcher” and “research assistant” that do a disservice to their complexities.

This chapter further contributes to these theoretical and methodological goals by positing vulnerability not just as a phenomenon to be investigated, but also as a method. I chose to maintain a personal and vulnerable voice in writing this chapter as a strategy allowing me to reveal and challenge claims of critical authority. As such, it is a method for disrupting power structures that present themselves as impersonal and objective (Pratt and Rosner 2013; Miller 1991). It does the epistemological work of demonstrating the partiality and situatedness of knowledge (Haraway 1988), attempting to follow Katz’s (2001) critical warning against reducing situated knowledge into standard, reductive categories. By looking at the messy constitution of knowledge through the intertwining of vulnerable bodies and geopolitical hierarchies, I have argued for an approach to ethical fieldwork practices on the meaningful grounds of feminist solidarity.

Importantly, the act of grappling with the tensions between personal vulnerabilities and geopolitical bodies marked as “friendly” or “adversarial” led me to think about the geopoliticization of bodies, family values, and gender development projects. The “spy incident” in particular highlighted for me how women's bodies and actions were marked by geopolitical

divides both spatial and moral—”East” and “West,” “good girls” and “bad” ones, which is the focus of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### **GEPOLITICIZING GENDER AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: FEMINIST GEPOLITICS, (in)SECURITY, AND “SAVING” WOMEN IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA**

#### **Introduction**

In Armenia, gender and domestic violence are uniquely geopolitical sites between “East” and “West” where conflicting influences and interventions are being articulated and debated. Euro-American international development programs<sup>5</sup> in Armenia have focused on preventing domestic violence and legislating equal rights policies. Yet, domestic violence and gender equality were *not* the primary concerns of grassroots women’s groups in Armenia (Ishkanian 2007; 2009). Exploiting this disconnect between the interests of local groups and international development actors, Russian actors have muddied local understandings of “gender” and “rights” to further exert their influence in the region. Local groups refer to the competing agendas and logics of Euro-American development and Russian-supported counter-interventions as “gender

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “Euro-American” and “Western” to identify a number of different international development agencies and regulating bodies including USAID, the United Nations, Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and other private, donor-driven organizations such as the Ford Foundation or the Soros Foundation. These organizations have supported local women-focused NGO projects and legislation, both directly and indirectly, for preventing domestic violence and for promoting gender and LGBT rights in Armenia.

hysteria”—a dramatic public debate and backlash against women’s and LGBT rights that has led to the removal of the word “gender” from legislative and educational documents and a re-entrenchment of patriarchal family values. In this context, both liberal development projects and conservative national groups rely on the concept of “protection” to garner popular support for their respective positions. Conservatives seek to protect “traditional” Armenian families from the “perversions” of western influence, while Euro-American anti-domestic violence projects seek to “protect” women from abusive husbands and mothers-in-law.

These two oppositional international influences—Western development initiatives and Russian-supported conservative groups—have resulted “gender hysteria,” a deep confusion regarding the concept of “gender” and the roles for women in society more generally. In this chapter, I analyze the conflicting interpretations and understandings of “gender” by women’s rights groups, conservative groups, and women themselves to demonstrate how both international groups deploy rhetoric that purports to “save” women and families in the interest of furthering their own geopolitical and geo-economic influence. Yet, neither “side” truly addresses the multiple forms of insecurity that women and families experience, including economic insecurity and political marginalization. Instead, “gender,” “the family” and “the home” have become discursive sites at which geopolitical lines are drawn with little consequence for the everyday lives and concerns of women.

The tensions between Russian and Euro-American geopolitical projects that manifested in Armenia’s “gender hysteria” originated in contemporary debates surrounding two specific pieces of legislation. The first piece of legislation was intended to ensure equal rights and participation for men and women in social, economic, and political life. The second legislative act was intended to prevent domestic violence through better enforcement and criminalization of

spousal abuse. Using Pain and Smith's (2008) double-helix model for investigating the intertwining of the everyday and the geopolitical, I analyze the logics behind Armenia's "gender hysteria" to reveal how geopolitical divisions are written onto gendered bodies, domestic spaces, and notions of family, increasing women's daily experiences of insecurity.

Building upon critical feminist geopolitical analysis, I highlight scalar connections between geopolitical influences and the microscales of the home and body. I examine the competing logic and strategies of Euro-American actions and Russian counteractions that constitute the geopolitical landscape of Armenia in order to understand how they impact women's lives to produce various forms of insecurity. The following analysis will show how cultural misunderstandings and the NGOization of development lead to distrust and suspicion among local citizens toward the women's rights movements. "Western" values underpinning gender rights and domestic violence protection programs provided fuel for conservative, nationalist groups' to attack Euro-American development interventions.

### *Methods*

Empirical data regarding the "gender hysteria" debate in Armenia are drawn from key official texts (i.e. government publications, speeches, interviews) and popular sources (i.e. mass media and secondary reports) in which representatives of various NGOs and other political organizations express their viewpoints regarding the "gender debate." I reviewed international assessments of domestic violence in Armenia from organizations such as USAID, the World Bank, and the United Nations. I also analyze international and national media sources, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Eurasianet, OpenDemocracy, Armenian Weekly, ArmenPress, and others from 2013-2017 for views and commentary on this topic. This disparate dataset was

selected because it reveals how various political groups—local NGOs, government officials, and international development programs understand and address domestic violence and other gender related issues.

Though I did conduct interviews with representatives of several local Armenian women-oriented NGOs which inform this analysis, these interviews are not referenced as primary data sources. The decision to reserve this information comes in part from the reluctance on the part of some of those representatives to discuss the “gender hysteria” debate. More significantly, however, I am withholding direct reference to specific NGOs and their representative because of the potentially damaging impact its publication might have for their work. During the height of this public debate in Armenia, many women- and LGBT-rights activists faced harassment, threats of backlisting and violence (one LGBT-friendly bar in Yerevan was bombed in 2012), and public shaming for their work on those issues. Additionally, some representatives were concerned about how their organizations might be portrayed by a foreign researcher (Koopman 2016; see Coddington 2017 on the value of silence). Interviews with government representatives were also sought, but solicitations were declined, delayed, or ignored. Given these circumstances, I have chosen to account for the safety, comfort, and security of local participants by focusing instead on published accounts and public opinions made by both conservative groups and by women’s rights activists who felt comfortable disseminating their viewpoints through news media. Analysis of these secondary materials allows me to focus on the “events, encounters, dialogues, and actions” that highlight both the connections and disconnections between the US/European and Russian geopolitics and everyday practices and realities (Pain and Smith 2008, 7). Unlike many other feminist studies of geopolitics (see Koch 2011 for an exception), this case study does not immediately grapple with the “everyday”



experiences of women and men in Armenia. Instead, I explore how gender security and the very concept of “gender” itself has been discursively used to promote divergent geopolitical interests.

### **Feminist Geopolitics: Scale and Security**

The connections between discourses of the “gender” debate, the material effects of Western development interventions, and Russian-backed, nationalist counter-interventions are best illustrated by a feminist geopolitical framework. Feminist geopolitics emphasizes embodied practices occurring across scales that support and challenge particular political formations, especially among those who are at “the sharp-end” of various forms of international geopolitical activities (Dixon and Marston 2011, 445; see also Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001). Hyndman (2001, 414) looks across scale—those that are both “finer and coarser” than that of the nation-state and global political economy—and thus illustrates the complex relations between the international and the everyday. This approach stresses the social construction of scale and interconnections across scale (Marston 2000; Pratt and Rosner 2013; Herod and Wright 2002; Mountz and Hyndman 2006) to reveal the often-invisible forms of geopolitical power as they operate in everyday life (Massaro and Williams 2013). Feminist approaches to “the global intimate” (Pratt and Rosner 2013; Mountz and Hyndman 2006) and “intimate geopolitics” (Smith 2012a) show how global forces haunt intimate spaces.

Feminist geopolitics thus illustrate the complex relations between the international and the everyday; they reveal how the microscale of home and body can be manipulated or used to secure support for larger geopolitical interests. Through attention to scale and the grounded practices of geopolitics in place, seemingly non-geopolitical sites and concerns such as love and

desire (Smith 2009; 2012a), emotion (Pain and Smith 2008), and place (Koopman 2011; Clark 2013; Secor 2001) are revealed to be significant to the operation of global power. A feminist geopolitical analytic exposes “the force relations that operate through and upon those bodies such that particular subjectivities are enhanced, constrained, and put to work, and particular corporealities are violated, exploited, and often abandoned” (Dixon and Marston 2011, 445). The contribution of this approach is to reveal the often-invisible forms of geopolitical power as they operate in everyday life (Massaro and Williams 2013, 567).

For the case study of Armenia, feminist geopolitics highlights the competing actors that manipulate security concerns to further their own interests. Western development programs attend to women’s physical security at the scale of the body through domestic violence intervention programs that purport to keep women safe from violent men and free them from an oppressive patriarchal culture (Ishkanian 2007). At the same time, conservative groups identify the patriarchal Armenian family—viewed by many Armenians as the defining mechanism through which they have endured as a nation—as under threat from a foreign power. Thus, saving the Armenian family is necessary to ensure a secure nation. Using security as a rhetorical tool, both groups also seek to secure their own influence and power over a geopolitically significant region, each by manipulating or using the microscale of the home or body to secure support for these interests.

Scale and space, central to feminist geopolitical scholarship, reveal very different forms of violence—whether intimate partner violence within the home or global conflicts waged between nations—and reveal them as constructed, mediated, used, and responded to by individuals, communities, and the state (Pain 2014, 533-534; see also Massaro and Williams 2013; Cuomo 2013; Pain 2015; Brickell 2014). Domestic violence intervention policies in the

United Kingdom, for example, may seem unrelated to the “War on Terror” or US imperialism. However, feminist geopolitics reveals how they are interrelated by underscoring how dangerous notions of domination are embedded within security discourse (Pain 2010; Pain 2014; Pain 2015) or by demonstrating the ways gender-based security has been used to justify military or development interventions (Fluri 2011; Koch 2011; Young 2003).

Further work in feminist geography shows how vulnerable subjects must navigate a range of everyday security concerns, which go far beyond physical security, as they move through different spaces, encounter economic (in)securities, and legal uncertainties (Clark 2013). In particular, Cuomo’s (2013) analysis of multiple insecurities produced through domestic violence interventions in the United States shows that despite the varied needs of vulnerable populations, specific forms of security, primarily physical or bodily security, are privileged over other forms including emotional and economic. Kennedy-Pipe (2016), in an analysis of the Soviet policy of compulsory unveiling imposed on women in Central Asia for their “emancipation,” concluded that such security policies have paradoxical results for women. Even if women were freed from the “tyranny” of the home, that oppression was often replaced with the drudgery of industrial or agricultural labor or harassment from angry and traditional neighbors. These examples ask under what conditions women feel (in)secure and whether state actions support or undermine those conditions. In the case of the Armenian debate regarding “gender,” Western domestic violence prevention programs focus on the scale of the body and women’s physical security at the expense of their role within the family. The focus on physical security ignores the necessity of kinship relations for economic and emotional security for Armenian women (Dudwick 1997; Ishkanian 2007). Conservative groups’ focus on preserving and maintaining the “traditional” family serves to protect patriarchal relations, ignores the real issue of violence against women,

and perpetuates new forms of violence against those who do not conform to traditional gender roles and family values.

Rachel Pain's (2010; 2014; 2015; Pain and Smith 2008) work has been particularly key to conceptualizing the scalar relationships of "everyday" violence to geopolitical conflicts. Indeed, Pain and Smith (2008) critique conceptualizations of violence that treat the geopolitical and the everyday as two distinct realms. They propose a double-helix model consisting of two equal strands, one representing geopolitics and the other everyday life, though both are part of the same broad structure (Pain and Smith 2008). I build upon Pain and Smith's double-helix model to analyze the geopoliticization of gender in Armenia which culminated in the public debate referred to by locals as "gender hysteria." However, in a departure from their approach, I disaggregate the "geopolitical" of Pain's double-helix model in order to bring the tension between Euro-American development interventions and Russian responses into theoretical focus. This conceptual move draws attention to the relationships between the Euro-American logic of domestic violence intervention, Russian counter-interventions, and the everyday practices of citizens in Armenia. Disaggregating the "geopolitical/global" in Pain and Smith's model opens analytical space to look at competing geopolitical discourses and their relationship to the microscale of the home and body.

Examining the interplay of competing geopolitical rhetoric surrounding the concept of "gender" in Armenia runs the risk of assuming a "trickle down" effect of geopolitics onto everyday life, a move that goes against the framework of feminist geopolitics. Nevertheless, I argue that this conceptualization draws attention to a geopolitical landscape created by Euro-American development programs and disorganized by nationalist rhetoric through critique and counter-action with consequences across multiple scales. It reveals the ways the intimate scales

of the home and body are caught up in relations of power and reinforces the feminist argument that the intimate cannot stand as a stronghold of authenticity as it takes on specific political social and cultural meanings in different contexts (Pratt and Rosner 2013). Disaggregating the geopolitical uses of gender in Armenia shows the centrality of the intimate scale in the making of global and geopolitical practices.

### **Gender Hysteria in Armenia: The Debate over “Gender” and Domestic Violence**

Before analyzing the competing logics that underlie public debate about the concept of “gender” and domestic violence protections, it is useful to unpack the events that led up to and constitute Armenia’s “gender hysteria.”

On May 20, 2013, the Armenian parliament adopted a new law on “gender equality” as a part of its commitment to international agreements, treaties with the European community, and regional organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, and the European Union. The adoption of the Law “*On Provision of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men*” was intended to ensure equal participation for men and women in social, economic, and political life. Initially, the acceptance of this legislation appeared to follow routine for a “developing,” formerly-Soviet country aspiring to reach European and other international standards of democracy and modernity. Unexpectedly, however, this piece of legislation became the first flashpoint in the geopolitical debates over “gender” and “family values” in Armenia and eventually raised questions about the role of Western development and changing Russian involvement in the region.

A few months after its adoption by the parliament in 2013, the law faced fierce opposition from newly-formed, conservative groups. Through various online media channels, these groups argued that the definition of the term “gender” used in Article 3<sup>6</sup>—“acquired and socially prescribed behaviors of different genders, the social aspect of relations between women and men, which is reflected in all aspects of life, including politics, economy, law, ideology, culture, education, science, and health care”—would lead to the “perversion” of society” (Pan-Armenian Parental Committee, [www.hanun.am](http://www.hanun.am)). They claimed that accepting a socially defined notion of gender meant accepting homosexuality because it blurs what they consider to be strictly and biologically defined male and female roles and characteristics (see example below). They also claim it would give unwarranted benefits to sexual minorities in Armenia.

Conservative groups relied methods that incited public disgust by using vivid images of trans-gender appearances circulating on social media (see Figure 1 below). Their social media campaign, “Stop Gender in Armenia,” connected “gender” to pedophilia and bestiality. Indeed, these groups’ strategy of rhetorically equating the term “gender” with homosexuality transformed “gender” into an insult to humiliate LGBT individuals and their allies. Derivative forms of the word such as *genderast* (-ast suffix suggests the associated noun is “dirty”), *genderner* (the plural form of “gender” implying that someone must have or accept multiple genders), and *genderik* (the diminutive form of “gender” implying a “little homosexual”) entered everyday language. Such derivative forms were often used by conservative protestors demonstrating at local women’s rights or LGBT rights events (Nikoghosian 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.parliament.am/drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=28173>

Figure 1. Images and Text from Pan-Armenian Parental Committee Social Media Page (<http://hanun.am/?p=372>)



“Man, gendered female=unacceptable” “Woman, gendered male=unacceptable”

Such provocative images circulated across social media were accompanied by claims that reinforced the need for patriarchal gender roles for men and women. In one discussion circulated online (<http://www.aravot-en.am/2014/11/03/167578/>), a conservative blogger Tigran Kharapetyan defended his critiques of the gender equality law by saying that

Both woman and man are creatures given by God, equal in every way. They are equal as creatures, but the man has his functions, and the women hers. Such is given by nature. No need for a man to act like a woman and vice versa. Man should respect and love her as a woman, the same for the woman. Man should do so to feel himself a man, and the same for the opposite.

According to this position, a socially defined notion of gender threatens national identity and the longevity of the Armenian population because it will result in a cultural and biological “perversion” that undermines fundamental values of family and *reproduction*. As part of a conservative social media campaign to protest the law, including an online petition on the website [www.change.org](http://www.change.org), protestors to the law claim that the acceptance of gender and rights for sexual minorities will undermine traditional moral values and, predicting that homosexuality will become more widespread, the law would mean fewer children would be born. According to one online commenter to the petition, “This will lead to a decline in our already weak demographic

growth and—given the military problems our state faces—it could threaten our national security” (Arsen Hayrapetyan, 2013). Thus, non-normative gender roles (and appearances) are viewed as threats against the nation that puts the future of Armenian society at risk.

In addition to viewing the acceptance of gender as a threat to Armenian families and national security, conservative activists identify Western aid programs as the primary agents of these “deviant” practices.

At present the resources of international organizations are often used to redefine of 'gender' and 'gender identity' terms to further pressure states, aiming at forcing them to accept the new definitions as new “international legal standards”. The trend has gone too far and it is impossible to ignore or deny its existence. (Armen Boshyan, Pan-Armenian Parental Committee Founder 2014)

The above statement by Armen Boshyan at a news conference refers to a number of international agreements that the government of Armenia is a signatory of, including *Conventional on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) and the UN Millennium Development Goals. By identifying international agreements as threats to Armenian autonomy and sovereignty, conservative groups perpetuate distrust and suspicion of “Western” values and a revival of nationalistic discourse that supports patriarchal Armenian family values with a clear division of roles for men and women.



Figure 2. Widely circulated "advertisement" promoting protest against the "Gender Rights Law." [www.hunan.am](http://www.hunan.am)



(Left Column Text) “Gender culture is mandatory.” (Right Column Text) “Armenian culture is prohibited.” (Center title) “Gender Law’s 57 threats to Armenian culture.” “Stop the Gender Law.”

Local women’s organizations and NGOs Activists in Armenia working for women’s rights and LGBT rights described the result of this backlash as “gender hysteria”. Yet, they had fewer rhetorical means of countering conservative discourse. As individuals, they were also under intense pressure through online harassment, public shaming, and threats of violence. They also believed that the government was obligated to adopt the “gender rights” law in order to join a partnership agreement with the EU (Nikoghosyan 2016; Martirosyan 2013; Matosian and Ishkanian 2017). Thus, their methods of advocating for the law were more limited and strategic than populist, especially in comparison to conservative groups’ ubiquitous online media presence.

The Armenian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs responded to the “gender hysteria” controversy by stating that in order to avoid dual interpretations of the word “gender,” the phrasing of the law would be changed to “men and women.” This move placated the conservative groups because it reinforces a biologically determined definition with specific

social and biological roles for each sex. In subsequent actions, the Armenian government attempted to reassure both sides. They reaffirmed to the international community, local women's and LGBT rights NGOs, and human rights activist groups that they remained committed to CEDAW and other international conventions on gender rights. However, they also eliminated the term "gender" from official government documents suggesting tacit agreement with conservative critiques.

While the gender rights law was disputed in social and news media in August 2013, the Armenian government also faced another important policy decision. This regarded a choice between joining an economic association agreement with the European Union or with the Russian-led Customs Union (now named the Eurasian Economic Union, or EAEU). Despite several months of negotiations with Brussels, in September 2013, the President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, announced that Armenia would join the Customs Union. Conservative groups protested the law and insisted that the country should resist greater western influence, and particularly any further association with the European community because of the "dangerous" influence of "western perversions" like homosexuality and "gender ideology" for the traditional Armenian family. Pro-family, pro-nationalist, and neo-traditionalist groups drew a clear geopolitical line between "European values" and Armenian nationalist "family values" shared by Russia: "In the world today, there is a clash between two geopolitical poles. One is the west and the other is the Russian Federation with its allies in the Eurasian Economic Union. Today, only this Eastern bloc has in this or that way presented a challenge to the values of dehumanization." (Armen Boshyan, Pan-Armenian Parental Committee Founder, 2016). Boshyan's position clearly articulates the geopolitical use of gender by local conservative actors. This conservative values leader equates the "West" and "European values" with the acceptance of homosexuality, a force

which he sees as both “dehumanizing” and a threat to the sanctity of the Armenian family. Consequently, such a position can explicitly identify Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union as “protectors” and defenders of Armenians from a foreign invasion of unwanted values.

These same conservative groups use similar (geo)politicized discourses about the need to oppose foreign (Euro-American) influences and to protect “traditional” family values in order to halt a long-awaited law addressing domestic violence in Armenia. Local women’s rights NGOs in Yerevan have been working through the UN Gender Theme Group with members from a number of organizations including representatives from OSCE and the Armenian government to draft a domestic violence prevention law. The draft law was titled “Prevention of the Struggle Against Domestic Violence” and was published on the Ministry of Justice’s website in November of 2016. The law would have strengthened existing laws against domestic violence, creating mechanisms aimed at preventing domestic abuse and providing services for domestic violence survivors. It was introduced, in part, as a component of a European Union agreement which would have made Armenia eligible to receive 11 million Euros in aid, which was contingent on the implementation of the law. However, in February 2017, the Armenian government decided to withdraw the domestic law after conservative groups, heavily funded and supported by Russian actors, represented the law as a European attempt to undermine traditional Armenian values – a “bill imposed by immoral Europe” (Abrahamyan 2017). The debate surrounding the law continued until December of 2017, when the law was eventually passed—though not in the same form that women’s right groups had advocated for (Nikoghosyan 2018).

Supporters of the law argued that conservative, neo-traditionalist groups are part of a campaign to extend Russian influence and are using the law as a convenient pre-text to boost anti-European sentiments within Armenian society (Babayan 2013; Nikoghosyan 2016). As one

women's activist suggested, LGBT and women's rights activists in Armenia are trying to advance the feminist slogan of the "personal is political" through advocacy for domestic violence protections, but they also point to the ways that "gender is geopolitical" (Nikoghosian 2016). Various actors in the "gender" debate use "gender" to reinforce geopolitical and ideological divisions between Europe (the "West") and Russia (the "East"). According to nationalist viewpoints, Europe/US/West seeks to "invade" and transform family relations through specific gender rights protection policies and the East/Russia serves as benevolent protector of "traditional" values. For local NGOs, such conservative viewpoints serve to reinforce biologically defined gender roles for men and women, obscure the real violence against women in Armenia, and perpetuate geopolitical tensions that ultimately undermine efforts to redress political and economic marginalization (Nikoghosian 2016)

### **Complicating Families and Disaggregating the Geopolitical**

As the public debate over "gender hysteria" makes evident, the concept of "gender" and family in Armenia are sites at which geopolitical strategies are animated. Such geopolitical strategies—whether those of Euro-American development actors or Russian-supported conservative groups—attempt to manipulate the microscale of family and (women's) bodies to ensure their own interests. Following feminist geopolitical attention to issues of scale and security, I complicate conventional understandings of the family and domestic violence in order to show how the liberal assumptions of Western domestic violence intervention programs that generated so much public debate in Armenia remain problematic.

Western security paradigms ignore multiple forms of (in)security that remain unaddressed by conventional domestic violence programs grounded in logics that prioritize domestic violence shelters, mandatory arrest, and a rights-based model. Clark's (2013) analysis of gender-based development programs in predominantly Kurdish regions of Turkey, for example, reveals how development programs grounded in discourses of "rights" did not successfully speak to women's everyday realities: they failed to consider the ways that women are multiply positioned within their family, community, and other relationships. Instead, the very programs aimed at creating economic and national security for the nation-state, via the development of the individual, produced a whole new set of insecurities for the women who are both the objects and subjects of development intervention (Clark 2013). In another example, Cuomo (2013), drawing on Young's (2003) conceptualization of masculinist protection, illustrated how a narrow focus on physical security in US policies and police procedures regarding domestic violence, such as mandatory arrest, is enacted through a particular logic that requires the victim to seek protection from another masculine entity, the police. Despite its good intentions, this logic stifles the capacity of responders and victims alike to attend to multiple and varying security needs, paradoxically causing more insecurity for women.

