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'I want to be a mother but not right now': women negotiating the pressures of motherhood under Armenia's far-right

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'I want to be a mother but not right now': women negotiating the pressures of motherhood under Armenia's far-right

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rise of the far-right in post-Soviet Armenia and its articulation of the 'Motherhood Project', an ideological framework that positions women's primary social value in bearing and raising children amid protracted conflict with Azerbaijan. Drawing on interviews with three generational cohorts of women working in NGO settings, the study explores how the Motherhood Project shapes their everyday lives and the strategies they use to resist it. The findings reveal clear generational distinctions. Older participants, having fulfilled normative expectations of marriage and motherhood, are insulated from its pressures. Younger participants draw on everyday resistance practices that rework, rather than refuse, the ideology of the Motherhood Project; they embrace motherhood, while asserting greater control over its timing and conditions, as well as over partner choice and childcare options. Engagement in NGO spaces provides access to knowledge and support networks that enable participants to sustain these practices. Through these findings, the study advances analyses of women's resistance under far-right, militarized conditions and bridges scholarship on everyday resistance and social movements by showing how NGO activism intersects with daily life negotiations.

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Introduction

Ranked as the fourth most militarized country in the world (Bonn International Center for Conversion [BICC], 2026), Armenia has invested heavily in military personnel and weaponry since the collapse of the Soviet Union and first Nagorno-Karabakh war with Azerbaijan. Far-right nationalist actors – including figures connected to the Armenian Apostolic Church, ultraconservative NGOs, and opposition political parties – have leveraged this militarized context to mobilize gender as a central site of political intervention (Ziemer, 2023). Within this framework, men are valorized as strong, brave, and heroic defenders of the nation, while women are positioned as its reproducers, confined to the private sphere and tasked with sustaining the Armenian population and culture through motherhood (Ohanyan, 2009). These ideals have been deeply internalized within Armenian society and are reflected in prevailing public attitudes: in 2017, 82% of

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Armenians agreed with the statement that ‘women have a responsibility to society to bear children’ (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Across Latin America and Europe, far-right actors similarly instrumentalize gender politics to advance their agendas, targeting areas such as women’s reproductive autonomy and LGBTQ+ rights (Zarembek et al., 2021). Scholarship has largely understood resistance to far-right gender politics through the activities of feminist, LGBTQ+, and human rights organizations engaged in protest, advocacy, and mass mobilization (Kurylo, 2022). In Armenia, however, women’s rights NGOs have become increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized, leaving limited space for grassroots activism and protest activities (Baldrian, 2025). This reflects Western donor funding structures that privilege service provision and policy advocacy over collective resistance.

In the absence of sustained public, collective action, I argue that everyday life constitutes an alternative and critical site of women’s struggle against the far right in Armenia. The women at the centre of this study refuse prescriptions that define their value exclusively through motherhood; instead, they negotiate its meaning within the intimate spaces of family life. These negotiations take multiple forms: balancing childcare with paid employment despite opposition from their husbands; delaying motherhood to pursue education, travel, and careers; and challenging ethnonationalist norms of family formation by choosing partners who are not Armenian (Connor, 2018).

The study focuses on women working in feminist and gender equality organizations in Armenia. Unlike the ‘everyday woman’ as traditionally conceptualized in studies of everyday resistance – typically framed as poor, working-class, or rural (Bayat, 2013; Scott, 1985) – these women are middle-class, university educated, and embedded in social networks that shape their awareness of and responses to dominant gender norms. Drawing on interviews across three generational cohorts – the Soviet, Transition, and Independence Generations – this analysis examines how their historical and social positions influence their experiences of and responses to the Motherhood Project.

The article begins by tracing the rise of far-right ideologies in post-Soviet Armenia. It then engages with literature on feminist and everyday resistance. The empirical sections that follow explore how far-right gender politics are lived and negotiated in the everyday lives of interview participants.

The making of the ‘Motherhood Project’

Forged through invasion, genocide, statelessness, and colonization, Armenian national identity has developed around the idea of a collective, bound by shared ancestry, trauma, and culture. As Shirinian (2018, p. 48) notes, the nation is understood and practised as a ‘nation–family’: a community of kin in which belonging carries responsibilities towards collective survival. Within this framework, to be Armenian is not simply to hold citizenship, but to ‘do’ for Armenia – to safeguard its continuity and uphold the moral and cultural codes believed to protect it. Relatives, neighbours, and even strangers thus participate in monitoring and correcting behaviours perceived to threaten the integrity of the nation-family. Those who fail to conform, risk being ostracized from family and community life.

