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## **REFLECTION OF SOVIET EVERYDAY LIFE DURING THE PERESTROIKA PERIOD IN THE MAGAZINE “WOMAN WORKER OF ARMENIA”**

### ***Abstract***

The magazine “Woman Worker of Armenia”, published in Yerevan from 1924 to 1998, holds exceptional value as a source for studying the history of everyday life during the Perestroika period in Soviet Armenia (1985–1991). Despite the inherent limitations of the Soviet press, which this periodical could not entirely escape, its propagandistic content remains relatively low. The magazine actively collaborated with a broad cross-section of society. Its large readership and their active participation through letters, complaints, and advice on various everyday issues transformed the periodical into a unique document reflecting the lifestyle of Armenian society. It provides an unparalleled representation of public opinion and sentiments on matters of vital significance to Armenian society. The periodical addressed issues related to the interplay of society, family, and individual, women’s lives, medical and domestic concerns,

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and celebrated women who made significant contributions to the republic's development.

**Keywords:** *Soviet Armenia, Perestroika, "Woman Worker of Armenia", Soviet society, everyday life, family, magazine.*

### ***Introduction***

The principal characteristic of the Soviet press was its inherently propagandistic nature. It is evident that the press primarily served the ideological interests of the Communist Party, articulating and defending the party's propaganda narratives and theses. As a result, Soviet reality was presented in the media according to a specific logic: the consistent realisation of socialist ideals, the critique of capitalist ideas and lifestyles, and the celebration of the industrial, cultural, and economic achievements of Soviet society. Articles extolling the accomplishments of the party and state, or the achievements of shock workers – often embellished with exaggerated details and “proud” commentary – occupied substantial portions of newspaper pages, frequently taking up the largest sections of the issues. Any shortcomings mentioned in critical articles were rarely attributed to party or state bodies (even when they were clearly at fault); instead, they were portrayed as deviations committed by individuals who had strayed from the principles laid out by the party, abuses of trust in the party and the state, or manifestations of communist behaviour inconsistent with the party's value system, among other explanations.

The profound political changes that occurred in the USSR during the 1980s had a significant impact on the activities of the mass media. At the time, the Soviet Union was grappling with a severe political and economic crisis when Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU on 11 March 1985. The new leader of the USSR and his close circle were acutely aware that the Union was on a trajectory of decline. In particular, economic stagnation had created serious challenges for the state. It became evident that without radical reforms, Soviet society could not move forward.

Consequently, a decision was made to initiate a transformation and improvement of the country's economy, public life, and governance structures. These reforms were formally launched through the decisions of the CPSU Central Committee Plenum in April 1985, and a similar commitment was reiterated at the

27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU in February 1986. The comprehensive reforms that began in the spring of 1985 came to be collectively known as “Perestroika”. Publicity and openness in all aspects of public life were declared as fundamental principles of the reform agenda.<sup>1</sup> Following the example set by Moscow, analogous legal acts were adopted in the Union republics, including the Armenian SSR.<sup>2</sup>

For the Soviet mass media and publishers, the concept of publicity signified progress in the realm of freedom of speech and a retreat from political censorship. Under the influence of this policy, the Soviet press began to gradually liberate itself from the constraints of party ideology. Publications emerged that addressed a wide range of topics, including those previously deemed taboo in Soviet discourse. Periodicals such as “Novy Mir” (“New World”), “Moscow News”, “Arguments and Facts”, “Ogonyok” (“Twinkle”), “Izvestia” (“Bulletin”), and “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” (“Independent Newspaper”), became emblematic of the liberalisation of the Soviet press during this time.

