

Rights of Children from Religious and Ethnic Minority Groups in Armenia



Field study with children
and young people in Armenia

Yerevan 2014



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PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN FROM RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS IN ARMENIA

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Protection of the Rights of Children from Religious and Ethnic Minority Groups in Armenia – Field Study Report

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ABOUT THE PROJECT “PROTECTING CHILD RIGHTS OF RELIGIOUS MINORITY GROUPS IN ARMENIA”

The present study was carried within the framework of the project of the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, “Protecting child rights of religious minority groups in Armenia: combating intolerance online”, and was implemented with the financial support of the Embassy of the Netherlands to Armenia.

The project has focused on the rights of children and youth belonging to minority groups, specifically religious minorities, and aimed at combating intolerance towards minorities through education and awareness raising. A good understanding of the problems faced by children and youth from minority groups is an important step in that process and one that cannot be carried out without involving the children and young people themselves.

Minority groups, including religious minorities, are subject to pressure, sometimes unconscious, from mainstream society and from within the community; children and young people from minority groups can be doubly affected and experience double discrimination. On the one hand, they are vulnerable and easily discriminated against and stigmatised, and on the other hand, the isolation inherent in the minority groups they belong to reinforces these discriminations.

Education – and the development of educational approaches, formal and non-formal – is indispensable for developing an understanding of the values of human rights and dignity, and when addressing such consequential issues, listening to children is essential. In order to shape campaigns and provide adequate, targeted educational activities, our work needs to be based on empirical data and quality analyses; identifying the most relevant issues and getting to know the reality of children is a key for understanding. The studies and research carried out in the project support the activities by providing evidence-based information which then served as a basis for planning further measures to combat religious intolerance and to protect the rights of children belonging to minorities.

Since children and young people increasingly rely on social media to share their views, obtain information and socialise, and as the Internet is also an area where discrimination and hate speech are practised, particular attention has been paid to securing links with the Council of Europe’s No Hate Speech Movement in Armenia.

The project was structured around three objectives:

- To conduct a survey among the population (including children and youth) to provide empirical data to support further research and shape the online campaign against intolerance;
- To mobilise youth organisations and other stakeholders to build coalitions or partnerships that will support the youth campaign against intolerance, including online campaigns;
- To organise workshops aimed at preparing and developing the competences of educators, youth leaders and multipliers to raise awareness of and address intolerance.

In addition to this study, the project has thus included:

- Consultations with human rights, children and youth organisations and public institutions concerned with children and youth policies about the relevance and possible focus of the project, notably to secure complementarity with and the continuation of previous similar projects;
- A stakeholder meeting, public presentation and discussion on the findings of the studies and preparation of follow-up actions;
- A training course on human rights education linking formal and non-formal education: methods, approaches and best practices have been shared and a local network for various actors in education has been created. Teachers, youth workers, educators and NGOs have been working together with the common aim of protecting children and human rights, combating hate speech and discrimination. As a result, the long-term co-operation between the two sectors has been strengthened and the awareness of the necessity of human rights education has been raised.
- Workshops for journalists of online and printed media on how to report on religious minority issues in an appropriate manner, and on tools for identifying biased reporting and expressions of hate speech. A virtual “Pop-up newsroom” brought together 30 journalists and published a significant number of articles covering the topic of freedom of religion and conscience in Armenia.

- Mini-grants to youth organisations for the support of youth initiatives aiming at promoting tolerance for religious and cultural minorities and understanding of children’s rights. Five projects were implemented by and for young people around the country, such as a photo exhibition about religious diversity which took place in the only mosque of Armenia, a three-day training course for representatives of minority groups, and a one-day event reaching out to university students and encouraging them to become multipliers.
- Visibility of the results and awareness raising of the results and issues through an internet site: www.nohate.am/freedom-of-religion;
- The inclusion of discrimination on the basis of religion in the programme of the Armenian national campaign of the No Hate Speech Movement through the dissemination of educational resources and tools and support to the campaign in Armenia;
- Community meetings by local civil society organisations in the four cities of Armavir, Gyumri, Ijevan and Vanadzor; 114 direct beneficiaries of community workshops have been sensitised towards the topic, and have been able to develop their understanding of the risks of hate speech towards religious minority children and youth, and learnt ways to address those.

All project elements made use of the findings of the field study “Protection of the Rights of Children from Religious and Ethnic Minority Groups in Armenia” as a tool to state the need for preventive measures against discrimination of religious minority children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to express our gratitude to the community leaders of the various religious and ethnic communities in Armenia who facilitated the study, and of course the young people who took part in the interviews and group meetings in the summer of 2013.

The field study which this report covers was conducted within the framework of the Council of Europe project 'Protection of the Rights of Children from Religious and Ethnic Minority Groups in Armenia'. The project is made possible by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Armenia.



Kingdom of the Netherlands

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is a first attempt to look into cases of discrimination which children from ethnic and religious minority groups face in Armenia in the sphere of social, family, church and community life, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The particular purpose of the study was to learn what children and young people themselves think about discrimination and intolerance, since almost all other studies conducted so far have been based on experts' surveys, and rarely reflect children's opinions. Based on hands-on evidence, case studies and findings of previously conducted desk research, the report presents recommendations on the protection of the rights of children from ethnic and religious minority groups, and conclusions which would contribute to the reduction in cases of discrimination and intolerance in Armenia.

The study involved discussions with eight focus groups held in five different 'marzes' (administrative regions) of Armenia, both in rural and urban settlements. The focus groups each consisted of seven to ten children, both male and female, with an average age of 15. To ensure representation of ethnic and minority children, six of the focus groups were designed to include Yezidi and Molokan ethnic community members, as well as individuals who identified themselves as members of the Evangelist, Pentecostalist, Word of Life and Jehovah's Witness religious communities. Discussion topics such as social, family, church and community life were selected to take a holistic view of children's rights in the sphere of everyday life. However, many of the cases outlined in the study do not always represent a pattern and cannot be attributed to the majority alone.

The whole process was carefully designed by experts who took into consideration age group, community differences and the overall sensitivity of the topic.

The results of this study suggest several trends which can be generalised, mainly occurring along the gender, age and urban-rural gradients. Some seemingly isolated cases in certain communities may appear to have more troubling consequences.

The study also reveals certain differences in characteristics inherent to ethnic and religious minority groups. Thus, ethnic minorities who are mainly living in compact communities situated in remote regions of Armenia rarely become deliberate subjects of intolerance in the media, or targets of discrimination in schools or other public institutions. At the same time, because of their remoteness from large centres, they have less access to education, public services and goods. However, it

should be noted that, frequently, social conditions transcend religious or ethnic minority status, and rural dwellers are more likely to experience social exclusion as a result of poverty-bound obstacles, such as a lack of access to infrastructure, and fewer opportunities and/or a desire to pursue education, which are specific to the majority of other rural inhabitants of Armenia. What is more important is that, due to their conservative values and traditional lifestyles, children from some ethnic and religious minority groups, especially girls, are often affected by multiple discrimination that is driven by the local community and/or family. For instance, in some communities there were reported cases of discrimination towards girls in terms of access to modern information and communication technologies: whereas boys are encouraged to use the Internet and cellular phones, girls are forbidden from doing the same, and are socialised instead to become nurturing mothers and competent wives. This observation is also relevant in relation to school drop-outs of boys, and early marriages for girls.

As for religious minorities, especially so-called non-traditional religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses, there is a clear tendency of faith-based discrimination, which is particularly noticeable in public schools and significantly intensified by mass media. On the other hand, in comparison with ethnic minorities, religious groups, particularly those from urban areas, demonstrate more eagerness in acquiring an education, participating in public life and building up a prosperous career in various spheres. Nevertheless, certain limitations of rights and personal freedoms are imposed on children by religious norms as well as by community leaders and families.