Women’s role within the nation-family framework has long been a site of social and political negotiation. In 19th-century Armenia, women enjoyed relative autonomy and were encouraged to pursue education and participate in public life, grounded in the

belief that a strong nation required women's intellectual and civic engagement alongside their roles as mothers and their right to personal fulfilment (Khalapyan, 2020). During the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923), perpetrated by the Ottoman Turkish authorities, women assumed public roles, including organizing relief, distributing aid, and participating in armed resistance.

During the Soviet era, women's expected contribution to the nation was shaped by state policies that promoted their participation in education and the workforce. Although this encouraged women's presence in public life, it produced a 'double burden' of paid work alongside household duties (Buckley, 1981), and fostered the ideal of the 'super-woman' – a figure defined by strength, endurance, and self-sacrifice in service of the nation-family (Harden, 2002, p. 2). The collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted this model as Armenia was plunged into economic crisis, marked by widespread unemployment, energy shortages, and war with Azerbaijan, followed by a succession of authoritarian regimes that embraced nationalist rhetoric, resisted European integration, and deepened the country's political and security dependence on Russia (Petrosyan, 2010).

In 2018, Armenia experienced a peaceful revolution which ousted a corrupt, oligarchic, and pro-Russian government. However, the former regime retained substantial economic and institutional power and forged alliances with the Armenian Apostolic Church and ultraconservative NGOs, actors closely aligned with the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church (Vardanyan & Zolyan, 2023). In line with Mudde's (2019) framework, I approach these actors collectively as constituting Armenia's 'far-right', which Mudde conceptualizes through the interrelated dimensions of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. While these dimensions are unevenly expressed across the actors in Armenia, what enables their analytical grouping is a shared investment in nativism, understood as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia centred on protecting the assumed interests, culture, and continuity of the native population.

Across the post-Soviet space, gender has become a key site through which such far-right nativist concerns are articulated, contributing to the growing use of the term 'anti-gender movement' (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In Armenia, this articulation of anti-gender politics is shaped by the country's highly militarized context and a 'nation-army' framework, in which citizenship is defined through service, sacrifice, and readiness for war (Pambukhchyan, 2018). Within this framework, gender roles are rigidly prescribed: men's strength, masculinity, and heroism are celebrated as sources of social status, identity, and purpose amid war and economic instability. Women are idealized as mothers: 'the constructed ideal image of the Armenian woman, much admired and respected, is one of a sacrificing, caring, and nurturing Armenian mother for her family and her nation' (Beukian, 2014, p. 249). Motherhood is positioned as the highest form of national service, ensuring demographic survival, cultural transmission, and future defence of the homeland (Ohanyan, 2009). Queer individuals who do not conform to these heteronormative expectations are seen as non-reproductive and unable to support the nation-family, often labelled as *R E S E A (ԲԱՐՏԱՆԻՐ - traitors)*, shamed, and socially excluded (Shirinian, 2024).

A pronatalist articulation of far-right nativism is particularly visible in the discourse of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Each year on 7 April, Armenia celebrates Motherhood and Beauty Day, a Christian holiday dedicated to femininity and motherhood. Beyond its celebratory veneer, the occasion has become a platform for promoting motherhood as

a national obligation. For example, in 2025, Karekin II Catholicos of All Armenians, invoked the Blessed Virgin Mary as an archetype of maternal devotion, purity, and self-sacrifice, praying that ‘the birth of new children strengthen our nation’ and urging that sons and daughters be raised in love of the homeland and its values (Karekin, 2025).

Ultraconservative NGOs, such as I R H (Արհամարհ) and m e l (Խոսակ), extend this logic through a more explicitly ethnonationalist interpretation of nativism centred on ethnic homogeneity and cultural purity (Connor, 2018). Framing Armenia as threatened by Western moral and cultural encroachment as well as by Turkey and Azerbaijan, these groups cast reproduction as a matter of national survival. Hosank, for example, warns that ‘emigration, immigration, low birth rates, and mixed marriages form a perfect recipe for slow genocide’ (Hosank, 2026). Such groups also actively target NGOs working on women’s rights and LGBTQ+ issues, casting them as Western imports that threaten Armenian traditional values (Baldrian, 2025).