They began publishing works by authors renowned for their severe criticism of the Soviet regime (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Anatoly Zhigulin, Nikolai Shmelyov, among others), and active, open discussions were initiated regarding the shortcomings of the socialist system and potential strategies for its reform. Criticism and journalistic initiatives aimed at evaluating the socialist past and envisioning its future became more objective and targeted within the press.<sup>3</sup>

With the proclamation of the declaration of publicity, many periodicals of this era included articles of both a declarative nature and those addressing social issues and the daily lives and concerns of Soviet citizens. Consequently, while the content of Soviet newspapers prior to Perestroika was strictly regulated by ideological norms – rendering their value as historical sources for Soviet everyday life debatable – the articles published during the Perestroika years provide invaluable insights. Their valuable descriptions of the social consciousness of Soviet society constitute significant sources for understanding the history of everyday Soviet life.

From this perspective, one of the notable periodicals published in Armenia in the Armenian language from 1924 to 1998 is the magazine “Woman Worker of Armenia,” which embodied the best traditions of the Soviet Russian newspapers

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<sup>1</sup> **Brown** 2022, 123–145.

<sup>2</sup> **Abrahamyan** 2019, 84–86.

<sup>3</sup> **Savintseva** 2009, 267–276.

“Rabotnitsa” (“Woman Worker”) and “Sovetskaya Zhenschina” (“Soviet Woman”) offering coverage of the lives of Soviet women within the Armenian context. Published by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia, “Woman Worker of Armenia” was tasked with advancing the ideological and political agenda of the Communist Party among women, fostering their involvement in public life, and enhancing their self-awareness. The periodical addressed issues related to the interplay of society, family, and individual, women’s lives, medical and domestic concerns, and celebrated women who made significant contributions to the republic’s development.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1985–1988 issues of “Woman Worker of Armenia,” alongside propaganda articles, remarkable publications appeared that explored various key issues and aspects of Soviet life. However, after the Karabakh movement began in February 1988 and the devastating earthquake struck the northern regions of Armenia on 7 December of the same year, a noticeable shift occurred in the magazine’s content. In the issues leading up to Armenia’s independence in September 1991, the focus on such topics diminished, with increasing attention given to political and economic issues of national importance.

The magazine stood out from other Soviet Armenian periodicals such as “Soviet Armenia”, “Evening Yerevan”, “Avantgarde”, and “Communist”, due to several distinguishing features. Its distinctly “feminine orientation”, so to speak, enabled an exploration of life in Soviet Armenia through the lens of women’s emotional, candid, sincere, and often bold observations. The topics addressed encompassed a wide array of aspects of Soviet Armenian social reality, including family dynamics, norms of coexistence, everyday thought processes, morality, service culture, and more.

### ***Reflection on Social Morality and New Morals***

During the years of Perestroika, slogans advocating the democratization of society, the rapid development of the economy, and the improvement of people’s living conditions stimulated various discussions within society about lifestyle and thinking in line with the announced reforms, about publicly acceptable behaviour, and the elimination of unacceptable phenomena. These discussions are best reflected in various articles published in the magazine “Woman Worker of Armenia”, the careful analysis of which allows for an observation of the new

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<sup>4</sup> Zakaryan, Harutyunyan 2010, 79.

trends in social development and the changes in public moods and perceptions in Soviet Armenia that were caused by them. One of the characteristic features of the magazine's publications is the resistance of old thinking to the new morals emerging in society.

Thus, the author of the article entitled "The Means of Living, the Purpose of Living" criticises, with undisguised disappointment, the obsession with accumulating wealth that had begun to spread. In his moral reflections, he criticises the concepts "borrowed from bourgeois society and alien to socialist society," which lie at the basis of the obsession with accumulation.<sup>5</sup>

The article entitled "Dignity... Do We Always Preserve It?" is also accompanied by moralistic comments, in which the author contrasts two attitudes towards life: "For one, the main thing is personal dignity, for the other, profit." The article presents two groups of workers: those who are honest and principled in their work, and those who are not averse to building their personal well-being through petty (or large, depending on the degree of material responsibility) extortions and embezzlement. Cashiers and salespeople who embezzle change, teachers who demand money from pupils and their parents on the occasion of International Women's Day (March 8), officials who hire people to work at school for 1,000 rubles. The author attributes a low moral value system to these people, calling them speculators and snobs. At the same time, the author notes that these negative phenomena are largely unpunished and have become widespread. People justify such behaviour with the reasoning "everyone does it that way."<sup>6</sup>