Similarly in Armenia, anti-domestic violence campaigns focused too heavily on physical security and failed to consider the multiple positionality of women within the family, the home, and nationalist ideology. Western rights-based assessment of domestic violence in Armenia failed to see the home as comprised of complex structural and emotional geographies of (in)security (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Rose 1993). An Armenian home is a multi-generational site that includes extensive kin networks operating within and outside the domestic space as essential systems for economic, physical, and other forms of security, though the same networks

also serve to ensure corporeal control and monitoring (of women's behavior). During the Soviet period, domestic spaces were viewed as places of respite and reprieve from the prying eyes of the state (Platz 1996; Gal and Kligman 2000). They were also sites of economic production (not only social reproduction), community and kin gatherings, and even "kitchen politics" where individuals could be critical of the state without fear of reprisal (Pine 1997). With the collapse of the Soviet system and the implementation of neoliberal reforms that cut state services, the family and the home came to play an increasingly important role in providing care and support, at times being the *only* source for support for individuals in need. The importance of family and extended kin networks is further reinforced by the fact that many Armenian families rely on remittances sent from relatives abroad (Dudwick 1997).<sup>7</sup>

Though there are asymmetrical gender relations within families, these relations are marked by complimentary and mutually recognized rights and obligations for men and women similar to classic forms of patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988). Men are expected to be leaders and decision-makers within the home as well as in political and economic realms. They are responsible for their family's honor and protection. Women should be self-sacrificing nurturers and supporters of their family and the nation (Platz 1996; Dudwick 1994; 1997). Armenian families are also multi-generational and patrilineal—a newly married young woman will move into the home of her husband where they will live with his parents and siblings. Though this traditional family structure may not be the predominant *practice* among Armenian families, the

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<sup>7</sup> A recent study of migration estimated that 643,823 Armenian migrants resided abroad in years around 2012 representing nearly 20% of the total population residing in Armenia had migrated (EU Neighborhood Migration Report 2013). Remittances from family members living abroad sent to Armenia represented 13.1% of the country's GDP in 2016 (World Bank <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=AM>). Furthermore, approximately 90% of those remittances are sent from relatives living and working in Russia (IMF Report 2012 <https://www.imf.org/external/country/arm/rr/2012/062012.pdf>).

values and roles expressed in this patriarchal family structure continue to inform and discipline the actions and behaviors of men and women across generations.

Nuanced understanding of the importance of family and gender roles illustrates how the spatial and temporal experiences within the home can impact one's experiences and emotional relationship to that site as a space of either security and insecurity. For example, international development programs viewed the patriarchal and gendered structure of Armenian families as responsible for rendering women vulnerable to violence from the male members of the household as well as mothers-in-law or more senior women (Ishkanian 2007, discussed further below). However, this view of the Armenian family fails to recognize the fact that without strong family ties, people feel isolated, more vulnerable and marginalized, and unable to advance socially or economically (Dudwick 1997; Platz 2000; Ishkanian 2007). Though domestic violence occurs within Armenian homes, the extent and occurrence of verbal, emotion, and physical violence used to discipline women into a strict gender role varies significantly by household. Furthermore, when conceptualizing family and the home for development interventions, it is necessary to recognize that domestic spaces can be sites of both abuse *and* comfort as non-abusive members of the household may support, intervene, or diminish the amount or intensity of abuse (Fluri 2011; see also Rose 1993; hooks 1990). Home spaces are important sites of belonging and alienation that are linked to one's own sense of identity as well as connection to and place within the broader community (Blunt 2005; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Attending to the ways that family and domestic spaces contribute to experiences of (in)security through examination of intimate and social reproductive processes, it is possible to eliminate well-worn tropes of violence rather than perpetuate the identification and objectification of women's lives as oppressed, unfulfilled, or bare (Fluri 2011, 287). Despite the

complexities of kinship practices and domestic lives, gender rights and domestic violence prevention became key targets of Western development programs in Armenia and other formerly socialist states in the region after 1991.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I further describe and analyze the geopolitical landscape that led to the emergence of “gender hysteria” in Armenia. To do so, I disaggregate “the geopolitical” of Pain and Smith’s (2008) double-helix model by first identifying the limitations of Western domestic violence intervention projects and then analyzing how Western assumptions and Russian geopolitical ambitions helped to create a climate in which conservative counter-actions that purport to protect Armenian families emerged. I critically examine both the emergence of gender development projects in post-Soviet spaces and recent conservative counter-actions that challenge the logics of Western development. Finally, I address how these competing logics produce new forms of insecurity or perpetuate existing ones.

## **Post-Communist Development Interventions: Gender Mainstreaming and Domestic Violence**

### *Gender Mainstreaming and Post-Soviet Development*

The public controversy in Armenia over the concept of gender emerged, in part, from the legacy of international interventions that sought to “correct” the course of development in the former Soviet Union. Development discourses in the early 1990s held that formerly communist countries were not undeveloped, like Third World countries, but “misdeveloped.” Based on this understanding, aid was focused on excising the legacy of communism (Wedel 2001, 21), a task accomplished through (Euro-American) expert intervention, the sharing of knowledge, and the



development of civil society classically defined as the sphere of public interaction between the family and the state. “Civil society” and NGOs were romanticized as the primary agents of development by “one-size fits all” programs of neoliberal economic and political reforms (Mandel and Humphrey 2002). International development used civil society as a means to promote democratization of politics and the privatization and marketization of the formerly centralized economy. Civil society was intended to step in to address the gap in services created by the withdrawal of the state (E. Dunn 2008; Guenther 2011).

Around the same time, “gender mainstreaming” emerged as a key goal in international development and was adopted by the UN in 1995. Gender mainstreaming refers to efforts to move women’s rights issues from a peripheral concern to a key one on the conceptual map of development issues (Meyer and Prügl 1999). The gender mainstreaming agenda aims to address the “gender gap” for equity, women’s rights, and the need for women’s organizations (United Nations 2002; Visvanathan, Duggan, and Nisonoff 2011; Lawson 2009). Other key issues include disproportionate access to employment and wages and the inclusion of violence against women as part of human rights concerns (Rees 2005; Walby 2005). Donor organizations such as USAID, the Ford Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation, and the Open Society Institute believed there is a direct link between gender equality, women’s groups activism, and democratization (Hemment 2004; Richter 2002). Consequently, there was substantial attention and financial support given for women’s NGOs and NGOs that address gender issues as part of the post-socialist democracy-building and civil-society strengthening programs of the 1990s.

International attention to women’s issues in the former Soviet Union was also spurred by local conditions of women’s marginalization from economic and political processes (Hemment 2007). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the imposition of market reforms by the

World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, unemployment and inflation skyrocketed (Wedel 2001; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Berdahl, Bunzl, and Lampland 2000). Women suffered the most from these conditions, particularly in the forms of unemployment and underemployment (Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004; Pine 2003; Einhorn 1993). Additionally, women's issues were depoliticized and largely left out of government, political parties, and the official public sphere in Armenia and other formerly socialist states (Ishkanian 2004; Einhorn 1993). Women experienced a greater burden as caregivers because state services for child and elder care were withdrawn, and women became increasingly responsible for their family's social reproductive needs despite having fewer resources (True 2003; Gal and Kligman 2000). The transition to a market economy not only failed to remove the disadvantages of the Soviet system for women, but it intensified existing asymmetries and inequalities (Kuehnast and Nechimas 2004; see also Moghadam 2000).

Yet despite conditions that created *economic* insecurity for women, the international mandate for "gender mainstreaming" materialized in Armenia and in other post-socialist states through specific anti-domestic violence campaigns, women's rights education programs, and evaluations of women's participation in formal politics.

As funding organizations began to support the work of women's NGOs providing services for women, the number of NGOs addressing gender issues proliferated considerably (Ishkanian 2000; 2007; see Hemment 2007 for similar analysis of women's NGOs in Russia). By dint of donor preferences for programs that supported women's advocacy and service delivery, there was an "NGOization" of women's movements in Armenia and other former socialist countries (Ishkanian 2007). NGOization refers to the "national and global neo-liberalism's active promotion and official sanctioning of particular organizational forms and practices among

feminist organizations and other sectors of civil society” (Alvarez 2009, 176; see also Nagar and the Sangtin Writers 2006), a process that can limit the effectiveness and sensitivity to local issues by women’s NGOs. NGOization in the former Soviet Union meant that international development programs used the discourse of “women’s rights” to effectively demobilize and co-opt local groups’ own initiatives (Berman 2003).

The feminist conception of gender was hitched to new projects defined by international agency goals that displaced concerns for class and social inequality and made it impossible to speak to structural violence or economic issues. By the late 1990s, small groups of women’s NGOs had become well-integrated into transnational feminist networks, articulating their goals through international concepts such as women’s empowerment, domestic violence protection, sustainability, and civil society (Hemment 2007). But they were also hierarchicalized, bureaucratized, and dependent upon relations of patronage as their international donors’ priorities came to eclipse more local concerns (Richter 1999; Mandel 2002; Hemment 2007; Ghodsee 2006).

Within Armenia, international support for women’s movements created a number of new obstacles well-documented by Ishkanian (2000, 2004, 2007). First, it expanded the existing fissures between the former Soviet elite and ordinary women. Activists were often called “grant-eaters,” a derogatory phrase that accused them of focusing on the advancement of their own careers rather than on meaningful social transformation. Secondly, many Armenian women’s groups became adept at manipulating categories such as “modernity” and “tradition” in order to dampen local criticisms while also garnering international support. They would, for example, portray themselves as traditionalist and anti-feminists to appease local politicians who resented women’s participation in public matters, while also presenting their work to international donors

using the rhetoric of modernization and development (Ishkanian 2000). Though that strategy had short-term benefits, scholars looking at gender development programs following the collapse of the Soviet Union found that while gender mainstreaming was supposed to elevate “women’s issues” to garner political attention, the reverse was actually true—women’s groups and women were worse off than before (Hemment 2007; Mandel 2002; Ghodsee 2006). Women continued to suffer from economic and political marginalization due to neoliberal restructuring and women’s groups were forced to focus on issues that international donors felt were most pressing, a process typical of donor-driven development (see also Campbell and Teghtsoonian 2010 for discussion of similar women’s empowerment models in Kyrgyzstan). Thus women’s groups became effective actors garnering support for various concerns at the transnational scale, but their effectiveness at the local scale was much more limited (see also Fluri 2009).

#### *2002-2004 Anti-Domestic Violence Campaign*

Ishkanian (2000; 2004; 2007) thoroughly documented the NGOization for of local organizations that came to work on domestic violence issues at the behest of donors. In particular, she examined US-led gender development interventions, particularly a 2002-2004 anti-domestic violence campaign supported by USAID, which led to a focus on domestic violence as an issue for public concern. In 2002, USAID made a considerable amount of funding available through a direct grant for NGOs to expand and enhance existing services for victims of domestic violence (USAID press release, cited in Ishkanian 2007, 500). The NGOs that were awarded the grant engaged in a number of activities including women’s rights education training, court representations, shelters, emergency hotlines, and publishing projects. Once the grant ended in 2004, the projects organized by these NGOs also ended, including the closure of three

of four local shelters, calling the entire project's effectiveness into question. The project resulted in weighty critiques of the issue itself—namely domestic violence—as well as its proposed solutions.

The NGOs that had implemented the grant reported to Ishkanian (2007) that the anti-violence campaign was ineffective in overcoming resistance and criticism of domestic violence as an issue. The ineffectiveness was due in part to views toward domestic violence in Armenia where, unlike in the US or Europe where domestic violence was first raised and addressed by local women's organizations, there was no broad-based grassroots movement pushing for recognition of the problem. Armenian NGOs had not begun work on the issue until the announcement of large grants. This early example of an anti-domestic violence campaign indicates that the issue has become a public matter in Armenia, and not because of local awareness, but because of support from Western donors and their subsequent funding of initiatives and projects aimed at addressing the problem (Ishkanian 2007).

Furthermore, development assessments that determined domestic violence was a priority for international organization essentialized local "Armenian" culture. Ishkanian notes in her analysis that experts brought in to identify women's issues described Armenian "culture" as one in which violence is "viewed as normal" and where women are "vulnerable," describing women as if they were without agency and at the mercy of their husband's or husband's families (Cooper and Duban 2001, 80 *cited in* Ishkanian 2007, 492). Women were portrayed in development assessments as helpless, unenlightened victims who suffer because of their "culture," ignoring their agency and the crucial intersections of class, education, and rural-urban differences among women (Ishkanian 2007). Instead, women were lumped together into an undifferentiated category as "oppressed" and *in need of saving* (Mohanty 1988).

Development interventions were founded on the assumption that Armenian women needed to be saved from Armenian men/culture. Indeed, these interventions were grounded in the same assumptions seen across the world where women are used symbolically as victims to justify conflict or intervention (Spivak 2010; Abu-Lughod 2002; Kandiyoti 1991; Ahmed 2014). The project of saving women both depends on and reinforces a sense of superiority by the West, a kind of arrogance that does violence to the agency and subjectivity of the women it is purporting to save (Abu-Lughod 2002; Young 2003).

Another main criticism of the program from the Armenian public, journalists, academics and other NGOs was that the problem of domestic violence was not as acute as claimed by some of the NGOs involved in domestic violence campaigns (Ishkanian 2007). This remained, in 2016, a common critique of anti-domestic violence programs and education based on my own observations and interviews. Many citizens felt that domestic violence was not as pronounced as western development assessments claimed, and therefore the real intention behind such interventions was to break up traditional Armenian families. These citizens feared that the application of “Western values” would include the breakdown of extended family networks, large families and multi-generational homes, clearly defined divisions of labor for men and women, and the sanctity of the home and “private sphere” as free from state intervention. As a consequence, anti-domestic violence campaigns in Armenia perpetuated traditional/modern, East/West binaries that ignore the complexities of the family and domestic spaces for Armenian women as well as brush off the many economic insecurities that remain a main concern for them.

*The Intimate Geopolitics of Domestic Violence And “Gender Hysteria”*

The landscape of women- and LGBT-rights programs and initiatives in Armenia has changed considerably since the 2002-2004 anti-domestic violence campaign discussed above. There are now several more women’s rights-based organizations and their scope of interests range from domestic violence protection to education, legislation, and economic development. However, the history of NGOization and cultural blaming which characterized early Western development interventions in Armenia produced a context in which conservative nationalist rhetoric has been very effective (and even viewed by some as necessary) at garnering support for state actions that either ignore or push back against Western international development programs and values. Following Pain and Smith’s (2008) double-helix model connecting the geopolitical with the everyday, domestic violence in Armenia had literally become a geopolitical project. As the “gender hysteria” debate that emerged in 2013 indicates, nationalist groups are able to drum up fear that society will collapse if foreigners are allowed to interfere (and thus dissolve) Armenia’s most sacred social institution: the family.

Both the 2002-2004 anti-domestic violence campaign analyzed by Ishkanian (2007) and the “gender hysteria” debates over the gender rights and domestic violence prevention are examples of intimate entanglements with geopolitics (Smith 2012a). That is, these moments of public debate over gender roles and domestic violence are exemplars of the ways that the intimate has become entangled in the geopolitical. Euro-American aid to formerly communist countries was focused on correcting the course of development by excising communism, viewing NGOs and civil society as the “one size fits all” solution. Yet, as Ishkanian’s (2007) analysis of the USAID domestic violence prevention campaign illustrated, the donor-driven economy supported projects that were often at odds with the local context. In Armenia, domestic violence

prevention and protection outweighed goals posed by local organizations for greater participation of women in politics (Ishkanian 2004). The imposition of donor-driven goals onto women's organizations had the unintended effect of linking women's bodies and their roles within the family to geopolitical poles. Many people associate patriarchal family values and gender roles with "tradition" and "the East," while women and LGBT rights and domestic violence protections are marked as "foreign" and "Western." Thus, the "geopolitical" in the case of Armenia cannot be simple reduced to Western interventions. The irony of the situation is that conservative nationalist groups in Armenia have appropriated the binaries implicit in Western development interventions that separated "traditional/modern" and "East/West," and post-colonial critiques of foreign interference to argue that "feminism" is simply a foreign import that has no relevance to local women's lives, thereby attempting to dismantle the fragile protections that are in place. This led to the other strand of geopolitical influences that use women's bodies and the home to further support their own interests: Russian-Armenian entanglements.

### **Russian-Armenian Entanglements and Russia's "Occupation without Occupation"**

"Gender hysteria" in Armenia is partly a result of Euro-American development interventions which ignored local conditions and the concerns of women's NGOs. Poorly designed programs provided the discursive fuel for conservative groups to perpetuate fears that Armenian families and family values are under siege by what they define as "a foreign power". However, "gender hysteria" is about far more than local nationalist critiques of foreign interventions; gender hysteria has also been an instrument of Russia's geopolitical interference in Armenia. To further analyze the relationship between the microscale of the body and family to



the geopolitics of the region (Pain and Smith 2008; Pratt and Rosner 2013), I address the ways discourses of “saving women” and “saving families” have been co-opted by Pro-Russian nationalist actors (see also Fluri 2011). In the case of Armenia, Russia has created and exploited fear and conditions of insecurity in order to better position itself as the necessary “protector” of Armenian families and interests. Drawing on Dunn and Bobick’s (2014) concept of “occupation without occupation,” I argue that Russia uses cultural constructions of fear to ensure compliance with their interests. By creating a new form of liminality and precarity for both the Armenian state and local citizens, Russian counter-actions challenge Euro-American development programs by co-opting post-colonial critiques of foreign influence and articulating them rhetorically in the claim of “saving families.”

### *Armenian Histories of Insecurity*

There are a number of historical events and cultural factors that highlight the significance of fear and insecurity for Armenian citizens and explain why nationalist rhetoric that plays to fears and threats toward the family serves as an effective geopolitical instrument. The first and perhaps most dominant narrative used by Armenians to explain the rise of their strident nationalism and pronatalism is the 1915 mass killings and deportations of Armenians in what is now eastern Turkey. These events took place between 1915 and 1918 and are often referred to as the Armenian Genocide, during which an estimated 1.5 million Armenians died (Panossian 2006; Hovannisian 2011). The Armenian Genocide is continually referenced in contemporary society as evidence to justify Armenian fears of annihilation. Often, threats of perverting family values tap into broader Armenian fears of obliteration, because the nation is imagined as a scaled-up reflection of the family (Platz 1996). Threats to a particularly narrow and patriarchal constitution

of the family are perceived as threats to the entire nation itself. In other words, threats of insecurity at one scale are experienced as a threat across multiple scales.

In addition to the 1915 Genocide, Armenia has been embroiled in a protracted conflict with Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh since 1988. This conflict has resulted in more than 20,000 deaths and the displacement of more than a million Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Nagorno-Karabakh is a breakaway territory within the borders of Azerbaijan but is currently occupied and defended by Armenian forces (for more details on this conflict see Croissant 1998; de Waal 2003; Özkan 2008). Though formally this has been a “frozen conflict” since a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan was declared in 1994, tensions have escalated as recently as April 2016, when there erupted a “Four Day War” between the two sides. These events heightened fears of territorial and political insecurity for many Armenian citizens, particularly the concern that their population is constantly under threat from foreign groups. The 1915 genocide and geopolitical conflicts between Armenia and its neighbors ultimately serve to reinforce the notion that “traditional” families, pronatalist policies, and the preservation of cultural practices are crucial for the continued existence of the Armenian population. Given the pervasiveness of perceived threats to Armenia—territorial, economic, or political—Russia has positioned itself as the defender and protector of the Armenian nation (Torosyan and Vardanyan 2015; Gachechiladze 2010).

### *Russian Entanglements*

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia has remained staunchly allied with Russia, even as its neighbors Georgia and Azerbaijan seek to make themselves more attractive to the European Union (Torosyan and Vardanyan 2015). However, Russian and Armenian

alignments are significantly inequitable with Russia as a dominant partner. In 2003, faced with increasing foreign debt to Russia and limited gross domestic product growth, Armenia made a number of equity-for-debt deals that placed virtually the entire Armenian energy sector under Russian control. For example, Russia wrote off \$100 million of Armenia's debt in return for obtaining control over five state-run Armenian enterprises including the nuclear power station and six hydro-electric plants (Danielyan 2005). As a result of the deal, Russians controlled 90 percent of Armenia's energy sector.<sup>8</sup> Then in 2012, Armenia broke off negotiations with the European Union that would have paved the way for closer economic partnerships. Instead, the Armenian government signed an agreement to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia is Armenia's largest trade partner, where it sends 15.2% of its exports and sources 29% of its imports.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the 2010 Russian census showed that more than 1 million Armenians live and work in Russia, and this figure does not account for those Armenians who are there illegally or seasonally. Other estimates including those categories put the figure of Armenians in Russia at more than 2 million. As Putin himself hyperbolically noted in a speech given while visiting Armenia in 2016, he is as much the president of Armenians as he is of Russians given that more Armenians reside in Russia than in Armenia itself. Economic migration to Russia accounts for nearly 89% of the remittances sent back to relatives in Armenia.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Russian economic policies in Armenia purport to protect and provide for Armenian citizens' interests, while actually allowing Russia to maintain a dominant position of power by keeping Armenia economically dependent.

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<sup>8</sup> This figure includes the fact that Armenia imports roughly 80% of its natural gas from Russia's state-owned Gazprom.

<sup>9</sup> CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/am.html>

<sup>10</sup> European University Institute, 2013 EU Neighborhood Migration Report

In addition to economic entanglements, Russia is heavily invested in Armenian national security issues and promotes its role as a protector of Armenia. Armenia and Russia have joint military agreement that allows Russian use of a military base in Gyumri, strategically positioned 25 miles from the militarized border with Turkey. This base is of particular symbolic importance to Armenians because of their fraught history with Turkey over the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the current economic blockade. Russia also promised the Armenian government a \$200 million credit for the purchase of weapons to help Armenia support the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh following the “Four Day War” in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to its political, economic, and military entanglements, Russia presents itself as a moral leader, protecting its allies from foreign cultural “invasions.” Leading by example, Russia has made its own legislative moves to decriminalize domestic violence, to promote anti-homosexuality campaigns (banning LGBT rights movements as propaganda), and to enshrine patriarchal gender roles and “family values” (Persson 2014). In early 2017, for example, Putin signed a law decriminalizing domestic violence that results in “minor harm” such as small lacerations and bruising. Such incidences are now considered misdemeanors and punishable by a fine (up to \$500) or 15 days in jail. This legislation was proposed by the same law makers who successfully passed a law banning “gay propaganda” in 2013 with a platform grounded in “family values” and patriarchal family practices.

The Russian government enacted a “maternity capital” policy to provide support to young mothers. Maternity capital refers to material support roughly equivalent to \$10,000 given to mothers to supplement education or housing when their second child turns 3-years old. This

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<sup>11</sup> (Ramani 2016). Even though Armenia looks to Russia for military aid, Russia actually sells weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan despite being one of the co-chairs, along with the United States and France, in mediation over the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

policy, however, was part of a pronatalist agenda fueled by conservative, nationalist views that see family planning and sex education as deliberate tactics by hostile Western forces attempting to weaken Russia by reducing its population. Rivkin-Fish (2010) argues that the maternity capital policy is largely a symbolic effort that actually consolidates a neo-traditional paradigm of gender and family. This paradigm emphasizes the importance of a strong nuclear family over “fragmented families” and, in line with neoliberal reforms, rejects the Soviet policy of dissolving the family’s moral autonomy through collectivization of social reproduction. Instead, it puts more emphasis on the family as the key site of production and reproduction. Russia’s pronatalist agenda posits the primary role of the family is procreation, thus repositioning the family as both a reproductive and productive economic center. In doing so, it attacks the supposed loss of femininity and women’s independence that came with Soviet gender policies. The pronatalist policy reveals the Russian state’s abhorrence of global forms of gender and sexual politics—feminism in particular—as threats to the nation’s demographic and moral well-being.

Russian entanglements with Armenian politics, economics, and national security purport to “protect” Armenian territory, its traditional families, and its autonomy from foreign influence or invasion. Yet with the implicit threat of cutting off energy resources, enacting economic sanctions, or limiting military support, Russia can essentially influence any major political decision by the Armenian state. Despite these examples of the Russian leverage over Armenian interests, the actual role of Russia in Armenia is muddied through a lack of transparency. The conservative groups responsible for Armenia’s “gender hysteria,” for example, are enabled and supported by Russian parent-organizations, though there is no clear chain of command that links their leadership to Moscow. Instead, Armenian conservative elites, as well as many state elites, act within a set of unarticulated, informal boundaries of political action shaped by a pervasive

sense of threat they helped to perpetuate. Armenian state and conservative actors believe their interests coincide with Russia's, and they anticipate and accommodate Moscow's strategic and ideological goals. Thus, through the use of symbols, implied threats, and economic leverage, Russia has been able to exert considerable influence and control over Armenian policy decisions, without reliance on more direct forms of governance.