Tracing the history of women’s roles within the nation–family reveals that, while Armenian women were once celebrated for their political, educational, and social contributions, the post-Soviet era has seen far-right actors increasingly narrow and redefine those roles around motherhood. I term this reconfiguration the ‘Motherhood Project’: an ongoing, far-right ideological effort that links women’s value to their capacity to bear and raise Armenian children. This project strategically co-opts the nation–family framework and appeals to Armenia’s prevailing family values, leveraging social pressures: the desire to contribute, defend the country, and avoid being ostracized or accused of betrayal. As this article demonstrates, the meanings and effects of the Motherhood Project are diverse, as Armenian women negotiate their roles within it.

Everyday experience and resistance: theoretical considerations

Feminist studies, development studies, social movement theory, and the field of everyday resistance each illuminate different dimensions of women’s daily experiences under far-right, militarized, and nationalist projects. This article engages three key strands in particular: feminist analyses of militarization; feminist scholarship on everyday life politics; and broader studies of everyday resistance.

Feminist analyses show how war and militarization permeate everyday life, affecting women differently depending on their social position, geographical location, and proximity to violence (Enloe, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997). In the Armenian context, these dynamics are evident across distinct social groups. Studies of displaced women from Nagorno-Karabakh and war widows show how experiences of loss are shaped by enduring expectations to conform to gendered social norms, with social sanctions often accompanying deviation from prescribed roles (Ghazaryan, 2020; Shahnazarian & Ziemer, 2019).

While feminist scholarship demonstrates the pervasiveness of militarization, generation remains under-theorized as a distinct analytical lens, consistent with feminist approaches that prioritize class, sexuality, nationality, and religion. When generation is addressed, it is typically through Western ‘wave’ frameworks or narratives of intergenerational tension between feminist cohorts (Henry, 2004), rather than as a broader structuring condition of social life. As Mannheim (1952) suggests, generations can be understood as more than age cohorts; they are social locations shaped by shared formative historical experiences. In Armenia, such experiences include Soviet rule, state collapse, war, and

ongoing political and economic instability. Foregrounding generational analysis therefore enables a more precise account of how women's navigation of militarization is shaped by these historical ruptures, helping to avoid the flattening of women's experiences.

Budgeon (2001) provides a rare example within feminist scholarship that explicitly centres generation, showing how young women in the UK often distance themselves from the feminist label associated with older cohorts while still exercising politicized agency in everyday relations. As Budgeon (2001, p. 25) notes, 'young women today have available to them ideas not only about being able to make choices but that the very notion of choice is their fundamental right'. This notion of choice is reflected in popular texts that encourage women to exercise agency, empowerment, and freedom of choice in everyday decisions – calling out sexism, ending a relationship, or choosing not to have children (Given, 2020).

In the post-Soviet space, however, feminism has struggled to transform social norms and institutional structures in ways comparable to Western contexts. Feminist movements have struggled to take hold and the concept of 'waves' of feminism is of limited relevance; consequently, the inheritance of choice as a fundamental right for young women cannot be assumed. In Armenia, applying Western feminist approaches of empowerment risks overlooking the culturally and historically embedded ways that women navigate the Motherhood Project, a concern reflected in Mohanty (1988) and Ahmed's (2023) call to understand women's practices as situated within local priorities, constraints, resources, and conditions of safety. As Abu-Lughod (1990) shows, it is also important to avoid romanticizing resistance; not all acts of resistance are transformative and capable of overturning or reshaping existing systems of power.

By examining local power structures in Palestine, Richter-Devroe (2011) demonstrates how women's everyday acts, such as crossing Israeli-imposed borders or travelling for personal enjoyment, constitute momentary and highly localized disruptions of power. Richter-Devroe's work aligns with a broader literature base on everyday resistance, including Scott's (1985) influential study of peasant resistance in a Malaysian village. Scott examines how villagers employ informal and hidden strategies – foot-dragging, evasion, disloyalty, and sarcasm – to subtly undermine authority. Similarly, Bayat's (2013, p. 43) concept of 'quiet encroachment' describes how the urban poor resist and stretch rules without open confrontation, through acts such as occupying land, resisting eviction, or creating informal livelihoods.

As Johansson and Vinthagen (2020) note, such studies focused on everyday resistance tend to privilege subordinated or subaltern actors, asking how the powerless subtly resist domination, while paying far less attention to those located in 'middle-level' positions within hierarchies or organizations. This raises important questions: what constitutes everyday resistance for professionals engaged in formal advocacy work? Further, how does institutional affiliation enable, constrain, or reshape forms of resistance? By focusing on NGO workers, this article explores how engagement in institutional activism intersects with everyday practices of resistance.

