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REFRAMING FAIRY TALES TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical roots and present challenges of integrating Armenian women into technical disciplines. While legal rights to education are secured, cultural norms and educational practices continue to shape and limit women's participation in technical fields. Drawing on historical discourse, current statistics, and a pilot educational intervention, this study proposes targeted pedagogical reforms, including inclusive storytelling and early exposure to technical fields. Emphasis is placed on developing critical thinking from an early age and integrating empowering narratives that reflect gender equity. The findings argue for systemic educational reform, inclusive curriculum design, and strong mentorship pathways to enhance women's representation in science and challenge societal stereotypes.

Keywords: women in science, technical disciplines, gender equity, inclusive curriculum, empowering narratives.

Introduction

While women's lives differ greatly across cultures, many of the challenges they encounter, transcend the cultural boundaries. Methods of overcoming these challenges are shaped by cultural context. The present article aims to examine the historical foundations of women's education in Armenia and evaluate the current trends of women's enrollment in technical education. It further explores how early education and cultural norms affect gender stereotypes, identifies barriers to women's enrollment in technical fields, and offers solutions aimed at improving women's representation in technical education and careers.

The analysis involves factors such as upbringing, access to education, professional development, and the role of feminist movement.

Generally, disparities in access to resources, education and opportunities often bring to gendered power imbalance, which in turn affect societal expectations and behaviors. These dynamics shape the opportunities and constraints experienced by

women. In frames of education, gender stereotypes might impact academic performance, subject choice and students' sense of self-efficacy and well-being.

Recent international survey on gender equality in STEM education underlines some key aspects influencing girl's involvement in scientific and technical disciplines. Research shows that gender stereotypes, lack of visible female role models, and early educational experiences shape student's career aspirations. According to UNESCO's report *Cracking Code: Girls' and Women's Education in STEM*, social expectations and cultural beliefs about gender-based careers often discourage girls from pursuing technical fields in spite of comparable academic performance [1].

Likewise, Cheryan et al. (2017) emphasize three main barriers influencing women's involvement in STEM – cultural stereotypes about scientists, limited early exposure to technical activities and insufficient institutional support. These factors along with educational practices influence both subject choice and career pathways [2]. Research also underlines the significance of early education interventions. Studies offer that inclusive pedagogical strategies, such as gender-sensitive curricula, collaborative learning, and exposure to female role models in science, can increase girls' curiosity and persistence in STEM-related fields [3].

These assumptions support the argument that addressing gender disparities requires not only reforms but also changes in classroom practices and cultural narratives.

Historical Overview

An analysis of Armenian literature and historical discourse exposes a longstanding cultural emphasis on the essence of women's intellectual and moral contributions. Historical advocacy for women's education still goes along with contemporary debates on gender equality in technical-scientific fields.

For example, Armenia's national epic *Daredivils of Sassoun* portrays female characters who are presented as brave and loyal to their responsibilities, suggest recognition of women's agency. As early as the 12th century, the scholar and lawmaker Mkhitar Gosh proved the value of educated women in his *Datastanagirk* (Law Code), stating, "Educated women in society are gems" [4].

In the 19th century, eminent Armenian novelist Raffi published an influential article *Hay Kine* ("The Armenian Woman", 1879), in which he advocated for women's active involvement in both public and family life. He argued that empowering women through education would facilitate moral renewal, societal restructuring, and the development of a new generation of progressive Armenians. Raffi regarded education as a cornerstone of national advancement and political emancipation [5].

Khrimyan Hayrik, a 19th – century Armenian religious and national leader, also supported the idea of education for both men and women. Khrimyan realized that the education of women was vital for broader societal progress. He set up schools for girls and highlighted the mother's role in a child's early education. In his work *Papik ev Tornik*, Khrimyan challenges prevailing norms by stating that uneducated

woman poses a greater threat to the family than an uneducated man. He insists that a mother, as the child's first teacher, must be educated to effectively nurture future generations [6].

In recent years, both governmental and non-governmental organizations have addressed gender disparities in education. One notable initiative is the History#5 gender toolkit developed by the independent educational foundation Paradigma. This toolkit examines five key periods in Armenian history from the 19th to 20th centuries, highlighting perspectives on women's education during the Ottoman, Russian, and early Soviet periods [7].

Among the figures featured in the toolkit is Dr. Vahan Artsruni, who criticized traditional approaches to girls' education in Armenian society. He argued that the lack of autonomy granted to girls from an early age led to broader social stagnation:

"Many years of observation and study have convinced me that the mistakes in the education and upbringing of Armenian girls play a leading role in the progressive degradation and alienation of our nation. The girl moves according to someone else's will her entire life – first according to the will of her parents, then her school and neighbors. The concept of independence remains incomprehensible to the modern girl... And the older she grows, the more her freedom is restricted" [8].