*The (Intimate) Geopolitics of "Occupation without Occupation"*

Dunn and Bobick (2014) refer to Russia's methods of indirect control over smaller, post-Soviet nations as "occupation without occupation." Considering the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 and smaller, Russian-led separatist movements in the region, Dunn and Bobick (2014) argue that Putin's strategy of "occupation without occupation" is a distinctive form of military action that uses the cultural construction of fear and intimidation to prevent the expansion of the European Union into their sphere of influence. Putin's Russia enacts violence, invasion, and indirect governance through small-scale gestures rather than full-blown military action or formal governance. Russia's "occupation without occupation" in eastern Ukraine and other breakaway territories raises questions about new forms of sovereignty, political technologies of warfare and imperialism, and the ways political spectacle is used throughout the former Soviet Union to help establish Russia's resurgent empire. Dunn and Bobick (2014) examined these new forms of Russian warfare in separatist sites within the region—South Ossetia and Transnistria with a focus on the direct violent conflicts that led to their current *de facto* state status. However, in Armenia the battle over influence is also being fought in more intimate arenas—through the family—using political techniques that similarly institute fear and insecurity.

As described above, Russia attempts to ensure Armenia's state support of their interests in the region by using economic and military leverage. To sway popular opinion in support of Russian alignment, conservative groups rely on the geopoliticization of the concept of "gender," ideologies about family and family values, and attacks on development projects aiming to support gender equality and domestic violence prevention. They claim such programs are threats to the Armenian nation and patriarchal values camouflaged as "development." Unlike the public, political, and global attention that the Ukrainian conflict garnered, the manipulation of "gender" in Armenia is a different kind of geopolitical tool, perhaps a more insidious one. The manipulation of "gender" and "domestic violence" by Russian-allied conservative groups draws on a sense of insecurity arising from the threat of war with Azerbaijan and economic insecurity to further perpetuate fears of foreign invasion across multiple scales including the everyday and mundane daily life of family. Russia's entanglements with Armenia, its "occupation without occupation," opens new domains where values, fear, and norms are reconstituted into daily experiences of threat, making Russia the only entity capable of providing protection and restoring order. Such geopolitical influences haunt the intimate scale of the family, creating insecurities for those who do follow normative values.

Russian-supported interventions purport to protect Armenia and Armenian "families" by fulfilling the role of masculinist protector at a national level (Young 2003). Russia claims to provide economic security through trade relations, national security through military agreements, and moral security through protections of "traditional" family values. Yet their political, economic and military aid can easily be withdrawn leaving Armenia in a more precarious position than ever. Insecurity is exploited, or created, to serve as the pretext for Putin's new expression of Russian imperialism and its indirect governance through threat and intimidation,

“occupation without occupation.” While claiming to ensure Armenia’s security and moral integrity, Russian counter-interventions against development programs puts women’s bodies at greater risk as masculine individuals are empowered by anti-Western, anti-gender discourses to discipline those individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

## **Conclusions**

The phenomena of “gender hysteria” in Armenia emerged from the disjuncture between Euro-American development logic that purports to “save women” and Russian-supported conservative groups who desire to “save families” from unwanted foreign interventions. However, while claims to “save” women or families similarly co-opt women or women’s issues to further justify their own interests, each group’s logic operates at different scales and serves to create different forms of insecurity. On one hand, Euro-American interventions posit that women’s bodies are made insecure due to Armenian “culture” that normalizes violence against them. Women are therefore understood to be in need of protection that can only be secured through interventions ensuring equal rights, public awareness, and democratic solutions. On the other hand, nationalist groups in Armenia with Russian sympathies suggest that the Armenian family is under threat from foreign influences which, according to their scalar logic, puts the whole nation itself at risk of cultural annihilation. Additionally, their use of anti-LGBT rhetoric reinforces patriarchal norms and specific gender roles grounded in biologically defined divisions of labor.

Disaggregating “the geopolitical” of Pain and Smith’s (2008) double-helix model to examine the events, encounters, dialogues, action, and counter-action of two competing players



in Armenia reveals the problematic assumptions of Western international development projects. Perhaps more importantly, this analysis shows how false assumptions and misunderstandings can jeopardize not only the effectiveness of domestic violence programs but also women's daily lives. Public opposition by nationalist groups to the "gender rights" law, the domestic violence prevention law, and to Euro-American gender development programs more generally has led to a re-entrenchment of patriarchal gender norms and the lack of effective mechanisms for ensuring greater security for women across multiple spheres. For example, women's groups working to address domestic violence continue to struggle against conflicting perceptions of the problem: though incidents of domestic violence are often unreported, a recent survey has shown that 8.9% of women who have been married were subjected to physical violence; 25% of women experienced psychological violence; and nearly 62% reported controlling behavior of some kind.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the issue of physical security, women continue to face economic marginalization and a geopoliticization of their bodies. A survey conducted in 2014, for instance, found that while 60% of men had earned an income in the previous month, only 32% of women had, suggesting that women have fewer employment opportunities or greater difficulty balancing employment and family responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Beyond gendered statistics of employment and rates of violence, women are often marked and evaluated as either "European" or "traditional" according to what clothes they wear, how they fix their hair, their lifestyle, or their career choices, which puts women under constant surveillance and judgment regarding their alignment with one set of values over the other. In these ways, geopoliticizing gender in

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<sup>12</sup> World Bank Economic Report, Armenia, A Cloudy Outlook  
<https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/armenia/Armenia%20ER.pdf>

Armenia has led to confusion and frustration over what expected gender roles are or should be as women find themselves caught between modernizing, neoliberal logics and “traditional” familial expectations. The pervasive confusion and frustration felt by many young women regarding what gender roles are or should be is further explored in Chapter 5.

By attending to the scalar links between gendered discourses (women’s bodies, the home, and family) and geopolitical forms of governance, this analysis responds to Cynthia Enloe’s insistent question about international politics: “It is always worth asking, ‘where are the women?’ Answering this question reveals the dependence of most political and economic systems not just on women, but on certain kinds of relations between women and men” (1989, 133). Specifically, this chapter has demonstrated the ways that women’s bodies and (perceived) threats against them have been used to justify various development and political interventions, while simultaneously obscuring the ways that women’s daily insecurities are produced or perpetuated by those same interventions. Concerns regarding women maybe ever-present in the (geo)political discourses and logics analyzed here--whether through gender mainstreaming in international development models or claims to protect family values in conservative discourses. However, the complex, multi-positioned lives of women themselves are rarely considered despite their pivotal role in the production and reproduction of (geo)political relations and economic processes. The remainder of this dissertation then serves to further counter this trend by putting the multiple and complex insecurities faced by Armenian women at the center of analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### **BORROWING FOR NOW OR THE FUTURE: FINANCING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA THROUGH CREDIT, DEBT, AND DISPOSSESSION**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I addressed how the geopoliticization of “gender” in Armenia by international development programs and Armenian nationalist groups has made political advocacy for women’s rights a controversial issue. Despite the geopolitical obstacles faced by international development programs to get gender rights and domestic violence protections enshrined within the legal system, development projects to empower citizens as economic actors have proceeded with significantly less public debate. This chapter continues to explore the consequences of the increasing neoliberalization in Armenia and international development projects for women’s everyday lives. In this chapter, however, I examine these issues through the lens of financialization—the growing power and influence of financial intermediaries and neoliberal market logic within the economy, society, and state (French, Leyshon, and Wainwright 2011; Pike and Pollard 2010; Christopherson, Martin, and Pollard 2013). Financialization is a theoretical framework useful for understanding the integral position of money and finance in everyday life and a point of entry for addressing the uneven impacts of contemporary capitalism on individuals and households (Coppock 2013, 479). This chapter will examine financialization and the increasingly common occurrence of indebtedness for rural

Armenian families through the lens of feminist readings of dispossession, (micro)finance, and social reproduction. I examine the impacts of high-interest loans and microcredit for practices of social reproduction and how the phenomena of increasing debt produce new forms of insecurity in gendered and generational ways.

Financialization has recently garnered significant attention among geographers attempting to evaluate its impacts among communities at the scale of the everyday (Pike and Pollard 2010, Pollard 2013; Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty 2009; Roberts 2008; Mullings 2009; Strauss 2012). Whereas geographers have been critical of the unevenness of financialization, proponents of financial access including international development organizations such as the United Nations (UN) argue that increased access to capital empowers rural women as economic actors and provides the opportunity for them to be independent from patriarchal family structures (UN 2006). Advocates further argue that empowering women economically will not only increase their opportunities within society but will make societies more equitable overall (Rankin 2002). Microcredit in particular—loans designated as capital for the start-up of small enterprises—has become a widely recognized strategy within international development for alleviating poverty and promoting women’s empowerment. Feminist political economy analyses, however, emphasize the ways that financialization of previously non-capitalist processes contributes to the macro-processes of capital accumulation. The financialization and privatization of social reproduction, for example, perpetuates processes of dispossession adding to the burdens of responsibility on women and increasing their vulnerability (Hartsock 2006; Keating et al 2010; Roberts 2008; Pollard 2013). Armenia is an excellent case in point: increased debt among rural households through high-interest loans and microcredit programs

deepens the penetration of market relations into new spaces such as the home and depends on the exploitation of gendered and aged labor.

In this chapter, I draw from feminist political economy critiques to explore the impacts of financialization for social reproduction in Armenia. I argue that the debt phenomenon produces new forms of *gendered and generational insecurity*. Examining the intersection of these two critical factors is significant to understanding dispossession by financialization, because the debt phenomenon in Armenia plays out, not necessarily as a dramatic event or urgent financial crisis, but as part of the mundane, ongoing processes of dispossession affecting older and younger generations differently.

Indeed, the ordinariness of increasing debt in Armenia suggests a new temporality for understanding the financialization of social reproduction. The sometimes-subtle depletion of resources for social reproduction (see Rai et al 2014) caused by financialization is particularly acute in post-Soviet societies where the skills, practices, and strategies of social reproduction are markedly different between those who came of age during the Soviet period and those who grew up after the collapse of state socialism. In Armenia in particular, social reproductive labor is marked by both gender and generational roles. The care-taking practices of social reproduction are predominantly the responsibility of women, and, increasingly, older women as younger women become enrolled in waged labor. The financialization of social reproduction among one generation, however, reverberates through another generation and affects those both older and younger. Therefore, in this context it is necessary to view gender and generation as inextricably intertwined, and to see that the processes that affect these roles play out spatially across generations and multi-sited households.

Recognizing that it is the slow-moving consequences and depletion of resources that produces increased burdens and economic insecurity, this analysis considers three key processes: 1) how practices of social reproduction have been transformed by neoliberalization following the collapse of the Soviet Union, 2) how the increase in credit and debt transformed the economic landscape for rural households, and 3) how financialization has transformed the subjects, spaces, and temporalities of social reproduction.

This study will contribute to existing literature on financialization, social reproduction, and development by considering the intersection of these issues from a post-socialist context. I respond to calls for more research on how financialization has had an impact on the household scale (Pollard 2013). Additionally, I use empirical analyses to illustrate the gendered social reproductive consequences of dispossession on practices of social reproduction (Hartsock 2006; Fernandez 2017). Despite the fact that the post-socialist world is at the forefront of the expansion of financial products and services and the subsequent remaking of economic practices, there has been limited study of finance and financial (in)security at the scale of the everyday in this part of the world (for exceptions see Guseva 2008; Stenning et al 2010). Examining the introduction of financial services in Armenia not only helps to address this gap, it also provides an empirical case study to analyze the interrelated links among financialization, diverse economic practices, dispossession, and development in a part of the world where these issues are not often considered together.

This chapter draws on formal interviews conducted with 44 households in 6 different villages in southern Armenia as part of empirical research into the transformations of women's domestic labor practices. Households were selected using chain sampling and criterion methods to include participants from various income levels, family structures, and work histories

(Creswell 2013; Russell 2002). Formal interviews were conducted with women between the ages of 18-78 and were designed to investigate the diversity of economic practices within their households. These interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to several hours. During my initial line of inquiry, women consistently noted the new and impactful presence of credit and debt in their lives and decision-making regarding social reproduction, and their discussions drove further investigations into the issue of financialization. A majority of the interviews were conducted with the help of Seda Adnanyan, and they were translated and transcribed with the assistance of Sona Avagyan. This chapter also draws on participant observation conducted in more than 12 households within 3 villages. Participant observation included spending several hours, sometimes days, with a particular household as they performed their daily work including gardening, animal care, provisioning, social events, shopping, and other daily tasks. I also rely on information gathered from informal interviews and encounters with local merchants, brokers, and bankers to describe the economic landscape of rural, southern Armenia.

### **Financialization of Social Reproduction and Dispossession**

In the current literature, finance geographers have predominantly focused on the sites, policies, and impacts of the 2008 global finance crises (Hall 2010; 2011; Pike and Pollard 2010). Consequently, studies examining the impacts of financialization on everyday life have been particularly attentive to the housing crisis in American and European contexts (Roberts 2008). Pollard et al (2009), however, argued for a theoretical and empirical shift in dialogue to include postcolonial sites and theoretical viewpoints. From the point of view of the postcolonial Global South, development and (micro)finance have been key issues often examined through the lens of

dispossession (Casolo and Doshi 2013; Rankin 2002; 2003; Hart 2006). Studies of post-socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have focused on the diversity of economic practices and the articulation of previous (socialist) economic landscapes with new (capitalist) ones (Stenning et al 2010; Creed 2002; Caldwell 2004; Dunn 2009; Mandel and Humphrey 2002). In this section, I situate the Armenian case study within the intersection of these diverse approaches to finance and social reproduction to argue that although financial products in Armenia have been “domesticated” by local actors (Creed 1998; Stenning et al 2010), financialization also serves to perpetuate dispossession (Harvey 2003) with specifically gendered and generational consequences.

Accumulation by dispossession expands Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation and refers to the processes by which new subjects are brought into the structure of capitalism in exploitative and violent ways (Harvey 2003, 144). According to Marx, primitive accumulation was the mass dispossession of resources from existing social structures that was needed to create the original surplus to make the first round of capitalist accumulation possible (Marx 1978). Harvey (2003), drawing on Luxemburg (1951), asserts that primitive accumulation did not end with the first round of capital accumulation but is a key way that capitalism reproduces itself. He further identifies the contemporary era as a particularly acute moment of accumulation marked by new forms of dispossession, including land grabs and the privatization of common resources (see Glassman 2016; Li 2009; Hart 2006). Of these, one predominant form is “dispossession by financialization” which includes credit fraud and debt-based financing to the Global South. Finance-led capitalism is dispossessive to the extent that it extracts wealth through predation and turns poor households into new markets for financial instruments (Rankin 2013). Debt-based financing in the Global South can be a particularly devastating form of dispossession as it



appropriates and transforms the cultural practices of the poor, such as social networks, into recognizable forms of social capital through relations of debt. Elychar (2005) refers to this expansion of financialization in the Global South as “yet another side of more familiar forms of dispossession encouraged by neoliberal economic policies such as enforced privatization and structural adjustment programs” (2005, 29).

Globally, financial institutions and international development programs have looked to expand access to credit as a means of alleviating poverty and providing better access to financial products and services. This expansion has come about despite many critiques raised by development studies and economic geography (Casolo and Doshi 2013; Rankin 2013; Roy 2010; Pollard 2013; Stenning et al 2010; Elychar 2005; Keating et al 2010). Viewing access to financial products such as microcredit as dispossessive may be surprising, because microcredit programs *appear* to work against the extractive logics of capitalism. They are designed to disperse capital into a greater number of hands, to facilitate ownership of the means of production for the poor, and to ease the burden of social reproduction (Rankin 2002; Roy 2010). A closer examination of the terms and conditions of these programs, however, reveals them to be quite extractive (Rankin 2013). Microcredit and other “subprime” loans are characterized by high interest rates, short terms, and strict repayment schedules (Keating et al 2010; see Mayoux 1997; 1999). In Armenia, interest rates for personal and agricultural loans to rural citizens range from 10-24 percent or higher (see also Weber 2002, 540). Microcredit programs also widen and deepen the reach of the financial service industry by facilitating an intensification of surveillance and regulation (Keating et al 2010, 162; see also Roy 2010). Many lenders also require material collateral, including marketable assets that borrowers are forced to sell if they are unable to make payments.

Feminist geographers, similarly interested in accumulation by dispossession, have noted that Harvey's account does not pay sufficient attention to the role of gender (Hartsock 2006; Fernandez 2017; Keating et al 2010). According to Hartsock (2006), "Primitive accumulation is very clearly and perhaps at its very core a gendered set of processes, a moment which cannot be understood without central attention to the differential situations of women and men" (2006, 183). By identifying capital accumulation as profoundly marked by gender, Hartsock (2006) calls attention to the tools and strategies of dispossession that serve to concentrate capital among ever smaller circles and to render workers more vulnerable to exploitation. The gendering of capital accumulation and its uneven consequences for women are certainly not new as feminist political economy has long critiqued the gender blindness of economic theory (Pollard 2013; Elson 1992; 1993; Gibson-Graham 1996; Hartsock 2006). Elson and Catagay (2000, 1355), for example, point out the biases of macro-economic adjustment policies that have harmful implications for women such as the assumed concept of "elastic endurance," in which the poor can endure the event of economic crisis due to women's ability to absorb the shocks through more work and "making do" on limited resources. Following Hartsock's (2006) imperative to attend to the gendered consequences of dispossession, in what follows I examine how financialization broadly—and microcredit in particular—has a disproportionate effect on women in Armenia.

Studies of economic transformation in post-socialist societies (my own included; see Fertaly 2012) have sometimes highlighted women's ability to serve as "shock absorbers" (Elson 1993; 241). They have documented how women's use of multiple economic practices including social networks, provisioning skills, and other practices of "making do" articulate with, but also challenge, patriarchal structures and the neoliberalization of the economy (Caldwell 2004; True

2000; Smith and Rochovska 2007; Round et al 2010). However, as theoretically and analytically compelling as these analyses might be, they can have the unintended effect of obfuscating how the increasing privatization and financialization of social reproduction is further depleting women's resources, producing even greater burdens of labor, and reducing pressure on the state to provide better support, infrastructure, and social safety nets (see also Fraser 2009). Though it is important to consider the diversity of economic practices used by women for social reproduction—practices that include the use of financial products and services—analyses must also consider how financialization is perpetuating dispossession and leading to increased burdens of debt and insecurity.

Social reproduction, or the “broad range of practices and social relations that maintain and reproduce particular relations of production along with the material social grounds in which they take place” (Katz 2004, x), is a particularly useful lens for viewing the gendered consequences of dispossession. Social reproduction includes practices such as shopping, caring, gardening, or cooking through which social and biological lives are reproduced both in the long term and in the everyday. It encapsulates the “indeterminate” practices of everyday life as well those more structured practices that develop or evolve in relation to systems of production (Katz 2001b, 711; see also Marston 2003). Following Marxist-feminists in the 1970s, studies of social reproduction identified the ways that capitalism extracted surplus value from women's unpaid labor in the household. They also emphasized how patriarchy was articulated alongside capitalist relations through gendered divisions of labor in the household (Edholm et al 1978; Young et al 1981; Mies 1986). The concept has recently re-emerged as a key focus in feminist literature because of the neoliberal state's diminishing role in ensuring support for its citizens

and the increased privatization of social reproduction (Lawson 2007; Bakker and Gill 2003; Bakker 2007; Roberts 2008, Federici 2004).

One of the chief empowerment claims for increasing access to financial goods and services, including microcredit, is the promise of transforming the relations of social reproduction. Access to (micro)credit is intended to ensure that women have more voice, respect, and autonomy in the family, thereby enabling them to challenge traditional power relations within the family. As Keating et al. (2010, 166) point out, however, microcredit lending programs, in many cases, reinforce traditional gender structures driven by their own gendered conceptions of women as virtuous entrepreneurs and their use of social coercion to encourage repayment (see also Rankin 2001, 20; Mallick 2002, 152-154). Thus, such processes of financialization are not merely dispossessive, they often map onto patriarchal practices that reproduce or even heighten *gendered* insecurity.

Social reproduction is also useful for understanding the consequences of “dispossession by financialization” because it draws attention to the long-term costs and sacrifices of undervalued labor. Rai et al. (2014), drawing on Elson (2000), developed the concept of *depletion* to better articulate the gendered consequences of dispossession for social reproduction. They define depletion as “the level at which resource outflows exceed resource inflows in carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold of sustainability, making it harmful for those engaged in this unvalued work” (2014, 88-89). Their examples of resource outflows include unpaid domestic work, subsistence, caring, and other community labor; and examples of resource inflows include welfare provisioning and community support networks.

In Armenia, where state support for practices of social reproduction have been dramatically reduced, practices of social reproduction, primarily provided by women’s labor,

have been used to fill the gap left following the collapse of state socialism (Stenning et al 2010b). The increasing financialization of social reproduction is being used as a short-term solution for addressing the widening gap between needed and available resources. The concept of depletion can also be usefully extended to consider the depletion of resources across space and time, and particularly the generational consequences of financialization.

Both social reproduction and depletion are processes that are ongoing, occupying multiple temporalities and spatialities. While it is common to think of financial crisis or loss driven by dispossession as discrete events—such as the loss of land or the privatization of a common resource (Paudel 2016; Harvey 2003), depletion and social reproduction are better attuned to how the processes of dispossession play out over time and across space. Generational roles, responsibilities, and strategies for investing in the future can be dramatically reshaped by financialization, in ways that might remain unknowable for years to come. In Armenia, multi-generational family responsibilities are being renegotiated by increased access to financial goods and services in ways that can accumulate the burdens of labor at one end and increase debt at the other. Through an examination of debt, depletion, and the transformation of practices of social reproduction, I make the case that attending to intergenerational relationships of labor and debt can lead to a richer understanding of dispossession by financialization. While young generations in Armenia comprise an investment in the future, these investments are fraught with the risks of debt and increased economic insecurity. In the following sections, I outline the key economic transformations in Armenia following the collapse of state socialism while identifying the shifts in practices of social reproduction that have heightened gendered and generational forms of insecurity.

## **Historical Background: Key Transformation in Armenia from the late Soviet Period to the Present**

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia was one of the most urbanized, industrialized, and interconnected republics. In the 1980s, 55 percent of the Armenian gross domestic product came from its industrial sector, including engineering, light, and chemical industries. Because Soviet Armenia was one of the most integrated republics within the Soviet Union, the economy was highly dependent on imports of energy, agricultural products, chemical inputs, and other intermediate goods that were to be processed and then exported (World Bank Country Report- Armenia 1993). Armenians were also one of the most educated populations within the USSR, and despite the dramatic urbanization of the country that began in the 1970s, even Armenians in rural areas could boast access to education and improved domestic living conditions (Platz 2000). Despite the relative prosperity of the Armenian population at this time, women were still expected to engage in both the waged and unwaged labor of social reproduction (Platz 1996).

Under the Soviet system, social reproduction practices were generally supplemented by high levels of state support (Soulsby and Clark 1995), although they were simultaneously impacted by an economy of shortage (Kornai 1992). Households were highly subsidized by the ‘social wage’ provided by state socialism. This social wage included non-monetary access to cultural facilities, holidays and vacations, and health care (Soulsby and Clark 1995). However, the prevailing economy of shortage during the late Soviet period was characterized by supply networks in which access to scarce goods and services was ensured through social networks rather than economic/cash access. An array of economic practices evolved to ensure everyday

social reproduction, which often involved a thoroughly socialized economy of household networks and forms of reciprocity (Sik 1995; Ledeneva 1998; Smith 2002).

