

THE EARLY DAYS: ILLUMINATING ARMENIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

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Introduction¹

Just over 100 years ago, Armenian women and girls across Anatolia and beyond were witnessing their teachers and community leaders being executed, mourning their murdered husbands and sons, hiding weapons from gendarmes, taking food to arrested male relatives, negotiating with authorities, and comforting distressed children.² Amid the chaos of the First World War, the Ottoman authorities launched a coordinated and systematic genocide against the Armenian population. The narrative of the Armenian Genocide commonly begins with attacks on the Armenian elite followed by massacres of “battle-aged” men. Stories of women during the early days of the genocide have largely been omitted or positioned as peripheral to the “main event.” Yet their experiences are revealing in a number of ways, not least in their exposure of perpetrator intent and brutality. Marion Kaplan wrote in 1982 that including women’s voices in historical study can “sharpen our understanding of a past that has been interpreted without any reference to women at all,”³ an assertion that underlies this essay. In viewing the early phases of the Armenian Genocide from the perspectives of women, a richer and fuller history of victim experiences and perpetrator tactics emerges.

Here I integrate women’s stories into the following stages of the Armenian Genocide narrative: early persecution; disarming of the community; targeting

1 In April 2015, I was honoured to give the keynote address in Melbourne for the 100 Year Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. The community connected deeply to the stories of Armenian women highlighted during my talk, to their losses and suffering and their survival and resilience. It was the profound response from Melbourne’s Armenian community to the stories of women—the sense that they somehow captured an essence of Armenian identity—that compelled me to undertake further research.

2 Although women’s experiences were not homogeneous (there were distinctions based on age and socio-economic position, as well as regional variation), patterns do emerge in practices employed by authorities and in women’s responses.

3 Marion A. Kaplan, “Tradition and Transition: The Acculturation, Assimilation and Integration of Jews in Imperial Germany: A Gender Analysis,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 27, no. 1 (1982), 7.

of community leaders and intellectuals (eliticide);⁴ and the arrest, torture and killing of large numbers of men, although it should be noted that these did not necessarily happen in the same order in every region, and many aspects of the genocide overlapped, occurred concurrently or in close succession.

In genocide historiography, the concept of the male norm,⁵ or the assumption that men's experience is the universal human experience, has created a dichotomy by which women's stories are seen as divergent or particular.⁶ As Paula Hyman suggests, history has been written in a way that spoke "explicitly of men but implied that women were included in the category of man"⁷ or, alternatively, presented women's experiences as so distinct and separate from men's that they are not included in the core narrative of the genocide. Further, as Pascale Bos argues, "when one introduces gender as an analytic tool, culturally dominant and male ways of categorizing what is historically important and what is not are challenged."⁸

In fact, nuances contained in the experiences of Armenian women illustrate a number of important dimensions of the genocidal process, including deliberate attacks on the family unit as the symbol of the group's continuity.⁹ Further, examining events from women's points of view helps to crystallise perpetrators' intent to destroy the social and cultural fabric of the group, a crucial dimension of Raphael Lemkin's concept of genocide. The destruction of family, community and cultural life has unique effects on women. Perpetrators attacked women in ways that aimed to break down Armenian society and although women were not generally targeted with mass murder until later in the genocidal process, their treatment while male relatives were arrested and killed was a clear harbinger of increasing brutality.

A notable exception to the majority of male-centric historiography is the pioneering study "Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide" by Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller. They develop the concept of "tragic moral choices" to describe how "women were placed in untenable situations where

4 "Eliticide refers to the killing of the leadership, the educated, and the clergy of a group." See Samuel Totten and Paul R. Bartrop, *Dictionary of Genocide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 1:129.

5 "Since men lay claim to representing 'humanity' in all its universality, both in theory and in everyday life, it is women who have to be singled out for closer specification." Maria Wendt Höjer and Cecilia Åse, *The Paradoxes of Politics: An Introduction to Feminist Political Theory* (Stockholm: Academia Adacta, 1999), 17.

6 For more detail, see Pascale Rachel Bos, "Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, eds. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

7 Cited in *Ibid.*, 24.

8 *Ibid.*, 24.

