

**PROMOTING YEZIDI GIRLS
AND WOMEN' CIVIC
PARTICIPATION AND
DECISION-MAKING POWER:
FROM PERSONAL CHOICES TO
SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
CCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CoE	Council of Europe
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSOs	Civil society organizations
EU	European Union
RA	Republic of Armenia
UN	United Nations

OVERVIEW

Within the framework of the “Women in Politics, Public Administration, and Civil Society” project, three dialogue events were organized with 49 Yezidi national minority representatives¹ living in Ararat and Aragatsotn Regions and Yerevan, which have revealed a spectrum of challenges confronting Yezidi girls and women in Armenia.

Yezidi community – the largest national minority in Armenia, comprise 1.08 percent of country’s population¹; although their numbers are substantial, Yezidi people remain underrepresented in political, decision-making areas. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, and language compounds this problem; Yezidi women’s representation in civic and public life, decision and policy-making processes is conspicuously lacking. Ranging from educational barriers to early marriages, discrimination to limited opportunities, and the balance between cultural preservation and human rights, these challenges present complex obstacles to the empowerment and inclusion of Yezidi girls and women in policy and decision-making processes. Despite some positive developments mentioned by the community, significant systemic barriers persist.

This policy brief was developed based on the results of the dialogue events with the community members with the aim to support and contribute to an effective and meaningful participation of Yezidi national minority girls and women in decision-making processes and foster their empowerment to assume leadership roles. It provides an analysis of the progress and gaps in facilitating Yezidi girls and women’s participation and engagement in public life and outlines comprehensive recommendations to address the challenges faced by them. It examines solutions to addressing barriers in institutions, sociocultural norms, and individual capacity in order to empower Yezidi girls and women and amplify their voices in decision and policy-making processes. The interventions range from raising awareness among Yezidi girls and women to strengthening legal and policy frameworks aimed at promoting the community’s level of education, leadership skills and include them in civic and public life.

CONTEXT

Armenia has made positive strides in promoting and increasing women’s civic and decision-making power. Effective participation in civic life, decision and policy-making is a fundamental human right guaranteed under international and national legal instruments. Armenia has ratified a number of international conventions and treaties related to human rights, women’s rights and, in particular, the rights of ethnic minority women. These include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)². Armenia also signed another strategic document, the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action, which was adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, and Armenia’s Government has been engaging around national, regional and global dialogue on the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)³ committing to develop and implement national strategies and policies for gender equality.

¹ The answer to the question about the nationality during the RA 2022 census was indicated in the questionnaire according to the respondent’s self-determination and desire. The nationality of the children was determined by the parents. The term Yezidi is used for the community that identifies itself as such, <https://www.armstat.am/am/?nid=82&id=2623>.

Moreover, Armenia is a member state of the CoE since 2001⁴ and in 2017, the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed aiming at enhancing gender equality, combating discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, and ensuring equal opportunities for women⁵.

Armenia's legislative frameworks in support of ensuring gender equality and advancing women's empowerment is relatively strong. The National Constitution⁶ enshrines equality between sexes (Article 86); upholds women's equal rights to enter into marriage (Article 35); guarantees the right to education (Article 38); and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race, skin color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, world view, political or other views, belonging to a national minority, property status, birth, disability, age and other personal or social circumstances (Article 29). Moreover, the draft decision of the RA government "On the Approval of the 2024-2028 Gender Policy Implementation Strategy and Program of Events in the Republic of Armenia" proposes to establish six priorities for ensuring gender equality policies in the areas of management and decision-making levels, socio-economic and labor, education and science, health, gender-based violence, women/girls and domestic violence prevention and climate⁷. These priorities serve as strategic avenues to foster an enabling environment that upholds the rights of women, including national minority women, striving to unlock opportunities across these spheres. Despite the fact that Yezidis have all the rights of equal participation and representation as citizens, Yezidi girls and women are hardly represented in decision-making positions, they continue to be marginalized from civic and public life, they rarely have leadership roles and are not involved in policy-making processes due to lack of access to quality education, uneven distribution of resources, institutional barriers and discriminatory practices. The challenges that hinder the full realization of the rights of Yezidi girls and women in Armenia are based on gender norms – and subsequent gender roles and stereotypes, which are pervasive in the Yezidi community. Gender perceptions and stereotypes are rooted and stable, they are appropriated even by the groups for which they were formed and become an unconscious ideology, these stereotypes are different from family to family due to religious characteristics, living conditions, age, education and are often reproduced by community leaders, policy makers and media representatives. Moreover, the scarcity of initiatives promoting the important role of education, educational and career opportunities among Yezidis further perpetuate Yezidi girls and women's marginalization and reinforce existing gender disparities in participation in civic and public life.