Another important finding of the study is that public schools are the most significant institutions where discrimination towards minority children occurs and, as a rule, younger children are more vulnerable to any manifestations of intolerance. In this respect, both negative and positive roles of teachers as well as parents cannot be underestimated.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the full range of issues minority groups face in Armenia, it is noticeable that children are significantly more positive and optimistic about their social experiences and their future than is presented by experts and community leaders.

Due to the diversity of issues at hand, it is recommended that changes occur at all levels of society, beginning at the local community level and rising all the way to the Armenian governmental structures. Raising awareness for human rights' issues

involving ethnic and religious minority children, for the modification of practices or legislation which further discriminatory acts, and advocating for the preservation of ethnic and religious minority culture in the public sphere, are some of the recommended approaches for tackling these issues.

The study was initially conducted in Armenian and later translated into English; this may have altered speech nuances present during focus group discussions, although every effort has been made to provide the clearest and most accurate translation of the intent of the Armenian speakers.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to obtain a holistic view on the protection of the rights of children from religious and ethnic minority groups in Armenia, and related breaches. The study is the first attempt to look into the cases of discrimination of minority children in the spheres of social, family, church and community life, in the light of the provisions of the CRC, ratified by Armenia.

Detecting and revealing cases of intolerance and discrimination is important for the implementation of Armenia's international commitments and the improvement of the protection of the rights of minorities and their children in Armenia. The issue has been examined from a number of perspectives, for instance social exclusion, lack of access to educational and medical services, lack of the right to opt out of certain educational subjects, and the existence of discriminatory and intolerant attitudes by different layers of the society including schools, early marriages, and other important areas.

One of the purposes of this study is to come up with recommendations on the protection of the rights of children from ethnic and religious minority groups based on facts and collected evidence, as well as conclusions that would contribute to the creation of a friendly environment, and public attitudes, behaviours and legislation that would reduce the cases of discrimination and intolerance.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using qualitative methods. Eight focus group discussions took place in five different ‘marzes’ (administrative regions) of Armenia, both in rural and urban settlements. The focus groups comprised 7-10 children, with an average age of 15. The principle of gender balance was maintained.

Two communities were selected from among ethnic minorities: a Yezidi community (Gyalto village, Aragatsotn Marz) and a Molokan community who are ethnic Russians and were expelled from Russia to the South Caucasus in the 19th century for their religious views.

Focus groups with children from religious minority groups were organised with representatives of Evangelist-Pentecostals (the town of Sevan), the Jehovah’s Witness Christian organisation (Yerevan city), and the Word of Life Church and Armenian Evangelical Church (Vanadzor town). Another mixed group with the Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses was organised in the town of Armavir. There were also two focus group discussions with children from a nominally “majority” group, that is, belonging to Armenian Apostolic Church in the cities of Yerevan and Gyumri.

A desk research, commissioned by the Council of Europe and carried out by Isabella Sargsyan, which outlines the main issues of children belonging to the national and ethnic minority groups in Armenia, served as a basis for this field study. The purpose of the current field of study is to learn to what extent findings of the desk research correspond to the realities in the field, and to discover hidden problems and concerns.

In Armenia there have been a few certain studies conducted on issues of religious minorities¹, the state of tolerance in Armenia², teaching the History of the Armenian Church in schools³, the content of textbooks of the History of the Armenian Church⁴, and other related topics⁵. Notwithstanding the fact that some

¹ See http://armhels.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/344eng-Freedom_of_Religion_in_Armenia.pdf

² See ‘Tolerance in Armenia Today’, www.epfound.am/files/tolerance_in_armenia_occasional_policy_brief.pdf
The study ‘Religious Tolerance in Armenia’ was carried out by Collaboration for Democracy. See www.religions.am/files/1577/english/library/Religious-tolerance-in-Armenia.pdf

³ Stepan Danielyan, Ara Gazaryan, Hovhannes Hovhannisyanyan, Artur Avtandilyan, ‘Issues of Religious Education in public Schools of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, 2012

⁴ The study was carried out by Hovhannes Hovhannisyanyan, Satenik Mkrtchyan and Armine Davtyan with funding from Open Society Foundations. The text in Armenian can be found here: www.religions.am/files/3290/library/legal/L011.pdf

⁵ This has been presented in a fair amount of detail by Isabella Sargsyan in her study.

studies are conducted on the issues of freedom of religion, that TV and radio discussions and talk shows on the issues of the Church and the state, religion and belief exist, there has been no specific study conducted on the topic of the protection of the rights of children belonging to religious minority groups.

We believe that this study is the first one that focuses on this topic and might have a substantial impact in attracting the attention of state bodies and specialists to the issues of minority children.

RIGHTS OF CHILDREN BELONGING TO MINORITY GROUPS IN ARMENIA

According to the census carried out by the National Statistics Service in Armenia in 2011, 98% of Armenia's population is represented by ethnic Armenians, 92% of whom consider themselves as followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC)⁶. According to some experts, the majority of people who identified themselves with the AAC have relatively weak links with the church. Atheists, seculars, agnostics and other groups, who relate themselves to the AAC in more of a cultural way but not through religious ties, are often included among the followers of the AAC. In our conversations with children from religious minorities, they characterised AAC followers or the representatives of the majority as 'seculars', 'nonbelievers' or 'laic', who are far from spiritual realities.

There are 65 registered religious organisations in Armenia⁷ and a few non-registered ones, while ethnic minorities are registered as non-governmental organisations⁸. The registered religious organisations are represented by various Protestant-Evangelical churches, among which there are a significant number of Pentecostal churches. There are also Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches functioning in Armenia. According to a number of studies, the attitude of the AAC towards them, as well as public perceptions, are quite neutral or even positive.

Various studies indicate that some servants of the AAC have quite a negative attitude towards the representatives of Protestant, Evangelical and other non-conventional religious groups, as they believe those people are engaged in so called "soul-hunting" (a term from Armenian Law on Religious Organisations describing proselytism, though the concept has no legal definition) or "disrupt the unity of the nation" and "undermine statehood". In 2004, as a result of constitutional reforms, the following paragraph was added to Article 8.1: "The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church, in the spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia"⁹.

⁶ See http://armstat.am/file/article/sv_03_13a_520.pdf

⁷ See http://gov.am/u_files/file/kron/Tsutsak2-%20herakhos%20gov.pdf

⁸ See http://gov.am/u_files/file/kron/min.pdf

⁹ See www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=1&lang=eng

On 22 February 2007 the National Assembly adopted a Law on the Relations between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Republic of Armenia, which guaranteed the church the privilege of playing a special role in Armenian public schools. This also enabled the AAC to establish closer relations with various state institutions. That co-operation resulted in the substitution of the pilot 'History of Religions' subject with the 'History of the Armenian Church'. In addition, government officials started to appear together with church representatives more often on public platforms, and the church acquired a significant role in state matters. At the same time, some church representatives appeared at the centre of scandals¹⁰. It is also worth mentioning that new draft laws on regulating religious affairs have started to be discussed regularly, some of which have the apparent intention of reducing the sphere of activity of religious organisations other than the AAC. The majority of the draft laws have received a critical assessment from the OSCE / ODIHR and the Council of Europe Venice Commission. Specifically, one of the laws attempted to define the Holy Trinity and other religious concepts.

Hate speech is frequently used by some media outlets which support chauvinistic ideas and are adherent to the rather nationalistic concept "one nation, one religion, one culture". They are few, but the level of hatred expressed is rather high. Insufficient professionalism of journalists covering issues related to religious and ethnic minorities also plays a significant role and often becomes a cause of misleading information, and implicitly contributes to the propagation of hate speech. Evidence of negative media coverage is indicated in the media monitoring report conducted by the Collaboration for Democracy Center¹¹.