Likewise, journalist and critic Grigor Artsruni linked women's effort to their lack of access to economic and educational independence. Writing in 1872, he noted: "In those countries where the light of education also reached women, where she advanced in her development, she began to speak and act differently than our women... She realized that her slavery and subordination stemmed from her inability to support herself independently... I will work, she said. I will live by my own labor. But in order to achieve independence, how many barriers must she overcome, both in society and in the family. Not only does society and the family deny her rights, but even the law refuses to recognize her equality as a human being" [9].

These historical perspectives underline the nature of the challenges women encounter in education and professional life. They also state the longstanding recognition, among Armenian intellectuals, clergy and activities, of education as a transformative means for individual empowerment and collective progress.

The legacy of Armenian intellectuals who supported women's education is both rich and enduring. These people underlined the foundational role of education shaping Armenian families and society. They realized that empowering women through knowledge was not only a matter of equity but a background for nation's cultural, social and intellectual development.

Nowadays, their ideas stay relevant and can be extended into contemporary technical/scientific context through different means, literary and academic publications, workshops and conferences, public campaigns, outreach programs in schools and other educational institutions. These efforts can serve to challenge prevailing

gender stereotypes, boost inclusive learning environments and support a new generation of women in science and technology.

Current Status of Women in Armenian Technical Education

Fortunately, the contemporary educational landscape in Armenia no longer imposes the establishment of equal educational rights for women; these rights are legally secured.

Nowadays the issue today lies in the underrepresentation of women in technical and scientific fields. Armenia has the potential to set itself competitively in global science and technology market, yet achieving this demands addressing gender disparities in technical education.

In spite of the limited availability of gender-disaggregated statistical data in Armenia, particularly in the technology sector (World Bank, Statistical Committee of Armenia), available data reveal promising developments. According to Forbes, nearly 30% of Armenia's tech sector workforce comprises women, surpassing the global average of 20%. In biotechnology, the Armenian Bioinformatics Institute states that 60–70 % of professionals are women, compared to a global average of 47%. At the Enterprise Incubator Foundation (EIF), women comprise approximately 70% of the staff.

These figures reflect the growing presence of women in Armenia's dynamic tech sector. However, educational enrollment patterns reveal a more complex picture. Data from the World Bank show that women represent 54% of mathematics majors, whereas men dominate physical sciences (67%) and ICT (66%). In contrast, 96% of philology students are women, while engineering programs are overwhelmingly male-dominated (89%) [10, 11].

(See Table 1.)

Table 1. Gender Distribution in Armenian Technical/Scientific Disciplines.

| Discipline | Women (%) | Men (%) |
|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Mathematics | 54 | 46 |
| Physics | 33 | 67 |
| ICT | 34 | 66 |
| Engineering | 11 | 89 |
| Philology | 96 | 4 |

The statistical figures used in this research are derived from different sources, involving the World Bank's education database, reports of the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, and sectoral analyses published by organizations working within Armenia's technology ecosystem. While these sources provide essential insights into gender involvement trends, the availability of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data remains limited. This limitation underscores the need for

more systematic national-level data collection on gender representation across STEM disciplines.

This disparity underlines the need to foster science education at the secondary level. A strong curriculum forms the basis of academic programs and directly affects student's career trajectories. However, the persistent misconception that women are inherently less capable in scientific fields continues to refrain many girls from pursuing technical education.

This study argues for a reimagining of technical education for girls in Armenia, from early childhood to higher education. While Armenia had made progress, some rooted gender biases continue to influence girls' academic and career choices. These biases manifest in multiple ways, limited early exposure to science, a lack of female role models, pedagogy that favors male students, and societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Initiatives like Geek Girls Dinner, launched by GIT Armenia in 2018, aim to counteract this by showcasing successful women in tech and boosting peer support networks.

Cronin and Roger (1999) identify three main approaches to increasing women's involvement in science, encouraging girls to enter the field, supporting those already within it, and transforming scientific culture to be more inclusive. This article adopts their framework to analyze the Armenian context and suggests targeted recommendation based on qualitative and statistical research.

Recently, Armenia had seen meaningful progress in some areas of gender equality, particularly in employment and access to education. However, technical education remains an area of concern. The way science is taught is critical. Educators, industry leaders and policymakers should collaborate to expand content and pedagogy but also addressing social norms that form children's understanding of gender roles from a very early age.