THE CHALLENGE

The dialogue events with the Yezidi community have revealed the current situation regarding Yezidi girls and women's participation in civic life across Armenia and emphasized the ongoing imperative to enhance efforts aimed at fostering their participation in leadership positions. Although multiple international agreements and national laws recognize girls and women's right to lead and participate in decision and policy-making, the widespread absence of Yezidi women in decision-making bodies persists. There has been positive progress in increasing Yezidi girls and women's rights⁸, specifically right to education; however, progress from region to region varies considerably and statisticsⁱⁱ in relation to Yezidi women's education reaffirms that more still needs to be done to promote their leadership roles.

ⁱⁱ According to the 2011 Population Census of the Republic of Armenia, out of the 15,932 Yezidi women, 1,676 women had no primary education, only 114 women had primary professional education, 221 women had secondary professional education, and 167 women had higher professional education, <https://armstat.am/file/doc/99486268.pdf>.

Yezidi girls and women in Armenia encounter multifaceted challenges that hinder their full participation in social, economic, and political spheres⁹. Underpinning the barriers to Yezidi girls and women's more active participation in civic and public life are discriminatory societal norms and gender-based stereotypes that shape social attitudes and practices denying them leadership opportunities. Moreover, familial and marital responsibilities, the burden of domestic chores greatly impact on the opportunities to get involved in civic activities. Many young girls who are having success at school are pressured to give up ambitions in favor of traditions and customs. Incomplete education and subsequently lack of economic opportunities aggravate the impact of negative social norms.

The challenges raised by the community during the dialogue meetings include:

Limited Access to Quality Education: There has been a reversal in the gender gap in access to education between Yezidi boys and girls in the recent years. Currently, Yezidi girls have a higher rate of attending school at the stipulated age; however, access to quality education continues to be a challenge for them especially in the regions. Yezidi girls face difficulties to accessing education due to language barriers, discriminatory practices in families and educational institutions, transportation issues, financial constraints, fear of being kidnapped, gender roles and stereotypes.

Lack of Awareness about Opportunities: Yezidi girls and women lack information about available opportunities for education and career growth provided by the state, national and international organizations, the majority of them do not have knowledge on basic human rights and freedoms, which is exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and limiting their potential for advancement and career development.

Prevalence of Early Marriages: Underage and child marriage among Yezidi people has been reducing year by year, but it is still a complex issue, restricting and depriving girls of the right to self-determination, losing their educational and professional opportunities, making them more vulnerable to discrimination and limiting their participation in the economic, political and social spheres, perpetuating gender disparities and financial dependence on male representatives.

Discrimination and Gender Stereotypes: Yezidi girls and women experience discrimination based on both religion and gender, both within their community and in broader society. There is a widespread concept of cultural dependence in the community, when women cannot make achievements and succeed, as the role of men in male-female relations is dominant. Gender stereotypes limit their roles and opportunities, particularly in public life.

Socio-economic Barriers: Financial constraints and ingrained beliefs confine many Yezidi women to domestic spheres, limiting their economic independence and professional development. There are many barriers for female Yezidis to move out of employment in the agriculture and cattle-breeding sectors and access employment in state institutions due to their gender roles, stereotypes against women working away from home, low level of education, and restricted technical and professional training opportunities. In Armenia, there is currently no system in place to track and make public allocations for the economic empowerment of national minority women.

Preservation of Culture vs. Human Rights: Balancing the preservation of cultural traditions with the promotion of human rights poses a challenge within the community, particularly concerning education. In the community, the priority is given to the preservation of traditions and customs, which often leads to the incomplete realization of the rights of women and children.