Social networks and other improvisational practices of “making do” were key components of the reciprocal economies that defined the late socialist period. In particular, there was a preponderance of bartering and exchange practices were predominant in both personal and industrial economies. In Russia, these networks were referred to as *blat*, “a distinctive form of non-monetary exchange, a kind of barter based on personal relationships” (Ledeneva 1998, 39; see also Wedel 1986, 1992; Smith and Stenning 2006; Fertaly 2012). Previous scholarship has also examined the practices of “making do” including the re-using, re-making, or other negotiations of products, representations, and activities of the established status-quo (Caldwell 2004; Clarke 2002; Smith 2000; Fertaly 2012). In Armenia, for example, the responsibility of provisioning both basic foodstuffs (via long queues) and specialty items (via social networks) was often left to women who were already juggling formal and domestic care work. This work was also generational—retired women took on greater responsibilities for care work, family garden plots, and other domestic labor. Drawing on this literature, it can be said that practices of social reproduction during the Soviet period were characterized by a diversity of economic strategies often performed by women and primarily involving connections to both the state and social networks through which household, communities, and individuals engaged to “make do” under an economy of shortage (Stenning et al 2010b, 64).

The relative comfort of Armenian daily life under the Soviet system was radically altered beginning with a devastating earthquake in 1988 that levelled a large city and many surrounding villages and left an estimated 25,000 people dead and several thousands homeless. It was also in that same year that a mass movement for self-determination was sparked by a conflict between

Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabagh (NK), a semi-autonomous region populated predominantly by Armenians but located within the borders of Azerbaijan. The Armenian movement was unprecedented in Soviet history, as hundreds of thousands of citizens demonstrated their support in Yerevan for Armenians in NK, as well as for the fulfillment of their constitutional rights, and eventually for independence from the Soviet Union. Despite the humanitarian crisis caused by the earthquake, the two years lasting from 1988-1990 are often remembered by those who participated in the movement for the collective sense of enthusiasm, optimism, and euphoria for pan-Armenian solidarity (Abrahamian 1993, 103-9; Dudwick 1994, 168; Platz 2000).

Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. That year, however, marked the intensification of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over NK. The escalation of the fighting led to the institution of an economic embargo by Azerbaijan and Turkey (Azerbaijan's ally in the conflict), meaning that the only existing trade routes were through Georgia. In combination with the closing of the dilapidated nuclear power plant after the earthquake, the trade embargo meant that the flow of energy into the country quickly decreased and then stopped altogether. From 1991 until 1994, Armenians experienced what they called the "Dark Years," which were characterized by lack of water, electricity, heat, and other basic amenities, as well as an almost complete collapse of the economic sector (in 1994 only 30% of the country's industry was functioning and there was a five- to six-fold decrease in Armenia's gross national product between 1988 and 1993) (Tapan 1994, based on IMF estimates; cited in Platz 2000). Everything from telephone lines to public transportation, including mail delivery, garbage collection, and pest extermination were either reduced or completely unavailable due to both the transition to a free market economy and the economic blockade (Platz 1996:201-202).



The shocking transformation of Armenian society during the “Dark Years” marked the onset of neoliberal policies that emphasized marketization and led to various forms of dispossession, including the privatization of land and housing which dissolved once collectively held industrial and agricultural assets such as factories and large farms, and dramatically reduced state services and welfare support. Unfortunately, the energy crisis that was created by the economic embargo and collapse of regional trade simply meant that few businesses could operate successfully; even the Armenian government was unable to generate significant revenue through industry or export to support basic functions. Consequently, many state employees in factories and other institutions were indefinitely laid off. In the period between 1988 and 1993, Armenia’s GDP declined five- to six-fold.<sup>13</sup> By 1994 only 30% of the country’s industries were still functioning. Unemployment skyrocketed so that by April 1994, local estimates calculated that more than 94 percent of the population lived at or below the international poverty line.<sup>14</sup>

To make matters worse, economic reform policies that were instituted across the former Soviet Union led to massive inflation. Prior to the introduction of the Armenian national currency, the dram, in 1994, prices for basic items could rise as much as 100 percent in a single day. After the exchange rate stabilized in 1994, nearly 80% of the population could not afford the minimum amount of food needed for basic subsistence. These conditions led to a migration of people away from Armenia, particularly from its urban areas.<sup>15</sup> Many individuals, especially retirees, left the cities to go back to their families’ villages where they could better subsist off of

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<sup>13</sup> According to IMF estimates, the Armenian GNP dropped from \$16.5 billion to \$2.7 billion during the same five-years (Noyan Tapa, July 18, 1994 [Armenian Statistical Service, July 19, 1994], cited in Platz 2000.

<sup>14</sup> BBC World Broadcasts, January 11, 1994 (Armenian Statistical Service)

<sup>15</sup> The movement back to rural areas was temporary for many who were better able to economically recover from the by finding jobs in Yerevan or abroad. Yerevan is one of the fastest growing and most densely populated cities in the country.

food grown in family garden plots. The transition to independence, therefore, was devastating for citizens who, until just a few years before, had one of the highest standards of living across the USSR.

### **Transformation of Production and Social Reproduction after 1991**

These dramatic events led to a transformation of the practices of production and social reproduction at multiple scales. Relatively secure and singular employment in state-owned enterprises gave way to greater labor market differentiation and uncertainty. High unemployment rates and insecure labor markets then led to the emergence of a class of “working poor,” or those who work in low-paid, less secure positions (Peck and Theodore 2001; see also Smith et al 2008). Consequently, these workers must negotiate between formal and informal employment, domestic and other unpaid labor, and forms of self-employment (Smith et al 2008). In the villages and small towns of southern Armenia, there are limited opportunities for formal employment beyond positions as school teachers, drivers, or shop keepers. Given such limited formal employment options, many households have learned to sustain themselves through a combination of economic practices including agricultural production, barter and exchange, remittances, and, among older generations, small pensions. Despite the diversity of economic practices required for households to “make do,” agricultural production, including the cultivation of various crops on privatized land and animal husbandry, were reported to be a significant source of either food or income in 42 out of 44 households included in this study.

As the country continued to face high unemployment due to deindustrialization, many households described an increased importance in household agricultural production for basic

subsistence. One woman described this shift saying, “During the Soviet time, we didn’t work much. We didn’t do much agriculture. We used to buy everything we needed. Before you used to work and get a salary, now you have more animals and a garden.” Under state socialism, gardens and canning were a means to preserve resources that were difficult to obtain due to chaotic production but affordable where available. During the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, gardens became a necessity as stores often lacked supplies or costs were too high due to inflation. In the literature on post-socialism, both self-provisioning and domestic food production have been regarded as “survival strategies,” or an “economy of jars” (Smollet 1989; Smith 2000; 2002; Clarke 2002; Caldwell 2004; Cellarius 2004).

Though some scholars have noted that these practices do not derive from necessity but are part of deeply embedded social networks and interpersonal exchanges (see Caldwell 2004, 116-117), most rural Armenian women interviewed noted that agricultural production and self-provisioning make up a majority of their household income. Gardening and canning are now considered essential skills for women because without them they would have to use their limited cash to pay for increasingly expensive foods (see also Dunn 2008). Even older women who are relatively financially secure feel compelled to spend an enormous amount of time and energy on these activities. These women often view those who do not take the time to garden or make preserves as lazy and weak, lacking in traditional (and patriarchal) notions of women’s integrity or strength (Fertaly 2012).

Today, Armenia’s formal economy has experienced some recovery, though the processes of neoliberalization have led to pronounced social stratification. A cease-fire in the Nagorno-Karakakh conflict was established in 1994 and gradually a commercial elite began to form,

flashy shops opened in Yerevan, and the availability of goods almost instantaneously began to stratify society according to those who could afford to purchase luxury items and those who were increasingly impoverished (Platz 2000). In the early 2000s, nearly half of the population continued to live below the international poverty line. In addition, incidences of poverty in Armenia are marked along rural/urban lines. Employment opportunities are the greatest in Yerevan, and there has been a recent increase in employment rates in labor intensive industries such as construction and the retail trade. This has resulted in another round of migration as individuals, often young men and women, leave their villages to pursue jobs or educational opportunities in larger cities such as Yerevan. Consequently, the population of smaller towns and villages is declining due to out-migration at the same time as it is aging—in some cases leaving towns of almost entirely retirees. In 2014, poverty continued to decline with only 30% of the population, mostly in rural areas, living below the international poverty line. Economic reports, however, indicate that there are still extremely limited job opportunities with unemployment rates at nearly 18%, and as high as 35% among youth between the age of 15-24.<sup>16</sup>

In order to “make do” under the conditions of high unemployment, most Armenian families continue to engage in a number of economic practices that span generations, such as bartering and exchanging with both kin and mobile merchants. Exchange is one of the primary means through which households with increased agricultural production secure goods necessary for everyday needs. Of the more than 40 households who were interviewed, 27 reported that they commonly exchange their agricultural products—cheese, meat, garlic, potatoes, cabbage, beans, honey, and wheat—for basic household items, including washing powder, coffee, sugar, fresh

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<sup>16</sup> (World Bank Report 2014, Armenia-A Cloudy Outlook).

fruit, and even clothing. In particular, exchanging agricultural products for household items is important for those households in very remote areas with difficult or inaccessible roads. Generally, this type of exchange takes place in the summer months when merchants from larger regional cities arrive in large cars or vans with their own products to exchange. Households negotiate the value of several kilos of beans, for example, to exchange for other various goods the merchants have on hand. Here, direct exchange is necessary, if economically disadvantageous, because most households do not have other means of getting their products to larger markets, nor do they have enough access to cash resources to pay outright for all the necessary goods.

One interviewee, Rosa, said that her family prefers to buy goods with money instead of bartering because the merchants often set a low value to families' goods, and it is the merchant who ultimately decides the price of both their and Rosa's products. Yet despite their preference for paying in cash, her family's limited cash resources and inability to bring their own products to market sometimes necessitates these types of exchange. Limited access to both a regional market and to monetized resources makes it difficult for her to ensure a more equal exchange rate for her products overall. For proponents of market-based development solutions and microfinance, limited market access and cash resources are viewed as causes of unequal exchange and, therefore, the primary argument for providing these household with access to financial products and services (UN 2006; see also Rankin 2003; Young 2010).

What precious cash resources families do have usually come from pensions and remittances. According to interview data, households with a family member older than 65 who previously worked in waged labor positions during the Soviet period receive a small pension that ranges from the equivalent of 25 to 75USD per month depending on their former position and

employment sector (see also European Commission Report 2011), which is considerably lower than the average monthly salary of approximately \$390 (as reported by the National Statistical Service of Armenia in 2016). Because pensions account for such a small contribution to a household's cash resources, remittances are far more significant. In Armenia overall, IMF reports indicate that in 2008 remittances constituted 16% of the overall GDP, making Armenia among the 15 largest remittance recipients in the world (IMF 2012). Approximately 89% of remittances to Armenia come from Russia (IMF 2012). For the rural households of southern Armenia, most remittances come from sons who have emigrated to Russia for seasonal work in the construction industry. Though the amount and timing of remittances varies tremendously from household to household, the cash provided by these sources is often used for health care, educational needs, weddings, and, occasionally, large purchases for the home such as refrigerators, televisions, or other home renovations (see also Smith and Stenning 2006).

As these data sets from the UN, IMF, National Statistical Service, and my own interviews suggest, the greatest economic shift in the 1990s was the collapse of Soviet industries which resulted in deindustrialization and high rates of unemployment. Consequently, practices of social reproduction in rural areas shifted from participation in waged labor to a reliance on informal economies and agricultural production at a relatively small scale. Other economic practices such as barter and exchange and the use of social networks involving kin and neighbors persisted and, in fact, became more significant as households were increasingly separated between rural and urban areas.

## **Gendered and Generational Practices of Social Reproduction in Rural Armenia**

The diverse range of economic practices that constitute a family's means of social reproduction are marked by both gender and generation. The majority of rural Armenian families remain multi-generational and patrilocal despite the increasing practice of out-migration to more urban areas. Older women, generally age 50 and older, are typically responsible for gardening vegetables, milking cows, making cheese, and other physically demanding "outside" labor. Younger women, particularly new brides, are responsible for the less physically demanding, "inside" labor such as child-care, keeping the house tidy, and sharing the work of cooking meals. The able-bodied men who are present at home (those who have not migrated to Russia or Yerevan for seasonal work) are responsible for the larger agricultural fields producing hay, wheat, beans, and potatoes, depending on the local growing conditions. They are also responsible for the herding and culling of the animals. Due to increased migration, many households continue to rely on younger relatives who have moved to regional cities or to Yerevan for better employment opportunities. Therefore, the diverse practices of exchange and social reproduction extend across generations and well beyond the immediate site of the village home (see also Smith and Stenning 2006). The multi-generational and multi-sited nature of families makes their use of various economic practices complex. Goods, resources, and financial assets are constantly exchanged up and down generations and across various sites.

Consider, for example, Anoush's multi-generational family, which includes her grandparents, who live in a relatively remote village, her and her parents who reside in a small regional city, and her sister who married and lives in Yerevan with her husband's family. Anoush's grandparents, now in their mid 70s, moved to the village after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to better provide for their family, despite owning a home in the city. There,

they live in relatively difficult conditions without gas heating, running water, or indoor toilets. They perform the hard, physical labor required for growing potatoes and beans, keeping bees for honey, and tending to chickens, sheep, and cows for both meat and milk. Anoush's grandmother processes the milk into cheese, yogurt, or other dairy products, and her grandfather is responsible for selling or slaughtering their livestock. Meanwhile, Anoush's father was able to keep his job as a city official after the collapse of the Soviet system, providing much-needed cash income for his family. In the regional city where they live, their apartment contains luxuries such as a washing machine and an internet connection. Anoush's father also has a vehicle making it possible for him to bring flour, sugar, candies, coffee, and other household products that are unavailable in the village to her grandparents. He then returns to the small city where he lives with Anoush, carrying with him the cheese, eggs, and honey provided by her grandparents, either selling them at local markets or delivering them to other relatives in the area. When Anoush's grandparents slaughter their animal stock in the fall, they give the money to Anoush's father to pay for her education expenses at the local college. Money from the sale of the grandparents' agricultural labor was also used to pay for Anoush's sister's wedding and part of the down payment on an apartment in the city for her and her husband. Anoush's grandparents provide similar support to their other grown children and grandchildren.<sup>17</sup>

The organization and exchange of goods and labor in this family are typical of the region and fit into long-established patterns of support and exchange marked by familial roles in which the division of labor is both gendered and generational. This example indicates that resources originating from the agricultural labor of older generations or individuals living in rural villages

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<sup>17</sup> Though this example focuses on the flows of exchange up and down the generations, in actuality, the diversity of economic practice within an extended family can be far more complex when aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, other grandchildren, neighbors and friends are also involved.



often flow down to later generations or to more urban areas which are then used for larger expenses such as housing, education, and weddings. Younger generations support older generations by providing money for small everyday items or by organizing resources to help older generations make small improvements to their homes, including the installation of toilets and investments in equipment or new technologies for agricultural production. Older generations may have the most decision-making power within the household, yet they also see it as their responsibility to make the necessary sacrifices and commitments in terms of their own labor and comfort to support and take care of younger generations. Parents and grandparents will work long hours at demanding tasks to allow their children or grandchildren to pursue educational goals. This is because many see their children and grandchildren as key investments in the future, investments that often require cash. In turn, these children are expected to follow the instructions and expectations of the older generations and to provide for and care for them in the future.

While practices of exchange among the family or between neighbors is not new to the economic landscape of the region, household economic practices became dependent on the agricultural labor provided by those living in remote villages in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As inflation rose dramatically and food and other agricultural products became increasingly expensive, family members in villages were often a primary source of both staple food products and additional income. Yet, despite the dependency that dispersed family members may still have on relatives' agricultural labor, it is difficult for families to sustain rural livelihoods. This increased difficulty is driven by a rising cost of living, dilapidated infrastructure, and lack of opportunities for younger family members who are unwilling to endure the hardships of village life. Following Rai et al.'s (2014) definition of

depletion, these difficulties suggest that many villages in rural Armenia are currently experiencing the point at which resource outflows of labor, earnings, and social networks are exceeding resource inflow, putting those who engage in social reproductive work in a position of greater economic vulnerability.

These transformations in the practices of social reproduction, particularly the ways practices are marked by gendered and generational roles, leads us to look at the new phenomena of financialization which has recently emerging in the midst of all this. Access to credit is intended to help rural households improve the efficiency of their agricultural production, improve their living conditions, and ensure more equal exchange rates in the market. The following section outlines the introduction of credit and the progress of financialization in Armenia, revealing the ways that loans and other financial services articulate with existing economic practices. The final section of the chapter draws connections between greater access to credit and increased indebtedness, the depletion of resources for social reproduction, and new forms of insecurity that are particularly acute for women and older generations.

### **The Introduction of Credit and Debt to the Economic Landscape of Rural Armenia**

Monetization in post-socialist countries proceeded rapidly as the emergence of the market economy led to the increasing commodification of daily life. In this context, the retail banking sector saw significant growth with a shift towards a small but rapidly growing mortgage market (Lux 2003) and consumer credit market (Stenning et al 2010a). In 2016, World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) data showed that from 1997 to 2016, credit to the private sector had gone from 5.5% of Armenia's gross domestic product (GDP) to more than 54% in 2016 (World Bank Data). However, there remains a scarcity of "prime" customers with

sufficient income to meet the criteria above credit risk, particularly in rural areas. So the increasing competition among banks has led to the extension of banking products to new and less affluent customers. This segment of the population does not meet the relevant income criteria and are served by diverse sets of institutions offering what may be called “subprime” services. For instance, large household items like televisions or washing machines may be purchased via store credit at high interest rates ranging from 13%-21%, depending on age and income. There is also an increasing availability of personal loans taken from banks for a variety of needs—healthcare, travel, home improvement, etc.—which are given to middle- and upper-income households or individuals at similar rates.

Access to financial products and services such as personal loans or microcredit programs stem from the idea that poor and rural households have been excluded from financial institutions and that better access to capital would serve to alleviate poverty and empower women (Leyshon 1995; Keating et al 2010; Rankin 2002). Lending from banks, nongovernmental organization (NGOs), the World Bank, or other agencies have become increasingly popular strategies for encouraging economic development. Microcredit, in particular, has been heralded as a creative development project that can redress the effects of globalization by extending direct help, in the form of capital, to impoverished communities and households with the goal of encouraging self-employment and economic independence (see also Fermon 1998 on the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh; Roy 2010). Women have historically been targeted as the specific beneficiaries of these programs with the aim of bringing them into the global economy through small-scale, home-based, independent production. Though there is considerable variation in the types of bank loans and microcredit programs, in rural Armenia the predominant form is high-interest, market-based loans administered by banking institutions.

Agricultural loans for up to 10,000USD with varying repayment plans ranging from as little as 6-9 months (generally to match the planting and harvesting cycle) to 3 years for larger amounts were the most commonly reported loan product used among interviewees. Many of the interviewees noted that their loan interest rates ranged from 18%-24% with an additional servicing fee of anywhere from 1.5% to 10% of the loan amount. Some institutions, however, offered agricultural loans through a microfinance program at lower interest rates, generally between 10% and 13%. Personal or micro-loans for up to 3,000USD were also common. Interest rates ranged from 15-24%, though unlike agricultural loans which are secured by land holdings and other forms of collateral, personal loans were often secured by using either the family's home or women's gold jewelry as collateral.

Given the limited access to cash resources among most rural households, increasing access to cash through various credit and lending programs was viewed as a solution to the problems of financial exclusion (UN 2006). The need (or interest) among rural households for greater access is reflected in the fact that a majority of those interviewed for this study (29 out of 44) were either currently repaying a loan or had taken one in the past, suggesting that financial debt has increased for many households. The following examples consider a range of new financial products and services available in rural Armenia including conventional loans provided by banking institutions and loans provided through microcredit programs. The intention between both credit and lending programs is to create a solution to financial exclusion. However, access to credit, including microcredit, has 1) increased the indebtedness of households, 2) initiated transformations of the spaces, temporality, and subjects of existing relations between kin and neighbors, and 3) changed practices of social reproduction in ways that are both gendered and

generational. The following sections of this chapter will address these implications of access to financial credit.

### **Dispossession by Financialization: Changing the Space, Time, and Subjects of Social Reproduction**

Greater access to financial credit has increased the indebtedness of households. Financialization has transformed understandings of debt among rural Armenian citizens included in this study. Interviews with these participants suggest that financialization is shifting social relations and the spatial and temporal logics through which people have used and experienced debt. The following examples indicate a change in the local understanding of indebtedness which stems from an on-going sense of uncertainty about the future and a shift in the relations of trust and reciprocity. Previously, these same sentiments had once served to help families maintain their practices of social reproduction. Now, the consequences of financialization have entailed a turn away from a sense of collective responsibility for social reproduction among family members, households and communities to an increased emphasis on individual responsibility and personal investment (see also Rankin 2002; Mayoux 1997). The accumulation of debt for homes, education, and other goods suggests there is a new factor that is adding to the already-occurring processes of depletion—namely an increasing disconnection between outgoing and in-coming resources necessary for social reproduction (Rai et al 2014; Elson 2000). Financialization places an increased burden on the existing practices of social reproduction, along with the generational labor that supports it. The following examples consider how

financialization has transformed the spaces, temporality, and subjects of social reproduction and consequently produced new forms of debt and insecurity.

### *Space*

From interviews conducted in this study, 8 households had used their homes or apartments as collateral for a loan that was in repayment at the time of our interview or had been repaid at some point beforehand. Twelve households also reported needing a loan to purchase their home or apartment. Although no interviewee had themselves been displaced because of debt or default, four interviewees gave examples of other individuals who had to sell their homes in order to pay off other debts. One woman, whose experience of debt was representative of several other participants, described her current situation by comparing it to past experiences with housing during the Soviet Union: “Before we had to wait for the state to give us an apartment, but now we worry that the bank will take it away.”<sup>18</sup> For those who acquired debt to keep (or improve) their homes or purchase a new one, they faced increased uncertainty over their ability to repay those debts and maintain their livelihoods. That sense of uncertainty is particularly acute for women whose gendered roles within the family structure and livelihoods are centered around the home and home-making practices; the loss of a home would have unequal costs for women who may be both socially and physically displaced in the event of

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<sup>18</sup> Armenia suffered from relatively severe housing shortages during the Soviet period and many families had to wait years to receive an apartment. After the collapse of state socialism and during the initial period of privatization, most households in the region were given small plots of land and ownership of their homes or apartments. In some cases, rural citizens were able to move into homes and take over land plots of former Azeri villagers who left or fled due to ethnic conflicts. In parts of the region, entire Azeri villages were forcibly displaced due to ethnic violence in the early 1990s. Ironically, there may be citizens who benefited from the forced dispossession of homes and land from Azeri villagers, only to be facing the consequences of “dispossession by financialization” themselves.

repossession by a bank. More importantly, however, financialization requires women to work additional hours to repay their loans. Their labor contributions are both direct (i.e. cheese made by women is often sold for additional income) and indirect (i.e. preserving, canning, and other practices of “making do” reduce the direct costs of social reproduction). The prevalence of mortgage debt among rural households in this region suggests the cost of social reproduction for these rural households is increasingly determined by the rate of interest and terms of their loans as they must generate enough income to service their debt and provide for their own consumption needs (see also Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty 2009).

In Armenia, financialization has led to shifts in the ways individuals and households imagine and experience their homes and land in relation to practices of social reproduction. Blunt and Dowling (2006) remind us that homes should be conceptualized as both a material dwelling and affective space produced through home-making practices (2006, 22). Homes in Armenia have primarily been viewed as sites for living with (extended) family and for producing goods to be circulated and shared under the expectations of reciprocity and exchange. Through neoliberal reforms in the 1990s and the cutting off of state services, the family and the home became key sites for providing care and support, at times the only remaining safety net for those most in need (Platz 2000; Dudwick 1997). Financialization, however, is transforming these sites from spaces of sociality and reciprocity into sources of capital. As a source of capital, homes and gardens should either be invested in (to increase agricultural output) or used as collateral to invest in other family members. Thus, introduction of loans requiring collateral, such as a family's home and land, transforms these domestic and familial places into speculative assets (Pollard 2013; Bryan, Martin, and Rafferty 2009).