9 For more on targeting of the family unit, see Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, "The Devil in the Details: 'Life Force Atrocities' and the Assault on the Family in Times of Conflict," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 5 no. 1 (2010), 1–19.

no uncompromised moral decision could be made; only tragic moral choices existed as options.”¹⁰ Unthinkable decisions women faced, often alone, included whether to leave children with Turkish families in the hope they might be saved, or to kill themselves and their children to avoid deportation, abduction or sexual violence. This concept contains echoes of Lawrence Langer’s “choiceless choices,”¹¹ those decisions made by victims of the Holocaust that may be considered problematic in other circumstances, such as stealing, smuggling or suicide. In the moral grey zone of genocide, such dilemmas were additional tortures that cannot be judged retrospectively, nor perhaps even fully comprehended.¹²

The pain and victimhood embedded in these situations is clear. What is less overt, but equally important, is the concept of agency. In order to build on Miller and Miller’s “tragic moral choices,” I attempt to introduce an additional dimension of analysis to Armenian women’s experiences by recognising and highlighting agency and resilience. Not only does the process of uncovering women’s roles and responses serve to counterbalance the pervasive, one-dimensional image of the “female victim,” it also tells much about how targeted communities respond to genocide, how individuals assert their dignity and humanity even within a prison of oppression. Such responses also entail gendered aspects. Survivor accounts often depict how women maintained their domestic roles such as comforting children in times of great stress, while also noting women’s “resourcefulness” in attempting to rescue their male relatives or negotiate with authorities. Although I am conscious of the risk of glorifying women’s actions,¹³ testimonial literature does frequently include reference to women’s adaptability to changing and ever more perilous situations. Their daily struggle to survive and their adaptation to changing circumstances and extraordinary challenges should not be relegated to the sphere of “unimportant” women’s domestic issues but rather, understood as central to the genocide experience.

10 Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, “Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St Martin’s, 1992), 168. See also Miller and Miller’s comprehensive testimonial collection and analysis, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

11 Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1982).

12 “Grey zone” describes moral ambiguity in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Sphere Books, 1989).

13 Early gender analysis of the Holocaust tended to identify “special vulnerabilities” and to idealise women’s “special abilities” (coping skills, resourcefulness and sisterhood). See Bos, “Women and the Holocaust.”

Theoretical approach

In 2005 Katharine Derderian wrote that “further scholarly examination of gender-specific experience in the [Armenian] Genocide would aid in the understanding of the Genocide as a whole and provide a crucial basis for comparative work with other genocides.”¹⁴ While my aim is not a comprehensive comparative analysis, the theoretical approach in this essay has been influenced by analyses of Jewish women’s lives during the early stages of the Holocaust, especially Kaplan’s contribution to Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman’s *Women in the Holocaust*.¹⁵

In *The Magnitude of Genocide*, Colin Tatz and Winton Higgins note the “comprehensive analytical toolbox” provided by Holocaust Studies, asserting that it provides useful frameworks and lenses for examination of other cases.¹⁶ In line with their view, I argue that gender analysis within Holocaust Studies, as an area of research that has developed over several decades, provides us with a reliable framework for application to the Armenian case.

This essay explores how women were often at the forefront as victims of violence and intimidation, and forced to deal directly with Turkish authorities. It investigates the ramifications of the disappearance of community leaders and intellectuals on women and girls, including long-term effects of disruption to their education. I also show how Armenian women managed the multiple responsibilities of their daily lives and, in addition, took on traditionally male responsibilities like representing the family in political or social affairs.

Over recent years an increasing body of scholarship has emerged on the use of sexual violence as a genocidal strategy against Armenian women and girls. During the genocide, sexual violence, abduction, and forced marriage and conversion were ubiquitous and enshrined in government policy.¹⁷ It would be a mistake, however, to restrict the study of women’s experiences to these crimes. Women were affected during every stage of the genocide and their distinct

14 Katharine Derderian, “Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005), 5.

15 Marion Kaplan, “Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women’s Responses to Daily Life in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

16 Colin Tatz and Winton Higgins, *The Magnitude of Genocide* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016), xii.

17 In addition to Derderian, see Matthias Bjørnlund, “A Fate Worse Than Dying: Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide,” in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Ara Sarafian, “The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide,” in *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Anthonie Holslag, “Exposed Bodies: A Conceptual Approach to Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide,” in *Gender and Genocide in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey*, ed. Amy E. Randall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); and various texts by Lerna Ekmekcioglu.

experiences spanned every facet of life—sexual, social, familial, economic, physical, intellectual and more. In fact, there is a danger in defining women’s experiences exclusively by sexual violence and trafficking, in that it can obscure or further sideline women’s experiences of genocide. As Ofer and Weitzman argue, “While it is important to stress the distinctiveness of gendered experiences during the Holocaust, it is essential that women’s experiences not be discussed exclusively in terms of motherhood or sexuality. To do so marginalizes women and, ironically, reinforces the male experience as the ‘master narrative.’”¹⁸

The very beginning

The arrest and execution of Armenian community leaders and intellectuals marks the official start of the Armenian Genocide in the academic narrative and collective memory, partly because the roundups represented a sudden and significant escalation in violence against the Armenian population. Arguably, this has also been the result of an overwhelming attention in the genocide studies field on overt, physical tactics of genocide, most obviously mass murder. Survivors often began their testimonies with the arrests of community leaders or male relatives, not necessarily because this was the first episode of violence experienced, but possibly because they (and interviewers) assumed this was where the genocide story should commence. This starting point has the experiences of men as its foundation.¹⁹