Limited Visibility and Representation: Yezidi women are often underrepresented in media and public discourse, contributing to their marginalization and hindering efforts to promote their empowerment and inclusion. The achievements of Yezidi girls and women can rarely be reported through traditional and social media platforms. The lack of role models and success stories contributes to gender stereotypes, further excluding Yazidi women from public life.

SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

Addressing the complex challenges faced by Yezidi girls and women in Armenia requires a comprehensive and integrated approach. Key strategies include:

Promoting education and participation: Educational institutions play a crucial role in challenging societal norms by promoting gender equality, fostering awareness about discriminatory practices, and cultivating inclusive environments where Yezidi girls and women can develop the skills and confidence to engage actively in civic and public life. Prioritizing inclusive education and addressing systemic barriers, educational institutions can contribute significantly to combating gender stereotypes and empowering Yezidi girls in Armenia. These efforts encompass a range of measures, including promoting the development of a quality and accessible preschool system in ethnic minority areas to ensure Yezidi children attend school, conducting research to understand the root causes of school dropouts among Yezidi girls, enhancing accountability in general education for out-of-school Yezidi children, providing training for Yezidi language teachers to increase language proficiency level, promoting cultural understanding at educational institutions, and expanding educational opportunities through culturally sensitive curricula and language support programs. Additionally, awareness campaigns aimed at combating discrimination, disseminating information about national and international documents enhancing rights and freedoms, allowing young girls to learn about decision-making processes and exercising their rights in issues affecting their own life and community, further reinforce these efforts.

Addressing early marriages: Enforcing legislation to raise the minimum marriage age to 18, coupled with robust implementation measures, expanding the provision of counselling and intervention support services at schools, carrying out community education programs and awareness raising activities for Yezidi people regarding reproductive health care, maternal, infant and child health care are essential to prevent coerced marriages and protect at-risk girls. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, civil society organizations, and grassroots initiatives can establish a network of support, providing comprehensive assistance and empowering vulnerable girls to make autonomous decisions about their education, career, and personal lives.

Investing in social norm change: Social norm change requires fostering dialogue and engagement across range of stakeholders and sectors. There should be collaboration between Yezidi women, religious community leaders, and human rights organizations to reconcile cultural traditions with international human rights standards. Promoting inclusive cultural practices that respect human rights and gender equality while preserving the rich traditions and cultural heritage of the Yezidi community is paramount. Conducting cultural sensitivity training sessions and awareness campaigns aimed at raising awareness among stakeholders (such as education, health professionals, law enforcement agencies) can contribute to breaking

stereotypes among both Yazidi women and society at large, while promoting the creation of inclusive environments, respect and tolerance for cultural diversity. Additionally, amplifying the voices and experiences of Yazidi women through media campaigns, storytelling initiatives, and community-led projects can highlight their achievements and contributions, fostering visibility, motivation and professional aspirations within the community.

Empowering Yazidi girls and women: There have been a number of capacity building and training opportunities provided by CSOs, state institutions, international organizations to promote girls and women' participation in civic and political life; these initiatives can be adapted to develop Yazidi girls and women' leadership and advocacy skills, promote their motivation to continue studies so that they have the skills to succeed. Targeted outreach programs and information campaigns tailored to the needs of Yazidi girls and women are essential to raise awareness about available opportunities and empower them to pursue their career aspirations. It is essential to increase the participation of Yazidi children in the decision-making processes related to children, initiate capacity building for teenage girls so that girls are confident and independent when attending schools and community activities. Supporting Yazidi girls and women requires expanding access to vocational training programs and economic resources, with a focus on addressing transportation problem in the Yazidi-inhabited villages. Furthermore, it is important to ensure access to various opportunities and resources for Yazidi women; resource planning should be accompanied by their equitable and targeted distribution. Efforts should be made to provide skills development, entrepreneurship support and employment opportunities reinforcing Yazidi women' socio-economic empowerment.

In essence, by implementing these meaningful interventions and fostering collaboration across various domains, the promotion of Yazidi girls and women' participation in civic life and decision-making processes can be realized, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive society.