It should be also mentioned that imprudent claims made by some clergymen in the media could provoke a significant upheaval of nationalistic attitudes, especially against religious minorities. For instance, a statement by the representative of the AAC, Komitas Vardapet Hovnanyan¹², claiming that "religious organizations are funded from abroad with the intention to undermine the Armenian statehood"¹³ resulted in attacks on the representatives of religious minorities, and their offices. The groups who were attacked clearly connected the violence with the above-

¹⁰ The Vicar of the Ararat Diocese, Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan, together with Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan, appeared at the centre of a scandal related to offshore accounts. See <http://m.news.am/eng/news/192103.html>

¹¹ See, in Armenian, www.religions.am/files/3247/documents/comments/p13.pdf

¹² [editor's note] A **vardapet** or **vartabed** in the Armenian Apostolic Church tradition is an educated archimandrite who holds a Doctorate in Theology.

¹³ See <http://armenpress.am/arm/news/734447/hayastan-nertapancats-axandavorakan-sharzhumn-yntaniquim.html>

mentioned statement¹⁴. Hence, such an intolerant attitude inevitably raised the concern of the representatives of religious groups. A number of well covered court proceedings, for example, *Word of Life Church v. Iravunk newspaper*, and *Sevan Evangelical Church v. Shant Television Company* took place.

The concerns stated above are hardly relevant to national minorities. Despite the fact that they are free in their actions, there are few if any calls for hatred against them. Nevertheless, ethnic minorities in Armenia are quite isolated, which is largely caused by the internal decision of these communities to preserve their identity and independence and by the limited support from the state.

Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by UN specifies:

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.

However, and despite the aforementioned problems, the focus group discussions largely revealed that the issues of children from minority groups are not very different from those of other children: children are often the subject of corporal punishment and do not see it as a problem. It is also noticeable that children's views are often significantly different from the opinions of adults from their communities. We will deal separately with each of these findings below.

¹⁴ According to the pastor of the Yerevan Evangelical Church, Levon Bardakjian, after this statement a young man armed with a knife invaded their church looking for the pastor. See www.relignations.am/eng/news/attacks-on-the-members-of-the-evangelical-church-of-yerevan-after-archimandrite-komitas%E2%80%99s-statements

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND STIGMA

The study revealed that there are significant differences between rural and urban populations in terms of social involvement, irrespective of their belonging to a particular religious and/or ethnic group. Social exclusion is caused by social conditions, lack of access to infrastructure, in particular, dilapidated roads that are not being renovated, weak linkage between the marz (regional) centre and other governance centres, the lack of transport and infrastructure necessary for linkage to the market, a lack of cultural involvement, and so on.

Poverty is one of the main causes of the lack of social involvement. Financial conditions and welfare issues were mentioned as the main obstacle to broader involvement in social and cultural life.

Both religious and ethnic minorities are cautious in terms of political involvement. They maintain loyalty towards the incumbent government and mention their lack of interest in political processes. The representatives of religious minorities justify their loyalty with religious motives. Their approach is typical of the minorities in different countries who do not want to add to their existing problems and attempt to stay away from political issues through isolation.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Children from religious minorities whom we met in Armavir, Sevan, Vanadzor and Yerevan mentioned that they do not experience any exclusion in terms of access to public goods or in feeling unequal to other children. Unlike many children from ethnic minorities, they are relatively involved in different spheres of public, cultural and social life, participate in cultural, sports and other events and in most cases do not feel any different from others. However, sometimes their involvement is mainly of a unilateral nature, in that the religious institutions organise their own youth unions, summer and learning camps, and groups and events stimulating cultural and other activities, which are attended predominantly by children belonging to that particular group.

The only difference mentioned by children from religious minority groups is their spiritual nature, which differentiates them from the 'secular', 'nonbeliever' majority. By saying 'secular' the children refer to the nominal followers of the AAC who are not active in spiritual practices and limit themselves to traditional, non-regular ritual activities.

The focus on the identity of children from religious minorities is primarily being Armenian and secondly belonging to a specific religious community, which contributes to their involvement in public life. Besides that, some children from religious communities mentioned that they see no problem in visiting Armenian churches with their friends, attending liturgy and lighting candles.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

Children from the Yezidi and Russian Molokan communities we talked to are fairly isolated in Armenia and hardly integrate into Armenian public life. In the case of Yezidi children there are no language obstacles, since the majority of them speak and understand Armenian. In the case of Russian Molokans the majority of children understands Armenian to a certain extent but is not fluent in that language, which causes social exclusion. The majority of Russian Molokans have kinship or other relations with their compatriots residing in Russia, which creates an attitude that at a certain age they will emigrate from Armenia and settle in Russia. Such an attitude contributes to greater social exclusion.

In the case of the two ethnic minority groups mentioned, the isolation comes from an internal creed, since in this way ethnic minorities try to prevent assimilation and preserve their national identity. Children from ethnic minorities in rural communities do not have a certain view on whether it is worth continuing education in higher or vocational educational institutions. The small number of students and limited number of teachers have a negative impact on the quality of education and, consequently, on the children's motivation. In many cases there are no local teachers in those villages mentioned and very often, for various reasons, there are also very few from neighbouring towns or villages who are willing to travel every day and work in those schools. The children find it difficult to describe their future educational perspectives or goals. Their vision is focused on setting up and supporting a family rather than on receiving additional education in the future.

While some of the Yezidi children have friends among their Armenian peers, all children from the Russian Molokan community stressed that they do not have any Armenian friends and that the closed nature of their community often prevents them from having friends of a different nationality. Yezidi children were noted for their poor social conditions and the isolated state of their settlement from the marz (regional) centre, while the Molokan rural community was located on the main road, thus having an advantage over the other communities. Despite this, the internal automobile roads of the Molokan Fioletovo community were in a dreadful condition, while such roads were completely non-existent in the Yezidi village of Gyalto.

EDUCATION

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

In the case of both religious and ethnic minorities, the state carries out its commitments by providing free elementary and general secondary (9 years) as well as vocational education. From this perspective, Yezidi community children are to a certain extent an exception since they do not have high school in their village, and if children want to continue education in high school, they have to attend school in the neighbouring village, which is costly and not feasible for many families.

It should, however, be mentioned that there are very few children in the Yezidi community who wanted to continue education in high school, even less so in higher educational institutions.

According to Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the State Parties commit to ensure equal rights of all children in education, make primary education available and free to all, support children in need in getting general and vocational education, make higher education accessible to all, take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and reduce drop-out rates, and so on. Similar approaches are also specified in the 2004-2015 National Programme for the Protection of the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Armenia approved by the Republic of Armenia Government Decree 18 N

Because of the lesser degree of integration, Russian Molokans mainly continue their education in specialities related to agriculture, and often out of Armenia, since the language obstacle deprives them of this opportunity. The headmaster of the only school in the Fioletovo village was able to recall only one or two children's names over recent years who had continued their education in the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University.

The children are offered different programmes for continuing education in Russia through the Russian Embassy in Armenia, and they usually take this opportunity. Education offered in Russia is usually free for Molokan children.

The issue is different with children from religious minorities. In this case we are dealing with general patterns that can be observed in rural and urban populations, where children living in urban areas are more active in continuing education.

Religious belonging is not an obstacle for children to receive an education and acquire a profession. Among the children we met, there were some who studied computer science through self-teaching, and were developing innovative software. The main difference between the AAC-following children and the children from religious minorities are the levels of activity, involvement in voluntary activities and a more conservative approach. For AAC-following children, the religious factor does not have any significant impact on daily activities, their worldview or attitudes, since they are mainly secular, while in the case of religious minorities the religious factor has a significant influence on their daily decisions and choosing a life path; this is the cause of their conservatism.

SCHOOL DROPOUTS (BOYS AND GIRLS)

Children residing in rural areas tend to drop out of school, mainly to find jobs in Russia. This is common among Russian Molokans and Yezidis who leave for Russia to work for their relatives and support the family. It is also common in the Yezidi community due to girls' marrying at a young age.

One of the AAC-following children in Gyumri mentioned that there was a girl in their class belonging to a religious minority who had left school at an early age. According to information available to the children, the mother encouraged the girl to engage in prostitution, as a result of which she became isolated and was left out of school.