Method

This article emerges from a wider study on feminist and sexuality politics in Armenia, conducted between 2020 and 2024. It draws on 35 semi-structured interviews to examine

how women experienced and navigated the Motherhood Project in their private lives. Participants worked in NGOs addressing issues such as domestic violence, gender equality, human rights, and women's economic empowerment. NGOs in Armenia vary widely in size and scope, ranging from large, professionalized organizations with substantial workforces and stable funding – such as the Women's Resource Center and Women's Support Center – to smaller groups, often with just one or two employees, operating in rural regions, including the Resource Center for Women's Empowerment NGO and Spitak Helsinki NGO.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity across age, geography, and professional role, with snowball sampling employed to improve access, particularly in regions beyond the capital city, Yerevan. All participants self-identified as women and were aged between 19 and 72 at the time of the interview. All were of Armenian origin, born in Armenia or diasporans who had repatriated to Armenia. All identified as middle class.

Interviews were primarily conducted in person, most often at NGO offices. A small number were conducted online with participants who had moved abroad but remained involved in Armenian civil society. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share their life histories and reflections on traditional gender norms. In some cases, I asked directly about themes such as the Motherhood Project; in others, these topics emerged naturally in broader discussions of everyday life. As a member of the Armenian diaspora, I was mindful of my insider–outsider positionality and dual positioning, being culturally and linguistically connected, yet geographically and experientially distant (Acker, 2000). I approached the research with reflexive curiosity, allowing participants to define their narratives, while remaining attentive to the ways in which my presence may have influenced what was shared.

Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2024 and therefore spanned a period marked by the second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and Azerbaijan's ethnic cleansing of Armenians from the region in 2023. No clear differences emerged in participants' narratives before and after these events; instead, participants consistently described an increasing proximity of war and militarization in everyday life alongside greater visibility of far-right actors in political discourse and on social media. These temporal conditions are treated as contextual background shaping participants' accounts, rather than producing narrative rupture.

Ethical approval was sought for the study in line with University of Kent ethics guidelines and all participants provided informed consent. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English where necessary. NVivo was used for initial coding and the development of thematic categories, followed by iterative refinement to narrow down themes, which were informed by feminist and everyday resistance scholarship. In presenting the findings, pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities and ensure confidentiality.

Coding and analysis of the interview data revealed distinct patterns of experience and resistance among three generational cohorts of women, which form the analytical structure of this paper. Following Mannheim's (1952) conceptualization of generation, each cohort can be understood as sharing values and experiences that developed during their formative years, which continue to shape their present lives, and engagement with the Motherhood Project. The three cohorts are:

- (1) The Soviet Generation (8 participants): born and raised during the Soviet period, these women were socialized under Soviet gender ideology and entered marriage and motherhood during that time. At the time of interview, they were aged 50 and above.
- (2) The Transition Generation (13 participants): born before the collapse of the Soviet Union but entered adulthood during the post-Soviet transition defined by economic crisis, political instability, and rising right-wing nationalism. Aged 34 to 49, all were married and had children at home at the time of the interview.
- (3) The Independence Generation (14 participants): born after 1990 and raised entirely in post-Soviet Armenia, these women grew up in an era shaped by globalization, digital media, and ongoing militarization and far-right activity. At the time of interview, they were aged 18 to 33. None were married or had children.

Participants across cohorts were offered the choice of speaking in Armenian or English. Those from the Transition and Independence Generations predominantly chose English, reflecting its use among young, middle-class professionals, whereas participants from the Soviet Generation, particularly outside Yerevan, preferred Armenian. These linguistic differences shaped the research process, as translation involves interpretive choices through which meanings may shift or be lost (Temple & Edwards, 2002). This was evident when younger participants described family negotiations in English using terms such as 'open-minded', which can carry Western connotations of autonomy, freedom, and acceptance of difference that did not always align with their intended meaning. Reflecting on such differences in framing and the potential gap between lived experience and its articulation through language was an important part of the research process.

Findings

The Soviet Generation: privilege and protection from the Motherhood Project

The Soviet Generation grew up, married, and raised young children under the Soviet system. Benefiting from universal access to education, many subsequently became engaged in public life through the Communist Party or affiliated institutions. Participants described strong support from husbands and family in their early careers and expressed pride in managing both paid work and domestic responsibilities, as one recalled, 'I am an example of a woman who did everything' (Mara, 65). Such accounts reflected the Soviet ideal of the 'superwoman', rooted in a gender contract that organized work, care, and social reproduction around state-supported female employment and childcare provision (Harden, 2002; Temkina & Rotkirch, 2002).