Yet, prior or simultaneous to the roundups, both men and women were intensely affected by escalating persecution, rumours of violence in other regions, and the anxiety of anticipating what was to come. I have therefore chosen to begin not with the eliticide but with “early persecution,” a category intended to capture the tense atmosphere before the arrests and murders. For instance, child survivor Ermance Rejebian said that before her father was arrested, she knew “something was afoot, because we would speak in whispers in our home.”²⁰ Another survivor explicitly distinguished between the early reactions of men and women: “I could see and sense the men of our town gathering in groups, talking and looking very sad. The women used to sigh.”²¹

18 Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 16.

19 Only one woman was included on the list of Armenians to be deported or killed on April 24, 1915, writer Zabel Yesayan. See “Zabel Yessayan, Leading Female Writer of Armenian Awakening Period,” *100 Lives* (blog), <https://aurorapize.com/en/armenia/detail/10160/zabel-yessayan-leading-female-writer-armenian-awakening-period>.

20 Testimony of Ermance Rejebian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56718&returnIndex=0>.

21 Testimony of Takouhi Levonian, cited in Miller and Miller, “Women and Children,” 158.

In the months, even years leading up to April 1915, there was an inherent danger for Armenian girls walking alone. Mothers would warn their daughters: “Horrific dangers are lurking around every corner. . . . So many young girls just disappear, even when they’re just popping out to visit their neighbors.”²² The fear of sexual violence, which had been widespread during the 1909 Adana massacres, was palpable. Women and girls faced public taunts and a general sense of fear for their safety. As Derderian identified, “sexual intimidation created an environment of rumor and alarm.”²³ The necessity of going out of the home on errands increased as men began to disappear or, fearing arrest, stayed hidden. Disguising one’s “Armenianness” in public became imperative for girls and women. One survivor explained that a teenage girl “could not go out with her face uncovered fearing the Turks,”²⁴ and the risk intensified as public insults and humiliation came to be condoned among the Turkish population. Peter Balakian described one such attack on a cousin in his memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*. In an increasingly ominous atmosphere in Diarbekir, rumours of arrest, murder and deportation in other towns spread through the local community. Gendarmes began searching for weapons in houses and individuals started to disappear, including young women returning home from the bathhouse. The episode below conveys the gendered use of genocidal language and the growing acceptability of violence against civilians, both of which were used to instil fear in the Armenian community:

I dressed fast and put on my *charshaff*, because if you look Muslim they might ignore you . . . in the distance I could hear women’s voices screaming . . . and I was walking faster now when a group of Turkish men came out of a side street and began to throw stones at me. “Armenian. Whore. *Giaur* [infidel].” They chanted it, and they ripped my *charshaff* off and began spitting at me . . . throwing stones at me.²⁵

Despite women’s heightened sense of fear for their own safety and for their children, they continued to perform their accepted roles and daily tasks as caregivers for immediate and extended family members. Further, they drew on traditional knowledge and skills to respond to unusual and violent situations. Kaplan has described how Jewish women kept their households running

22 Astrid Katcharyan, *Affinity with Night Skies: Astra Sabondjian’s Story* (London: Taderon Press, 2003), 20.

23 Derderian, “Common Fate,” 5.

24 Testimony of Anna Boghossian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project, Center for Armenian Research, University of Michigan-Dearborn, 1981, <http://umdearborn.edu/casl/686475>.

25 Peter Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate* (1999; New York: Basic Books, 2009), 220–21.

and comforted their children as persecution intensified before the Holocaust: "At the center of Jewish family life, holding it together and attempting to keep the effects of Nazism at bay, women's stories provide a history not of mere victims but of active people attempting to sustain their families and community, to fend off increasingly nightmarish dilemmas."²⁶ There are significant parallels in the Armenian case. Balakian describes his cousin's mother crying, wishing she were blind so she would not see her daughter hurt. Yet he emphasises her pragmatism and use of traditional cultural knowledge, soothing her daughter's wounds with beeswax and gauze soaked in milk, and a cloth dipped in egg yolk.²⁷

Indeed, the role of women as caregivers and mothers permeates survivor testimony. Many child survivors retain vivid memories of how their suffering was tempered, mediated, by their mothers' efforts to reassure them, offer wise words or simple gestures like holding their hands. This is what Kaplan refers to as "the psychological work necessary to raise their family's spirits and tide the family over until better times."²⁸

It is clear that even prior to the disarming of the Armenian population and elimination of the Armenian leadership, intimidation of women was imbued with genocidal intent, aiming to weaken the fortitude of the community. Women tried to keep their families' spirits up; ever more so once fathers, husbands and brothers began to disappear. The shattering of the family unit meant that women were suddenly launched into unfamiliar roles, such as negotiating with authorities, while also grieving for loved ones and apprehensive of the fate awaiting them.