However, dropout is mainly related to financial conditions and is typical of all Armenian children.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONS

Corporal punishment without discrimination

A common, very negative and intolerable practice in schools (with the exception of certain schools in Yerevan city), one that comes from historical pasts, and a tradition which has been preserved and cherished in Armenia, is the corporal punishment of children, whereby the teacher may throw a piece of chalk at the student (in the best case scenario) or hit the child with a wooden pointer, book or hand. Such actions are carried out mainly towards younger children who are more vulnerable. Naturally, both corporal punishment and rebelling against it are

more common with boys than girls. Girls, however, do not interfere, which makes the practice more unacceptable and contributes to girls tolerating or applying such behaviour when they grow up. One of the children residing in Armavir explained that every day their teacher enters the class with a long pointer and says, “This is your elder brother; whoever misbehaves, will be punished by the elder brother”.

There is a prevailing view among ethnic minority children, specifically among Yezidi children, that corporal punishment is used only with positive considerations both by parents and teachers. They have absolutely no idea about their own rights. They believe that in the case of punching, only children are to be blamed, and that it is a normal practice. Moreover, some children consider this the only appropriate way of educating a child. This view proves that there is a significant lack of knowledge about the rights of children, first of all among adults, and that there is a need to work extensively with adults to form a positive change in their stereotypes and views.

Discrimination without corporal punishment

Some of the respondents mentioned that, at the initial stage when the teacher learns about their belonging to a different religious group, a certain change in his/her attitude can be noted, which, however, improves over time. There was a prevailing belief among all children that especially during recent years there have been certain positive changes in the perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards religious minorities. A certain amount of caution can also be noted, which is stimulated by the protection of rights of religious minorities by international organisations over recent years, and the articulation of the issue in various international reports. Our study shows that all disagreements with children have been resolved in a positive way by headmasters who protected the rights of minorities.

During the ‘History of the Armenian Church’ course, some teachers arbitrarily, without following the programme methodology, start the class with The Lord’s Prayer, during which the children stand up, and at the end they make the sign of the cross. This ritual, which is carried out regularly during the class, is in conflict with the religious beliefs of some religious organisations, specifically, Jehovah’s Witnesses. It also breaches the rights of children and is in conflict with the constitutional principle of separating religion and state. In one of the schools in Armavir the teacher decided to resolve this issue in a unique way. Since Jehovah’s

Witnesses refused to pray and, moreover, to make the sign of the cross, “the teacher asked us to get out of the classroom; we waited by the door while the rest prayed and then we returned to the classroom and continued with the classes”.

Such an approach is evidence of a discriminatory attitude. It should, however, be mentioned that we did not come across such practices in other schools although there have always been problems with Jehovah’s Witnesses in relation to this issue.

Some teachers display an obviously disrespectful attitude towards the religious beliefs of children. This is what one of the children told us: “When the teacher entered the classroom for the first time, she asked whether there is anybody of a different religion. We stood up and said that we are Jehovah’s Witnesses. Then she insulted us, said that we go and pray with old dull people. We did not say anything. On the next day I asked whether it would be ok if we did not pray and she told us to pray but not make the sign of the cross. I did not pray and did not make the sign of the cross. The teacher told me to learn The Lord's Prayer, I learned from the Bible but she said ours is in old Armenian and yours is in secular Armenian. She said: ‘learn ours’.”

ISSUES WITH THE PEERS

Children from ethnic or religious minority backgrounds often experience mockery or an unkind attitude from their peers. Such things often happen at school, sometimes with silent approval or permission from other peers, teachers and parents. One of the children from the Jehovah’s Witness organisations told us that the teacher instigated an attitude of hostility and hatred towards the child as a result of which one of the aggressively-disposed boys attacked him and tore his shirt. “During the Armenian language, language origin and translation class the teacher asked me which one is our Bible. Since it is not appropriate to talk about that during the class I said that we could talk about it after the class if she wanted. Then the teacher said that she would dedicate her class to this topic and children started to experience hatred towards me to the extent that one boy attacked me and tore my shirt and said that we don’t go to the army. Naturally I did not respond to her at that time. The teacher tried to calm him down but did not say anything serious. I called my parents immediately. After half an hour they came to school and we went to see the headmaster who then beat the boy [author’s note: we hope this is an exaggeration]. The headmaster then reprimanded the teacher

and the next day the boy's father came to school and paid for the damage to the shirt. Everything seems to have settled after that. This is a case that happened one week ago." With active interference of the headmaster the teacher apologised in the class for what he had done.

Another similar case: "For example, I am aware of a case when the teacher encouraged the students to harass and mock twin sisters after which the sisters approached the teacher and asked what's bad about their religion and suggested that they should attend the classes without interfering. The teacher took this case to the headmaster but the girls retained their neutral position till the end."

It should be noted that children from Jehovah's Witness Christian organisations are considered to be the most vulnerable group because the media and other information sources accuse them of different vices. In particular, in the case of suicides, the first version that is usually circulated in the media is that the suicidee belongs to a religious organisation, most frequently, and to a Jehovah's Witness organisation. This argument is obviously rejected by religious minority children, and does not usually correspond with the facts.

Such cases also occurred with the representatives of other religious organisations but infrequently. Thus, the children of the pastor of one of the Evangelical churches in Vanadzor used to have a number of problems at school due to their religious belonging which, however, improved over time. At present, such occurrences are rare among representatives of the Evangelical Church.

There were also cases of despise and intolerant attitudes by children towards their Molokan or Yezidi classmates. It is worthy noting that when Armenian children want to offend or accuse each other of poor taste, they say, "Are you a Yezidi?" Although the general attitude towards Molokans is tolerant, one of the children from the Vanadzor Evangelical Church told us how he had protected a Molokan child from harassment by others: "I protected the Molokan from our class though at that time I was not yet spiritual. They treated him badly, made various comments behind his back and called him a potato, a cabbage, i.e. things that Molokans sell".

In the case of ethnic minorities, such cases are rare, which is mainly due to the isolated nature of their communities and very few links with the majority children. Some sub-ethnic peculiarities become a reason for aggression from peers, as well as minor violence such as permanent harassment by boys. An example of this is the case of a teenage girl, studying in an Armenian school, whose family had

emigrated from Iran and who had been taught to be modest and not to respond to rude behaviour by boys. There is an underlying belief here that representing the minority is a manifestation of being unprotected and weak.

We noticed certain differences among respondent children belonging to the Apostolic majority in the cities of Yerevan and Gyumri. AAC-following children residing in Yerevan demonstrated more tolerant attitudes towards other nations and religions and this also applies to followers of Islam. Children we talked to in Gyumri city had certain reservations towards religious minorities, believing that “they have deviated from the right path, are lost and will return to the AAC one day”. Children told us that there is a certain negative attitude towards foreigners who practice Islam, which is more vividly manifested towards Iranians: “There is an Iranian girl in our school who is under pressure from boys in our group; they even hit her. But when they ask her why she allows this she says: he is my brother, what can I do? She is obedient to the situation.”

Our study shows that ethnic or religious differences can be a reason for aggression but aggression may know no discrimination. If ethnic or personal differences lead to not resisting aggression, the latter becomes stronger. Thus, it is important to nip the aggression in the bud, without responding to aggression, and propagate respective methods among groups of young children.

THE HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH SCHOOL SUBJECT, AND THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS MINORITIES

The school curriculum includes two subjects that promote discontent among minority groups: ‘Initial Military Training’ and the ‘History of the Armenian Church’. The military training is in conflict with the pacifistic ideology of Jehovah’s Witnesses and also some Molokan groups, which forbids them to take up arms. The children believe that a subject teaching them about their motherland is useful but if it contains elements that are against their conscience, it is unacceptable and they refuse to take actions that are against their conscience. Jehovah’s Witness children expressed the view that if there was no such subject in the list of subjects, or if they were allowed not to attend the course and select another subject instead, it would be better.