CALLS TO ACTION

Empowering Yazidi women in Armenia requires collaborative efforts from government agencies, civil society organizations, media, international partners, and the Yazidi community itself. Key recommendations include:

- Recognizing the social, economic and structural barriers that hinder Yazidi girls and women' full participation and representation in decision-making. (Most relevant for: the government and CSOs)
- Enhancing gender-segregated data collection and analysis efforts in education and training to better understand the experiences and needs of Yazidi girls and women, implementing evidence-based programming. (Most relevant for: the government and CSOs)
- Investing in education and awareness raising programs that cater to the needs of Yazidi girls and women and promote their empowerment. (Most relevant for: the government, private sector and CSOs)
- Undertaking capacity building programs to specifically develop the leadership and engagement skills of Yazidi girls and women, alongside knowledge and expertise to make key political and public institutions more accountable, inclusive and sensitive. (Most relevant for: the government)

and CSOs)

- Strengthening the legal framework by making relevant legislative improvements and reforms, including raising the marriage age limit, defining the concept of "national minority", adopting an anti-discrimination law to promote the protection of the rights of Yazidi girls and women. (Most relevant for: the government)
- Ensuring the visibility of female Yezidis having progress in leadership roles and participating in public life. (Most relevant for: the media)
- Supporting community-led initiatives that promote gender equality, challenge harmful stereotypes, and empower Yezidi girls and women to stand for their rights. (Most relevant for: the government, private sector, international partners and CSOs)
- Collaborating with Yezidi men and community's religious leaders to promote inclusive cultural practices that respect human rights and gender equality. (Most relevant for: the government, CSOs and media)
- Engaging with international partners and multilateral organizations to leverage resources and expertise in support of Yezidi women' empowerment in Armenia. (Most relevant for: the government and CSOs)

By implementing these recommendations, Armenia can advance its commitment to gender equality and human rights, ensuring that Yezidi girls and women have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and contribute to country's democratic development.

CONCLUSIONS

It is crucial to underscore that the ultimate objective isn't solely about augmenting the representation of Yezidi women in policy and decision-making roles. Rather, the focus is on empowering them to actively engage in these capacities, contributing insights on tackling gender-related challenges, discrimination, and societal norms. This involves enabling them to effectively participate in public life, become involved in shaping government policies and decisions impacting their life, fostering gender equality, inclusive development, and progress. We aspire for policy and decision-makers to actively support initiatives that foster and expedite the civic engagement and decision-making authority of Yezidi girls and women in leadership roles. By doing so, we aim to create an environment where their voices are not only heard but also influential in shaping the direction of policies and actions, thereby advancing the cause of gender equality and facilitating broader societal development.

ENDNOTES

¹ RA Statistical Committee, 2011 Census results, <https://www.armstat.am/am/?nid=82&id=2623>.

² UN Treaty Body Database,

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=8&Lang=en.

³ OxYGen Foundation (2020), An Analysis of Implementation of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Armenia, https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Beijing25_analysis-of-3-areas-of-concern_ENG.pdf.

⁴ coe.int, Action of the Council of Europe in Armenia, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/armenia>.

⁵ ec.europa.eu (2021), Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement,

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⁶ president.am, Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, Adopted 06.12.2015,

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⁷ e-draft.am (2024), Draft decision of the RA government "On the Approval of the 2024-2028 Gender Policy Implementation Strategy and Program of Events in the Republic of Armenia", [https://www.e-](https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/6821?fbclid=IwAR0GrHMH_ne19aUtfVIg6xKs4qrOwsbJOu4g5vtOPwjjEnxTGJ_ji09e4F4)

[draft.am/en/projects/6821?fbclid=IwAR0GrHMH_ne19aUtfVIg6xKs4qrOwsbJOu4g5vtOPwjjEnxTGJ_ji09e4F4](https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/6821?fbclid=IwAR0GrHMH_ne19aUtfVIg6xKs4qrOwsbJOu4g5vtOPwjjEnxTGJ_ji09e4F4).

⁸ gov.am (2006), Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, 2nd Opinion on Armenia, Brief Summary,

https://www.gov.am/u_files/file/kron/2d%20Komiteji%20kartsiqy%20hajeren%202006.pdf.

⁹ Eurasia Partnership Foundation (2022), The Problem of Early Marriages and School Dropouts in the Yezidi Community in Armenia,

https://epfarmeria.am/sites/default/files/Document/Problems_of_Early_Marriage_and_School_Dropout_in_the_Yezidi_Community_2022_Armenian.pdf.