

The Depoliticised Sexism in the Political Arena: Civil Society's Response and the Silence of the Systems

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Abstract

This essay addresses the manifestations of sexism in Armenia's political arena, analyzing specific examples amid the lack of adequate response. The authors highlight civil society as the primary actor that consistently challenges and condemns sexist political discourse. They also critique the absence of a systemic response to these manifestations within the political system.

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Introduction

“Politics is a filthy, dirty business; it’s no place for a woman.” This is what the political system reinforces. Whether unconsciously, or, at times, quite deliberately, this is precisely how many politicians perceive politics. Under the guise of being “advocates for women’s empowerment,” we have repeatedly witnessed politicians – particularly men – insulting, denigrating, making sexual innuendos and remarks bordering on harassment, towards male and female politicians, journalists, and other colleagues. We have seen these manifestations time and again: a male politician, without hesitation, emphasized a colleague’s gender, stating we should be grateful he was not born a woman;¹ another accused a female colleague of being sexually suggestive from a parliamentary podium simply for opposing him.² A journalist was told to go to a hairdresser for asking a seemingly provocative question;³ another male politician was accused of sexual violence. Yet another publicly scrutinized a colleague’s sex life, marital status, hair, and lips, while a leading political figure suggested his rival “carry on shagging his uncle’s wife.”⁴ We all remember the happy smiles in the first rows of the chamber during a former minister of justice’s speech, as a button on her blouse came undone – to say nothing of the sexualised and gendered insults that have become commonplace in political discourse.

Sexism knows no boundaries, and it would perhaps be naive to confine it to a single definition. Nowadays, there is a widespread fear of artificial intelligence and a forthcoming revolution; yet, this overshadows decades-long struggles against sexism, racism, wars, human trafficking, slavery, torture and other man-made menaces. The critique of sexism, both in practice and in extensive academic literature, points to issues familiar to the

1 | Robert Kocharyan, “Fortunately, Pashinyan wasn’t born a woman; that would be a national disgrace,” panorama.am, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbM_DgX8oGc.

2 | Zara Hovhannisyan, “Areni Simonyan’s entire speech was discriminatory, sexist, and demeaning, targeting the opposition in general and women in particular,” MediaLab, <https://medialab.am/61573/>.

3 | Andranik Kocharyan, “Don’t shout! I know how our boys are doing. Go to a hairdresser,” a1plus.am, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6DG-3SEHow>.

4 | Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Facebook post - <https://bit.ly/4jQoARw>

wider feminist community. The difficulty of the struggle lies in the fact that the manifestations of sexism, in their scale, scope, and direction, truly have no limits. Today it is the disparagement of a woman's genitalia;⁵ tomorrow, it is a call to set a trans woman on fire;⁶ the next day, it is the judgment of a schoolgirl for not being "girly" enough.⁷ Why should a child think about their sexuality more than Pythagoras's theorem, gravitational force, or caring for the environment? These questions are not rhetorical; they point to the fact that the very systems striving to dismantle stereotypes unfortunately fall into the traps they are fighting against.

5 | "Society must reject and not legitimize hate speech against women," A joint statement by NGOs regarding Vardan Ghukasyan's unacceptable remarks, factor.am, <https://factor.am/876370.html>.

6 | Yelena Sargsyan, "Nothing has changed in the city; they've simply killed and burned a trans* woman," <https://bit.ly/4qVh0r2>

7 | Evidence from practice.

This essay, or cluster of reflections, is intended to highlight key ideas from a lengthy and ongoing discussion. The text should be read as a critical engagement with one's own thoughts, beliefs, work, and critiques. In the authors' view, the text is situated at the crossroads of accessible academic inquiry and well-founded public discourse. It is not a manifesto, nor is it intended to be manipulated by any side during an election campaign – let alone to serve as an accusation against those who fight sexism. Rather, it is a compilation of reflections by a small group of individuals who in one way or another, relate to these anxieties and everyday concerns. This is an opportunity to reflect on issues often sidelined in primary discussions, particularly given the prevailing chaos and the atmosphere of panic surrounding the anticipated future.

Sexism and Armenian Politics

When discussing sexism, it is essential to recognize its systemic nature; it is not merely a manifestation of one person's behavior, or a single offensive remark. The sphere in which sexism operates and flourishes is much broader and more public – spanning from political parties and the media to public discourse and institutional culture. All of these reproduce the same stereotypes: the masculine as the standard, and a woman's existence as secondary, derivative of the man.

Sexist expressions do not appear out of thin air, but are based on well-established – though sometimes invisible – rules that determine who should speak loudly, whose concerns deserve serious consideration, and who can be humiliated without serious consequences. When the political system is built on displays of force, derogatory language, and performative aggression, the female body, sexuality, identity, and behavior are transformed into political tools. The result is not a series of random sexist remarks, but a systemic manifestation of sexism that serves competing political interests while further entrenching social inequalities.