More obvious instances of impunity in the field of public economic management are described in the article with the telling title "A Crime Born of Inconsistency". The article includes a letter from a resident of one of the cooperative buildings in Yerevan, reporting that two residents had demolished the foundation walls of the semi-basement section of the building, closed the resulting opening with iron gates, and declared it their property for all to see. The article provides notable details from the round of residents' complaints lodged at the offices of the Yerevan City Council. The result, however, is that the violators are not punished and continue to use the appropriated parts of the building as garages. Furthermore, the article highlights that the residents are complaining

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<sup>5</sup> **Tonoyan** 1986b, 7.

<sup>6</sup> **Grigorova** 1986, 8.

about two garages, whereas the number has already increased to eight.<sup>7</sup> Similar incidents are also described in another publication concerning illegal constructions, entitled "Knock on Your Neighbour's Door". This title, in essence, conveys a moralising message of solidarity and peaceful coexistence within apartment buildings. The publication discusses residents who violate the norms of coexistence with their neighbours by expanding their living space and creating additional comfort for themselves at the expense of shared areas, such as common balconies and corridors. As a result, relations between neighbours become tense, arguments and mutual accusations arise, and individuals begin to isolate themselves, retreating further into their personal space.<sup>8</sup>

The images of social life presented testify to the new social thinking brought about by the Perestroika policy in Soviet Armenia. The descriptions of these phenomena in the magazine "Woman Worker of Armenia" are accompanied by critical comments, and are given negative moral assessments as phenomena that are inappropriate for a socialist society. These comments are understandable when we take into account the fact that the freedom of the magazine's editorial staff was not absolute. It was obliged to adhere to the rules established for the Soviet press. Therefore, the newspaper kept the Soviet state and the Communist Party, so to speak, "cleansed" of responsibility for the negative phenomena that were taking root. The party and the state were presented as the vanguards of a principled and consistent struggle for the victory of socialism. The Perestroika policy was presented in the context of this struggle, and the official justifications of its goals were interpreted as the imperative of improving the socialist social order. In practice, however, these perceptions were in contradiction with the principles of a market economy introduced by those same reforms, which had stimulated new aspirations for ownership within society, and, in the context of the failure of reforms, led to the collapse of that social order. Consequently, class thinking, or adherence to socialist ideals, was not characteristic of public perceptions during the period of Perestroika in Armenia. In the previously mentioned article "The Means of Living, the Purpose of Living," for example, the author presents such elements of everyday life as a two-story mansion, luxurious frescoes, foreign items, a car, and a summer house – things that, for the average Soviet citizen,

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<sup>7</sup> Grigoryan 1986, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Dshkhoyan 1987, 27–28.

were a dream, rather than an object of moral self-assessment. It is clear that people desired these as evidence of a new, more attractive lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>

From the study of the publications in the magazine "Woman Worker of Armenia" from 1985 to 1987, it becomes evident that, during the Perestroika reforms, society was seeking prospects for liberation from the "shackles of socialism." Consequently, socialist morality, no matter how vigorously the Communist Party promoted it through the press, was losing its relevance. This factor can be used to identify the main trends of the new social thinking, which were unified by the aspiration to "break free" from socialist ideology. Concern for material well-being, which in many cases assumed hedonistic manifestations, posed a distinct challenge to the socialist asceticism propagated by party ideology. A vivid description of these sentiments can be found in the correspondence "Dignity... Do We Always Preserve It?" "... all the fingers of the doctor in the clinic, the nurse who gives you injections, are decorated with diamond rings, ... we go to work in our most expensive, theater-going clothes, striving to demonstrate our material well-being at every opportunity. And no one reprimands us, no one laughs at us."<sup>10</sup>

