

# PREMARITAL VIRGINITY: THE CULTURAL CODE OF THE GENDER ORDER IN CONTEMPORARY ARMENIA (THE CASE OF YEREVAN).

## *Summary*

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Based on biographical interviews, this paper aims to reconstruct the central cultural code of Armenia's gender order: the preservation of women's premarital virginity. I analyze normative and "deviant" practices of female premarital sexuality in relation to this code. This analysis enables me to draw certain conclusions regarding changes in the Armenian gender order. The study is based on 42 biographical interviews with middle-class urban women and men (residents of Armenia, mostly Yerevan), as well as 13 expert interviews (2004–5).

In analyzing the gender order in late Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia (the 1960s–80s and 1990s–2000s, respectively), I use the concept of a "paradigm script" to uncover the rules that regulate the gender and sexual practices of men and women throughout their life cycle. These cultural scripts of sexuality define the central legitimate models of sexual practices in patriarchal society. In the "normal stage" of classical patriarchy, most members of the community share these principles and base their everyday practices on them. Marriage partners are chosen by parents, the young generation is controlled by the older generation, and women by men. Women's sexual life is identified with their reproductive function and is controlled at all stages of the life cycle.

Despite the emancipation that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and intensified in Soviet and post-Soviet times, the patriarchal paradigm script remains stable in Armenia. It implies a hierarchy based on age and gender, the primacy of the male breadwinner role, women's exclusive responsibility for the household, control over female sexuality, and premarital female virginity. Unlike, for example, in Tajikistan, parents in educated strata in Armenia no longer systematically choose marriage partners for their daughters, but they are still expected to guarantee the absence of premarital sexual contacts. After the wedding night, the groom's mother confirms that there was evidence of defloration by presenting a symbolic red apple to the bride's mother.

However, the patriarchal script is not immutable. It is vulnerable and subject to crises. Individual transgressions occur during the "normal" phase of patriarchy;

crisis only sets in when deviance becomes systemic and obvious. Empirical research has shown that gender relations in Armenia changed considerably in Soviet times. Women had access to education and employment, and were socially mobile in Soviet society. However, emancipation in the public sphere was not matched by emancipation in the private sphere, even though divorce and remarriage was possible, as was abortion. Practices among the intelligentsia were more liberal, although preserving premarital virginity remained a rigid demand, and violation of this rule was rare and carefully hidden.

I chose to interview city dwellers with higher education, willing to discuss their sex life, in order to study the modernization of the gender order. Informants included 32 women and 10 men belonging to three generations: one cohort formed in the late Soviet period and two post-Soviet cohorts. The latter of these two, born between 1980 and 1985, were most likely to problematize and debate practices such as premarital virginity and traditional family structure.

The paradigm script is still in force for all generations interviewed, although it has been problematized to the extent that the virginity of the bride-to-be is often questioned, and new institutions, such as modern medicine, are informally involved in its verification. Women who lost their virginity before marriage cease to be eligible brides, whether this is discovered during the wedding night or before. Conversely, a man who takes a woman's virginity is expected to marry her, a mechanism that imposes limits on the male sex drive and men's power over women. Men thus choose partners for premarital sex from outside their immediate circle, including among prostitutes, to avoid dishonoring a woman from their community and possibly being forced to marry her. Women tend to shun premarital romantic relationships in order to avoid situations of actual or even assumed sexual contact, which would automatically subject them to the man's discretion, at the risk of losing their honor.

This gender code also creates the preconditions for marriage by abduction, in particular a type of abduction where a man kidnaps an unwitting bride in order to marry her against the will of her parents, which she would otherwise honor even if willing to marry him. By making the bride spend the night with him or alone and without supervision, he performs a symbolic defloration and makes it impossible for her to return to her parents' home. In narrating such episodes, women represent themselves as passive objects, unable to affect the course of events or to assume responsibility for the outcome.

Faced with sexual liberalization, the patriarchal gender ideology creates a variety of ways to integrate non-standard behavior into the normative framework, reproducing the latter's symbolic legitimacy. For example, even where in-laws are not concerned with the bride's virginity, they may still perform the "red apple" ritual as a formality. The newlyweds may simulate or declare defloration on the wedding night.

In the Soviet period, the processes of Sovietization and Russification unintentionally led to the liberalization of some sexual norms, in particular for those who identified with the intelligentsia. They were geographically mobile, often studied in Russia or other Soviet republics, and adopted a variety of lifestyles that included remarriage and single motherhood. Premarital sex remained an illegitimate practice

among these strata, but implementation of these rules was not subject to community control, and thus they could occasionally be overcome as long as the transgression was not made public. The presence of more traditional families among the intelligentsia created a need for constant negotiation. Deviance from sexual norms was an accidental result of a more liberal youth culture with increased contact between genders, rather than part of a conscious biographical project. Nevertheless, according to my informants, explicit reflection about sexuality was rare, due to both Armenian cultural traditions and the Soviet sexual culture of official hypocrisy.

In the post-Soviet period, premarital virginity and the red apple ritual ceased to be routine practices and were subjected to reflection and controversy. New institutions arose that problematized sexual practices, including the mass media, some campaigns of education and development, a women's movement, medicine, the church, a birth control market, and a sex industry. Some young people continue to consider the norm of female (but not male) premarital virginity necessary, albeit in some cases for explicitly stated reasons of security and marital harmony, but they resent community control and the rituals surrounding it. Others consider the norm obsolete. Still others see it as a feature of ethnic tradition that should be selectively encouraged to preserve national culture. Confirmed premarital virginity continues to be an important factor in women's life chances, but reputation alone is no longer considered sufficient evidence of virginity due to the availability of hymenoplasty. However, there are now also young women who engage in sexual activity for pleasure, repudiating the old norms as a mark of lower social status. For these young educated women, sexual debuts and sex life are separate from marriage.

In post-Soviet comparison, Armenia constitutes an intermediate case between countries with liberal sexual practices, such as Russia, and Central Asian societies, where traditional norms of sexual behavior and community control are still in force. In Armenia, premarital virginity is increasingly medicalized, moralized, and politicized. It is a subject of debate among young people, and a norm to which some women refuse to adhere.