Following the Soviet collapse, the transition to market relations disrupted this gender contract through the erosion of institutional support, alongside rising work intensity which made balancing work and family life increasingly difficult (Zdravomyslova, 2010). Having lost their positions in state institutions, participants faced growing societal expectations to withdraw from employment into full-time caregiving. Drawing on an influx of Western development funding, participants nevertheless resisted these pressures by establishing Armenia's earliest women's NGOs while continuing to shoulder an intensified double burden of work and

domestic responsibilities. This helped establish NGO work as a respected career path for educated, middle-class women. Over time, these organizations became highly professionalized and the largest in the field in terms of scale and staffing (Baldrian, 2025).

By the time of the interviews, most participants no longer faced a double burden. As their NGOs expanded, they gained greater financial stability and were able to hire personal cooks, cleaners, and drivers. Their regular presence in central cafés, restaurants, and leisure spaces in Yerevan reflected both financial independence and social freedom. Some also owned second homes in the countryside, reflecting a lifestyle orientated around leisure and professional work rather than domestic labour.

This shift away from domestic life ran counter to the ideals of the contemporary Motherhood Project, yet participants distanced themselves from these expectations without facing social sanction. All reported feeling largely unaffected by far-right gender ideologies. As Gayane (age 68) explained, 'there are no restrictions on my life – I can do what I want', while Tara (age 57) similarly felt free: 'I don't think like oh I am female so I'm going to be in this box or I have to be a certain way or live my life in a certain way'. This detachment was due to life stage and social position as all participants were married with adult children and, in many cases, grandchildren. Their identities as mothers had already been socially validated, meaning they were no longer the primary targets of the far-right. Having reached post-childbearing age shielded them from pronatalist pressures.

Although not directly affected by the Motherhood Project, Soviet Generation participants were influenced by the far-right in how they articulated gender politics and framed their support for women in Armenia. After entering the NGO sector, they became increasingly embedded in transnational donor networks, which also served as a key site through which feminist ideas were encountered. In interviews, participants generally avoided identifying as 'feminist' or 'anti-militarist', instead framing their work in terms of supporting women's participation in the workforce and public life, as Lucine (age 58) and Nina (age 67) explained:

I am not a feminist, and my organization is not a feminist organization. You have to be very careful about what you say you are doing and we certainly don't speak about feminism with our communities as it won't work. (Lucine)

We need to understand the society in Armenia and not make a show of feminism. Europeans working in the feminist and LGBTQ+ areas do their work in such an aggressive way and use a very different methodology which is not necessarily useful in Armenia. (Nina)

This reluctance to identify with feminism partially reflected the lingering stigma attached to feminism through Soviet-era propaganda (Markowitz, 1995), with similar patterns observed elsewhere in the region (Aliyeva, 2020). In Armenia, however, it was also shaped by far-right campaigns that target feminist activists and frame feminism as a Western import aimed at eroding local values (Baldrian, 2025), evident in Nina's framing of 'European' feminism as incompatible with Armenian culture. These concerns were pronounced among the Soviet Generation, who feared that identifying as feminist could jeopardize their professional reputations and the organizational legitimacy they had built over decades.

The Transition Generation: overcoming the double burden

Participants from the Transition Generation were born in the late Soviet period and grew up during the unstable years that followed its collapse. By the time of the interviews, all were married and had school-age children. Some participants were based in Yerevan and other major cities, working in large NGOs founded by the Soviet Generation or newly established initiatives, while others lived in rural areas and worked in smaller organizations.

Exposure to feminist ideas often began during university education and was subsequently deepened through involvement in the NGO sector and periods spent abroad. Many had engaged in local projects, trainings and conferences that addressed topics related to feminism, militarization, and peacebuilding. Like the Soviet Generation, most participants rejected the label of 'feminist', expressing concern about how such terms resonate in Armenian social and political realities.

Participants were highly educated and many had worked in a school or university settings during the early independence years. After marriage, however, they were forbidden from working, as their husbands absorbed rising nationalist discourse, and insisted that their wives stay at home and raise children. After experiencing freedom through education and early employment, this constraint emerged as a source of frustration. As Anahit (42) explained, 'I left my job when I got married because my husband told me to ... I had previously held a lectureship job at the local university and was happy there'. Lia (40) similarly recalled: 'my husband told me I could not work after we got married as it would be shameful for our family ... I hated that. I wanted to do so much more with my life'.