It should also be noted that society's desire to "break free from socialist shackles" was not spontaneous but was driven by the failure of the political and socio-economic reforms proclaimed under the policy of Perestroika. These failures, in turn, generated widespread distrust in society towards the state and the socialist morality it sought to propagate. This disillusionment was particularly exacerbated by the inconsistency between the slogans declared by representatives of the authorities and the realities of life, which fostered an indifferent, and often even nihilistic, attitude towards the policy of Perestroika among broad sections of society.<sup>11</sup>

Under the administrative-command system, entrenched in the USSR for decades, economic reforms carried out by active, initiative-driven members of society failed to create genuine competitive opportunities for the working class. Amid the state's deepening socio-economic crisis, shadow economic phenomena thrived, as corroborated by other sources. During the years of Perestroika, incidents of theft of state and public property in the Armenian SSR did not

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<sup>9</sup> **Tonoyan** 1986b, 7–9.

<sup>10</sup> **Grigorova** 1986, 9.

<sup>11</sup> **Abrahamyan** 2019, 84–85; **Azizbekyan** 1992, 12–13.

diminish; on the contrary, they increased. These incidents affected a wide range of public life. Law enforcement agencies often displayed criminal negligence in addressing cases of theft of public property in institutions, enterprises, and collective and state farms, or they even extended patronage to the perpetrators.<sup>12</sup>

Abuses were facilitated by the inaction of employees in regional extradepartmental security departments, who were responsible for preventing such incidents and who sometimes collaborated with embezzlers of public property. Consequently, they failed to take actions aimed at upholding the rule of law. For instance, in 1987, an attempt to steal 52 metres of fabric from a garment factory in the village of Amasia, in the Amasia region of the Armenian SSR, was thwarted by a newly appointed guard on his first duty, "who had not yet had time to become familiar with the order of the factory and its workers."<sup>13</sup> Similar negative practices were widespread in other institutions and enterprises across Armenia.

During the Perestroika period, local leaders became increasingly unrestrained and unaccountable. The heads of institutions and enterprises, endowed with significant de facto authority, frequently violated existing legislation and social norms of coexistence without facing consequences, either from a party or administrative perspective. Instead, double standards became more prevalent. In cases of legal violations, ordinary citizens were accused and punished, while leading figures were often pardoned or merely dismissed.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, the number of unsolved cases significantly outnumbered those resolved. While some offenders were referred to investigative bodies and subjected to various means of public reprimand, these measures seldom served as a deterrent to their accomplices.

This phenomenon was widespread throughout the republic. "Dragging out" something from state or public property was not widely perceived as a crime but rather as a demonstration of ingenuity.

### ***Reflections on Marital and Family Relations***

During the Perestroika period, the openly displayed materialistic aspirations among the population of the Armenian SSR gave rise to another pressing social

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<sup>12</sup> NAA, SHRB, f. 114, l. 6, w. 83, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> NAA, SHRB, f. 114, l. 6, w. 83, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> NAA, SHRB, f. 114, l. 6, w. 83, p. 26.

issue, frequently highlighted in numerous publications of the magazine "Woman Worker of Armenia": the increasing number of divorces in the republic. Articles published under evocative titles such as "She Came to Change ... the Surname,"<sup>15</sup> "Reflections on Divorces,"<sup>16</sup> "And Again About Lost Happiness,"<sup>17</sup> "Divorces – Aren't There Too Many?"<sup>18</sup> and "Will Conscience Awaken?"<sup>19</sup> featured well-known writers, publicists, lawyers, and ordinary readers voicing their concerns about the growing divorce rates in Armenia. These articles explored the socio-psychological and economic factors contributing to this trend.