Education often begins with stories. Fairy tales such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Little Red Riding Hood, mainstays in Armenian and global early childhood storytelling, have been criticized for reinforcing passive, dependent female archetypes. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars such as Karen Rowe have critiqued these narratives for promoting ideals incompatible with the modern woman. [12] Others, like D. Haase, argue that fairy tales often diminish female agency, demonize female power, and impose restrictive role models [13].

This context is especially relevant when examining early childhood education in Armenia. State nursery schools mainly focus on developing basic literacy and numeracy, as well as exposing children to culture and nature. While basic science-related topics, such as seasons, weather and the human body, are covered, technical education remains limited in scope and presence, especially within public institutions.

However, some private nursery schools and specialized centers are beginning to incorporate science-based learning approaches. Notable examples include the

Khoren and Shooshanig Avedisian School and Community Center in Yerevan, operated by the Armenian Missionary Association of America, and Kids House Private Kindergarten, which emphasizes individualized care and education. These educational centers reflect a growing recognition of the importance of science exposure in early childhood. Unfortunately, such programs are rare and largely inaccessible to the broader population due to their private status.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative-quantitative mixed-method approach combining historical analysis, statistical data review, and a pilot pedagogical intervention. The methodological framework is designed to examine both the structural and cultural factors affecting women's involvement in technical education in Armenia.

Firstly, a historical-discursive analysis was carried to examine Armenian intellectual and literary texts that addresses women's education. Primary and secondary sources from the 12th to the 20th century, including works by Mkhitar Gosh, Raffi. Khrimyan Hayrik and Armenian publicists of the 19th century, were analyzed to define historical attitudes toward women's intellectual participation. This analysis aimed to contextualize contemporary gender issues within Armenia's intellectual and cultural heritage.

Secondly, the study involved descriptive statistical analysis of available gender-disaggregated educational data. Data were observed and collected from international and national sources, including reports by the World Bank and the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia. These data were used to examine involvement patterns across academic disciplines, particularly mathematics, engineering, ICT and physics. The analysis focused on identifying gender gaps in participation and comparing them with global trends reported in international studies on STEM education.

Thirdly, the research involves a pilot pedagogical intervention implemented in a nursery school. The intervention includes an adapted storytelling lesson based on the fairy tale Cinderella, designed to encourage critical thinking about gender roles. The lesson followed an interactive analysis model, in which children were asked to reflect on key decision points in the story and offer alternative actions for the protagonist. During the activity observational data were collected focusing on student engagement, involvement in discussion, and the diversity of proposed solutions.

Finally, the study integrates elements of qualitative classroom observation and reflective pedagogical analysis. Observations were used to evaluate how storytelling-based discussions can foster critical thinking and challenge gender stereotypes at an early educational stage.

The combination of historical analysis, statistical review, and classroom-based experimentation allows for a multidimensional understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding women's involvement in technical education in Armenia.

Storytelling Intervention and Pedagogical Innovation

Recently Armenia has laid important foundation for the promotion of women's rights and participation in education. However, bridging the gender gap in technical fields requires referring both systemic barriers and ingrained social norms. Early childhood education, curriculum reform, visible female role models, and inclusive pedagogical practices are important components of a long-term strategy to empower girls and women in science and technology.

In Armenian nursery schools, storytelling remains a core component of early childhood education, with fairy tales by the folk Armenian writer Hovhannes Tumanyan occupying a significant place. However, a critical examination of these narratives reveals a recurring gender imbalance. In many of Tumanyan's tales, male protagonists dominate the narrative, often depicted as intelligent, resourceful, and heroic problem-solvers. These characters typically drive the plot and are portrayed as rescuers of passive or distressed female figures. In contrast, female characters are frequently relegated to secondary roles and are portrayed as naïve, submissive, or even foolish – as exemplified in tales such as *Barekendan* and *Ankhelq Mardy* (The Foolish Man). These images reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, presenting men as central figures of authority and agency, while women are limited to roles associated with domesticity and dependence.

Such narratives introduce and normalize a hierarchical perception of gender roles from an early age—men are implicitly associated with higher social status, professional success, and leadership, while women are cast in supportive, often diminished, roles. This subtle but pervasive messaging contributes to the social conditioning of children and perpetuates gender inequality across generations.

Notably, there exists a rich tradition of Armenian folk tales featuring clever and assertive female characters, those aligned with the ATU 875 tale type, commonly referred to as *The Clever Farmgirl*. These stories highlight female wit and independence. However, they are rarely included in kindergarten curricula or recommended reading lists for parents. One contributing factor is the linguistic complexity of these tales, many are written in regional dialects, which may render them less accessible to young readers or non-specialist educators.