Disarming the population

The disarming of the Armenian community had distinct impacts on women. First, women were often at the frontline of the violence, since they were likely to be in the home when searches were conducted. Second, with the home traditionally a female domain, women were deeply affected by the trauma of having their domestic spaces invaded and treasured items destroyed. Finally, they were often responsible for either hiding weapons or retrieving those hidden earlier. In order to terrorise the community, gendarmes would conduct

26 Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

27 Balakian, *Black Dog*, 221.

28 Kaplan, "Keeping Calm," 43.

searches at all hours of the day and night and did so with excessive force.²⁹ In her unpublished autobiography written in 1922, Vartuhi Boyajian wrote:

They dug the floors and the walls of the houses in search of guns and when they found any they would torture the people of that household to extort information about other houses or sources where guns were hidden. The torturing was so bad that Armenians would go secretly and buy guns to give it to them to escape torture. . . . The women who had guns for self defence would wrap them up into towels then carry them secretly to the elders of the Armenian Church who would turn them in to the Turkish government, to be in good standing citizens. But all was to no avail.³⁰

Armenian homes were often decorated with items handmade by the women and girls of the household and after the violent attacks, women were left not only with physical damage to their belongings, but also with a sense that any semblance of sanctuary had been obliterated. Theft or breakage of items created by the women using skills passed down over centuries was particularly distressing; a symbolic representation of the destruction of Armenian culture and identity. In addition, often the searches were simply an excuse to steal valuables from Armenian houses.³¹

Women's descriptions of chaos and terror during Turkish searches bring to mind Kaplan's portrayal of Jewish women's experiences of *Kristallnacht*, so named because of the "shards of shattered glass that lined German streets in the wake of the pogrom . . . from the windows of synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses plundered and destroyed during the violence."³² Yet "the night of broken glass" was experienced by many women as the destruction of their domestic spaces and intimate belongings, particularly bedding and pillows: "This image of feathers flying, of a domestic scene gravely disturbed, represents women's primary experience of the pogrom."³³ As Bos has

29 US Consul to Harput, Leslie Davis, U.S. State Department Record Group 59, 867.00/803, <http://www.armenocide.de/armenocide/armgende.nsf/>.

30 Vartuhi Boyajian, *My Autobiography—Written in Constantinople 1922: This is the Story of the Black Days of My Life*, unpublished testimony, Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Archives, Yerevan.

31 "The Turkish soldiers, and also civilians, were going through Armenian homes, ostensibly searching for firearms and weapons and evidences of rebellion against the government, but really they were robbing of us whatever they wished to take." See Serpouhi Tavoukdjian, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933), 25.

32 *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005201>

33 Kaplan, "Keeping Calm," 46.

asserted, men and women not only experience but also remember and recount the same events in different and gendered ways.

Women's actions in times of intense stress can illuminate forgotten aspects of victim responses. In order to protect their families, and often at great risk to themselves, women attempted to hide or dispose of any items that might have led to arrest.³⁴ Echoing stories of Jewish families who burned book collections and documents in an attempt to avoid arrest by the Nazis, survivor Alice Muggerditchian Shipley recalled how she and her mother buried weapons along with her father's books and valuables under the basement floor. She was also responsible for burning her father's letters containing war and political information in the stove, while her mother cooked stuffed cabbages—an enlightening juxtaposition of traditional tasks and exceptional challenges. Alice had been so engaged with putting papers in the stove that she did not notice the cabbage burning; they ate it regardless.³⁵

Hiding or handing over weapons did not necessarily prevent violence. One survivor remembered digging up a hidden weapon and placing it in the box for the gendarmes, only to have a senior official beat her mother with a cane: "I spread myself on mother so the blow would fall on me."³⁶ Gendarmes saw the searches as an opportunity to sexually assault Armenian women, the trauma of which was compounded if family members were present.³⁷ Such episodes elucidate genocidal intent, as the symbolism of attacking women in front of male relatives is an assault on the woman herself as well as a way to desecrate the sanctity of the family.³⁸ In addition to searches for weapons, Turkish soldiers would demand to know the whereabouts of men of the household. Vartuhi Boyajian recalled her neighbour's experience:

It was Winter and the family was doing their laundry. The soldiers threw their laundry out in the mud outside and beat them up violently in order to make them confess where was the husband hiding. Then they threw them out of their home into the cold and took over their house leaving the poor

34 For instance, by throwing weapons into the river in the middle of the night. See the testimony of Massis Nikoghos Kodjoyan, in Verjine Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitoutyoun Publishing, House of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, 2011), 203.

