

*Kristine Tsaturyan*

My name is Ruzanna Grigoryan, but everybody calls me Anahit because my grandfather did not like my first name. I am Armenian and 53 years old. My original occupation was managing a clothing company. I worked in the textile industry for many years, but since coming to United States, I have done many different jobs, including retail and being a caregiver.

As a young girl, my mother would repeat phrases such as "Have shame! Be graceful! Remain quiet when elders talk! Be more feminine! Girls, don't stay out too late!" and so on. She and grandmother were always at home doing chores. My mother had seven children; her role was to be a full-time mother, so my main perception of gender was that females stayed home and men were breadwinners for the family. She was illiterate, so the only thing that I learned from her was how to do housework, because that is all she knew. I also looked up to my five sisters and mimicked the way they behaved. I would watch them put on dresses, do their hair and apply makeup. They used Lancôme makeup and French perfume. It made me think they were so cool and their behavior also influenced my gender perception.

Growing up, I heard many stories of struggle. My mother and grandmother both witnessed war, depression, hunger, and the loss of loved ones. I listened to my paternal grandmother talk about her struggles as a single mother who had to take care of her five children because her husband was a "bad boy" who was imprisoned for a long time. I admired her because she was strong and never showed any weakness. The other stories of hardship came from my mother, who at a very young age fell into a river and could not have children for many years. However, my father had a big ego and wanted boys, so he made her get treatment and start having children. After the treatment she had four girls, which I am sure made him mad, but because it was his decision to have children, he never complained.

As my grandfather changing my name as a baby illustrates, both he and my father were very controlling and wanted women to submit to them. Because my mother was illiterate, my father made all decisions. She had little to say about it, and was taught to believe that sons deserved the best of everything. There was no equality in our household. One example was my attempts to get into a university. I loved school and submitted my papers, took my exams and got in, but because my score was not high enough, I was automatically put into the self-pay tuition system. I pleaded with my father to pay for my education, but instead of helping me, he said that I could only go to school if it was free. I was discouraged, but attended a community college and earned an AA degree. When it was time for my brother to get into university, everything was done for him and no expense was spared for his education. The point I am trying to make is that males in my family did not even try to hide gender inequality. This had a strong impact on my perception of gender, but not in a positive way.

I once was married, but now I am a widow. I was introduced to my

husband through a relative when we were in our late twenties. He was a friend of my cousin's husband. They introduced him to me at their wedding and we started dating. We stayed engaged for two years because his family did not approve of our union. Since we were both adults, we decided to stay together despite what his family thought. This was the best decision we made. I knew early on that he was an exceptional person and would be a great husband and father to my children.

Our marriage was very different from most marriages in our culture. As I mentioned before, my father ruled over, controlled and took advantage of my mother and the fact that she was illiterate. I wanted to learn from her mistakes and through the years witnessing such gender inequality, I promised myself that I would never approach marriage the way that my father and mother did. I did not want to be bitter or blame my parents. I fully understand and respect where they were coming from, but decided to be different. In every race or culture, married couples should respect each other. If there is no respect, the marriage will most likely end up unsuccessful. One gender having more authority than the other always causes tension in the family. My husband and I always approached problems together.

When I was thirty-seven years old, my husband died in my arms. Not a day passes without me remembering his death. Although our married life lasted only twelve years, those days are unforgettable. I decided not to remarry after he died because I believe that there is nobody in the world who can replace him; that's how wonderful of a husband he was for me. Marriage is a union between two people who come together because being together is their destiny. I believe that there is such a thing as soul mates, and he was mine. This has made for a hard life, but I do not regret my decision to remain a widow. Women are able to go through life's difficulties and still be hopeful and positive because nature made us both emotionally and physically strong. In my culture, elders recommend that women who lose their husbands become both father and mother to their children. That is exactly what I have done, both in Armenia and the United States. I have always had the option to remarry, but as a mother, I have made the conscious decision to sacrifice my life in order to please my children.

I have two children, a son and a daughter. I have decided not to raise them according to traditional Armenian customs. My parents structured the household according to my brother's liking and complied with all his demands because they thought that he was going to be the only person able to take care of them in their old age. My sisters and I resented that he was getting the best of everything, while we were given what was left. However, my parents are living far away from my brother today. This taught me that you never know which child will be caring for you. This is one reason I determined early on that I would try to be fair and treat my children equally. I also did not want my children to grow up believing that males were superior to females, which would give them negative or disrespectful thoughts about me because of my gender. I taught my daughter to be strong, independent and feminine and my son to respect those values in women. My vision for gender equality would be men understanding and

respecting women for the people that they are, because it is not easy to be a woman in today's world. Women have too much responsibility and work more; men should acknowledge this. I have tried my best to teach my children to think about gender equality and forget cultural gender rules.

Besides family, I believe that culture is the second biggest influence on gender perception. Armenians have their own set of rules with strict consequences for breaking them. These rules give a perception of gender roles that is unequal. For example, girls have a strict curfew when it comes to dating or going out, but young men do not. Every day I see and hear stories that make me wonder if my culture is at fault for setting so many rules. The real question is who sets the rules and why, because they can be unfair in so many ways. Elders and family members don't even try to hide the unfair treatment. Armenians usually like their women quiet, obedient and to be able to take criticism, but they want their men to be the opposite. For a man to be quiet is seen as a sign of weakness. When I was growing up, I used to ask why I was even born Armenian because there was so much inequality between sexes.

When I arrived in the United States, I was surprised to see so many women employees at the airport. The longer I live in this country, the more I appreciate that women actually have rights here. Growing up in Armenia, especially under its communist regime, they liked to pretend that there was gender equality. The reality couldn't have been farther away from the equality on the surface of our society, but we did not know this because the regime would not let us know how women were treated in other places. I don't believe this will ever change in Armenia. The European influence might change some aspects, but the country will never fully change. It took me a long time to get used to the fact that the justice system in this country actually favors women and that women outnumber men in universities and the workplace. It brings me pride that women have the same rights as men. I hear complaints from women that they are still facing challenges in the workplace and they are not offered the same promotions as men. I do not believe that these issues are unimportant, but we forget that there are countries where women are not allowed to voice an opinion, let alone complain. In this country, everything has been made easy for women at home and in the workplace. It is easy to complain here because the geography of this country doesn't allow us to have close contact with other nations. This leaves us with the perception that all is well, but in reality things are much worse in other nations for women than we can imagine.

I think that, more than ever, women have been taking the responsibilities of both genders. Women of the twenty-first century are expected to have a university education, well-paid job, and stable family. In my day, most women were only expected to get married and be a housewife. Of course there were women that worked, but the majority stayed home and took care of their families. Sometimes I feel bad for women in this country, because they can't fully enjoy their life. When I talk to working mothers, their first complaint is usually that they don't spend enough time with their families. I also sense that most of them feel a tremendous amount of guilt, because while they want to be with their children, the cost of living makes it

very hard to do so. This issue is really give-and-take because the sacrifices that have to be made are not always beneficial for women. Overall, I would say that women's roles have changed, but not necessarily for the better.

It is very unfortunate that there were not any influential women in places of authority when I was growing up. The only women who we admired were actresses and models like Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor. I remember that we actually thought that their being famous was a huge accomplishment. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that a woman could actually be running for the presidency because I was brainwashed into thinking that no woman could do such a job. I am happy that we have women who compete with men for positions and are treated as equals in this country. My grandchildren are lucky. I hope that they will be inspired by these examples and to go out into the world to make a bigger place for women.