As a starting point toward promoting gender equality in early education, we offer the adaptation and integration of such empowering tales into both formal and informal reading practices. This could include linguistic modernization and simplification to make the stories more accessible, followed by their inclusion in bedtime reading lists for parents and in the storytelling curriculum of kindergartens. These stories can play a groundbreaking role in nurturing self-confidence, autonomy, and ambition in young girls.

Moreover, educational strategies such as critical reading, guided literary analysis, case-based discussions, and problem-based learning (PBL) can be applied to

help children involve more deeply into the values embedded in stories. These pedagogical methods promotes reflection, dialogue, and critical thinking about gender roles, ultimately boosting more equitable attitudes among both girls and boys.

It is also significant to recognize that gendered stereotypes introduced through fairy tales are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they form part of a broader, interconnected system that develops into primary and secondary education. Referring to gender bias in early storytelling is therefore not an end in itself but a foundational measure in a long-term effort to break down systemic gender inequalities across the educational spectrum.

In spite of numerous suggested strategies, such as incorporating historical narratives of women's education into textbooks, literature, and academic discourse, these alone are insufficient to address the rooted gender imbalance in Armenia's educational system. In order to foster girls' interest in technical education, educators should develop methods and pedagogical techniques to suit various stages of age, cognitive development, and proficiency.

Collaboration between educational institutions and technical professionals, between the public and private sectors is the key component to enhance technical education among girls. Mentorship projects, guest lectures, and interactive workshops provide essential guidance, while government-led initiatives such as scholarships, structured mentorships suggest institutional support. Partnerships with tech companies to provide internships and employment opportunities further enhance the visibility of technical careers for women. These success stories of women in science, play a vital role in breaking down stereotypes and inspiring younger generations.

Methodological Approaches for Promoting in Science

From a pedagogical perspective, modern pedagogical methods, such as critical reading and analysis, case studies, debate-based inquiry, and Problem-Based Learning (PBL), are significant for reshaping outdated narratives and encouraging independent thought. Even at an early age, these approaches boost critical thinking, a skill fundamental to resilience, decision-making, and personal empowerment.

For younger learners, this shift can begin with science-oriented play (e.g., Legos, science kits, building sets), which are often aimed to boys, but can and should be equally accessible and encouraged for girls.

Inclusive storytelling, where educators intentionally frame stories in ways that highlight the strength, intelligence, thereby prompting reflection and critical discussion.

Critical thinking is not only an academic skill, it is a life skill. It provokes confidence, autonomy, and problem-solving ability. Girls who are taught to think critically are more likely to question limiting societal norms, assert themselves, and

persist in the face of challenges, especially in male-dominated fields. Unfortunately, many Armenian schools still operate under strict, standardized curricula that leave little room for the development of these skills.

Critical reading, in particular, enables girls to explore the wide variety of opportunities in science. By analyzing articles, reports, and biographies of successful women in technical fields, students develop both inspiration and awareness. This helps persist the imaginary myth that science and technology is primarily “for boys” and encourages students to make informed, interest-aligned career choices.

Understanding the real-world impact of science, on healthcare, environmental sustainability, communication, and society at large, can also provide girls with a deeper sense of purpose and a more notable connection to these fields. Along with narratives of successful female engineers, computer scientists, and innovators, these lessons show that women not only belong in technology and science but excel in it.

To lay the foundation for these shifts from the earliest stages of education, we analyzed the storytelling materials which are used in Armenian nursery schools. Our research revealed that many popular tales depict women as passive figures whose destinies are formed by male decision-makers. These narratives usually decrease the potential for girls to see themselves as capable, independent problem-solvers.

As part of our intervention, we designed and piloted an interactive lesson plan based on the well-known fairy tale Cinderella. The trial lesson was implemented in Aygestan Village Nursery-kindergarten, NPO of the Artashat Community, as part of a pilot educational activity designed to explore children’s responses to gender-sensitive storytelling methods. The lesson was a success, the children were enthusiastic and actively involved in the discussion. The story was divided into three narrative turning points:

1.The royal ball invitation – when Cinderella is told by her stepmother she cannot attend.

2.The glass slipper – after she flees the palace, leaving the shoe behind.

3.The prince’s search – when he seeks the girl who fits the slipper.

At each stage, children were asked to pause and consider alternative actions:

A) Should Cinderella obey, disobey, or prepare in secret?

B) Should she hide, return, or explain herself to the prince?

C) Should she wait passively or take initiative?