35 Alice Muggerditchian Shipley, *We Walked Then Ran*, privately published, 1983, 55.

36 Testimony of Paydsar Yerkat, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 366.

37 For example, survivor George Vetzgian said the Turks would invade Armenian houses, steal items and abuse young women in front of their relatives. See Carol Bedrosian and Laura Boghosian, "Survivors For All time: Stories of the Armenian Genocide," *Spirit of Change*, December 1, 2009, <http://www.spiritofchange.org/Winter-2009/Survivors-For-All-Time-Stories-of-the-Armenian-Genocide>.

38 von Joeden-Forgey, "The Devil in the Details."

woman with her kids outside on the frozen ice for days. They would beat her up three times each day, throwing out and destroying all her belongings and furniture, torturing her and her children until the day her husband would return and surrender. They assumed that the wife knew of his whereabouts. Several times they even put the house on fire but the helpless family did not have a clue where he was.³⁹

When searches were carried out simultaneously with the arrests of men of the household, many women immediately took action to rescue their husbands. Here lies another parallel with the circumstances of Jewish women in Germany, who “summoned the courage to overcome gender stereotypes of passivity in order to find any means to have husbands and fathers released from camps.”⁴⁰ Armenian women were suddenly responsible for liaising with authorities. When Astra Sabondjian’s husband was arrested:

she jumped into hostile territory to secure releases not only for her husband, but also for his closest friends, all high-ranking members of the Dashnag party. She argued with reason, pleaded with passion, threatened with caution, bargained with cunning, and they listened. She strode fearlessly into the Ministry of Interior demanding to be heard as though it was her right, she settled ransom payments at the Ministry of Finance, throwing money at them like confetti and persuaded every known newspaper contact of the international press propaganda machine to tell his story to the outside world.⁴¹

Not all women had such success, and their lack of political experience proved, in many cases, a ready target for officials. Shipley remembered how the women were tricked into handing over weapons with the promise that their imprisoned husbands would be released, only to have the authorities murder their husbands, and then the women too.⁴² Gender analyses of the Holocaust often stress the common experience of women creating social networks in order to survive. Armenian survivor testimonies frequently describe women acting collectively in appealing for their husbands to be released or delivering food to their imprisoned relatives, as in the case of a group of women who gathered at

39 Boyajian, *My Autobiography*.

40 Kaplan, “Keeping Calm,” 46.

41 Katcharyan, *Night Skies*, 72.

42 Testimony of Alice Muggerditchian Shipley, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage.aspx?testimonyID=56527&returnIndex=0>.

the prison where their male relatives were crowded into small cells, and were suffocating: “Some of the prisoners’ wives protested to the Ittihad executioners; Atan bey had said with an ironic smile: ‘Don’t worry, we’ll soon transfer your prisoners,’ meaning, transfer them to the slaughterhouse.”⁴³

Women also took on the task of communicating horrific news to one another. Survivor Sarah Attarian accompanied her neighbour to the prison, only to discover inadvertently that the men had already been killed. Her neighbour collected some of the blood that had soaked into the dirt outside the prison to show the other women in the village. Their screams and cries upon being told of the murder of their relatives remained engraved in Sarah’s memory.⁴⁴

Eliticide

Men constituted the religious and intellectual leadership of the Armenian community. Their torture and murder was a structural component of the genocide, leaving the community with little capacity for social or political organisation and thus more vulnerable to further attacks. As scholars Samuel Totten and Paul R. Bartrop have written, “Eliticide is often committed at the outset of a genocide, and is perpetrated in order to deny a group those individuals who may be most capable of leading a resistance effort against the perpetrators. Concomitantly, it is used to instill fear in the citizenry of the targeted group and to engender an immense sense of loss.”⁴⁵ This strategy too is one experienced in gendered ways, and the impact on women is, rather than a side effect of the genocidal process, central to it. Women often endured intimidation and brutality that accompanied the murder of their leaders. Girls’ opportunities were diminished because of the destruction of educational infrastructure, and as the traditional transmitters of culture across generations, many women experienced the targeting of religious leaders and teachers as well as the desecration of sacred buildings as an attack on their identity.

Many Armenian women recalled with sadness the closure of their schools and arrest of beloved teachers. Survivor Perouze Ipekjian from Constantinople was in her graduation year when all her teachers disappeared.⁴⁶ Another survivor described her school uniform displaying one stripe to represent first

43 Hakob Manouk Holobikian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 262.

44 Testimony of Sarah Attarian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage.aspx?testimonyID=56633&returnIndex=0>.