The issue was different in the case of the ‘History of the Armenian Church’ course: both ethnic and religious minority children recognised the importance of the subject in terms of developing their knowledge. What they were concerned about

were the ritual actions sometimes imposed on them by teachers, for example, making them to pray and make the sign of the cross. A Jehovah's Witness girl in Armavir told the following story: "When the class started, we prayed. I told the teacher that I would not pray with the others and she said that if I was not going to pray she would mark me 'D' (but she didn't) and would also grade me 'D' for the entire quarter. But I studied excellently at school and the leading teacher for the class was trying to settle the conflict. She (the teacher) during each class gently 'picked on' our religion and provoked the children against me. The children did not really enjoy attending the class. I had a Russian education and did not know Armenian letters well, so I did not learn my lesson well. I told her to give me these topics in Russian and I would answer the lesson in Russian. She understood Russian well and I told the lesson in Russian so that she could mark me. I used Internet at home. When we reached ninth grade she had already calmed down since she saw that I studied her lessons with respect, so she did not say anything anymore."

Since the subject is considered useful, suggestions from minority representatives relate to reduction in the hours and avoiding the duplication of topics, especially with the Armenian history subject. One of the Jehovah's Witness children describes the practice of a college in Yerevan in the following way: "I studied that subject in the college last year and my tutors knew that I am a Jehovah's Witness and if I said that I did not want to study the subject there would certainly be no issue. But I did not refuse to study the subject because I was interested in studying historical data. There was no requirement in our college to pray, make the sign of the cross, etc." It is also an issue that the majority of children believe that teachers treat this subject in a formal and superficial way as an additional class to supplement their wages.

In the 'World of Life' church school in Kanaker¹⁵ the subject the 'History of the Armenian Church' is delivered by the representative of that particular church, and, as the children noted, in a fairly objective manner. Children attending the Evangelical Church see more problems in pagan mythology where there are numerous Gods than in the teaching of the Christian religion. They believe that one of the main issues is the lack of sufficient faith among teachers of the 'History of the Armenian Church', which, in their opinion, creates problems in terms of the objectivity of teaching the subject. According to one of the children from the Sevan Evangelical Church, in some cases teachers knowing about the belonging of

¹⁵ This is a private general education school, the founder of which is the 'Word of Life' Church. It is licensed and provides its graduates with state graduation certificates. It has been two years since the license for elementary grades was cancelled. At present only middle and high school grades are functional.

children to another religion were cautious and tried to treat everybody in an equitable manner. There were cases when the child representing a religious minority refused to even take the textbook, insisting that his/her mother would teach him/her whatever is necessary.

Some children, the followers of the AAC, supported the idea of substituting the subject the 'History of the Armenian Church' or making it an optional subject; they preferred to study a general history of religions and learn more about Islam and Buddhism. This approach is caused by the more open nature of children belonging to this group, and those who have the experience of communicating with foreigners, which has created a natural interest towards representatives of other religions and nations. Children inclined towards an atheist position had a radical approach towards the subject: "I am an atheist and it is very uninteresting for me to study the subject. And who would be interested in this, who would want to become a priest? – since this subject is specifically designed for becoming a priest."

Thus, many of the representatives of religious minorities have a positive attitude towards the 'History of the Armenian Church'. They regard the topics of this subject as part of their national history and if this is not in conflict with their conscience, they enjoy studying it. There are various opinions among AAC-following children. Children residing in Yerevan and communicating with foreigners support the optionality principle, while children in Gyumri are inclined to maintaining the current situation of having it as a compulsory subject.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND MINORITIES

There are significant differences between children from rural and urban areas in terms of entering higher educational institutions. A large segment of ethnic minorities belongs to the rural population. Many of the children in this category do not want to continue their education after nine years. In the Molokan community the majority of boys find jobs in Armenia or Russia after graduating from general secondary school. The same can be stated for the Yezidi community, which has greatly decreased in number over recent years, due to emigration. The issue is different in the case of Russian Molokans: the Russian Embassy supports their relocation to Russia and helps them to get a higher education: "We have very good opportunities to pass an interview at the Russian Embassy during which they test our knowledge of the mother tongue, Russian, after which we are provided with the opportunity to enter some Russian University without exams and also get a scholarship. There are already students from our village who study and live in

Russia. We also have students in Yerevan, at the Slavonic University”. The number of Russian Molokan children studying in higher educational institutions in Armenia is small, while the number of those who have left for Russia is big. Russian Molokans who receive an education in Russia do not return to Armenia after graduating because of not being able to find a job.

The situation is different in the case of the urban population, irrespective of religious adherence. If the community is particularly conservative, then the number of those who want to receive a higher education is lower. However, among representatives of the Evangelical Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious communities, the number of those who want to enter higher educational institutions is significant. Children from a family attending the Evangelical Church stated that the share of those who receive a higher education in their community is 75-80%.

HEALTHCARE

The state has committed to reducing infant and child mortality rates. The rate is higher in rural settlements and particularly small in Yerevan city where the quality of medical services is higher than in marzes (regions). Many of marz inhabitants make arrangements to have their child delivered in Yerevan.

According to Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state parties must guarantee the right of children for access to healthcare services. According to the Decree of the Government of Armenia N318-N dated 4 March 2004 'On free medical assistance and services guaranteed by the state', as well as according to the standard approved on 28 December 2012 'On Organizing Medical Assistance to Children in the Framework of free medical assistance and services guaranteed by the state' medical assistance services for children up to 7 years of age are free in Armenia. The state also covers costs related to prenatal care and childbirth for the citizens of Republic of Armenia.

AWARENESS AND ACCESS TO SERVICES

One of the main problems of healthcare service delivery is the low level of awareness of children and parents, particularly about the services that are free. Children from both rural and urban populations told us about cases when they were charged for medical services. In marzes, children complained about the bad conditions of the ambulance service, as well as the bad state of vehicles and roads. In Gyumri, the ambulance is often late because of the roads; even taxis refuse to go to certain neighborhoods where the roads are in a dreadful condition. The rural population is in a worse state. Problems double in winter when the roads are not cleared and it becomes impossible to get the patient to hospital.

Children from all religious communities receive regular vaccinations. The only reservation was made by Jehovah's Witnesses who said that if the vaccination contains a blood component they refuse to take the injection. There were cases in schools where children refused to take the injection, although the children thought that this was not related to religious approaches.

The quality of medical services is a significant issue. In many communities there are no nurses: they visit from marz (regional) centres or other communities according

to a fixed schedule. Elder women provide the assistance. Children are not aware of any case when the doctor refused to provide medical assistance for religious reasons.

CHILD DELIVERY AT HOME

The fact that child delivery assistance and obstetrics are free has significantly reduced the cases of child delivery at home over recent years. In villages where the regional centres are far away, or where there is no accessible hospital, there are still cases of child delivery at home, especially during winter, when it is not possible to get the woman to the hospital because of roads being impassable. The tradition of child delivery at home is still alive among Yezidis: “We go to Talin or Yerevan for medical assistance. We have a nurse in our village; she does the vaccinations. Child delivery is organised in Talin. The child is delivered at home when the roads are closed and impassable. Some of us were born at home because of the absence of nurses and because it was not possible to get the mother to the hospital in winter. There is an old woman in the village who delivers children.” There are cases of mortality during child delivery with non-specialist assistance.

MARRIAGE

EARLY MARRIAGES

During discussions on updating the allowable age for marriage in the Family Code when the preliminary proposed option was 18 years for both girls and boys, the Yezidi community complained; there were even street protests against the Government. In April 2013, the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia adopted a change in the Family Code. According to the new provision a person can get married at the age of 17 if he/she has permission from parents, adoptive parents or trustees; a person can get married at the age of 16 if he/she has permission from parents, adoptive parents or trustees and the other marrying person is at least 18 years old (Article 10).

Children in the Yezidi community explained that it is unacceptable for a girl not to be married by the age of 20; such a girl is considered an “old maid”. The marriage age for boys is considered to be 21-24 when the boy returns from military service. There are similarities between Yezidi and Russian Molokan communities in terms of being inclined towards early marriages.

