



## International

# Quota Law Puts More Women in Armenia's Election

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By Nicole Itano  
WeNews correspondent

*A gender quota law for political parties is putting more women on the ballot in the May 12 elections in Armenia, where only seven women serve in Parliament. Observers say women are now playing a wider role in local politics.*

YEREVAN, Armenia (WOMENSENEWS)--In this country's imposing, communist-era parliament building, men in somber suits hurry along cavernous hallways with fraying carpets.

With her colorful jewelry and high heels, Hranush Hakobyan is used to standing out from the crowd: just seven of the country's 131 parliamentarians are women. She is the longest-serving woman in the body and the only one directly elected by her constituency rather than being appointed by a party to fulfill a gender-quota law that she sponsored in 2005.



Hranush Hakobyan

On Saturday, May 12, Armenians go to the polls to elect the country's next parliament. Even before the elections international observers have raised concerns about unfair election practices by the ruling party; few expect the election to result in a major shift in power.

Armenia's parliament faces numerous continuing challenges: high rates of poverty, massive emigration and an unfinished war with neighboring Azerbaijan over the self-declared ethnic Armenian state of Nagorno-Karabakh.

But voters will determine the role Armenian women will play in helping to solve these problems. Women currently comprise less than 5 percent of the country's parliamentary members, putting them among the most under-represented in the world.

The participation of women in politics in Armenia, and across the South Caucasus region, has declined since the fall of the Soviet Union, when quotas for women in office ended.

Hakobyan's gender-quota legislation that took effect this year may help change that. The law requires political parties in Armenia, a predominantly Christian nation that became independent in 1991, to

ensure that women are at least 15 percent of their candidates.

"It's not that we don't have equal legal status, but we have a gender imbalance at the highest levels," she told Women's eNews. "I think there is a lot of unexplored potential in Armenian women."

Hakobyan, a 54-year-old former professor and one of Armenia's best known politicians, predicts that the new law will help double women's representation in parliament. This would bring the country in line with others in the region, but would still put it behind the global average.

Internationally women are just 17 percent of the members of parliamentary bodies, according to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union. But the problem is particularly acute in the South Caucasus, where fragile post-communist democracies have taken few steps to encourage greater participation by women in politics.

### **Situation in Armenia**

Despite high levels of education among women--60 percent of college students, for example, are female--the representation of women in public office in Armenia, with a population of 3 million, is among the lowest in the world. Men hold all but one ministerial post and all five regional governorships.

In neighboring Azerbaijan and Georgia, women fare little better. Only about 10 percent of parliamentarians in both countries are women, although in Georgia the speaker of parliament is female.

Armineh Arakelian, head of the Armenian office of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, based in Stockholm, Sweden, says the domination of the country's political system by economic cliques and oligarchs is a major hindrance to women. Political power is controlled largely by wealthy men, or groups of men, who control sectors of the economy.



Poverty is a pressing problem in Armenia.

Credit: Nick Hannes / WPN.

"Armenia, like other countries in the Caucasus, has been a very patriarchal society," she said. "We have men who are rich, but we don't have women oligarchs. We don't have women who have a strong position in economic fields."

Nor, said Arakelian, has there been a grassroots demand from women for more representation in politics. Even the new quota was pushed largely by international donors and was a requirement for Armenia's entry into the Council of Europe, a pan-European body which promotes human rights.

"You don't have activism, real activism. We don't really have this culture in Armenia," Arakelian said. "There is potential. I can see it in young people. We just need to support this."

### **Mandates Bring Few Results**

Quotas for women's participation, says Arakelian, are a start, but will not solve the underlying problems hindering women's fuller political participation.

In this current election, for example, political parties largely obeyed the

rule mandating that 15 percent of their candidate lists be women. But many female candidates are low on the lists, meaning it is unlikely they will actually be elected to parliament.

Only one party out of dozens running in the election, the Social Democrats, has a woman as head. But that party failed to win any seats in the last election. Another new party, the Liberal National United Party, has made women 44 percent of their candidate list. But that party is untried and poorly resourced.

Bigger parties have been less progressive. Women, for instance, are just 15 percent of the ruling Republican Party's list, on whose ticket Hakobyan will run this year.

Alla Bakunts, who works on election and gender issues in Armenia for the United Nations Development Program, says women are making better progress at the local levels.

"There are many more women now on the local level, working in local government as village heads or in village councils," she said. "Countrywide there is a group of about 300 to 400 women who are quite capable, very knowledgeable and very aggressive."

### **Lagging World Average**

Hakobyan, a champion of social welfare, education and youth issues, says that putting more women in parliament will help change legislative priorities in the country. She wants government to put more emphasis on social welfare for the poor--the average annual per capita income is \$1,470--and education for young people.

"The areas of interest for men are business, the economy, defense, trade," she said. "For women, it's different: social protection, women and kids, peace, the environment, education, health care," she said. "All those have to be given equal priority."

Despite the progress, some women in Armenia would like to see even stronger efforts to increase the representation of women. A coalition called Women Leaders backed by the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, a nonprofit that promotes democracy around the world, asked parties before this election to commit to making women 25 percent of their lists. But that effort was not supported by the governing party, the Republican Party, which is expected to remain the largest party in parliament after the May 12 elections.

Ultimately, says Arakelian, increasing the participation of women in politics is tied to building stronger democracy across the spectrum.

"We need more long-term resources, civil education and election education," she said. "If not, you won't have substantial positive change."

*Nicole Itano is a freelance writer based in Athens, Greece.*

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