45 Totten and Bartrop, *Dictionary of Genocide*, 129.

46 Testimony of Perouze Ipekjian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56592&returnIndex=0>.

grade, and then sadly, “I would’ve had two stripes the following year.”⁴⁷ Mari Vardanyan from Malatya recalled her education with pride—her school books, the opportunity to read aloud—and then the brutal end:

I was always a good student, because my mother would teach me at home before sending me off to school. I liked school a lot. But then a paper was issued which said that whoever taught in an Armenian church institution would have to leave the country. And if they didn’t leave the country in three days, their blood would be drunk out of a bowl. . . . I went to school, but the door was closed. I looked through the keyhole in the door and saw the priest praying inside. Our school never reopened.⁴⁸

While both boys and girls had their schooling disrupted, there was a lifelong impact on girls. By the time the deportations ended, surviving girls were usually unable to resume their education as it was considered of little importance in the wake of genocide. Some were living in poverty, with returning to school an impossible option. Most had matured to “marriageable age” and with their primary role seen as repopulating the shattered community, engagements were arranged quickly. Education for girls and young women was limited to domestic skills and older family members refused the opportunities some yearned for: “I desperately wanted to finish my education. But my grandmother and my uncle both said it wasn’t necessary; I had all the schooling I would ever need.”⁴⁹

Women related to community leaders were targeted with severe violence or forced to witness their family members tortured in a symbolic intersection of violence against women and men.⁵⁰ Authorities tormented women in the wake of their relatives’ murders, as in the case of a woman sent the eyeballs of her professor husband.⁵¹ These atrocities are indicative of a broader genocidal intent—one that used the initial murders of the community elite to terrorise remaining community members into submission. In this frightening atmosphere, women were faced with the challenge of caring for those men who had been tortured and then released. One professor was sent home in severe psycho-

47 Dirouhi Avedian, *Defying Fate: The Memoirs of Aram and Dirouhi Avedian* (California: H and K Manjikian Publications, 2014), 11.

48 Testimony of Mari Vardanyan, in Nazik Armenakian, *Survivors* (Yerevan: 4 Plus Documentary Photography Center, 2015), 133.

49 Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl* (Massachusetts: Baikar Publishing, 1985), 111.

50 For example, survivor Anaguel reported that her uncle had been a member of the Dashnag political party and that his wife was tortured so she would hand over his documents. See Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 105.

51 Testimony of Alice Muggerditchian Shipley.

logical distress, frequently running outside naked and screaming of what the authorities had done to him. The women would run after him covering his body with bedsheets and returning him to the house.⁵²

Finally, women were witness to their revered priests degraded, humiliated and brutally slain,⁵³ not only desecrating the sanctity of the church and removing any hope of a safe haven, but destroying a central element of women's spiritual and social life. The desecration of sacred spaces that were used by women for gathering and prayer, and the subversion of comforting rituals into signals of terror, such as the ringing of church bells to round up Armenian men, were often emphasised in survivor testimony. As Paydsar Yerkat recalled:

I was woken up from a deep sleep by the ringing of the twin bells. I was surprised to hear them. From the window of my room could be seen the alley to the local church, St Karapet. I saw the men hurrying to the church silently and thoughtfully. The church was filled up, the doors closed. The private meeting lasted until midnight. No one was allowed to come out. The women took food to the prisoners in the church, moaning and crying. . . . The Armenian men came out from there covered in blood, with beaten mouths and noses.⁵⁴

As the community leaders disappeared, some women maintained their religious and cultural traditions as a way to manage the intense grief and to distract their children. Shipley recalled hearing women crying from their homes as the prominent men were handcuffed and taken away, and that her mother "pulled us away from the windows and read many encouraging verses from the Bible and gave us more verses to memorize."⁵⁵

Forced army recruitment, imprisonment, murder and massacre

Over time, Armenian women lost husbands, fathers, sons and brothers to arrest, imprisonment, conscription and murder. Saying goodbye to fathers was a trauma that survivors never forgot, and those who were children frequently

52 Ibid.

53 For instance, Veronika Gaspar Berberian described how her grandfather, a priest, was decapitated as he knelt, praying, and his head used as a football by the Turkish soldiers. See Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 360.

54 Testimony of Paydsar Yerkat in Ibid., 366.

55 Shipley, *We Walked*, 53.

highlight the immediate impact on their mothers. Serpouhi Tavoukdjian remembered the heartbreak of her father's last night at home; as he gathered them for one last prayer, her mother was "ill from grief."⁵⁶ Nvart Assaturian described the night when the men in Bitlis, including her father, were arrested: "We waited and waited, and he was not coming . . . the Turks began knocking on the door, and my mother was sitting in the bed, and crying and praying . . . since then I cannot forget that night, and my mother's crying and praying."⁵⁷