Loans taken for home renovations, for example, are revealing of the intersection between urban/rural and generational dynamics of support within extended families. Many families have taken loans in order to renovate homes in small regional towns where younger couples and families live, rather than villages where older generations remain, despite the relatively poorer conditions of village homes. Compare, for instance, the village home of Nane's grandparents with the apartment she shares with her parents and younger brother. Nane's grandparents' home in the village is a two-story structure, each story has its own separate entrance to the outside and consists of 2 large rooms. Here is a summary of my fieldnotes describing their very different home spaces after spending the day with Nane in her grandparents' village:

The grandparents live on the bottom floor in one room (using the other for storage) that is lit by a single bulb and one window. In the room, there are two twin beds, a small television, a hutch for dishes, and a small kitchen table with chairs. In the winter, this room also holds a wood burning stove where either wood or dried cow manure is used for heat. The kitchen is lean-to that stands next to the main room and contains a small stove fueled by a propane tank and a counter for drying dishes. Water for cooking and washing is collected from a running water source outside. The toilet is also outside, and there is no shower. They tend many small plots of land within a kilometer of the house and keep several animals—cows and sheep, mostly—in the barn nearby. Nane's home in the nearby town, in contrast, is a modern, four-room apartment in a small town. Its amenities include indoor plumbing, internet, a gas heater that warms the entire apartment, a washing machine, and renovated floors and walls that give the apartment a definitively modern-feel compared to its Soviet-style neighbors. The new, light-colored furniture and wallpaper stands in sharp contrast her grandparents' home.

Nane's apartment was purchased and renovated using her father's income as a taxi driver. Her family took more than 3 years to pay off the loan which had an interest rate of 17%. The repayment of the loan was supported both directly and indirectly by her grandparent's labor which provided additional food and supplementary income so that Nane's father could use his salary to pay off the debt. The domestic space of Nane's home, now filled with modern furniture and other amenities, has transformed it into a display of taste, consumption, and status, which is in stark contrast to the profoundly functional space of her grandparent's home in the village.



More importantly, the loan taken to purchase the apartment enabled Nane's parents to live separately from her grandparents, shifting the traditional pattern of patrilocality.

The differences between these spaces suggests key generational dynamics about investments in homes and the generational direction of those investments. Loans taken to improve home spaces suggest that renovated homes have shifted from spaces of utility (see also Reid 2005; 2009 for historical analysis of late-Soviet home design) to sites for displaying status through "modern" appliances and furnishings (see Figure 3 and 4). It also indicates that investments in home spaces tend to flow down generations rather than up. When asked why the family does not use a loan to renovate the grandparent's village home, Nane explained that renovating village homes compared to apartments in town is far more expensive and requires infrastructure (water pipes and natural gas lines) that may not exist. She also explained that her father asks her grandparents every winter to move into the apartment with her family to alleviate the difficulties of village living conditions. They reply, however, that there would be no one to take care of their animals if they moved into town. Because grandparents' agricultural labor supports the economic stability of their extended family, they must remain in the village and perform the arduous tasks of agricultural labor to continue to provide that support.

Figure 3. Soviet Era Apartment Building in Village, 2016 (left). Women outside village home, 2016 (right).



Figure 4. Advertisement for home improvement loan. (<http://www.kamurj.am/>)



“Renovation Credit for old homes, 300,000-2,200,000 AMD, 5-10 year term, 14% interest rate, no collateral, no down payment, possible to receive financial assistance”

Financialization, particularly financialization of the *spaces* of social reproduction, has led to a transformation in the ways people experience and imagine their homes. It has also increased the cost of social reproduction as families must pay more for interest on mortgages in addition to meeting their daily needs. The above examples show that financialization has led to new forms of economic insecurity, where homes are used for collateral for loans, and that it differentially impacts generational labor. For older women, this means that gendered responsibility for social reproduction becomes further entrenched as their labor is necessary for both sustaining life *and* for supporting speculative economic investments into homes through credit/debt. For younger women, purchasing a home through credit allows them to live separately from their parents and enables that space to be transformed into a site for displaying status, even as it produces a greater

need for more income to repay high-interest debts. The generational dynamics of labor used to repay debt from loans thus speaks to the temporal aspects of financialization which are discussed below.

### *Time*

The changes associated with the financialization of the spaces of social reproduction discussed in the section above reveal some key temporal impacts of financialization for rural households. Household interviews show that increasing privatization of social reproduction and the reliance on credit to finance daily life has led to two new concerns: concern over the time required to ensure daily social reproduction, and concern over the decision-making regarding *when* and *whose* social reproduction one should invest in. These changes raise the question of the title of this chapter—to borrow for now or for the future? Households must decide whether to use their access to credit to support and improve their current means of production (agriculture and animal husbandry), to further invest in greater opportunities for their children and grandchildren, or to make improvements to their own homes (i.e., indoor toilets, running water, gas heating, etc.).

Financialization of social reproduction and the increased use of credit and debt has first increased the amount of labor-time needed for families to sustain themselves. For those households with loans, grandparents, often already aged 65 and above, work longer hours performing the demanding physical labor required by agricultural production to ensure repayment. Older generation and families in rural areas often raise cows and sheep for meat and milk which is made into cheese; these products can then be sold at local markets (or exchanged with merchants). For older women, their labor burden can be tripled or quadrupled as they take

on the task of daily social reproduction and the additional labor required to produce surplus products. Several women interviewed noted that they now perform additional hours of labor milking cows, making cheese, selling small consumer items, and tending crops in their gardens and fields to produce a surplus of goods that can be sold to produce extra income needed to pay back loans. This is a shift from previous practices where gardens and animals were kept for household use and for exchanging with friends and relatives. All the while women continue to be responsible for cooking, cleaning, and caring for other family members. As a result, many women lamented the lack of leisure time or rest in their lives. Gohar, an older woman, described her situation this way:

During the Soviet period, there was work, life was easy. We didn't have to work so hard, but now we work very hard [in gardens and with animals] because there is no [waged] work. In [her village], there is no rest time, especially if you have children at home. After work there are daily burdens. As soon as you go home you have to go to the garden, to the barn. We keep many animals so there is enough. My children have grown up, they are students now, we took a loan to pay the tuition. There are so many things.

Thus, the additional burden of labor required to service loan payments often falls to women, supporting the notion that women serve as “shock absorbers” during times of economic crisis (Elson 1993).

The dramatic increase in the labor time required to sustain social reproduction is only the first component to shifting temporalities of social reproduction due to financialization. Families must then consider *whose* future to invest in. Grandparents or parents may find themselves making risky bets regarding whose lives, livelihoods, and homes—their own or those of their (grand)children—will provide a secure future for the extended family. For instance, households must decide whether to use their credit to support their current means of production (agriculture and animal husbandry), to further invest in greater opportunities for their children and grandchildren to improve their lives through education, or to purchase technologies such as

televisions, washing machines, indoor toilets, and natural gas stoves that would make their own daily lives easier. Though older generations recognize that their labor provides economic stability for their extended family, they also recognize that their children are interested in greater (class) mobility. Another interviewee, Hasmik, expressed a common concern among older villagers about their children's futures:

Now everyone is separate and works for themselves...we milk the cows, we make cheese, my hars [daughter-in-law] is learning, she is from the city...but the elders are needed to teach the young people, but now they [younger generations] do not want to keep cows. If they don't want to keep cows, then they will meet difficulties. If they have a cow, then they can sell it to have money.

Hasmik's concerns reflect a common tension within families where they try to navigate between investing in the practices that have sustained families through economic collapse and investments in a new future which are supported by waged labor. While many older participants agreed with Hasmik's view that agriculture is the "safe bet," they also recognize their children's visions for a future that includes jobs and the promise of upward mobility.

Thus, despite concerns like Hasmik's, it is common for grandparents and parents to choose to invest in the education of their (grand)children with the hopes of improving that child's livelihood. As a consequence, the financialization of this investment has brought about a very different experience of time and temporality. Loans taken to pay for tuition must be paid back in the relative short-term, far sooner than it takes an individual to complete schooling and begin a career. In one example, extended family members poured a considerable amount of their resources, some of those resources secured through high-interest loans, into paying for a young woman to attend the medical university in Yerevan. Though she has not yet graduated, the loans used to partially finance her educational and living expenses have come due, and her grandparents, ages 78 and 65, have chosen to continue living in a remote village in order to

maintain the agricultural plots that continue to be the basis of their extended family’s economic security.

Consider also, “gold loans,” named as such because they are loans taken on short notice at high interest rates (usually 18% or higher) using women’s gold jewelry as collateral (see Figure 5). Such loans are usually taken when there is an immediate need for cash resources, such as unexpected health care expenses, a shortfall in expected income, and other immediate needs. The gold used as collateral is often the jewelry that a woman receives as gifts from the groom’s family on her wedding day. The bank keeps the gold until the loan is completely repaid. Time, in particular an urgent sense of time, is an explicit component in some advertisements for these loans—they can be approved (or rejected) within 20 minutes. However, there is also a collision of timelines here: most gold loans are expected to be repaid within 6 months to a year, but if repayment is based on agricultural production or remittances, both of which operate according to seasonal cycles, the expected repayment periods do not match up with the time lines necessary to secure repayment funds.

Figure 5. Advertisement for "Gold Loan" with variable interest rates. (<http://www.kamurj.am/>)



The advertisement is a screenshot of a website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with currency exchange rates for USD (479.00, 481.50), EUR (584.00, 594.00), and RUB (8.15, 8.48). Below the navigation bar, the main content area is divided into two sections. On the left, a dark grey box contains text in Armenian: 'Վարկեր ոսկու գրավով' (Loans with gold collateral), '20,000 - 2,000,000 ՀՀ դրամ' (20,000 - 2,000,000 AMD), 'Վարկ/գրավ' (Loan/Collateral), 'Է ենց՝ 100%, 125%, 150%' (Interest rates: 100%, 125%, 150%), and '20 րոպեում' (In 20 minutes). To the right of this text is a pocket watch. Further right is a hand holding a large pile of gold jewelry, including rings, necklaces, and bracelets. At the bottom right of the advertisement, there is a button labeled 'Իմանալ ավելին' (Learn more).

“Loans with gold collateral, 20,000-2,000,000 AMD, Available in 20 minutes.”

There is a similar kind of collision of time horizons in the practice of using loans to invest in the education of younger generations. On the one hand, these loans reveal a long-term investment strategy by parents and grandparents in future generation. On the other, the decision-making that uses financial resources to support youth is undermined by subprime loan terms that extract high interest rates and expect short repayment periods. The time horizon for a returned investment in youth is so far in the future that families may risk losing spatial claims to land and property as they struggle to repay loans in the immediate present (Massey 1994).

Financialization thus ushers in a new way of experiencing and conceptualizing long-term investments as financial time moves at a much faster rate than the time of social reproduction.

### *Subjects*

Understanding the production of subjects who are worthy of investment has long been of interest to economic geographers. Recent studies of financialization have also been attuned to how the (re)production and legitimation of new forms of financial subjectivity is clearly gendered (S. Hall 2012; Elyachar 2005; McDowell 1997). Research has shown that the intended beneficiaries of microfinance are women (Young 2010) repeatedly evoking the reliable female financial subject as the key to its success (Rankin 2001; MacLean 2013). In Armenia, financialization has produced new gendered subjects that are increasingly individualized and categorized as “cautious” risk-takers deserving of more lenient interest rates.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the production of new gendered subjectivities, however, there are gendered consequences to

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<sup>19</sup> For example, a local banking institution offered special loan rates on consumer loans for women as part of the International Women’s Day recognition on March 8. The loans were advertised to women and offered 8% interest rates.

“dispossession by financialization” as the widening and deepening of financial logics in households shapes power relations and financial divisions of labor within the household (Pollard 2010). This is discussed further in the following example of “gold loans.”

“Gold loans,” introduced in the previous section, are one example through which we can examine the gendered consequences of financialization. This type of loan is remarkable because it is revealing of the financial subject produced by credit and the consequences of default for women, and particularly women with young children. In the example of a gold loan, banks assume an individual borrower. The consequences, however, stretch beyond a single person. According to social convention, if a woman were to leave her marital home, she would be allowed to keep the gold she received from her husband’s family. The use of this gold as collateral for loans puts women, who are already vulnerable within the power structure of the household, at greater risk of economic insecurity particularly in the case of divorce or default. The circumstances of this type of loan relates to what is known in legal parlance as “sexually transmitted debt,” or the way in which liability for debt (usually due to a bank) is spread from the principal borrower to his or her spouse or sexual partner (Fehlberg 1994). In the case of divorce or default, legal liability for a loan may fall to the woman if her name is listed as a borrower. However, even if she is not legally named as a borrower on the loan, the use of gold loans may still strip away her limited sources of capital. For example, one interviewee who was recently divorced explained that, though her husband was legally responsible for debt owed to the bank for a gold loan, he refused to make payments following the divorce; consequently, the bank kept the gold used as collateral and confiscated other assets meaning the recently divorced woman lost her only forms of capital.



The example of gold loans also indicates how financialization works to produce certain kinds of economic actors who are not empowered by access to credit but remain a part of existing and unequal social structures, dispossessed not only of their capital but also of their understanding of investments in social relations. Gold loans and other short-term, high-interest loans rely on non-capitalist practices—subsistence agriculture, gift-giving, and other kinds of reciprocity—to ensure both collateral for debts and repayment. Gold loans, in particular, depend on existing patriarchal structures within the family, where men are the financial decision-makers, and thus women’s wedding gifts become speculative assets for them. The consequences of default are thus considerably unequal, with the greater burden on women. This situation in Armenia relates to the argument of Stenning et al (2010b) who describe how existing practices of social reproduction among households in east central Europe perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequalities with a cumulative effect. Stenning et al’s work (2010b) shows that households without secure work, for example, also often lacked access to work-based social networks or to a stable income that would enable access to loans, indicating that those already marginalized experience compound exclusions. In Armenia, similar exclusions tend to be gendered. Not only is women’s labor exploited to repay loans, but their marginalization is reinforced by both family structure and loan options.

While financial products are intended to help alleviate poverty and empower citizens as economic actors, financialization through credit and debt can undermine existing social relationships and practices of community support. Such financial products entail contradictory assumptions and results: financialization assumes local practices of reciprocity through kin and social networks, using them as a source of capital to ensure the loan, while at the same time undermining the trust those networks are based in (Rankin 2013; Elychar 2004). In the case of

microfinance, a group of individuals, usually 3 or more, take a loan together in order to secure a higher amount of credit and, in some cases, a lower interest rate. Initially, microcredit was designed to use women's existing networks of social capital to secure repayment of the loan (Rankin 2002; 2013; Roy 2010), so, in theory, women in Armenia would be well-suited to succeed in this model because of the use of existing social networks for exchange among household. In practice, however, such investments can be fraught with insecurity and imbalance, indicating a change in the way family members and neighbors are now understanding their relationships to one another.

In a representative example, a woman, Anna, noted that her experience of taking out a microfinance loan with other women in the village ultimately put her in greater financial risk when another woman stopped paying her share. According to Anna, "one would never think [this woman] would not fulfill her responsibility. Now the rest of us are responsible. How can she expect that we can pay for ourselves and for her?" The insecurity presented by the possibility of default on the loan reveals changes in the way that Anna imagines her neighbor and their relationship. The introduction of financial debt into social relationships has led to a new kind of insecurity and a new understanding of social relationship: whereas neighbors used to lend and borrow money in relationships based on mutual trust, the new focus on individual responsibility makes building and relying on kin/social networks of trust much more difficult.

Moreover, marginalization from social networks can further undermine household's abilities to ensure their daily needs and has the potential to further exacerbate inequalities where poor households become more isolated than ever before. The above example suggests financialization raises the stakes of individual responsibility and increases the marginalization or exclusion of those who have failed to meet the terms of the loan and the social agreement upon

which it was founded. The woman who was unable to repay her portion of the loan was at greater risk of exclusion not only from access to financial credit, but also the existing networks of exchange and reciprocity. Thus, there is a contradiction that emerges from the use of credit and debt within social networks: though the structure of the loan is designed to use women's social capital to improve their lives and livelihoods, they may ultimately undermine these very same social networks by introducing more neoliberal notions of individual responsibility and excluding those who fail to live up to the terms of the loan from other networks of exchange.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined how neoliberal economic policies and reforms following the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to changes in the practices of social reproduction and put an increased emphasis on agricultural labor and social networks while adding strain to the limited cash resources of most households. During periods of heightened economic crisis such as in the mid-1990s, most extended households developed complex practices of exchange and reciprocity that often were founded upon the agricultural labor of those family members living in rural villages. These practices were primarily focused on subsistence and providing for an extended family's basic needs. Consequently, most households struggled to provide the cash resources needed to improve the living conditions of their homes or to provide opportunities for younger generations to pursue higher education. Over the last 10 years, however, access to loans through various market-based institutions has increased, providing the much-needed cash that is now frequently used to invest in further agricultural production, educational opportunities, or to cover

immediate and unexpected household needs. Unfortunately, these loans are often given at dramatically high-interest rates with short-term repayment plans.

The diverse economic practices used by households in Armenia—practices that range from non-capitalist gift economies to the use of financial products and services—have helped families navigate the adverse and rapidly changing social and economic conditions of the “transition” to capitalism. However, these everyday, informal practices have also helped to enable neoliberalism and processes of dispossession. Non-capitalist practices of social reproduction such as subsistence agriculture or exchange and reciprocity among social networks absorb the costs of neoliberalization as the burden of providing basic resources has shifted from the public to the private realm (Stenning et al 2010; Hartsock 2006). The financialization of social reproduction through the use of loans has further driven the processes of financialization and accumulation by dispossession, as households are increasingly dependent on high-interest loans to meet their family’s needs and high-interest serves to accumulate capital away from households (Pollard 2013).

Financial products like high-interest loans have not replaced the existing practices of social reproduction but rather have become a part of the existing economic landscape (see also Stenning et al 2010a). In the process financialization has transformed the subjects, spaces, temporalities of social reproduction in gendered and generational ways. The resulting financialization of social reproduction has put additional burdens on women and older generations to support their own lives and livelihoods while they try to ensure the success of future generations. Older generations invest in younger generations through sometimes risky financial bets in the hopes that youth will be successful at navigating the new social and material conditions of the post-Soviet world. The accumulation of debts accentuates the consequences of

dispossession for women by making them particularly vulnerable as credit transforms the existing relations of social reproduction emphasizing individual responsibility. The examples above shed light on some interesting nuances of these processes: the phenomenon of financial debt has led to increased differential burdens on generations, often with the older generations taking on additional labor to support both themselves, their children, and grandchildren. These burdens are gendered as it is primarily women's responsibility for enduring the daily and long-term processes of social reproduction.

Because financialization in rural Armenia often relies on the generational labor of those remaining in the villages, the temporality of indebtedness comes into sharper focus. Looking at the gendered and generational effects of financialization suggests that *ongoing* processes of dispossession that have long been taking place in Armenia, beginning at least with Sovietization and continuing into the present through various rounds of privatization. However, dispossession by financialization cannot be thought of as a series of events, but as the slow-moving depletion of resources needed to ensure daily and generational reproduction (Rai et al 2014). In the case of Armenia, generational labor is used to address the gap between the outflows and inflows of resources. It is also now being used to pay for the high-interest on loans taken for homes, education, agriculture, or other needs. However, because older generations are primarily responsible for this labor, it remains unclear how families can sustain these practices in the future. As it is ongoing, dispossession by financialization will continue to deplete the resources of Armenian households and undermine the previously reliable strategies households have come to rely on for social reproduction.

Dispossession through financialization has also been viewed as generally mundane or banal by rural Armenians—in the sense that the experience of debt is not talked about as an

impending or urgent crisis. Given other dramatic transformations—social, political, economic, and otherwise—Armenians often speak of debt as another in an already very long list of daily burdens. Financial debt then seems to blend into the economic landscape with other practices of social reproduction, obscuring the ways that increased privatization and financialization of social reproduction further depletes women’s resources, producing even greater burdens of labor, and reducing pressure on the state to provide better support, infrastructure, and social safety nets. Though the consequences of financialization in Armenia may not seem immediate or extraordinary, taking on the analytical lens of social reproduction suggests that it is the gradual depletion of resources, articulated through the time demands of credit, that is most dramatically affecting households’ ability to sustain themselves in both the short term and the *longue duree*.

This chapter has examined financialization in Armenia through the lens of social reproduction to argue that depletion of resources for social reproduction is also a form of dispossession. Capital accumulation occurs through financial predation via high-interest loans that are slowly depleting family resources and undermining existing practices of exchange and reciprocity among kin and neighbors. From this investigation, it is evident that dispossession takes on many forms in many places and across time. In addition to the economic forms of dispossession discussed here, the following chapter will further investigate the processes of dispossession in Armenia from the perspective of young women. Younger generations in Armenia, especially women, must navigate the terrain of on-going and mundane dispossession in which the expectations of older generations and available opportunities are contradictory, leaving young women dispossessed of the skills and the intuition for how to navigate their world.

## CHAPTER 5

### “I CAN’T STAY HERE ANY LONGER”: CRUEL OPTIMISM, ENDURANCE, AND DISPOSSESSION

#### Introduction

Over the past 30 years, Armenia has endured a number of dramatic transformations and upheavals including the collapse of the Soviet Union (which led to privatization, marketization, and democratization), a devastating earthquake, an economic collapse, and a costly violent conflict with Azerbaijan over a territorial dispute. As the previous chapter discussed, subsequent processes of neoliberalization and dispossession have been experienced in markedly divergent ways as each generation faces different forms of insecurity and anxiety for the future. Older generations experienced privatization and neoliberalization as the shrinking of a world in which they are increasingly disconnected from other places as family members migrate for work and the daily practices of social reproduction are more difficult than ever. Those who grew up and came of age under the Soviet system, however, were generally able to develop (or fall back on) a number of strategies for navigating the economic and political uncertainty. The world they inhabit transformed dramatically, but it was recognizable.

Younger generations, however, sense both opportunity and distance: they are optimistic for the freedoms and opportunities available to other young people around the world as well as the changing gender roles and norms of their own society in which young people are (trying to

be) more independent from their parents. However, they also acknowledge the obstacles they face in terms of accessing those opportunities. They find themselves caught between two sets of normative modes of life that are both overwhelming and sustaining—the expectations of their parents and those of the increasingly globalized, urban society. Ani, a woman in her early 30s living with her mother in Yerevan, perfectly distilled a common feeling among young women of being caught between the expectations of her parents and those of the “modern” society:

The generation before us can understand, even if they don't agree with, the old (Soviet) way of doing things. They have the skills to navigate it, to make do (*yola gnal*). My generation, however, is “without a place” because we have different ideas and different values. We don't like the hierarchies, rigid codes of conduct, and lack of opportunities with the way things are now. We have few choices but to leave [the country through economic or marriage migration] or get married, have a child, then get divorced because the “old” roles for men and women no longer fit. I can't stay here any longer, Kate dear. I must move to Europe and find a good job, or I will have to go back to my village, get married, and have children.

Ani's reflection indicates there are shifting tensions for young women. Gender roles and norms for women are fluctuating such that marriage and family are no longer the only defining characteristics of a “good life.” She also suggests that young women today may not have the necessary skills needed to make that version life sustainable. And, there is a generational disconnect. For the younger generation, the older generation's strategies of endurance feel both inaccessible and untenable, leaving them practically and affectively “without a place.” The world, as it is presented to younger generations, is increasing unrecognizable. This phenomenon, so well named by Ani, raises a number of key questions: what are the causes of dispossession and displacement as experienced by Ani and others of her generation? And, how do young women attempt to navigate a world that is no longer recognizable? In other words, what is at stake for these young women who are overwhelmed but moving forward anyway?

Ani is far from alone in expressing a sense of displacement and disillusionment with Armenian society. My interviews suggest a number of Armenian women experience an affective



disconnection between their parents' and their own imaginations of the future. This disconnection is similar to the feeling of *generational vertigo* theorized by Sarah Smith (2013): “a mixture of apprehension and anticipation about a future understood to be precarious and unknowable except through dizzying glimpses observed or experienced in the lives of the young” (2013, 573). In the case of Armenia, the experience of vertigo is most often expressed by young women as a loss of balance or sense of place in the world. They are seemingly faced with limitless possibilities of a modernizing world but also a mounting number of obstacles to realize those possibilities. The lens of generational vertigo does more than simply identify a comparison between the “old” and the “young,” however. Importantly, it points to the *affective* resonance of dispossession—those dizzying visions of the future that speak to new subjects with mismatched skills of endurance. Though affect has not been firmly linked to practices of social reproduction and dispossession within geographical literature, generational vertigo serves to connect those two processes in a new way. Those dizzying visions of the future serve to highlight how the processes and consequences of dispossession have produced new affective modes of being, new subjects, and new practices of social reproduction.