Power is not demonstrated solely in physical form, nor is physical violence the only means of reaffirming it. As Bourdieu notes, power, or male dominance, often manifests as "symbolic violence."⁸ These are the invisible, everyday forms through which male dominance over women is reasserted: through words, thoughts, and actions that go unquestioned and are accepted as a "natural phenomenon." Such violence often goes unnoticed by the victim, because these symbolic rituals transform power into a sense of legitimacy and law. Consequently, manifestations of symbolic violence by

⁸ | Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

the state often escape the notice of analysts as well; yet, the very fact that symbolic violence remains unrecognised (*the paradox of doxa*),⁹ reinforces the myth of the naturalness of domination.

If we apply these theoretical lenses to the Armenian political sphere, we see various manifestations of sexism: sexualised insults, attacks on physical appearance, a struggle for masculinity at the expense of denigrating the “feminine,” moral judgments regarding women’s behavior, the infantilisation of women in political discourse, and more broadly, institutional sexism within political parties — all of which are amplified by the media, especially in the digital era.

Another philosopher further clarifies the systemic nature of sexism. Judith Butler argues that gender is not a natural fact, but a constantly repeated performance shaped by societal expectations.¹⁰ In Armenian politics, these performances are governed by rigid rules: male politicians are expected to embody authority and confrontation, while women are expected to be restrained and modest. What happens, then, when a woman dares to step outside these gendered performative acts? She is immediately met with a barrage of sexualised attacks intended to return her “to her place.” Conversely, male politicians — socialized to be confrontational and advance their political agendas in this way — target femininity, using sexist remarks against women, to humiliate their male opponents. Here, the logic mirrors what Simone de Beauvoir described: “woman represents only the negative.”¹¹

*“...because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity; a man is in his right by virtue of being man; it is the woman who is in the wrong.”*¹²

Because the woman is viewed as the wrong and the negative, attributing feminine characteristics to a male political opponent becomes a highly effective tool for humiliation. This is what the majority of male politicians do.

One of the most extreme manifestations of sexism is misogyny. As Kate Manne defines it:

9 | Bourdieu’s “paradox of doxa” refers to the process by which individuals who are disadvantaged by a social order nevertheless accept it as natural and self-evident, thereby unintentionally contributing to its reproduction.

10 | Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

11 | Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011): 28.

12 | Ibid, 28.

“...mysogyny should be understood primarily as the “law enforcement” branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function policing and enforcing its governing norms and expectations.”¹³

13 | Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 78.

Similarly, sexism should also be understood “as the justificatory branch of a patriarchal order that has the overall function of rationalizing and justifying patriarchal social relations.”¹⁴ Sexism operates when the differences between the sexes – already manifest in the social field as gender roles – are naturalized, making the patriarchal order logical and inevitable. It follows that the patriarchal system is based on a rigid division of gender roles which, according to the principle of binary opposition, imposes specific expectations for gender roles on both women and men, particularly in politics. No matter how obediently a woman accepts and performs her gender role in accordance with these rules, the very state of being a woman within the patriarchal system is treated as a humiliating phenomenon – or, to use the Russian slang word, *zapadlo* (“dishonourable”).¹⁵ In the patriarchal system, a woman’s place is one of otherness, an existence implicitly subordinate to the man that requires constant justification, whereas sexism functions by normalising this otherness and the resulting humiliation, rendering it commonplace and natural.

15 | For a detailed history and etymology of the term, see: <https://russian7.ru/post/cho-to-oznachaet-slovo-zapadlo-v-russk/> (in Russian).

If we project this principle of otherness onto the Armenian political arena, we will find out that the latter – inherently (as throughout the world) coded as masculine – regards a woman’s entry as an “alien” intrusion. This also explains why, regardless of how strictly a female politician follows the rules of the political game, or how effectively she brings about real changes and implements reforms, she remains an outsider in a man’s world of politics. Consequently, women are left with little choice but to maintain their gender performance under the “male gaze,”¹⁶ while men remain unwilling to relinquish their hegemonic masculinity.¹⁷

16 | Sandra Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” In *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990): 63–82.

Numerous examples illustrate how male politicians use sexist behavior to “put women in their place.” The first, and perhaps most common tactic is to question a woman’s morality. For instance, Alen Simonyan, Speaker of the National Assembly, suggested that MP Ani Samsonyan should speak

17 | Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

less about him, because he is married, adding *"I get the impression there is something manic about you."*¹⁸ More recently, Arthur Hovhannisyan, Secretary of the "Civil Contract" faction, suggested during a press briefing that opposition MP Taguhi Tovmasyan *"get tested for a sexually transmitted infection test, so that we can figure out how she managed to own four houses."*¹⁹ Andranik Kocharyan, another MP from the "Civil Contract" party – known for his sexist rhetoric and for silencing female politicians and female journalists who ask uneasy questions – once targeted Arpine Hovhannisyan, former Minister of Justice, insisting *"she should speak with facts by naming her mother and "unknown father."*²⁰ He also habitually dismisses female journalists by telling them to *"go to a hairdresser"* or to *"clean their lips,"* all without facing any accountability for such remarks.