Religious minorities are no different from majority children, with the exception of very conservative churches. The difference is not caused by religion but rather by the fact of residing in a city or a village. The marriage age for urban populations is higher than that for rural inhabitants by several years.

The representatives of both religious and ethnic minorities consider that it is important to get married within the community. It is a vital and important issue for ethnic minorities to prevent the risk of assimilation. The community stops communicating with the one who breaks the tradition. The most recent case of a mixed marriage that was recalled in the Molokan community was the marriage of a Molokan girl to an Azerbaijani man during Soviet times, after which the couple moved to Krasnodar. There were also very few cases of mixed marriages in the Yezidi community.

Children from religious minorities mentioned that they consider it possible to marry a person of a different religion if the person has highly-developed spiritual qualities and lives according to spiritual rules: “The marriage is organised in the

way that is accepted in Armenia; there is no special approach. Of course, it is not like the way 'seculars' do it. The pastor would be told, we have to tell our pastor everything, he is our friend. The marriage is organised right in the Protestant Church. There was a case when representatives from Apostolic and Protestant church married, the wedding took place in the Apostolic church and it did not lead to expulsion from the community." Some children who took part in the interviews said that one of their parents did not belong to the given religious movement; he/she either belonged to the majority, the AAC, or was an atheist.

MARRIAGE REGISTRATION

The representatives of both religious and ethnic minorities mentioned that the registration of marriage in the Civil Status Acts Registration Agency (CSAR) is compulsory. They mentioned that marriage registration is important from a number of perspectives. One of the Jehovah's Witness children mentioned: "All Jehovah's Witnesses have to register with the CSAR first and then get married. There is such a principle in the Bible that when one turns 18, he/she should register and get married. After registration at the state registry, the pastor delivers a special speech for the newly married couple at a meeting."

Representatives of all communities mentioned that they consider it important to follow the laws. They tried to comply with the law to avoid unnecessary problems.

In different Evangelical Churches and conservative communities the introduction of young men and women to each other within the community is mediated and is often organised through the pastor: "For example, in our community, when a boy likes a girl, he approaches the person responsible and says that he likes the girl and wants to get to know and marry her. The girl in turn tells the person responsible in their group that she likes a boy in our group. Then they ask the girl and if the girl agrees they start to date."

Religious organisations have limitations in terms of remarrying. Children from Jehovah's Witnesses Organisation told us there are very strict limitations in this matter. Remarrying is only allowed in a case where one spouse has committed adultery. Representatives of Evangelical Churches did not raise this issue.

The family is an important institution for all communities.

No cases of marriage on the basis of mutual agreement by parents have been identified by the research group. Only in Gyumri did the AAC-following children mention that they were aware of such cases.

RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE RIGHTS

According to the Constitution (Article 26) and ratified international agreements, everyone in Armenia has the right to freedom of mind, conscience and religion.

The main issue that has been observed in Armenia over recent years is the refusal by Jehovah's Witnesses to serve in the army. Before the adoption of the law on alternative service and subsequent amendments, dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses were put on trial in Armenia. One of the cases reached the European Court where a case law ruling was made¹⁶. Subsequently, Jehovah's Witnesses won a number of court cases against Armenia, and the Government was compelled to make compromises and reforms. No similar issues have arisen with other religious or ethnic communities.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

All registered and non-registered religious organisations in Armenia are free to convene meetings, make ritual actions and engage in worshipping ceremonies at their expense. Some of the religious organisations have their own area or facilities where they organise their ceremonies. During summer months they organise camps in the marzes of Armenia without any obstacle. Some churches even have their own schools and other social institutions.

Ethnic minorities also benefit from the right to freedom of assembly.

Russian Molokans, unlike other ethnic minorities, convene closed meetings where entrance by a representative of another religion or ethnic group is not encouraged. The children mentioned that they are not aware of any case where the meetings were forbidden or impeded. Moreover, Russian Molokans have different branches which they call sects, and these branches can convene their meetings independently in the same rural community and freely engage in their ceremonies.

¹⁶ *Bayatyan v. Armenia* (Application No. 23459/03). See <http://echr.ketse.com/doc/23459.03-en-20110707/view/>

TEXTBOOKS IN THE LANGUAGE OF MINORITIES

Children from ethnic minorities encounter no issue in terms of learning their native language and studying other subjects in the native language. The state publishes the textbooks for the Yezidi community and in the case of Molokans, apart from state sponsorship, significant support is also provided by the Russian Embassy in Armenia. Apart from textbooks, the Russian Embassy and various visiting officials donate equipment and computers to schools as well as providing opportunities for Russian Molokan children to continue higher education in Russia after leaving secondary school.

Russian Molokan children have certain issues with the subjects in the Armenian language, such as the 'History of the Armenian Church', for which no textbooks are available in Russian. In this situation, teachers read the text in Armenian and dictate the brief version in Russian, and the children study based on their notes.

It became clear from conversations with Yezidi children that the knowledge of their own history, religion and literature is much more limited than that of the Armenian history, AAC history and Armenian literature. What is more alarming is that the adults are not concerned about this. There is a shortage of teachers who teach in the Yezidi language, especially among the new generation, and the lessons are delivered mainly by Armenian teachers.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia (Article 27) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to freely express their opinion, to search for, receive and impart information and ideas regardless of the state frontiers, in written or printed form, in the form of a creative task or by any means available of the child's choice.

Given the existence of patriarchal families in Armenia it is difficult to imagine the complete assertion of this right for children: it is often restricted by parents or other members of the family. There are also objective reasons impeding free access to information, such as the lack of children's access to electronic means for obtaining information, despite the significant increase in the accessibility of computers and the Internet over recent years.

Religious and ethnic minorities, as well as the majority, mention television and then the Internet and radio as the main sources of information. In marzes, people have access to certain TV channels only which offer purely official information and this automatically puts them at a significant disadvantage. Minority children note that they treat the information provided by television with certain reservation. Sports programmes (specifically football) in case of boys, and soap operas in case of girls are the most watched programmes.

ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

Most children have cellular phones and can access the Internet through their phone. The majority uses Internet solely for using social networks, but even this has introduced certain changes in their daily life. For language reasons, Russian Molokans mainly visit Russian websites while the Armenian-speaking populations use other networks as well. Specifically, the majority of children in Gyumri, Vanadzor and Yerevan are active users of Facebook.

Some of the children attending the Evangelical Church mentioned that their family members – father or brother – often or completely ban them from using the Internet since the Internet is regarded as a tool that spreads immoral behaviour: “I do not watch television since my father does not allow me to watch anything. He forbids using social networks. It is better to read the Bible instead of visiting

Facebook.” There were children who believed that information makes a person stronger; it arms him or her with knowledge and makes him or her more protected from various anomalies and “enemies”.

Children in rural areas use the Internet solely for using the ‘Odnoklassniki’ social network¹⁷; they do not visit websites translating news, culture or sports. Children residing in urban areas not only visit social websites but also use social networks to disseminate and consume information.

In the Yezidi community there is clearly visible discrimination towards girls in terms of using the Internet and even cellular phones. Boys and men forbid girls to enter social networks, justifying this by the possible negative impact and the stereotype that “girls using the Internet are bad”. Parents encourage such behaviour by boys despite the girls’ desire to become familiar with the Internet resource that is considered modern.

‘SOCIAL SCIENCES’ SCHOOL SUBJECT¹⁸

Information about rights and their comprehension can introduce significant changes in the sphere of protection of the rights of minorities. In this respect, children mention the social sciences subject with enthusiasm: it gives them information about their rights, raises their awareness about laws and regulations, and from this they can start to defend their views and oppose violence.

Children from religious minority groups mentioned that they learnt from the subject that everybody has the right to freely practice his/her religion and no-one can impede them. Due to the comprehension of rights, there was a case when the teacher said disgraceful things about the religious beliefs of religious minorities and the children were able to complain to the headmaster through their parents. The headmaster reprimanded the teacher.