What Ani’s story and others like it suggest is that young women are both drawn to and alienated from the options available to sustain themselves in Armenia. It seems that those in Ani’s generation struggle to maintain a reliable intuition about how to navigate the world. The world is becoming ever more unrecognizable as they attempt to navigate between two competing visions of a “good life”—one that worked for their parent’s generation and a “modern” vision of independence and mobility. The dissolution of a coherent notion of a good life creates a nearly paralyzing sense of confusion for young women. Their expected place in the world is no longer clearly identifiable leaving young women to navigate through competing visions of the future.

This sense of displacement and disorientation relates to Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism—"a relation that exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). In the case of Armenia, cruel optimism illustrates how young women's desire for a particular place in the world is sustaining them while also dispossessing them of their intuition for how to navigate it.

Young women's sense of displacement, confusion, and even loss of intuition for navigating the world is exhausting. They often find themselves without the necessary skills of social reproduction to get by in their parent's world, a conundrum compounded by their inability to pursue or realize other, more "modern" opportunities. I argue here that this is a form of dispossession, but dispossession with fuzzy edges as there is no material object (land, home, livelihood) or social relation (family or community) to point to as having been taken away in the process of capital accumulation (see also Rai et al 2014; Paudel 2016; Mollet 2014). Nevertheless, there is a sense of loss of, or separation from, *something* necessary for enduring.

In this chapter, I investigate how young women in Armenia define, negotiate, and sustain themselves in a world where the fantasy of "the good life" is shifting, dissolving, and constantly out of their reach. Berlant (2011) defines the good life as a "moral-intimate-economic thing" (3). I am particularly interested in the transformation of affective attachments to rapidly shifting notions of "the good life" as a consequence of dispossession and depletion, and how women's affective dispositions may help to sustain capitalist relations, even as they wear out the subjects themselves. Theoretically, this chapter contributes to the discussions within geography regarding dispossession (Adnan 2013; Glassman 2006; Li 2011; Harvey 2003) and gendered practices of social reproduction (Hartsock 2006; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2004; Casolo and Doshi 2013; Federici 2004; Rai et al 2014; Fernandez 2017) by considering the role of affect within these

processes (Povinelli 2012; Berlant 2011). Specifically, I argue that a shift in focus from practices of social reproduction to endurance reveals dispossession beyond the material and social to the ideological and affective. Understanding endurance through relations of *cruel optimism* under neoliberal capitalism illustrates how new social lives might emerge from these conditions, or conversely, how the dissolution of affective orientations to the world can serve to reproduce the conditions through which capitalism flourishes.

This chapter emerged from observations and fieldwork encounters, which illustrated the deep confusion and tension resulting from generational differences, a profound lack of economic opportunities faced by young women, and the sense that these women were poorly equipped to navigate those tensions. To explore those emergent themes, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 30 women from across different age groups (ranging from 18-78 years of age) and locations within Armenia (both rural and urban). I also draw data from 15 focus groups with women that explored the unique concerns of young women. These focus groups were conducted with women from the ages of 20-35. Both the interviews and focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to many hours in length. The interviews were conducted with the help of my research associate, Shushan Ghazaryan, and were subsequently translated and transcribed by Sona Avagyan. To explore in even greater detail the affective attachments, practices of endurance, and ways of navigating the daily world, I draw on 2 life history interviews conducted with young, educated women aged 28 and 33 years old. These interviews took place over multiple sessions and engaged a range of topics and practices including family relationships, economic opportunities, and visions for the future. The life-history interviews were conducted without an interpreter using both English and Armenian languages; I subsequently transcribed and translated them.

## **From Social Reproduction to Affect Endurance**

### *The Case for Affect*

In this section, I bring affect theory into conversation with theories of social reproduction and dispossession. If affect is viewed as an extension of the work of Marxist thinkers engaged with culture and ideology (Hall 1981; Althusser 1971; Gramsci 1971), then it can expand our understanding of social reproduction and dispossession beyond the social and material. The expanded understanding of social reproduction and dispossession adds greater depth to feminist analyses because it accounts for sensory intuitions and ideological frameworks that are as necessary for enduring as social and material resources yet remain overlooked or too intangible to concretely describe. In what follows, I introduce these key concepts and argue that affect is a necessary component of social reproduction and therefore of dispossession in ways that are both gendered and generational.

Capital accumulation across scales depends on the unwaged, unaccounted for, and gendered labor of social reproduction. Because of capitalism's dependent relationship on social reproduction, capitalist accumulation, particularly "accumulation by dispossession" necessitates the transformation of all the constitutive aspects of social reproduction (Harvey 2003, Hartsock 2006, Federici 2004). Social reproduction, most commonly glossed as the "fleshy, messy, indeterminate stuff of everyday life" (Katz 2001b, 711), encompasses three main aspects. These include: 1) the biological reproduction of the species including the social constructions of motherhood, 2) the reproduction of the labor force including its daily subsistence and the reproduction of differentiated skills, and 3) the reproduction of cultural forms and practices such

as the learning and knowledge associated with becoming a member of a particular group (Katz 2001b, 711; see also Bakker and Gill 2003, 32; Mitchell, Katz and Marston 2003).

Recent analyses of social reproduction and dispossession have tended to focus on the ways individuals, households, communities, and even regions, are dispossessed of material resources and social relations through privatization and individualization (Fernandez 2017; Li 2009; Mullings 2009; Paudel 2016). However, we can look to the work of cultural Marxists in the 1980s for considerations of the cultural and ideological work of reproduction that also serves to perpetuate capital accumulation (Althusser 1971; Gramsci 1971; Hall 1981; Bourdieu 1984). These scholars addressed the ways capitalism produced specific kinds of subjects and accounted for how social actors reproduce the very social relations and material forms of capitalism that are so problematic in the first place. Though blurred with the political economic aspects of social reproduction, cultural reproduction involves “acquiring and assimilating the shared values, knowledge, and practices of the group to which one belongs” (Katz 2001b, 714). In essence, cultural reproduction works to shape ideas of what social actors can expect from the world and what is expected from them in turn. Cultural Marxists, for example, were interested in the production of subjects who, despite being alienated by capitalist relations, perpetuated those relations through practices of consumption (Hall 1981).

Affect theory builds on the theories of ideology and cultural reproduction to understand how desires and attachments are shaped by sensory intuition about how to manage living (Berlant 2011; Povinelli 2011). Affect theory begins with the body and explores senses or experiences that are difficult or impossible to render through representation (Thrift 2008; Probyn 2005; Grosz 1995). In geographical literature, affect has been primarily addressed by thinkers grappling with the non-representational (Thrift 2008), the (geo)politicization of emotion and

affect (Sharp 2009; Anderson 2006; Ahmed 2003; Sparke 2007; O’Tuathail 2003), and the potential divergences and convergences between geographies of emotion and geographies of affect (Pile 2010; Sharp 2009; Thien 2005). In this chapter, I draw on theorists who do not reject the representational, but see connections between the body, affect, and representation (Povinelli 2011; Berlant 2011). These thinkers recognize that affect mediates between ideas and forms outside our ability to represent them (Probyn 2005; Grosz 1995; Povinelli 2011; Berlant 2011). Understanding affect in this way illuminates how subjects shift between bodily struggles to persevere and the actual ideas or actions which emerge from that struggle.

Where theories of cultural reproduction lead us to consider the *ideas* social actors have about themselves and what they have learned to expect from the world, affect reveals how those expectations shape the ways individuals intuitively, socially, and physically manage living. Following Sedgwick (2003), the intuition that guides actors in navigating the world is, essentially, “affect”, which she defines as “immediate *instrumentality*, an orientation toward specified aims” (2003, 19 italics in original). Berlant (2011), drawing on Sedgwick (2003), further argues that intuition is “the process of dynamic sensual data-gathering through which affect takes shape in forms whose job it is to make reliable sense of life...Intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention” (2011,52). Intuition, then, is a key component of our attachments to reproducing a recognizable world, to our imaginations of the good life. Fantasies of “the good life” might include expectations of enduring cooperation in intimate partnerships, family, political systems, markets, and work despite ample evidence to suggest that these relationships are inherently unstable and costly. These expectations, however, have become more “fantasmatic” with less and less relation to the ways people can actually live their ordinary, everyday lives (Berlant

2011, 11). Yet, when actors remain attached to imaginations of the good life because they contain the promise of possibility, hope may actually exhaust rather than sustain.

As Berlant argues, affective attachments to visions of the good life provide a reliable framework for enduring and reproducing a recognizable world. But, when such attachments become cruel or unstable, they also have the potential to force adaptive change to conditions of normative crisis generating new strategies of endurance or the “will to be otherwise” (Berlant 2011, Povinelli 2011). This is where affect becomes useful to an analysis of social reproduction and dispossession. If affect is intuition about how to navigate the world, then it is shaped by ideologies and ideas about the world. And, if one loses their affective/intuitive sense of the world due to on-going crisis, then the world may no longer be navigable and new practices of endurance might emerge to either challenge or reproduce the existing forms and structures.

### *The Ordinarity of Crisis, Dispossession, and Endurance*

Attention to affective transformations thus suggests that processes of dispossession certainly include, but may also go well beyond, material forms such as land privatization (Li 2009) or the depletion of resources for social reproduction as discussed in the previous chapter (Fernandez 2017; Rai et al 2014). Indeed, it extends the focus beyond the processes of material dispossession to how individuals become dispossessed of their affective orientations or how their affective optimism for a “good life” sustains them in an otherwise unrecognizable world. Affective orientations are significant because they provide stability and balance such that one can endure crisis by having an intuition about how to navigate recognizable world. Affective intuitions, transformed by the processes of dispossession, reveals the depletion of recognizable

visions of the good life and individual's strategies for enduring, or not, in a world that may no longer be decipherable.

If one can be dispossessed of their affective intuition, like one might be dispossessed of social and material resources needed for social reproduction, then it is also necessary to broaden our understanding of endurance. I refer to endurance in two senses here. First, I use the concept of endurance to encapsulate the material, social, and biological practices of remaining, what is often referred to as social reproduction (Katz 2001b; Bakker and Gill 2003; Mitchell, Katz, and Marston 2003). Using *endurance* instead of social reproduction—or other terms for practices of negotiating everyday such as resistance, resilience, and reworking (Katz 2004)—highlights a mode of being that endures, often quietly and patiently, through unpleasant or difficult processes. Drawing on Povinelli (2011, 31-32), endurance captures both substance and temporality; it is the ability to suffer yet persist. It emphasizes the mundane and on-going, or “crudeness,” of everyday suffering (Povinelli 2011, 13) rather than celebrating the ability of individuals or communities to serve as shock absorbers who can withstand ever more crisis. Endurance, then, captures those practices referred to as social reproduction, to material and social practice, but, more importantly it also the sense or mode of being that endures everyday suffering.

This leads to the second form of endurance, *affective endurance*. Affective endurance refers to the affective and ideological modes of being that may provide actors with the ability to persist within materially dispossessed conditions. Yet this ability to persist frequently relies on relations that are *cruelly optimistic*—when the object or fantasy that is desired actually inhibits prospering. In the case of Armenia, when material, social, or physical conditions become nearly unbearable, ideological fantasies of “the good life” or affective relations of optimism for the future have helped to keep individuals going, particularly among older generations who had



reliable ideologies to turn to. When even the fantasy of the good life that might otherwise be sustaining becomes confused or faded due to on-going crises of dispossession, it is necessary to consider the forms of endurance people turn to and the practices they rely on to keep themselves going. Young women in Armenia like Ani, quoted in the introduction, are faced with cruelly optimistic attachments to fantasies of a good life that are no longer reliable, and as a consequence they are trying out new practices of endurance such as education and mobility in the hope that they will provide more stable, intuitive understandings of the world. Yet as we will see, young women often remain caught between two visions of the good life, both desirable but hardly attainable, and may ultimately wear themselves out in the process of trying to succeed.

This analytical framework considers affect in relation to dispossession and shifts attention away from questions of how everyday life has been *organized* by capitalism (Lefebvre 1991; Certeau 1984) to an emphasis on the ways capitalism *disorganizes* the rhythms of everyday life as people struggle to adjust and adapt to new pressures and the weight of on-going crisis (Berlant 2011). In other words, as capitalism jumbles the rhythms of everyday life, how do imaginations of and affective attachments to what constitutes a good life change or endure?

This question is particularly fascinating in the post-Soviet context of Armenia where the collapse of the Soviet Union and the enrollment of its former population in capitalist relations entailed marketization, privatization, commodification, and eventual corporatization of land and other state assets (Verdery 1996; Harvey 2003; Glassman 2006). Though it is easy to refer to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an event or a series of events, the processes of dispossession and the attending crises are, in fact, on-going and constitutive of extended reproduction (Harvey 2003; Glassman 2006; Levien 2015; Casolo and Doshi 2015; Hartsock 2006). The temporal and grammatical shift in understandings of dispossession as a historical event to continuous crisis

dovetails with recent critiques of the common discourse of “trauma” to describe present conditions of neoliberal capitalism and the effects of the catastrophic impacts on individuals and populations. Povinelli (2011, 132), for instance, uses the concept of *quasi-events* to describe the mundane, suffering that accompanies dispossession; quasi-events are “the forms of suffering and dying, enduring and expiring that are ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” caused by the political and economic conditions of neoliberalism. For Berlant (2011), the genre of “trauma” presents contemporary events as exceptional, a dramatic scene that “just shattered some on-going, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed to just keep going” (10). She instead posits understanding the systematic crises that seem to define contemporary society as *crisis ordinariness*, a condition that often forces people to adapt or change in order to endure.

The ordinariness of crisis produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attending processes of dispossession forced older generations to draw upon or develop skills of “making do” to survive a world that was habitually broken (see Caldwell 2004; Fertaly 2012; Jung 2016 for discussions of post-socialist practices of “making do”). For younger generations, however, such crises were already mundane and normalized, though no less difficult. Consequently, young people generally have a different kind of sensory intuition for survival and a different set of skills. Their intuition and skills, however, are not necessarily well-suited to the world they are expected to succeed in. Many young women interviewed refused to learn the practices of social reproduction that helped their parents’ generation survive dramatic transformations in society, but they have limited opportunity to effectively use the skills they developed for success in the “new” Armenian society. The gap between the ideas of the good life and the skills needed to succeed results in an affective orientation to the world characterized by uncertainty and confused

expectations. There is “cruel optimism” here in that young women are trying to believe in a version of the “good life” but are unable to attain it. Just as their parents’ generation was dispossessed of jobs, titles, and property, younger generations are dispossessed of an intuitive understanding of their place in the world making them often ill-prepared to navigate it but optimistic that might someday figure it out.

### **The Good Life During the Late Soviet Period**

Following Berlant (2011), the connection between the fraying fantasies of “the good life,” relations of cruel optimism, the expansion of capitalist relations, and subsequent experiences of dispossession reveal the dizzying differences in expectations and affect between older and younger generations in Armenia. Systems of political economy help to define what individuals can imagine and therefore desire as “the good life.” Berlant’s (2011) analysis is specifically grounded in western contexts of late capitalism; here I expand her ideas to Armenia, where what constituted “the good life” under state socialism was very different from what from youth consider to be a “good life.” The ethnographic details that follow serve as a starting point for understanding the disorganization of everyday life that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent dispossession of skills of social reproduction.

Armen, the mayor and resident veterinarian of a tiny hamlet in the hills of southern Armenia, described how daily life in his village had changed since the collapse of the Soviet system as I sat with him and his family around their dining room table. Though it may be counterintuitive to most Western perceptions of life under state socialism, Armen described the sense of mobility, connection, and interdependence among places (those within the Soviet Union

and Eastern bloc anyway) that is often associated with current political and economic conditions of globalization and post-Fordist production (see also Megoran 2017, 153). He described how fruit juice, for example, was made during the Soviet period: bottles, sugar, fruit, and other ingredients would come from faraway places to factories in Armenia where they would be processed and then shipped out again. In his words, “Every place was connected so that there was work everywhere, which was a good thing. There was one passport, one country, one currency, you could go wherever you wanted.” He went on to describe how much easier it was to feel economically secure during the Soviet period: his family had two cars, what would now be a luxury; they only needed 1-2 cows to provide enough milk, cheese, and butter for themselves (whereas now they need 5, 10, or 15); he received free higher education including veterinary school; his family went on vacation to Ukraine and East Germany.

The difference now, as he explained it, is that while the rest of the world is more connected—a natural disaster in the US, for example, affects agricultural markets in Armenia—it is more difficult than ever for individuals like himself to participate in these connections (Massey 1994; 2004). The population of the village is declining as young people cannot find work and lack interest in agricultural labor. Those who do stay must travel farther distances to make a living either by selling cattle or their dairy products. And, increasing numbers of men in the younger generation are migrating to Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, or Russia for work that helps to supplement their family’s cash-based income. Young women in the village have fewer opportunities for education that is farther away, more expensive, and rarely leads to secure employment.

Armen’s story about his life and village is representative of many other interviews I conducted with people who grew up under the Soviet regime and now live in rural Armenia. His

description of transformation speaks to a quiet nostalgia for a time when life was more secure, when there were no problems of “daily bread,” the expression many people used to refer to the increasing economic insecurity they feel following the collapse of state socialism. He was excited about the opportunities that capitalism brought with it, but disappointed to realize that capitalism’s promises would remain out of his reach. His story speaks to the contradictions felt in Armenia between the anticipated optimism of joining the capitalist world and the reality that from the point of view of abandoned places like his village, the world only got bigger and opportunity farther away.<sup>20</sup>

For those who grew up and came of age during the Soviet period like Armen, there was a relatively narrowly defined image of what “the good life” could be. For men and women, the fantasy of a good life often included receiving a higher education, finding a good work position, getting married, starting a family, and having a comfortable home. Problems of economic stability were not generally an issue for Armenian citizens because work and education were (at least in theory) guaranteed by the state. In this context, perhaps the most significant element of the fantasy of a good life was to have and to be a part of a family and extended kin network. Although Soviet and Western sources on kinship under state socialism argued that Soviet policies had diminished the significance of the family (Creuziger 1993, 24; Gireko 1984; Goldman 1993), ideologies of traditional kinship defined as patriarchal and patrilocal persisted.

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<sup>20</sup> On one hand, Armen’s explanation of an ever-expanding world resonates with Marx’s analysis of a society under capitalist relations where “all that is solid melts into air” as the previous conditions of social relations vanish according to capitalist logics. According to Harvey (1990) drawing on Marx, one of advanced capitalism’s signature effects is the “annihilation of space by time” such that capital, goods, information, and people move around the world faster and across ever greater distances, a process he refers to as *time-space compression*. On the other hand, Armen’s narrative reminds us that not all people and not all places experience the forces of capitalism in the same way (Massey 1994). From the point of view of some places, as Katz (2001) argued, the world has not become more accessible; it has gotten bigger as practices of social reproduction remain similar but those same practices must now be worked out over extended distances and time. Katz refers to this as *time-space expansion*, “the expanded field of material social practice” (2001, 1224).

The image of a traditional family was conceived to be static, enduring, and uniquely Armenian. Based on a survey taken in 1993 (Poghosian 1993), 94.2 percent of Armenians considered family and their extended kin networks to be necessary to their happiness (cited in Platz 2000). Additionally, the performance of kin-based responsibilities and emotions determined whether individuals were considered “un-Armenian.”

For women, the designated caretakers of the family according to nationalist values, rites of passage including marriage and childbirth were considered crucial to their happiness and realization of important goals (Platz 1996; Dudwick 1994; Ishkanian 2007). According to many of the older women I interviewed, the ideal narrative of a young woman’s life included the pursuit of a higher education and some (limited) worldly experiences through travel and work so that she was well-prepared to raise children.<sup>21</sup> Her pursuits outside the home were considered to be legitimate and encouraged until she married and started a family. After marriage, she was expected to prioritize her family over other interests and goals.

During the 1990s, the necessity of women’s social reproductive labor was amplified due to the conditions of economic collapse, and the value assigned to women’s roles as mothers and caretakers was also heightened in the moment of rising nationalism. Consequently, the expectation of a good life among women was often articulated through the position of mother, wife, and caretaker. The role of motherhood was rewarding emotionally, economically, and socially. There was an inherent contradiction within this version of the good life, however. The

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<sup>21</sup> Under the Soviet system, women had nearly equal access to education, in many cases attending higher education in greater numbers than men (Kuehnast and Nechimas 2004). Additionally, access to education was not a class indicator as everyone was given access to at least a basic education. Following the collapse, however, there was intense criticism toward Soviet policies that gave women rights to abortion and equal pay as Soviet policies as a whole were rejected by new governments. As a result, there was a revival of nationalist sentiments that idealized a “traditional family” where women’s place was a caretaker and bearer of tradition (see also Einhorn 1991, 1993, Verdery 1996, Gal and Kligman 2000, Rudd 2000, True 2003).

labor of reproducing life and family under those conditions not only exhausted women's bodies through stress and labor. Furthermore, the introduction of capitalist relations in Armenia also undermined the very fantasy of good life that these women had invested in—the sanctity of the family and women's valued position within it.

The version of a good life expressed to me by women who came of age during this period (before 1994) may be drawn, in part, from a sense of nostalgia for what many considered to be “easier” years of their lives. Women's accounts suggest a reliable ideological framework and a mode of being that enabled these subjects to endure difficult political and economic conditions. The absence of rich detail in this aggregated version of what one might have envisioned as a good life under state socialism is also noteworthy. It reveals a very different affective orientation toward the future between older and younger generations: older generations were occupied with the daily activities of getting by and with maintaining social relationships during the late socialist period but were otherwise relatively secure in knowing what to expect and what was expected of them. They experienced crisis but were not necessarily dispossessed of the ability to recognize their place in the world. Today, younger generations, influenced by neoliberal notions of the “sovereign” individual, desire a more limitless future, yet one that is far more uncertain, suggesting that contemporary articulations of “the good life” are emerging, less stable, and very much a part of the experience of being always already in crisis.

### **Dispossession of Skills and The Emergence of an Unrecognizable World**

Young people who did not come of age until after Armenia achieved some economic stability in the mid-1990s have a very different view of the possibilities the world has to offer

than their parents. While Armen was ultimately disappointed by new social relations and opportunities of capitalism, his daughter, Satenik (age 18) was much more optimistic. In fact, her understanding of the Soviet period compared with the present day was stated in nearly opposite terms.

The difference [between generations] is that we have lots of opportunities. Everything was limited for them [her parents]. During the Soviet years they went to work, came back home. Everyone had the same salary, the food was sold in one store, and that was all. Everything was limited then. We have lots of possibilities, and we want to make use of everything.

Where Armen's recollections of the Soviet period brought to mind interconnection and economic stability, Satenik saw narrow opportunity for upward mobility and fewer (consumption) choices. The current world from her perspective offers a more limitless sense of choice, possibility, and opportunity, even if those possibilities may further transform the world that Satenik knows and her place in it. The differences between Satenik's expectations for a limitless future and her father's far more moderated vision recalls Smith's (2012) notion of generational vertigo, or the dizziness and disjuncture experienced by different generations in imagining what the future might hold.

Satenik's optimism for the world's possibilities might be tempered by a more comparative perspective that accounts for the likely futures available to most young women in rural places and the skills of social reproduction necessary for life in rural Armenia. Satenik's mother, Seda, for example, is responsible for the family's garden, helping with the animals (milking, cleaning the barn, etc), preparing meals for the family, serving guests, and maintaining the house. Her labor is required to make cheese, oil, homemade butter, and preserves for both keeping, selling, and circulating through networks of exchange between relatives and friends. Women's labor in rural Armenia is physically demanding, and many young women, like Satenik, envision a life for themselves outside of those conditions. Because Satenik desires a higher



education in Yerevan, she has not invested her time in learning the same skills as her mother. As a young unmarried woman, her contribution to the household is limited to making special sweets for guests and helping to keep the house tidy.

Instead, Satenik, like many young women, imagines a future world that is very different from the realities of her hometown. Her imagination of a world of possibilities may dramatically underprepare her for a version of the future she is likely to face. If young women in Satenik's position are unable to pursue a higher education (due to raising costs or increased debt, for example) or to secure a job with a reasonable salary afterwards (rates of unemployment are exceptionally high for youth in Armenia), it is a common practice for them to return to their villages, marry, have children, and participate in the difficult labor practices demanded of rural women. When this happens, the sense that the world has limitless possibility can result in crisis: the necessity of "making do" with limited resources for survival is less meaningful to young women than it was to their parents who endured the chaotic years following the collapse of state socialism. They often do not view the skills of social reproduction of their parent's generation as necessary and sometimes even refuse to learn them. Consequently, they find themselves ill-equipped for rural life, especially after getting an education.