Occasionally, arrested men were returned to their families, but in a horrific state, and women immediately resumed their role as the men's carers. This included nursing their wounds, as in the case of a woman who bathed her husband's skin that had turned black from daily beatings.⁵⁸ Publicising the torture was even used as a strategy of intimidation to show the remaining population what the authorities were capable of. Some women were sent the bloodied clothes of their beaten relatives, while Balakian writes of his cousin's father being tortured and crucified, his mutilated body left on the doorstep (and his decapitated head at the edge of the street) for his wife to find.⁵⁹

Women's roles were profoundly affected by the loss of male relatives. The structure of the Armenian household had been determined by gender and age, with young married couples moving into the husband's parents' house, often with uncles and aunts living under the same roof.⁶⁰ Relationships between family members were ordered according to generational protocols, with older women holding authority over young women and some new brides forbidden from speaking to their elders until the birth of their first child, or until grandparents had passed away.⁶¹ Young mothers, usually teenagers, had traditionally relied on older women to help them with new babies. As Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas writes, "My major upbringing was gladly undertaken by my grandmother. Older women in the household often took over the care of babies born to such young girls."⁶²

Men's absence had serious repercussions on gender roles and intergenerational relationships, an aspect of the genocide that has so far been neglected

56 Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*, 24.

57 Testimony of Nvart Assaturian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage.aspx?testimonyID=56720&returnIndex=0>.

58 Testimony of Mikayel Mkrtich Chilingarian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 268.

59 Balakian, *Black Dog*, 222–23.

60 For example, see the testimony of Zarouhi Ayanian, Center for Armenian Research, University of Michigan-Dearborn, <http://umdearborn.edu/cas/686475>.

61 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 55.

62 Highgas, *Refugee Girl*, 14.

in academic research. Existing rules of relationships and communication were broken, as young women had to become “the head of the family”⁶³ or the sole protectors of sons and younger brothers,⁶⁴ positions historically occupied by fathers. Further, while the eldest man had been responsible for dealing with “social and political interactions,”⁶⁵ women both young and old now took on the unfamiliar tasks of liaising with authorities, as well as daily activities that had previously been the province of men, including shopping for food.⁶⁶ There were also financial consequences. Just as some Jewish women sought employment when their husbands were arrested, Armenian women took on paid jobs to support their children in the absence of an income, overturning traditional gender roles and, for those who had occupied a high socio-economic position, class status as well. Some even had to manage the moral dilemma of taking jobs washing or sewing uniforms for Turkish soldiers.⁶⁷

Women began to straddle multiple roles. Without abandoning their traditional responsibilities, they quickly learnt how to advocate to authorities or use illegal means to rescue male relatives or protect their families, including bribery. Kaplan notes that actions by Jewish women “not only broke gender barriers but also bypassed normal standards of legality,”⁶⁸ and likewise, Armenian women took huge risks in stepping out of gender constraints and engaging in common but illegal methods of survival. Vergine Rouben Nadjarian recalled how her mother hid, negotiated and bribed to save their lives at every opportunity, including trading jewellery for shelter in Turkish homes. Yet she continued to conform to traditional gender expectations of self-sacrifice, telling her mother, “If you die, I’ll die with you.”⁶⁹ Another woman took a handful of gold pieces to a senior official in exchange for the release of her husband, and when he returned home, she dressed him in cotton for a month to protect his wounds.⁷⁰ The dual persona that women came to embody is exemplified by Astra Sabondjian, who, in addition to negotiating on behalf of her husband and collecting information for his illicit newspaper, visited her hus-

63 Testimony of Garegin Touroudjikian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 522.

64 Eliz Sanasarian, “Gender Distinction in the Genocidal Process: A Preliminary Study of the Armenian Case,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 4 (1989), 452.

65 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 55.

66 Several testimonies refer to shopping having been a male duty. For instance, Zarouhi Ayanian, Center for Armenian Research, University of Michigan-Dearborn.

67 Testimony of Haiganoush Bedrosian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage.aspx?testimonyID=56699&returnIndex=0>.

68 Kaplan, “Keeping Calm,” 44.

69 Testimony of Vergine Rouben Nadjarian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 284–85.

70 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 66.

band in prison every week and brought him fresh bandages and ointment for his wounds.

Significantly, women were forced to make life-changing and tragic decisions without the support of husbands, brothers or fathers. Rubina Peroomian writes:

In almost every household, with the men of the family murdered or imprisoned, it was now up to the women to assume responsibility and make the difficult decisions, first, to accept the loss of the murdered or imprisoned husband or son . . . [and deciding] whether or not to entrust a young child to the care of a volunteering neighbor—with the hope of returning and reclaiming the child.⁷¹