This strategy allowed children to reflect, discuss, and reimagine the narrative-placing emphasis on agency, autonomy, and ethical reasoning. By exploring various outcomes and defending their choices, children began to understand that the protagonist (and by extension, themselves) could have multiple paths – not all of which required external validation or male intervention.

This method not only enhances critical thinking and decision-making but also fosters gender-sensitive perspectives from a young age. By actively engaging with

story content, students learn to question stereotypes and evaluate actions, building the foundation for more equitable and reflective views of gender roles.

Thus, to foster gender-inclusive technical education, we recommend:

- Integrating modernized folk tales with strong female protagonists into kindergarten and primary curricula.
- Encouraging science-related play and activities equally for all genders.
- Training educators in inclusive storytelling and critical reading techniques.
- Promoting female scientific role models through media, mentorship, and school visits.

Partnering with tech companies to offer workshops and internships for girls.

Methods such as case-based learning, guided discussion, and problem-solving activities build critical thinking and resilience. These skills support girls' long-term engagement in technical education and careers.

So, we assure that early education plays a critical role in shaping gender perceptions. By integrating inclusive stories, critical thinking frameworks, and scientific/technical exposure into the curriculum, educators can empower girls to envision and pursue careers in technical fields. These reforms are essential steps toward a more inclusive and equitable educational ecosystem in Armenia.

While Armenia faces challenges related to gender representation in technical education, similar patterns have been observed globally. Many countries have implemented targeted initiatives aimed at increasing girls' participation in STEM disciplines.

For example, the Girls Who Code initiative in the United States focuses on developing programming skills among school-aged girls through extracurricular clubs and summer programs. Similarly, the European Union has implemented projects such as Hypatia, which promotes gender-inclusive science education by providing teaching materials and training educators to address unconscious bias in STEM classrooms [14].

Nordic countries have also developed national strategies aimed at improving gender balance in science and technology. Finland and Sweden, for example, have integrated gender-sensitive career guidance into secondary education and actively promote female role models in engineering and technology sectors.

These international experiences demonstrate that long-term progress requires coordinated action across multiple levels – curriculum design, teacher training, public awareness campaigns, and industry partnerships. The Armenian educational system can benefit from adapting similar approaches while integrating them with local cultural traditions and educational practices.

Conclusion

To effectively bridge the gap between formal education, family dynamics, and social values, coordinated efforts are essential. Introducing literary works that highlight

intelligent, proactive female characters into early reading curricula nurtures self-awareness and builds self-esteem. From an early age, girls benefit from stories that reflect strength, curiosity, and agency, all qualities that align with technical thinking. In this context, it becomes the educator's responsibility to ignite a genuine love for science, cultivate curiosity, and provide pathways for continued exploration.

The primary school years are especially formative in this regard. These early stages are not only about knowledge acquisition but also about identity formation. The message girls receive during this period, about who they are and what they are capable of, can profoundly shape their academic and career aspirations.

We strongly believe that the future of a thriving society and a prosperous economy rests on robust scientific foundations, skilled professionals, and a motivated younger generation—one in which girls and women are not just included but are central contributors.

Ultimately, empowering girls through critical reading and analysis gives them the intellectual tools to navigate and challenge stereotypes, make informed choices about their futures, and embrace the world of science as a place where they belong.

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РЕФРЕЙМИНГ СКАЗОК КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ РАСШИРЕНИЯ ПРАВ И ВОЗМОЖНОСТЕЙ ЖЕНЩИН В СФЕРЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье анализируются исторические предпосылки и современные вызовы, связанные с интеграцией армянских женщин в сферу технических дисциплин. Несмотря на формально гарантированное право на образование, культурные нормы и сложившиеся образовательные практики продолжают оказывать существенное влияние на уровень участия женщин в технических областях и зачастую ограничивают их вовлеченность. На основе анализа исторического дискурса, актуальных статистических данных, а также пилотного образовательного проекта, в исследовании формулируются предложения по реализации целевых педагогических реформ. Среди них особое внимание уделяется внедрению инклюзивного повествования и обеспечению раннего знакомства учащихся с техническими направлениями. Отдельно акцентируется необходимость формирования критического мышления с раннего возраста и включения в образовательный процесс нарративов, способствующих укреплению принципов гендерного равенства. Полученные результаты подчеркивают актуальность системной образовательной реформы, разработки инклюзивных учебных программ, а также создания устойчивых механизмов наставничества, направленных на расширение представительства женщин в научно-технической сфере и преодоление укоренившихся гендерных стереотипов.

Ключевые слова: женщины в науке, технические дисциплины, гендерное равенство, инклюзивное образование, нарративные практики.