¹⁷ [editor’s note] Russian analogue of Facebook

¹⁸ [editor’s note] The school subject ‘Social studies’ is compulsory in grades 9-12. It addresses issues of rights and responsibilities, the economy, philosophy, ethics and other humanities.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Children from ethnic minorities were self-contained, they were unable or too shy to voice express their thoughts, and their isolation from others could be clearly seen. Religious minority children could clearly express their views and talk about their approaches. Among religious minority children, Jehovah's Witnesses could be distinguished by the fluency and freedom of their speech since, according to them, "One of our missions is to share what we have learnt with others".

Children at a young age do not learn to express their opinions freely at school; this changes significantly over time when they grow up. In the case of ethnic minorities, there are no significant changes in the situation. In one of the schools in Sevan, children relayed their messages to the school management through the student council, which children claim to be an effective tool for asserting the right to freedom of speech and expression.

Children claim that parents in their families consider their opinions especially in matters relating to them, such as the purchase of clothes, attending different out-of-school options and other matters. Most of them are not aware of the family budget and similar issues. One of the children in Yerevan told us how it was he who made the decision about changing schools and going to the 'Ayb' private school. Children not residing in the capital city cannot do the same: here very often the father of the family makes the decisions for everybody else in the family. One of the children describes the patriarchal family model in the following way: "The man has to have certain advantages in the family. Because the man is the family supporter, the woman has to spend more time caring for the child and thinking more about the family atmosphere to create the right environment for the upbringing of her child and for the husband. The husband has to think first of all about earning money and supporting the family."

Children from religious minority groups mentioned that there is a fairly friendly and sociable atmosphere in their community when they can, and in some cases even have to, share in relation to different matters with the pastor, who is not only the spiritual leader but also a friend and a companion to talk to. The positive spiritual atmosphere in the community creates an environment where children, as they say, feel free and freely express themselves.

PARTICIPATION

The life of urban children is much more diverse compared to the daily life of someone who grows up in a rural environment. Yezidi community children told us that they have to go to Talin¹⁹, which they can only reach by taxi, to attend specialised classes (karate, dancing and singing). Yezidi children have Armenian friends with whom they maintain good relations. Of course the number of these friends is limited compared to the number of their Yezidi friends. Molokan children are more isolated and reserved. They pointed out that they do not associate much with their Armenian peers and do not have Armenian friends. Children from the Vanadzor and Sevan Evangelical Churches told us that in their environment Molokan children are not treated with particular tolerance by their peers.

Yerevan and Gyumri children are different from all the other children in terms of involvement in public life: they are involved in voluntary activities and other activist movements.

Religious minority children encounter issues in associating with majority children since the 'non-spiritual' nature of the latter is an impeding factor. They call the AAC followers 'seculars' and "in most cases feel different from secular children because of the latter going on the wrong path". Young Life²⁰ spiritual camps are important for Evangelist children where they are taught Bible commandments and various virtues. The camp also provides an opportunity to invite their friends out of the religious community so they learn more about each other.

Children from religious minority groups usually know that they should not talk about religious topics with others since the differences between their views may lead to a conflict. This is why they try to associate with other youngsters without discussing religious topics. Children representing the Armenian Apostolic majority say the same thing about associating with atheists.

A major gap for children is the lack of cultural life which is caused by insufficient activity or the absence of cultural centres. It is necessary to contribute to the establishment and development of cultural centres in the marzes and villages of Armenia.

¹⁹ [editor's note] One of the regional centres of the Aragatsotn region

²⁰ www.younglife.org/en/Pages/default.aspx

DISCRIMINATION

Children from ethnic minority groups could not recall any cases of discrimination against them. Armenian children mentioned cases of discrimination against ethnic minorities by other children. According to ethnic minority children, they benefit from the same rights in Armenia as other children do.

However, children from religious groups have frequently encountered discriminatory attitudes at school, among neighbours, friends and in other social relations. Discriminatory attitudes are experienced by Jehovah's Witness children to whom various vices and negative behaviours are attributed by the society due to the common stereotypes. Children from Jehovah's Witness organisations mentioned that they have frequently encountered such attitudes which, however, changed over time due to their appropriate and positive behaviour. They also noted that many employers give preference to Jehovah's Witnesses when the job is related to accounting or financial matters because they are confident about their honesty. Some children from Evangelical groups highlighted the same observation.

One of the respondents told us: "This case happened in the first or second grade when we were very young and my classmate learnt that I participated in meetings. When her parents learnt about this they told her not to associate with me. I told her that it had to be her decision. And when we grew up she said she wanted to socialise with me and her parents treated me with more confidence." Similar statements were made by the representatives of different religious groups.

There is a perception that children from religious minority groups think about other children as 'secular' non-believers who lack spiritual qualities, while the Armenian Apostolic majority usually label other religious groups as 'believers' or 'sectarians' and often treat them as aliens. The relation between "us" and "them" is more apparent in the case of more conservative religious minorities, while children from religious organisations with more liberal ideas see no issues in praying and lighting a candle in the AAC church. One of the children attending the Vanadzor Evangelical Church mentions: "They treat us not as Evangelists but as 'believers'. When our neighbours learnt that, they distanced themselves from us. Some people say that if one is a 'believer' you can expect good things from him or her, but there is also the opposite attitude."

Respondents we talked to claimed that when they encountered such a discriminatory attitude they had managed to deal with it through patience and by not responding to hatred with hatred; this required long conversations and positive behaviour.

Unlike the mature representatives and pastors of religious communities who constantly mention the existence of discriminatory attitudes, children rarely mention, recall or are aware of such cases.

CHILD LABOUR

In Armenia child labour is usually distinguished from child exploitation. Children of ethnic minority groups in rural populations usually help their parents in agriculture and household work from an early age. During the harvest, many of the children from the Russian Molokan community do not attend school so that they can help their parents in collecting potatoes or cabbages. Boys help with the use of equipment and tools while girls help with household work. A common practice among Yezidi boys is taking turns to take the cattle to the pasture²¹, while girls help the parents in the care of newborn or younger children; they also do the housework in their husband's house after marriage.

Children from religious minority groups in urban areas do not work until they are adults. Some of them do certain jobs during school holidays, mainly helping relatives or parents, or elsewhere earning small amounts of money to cover their minimal expenses, but the number of such children is small. The same can be said of AAC children, some of whom carried out paid work during holidays to support themselves and help with the family budget.

²¹ In the Armenian villages the farmers make an arrangement whereby every day one of the farmers takes the animals to pastures. The number of days is determined by the number of animals owned by the farmer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its limited scope, the study revealed a number of issues at different levels. Some of them relate to the more general developmental issues and priorities existing in Armenia (poverty, teachers' inappropriate behaviours, corporal punishment, low pay or low-quality teaching), and others relate solely to minorities (Molokans refusing to continue higher education in Armenia, or Jehovah's Witnesses withdrawing from military training classes). The third group of problems relates to the prevailing system of values (manifestations of discrimination; practices of avoiding conflict). Some of these issues are urgent priorities, while others need to be addressed in a systematised way. With this in mind, the recommendations below represent a system. Although they are grouped by target recipient groups, they can be useful for all stakeholders and organisations working for the development of Armenia.