Satenik provides a good example of the loss of skills for social reproduction many young women are facing. Without these skills, young women will be unprepared to participate in the world that (at least partially) worked for their parents. At 18, Satenik's commitment to a vision of the good life as one of boundless opportunity has not yet been tested; the (possibility of an) unrecognizable world remains in the future tense.

Other interviewees, however, have already started to grapple with the impossible mix of options or visions of a good life. One young woman explained the problem for her generation of

women in Armenia as caught between two sets of expectations, one traditional and the other “new.”

The problem is that we are overloaded by expectations. Armenia has become a place where different values are mixed. It isn't independent. It isn't Soviet. It isn't west nor east. The new thinking and the traditions are mixed with each other. I think that the young generation can't stay far from either. There is a fight over which one is right, which one is wrong.

This statement emphasizes a state of contradiction for young women; they are not sure which path is correct (or will *become* the correct path), and yet, they remain entangled with both sets of values. Another young woman, Tatevik, added that the result is bewilderment—an unrecognizable world where “a confusion is created inside you, and all that is reflected in the society, in your environment. You have both kinds of friends [‘new’ and ‘traditional’]”. Though this binary of “new” and “traditional” is problematic because it fails to capture the nuances of negotiations made by young women, the description of a choice between two, seemingly separate, worlds was repeated by many of the young women I interviewed.

These descriptions speak to the incomplete or superficial shift in the political economic conditions of state socialism to contemporary capitalism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and state socialism in Armenia necessarily entailed the fraying of older fantasies of a good life where family and kin networks could be prioritized over individual interests and economic security. Today, parents continue to emphasize family, the importance of children, of sustaining and reproducing the nation, and the attempt to conscript their children into the same world of skills and desires. However, the expectations for young women to live up to these “traditional” standards compete with economic pressure to find a good job with a living salary. They often need to participate in a growing consumer culture and increasingly view the responsibilities of family as a hindrance to personal freedoms and choices so often associated with neoliberal economic reforms. These pressures attempt to draw young women into a life dedicated to

moving towards the globally normative good life of employment and independence that can equally trap them in conditions that can barely support them. This recalls what Fraser (2009) noted regarding the intertwining of capitalism and feminism: “At both ends, the dream of woman’s emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation” (110-111).

The tension between two sets of expectations of the good life available to women in Armenia reveals that in addition to the material transformations of society, women no longer have a reliable affective or ideological framework for enduring in the world. They often find themselves in an state of confusion, torn between two competing ideological orientations toward the world. Not only are previous habits and practices of social reproduction devalued or outright refused by young women, but young women are faced with a conundrum of what the good life can be when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility has gone awry.

### **Cruel Optimism and Affective Endurance**

Young women in contemporary Armenian society experience a relation of cruel optimism to their attachments to fantasies of the good life because the prevailing imaginaries are two opposing sets of values, neither of which can be fully realized. On one side, “traditional” or nationalist Armenian desires to protect the nation and territory through pro-natal values push women to have children and give up their sense of individual goals and desires for the collective good of the family and the nation. Women on this path would ideally be venerated for their roles as mothers, caretakers, and reproducers of the nation. On the other side, there is a push from international development, neoliberal ideals, and economic opportunities that encourage women to pursue individual interests such as careers outside of the home and family. “Traditional”

values of family and motherhood clash with neoliberal ideals of “individual rights,” “freedom,” and “independence.” These different ideological orientations to world and the impossibility of achieving either produce confused and disoriented subjects that struggle to understand their place in the transforming social relations of Armenian society.

The previous ethnographic descriptions of Armen and Satenik revealed a disjuncture between everyday realities and the younger generation’s skills for social reproduction. Here I will narrow the focus of analysis to practices of endurance in order to understand the effects of dispossession for affective or intuitive ways of navigating the world. The following life stories of Nora and Marine reveal the relations of cruel optimism to visions of “the good life” and the practices or strategies women rely on to navigate an unrecognizable world. These life histories were chosen because they are exemplars of the perceived distinctions between “new” and “traditional” imaginations of the good life. They also illustrate how cruelly optimistic attachments to unattainable versions of the good life can lead to exhaustion.

Nora’s story shows how a young woman who initially desired a “traditional” life as a wife and mother found it to be unsuitable and unattainable. Her subsequent story of constant mobility contrasts with Marine’s who had always desired independence but finds herself “stuck” in her parents’ home after the birth of her daughter and failed marriage. These stories indicate the stakes of cruel optimism, the practices for navigating it, and are suggestive of how the dissolution of affective intuition and a reliable vision of the world serve to reproduce the conditions of capitalism.

## *Nora*

Nora's story describes the desire for "traditional" life that included marriage and family, but her version of the good life eluded her. Her solution to this disenfranchisement has been to identify more with what many in Armenia gloss as "European" values—individuality, mobility, and freedom. Yet the realization of those values is also difficult as young women often experience social disciplining and pressure to uphold "traditional" roles. To escape this situation of confusion and contradiction, Nora recently left Armenia where she no longer has to endure the social disciplining of being a young unmarried woman. Her departure, however, does little to ease her longing to be a part of a world that is quickly dissolving and out of her reach.

Nora was born in 1991, the year of Armenian Independence, making her a part of the "generation of liberty." She never lived under the conditions of the Soviet system, but instead grew up during Armenia's "dark years" in the 1990s when gas, electricity, and many goods and services were in dramatically short supply as the country fought a war with neighboring Azerbaijan. She was born in a small city (<15,000) people in the south of country at a time when the region was rapidly deindustrializing, losing jobs as people were laid off from various industrial and agricultural factories that existed in the area. Yet, she was relatively lucky in that both of her parents who worked directly for the government were able to keep their jobs. Nora grew up well-educated with piano-lessons and tutors in nearly every subject to ensure Nora's acceptance into the university, and she was never asked or expected to learn the demanding skills of agricultural labor and housework that provided the resources that enabled her to pursue opportunities for education.

At 25, Nora had created for herself a robust, if patchwork, professional life that included language tutoring, translation work in both English and Spanish, work in the tourism industry, and a number of significant social and professional connections. She contributed significantly to the budget of her immediate family, helping to pay for the rented apartment she shares with family in Yerevan. Yet one of the constant anxieties and pressures in her life was a concern over a lack of suitable romantic interests and fulfilling the expectations of becoming a "good" Armenian woman through marriage and children. She had had a boyfriend. She waited for him when he went to university and she finished high school. She waited for him when he went into the army for two years of mandatory service. After his army service, he intended to move to Russia to be closer with his parents. At the time, Nora contemplated leaving the university early; she had one year left to complete her Master's degree. However, her boyfriend was very jealous of her work and she was wary of his jealousy and controlling reactions. After the initial

disappointment settled, Nora was glad she decided not to go to Russia with him; her own prediction was that she would have probably ended up divorced at 24 with a child to take care of.

After this disappointment with attaining the ideal of marriage and motherhood, Nora dedicated herself to her work, finishing post-graduate education, and choosing employment opportunities that would often take her on short trips to Europe. Yet due to the difficulty of finding meaningful, full-time employment in either Armenia or Europe, Nora decided to escape her frustrations of being a young woman in Armenia by moving to China to pursue an entirely different career path. There she can earn enough money to support herself and send some money back to her parents. She can also escape the expectation that one day she will become a “traditional” subservient wife and doting mother, an expectation she eschews but has not given up on. Though China provides sufficient opportunity for the present, Nora knows she will not settle there. She knows she will keep moving—hopefully to Europe or to the United States next—with an eye towards one day finding the right husband to have a family with.

Nora’s story recalls what Berlant (2011) and Povinelli (2011) identified as the ordinariness of crisis and “cruddiness” of endurance; there was no defining “trauma” or dramatic event, but rather a number of trying happenstances to which she must always be responding. In Nora’s case, her initial disillusionment with “traditional” expectations for women led her to pursue higher education and mobility. However, even though her education allowed her to be more mobile, this example suggests that sometimes mobility is simply that—mobility through space does not necessarily lead to more reliable intuition or satisfaction with one’s place in the world. Indeed, Nora must keep moving in order to maintain her optimism that the next place or the next opportunity will be better. After her education could not help her garner better employment in Armenia, she had to respond again with mobility.

This constant mobility exemplifies her form of endurance—a continual movement buttressed by the belief that the next place will be better than the last. Enduring in place is not an option for young women like Nora, so she continues to move to new places attached to the cruelly optimistic imagination of a “good life” under capitalist relations. Nora, then, is an

exemplar of rootlessness as endurance and a counter-example to Marine's story of eventual "stuckness" in a particular place.

### *Marine*

Marine's story reveals the reversal of this contradiction. Marine wanted a life of independence where she was financially "free" from her parents and able to make decisions over her own mobility, career path, and romantic life. However, following her decision to marry and an unplanned pregnancy a few years later, she found herself living with her husband's family in a tense situation that impeded her sense of independence. To relieve the pressure of that situation, she left Armenia with her husband and new-born baby. When the move abroad did not work out, she left her husband. She now finds herself confined at her parents' home with her young daughter, not having attained the satisfactions that mobility or financial independence seemed to promise in her youth.

Marine was born in 1983, making her about 5 years old in 1988 when an earthquake struck the city of Gyumri, a few miles from the village where her family lived. Her family members were displaced from their home for months and the family spent years living in a temporary dwelling that they slowly improved and expanded. The years of hardship caused by the earthquake were soon compounded by the collapse of the Soviet system. Her mother lost her job as an accountant and her father struggled to keep his own position at a local school. Though still a child when the Soviet period came to an end, Marine grew up at crossroads between two worlds.

On the one hand, Marine insisted upon pursuing a good education though her family struggled to support her during the process. Consequently, she worked to support herself even while studying, willingly taking part in (at that time) uncommon and socially tenuous activities such as selling goods at a market and living alone as a young woman. She also shouldered the burden of house work for her brother and his wife including cooking, cleaning, and washing while also going to university. When I met her, Marine had married, was living with her husband, and was very much a strong and independent woman. She proudly self-identified as a "modern" woman without a "Soviet" mentality, choosing not to be bothered by what people think about her clothes, her hair, or her lifestyle. She was working towards a graduate degree and doing consulting work for local research institutes.

On the other hand, Marine found herself to be a very “traditional” situation after the birth of her daughter. Upon learning of her pregnancy, she and her husband moved to a larger house which they shared with her husband’s parents. Armenians have historically practiced patrilocality where a young bride moves in with her husband and his family where she is often the most subordinate member of the household until the birth of her first son. In Marine’s case, the living arrangements were convenient at first as the additional space and support helped her through the pregnancy. Just before her daughter was born, however, her husband lost his job making them more financially dependent on his parents not only for their own needs, but also the costs of a newborn child. Their financial dependence on his parents meant the parents felt they had more say over Marine’s decisions and behavior. Tensions within the family quickly escalated after Marine’s daughter was born and there were disagreements about various techniques and strategies of child-rearing. Marine felt she was ill-suited to perform the roles and duties of a subservient and subordinate daughter-in-law and often found herself challenging her father-in-law’s decisions. Eventually, the disagreements became so protracted that Marine and her husband moved abroad where he could find enough work to support her and their daughter without the assistance of his parents.

Despite the hopes she had pinned on the strategy of mobility and independence, Marine’s situation did not improve. Her and her husband had several disagreements prompting her to return home to her parents with her daughter and eventually to get a divorce. She now faces numerous threats from her ex-husband and harassment from her relatives who believe she made poor decisions for her daughter. Lucky as she is to have the support of her parents, she has very limited options for the future. Even as she looks for employment to support herself—the opportunities are rare enough—her family continues to enforce traditional gendered expectations by chastising her for trying to work while her daughter is young.

Marine’s situation reveals the obstacles, and up to this point, the inability, of a young woman to attain her aspirations for independence despite her hard work and education. She had her own dreams that she never considered surrendering after the birth of her daughter. Though she is relieved to have escaped a difficult marriage, she finds herself with even less mobility and financial independence as she has lost some of her previous social networks and career opportunities. Her refusal to endure in a situation where she was expected to perform the responsibilities of a subservient wife and daughter-in-law has also resulted in the dissolution of her own fantasy of a good life where independence and freedom meant the ability to choose her own future.



The accumulation of insecurities in Marine's life suggests it is an exemplar of the exhaustion and loss of intuition that comes from the dissolution of cruelly optimistic attachments to a particular vision of the good life. Marine's life history reveals the shift from big dreams of (neoliberal) individualism expressed through independence to eventual "stuckness" in a particular time and place. For most of her life, Marine was resilient and determined, but mobility did not offer her the version of a good life she desired. Moving into her husband's family's home did not provide the support or comfort she had hoped for and moving abroad to escape did not provide the security or independence she imagined it might. Despite believing that education and mobility would help her to realize her imagined version of a good life, Marine is now "stuck" at her parents' home in the village she grew up in and always believe she would one day leave. The world as it has unfolded is unrecognizable to Marine; though she refused a "traditional" version of the good life to pursue a "new" one, the promised upward mobility and independence are as distant as ever. The unrecognizability of Marine's world has meant a loss of intuition for how to navigate through it.

Together, these life histories are examples of the dizzying effect of on-going transformation and the (geo)political manipulations of family and gender roles for young women in Armenia. They also highlight the significance of affect for understandings of endurance and social reproduction. The grounds on which young women in Armenia stand are constantly shifting, which is why their affective intuition for how to navigate an unstable world is so necessary but also clearly unreliable. Their desires for a reliable intuition are not demands for revolution or transcendence, but express the need to be free to think beyond the immediate. Yet as the life histories of Marine and Nora suggest, there is no clear path to success, no matter which version of the good life one strives for, and the result is a dizzying vertigo which

challenges their ability to navigate and endure their uncertain worlds. This vertigo is compounded by the ways that family and gender roles have been used by various groups—nationalists, international development programs, conservative groups, women’s rights NGOs, and others—to ensure their own policies and values. The result is a confusion of expectations for young women that they are not sure where they belong. Therefore, as illustrated by these life histories, young women find themselves either choosing to be hypermobile in hopes of finding a sense of security or stuck in place, unable to navigate out of the situation.

## **Conclusion**

Young women in Armenia are experiencing the consequences of crisis and transformation that have led to fluctuating gender roles and norms. On-going political and economic changes have up-ended the previously reliable expectation that marriage and family were the defining characteristics of a good life fantasy, leading young women to seek out new skills of social reproduction and endurance. The examples and stories discussed above suggest that young women’s lives are insecure if they desire a traditional role and that they likely lack the skills and affective endurance needed to survive this path. Yet if they seek to follow the “new” path defined by individualism and independence, this too is problematic as it is often unattainable. For the different generations of women in Armenia, this is expressed as generational vertigo (Smith 2012b). Young women in particular look at older generations’ strategies of endurance finding them untenable while also having no reliable alternative. The result is a dissolution of fantasies of the good life that could have been sustaining, if cruel (Berlant 2011). When even a cruelly optimistic attachment to a vision of the good life is no

longer available, subjects turn to new strategies of endurance—hypermobility or enduring in place—which may ultimately lead to exhaustion.

To address the role of affect for practices of endurance, this chapter has considered the multiple forms that dispossession can take on. Caroline Humphrey (1996) examined the significant segments of the population in the former Soviet Union who were transformed into new social groups she called “the dispossessed.” In post-Soviet Russia, the dispossessed were “themselves no longer possessed” (1996-97,70) as they were isolated from the collective domains that had become in practice “the key units disposing of property and people in Russia” (70). Following Humphrey (1996), I have argued that dispossession is more than economic; it can strip individuals of their political identity and affective well-being. Whereas the previous chapter explored the material and social forms of dispossession experienced in rural Armenia, this chapter has examined the affective consequences of the processes of dispossession; that is, what happens when individuals no longer possess a reliable intuition for how to navigate the world. Younger generations in Armenia, especially women, must navigate the terrain of ongoing dispossession in which the expectations of older generations and available opportunities are contradictory, producing the dizzying effects of generational vertigo (S. Smith 2012b) and leaving young women dispossessed of a reliable intuition for how to navigate their world.

Intuition and affective endurance also reveal how normative ideologies and practices work to produce subjects capable of navigating the world, and a reliable world for those subjects to exist in (Berlant 2011, 93; Althusser 1971). Within this world, capital accumulation through dispossession happens when material and social resources are privatized or individualized concentrating wealth in the hand of ever fewer, and making workers ever more vulnerable (Harvey 2003, Hartsock 2006). Capital ideologies produce subjects for that world, subjects

whose desires are mediated through attachments to modes of life to which they rarely remember consenting—desire for family and traditionally defined gender roles, desire for independence and mobility, or desire for both. Neoliberalization and the sense of on-going crisis in Armenia then might be viewed as both a moment and a space of transformation, not only between modes of production and modes of life, but also between different normative ideologies and sustaining fantasies. Young women in Armenia are currently suspended between two sets of expectations for what the good life should be and as a result have been dispossessed of an intuitive sense for how to navigate that world.

Affect draws attention to the ordinariness of crisis that has emerged as a result of on-going dispossession. As Berlant (2011, 225) notes, the crises of the recent past and the uncertainty of the near future demands constant cleanup and speculation about the future, but subjects do not yet have a framework for evaluating the situation in order to define it as an event. In this new ordinary present, subjects must consider what it means to live in a moment where plans do not work out and things do not seem to make sense. The goal of this chapter was to take stock of that ordinariness to see what was stuttering, halting, or made possible by it. Though practices of both mobility and enduring in place, young women remain optimistic (if cruelly so) to future in which they do have a better intuition. Attention to affective endurance and dispossession in Armenia has revealed the ways that young women are made vulnerable as they experience a depletion of resources *and* they are dispossessed of a world that is recognizable to them, despite remaining optimistic that someday their desires for that world will be realized. This situation of ordinary crisis and affective dispossession raises the questions of what alternatives remain for (re)making a fantasy of the good life that is sustainable and what kind of material infrastructure is needed to support it.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

In Armenia, neoliberalization has dramatically reshaped the nature and experience of everyday life, and for many, intensified struggles for political rights, economic security, and everyday social reproduction. In the preceding chapters, this dissertation has examined various forms of insecurity and uncertainty for women's lives in post-Soviet Armenia. To analyze the contours of neoliberalization in Armenia, I engaged with feminist and political economic approaches that facilitate the investigation of how global economic transformations affect everyday lives and how gender roles and subjectivities are being reworked and negotiated through various crises.

“The global” typically evokes a historical conjuncture of economic, regulatory, geopolitical, and cultural forces often glossed as globalization. Familiar features of the global include the “deregulation of markets, privatization of services, flexible production, structural adjustment, a proliferation of governmental bodies beyond the nation state, networked connectivity, increased spatial mobility, transnational organizing, and the deep burrowing of capital accumulation into the body and circuits of affect” (Pratt and Rosner 2013, 11). Feminist thinking is skeptical of grand, simplifying theories of globalization or neoliberalism, however, because they cannot begin to account for the complexities of individuals' life circumstances (Nagar et al 2002; Domosh and Seager 2001). Therefore, the centrality of intimacy, defined as

“embodied social relations that include mobility, emotions, materiality, belonging and alienation...[which] encompasses not only those entanglements rooted in the everyday, but also the subtlety of their interconnectedness to everyday intimacies in other places and times” becomes paramount for analysis (Mountz and Hyndman 2006, 447). Showing how the intimate and the global intertwine disrupts grand narratives of global relations through a focus on the specific, the quotidian, and the eccentric. It reveals how intimacy is caught up in relations of power, violence, and inequality, and therefore, cannot be held up as the epitome (or remaining site) of authenticity, caring, and equality.

This feminist framework draws attention to the ways that intimate spaces and bodies are bound up in various global processes from geopolitics to economic transformation. Studies of intimate geopolitics, for example, have shown the ways that reproductive bodies are caught up in territorial projects (Smith 2012) or how women can become effective vectors for sentimental politics which can fuel nationalism and an abstracted liberal human rights regime (Pratt 2003, Fluri 2011b; Oza 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer 2000). Blunt (2005) examines the intimate practices of domesticity among Anglo-Indian communities to show how the spatial politics of the home are written into narratives of modernity, imperialism, and nationalism. By looking at the legal regulation of love through marital and reproductive laws, Povinelli (2006, 175-176) argues that “love is a political event,” not simply a private, interpersonal affair. These laws are anchored in particular conceptions of the subject, the body, and its extension into the world (i.e. a body and person that is bounded and self-sovereign). Such examples reflect the constitutive role of intimate attachments in the formation of a territory, nation-state, and other global processes.

Thinking with the intimate global also highlights the significance of affect (Wright 2010). Recent attention to affect within feminist geography argues that emotion and affect are grounded

in the body, but that they also extend beyond the individual to a globalized frame (Pratt and Rosner 2012). For example, Sedgwick (2003) argues that affect does not reside within the discrete contours of the body but circulates among perceiving subjects (and objects). In this view, the perceiving subject is not an island but deeply and multiply connected to the surrounding world. Affect thus reinforces the feminist conceptualization of subjects as relational and constituted through and by attachments, determined not only by gender but by life experience, age, sexuality, and other elements. This view of the affective body shows how it is simultaneously global and intimate, interpreted and understood through its relation to a history of global migrations and conflicts. The affective body then is a testament to historical violence but also a site of resilience in the face of violent forces.

Following the contours of this feminist framework, I have investigated the nuances of economic restructuring in post-Soviet Armenia by looking at the intimate scale of the home and women's bodies, the financialization of social reproduction, and the role of affect and attachment for enduring. I have made three broad points regarding the processes of neoliberalization and on-going crisis in Armenia. First, I demonstrated that the intimate space of women's bodies and the family are bound up with (geo)political projects as various actors seek to manipulate them to further their own interests. As a result, certain values, family types, and gender roles are geopolitically marked as "traditional" or "European," "Eastern" or "Western." Both Euro-American international development programs and Russian-supported nationalist groups deploy the language of protection—protecting women's bodies from domestic violence or protecting families from foreign influences—while simultaneously ignoring the multiple forms of insecurity women are facing. This chapter served to describe the current discursive and ideological context in which women's daily lives and gender roles are entangled in various geopolitical and

economic contexts producing both a loss of intuition (discussed further in Chapter 5) and economic insecurity (discussed in Chapter 4).

Second, by extending the analysis of insecurity produced by international development programs for gender rights and domestic violence prevention, Chapter 4 focused on economic insecurities and the transformation of economic practices among rural households. I examined the financialization of social reproduction in Armenia where households are increasingly entangled in global systems of finance through a reliance on high-interest loans to secure both their everyday needs and provide support for younger generations. Greater access to financial credit, whether through bank loans or microcredit programs, is intended to help alleviate the problems of social reproduction by helping households secure housing, invest in their livelihoods, and serve as a safety net in the case of unexpected expenses. However, in Armenia, financial credit is actually quite extractive as the high-interest rates and short repayment schedules serve to deplete families of necessary resources. Dispossession by financialization serves to perpetuate capital accumulation by relying on non-capitalist practices included women's gendered labor of social reproduction (Hartsock 2006, Pollard 2013). Using Rai et al's (2014) concept of depletion, this chapter asked how long can the gendered and generational labor that supports social reproduction can be sustainable under conditions of such on-going dispossession. I argued that not only are the existing practices of social reproduction being depleted by financialization, but that these practices are perpetuating the general trajectory of developments that necessitated the use of loans and credit in the first place.

Third, my investigation of generational labor and material forms of dispossession through financialization also led me to consider how on-going crisis in Armenia has led to a sense of disillusionment and displacement for young women. Many young women feel a dizzying



disconnection from older generations' strategies of endurance as they are both drawn to and alienated from opposing normative expectations for the good life—a traditional or nationalist ideology that expects women to be good mothers and domestic caretakers and a “modern” set of expectations that encourages women to pursue their individual interests. Caught between these two opposing expectations, a generation of young women is struggling to maintain a reliable intuition about how to navigate a world that is increasingly unstable and where visions of the “good life” are no longer sustaining, but cruelly optimistic (Berlant 2011). Attention to the affective transformations suggests that processes of dispossession produced by neoliberalization include, but also extend beyond, material forms. Young women may not only be disconnected from the skills of social reproduction that have supported their families, they may also be dispossessed of their affective or intuitive orientation to the world.