Another form of sexism is weaponising the concept of "womanhood" as an insult to humiliate a male political opponent. When the second President of Armenia says of the current Prime Minister, "Fortunately, Pashinyan wasn't born a woman; that would be a national disgrace,"²¹ it explicitly reveals a mindset where: 1) being compared to a woman is an insult; b) being a woman implies a lack of moral standing; and 3) a woman in politics is expected to do nothing but submit to the will of male politicians and act in accordance with the decisions. This suggests that a woman is merely a passive object denied any agency. A similar logic underlies the Prime Minister's own remark: "Your holiness, carry on shagging your uncle's wife; what do you want from me?"²² Here too, the woman is reduced to a sexual object whose intimate life is casually weaponised for political gain.

Amidst these frequent outbursts of sexism, the struggle for gender equality and the fight against stereotypes become nearly impossible to sustain. Statements made from the highest political pulpits by the most prominent political figures reinforce the patriarchal system by humiliating and demeaning women. The internalised sexism of female politicians remains a separate topic that falls outside the scope of this essay.

Regarding the response to these instances of sexism and the issue of accountability, it is evident that an appropriate reaction is lacking; instead,

18 | Zara Hovhannisyan, "Alen Simonyan's entire speech was discriminatory, sexist, and demeaning, targeting the opposition in general and women in particular," MediaLab, <https://medialab.am/61573/>.

19 | "The Problem of Sexism in Armenia's Ruling Party," Civilnet, <https://bit.ly/4r2pPzr>

20 | Ibid

21 | In his interview, Robert Kocharyan criticises Nikol Pashinyan's policies, suggesting that he yields territory whenever other leaders demand it. He remarks, "Mother Teresa is working at the expense of Armenia," which is followed by the quoted expression, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbM_DgX8oGc.

22 | Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Facebook post -<https://www.facebook.com/nikol.pashinyan/posts/pfbid02dvxuULKVbLBdbCuDyitmZU31wm87pg3WEiBh3SDRnTzxHwE6bXevihjaAPGq6QUUI?rid=O0ttXKwrAgxiKrt6#>

these cases are discussed through a narrow, partisan lens. The “Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly,” which guide the Ad-hoc Committee on Parliamentary Ethics, lack a gender perspective and a specific clause prohibiting discrimination and sexism. The law regulating the conduct of deputies simply states that a member of parliament is obliged to *“show respectful attitude towards political opponents, participants of the debate, as well as towards all persons with whom an MP communicates during the exercise of his or her powers.”*²³ Consequently, in the absence of a clear prohibition of gender-based discrimination, the committee does not address sexist incidents – a fact confirmed by the committee’s record on the National Assembly’s website.²⁴

23 | Article 3.8, <http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=5707&lang=eng>

In contrast to the parliamentary committee, the ruling party recently adopted an internal Code of Ethics²⁵ that includes a specific clause on equality and non-discrimination. It states,

24 | <http://www.parliament.am/committees.php?do=show&ID=111175&lang=arm>

“Party members are obliged to uphold the principle of equality, rejecting any form of discrimination based on sex, ethnic origin, religious belief, health condition (including disability), or any other circumstance.”

25 | “Civil Contract adopts a Code of Ethics,” Radio Liberty, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/kp-n-etikayi-kanonagirk-e-yndounel/33610651.html> (in Armenian).

*“Promoting an inclusive and respectful environment, ensuring equal opportunities in all aspects of the Party’s activities.”*²⁶

26 | <https://civilcontract.am/code-of-ethics> (in Armenian).

It is worth noting that the wording omits the term “gender,” opting instead for “sex” which implies that discrimination is understood primarily through biological characteristics rather than gender or social roles. Nevertheless, one can only hope that future incidents of sexism – which remain, alas, inevitable – will be assessed not as mere political disagreement, but as gender-based discrimination which further narrows the political space for women.

