

Health

Armenians urged to value their women as abortions of girls skew population

Armenians see sons as a way to ensure financial stability

GAVAR: When Karina Aghalaryan discovered she was going to be the mother of a baby girl, the 35-year-old Armenian was ecstatic. Her family was altogether more lukewarm. Talk swiftly turned to what the baby clearly wasn't: a boy. When Petrosyan got pregnant with a second girl the following year, there were no celebrations. Instead, her mother-in-law marched her to the doctor for an abortion. "My husband and my mother-in-law forced me to figure out if it was a boy or a girl."

When they found out it was a girl, they made me have an abortion," said Aghalaryan, whose name was changed to avoid being stigmatized in her community. "I had no words to say in that situation," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in Gavar, 100 km from the Armenian capital, Yerevan. For Armenian families, giving birth to at least one boy is a must, to continue the family line and carry forward the surname in a society where daughters often marry and move away.

As the economy worsens - nearly a third of the country lives below the poverty line - Armenians see sons as a way to ensure financial stability in old age but aborting girls is causing a potential shortage of women that authorities want to address. "People think that for a boy it's easier to earn money and become more economically sustainable than a girl," said Armine Hovakimyan, president of the Goris Women's Resource Center. "That has a very big impact especially in remote areas, they want to have boys more than girls." Typical of many Armenian towns, Gavar is a ramshackle, industrial city in decline. Its Soviet-era factories have faded along with the rest of a once-robust economy, which stalled when the small Caucasian country won independence in 1991.

Missing women

Some new industries are taking root, seeking to replace

the old, highly centralized economy, but unemployment remains high. Because of the high numbers of unemployed women, and a widespread belief that women should stay home and take care of family, Armenian women on average earn half of what the men do. Therefore, women who get pregnant with girls face a dilemma: giving birth to enough children that one of them will end up being a boy - or having abortions until one of them is male.

Worldwide, biologically 102 to 106 boys are born for every 100 girls on average, according to the United Nations. In 2012-2013, 114 boys were born in Armenia for every 100 girls, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) this is the third highest sex-selective abortion rate in the world after China and neighboring Azerbaijan. As a result, UNFPA estimates that in Armenia, nearly 93,000 women will be missing by 2060 if the country's high pre-natal sex selection rate remains unchanged, driving young, single men to leave the country in search of a partner.

But for now, a lack of opportunities has caused thousands of young, educated men to move out of the country in search of better-paid jobs, according to the United Nations - and the "brain drain" has balanced out the female shortfall. In a bid to curb the gender imbalance, the government outlawed sex-selective abortions last year as part of a wider crackdown on abortions. Abortion has been legal in the ex-Soviet republic since 1955 and a woman can have an abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Cultural change

A lack of widely available, affordable contraceptives and a common fear that contraceptives might cause health problems means abortion remains the main method of family planning in the country, researchers say. Almost 40 percent of Armenian women have had at least one abortion, according to UNFPA. Women's rights campaigners say some of the women they work with have two or three abortions in one

For Armenian families, giving birth to at least one boy is a must



ARENI, Armenia: Young women in traditional attire dance during the Areni Festival, some 120 km from Yerevan. —AFP

year alone.

Under the new law, aimed at reducing the rate at which women are aborting girls, patients must leave three days of "reflection" between their initial bid for abortion and the procedure and attend a counseling session. Doctors can be fined for performing sex-selective abortions, but it is unclear how many have been prosecuted. Government officials told the Thomson Reuters Foundation it was difficult to measure the impact of the law alone on the declining rate of sex-selective abortions but the legal change alongside awareness raising campaigns played a big part.

"It takes a long time to change mindsets," Gayane Avagyan, head of the maternal health division at the Armenian ministry of health, said in an email. "I think there is a change because huge work has been done to raise the level of public awareness." But aid groups and campaigners say cracking down on aborting female fetuses does not address

one of the main drivers behind the crisis: a deep-seated gender inequality in the country. "Only by changing legislation, it will not be possible to change the attitude and perception toward the problem," Garik Hayrapetyan, the head of UNFPA in Armenia said. "(Changing) the value of the girl, and women's equal status in society is the key to overcome this harmful practice."

