

Opponent's review of the Master's Thesis

Title: The Institution of Marriage in Armenia from Gender Perspective

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The thesis deals with the gender dimensions of the institution of marriage in Armenia. The main focus is on culture (traditions, habits, and images of women and men related to marriage), with a significant emphasis on history and religion. The author then tries to study the impact of these elements on gender roles and inequality in the Armenian society.

The objectives of the thesis have been defined quite broadly. One can expect that there are countless historical and religious influences that have shaped marriage and, in many cases, they are probably untraceable. Also, the relationship between the institution of marriage and gender roles in terms of shaping their forms is probably mutual. In this respect, therefore, the claim in the opening passages that "[t]he purpose of the research was to establish a cause-and-effect relationship" (p. 4) is somewhat surprising. The relationship between the causes and effects in this area are probably something one can only guess. In defining the objectives of the thesis, I also missed a clearer description of the research problem: a summary of what is known about the subject and what gaps in knowledge the thesis aims to fill. The introduction feels more like a summary of the outcomes. There is not a single reference to the relevant work of other authors, yet the introduction is followed by "Methodology".

The thesis is primarily a work of compilation. The author develops the topic with the help of a considerable number of sources, primarily thematic one, but occasionally, she also makes an effort to relate the text to more theoretical or general knowledge. The author quite deftly guides the readers through historical and religious influences, which have shaped the form of marriage and marital roles, and premarital customs and rituals. She also deals, for example, with the virginity cult in the Armenian society, the gendered effects of divorce, and same-sex marriage. The text as a whole is informative and readable, and it does not forget to emphasize that various norms oppress also men, despite their social privilege.

However, it is a pity that the thesis remains on the "cautious" compilation plane or does not discuss the findings from the used sources in a more active way. A stronger argument line would be beneficial. In the current form of the thesis, the argument line is rather implicit and it manifests primarily in the selection of the presented information and ways of connecting them into the whole text. Moreover, the author often takes over relatively long passages from literature without explicitly stating the quotes (in the referencing system using footnotes), so it is often impossible to recognize which part of the text is a paraphrase of the source and which is the author's reflection (e.g. the text on p. 30–32).

"Methodology", unfortunately, is a weak chapter. Due to the purely marginal use of the author's own data and the compilation character of the thesis, it is somewhat confusing to place this chapter right after "Introduction". Most importantly, this chapter inexplicably confuses the data collected and analysed by the author and by author(s) of the sources used in the thesis. Given that the author of the thesis interviewed (if I am not mistaken) only Armenian men and women, the following formulations is misleading (p. 2):

"The research aims to describe the marital familial institution in Armenia from feminist perspective. Throughout the research process, findings from interviews with Armenian men and women, religious authorities, media artefacts and content analysis reveal the highly patriarchal and inflexibly heteronormative character of the institution of marriage in Armenia..."

Considering that the author used only a couple of numbers and charts from the texts by other authors, the following statement is equally problematic (p. 4): "The research has been carried out mainly from

qualitative perspective, but quantitative research methods such as statistics have been used to address questions...“.

As for the author's own research and data collection, the presented information is incomplete. She reportedly interviewed 15 people from three organizations “dealing with gender issues”. These organizations, however, are not specified and neither is the role of their members in the author's research (they are not treated as experts on gender issues in the thesis).

The interviewing techniques include face-to-face interviews and focus groups, but the structure of the research participants is not stated and neither is any information on the areas of questions.

The last objection to the methodological aspects is related to the anonymization of some participants of the research. Anonymization (described in “Ethical considerations”) was used because the participants expressed their concerns about the disclosure of their statements. But should not anonymization be commonplace even in the case of participants who explicitly do not communicate or have concerns?

Generally, it is questionable whether the interviews were a necessary step. Or more importantly – their purpose was not sufficiently clarified and their results were minimally used in the thesis.

The comments below are related to various aspects of the thesis (and are to be understood as minor):

- In the text, I missed a little more intensive work with the data chronicling the attitude of the Armenian population and the frequency of relevant patterns of behaviour. The thesis includes claims that should be substantiated. However, it is possible that there will not be much data. (In this respect, it is a pity that the text did not use more, for example, the mentioned research of attitudes towards women's emancipation – Manukyan (2016)).
- Although the thesis primarily focuses on the cultural aspects of marriage, I missed a more detailed overview of findings regarding the division of labour in marital relationships that would further develop the image of gender roles and inequalities.
- Chapter 3 seems to combine relatively disparate topics.
- A considerable part of the chapter entitled “Patriarchal premarital cultural codes: Patterns and rituals” deals with topics unrelated to the premarital period (the historical situation of widows, gender socialization in childhood, the situation of women whose husbands migrate for work).
- The tables and charts on p. 65–68 should clearly state the specified source, including the page they were taken from, and the title.

Despite the above-mentioned critical comments I find this thesis to be informative and overall well-written. I therefore **recommend it for the defence**, and I suggest evaluating it with the **grade 2**.

Questions for discussion:

The thesis demonstrates how various customs and traditions strengthen the patriarchal order and traditional gender roles. Did the author come across any interesting ritual or custom that would show a different pattern (i.e. exceptions or alternatives)?

Most parts of the thesis point to the persisting patriarchal order and strong gender inequalities. Nevertheless, the data and conclusions presented in last chapters (3.4 and 3.5) reveal quite significant shifts in both attitudes and life patterns related to marriage and marital roles (or indicate at least some diversification). How (and how much) is this diversification related to socio-economic differences?

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