Between Two – or Three – Stones: The Deadlock of Civil Society

Given the aforementioned examples, a question arises: who counteracts sexism, and how? The first and foremost link in this systemic fight has been civil society,²⁷ which expresses public dissent through campaigns and advocacy. It is precisely on this matter that civil society finds itself in a somewhat intractable position. On the one hand, it fights for the realisation of fundamental human rights, and criticises policymakers and implementers for their shortcomings. On the other, it attempts to cooperate with and support “progressive” transformations. After all, many activists joined this struggle years ago specifically to fight injustice and secure a better future. This raises a profound question, famously formulated by Audre Lorde: is it truly possible to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools?²⁸

Today, many politicians claim to have “moved” into politics from civil society, suggesting they understand these problems better and remain open to suggestions. While utilizing such access is strategically important, the dilemma of struggling against the system from within remains. Are those who previously fought against the system now trying to change the system and its master, or have they simply learned to play by the rules of the existing game?

Generally speaking, is it possible to change the rules of the game, if politics itself – serving the creator and reproducers of these rules – is stagnant, full of “big fish”? Bourdieu argues that by entering a dominant “field” actors are forced to accept its inherent rules. Thus, activists-turned-officials risk reproducing the system’s oppressive logic.²⁹ Within this framework, we must ask: can individuals entering a political arena rife with sexism truly combat

27 | In this essay, the authors do not address the manifestations of sexism within civil society itself; this subject may be explored in a future publication.

28 | Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984): 110–114.

29 | Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

it, or do they eventually remain silent and remove the issue from the agenda (if fight against sexism is on the agenda at all)? As power analysis suggests, the closer one gets to decision-making, the more constraints there are on transparency.³⁰ Indeed, are the very people who came to politics from civil society actually fighting sexism in the political arena today? Is it visible in the public sphere that the fight against sexism is actually waged from within the political arena today?

30 | Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Pantheon Books, 1975).

The concept of “behind-the-scenes advocacy” has recently gained traction among civil society partners. This phenomenon involves advocacy directed at a single decision-maker, or non-public discussions about a particular topic to move forward a specific agenda.³¹ Perhaps this approach is meant to make it easier to tackle instances of sexism or gender discrimination among politicians; perhaps it is deemed “normal” for advocacy to move behind closed doors, as political teams transition. While this works for some and fails for others, depending on the goal, does it align with the cornerstone principles of the struggle for justice? It is precisely in this context that advocates of justice are criticised for being “liberal” or for serving governments, as cooperation with the system is viewed as a negative practice.³²

31 | Women's Fund Armenia, *Study on the Capacities of Women's Organizations in the Field of Activism against Gender-based Violence* (forthcoming).

But let's pause: does civil society have a fundamental counter-argument to these accusations? What is the response when the struggle in the streets disappears – given that the most powerful fights against sexism and its various manifestations have taken place in public places to transform public perceptions? Who takes the “street” into account now,³³ when politics has changed so much that public outcry seems to have little impact? This is evidenced by the developments in Georgia and Belarus as well as the protests for the lives of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh, Gaza, and Sudan – all of which feel nearly futile when policy remains unresponsive – policies even ignore the plight of women, children, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. In these circumstances, speaking of systemic sexism, sexuality, gender issues, deforestation, and other matters can feel like a laughable and anachronistic naivety,³⁴ if there is no political will to address them, whether through local strategy or international commitment.

32 | Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

33 | Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. 2nd ed., (Stanford University Press, 2013).

34 | Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Duke University Press, 2017).

A Summary or a New Cause For Thought?

It is difficult to expect a comprehensive analysis of such a complex concept to be contained within a single essay without giving rise to new ideas and unanswered questions. It is equally difficult to find instances where politicians themselves condemn the various manifestations of sexism within the political sphere.

Public criticism of sexualised insults, slurs, sexist speech, and demeaning comments regarding women's physical appearance in politics remains almost non-existent. Specifically, public criticism by politicians themselves directed at their own colleagues is rarely visible. Yet, political institutions ought to be precisely the platforms where norms are established and boundaries are set. Although the Civic Contract Party has adopted a Code of Ethics, it is still too early to determine its transformative impact on political culture and accountability.

Clearly, the work of overcoming systemic sexism cannot be the responsibility of a few individual MPs or bloggers. More fundamental questions arise: how will the next generation of political actors arise? Who will teach them non-sexist approaches? Who will explain why certain forms of speech are unethical and harmful? Who develops and normalizes the content of political schools, youth wings and other avenues for the reproduction of political power?

In this context, the vital role of civil society emerges once again – not merely as a «respondent,» but because the political sphere itself creates its own mechanisms for self-criticism or regulation. By voicing these concerns, civil

society creates a new discourse and maintains its role as a watchdog, even as political systems continue to remain silent and evade responsibility (and in our cultural context, shame as well).

It is important to realise that advocacy that fails to address visible, everyday, and fundamental issues remains misunderstood and incomplete. This is why public critiques of sexism are stoned by society and labeled as artificial. Sexism is not eradicated by policies and strategies alone; it is reproduced in everyday speech, practices, and the conduct of political figures amid the absence of its public condemnation. When these issues go unaddressed, the struggle against systemic sexism remains merely symbolic.

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