The archive of activities and negotiations presented in this dissertation and I have demonstrated how social reproduction, attachment, affect, and the domestic are all inseparable from the geopolitical and the economic as the commodification (or geopoliticization) of these areas of life devalues them in ways essential to capitalist accumulation and processes of dispossession.

The archive of activities and negotiations used to support the claims above might appear to be trivial because they do not deal with heroic actions that are often associated with (political) resistance. Instead the analyses presented here have turned toward deflation, depletion, unreliable forms of endurance, and the ordinariness of crisis. It has not been a romantic story of resistance to hegemonic ideologies through a politics of refusal, but a measure of the impasses faced by women in the emerging present. Cumulatively, these accounts document and analyze the production of various forms of insecurity and uncertainty—political, economic, and

affective—faced by citizens in Armenia. They also describe various practices of social reproduction and endurance through which neoliberalization and dispossession are both negotiated and perpetuated. I have demonstrated the ways that practices of social reproduction, attachment, affect, and the domestic are inseparable from the geopolitical and the economy as the commodification (or geopoliticization) of these areas of life devalues them in ways that are critical to capitalist accumulation and multiple forms of dispossession.

### **Globally Intimate Families**

At the center of these on-going transformations and crises is the traditional Armenian family and the women who are the “hearth” and “pillar” of those families. The family has often been a problematic site for feminist thinking. On the one hand, feminists have been quick to critique the patriarchal family because it assumes the place for women is in the domestic sphere, which then excludes them from participation in the public sphere and the political (Landes 1998, Rose 1993, Domosh and Seager 2001). This creates a problematic division between public and private that has been thoroughly critiqued and dismantled by feminist theorists (Staheli 1996, Secor 2012, Fraser 2013, Domosh 1998). On the other hand, despite the criticisms of the public/private dualism and normative gender roles, families do provide a sense of security, safety, and belonging for their members (hook 1990). For Armenians, a lack of family and social networks leaves people feeling isolated, more vulnerable and marginalized, and unable to advance socially or economically (Ishkanian 2007). Furthermore, many Armenians continue to put close family connections as a strong indicator of happiness and success (Center for Gender and Leadership Studies, Gender Barometer Survey 2015). Thus, home spaces and family

connections are important sites of belonging *and* alienation that are linked to one's sense of identity and to one's place in the broader community (Blunt 2005, Blunt and Dowling 2006).

In Armenia, families were historically the key means through which individuals navigated on-going crisis, and this is evident in both material practices of social reproduction and in nationalist narratives that celebrate families as a source of security and resilience amidst crisis (see also Dudwick 1997 and Platz 2000). What is unique about the contemporary context of crisis is that family has become the defining pivot point around which various forms of insecurity are articulated and negotiated. Family labor, particularly the labor of social reproduction performed by women, continues to be a source of social and economic security. The work of gardening, animal husbandry, cheese-making, preserving, exchange and reciprocity through social networks, and other forms of care work performed by women are significant to the financial security of extended family. Thus, the domestic spaces of the home and family have been the sites of non-capitalist labor that has sustained families through difficult times during the Soviet period and after it.

Yet in the current context, the common experience and perception of the family in Armenia as a site of security away from the chaotic world of on-going crisis has been up-ended. Neatly defined gendered divisions of labor and corresponding patriarchal gender roles are less sustainable in a neoliberal economy as women increasingly take on the roles of consumers and workers. In reaction to these shifting gender roles within the family, various political groups manipulate public understandings of the home and family in support of their own (geopolitical) interests. At the same time, financialization is speeding up the depletion of the resources needed for social reproduction, increasing the need for women to participate in waged labor. Gendered and generational practices of social reproduction then serve to subsidize neoliberalism, absorbing

the impacts of economic crisis and displacing responsibility onto individuals and away from state institutions (Elson 1993, Stenning et al 2010).

One of the major contributions of feminist scholarship on economic development is an insistence on looking beyond the formal spaces of waged labor to intimate and informal sites—the household, the street, the kitchen—that subsidize, constitute and express “global capitalism.” Feminist have drawn attention to the economic significance of informal production, care, love, and reciprocity through attention to gendered practices of social reproduction and their role in perpetuating class structures (Katz 2004; Nagar et al 2002; Perrons 2012; Rankin 2004). Yet these practices are not only gendered, but as I have shown in the case of Armenia, they are also generationally defined as the skills and labor burdens of older women may vastly differ from those of young women (see also Katz 2004). Examining generational differences and intergenerational relations adds complexity to analyses of the intimate and the global by revealing shifts in family structure and dynamics related to economic transformations. Earlier work on housing in Latin American, for instance showed growth of more extended, intergenerational household as families struggled to cope with raising costs (Gilbert 1985), which contrasts to the sense of family breakdown being experienced and politicized in Armenia (Ishkanian 2004; Platz 2000; Dudwick 1997). Furthermore, dynamics between and across generations draws attention to the temporalities, as well as spatialities, through which social reproduction is accomplished.

In Chapter 4, I highlighted some of these spatial and temporal nuances by looking at the generational forms of labor and the on-going depletion of resources within extended households. The generational labor burdens for social reproduction are often unequal as older generations perform more work to support the lives and new livelihoods of younger generations. Older

generations tend to perform agricultural and household production which provides for an extended families basic needs, enabling younger generations to pursue higher education, migration, and other new forms of work that take them away from villages and agricultural production. Despite the fact that older generations often support these practices directly or indirectly, the divergences between generations contributes to a sense of generational vertigo with families (Smith 2012b)—an apprehension about a future, unknowable to older generations except through glimpses of the decisions and experiences of the youth. The apprehension of older generations for the future is expressed as concern for younger family members who do not want to continue the kind of (agricultural) labor that older generations see as necessary for social reproduction. These apprehensions suggest there is a fear of depletion—a widening gap between resource inflows and resource outflows needed for social reproduction (Rai et al 2014)—which may produce new forms of insecurity in the present, but more devastating consequence for a more distant future.

The negotiated experiences of neoliberalization and generational vertigo in Armenia does not, however, suggest that women and families lack the means to persist, nor does the depletion of resources foretell the end of informal economic practices and reciprocity among kin (see also Stenning et al 2010). Katz (2004), for example, pointed to the practices of resilience among community members in Howa, Sudan and Harlem, New York as everyday means of negotiating the consequences of global capitalism. Practices of resilience refer to those small acts which themselves foster other, new ways to get by (Katz 2004, 244). These might include new forms of work, altered domestic divisions of labor, and other practices that negotiate new contradictions between “new” and “old” practices. This dissertation has identified a number of forms of resilience in Armenia such as migration, increased household production, and even the recent

increase in use of loans and high-interest credit. The contradiction inherent in practices of resilience, however, is that as members remake themselves for the new circumstances they face, they may also help to develop and sustain capital accumulation elsewhere. While sustaining in the short-term, practices of resilience support the general trajectory of developments that compelled those practices in the first place.

In this context, people are trying to find ways to navigate and endure an uncertain world where the previously reliable institution—the family—is suspended between competing and problematic ideologies without a clear path for security or certainty. Gender roles and norms for women are fluctuating such that marriage and the family are no longer the defining characteristics of a “good life” for young women in Armenia. The geopoliticization of the concept of “gender” and the role of the “traditional” family within Armenian society further illustrate the ideological divide between “modern” and “traditional” roles for women. These gendered expectations are played out on women’s bodies and are generationally marked. On one hand, young women in Armenia face pressure to fulfill traditional gender roles of wife, mother, and caretaker, but may not have the skills needed to make a “traditional” version of life sustainable. More significantly, many women do not feel as if they have a place in that world. On the other hand, young women are also presented with the seemingly limitless possibilities of a modernizing world as well as numerous obstacles for realizing those possibilities. Thus, I have argued that neoliberalization in Armenia has transformed not only modes of production through privatization and deindustrialization, but also sustaining intuitions for navigating crisis.

## Thistles

The experiences and life histories of Armenian citizens presented here suggest that subjects acknowledge the lack of reciprocity between themselves and the world having experienced nearly constant crisis in their lifetimes. However, they often refuse to see that lack of reciprocity as an end, seeking instead opportunities to persist in the hope of repairing that world through either constant mobility or through a stubborn persistence in place. For Berlant (2011) that hope for a better world might only amount to a toxic, cruel optimism for a world that is actually irreparable. In this sense, subjects might be “sutured...to a cramped and unimaginative space of committed replication, *just in case* it will be different” (2011, 259). If this relation of cruel optimism—a hopeful attachment to a world that inhibits flourishing—is all that remains, we are left to ask if the refusal to give in or wear out is the best we can hope for. In other words, what, if anything, can endurance (and studies of crisis and resilience) tell us about a world that might be otherwise?

Povinelli (2011) similarly noted that critical examinations of crisis, insecurity, and endurance open up the question of what an alternative world might be. Yet analyses often leave their readers without a description of where or what that alternative might be (2010, 188), despite the common expectation that such investigations should inform normative solutions or provide prescriptive definitions of what alternatives might look like. Povinelli, however, responds by arguing that negative critiques can actually function as positive descriptions for a world that might still emerge. In her view, critical theory shifts the viewpoint of the normative by presenting a background perspective, and this pivot is precisely what provides critique with a positive, rather than negative relief. In other words, looking at the background operations of

power relations in the normative world is positive in that what appears to be a negative critique (“not that”) becomes a positive description of “the preconditions in which some new social content might be nurtured” (2011, 191). Just as Nora and Marine, discussed in Chapter 5, refused to give in or collapse under the weight of pressures and minor cumulative acts of displacement from the world, their refusals to give in or wear out are positive actions. They are continuing to act, to endure in an unreliable social world despite the fact that they do not have a clearly defined sense of what happens next, or even what a more reliable world might look like. Following Povinelli, their endurance, their statements of “not this” make a difference even if they do not immediately produce a more sustainable alternative.

Berlant (2011) responds to her own question—is a collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat the best we can hope for—by looking to theorists (Graeber 2004; Gibson-Graham 2006) who advance a philosophical pragmatism in which political subjects do not see solidarity and consensual community as the end point for a more reliable world. Instead this kind of orientation to the political would resonate with Agamben’s (2000) “means without end,” in which “the pure mediality of being in the present of the political and the sensual is what matters and not any ends or preconditions” (Berlant 2011, 260). In this view, the commitment to repairing the world does not require a collectively held end goal or good life fantasy, nor does it require demonstrable effectiveness of one’s own actions. There is nothing to prove in Berlant’s view of positive, political action, just a willingness to remain without assurances in the present or for the future. It is a revitalization of political action “not first by mapping out the better good life but by valuing political action as the action of not being worn out by politics” (2011, 262).

Both Povinelli (2010) and Berlant (2011) avoid pursuit of a predetermined, normative definition of what a more sustainable world might look like derived from a study of the lives of



those who endure. Instead, they embrace the positivity and potentiality inherent in actors that persist through suffering and displacement. I am inclined to follow their assessments regarding crisis and endurance in an unreliable world. There are no easy, normative solutions to the insecurities produced by the geopoliticization of family and women's bodies, the financialization of everyday life, and the dispossession of intuition experienced by women in Armenia. Their endurance by itself is a form of political action, a refusal to surrender to a world that is not reliable and certainly not reciprocal to their efforts. And, though it is not heroic or transformative, their endurance evokes the thistle of Tolstoy's novel: prickly, tough, stubborn, and unwilling to stop fighting to preserve its place atop the stem of thorns.

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## APPENDIX 1: NGO LANDSCAPE IN YEREVAN, ARMENIA 2016

### Members of The Armenian Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women and Other Active Women’s Groups

Local Women’s NGOs	Organizer/ Director	Description of Activities and Affiliations	Website
Women’s Resource Center	Lara Aharonian	<p>The Women’s Resource Center of Armenia (WRCA) was founded in 2003. It is the first drop-in resource center created for young women in Armenia in the post-soviet era. The main objective of WRCA is to give women necessary tools to become active members of society through various types of teaching, training, and support. The WRCA work ethic is based on a democratic structure where women make decisions and run the organization collectively. Volunteer work, participation, and active membership are all essential parts of the activities offered. In the beginning stages, they worked within the Yerevan State University. In 2006, WRCA moved outside of the university, and began to offer services to all women regardless of their age, education, sexual orientation, or social status.</p> <p>WRCA was among the first non-governmental organizations in Armenia that raised the issue of sexual violence towards women, and offered a hotline for survivors. Since 2008, the Sexual Crisis Center offers legal and psychological counseling.</p> <p>The organization is active in the South Caucasus region. They are involved in activities to solve the issues of gender discrimination and gender based violence among refugee women from Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Syria. They are a founding member of the Women’s Coalition For Peace and the Young Women’s Network of South Caucasus.</p> <p>WRCA has a branch in Nagorno-Karabakh working on raising the voices of women directly affected by the conflict and their involvement in peace processes.</p> <p>The Women's Resource Center aims to contribute to the creation of an Armenian democratic society where feminist values and aspirations are accepted. By challenging individual and political patriarchal attitudes towards women's involvement in all spheres of public life, WRCA works towards creating a space free from all kind of discrimination where all women and girls can feel empowered to live and act in safety and peace.</p> <p>The Women's Resource Center is a feminist organization working with and for women. Its main goal is to create a safe space for all women and girls to empower themselves and challenge patriarchal institutions and discriminatory attitudes for a more inclusive and equal society. Through consciousness-raising, education and support, we aim at creating a safe and enabling environment for women and girls to develop their personal and professional skills and self-confidence, engage in collective actions for change.</p>	<a href="http://www.womenofarmenia.org/en/#priority">http://www.womenofarmenia.org/en/#priority</a>
Women’s Support Center	Maro Matosian,	<p>The objective is to create a safe environment for women — a place where they receive support, empathy, and the knowledge that they are not alone in their struggles.</p>	<a href="http://www.womensupportcenter.org/mission-and-vision/">http://www.womensupportcenter.org/mission-and-vision/</a>

		<p>Women are provided with practical learning about domestic violence, as well as counseling that bolsters self-esteem and confidence. The Center also strives to change myths and taboos regarding domestic violence and, more broadly, the role of women in society. They uphold progressive values that promote political, economic, and social rights for women. Thus, they are involved in not only social work, but also are combating larger, thornier problems of gender inequality, stereotypes, patriarchal values, so that women can live in safety, in peace, and as equals. The Center takes special interest in advocacy efforts.</p> <p>Together with accomplished groups such as the Women's Resource Center NGO, they try to raise awareness among young women about positive values and healthy families based on relationships of partnership, not control. They strive to help women achieve their potential as valuable members of and contributors to Armenian society. They are member of the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women, an ad hoc alliance of feminist, social work, and advocacy groups.</p> <p>The Center offers a hotline, walk-in services, legal and psychological counseling, training sessions, and community outreach. At the center they raise awareness about domestic violence so women can identify it, see the warning signs, learn safety plans and how to become stronger to be able to combat it. When a woman's life is threatened or she decides to come out of an abusive relationship, it is considered a most dangerous phase. To address this problem, they started a comprehensive shelter program — one that enables abused women and their children to recover fully in privacy and safety. In the US in the 1970s, women began to speak up about battery. Until then, many people thought men had a right to batter their women. Many changes occurred since the 70s and we believe that the same support to women and raising awareness towards the issue will help women in Armenia to feel safe and their children be raised in a positive and healthy environment and not be scared by violence.</p>	
Women's Rights Center	Susanna Vardanyan	<p>Women's Rights Center (WRC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization operating in Armenia. It is a voluntary union of people that have joined their efforts for the sake of accomplishing their shared goals to prevent domestic violence against women and their children, as well as to protect women's reproductive and sexual health and rights.</p> <p>WRC has its representatives and group of activists in all regional cities of Armenia.</p> <p>Organization's vision is to see Armenia becoming a democratic country free from any kind of violence including domestic violence, where the women's rights are respected as human rights, where women are independent, safe, protected and strong.</p>	<a href="http://www.wrcorg.am/en/about_us.htm">http://www.wrcorg.am/en/about_us.htm</a>

		<p>Main goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To prevent domestic violence against women and their children;</li> <li>• To protect women's and their children's right to be free from violence;</li> <li>• To support improvement of mechanisms of persecution for domestic violence;</li> <li>• To protect women's reproductive and sexual health and rights.</li> </ul>	
Society Without Violence	A. Arutshyan	<p>The organization was founded in 2001. Since its establishment the organization is implementing projects focused on women's empowerment, young girls' public awareness and participation raise, promotion of social activism and leadership skills as well as contribution to the formation of women human rights defenders' institutional system.</p> <p>They envision a society, where the state is governed by people, who respect and promote gender equality, where all women and girls enjoy equal human rights, opportunities and fundamental freedoms, where there is no gender based violence and discrimination and where women equally participate on all decision making levels. The mission is to educate and empower girls and women, promote gender equality and raise the awareness of the public, advocate for women's representation and participation in all levels of decision making and peace building processes, contribute to the elimination of gender based stereotypes, discrimination and violence, and increase the responsibility and accountability of duty bearers to protect and fulfill women's rights.</p>	<a href="http://www.swv.am/index.php/en/">http://www.swv.am/index.php/en/</a>
PINKArmenia		<p>PINK Armenia work in the spheres of sexual health, human rights and gender issues. We promote universal respect and tolerance.</p> <p>The activities of the NGO take place both in Yerevan and in regions of Armenia. At the "Information, Education, Communication" center (Yerevan), which was opened with the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the visitors have the possibility to participate in trainings, discussions, movie screenings, receive free of charge and anonymous counseling regarding sexual health and human rights, use the library and other services provided by the organization.</p> <p>According to their website:  "Public Information and Need of Knowledge" NGO encourages everyone to be active citizens of Armenia, contribute to the constructive changes and to the prosperity of the civil society.</p> <p>They started their activities in 2007. It was an initiative of a group of young and enthusiastic people to create an organization which would encourage safe sexual relations and foster human rights protection.</p> <p>Starting from the very first day of the ngo's functioning, they have lead activities to increase public awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.</p> <p>In the sphere of human rights protection PINK Armenia promotes the ideas of equality and acceptance of vulnerable groups.</p>	<a href="http://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/">http://www.pinkarmenia.org/en/</a>

		<p>The target group of the organization is the youth and especially the vulnerable ones.</p> <p>Vision - Society, where human rights of all are protected and everybody is accepted regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity and/or gender expression.</p> <p>Mission- Create a safe space for LGBT people by promoting well-being and protection in all spheres of life. With this mission, Pink Armenia aims to achieve the full protection of the rights of LGBT people and equality before the law in our country by strengthening the capacity of LGBT people, influencing decision-makers' policies and the approaches of the public.</p>	
Center for Gender and Leadership Studies at Yerevan State University	Gohar Shahnazaryan	<p>USAID, Arizona State University, Melikian Center YSU Center for Gender and Leadership Studies was established on May 7, 2013 in the framework of "Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Armenia" three-year USAID project. The project is implemented with the cooperation The Melikian Center; Russian, Eurasian &amp; East European Studies and The School of Social Transformations, Arizona State University.</p> <p>According to their website:</p> <p>The main goal of the Center is to promote gender equality and leadership in the Armenian society. YSU Center for Gender and Leadership Studies provides comprehensive research, training, and outreach functions engaging Armenian higher education institutions, local NGOs and international agencies in training women for career promotion and professional leadership.</p> <p>Their goals include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To raise awareness on gender issues in the Armenian society, and influence policies on gender-related matters with instructional, research, advocacy, and outreach activities.</li> <li>To provide students with cutting-edge training through newly designed graduate and undergraduate curricula in women and gender studies.</li> <li>To collaborate with the YSU Alumni and the Career Center, which specialize in career mentoring, workshops, and seminars to help women in utilizing educational capital into career, professional, and political leadership advancements</li> <li>To develop a sustainable outreach strategy to link CGLS /Center for Gender and Leadership Studies/with recognized and active women's NGOs, state and international organizations, and higher educational institutions in and beyond the borders of Yerevan.</li> <li>To develop an outreach program of conferences, professional networking, and other training opportunities for Armenian women seeking professional advancement in local private and public sectors.</li> <li>To serve as an interdisciplinary research platform to advance research and public policies on gender issues and women's leadership.</li> </ul>	<a href="http://ysu.am/gender/">http://ysu.am/gender/</a>

## Conservative Armenian Nationalist Groups

Group Name	Organizer	Description of Activities and Affiliations	Website
Pan-Armenian Parental Committee	Armen Boshyan	<p>This organization is an unofficial branch of the “All-Russian Parental Resistance” movement founded Sergey Kurghinyan. They follow Kurghinyan in believing that the collapse of the USSR was a “personal tragedy,” and their mission is to discover who is at fault. The group advocates against the law on gender equality and domestic violence protection through its Facebook and YouTube blog pages using anti-Western language. The group has been active in protesting gender rights legislation in Armenia since 2013.</p> <p>Հանուն ընտանիքի և ավանդական հոգևոր արժեքների պաշտպանություն. [Translation: For the protection of family and traditional spiritual values.]</p>	<p><a href="http://www.hanun.am">www.hanun.am</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2zZTAU93JY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2zZTAU93JY</a></p>
Stop G7	Armen Boshyan, Hayk Ayvazyan	<p>This is largely a webpage dedicated to news articles, blog posts, and videos analyzing the gender rights and domestic violence legislation to reveal their “perversions” and threats to the nation.</p>	<a href="http://stop-g7.com/">http://stop-g7.com/</a>
Yerevan Geopolitical Club	Armen Boshyan, Hayk Ayvazyan	<p>Their website includes videos analyzing the domestic violence law. These videos and website are published in Russian and some articles and videos feature prominent members of Russian political groups. Their “vkontakte” page was created in 2002 January 1; Youtube channel, and Twitter accounts became active in June 2012.</p> <p>The following information comes from their website: <u>Organization Purpose:</u> YGC is an organization that engages in scientific and educational activities in the fields of geopolitics, political science, political geography, globalistics, esotericism. YGC unites people by interests and gives them the opportunity to develop their knowledge, exchange them and publish their works. YGC is an organization for people who think out of box, who love their country, nation, family, who care about the destiny of mankind, and apart of all these, the Armenian nation and big brother nations.</p> <p><u>YGC does not:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. YGC does not intervene in political intrigues, games and events in Armenia and abroad.</li> <li>2. YGC is not a supporter of any party, political power or candidate.</li> <li>3. The internal political views of the YGC is neutral: any attempt to speak on behalf of the YGC without the neutrality of the internal political atmosphere ( support any of the sides) leads to an automatic exclusion from the club.</li> </ol> <p><u>Statements of the YGC</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.YGC prepares collective statements on different events in the world, objectively assessing the event and offering YGC opinion on that. The YGC can also make</li> </ol>	<a href="http://geoclub.info/">http://geoclub.info/</a>

		<p>statements on the events taking place in Armenia, offering a collective point of view of the spiritual elite of the Armenian people.</p> <p>2. YGC has the right to help spread the statements or public letters of scientific organizations, citizens, private companies, if they do not contain political agitation or appeals violating Armenian legislation. of self-development and broadening of the horizons.</p> <p>The board of the club decides on cooperation with certain organizations that do not contradict the views of the club.</p> <p>Financing of the club is carried out by means of comradesly collection of funds for the implementation of certain events.</p>	
HASAK political party	Armen Ghukasyan	<p>The “Social Justice” political party known for their pro-Russian positions and affiliations with Russian political leaders. The party is sponsored by the Russian Embassy. They recently joined the protests against the domestic violence law in 2017.</p> <p>The party was established on Aug 10 2016.</p> <p>According to their website: Mission is to turn Armenia into an all-Armenian home that will be so powerful and flourishing so that Armenians from all over the world can repatriate to their homeland and settle here.</p> <p>About - Intellectual strength, fresh ideas, new generation - this is all about the party.</p> <p>The main goal of the party is to establish an atmosphere of social justice in Armenia, to reduce the huge gap between the poor and the rich and to draw the attention of all political and civil forces to social justice and national interests in Armenia.</p> <p>The ideology of the party is the social-conservativeness, which includes a policy of gradually happening positive changes that are acceptable for the majority.</p>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/hasak/">https://www.facebook.com/hasak/</a>