In many cases, the negative statistics on divorces were driven by material factors, against which traditional ideals of family and social responsibility often proved powerless. Young couples exhibited a frivolous attitude towards family values. Even after marriage, they were often reluctant to shoulder household responsibilities, instead ceding decision-making authority for their family to their parents. The older generation, burdened with these chores, frequently found themselves at odds with their children's expectations, leading to interpersonal conflicts within the family. Moreover, parents increasingly approached their children's marriages with materialistic priorities, prioritising choices based on self-interest rather than mutual love and understanding as the foundation for happiness.

The phenomenon of spouses leaving to work abroad further exacerbated the problem of family disintegration. Prolonged absences from home, and in some cases the establishment of new families abroad, became common reasons for marital breakdowns. The articles also included poignant accounts of parents falling victim to their children's materialism, losing their homes, and ultimately finding themselves in nursing homes as a result of such neglect.

"Woman Worker of Armenia" also frequently addressed issues related to parenting and the upbringing of children. In these discussions, parental shortcomings were often linked to an overemphasis on money and material values. One article recounted the story of a father who regularly gave his school-aged child large sums of money for daily expenses. Standing before the school principal

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<sup>15</sup> Aleksanyan 1986, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Tonoyan 1986a, 14–16.

<sup>17</sup> Grigoryan 1986, 25–28.

<sup>18</sup> Poghosyan 1987, 28–32.

<sup>19</sup> Balabanyan 1988, 21–24.

with his head bowed, the father attempts to justify his actions, explaining that he provided his son with large sums of money so the boy would feel comfortable and “not appear pathetic”. However, after learning that his son’s behaviour had become so unruly that he even attempted to assault a teacher, the father admitted that he had made a grave mistake in raising him.<sup>20</sup>

The liberalism heralded by the policy of Glasnost during the years of Perestroika also encouraged the discussion of previously “taboo” topics in the press, which had been prohibited in Soviet society. In the context of discussions on family relations, the publications of the magazine “Woman Worker of Armenia” addressing issues related to women’s emancipation are particularly noteworthy. In one such article, the author examines several socio-psychological issues surrounding women’s emancipation, which were highly pertinent to Armenian society at the time.

The topics discussed are varied. The author explores the division of familial and extrafamilial social roles between women and men in Armenian society, the family conflicts arising from the asymmetry in this distribution, the necessity of altering the lifestyle of Armenian women, and the imperative of emancipation. Additionally, the issues raised challenge long-held taboos regarding female sexuality.

According to the author, one of the essential components of marital happiness is a harmonious sexual life. However, Armenian women, due to their inherent shyness, often refrain from consulting doctors about their sexual problems. Even if such an intention were to arise, practical barriers persist, as women’s clinics primarily provide gynaecological services and lack provisions for sexological counselling. This gap contributes to significant family challenges, psychological and physiological health issues in women, and, in many cases, divorce.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Reactions to Changes in Religious Mindset***

Under the conditions of relative freedom brought about by the Perestroika policy, public life in Soviet Armenia became more dynamic, allowing various groups and circles to operate more actively. The state began paying increased attention to Armenian culture, including ethnographic dances, songs, and music.

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<sup>20</sup> Poghosyan 1986, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Khrlopyan 1988, 12–15.

Numerous monasteries and churches that had previously ceased functioning were reopened, and religious life among the population became more vibrant. "Woman Worker of Armenia" also elucidated the socio-psychological changes occurring in Armenian society, particularly those related to religious thinking, an area previously prohibited from public discussion by the state.

Armenian society, which had traditionally upheld a Christian mindset and value system, had been re-educated in an atheistic spirit during the Soviet years. The Armenian Apostolic Church faced significant pressure and restrictions, while the clergy endured deplorable conditions.<sup>22</sup> During the years of Perestroika, alongside the democratisation of society, there was a notable revival of religious freedoms. Churches representing various religious denominations began operating both in Yerevan and across the republic. The periodical expressed concern over this new reality, directing criticism at the institutions responsible for promoting atheistic education in society, accusing them of failing in their duties. It observed a marked increase in church marriages and baptisms across the republic, alongside the resurgence of many religious rituals in daily life, which often supplanted socialist customs and traditions. The magazine characterised this development as a "darkening of people's consciousness," a "numbing of the brain," and a "return to the Middle Ages."<sup>23</sup> The assessments of the "Woman Worker of Armenia" are highly subjective, as the emergence of manifestations of religious diversity under the conditions of communist totalitarian ideology can be regarded as a progressive phenomenon.