Rather than insisting on their immediate return work, participants adopted pragmatic strategies to reconfigure gender dynamics within the household. Anahit and Lia went on to explain:

I stayed calm and then worked with him, telling him it's okay. I can work; it will be fine. I will still look after the children and the home. It took a long time and lots of patience and effort. I listened to him, and he listened to me, and we tried to understand each other's perspectives. Fighting is the easiest way, but it does not bring results. If in Armenia everyone fights for her rights, then no family will remain and 99% of families will be divorced. (Anahit)

He was angry at first when I suggested working, but I slowly and patiently began to work on him and explained to him again and again that I wanted to open an NGO – I explained how it would benefit us and the children and our future and give us some stability and how I could still manage everything at home. At the same time, I decided to open a small social enterprise in the form of a factory employing displaced women from Nagorno-Karabakh. I gave my husband the position of factory manager. After many years he eventually allowed me to open the NGO. (Lia)

As Ashwin and Lytkina (2004) show, primary breadwinning was central to masculine identity after the Soviet collapse, exposing unemployment as a key site of masculine insecurity. Against this backdrop, Lia's husband was unemployed, and she responded by assigning him a leadership role associated with authority, control, and decision-making, thereby preserving forms of masculinity that remained socially legible.

Having gained the freedom to work, a new challenge emerged for participants: how to manage both professional and domestic responsibilities. Unlike the Soviet Generation, the

Transition Generation did not view the double burden as a source of pride and came to realize that balancing work and home life was unsustainable, as described by Sveta:

It was so difficult for me to begin with trying to do everything so again I had to speak to my husband and convince him to help me ... I will share with you my greatest achievement: my husband changed. For example, I was going to training for two weeks last month and my husband took holiday from his job in the military to bring the children to school and collect them from school. He said to his military friends, okay this is for my wife because she is going to training. I said I'm very proud that you told everyone in your military place of work that this is what you were doing. (Sveta, age 42)

For Sveta, this achievement was especially meaningful given her husband's role in the military and his fears that his masculinity and commitment to the nation would be questioned by other soldiers in his military base. Beyond this challenge in balancing home and work life, the militarized ideals of the Motherhood Project also posed difficulties in the context of raising children as Hasmik described:

My son decided that he wants to be a military officer like his father and grandfather. He dreams to study in Russia and wants to learn how to become a military officer over there which I don't like at all, but I don't feel like I can do much about it and can't fight with him about everything. A family member bought him a toy gun and I hate it; when I can, I do try explaining to him that he shouldn't use it and encourage him to play with other toys. (Hasmik, age 39)

Through her experience in the NGO sector, Hasmik later described how she became aware of the pervasive influence of militarization:

I learnt about what militarization means through working at the organization and how it affects all aspects of life ... like even when I used to tell my son not to cry, I didn't realize that this was bad and was a result of society trying to push an ideal of what a boy should be like. It was my colleague that pointed it out to me, and it really opened my eyes.

While Hasmik did not identify as anti-militarist, she deliberately sought small ways to raise her son differently, creating distance from these norms where she felt able to. For many participants, NGO spaces provided similar opportunities to 'open their eyes' to social realities – through formal trainings, but often through conversations with colleagues about frustrations or upsetting experiences. Although each participant's circumstances were different, they shared common arenas of struggle. As Arpi (age 42) explained:

Sometimes I come into the office, and I just feel annoyed or frustrated by something I have experienced and I share that and they are like "oh yes that happened to us too!" and we laugh about it and also talk about whether there is anything we can do about it.

A recurring theme across these accounts was the sense that the workplace functioned 'like a family' (Ani, age 40), providing a space to build friendships with like-minded women and discuss everyday struggles.

The Independence Generation: reimagining marriage and motherhood

Participants from the Independence Generation were born after the Soviet collapse. At the time of interview, all were unmarried and childless, with many still living with their parents due to low NGO wages. Living in both urban and rural locations, they worked in

both well-established and smaller NGOs and were university educated, with many participants having pursued higher education in Europe. Exposure to feminist ideas often occurred during university, international travel, and volunteering; in most cases, participants internalized feminist identities prior to entering the NGO sector. Involvement in NGOs was frequently motivated by a desire to work in a field perceived as aligned with their feminist values, rather than by the pursuit of a career, which was more characteristic of the Soviet Generation.