TO THE GOVERNMENT

- Encourage and propose anti-discriminatory legislation in relation to ethnic and religious minorities and make relevant additions to specific laws to prohibit discrimination (this is also recommended to international and non-government organisations, and to the Ombudsman's office)
- Take measures to ensure continuity of education among ethnic minorities and use different means to encourage (mainly through creating jobs) the desire of minorities to receive education
- State agencies and human rights organisations are recommended to raise the level of awareness among children of their rights through implementing comprehensive programmes (this is also recommended to international and non-government organisations)
- Make the 'History of Armenian Church' subject optional and deliver in parallel to this subject an optional subject 'World religions' and/ or 'History of Culture'
- Create a working group which will remove from textbooks provisions identifying religious and ethnic belonging
- Develop, review and/or apply 'rules of ethics' for teachers – supplemented with provisions on tolerance, awareness and protection of children's rights, respecting diversity and other important provisions which should also be considered during the periodic teacher assessment process
- Allocate quotas for minority children in higher educational institutions
- Create an opportunity for Jehovah's Witnesses to withdraw from the subject 'Initial Military Training'
- Develop regulations for the subject 'Initial Military Training' which would regulate the means of delivering the subject to Jehovah's Witnesses and other pacifist groups if they refuse to study the subject; train the subject teachers in this matter
- Take measures to eliminate cases of corporal punishment by teachers in schools
- All recommendations which assume possible forms and arrangements of intervention should be included in the 2013-2016 Strategic Programme for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and other important programmes
- Create a social worker's position in communities. This recommendation is included in the Strategic Programme for the Protection of the Rights of the Child but is still in the process of being implemented, so there is a need to take serious action in this area (this is also recommended to local self-governing bodies)
- Encourage and provide opportunities for ethnic minorities to study and develop their own culture and history, including other forms of culture such as literature, theatre, painting, and media.

TO THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

- Organise workshops and discussions for teachers of Armenian language, literature, Armenian history, History of the Armenian church and social sciences on legal, religious and human rights matters
- Take measures to raise awareness of medical services among minority children and their parents, for example, support the establishment of the family doctors system, translations into minority languages and the dissemination of information on popular healthcare topics or on the prevention of common diseases (this is also recommended to local self-governing bodies)
- When allocating funding, give an advantage to those organisations which would envisage involving religious and ethnic minority children and young people in their activities (mainstreaming religious and ethnic tolerance)
- Implement programmes that contribute to civic activity and the integration of religious and ethnic minorities
- Fill the gap of objective programmes on ethnic and religious minorities through media programmes and films involving minority representatives, as well as develop small social promotional videos representing the situation (this is also recommended to non-government organisations)
- Organise courses for journalists who report about the issues of religious and ethnic minorities (this is also recommended to non-government organisations)
- Encourage the installation of video-recording equipment in kindergartens. This would improve the control of possible cases of violence in kindergartens and reduce their number (this is also recommended to non-government organisations)
- Stimulate and encourage pluralism among children through programmes and courses (this is also recommended to non-government organisations)
- Combine actions aimed at protecting the rights of minority children with programmes of raising the activity and awareness of women in the same communities
- Implement periodic in-depth and quantitative studies on minority issues.

TO BODIES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

- Encourage the creation of organisational bodies in communities (civic consultative groups, civic juries), which would deal with issues children are concerned with: protection of their rights and interests, organising events, maintaining links with other communities and organisations, and so on
- Create student councils to deepen the protection of children's rights and assert the right to freedom of speech
- Encourage the organisation of events that contribute to inter-community communication: community celebrations, harvest festivities, village establishment day, cultural festivals, sports and inter-school competitions, and so on. Avoid organising separate celebrations on a wide public scale, such as rituals of a religious nature.
- Organise, in self-governing bodies and with community councils, courses and activities for developing skills involving a participatory approach in the protection of interests and decision making
- Organise public discussions on the processes of formulating the community budget and expenditure planning, and include priority issues such as the full rehabilitation of community roads, support to socially vulnerable families and large families, and the creation of computer centres
- In the case of ethnic minorities, there could be a special focus on the opportunity to create community funds using diaspora resources.

TO INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS

- Become more active in organising seminars and events in marzes and rural communities, and more frequently, including allocating resources for organising such activities with local efforts
- Involve religious and national minority children in all events and activities
- Encourage the revelation of claims provoking hatred and hostility, protests against them and the processes for the appropriate legal treatment of such claims.

SELECTED CASES

Case 1.

A focus group was organised in Armavir Marz which involved representatives from different religious communities including children from Jehovah's Witness and Pentecostal religious communities. All the children, without exception, mentioned cases of corporal punishment by teachers. One of the Jehovah's Witness children said that they had issues during the 'History of Armenian Church' course when the teacher required that all children should start the class with The Lord's prayer. The teacher made the children representing religious minorities wait outside the classroom while the other children prayed, and only after finishing the prayer did she allow the children back in to participate in the class. The children clearly felt discriminated against. (Armavir, 15 years old, female)

Case 2.

Many children from religious minorities (especially from the Evangelical Church) told us that their parents or elder brothers ban them from using social networks or even the Internet because they consider it to be a source of evil. Instead they advise them to read the Bible. "I don't watch television, since my father does not allow me to watch anything. I am also prohibited from joining social networks. Instead of using Facebook it is better for you to read the Bible." (Vanadzor, 17 years old, female)

Case 3.

In conservative religious communities the children's right to form families based on their own direct choice is limited. In conservative religious communities, introductions to each other within the same community is mediated and organised through the pastor. "For example, in our community, when a boy likes a girl, he approaches the person responsible and says that he likes the girl and wants to get to know and marry her. The girl in turn tells the person responsible in their group that she likes a boy in our group. Then they ask the girl and if the girl agrees, they start to date." (Armavir, 18 years old, female)

Case 4.

One of the children from the Jehovah's Witness organisations told us that the teacher instigated an attitude of hostility and hatred towards the child as a result of which one of the aggressively-disposed boys attacked him and tore his shirt. "During the Armenian language, language origin and translation class the teacher asked me which one is our bible. Since it is not appropriate to talk about that during the class I said that we could talk about it after the class if she wanted. Then

she said that she would dedicate her class to this topic and children started to demonstrate hatred towards me to the extent that one boy attacked me and tore my shirt and said that we don't go to the army. Naturally I did not respond to him at that time. The teacher tried to calm him down but did not say anything serious. I called my parents immediately. After half an hour they came to school and we went to see the headmaster who then beat the boy. The headmaster then reprimanded the teacher and the next day the boy's father came to school and paid for the damage to the shirt. Everything seems to have settled after that. This is a case that happened one week ago." (Yerevan, 15 years old, male)

Case 5.

Another common practice is the disrespectful and contemptuous attitude of teachers towards children and their religious views. Here is what one of the children told us. "When the teacher entered the classroom for the first time she asked whether there is anybody of a different religion. We stood up and said that we are Jehovah's Witnesses. Then she insulted us, said that we go and pray with old dull people. We did not say anything. On the next day I asked whether it would be ok if we did not pray and she told us to pray but not make the sign of the cross. I did not pray and did not make the sign of the cross. The teacher told me to learn Our Father. I learned from the Bible but she said ours is in old Armenian and yours is in secular Armenian. She said: 'Learn ours'." (Armavir, 15 years old, female)

Case 6.

There is a certain biased attitude among children towards Islam followers, which is manifested in the attitudes towards Iranians and Turks. "There is an Iranian girl in our school who is under pressure from boys in our group; they even hit her. But when they ask her why she allows this she says: he is my brother, what can I do? She is obedient to the situation." (Yerevan, 17 years old, female)

The legislation on religious freedom, and the situation of religious minority groups in Armenia have been the subject of attention and recommendations of the Council of Europe Venice Commission, and European Commission against Intolerance and Discrimination. At the same time, the protection of children's rights is one of the priority topics identified by the Council of Europe and the Armenian authorities in the Council of Europe Action Plan for Armenia.

Therefore, the Council of Europe, with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Georgia and Armenia, initiated a project focusing on the rights of children and youth belonging to religious minority groups. The project was set up to combat intolerance towards religious minorities, including its online dimension; a better understanding of the problems faced by children and youth from those groups was essential.

A research group conducted interviews and youth meetings with children from various religious and ethnic communities of Armenia and their community leaders throughout the summer of 2013. The study addresses a number of educational and social issues, specifically access to education for ethnic and religious minority children, issues related to healthcare, and experiences of discrimination in classroom settings.

The study provides a number of recommendations to the Government of Armenia, the Council of Europe, international organisations and to local NGOs.



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With the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Armenia

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It includes 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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