As in the case of Jewish women sending their children out of Germany in the hope they might survive, some Armenian women had to decide whether to accept offers from non-Armenian families to take in their children. Knowing they would never see their children again, and that they would be converted and assimilated into Muslim Turkish society, these decisions encompassed the sorrow of losing loved ones and further, the pain that accompanies loss of culture and tradition. Many implored their children not to forget their heritage. The grief of mothers is recorded in their own testimonies and remembered by the children, with a survivor describing being sent to a Turkish official's house and the absence of a goodbye kiss from his mother, which he attributed to her inability to bear the sadness of bidding him farewell.⁷²

Survivor Bertha Nakshian Ketchian recalled daily searches by officials and pressure from a Turkish captain to give her away. Her story is pertinent in multiple ways, illustrating the predicaments women faced and their changed roles, and demonstrating that authorities knew in advance the atrocities awaiting deportees: "Grandmother Mariam, now the head of the household, would slowly open the door . . . the brutal presence of angry soldiers was terrifying . . . the captain concentrated on staring only at me." When Mariam continually refused to give Bertha away, he responded: "You'll be sorry. . . . You are all going on a long, troublesome journey. She is very little and will not survive it, or she will be taken by the Arabs."⁷³

71 Rubina Peroomian, "Women and the Armenian Genocide: The Victim, the Living Martyr" in *Plight and Fate of Women During and Following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 9.

72 Testimony of Sarkis Agojian, quoted in Rouben P. Adalian, "The Armenian Genocide," in *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 70.

The concepts of tragic moral decisions and choiceless choices are perhaps most explicitly revealed in acts of suicide or family murder.⁷⁴ Suicide and acts such as drowning or abandoning children were common on the deportation marches (usually to avoid violence, abduction or sexual abuse) but even at this early stage, some saw suicide and the killing of their children as their only option. After the murder of her father, Nektar Hovnan Gasparian's mother decided to end the remaining relatives' lives. Nektar herself survived, but remembered: "She had arsenic with her; she gave it to a few girls of the village; she drank it and made me and my sister Anoush drink it."⁷⁵

Such actions demonstrate both the lack of genuine options for Armenian women as well as the spectrum of responses. Decisions to choose death over deportation or abduction, or excruciating acts of sacrifice in giving away children in order to potentially save their lives, contained elements of victimhood but paradoxically also agency and resilience. Decision-making by women involved complex gendered dimensions in that the role of mothers and "appropriate female behaviour" was highly prescribed. Sometimes women's responses aligned with gender expectations; in other situations, they chose to act outside of their traditional roles. Cases also occurred where moral dilemmas had adverse consequences for women's intergenerational relationships, such as when grandmothers had a different view from mothers as to whether or not children should be given away.

Concluding thoughts

Forgotten elements of the complex crime of genocide, or those historically viewed as marginal, surface in women's stories. Scholars of the Holocaust who pioneered gender analysis uncovered significant and meaningful details, and by applying aspects of their theories and frameworks to the Armenian case, gendered experiences of the early days of the genocide are brought out of the shadows. The rounding up of community leaders, long known as the official start of the genocide, tells the story with men as the central characters. But the genocidal process relied on tactics that targeted both men and women in distinct, yet intersecting ways. The challenges faced by women are as vital to the history of the genocide as the executions and massacres of men. Beginning the analysis with early persecution, for instance by including escalating

73 Bertha Nakshian Ketchian, *In the Shadow of the Fortress: The Genocide Remembered* (Massachusetts: Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, 1988), 13.

74 Suicide among Jews in the early Nazi period was also common, see Konrad Kwiet, "The Ultimate Refuge: Suicide in the Jewish Community under the Nazis," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 29, no. 1 (1984), 135–67.

75 Testimony of Nektar Hovnan Gasparian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 198.

public attacks and insults against both women and men, sexual intimidation of women, and pressure to cover their faces, may help formulate a more gender-inclusive narrative.

What emerges clearly by viewing the events from women's points of view is the intent to annihilate the family unit and prevent the continuity of the community. Women's experiences highlight the unique essence, the real tragedy of genocide—the social, cultural, physical *and* biological destruction of the group. This is seen in the shattering of community structures, traditional ways of life, established familial roles, and the capacity for cultural transmission to new generations. Yet within the constraints imposed, many Armenian women responded in ways that asserted their resilience. Their actions and decisions straddled traditional gender expectations and attempts to take on new and challenging tasks. While this essay focuses on the beginning of the genocide, their fortitude continued to manifest during the next phases of torment—deportation marches under horrific conditions, systematic sexual violence, massacres, starvation, and eventually unimaginable suffering in desert concentration camps.

Testimonies describing the treatment of women expose their persecution, but also their strength. These were women who watched as their homes were invaded and torn apart, who tried to soothe crying children and tend to the wounds of tortured husbands. Women who read Bible stories as their relatives were shot in or outside the church, supported each other in groups to appeal to authorities, and bribed officials to release husbands and protect their children. Women who used every skill and every ounce of tenacity they had to survive.