Like the Transition Generation, they cultivated networks of friends formed through university and NGO spaces. Within these circles, they openly discussed their daily lives, dilemmas, and strategies for navigating the Motherhood Project. As Araxi (28) explained, 'I'm not alone as all of my friends at work face the same situation and so we talk about it a lot and help each other'. Similar to the Transition Generation, these networks functioned as peer-based support systems, bringing together colleagues of a similar age and life stage. Rather than seeking advice from older generations, participants surrounded themselves with young women experiencing comparable challenges – most notably the enduring social pressures to marry in their early 20s and have children, often with ethnonationalist expectations to wed an Armenian man. This pressure was described by all participants regardless of age and location. As Araxi explained:

I was feeling really irritated at times with my mum. So many times, she said to me: "you aren't married, when will you get married and have children? Don't you want children?" I kept explaining to her that there is more to life than that for me right now, but one day. She slowly started to listen.

A common sentiment among participants was wanting to pursue other goals in their 20s – travel, study, or explore life – without abandoning the desire for motherhood: 'I want to be a mother, but not right now' (Elena, age 25). At the same time, they emphasized that motherhood remained important and that they wished to respect family and cultural expectations. As Sophia (age 28) reflected: 'I can make changes in my life at my age and do what I want but I need to be respectful to others, be respectful to my culture, and be respectful to the fact that I am Armenian as I do not want to bring any shame to my family'.

For Maria, these pressures were intensified by living in a border community:

I had a relationship, but he went to war and got injured very badly. Now he has a cognitive issue because of a head injury. He is not the same person I used to know. There are many stories like mine where women married men with serious injuries. Everyone was saying, "Oh did you see? They had such a great wedding, and it is such a beautiful story, and this girl is a hero". But I knew that I wanted to end the relationship. As a feminist, I'm happy for those women, but I also needed to find my own happiness. It was so difficult because I was feeling awful, and my family did not want me to end the relationship. They were worried about what people would think and whether anyone else would marry me. It took many, many months for me to convince them that it was ok and that I would marry one day. (Maria, age 24)

Maria's decision was made particularly difficult by the societal glorification of wounded soldiers and the moral elevation of women who marry them; marriage and childbearing with a war hero confer social status and signal devotion to the nation-family. Maria, however, prioritized her own happiness over this narrative of sacrifice. Lilit (29) similarly foregrounded personal autonomy in her intimate life:

When I was living abroad, I started dating a Turkish guy. I know it's surprising, but I like Turkish guys because they are still from the region, but they are more modern and open-minded than Armenian guys and that is what I want for my future. It's so frustrating but I couldn't bring him to Armenia because they could kill him. I was so afraid to tell my mum because I was afraid about how she would react as I really hate to upset her and I don't want to lose her support ... I spoke with my friend, and she encouraged me to speak to her and to be honest.

The 1915 genocide, decades of genocide denial by Turkey, and Turkey's political and military support for Azerbaijan have entrenched deep distrust within Armenian culture. In militarized narratives, Turks are cast as a *B C E'tshnamiT* - the enemy), and those connected to them are at risk of being labelled a *R E S E('da Vachan'* - traitor). By choosing her partner and negotiating this decision within her family, encouraged by a friend at work, Lilit unsettled this ethnonational boundary and challenged the expectation that she marries an Armenian man.

Unlike the Soviet and Transition Generations, the Independence Generation encountered more overt and intrusive forms of social pressure from the wider community around marriage and childbearing. Within Armenia's kinship-based culture, a young woman's marital status is treated as a communal concern, prompting unsolicited comments, particularly within tightly knit rural communities (Shirinian, 2018). Kara shared her experiences of such comments:

I get asked about 20 times a month if I am married yet. I get in taxis in Yerevan, and they ask, "do you have a boyfriend?" I say yes. Then they ask, "is he Armenian and I say no". And they say "oh well my uncle's son is the perfect guy for you. Just dump your boyfriend and marry him". In that moment, I try to joke and be like "ha ha ok whatever I'll come tomorrow". (Kara, age 22)

Similarly, Anush reflected on the constant pressure to marry:

I get comments from neighbours all the time asking me about when I am getting married. It's relentless and really annoys me, but I came to accept that you cannot change how some people think. It comes from their lack of education and the fact that they are not open to the world and haven't even seen the world to be able to be open to it. You just have to ignore them. (Anush, age 21)

Across both urban and rural contexts, participants described avoiding direct confrontation with individuals outside their immediate family who upheld the Motherhood Project ideal, instead disengaging, deflecting, or responding with humour, and often rationalizing such encounters as stemming from ignorance or limited exposure to alternative perspectives.

