

Panel Discusses Women's Leadership in Armenia

Belmont, MA: Six young women from Armenia, ranging from ages 27-31, participated in a panel discussion at the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) headquarters on Mar 14, 2014 on the topic "Women in Politics and Government", organized by the Cambridge-Yerevan Sister City Association (CYSCA), and co-sponsored by NAASR and the Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA). The panel also included Marjorie Decker, prominent member of the MA House of Representatives. The women were hosted by CYSCA in the Greater Boston area for an 8 day intensive program of meetings/dialogues with directors of women's leadership programs at local universities and local organizations for women in politics and government as well as Cambridge and state officials. The program was made possible by a grant issued to CYSCA from the Open World Leadership Center of the U. S. Library of Congress (OW).

The OW program aimed to give the participants first-hand exposure to America's democratic government and free-market system. A key goal of the program was to develop leadership capability of young women in government and political organizations by engaging them with their American counterparts. Few women in Armenia are in leadership positions in politics and even government. Currently, only 11 of 131 Parliament members are women.

CYSCA designed and hosted a comprehensive program for the visitors, including visits/dialogues with various organizations/individuals in the Greater Boston area, including Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, UMASS Boston Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, Tufts University Fletcher School, Suffolk University, Massachusetts League of Women Voters, Mass. Caucus of Women Legislators, State Senate and House women leaders, Cambridge City government, the Armenian International Women's Association, and numerous other organizations and individuals.

The panel discussion began by the participants describing their work experience in Armenia and reflected on their visit to the U.S. They were: Anahit Beglaryan, attorney in the Chamber of Advocates of Armenia, defending human rights; Violeta Hovhannisyan, expert on the Armenian Parliament committee on integration of the Republic of Armenia laws with European Community laws; Sona Minasyan, head of the Free Democrats Political party in Kapan; Nune Sakanyan, head of international investment programs of the city of Yerevan; Lilit Seyranyan, attorney at the Chamber of Advocates and Anna Shahnazaryan, facilitator for the group, currently external relations coordinator for Yerevan-based Civilitas Foundation, a civil rights organization.

Panelists reflected on issues concerning women's leadership in Armenia. Anahit Beglaryan said that there is no real training mechanism for women in Armenia for them to learn the process of entering and leading in the political arena. Violeta Hovhannisyan felt that leadership training must happen in universities otherwise it will not be taken seriously. Anna Shahnazaryan pointed out that politics in Armenia is regarded as unclean and corrupt, which is one reason women prefer not to be involved. When this mindset is broken, women can go into politics and fight for their rights themselves, rather than rely on men to do it for them! Most panelists agreed that men are stereotypical and strive for power, whereas women tend to be issue-oriented. In general, most of the issues discussed seemed to evolve from

cultural reluctance for women to engage in leadership positions and lack of institutional framework to develop and encourage women's roles in society outside of the home and family.

A highlight of the evening was the presentation by the honorable Marjorie Decker, member of the MA House of Representatives. Marjorie related her humble beginnings living in subsidized housing and the first of her siblings to graduate from high school. Through hard work and dedication she went on to graduate from the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government and became active in Cambridge politics, eventually being elected to the MA legislature, following 19 years as a Cambridge City Councilor. She spoke passionately about her work and dedication to the improvement of the lives of her constituency and promotion of women in politics.

In all, the audience was impressed with the caliber of the women from Armenia and their optimism for future improvement in the role of women in leadership in their country.