

Պտղի սեռի խտրական ընտրության դեմ պայքար
“Combating Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Armenia”

Հանառոտագիր Policy Brief



Ծրագիրը ֆինանսավորվում է
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Modern Response to Gender-Biased Sex Selection from Traditional Faith-Based Organisations



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Traditional agents, new needs

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) are strategically placed to nurture and enrich human life, especially in the context of family, fertility, health, violence, community affairs and in the face of contemporary population and development challenges. Creating strategic partnerships with community opinion leaders, including FBOs, is a key to success in addressing the challenge of gender-biased sex selection (GBSS) effectively. In the context of mutual dependences, FBOs, CSOs, government and international development partners should join their efforts to work together for social transformation that will result in gender-balanced reproductive choices in the Armenian society, communities and families. Such partnership could rely on values and faith traditions that provide the foundation for a set of common fundamental rights. It could also bank on shared visions and common denominators in human dignity and human rights. Violence against women, including one of its worst forms – female infanticide – is a violation of human dignity, and therefore, human rights.

Armenian FBOs have proven critical for breaking the culture of silence and taboos around the issue. Indeed, FBOs continue to serve as community centres in Armenia: they are respected in the society, and are seen as co-leaders along with the elected political leaders and policy makers. FBOs have a key role in advocating for people-centred policies. Religious leaders and FBOs should be part of the solution and not part of the problem. They play a pivotal role in influencing local norms, raising awareness of communities on causes and consequences of gender-biased sex selection, and cultivating an environment conducive to a culture of gender-balanced reproduction and non-discrimination at large. In addition to their role of responding to violence against women through service provision, FBOs should be supported in utilizing their unique positions as influential agents in prevention of violence and gender-biased sex selection, in particular. There is a need for a safe space, virtual or real, where free discussions can take place on difficult issues, such as son preference and reproductive choices. Stronger FBOs could offer such real social and spiritual spaces to families, women and men.

With this understanding, key stakeholders in the government, civil society and international development community shall respond to learning and capacity building needs voiced by FBOs, including support for development of evidence-based advocacy, and building capacities for identifying and transferring relevant knowledge and practices in various contexts of gender-biased sex selection. Furthermore, the key actors shall build bridges between FBOs, media and other stakeholders to enhance awareness and generate opportunities for partnership.

Currently, such a successful synergetic action is implemented by a consortium of CSOs led by the International Center for Human Development (ICHD) and supported by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The consortium engages representatives of FBOs in the Community of Practice of Local Participation and Non-Discrimination (CoP), a countrywide network of practitioners engaging over 400 local actors in action against gender-biased sex selection in all regions of Armenia and Yerevan. The partnerships are also enhanced through implementation of inclusive public awareness and media campaigns on gender-biased sex selection, son preference, below replacement fertility and ethical use of reproductive technologies. This experience could be useful for the key actors to strengthen their collective efforts to support FBOs by facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building. These efforts shall be inclusive and strategic, so that work



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continues on two levels - with mainstream population, and with vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Reliable and contextualised evidence, information, research and technical support to build knowledge and capacity of FBOs will also help them support their constituencies, both in terms of messages they deliver and services they provide.

Acting in concert to address GBSS

Supporting FBOs to promote relevant practices in social sector policies, and creating a joint platform of general guiding principles, more detailed practical rules and examples relevant to practitioners, along with traditional instruments could be specifically useful. Helping FBOs to introduce and utilise innovative instruments on family support will multiply the effectiveness of the programmes implemented by the government and CSOs.

Such instruments should provide hands-on, how-to advice on some of the more challenging aspects of reproductive rights, fertility, family, women's rights and non-discrimination. These instruments should consolidate the experience of practitioners, localised knowledge and contemporary techniques. These would be valuable resources for clergy and other FBO representatives who are interested in gaining a better understanding of their constituencies, and in learning simple skills and tips to tackle the issues more effectively. Such assistance would offer a template to FBO representatives for initiating their own successful practices.

Armenian FBOs already have successful experiences of cooperation with CSOs and international development partners in creating innovative instruments on population and development issues with the ambition of facilitating social transformations. In particular, UNFPA/Armenia, ICHD and other actors have effectively cooperated with FBOs in developing guidelines for FBOs on domestic violence. These instruments and relevant capacities for the Armenian Apostolic Church specifically, should be based on the recommendations for policies and practices on the issues that have been frequently and intensively discussed in the recent three years, such marriage and Holy Matrimony, divorce, reproductive choices and fertility, Christian ethics and use of reproductive technologies, family, including kinship, roles, reproductive rights, rights of the mother, father and children, domestic violence, honour and responsibilities, economic issues, parents and children, and equal value of girls and boys.

Framework inventory for FBOs

Religious responses to prevent gender-biased sex-selection could be particularly instrumental in addressing specific religious communities. Exposing myths and facts about gender-biased sex selection and offering theological reflections on the matter is also significant. A good toolbox for the clergy should provide answers to such questions as: Why is there gender-biased sex selection in the society and families? What are the consequences of sex selection for the society, local communities and families? What are the root causes of gender-biased sex selection? Who practises sex selection? When does gender-biased sex selection take place? Where in community are the families selecting child sex more likely to be found? What is sex selection in a legal sense? Why should religious representatives be involved in prevention of gender-biased sex selection? How to react in such a situation? How to proceed both from secular and religious perspectives? What is to be done? What are the conditions to ensure effectiveness of prevention of gender-biased sex selection in families and communities?

Such instruments should strongly consider the social theories and doctrines of the religion at large and of the Armenian Apostolic Church in particular. In this effort, highlighting two theological and religious issues is important: the value of girls and women, and non-discrimination from a Christian perspective. It is further necessary to discuss the nature of marriage and other related aspects, including parental choice, boy preference and fertility, which are relevant to the problems of non-medical gender-biased sex selection. There are many other issues that need to be addressed, such as loss of faith, the image of God, the power of God to change people's behaviour and the connection between sex selection and social justice.

Another objective to be targeted is to help clergy to identify early warning signs of gender-biased sex-selection in their communities and congregations. Moreover, instruments are needed for helping clergy to address several critical issues: How to proceed when someone complains of having encountered gender-biased sex selection? How to conduct individual counselling, including pre-marital counselling and crisis counselling? How to implement effective measures to prevent gender-biased sex selection and persuasion tactics?

Different levels of action, including national and community levels, should be undertaken in this effort. Collaboration and networking, specifically enhancing coalition of the community of practitioners of local action and non-discrimination with FBOs is critical. Another crucial task is supporting clergy in voicing the issue and acting upon it, identifying coherence with legal principles and referring their congregations to relevant service providers, as well as helping them to identify and learn of relevant resources available to families, women and men.

Overall, it is necessary to equip the clergy with instruments enabling them to indicate that gender-biased sex selection and discrimination against the girl child are unacceptable. The FBOs need help to let their constituencies know where the Church and clergy stand on the issue in clear and simple terms. It is important to help the clergy to support congregations deal with the issues of sex selection and discrimination through preaching and setting up appropriate educational programs for adults, teens and children. The government, CSOs and international development community should help clergy to find out what the congregations can do to support national and local programs on prevention of gender-biased sex selection specifically, and discrimination at large. Last, but not least, it is necessary to familiarize clergy with the legal aspects of sex selective practices.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the off-the-record round table "The Experience and Inventory of the Church: Opportunities and Challenges", which took place on March 21, 2016. Independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of international organizations attended the discussion. The round table was organized within the framework of the project "Combating Gender-Biased Sex Selection in Armenia", funded by the European Commission.