Many aid groups have launched programs aimed at tackling domestic violence and dismantling cultural views about the role women should have in society - with the ultimate goal of getting families to embrace having daughters. "You can see the difference in communities in how the girls are raised and how the boys are raised," Sevan Petrosyan, who manages a project aimed at tackling gender inequality for World Vision in Armenia, said in an interview in the capital. "The way they are raised to be mothers, and how boys are raised to be fearless and powerful." —Reuters

Dove apologizes over advert branded racist

LONDON: Personal care brand Dove has apologized for a body wash advert that showed a black woman removing a top to reveal a white woman underneath, following accusations of racism. The three-second video clip appeared in the United States on the social networking site Facebook. Dove said on Twitter that it had "missed the mark in representing women of color thoughtfully" and deeply regretted any offence caused.

The ad showed a black woman removing her top, revealing a white woman underneath. She then took off her t-shirt, showing a third woman with a darker skin tone underneath. "Ready for a Dove shower? Sulfate free with 100 percent gentle cleansers, our

body wash gets top marks from dermatologists," the advert said. The Dove brand, owned by Rotterdam-based food and consumer products giant Unilever, which is listed on the London and Amsterdam stock exchanges, apologized after several people on social media deemed the advert racist.

"As a part of a campaign for Dove body wash, a three-second video clip was posted to the US Facebook page," a statement said. "This did not represent the diversity of real beauty which is something Dove is passionate about and is core to our beliefs, and it should not have happened. We have removed the post and have not published any other related content. We apologize deeply and sincerely for the offence that it has caused."

Social media storm

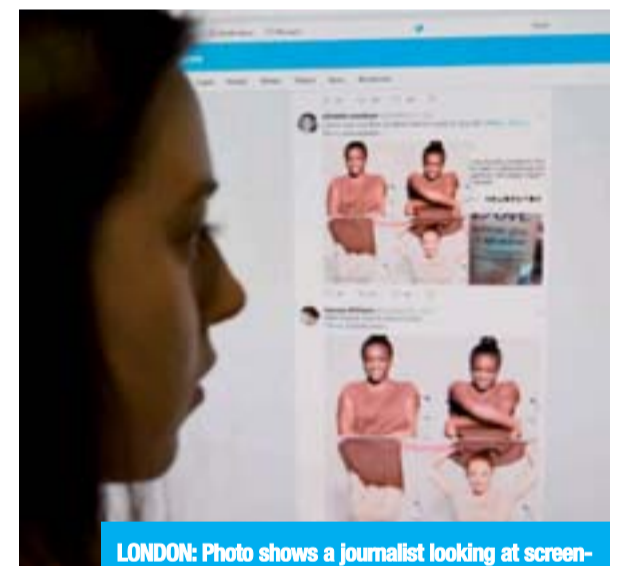
The advert on Facebook triggered a storm of outrage on social media. Oscar-nominated US film director Ava DuVernay said on Twitter: "You can do better than 'missed the mark.' Flip and diminishing. Deepens your offense. You do good work. Have been for years. Do better here." Social media users

posted a previous Dove advert featuring a black woman standing in front of a "before" close-up of dry skin and a white woman standing in front of an "after" picture.

They also re-posted pictures of a Dove self-tanning lotion labeled "for normal to dark skin". Twitter user African Child said: "Don't these brands know that it's 2017 now."

People are woke people have a say and people are allowed to boycott products." Meanwhile Toya M Jones said on Twitter: "Don't buy Dove soap, shower gel or lotion. Perhaps if we #BoycottDove and all Unilever products they will learn to RESPECT #blackwomen."

Unilever was slightly down in a stable market at the opening of the London stock exchange yesterday. The Dove page on Unilever's website begins: "Dove believes that beauty is not one dimensional; it is not defined by your age, the shape or size of your body, the color of your skin or your hair. We will continue to use ad campaigns as an opportunity to redefine beauty, challenge stereotypes and celebrate what makes women unique," it said. —AFP



LONDON: Photo shows a journalist looking at screenshots retweeted by Twitter users of a video-clip used in an online advert by Dove that originally appeared on social networking website Facebook. —AFP

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Dr. Fahad Al-Mukhaizeem
فهد علي المخيزيم

استشاري أطفال
M.B. Bch. FRCPC. FAAP. PEM

Al-Jabriya - Block 1A - St. 1 - Mazaya Building - 15th Floor - Clinic B - Tel.: 22269369 - Fax: 22269368