Discussion

Findings revealed that generational position mediated both exposure to and negotiation of the Motherhood Project. For the Soviet Generation, who had already fulfilled normative expectations of marriage and motherhood, pressures were not deeply felt or internalized; their views on gender politics were, however, influenced by far-right discourses that portrayed feminism as a threat to traditional values. In contrast, the Transition Generation encountered the Motherhood Project as a constraint, particularly after marriage, when they were prevented by their husbands from working outside the home. Among participants from the Independence

Generation, frustrations centred on familial and societal pressure to marry and have children at a young age.

The resistance strategies employed by the Transition and Independence Generations were characterized by careful negotiations with family members where new ideas were introduced cautiously, collaboratively, and with the deliberate avoidance of confrontation. Decisions were made in relation to multiple attachments including cultural norms, family expectations, kinship networks, economic precarity and community ties. In managing these variables, participants sought to make life under militarization and nationalism liveable, through arrangements such as continuing paid work after marriage, delaying childbirth, freely choosing a partner, or renegotiating childcare responsibilities.

Both the Transition and Independence Generations reclaimed Armenian ideals of womanhood by emphasizing devotion to family alongside personal happiness; as this article has shown, these ideals predate contemporary far-right nationalism and are rooted in Armenian feminist histories. These everyday negotiations reflect the emotional centrality of family life in Armenia, evidenced by a 2016 study which found that 87.8% of Armenian youth identified 'making their parents proud' as a primary life goal (Vermishyan et al., 2023, p. 152). This commitment was reinforced by material dependence on family and the fear of losing familial support or being ostracized by their community (Shirinian, 2018).

As Richter-Devroe (2011) and Riessman (2000) highlight, women's everyday forms of resistance can create space for individual agency and temporary subversions of power relations; however, the strength of patriarchal power means that such practices do not necessarily transform the broader gendered norms within which they operate. In Armenia, young women did not reject the Motherhood Project, and the normative gender order was therefore not displaced. Rather, they continued to view motherhood as a priority and for the Independence Generation, an important future aspiration: 'I want to be a mother, but not right now'. Instead, they negotiated the terms of the Motherhood Project by reshaping the conditions under which motherhood occurs and asserting greater autonomy over partner choice and family life. Through practices rooted in intimate relationships, the gender order was instead reworked through adjustments to the timing and conditions of its realization. This demonstrates both the depth of the Motherhood Project's social embeddedness and the ways everyday resistance to the far-right in Armenia operates through the rearticulation, rather than refusal, of dominant gender ideologies.

Participation in NGO spaces fostered what Clare Hemmings (2012, p. 147) terms 'affective solidarity', enabling Armenian women to connect through shared frustrations and experiences rather than through a unified ideology or centralized framework. These spaces exposed younger women to new ideas, helping them see their lives differently, and to recognize the social pressures they faced. They also provided supportive relationships and opportunities for reflection with peers of the same life stage, allowing participants to feel less isolated and reassured that others were confronting similar challenges. Friends encouraged their autonomy and, at times, helped them to navigate difficult conversations with family members.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the rise of the far-right in post-Soviet Armenia and its articulation of the ‘Motherhood Project’ – a term I develop to describe an ideological framework that positions women’s primary social value in bearing and raising Armenian children in the service of national survival. I traced how these narratives shape the lives of three generations of women working in NGO settings and explored how they respond through everyday resistance strategies.

By foregrounding generational position as a key analytical lens, this study advances feminist scholarship by demonstrating how militarized discourses are experienced unevenly across generations – an important insight in the post-Soviet context, where profound historical and ongoing social, economic, and political transformations have produced distinct generational subjectivities. Rather than rejecting the ideology of the Motherhood Project, Armenian women from the younger generations remained committed to motherhood while negotiating its terms, reshaping expectations around marriage, childbearing, and family life in culturally legible ways. These findings highlight the need to move beyond Western-centric assumptions about everyday empowerment, which often assume that women can exercise agency freely and assume choice as a fundamental right (Mohanty, 1988). In contexts like Armenia, such actions carry social, economic, and familial costs.

The study expands scholarship on women’s resistance to the far-right, which has to date focused on European and Latin American contexts and on visible, organized forms of civil society opposition, such as counter-protests, digital campaigns, and lobbying (Zaremborg et al., 2021). This focus reflects a divide within the literature, where social movement studies and everyday resistance scholarship have emerged as separate fields of enquiry, with limited exploration of their intersection. In the Armenian context, NGO spaces operate not only as sites of institutional work but also as arenas of knowledge exchange, relationship-building, and collective reflection, shaping women’s everyday strategies of negotiation.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Amelia Barnes:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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