### ***Conclusion***

The events unfolding in Armenia during the years of Perestroika significantly influenced the topics covered in press publications. The 1985–1988 issues of "Woman Worker of Armenia" contain numerous articles of a social and everyday nature, reflecting life in Soviet Armenia. The periodical addressed issues related to the interplay of society, family, and individual, women's lives, medical and domestic concerns, and celebrated women who made significant contributions to the republic's development.

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<sup>22</sup> Zhamharyan, Ghazaryan 2023, 107–114.

<sup>23</sup> Chilingaryan 1985, 9–12.

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## ՎԵՐԱԿԱՌՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԺԱՄԱՆԱԿԱՇՐՋԱՆԻ ԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՅԻՆ ԱՌՕՐԵԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՐՏԱՑՈԼՈՒՄԸ «ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ԱՇԽԱՏԱՎՈՐՈՒՄ» ԱՄՍԱԳՐՈՒՄ

### Ամփոփում

1985 թ. գարնանը ԽՍՀՄ-ում սկիզբ առած համալիր բարեփոխումները ստացան «Վերակառուցում» հավաքական անվանումը: Հանրային կյանքի բոլոր ոլորտներում հրապարակայնությունը հռչակվեց որպես գործունեության առանցքային սկզբունք: Հրապարակայնության քաղաքականությամբ հռչակված ազատականությունը Վերակառուցման տարիներին խթանեց նաև մամուլում խորհրդային հասարակության համար արգելված թեմաների արծարծումը: Վերակառուցման քաղաքականության հետևանքով ստեղծված հարաբերական ազատության պայմաններում խորհրդային Հայաստանում

աշխուժացավ հասարակական կյանքը, ակտիվ գործելու հնարավորություն ստացան տարբեր խմբեր ու խմբակներ:

Վերակառուցման տարիներին Հայաստանում ծավալվող իրադարձություններն իրենց ազդեցությունը թողեցին մամուլի հրապարակումների թեմատիկայի վրա: Քննադատությունը, սոցիալիստական անցյալը, ներկան ու գալիքը գնահատելու հրապարակախոսական նախաձեռնությունները մամուլում դարձան առավել առարկայական ու հասցեական: Արդյունքում՝ «Հայաստանի աշխատավորուհի» ամսագրի 1985–1988 թթ. համարներում մեծ քանակ են կազմում Խորհրդային Հայաստանի առօրյան արտացոլող սոցիալական, կենցաղային ուղղվածության հրապարակումները: 1988–1991 թթ. Հայաստանում տեղի ունեցած բախտորոշ իրադարձությունները (Ղարաբաղյան շարժում, ավերիչ երկրաշարժ, անկախության վերականգնում) կտրուկ փոխեցին բնակչության առօրյան, որն սկսեց ընթանալ աղետի բերած հոգեբանական ցնցումների հաղթահարման, ազգային հիմնախնդիրների շուրջ հանրային համախմբման և սոցիալ–տնտեսական մարտահրավերներին դիմակայելու տրամաբանությամբ: Այս ամենի հետևանքով «Հայաստանի աշխատավորուհի» ամսագրում սկսում է գերակշռել համազգային նշանակության քաղաքական և տնտեսական խնդիրների լուսաբանումը:

**Բանալի բառեր:** *Խորհրդային Հայաստան, Վերակառուցում, «Հայաստանի աշխատավորուհի», Խորհրդային հասարակություն, առօրյա կյանք, ընդհանր, ամսագիր:*