

PLENARY REMARKS BY
SJSU PRESIDENT DR. MARY A. PAPA ZIAN

CONFERENCE ON THE EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS AND
WOMEN IN ARMENIA

THE AMERICA UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA
YEREVAN, ARMENIA

APRIL 21, 2017

Indz hamar mets pativ e linel aystegh!

Good morning!

As a fourth-generation Armenian-American woman and American university leader, it is a tremendous honor to have been invited to open this vitally important conference.

And it *is* important. Empowering the girls and women of Armenia is a critical step in building a stable, sustainable future for this young Republic, its people, and the region.

I offer my special thanks to President Armen Der Kiureghian and Provost Randall Rhodes for their strong support of this conference and the establishment here at AUA of a Center for Women's Empowerment. Such an initiative could not move forward without strong support from the University's leadership.

I also want to congratulate Dr. Shakeh Kaftarian, who has been working as a Fulbright Scholar at AUA throughout this academic year. Dr. Kaftarian conceived of this conference and has been a driving force behind its coming to fruition today as well as behind the establishment of a Center for Women's Empowerment here at AUA, the first such center at an Armenian university. With the support of an outstanding staff, you have brought together scholars and supporters from Armenia and throughout the world to address this critical issue. We are all grateful!

And finally, I am pleased to be sharing the plenary duties for this conference with Veronika Zonabed, whose philanthropic work to advance the people of Armenia through education, opportunity, and economic development is worthy of our appreciation and thanks.

Before getting into the subject matter that will occupy us over the next two days, let me say that being in Armenia, and staying through the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide on April 24th, has a special meaning for me. I made my first trip to Yerevan in 1974 and have been returning regularly ever since. But I have never been here on April 24th to commemorate in our homeland our shared tragedy.

As I indicated at the outset, I am a fourth-generation Armenian-American. Thanks to a close-knit, deeply committed and culturally engaged family, I have since early childhood understood, embraced and celebrated my Armenian heritage.

Even though my maternal grandfather's family was one of the first ten Armenian families in Los Angeles, we have remained close to the community. I remember as a young child carrying a candle with a Genocide survivor as we broke ground fifty years ago for the first Armenian Genocide Memorial on public soil in America, the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Montebello, CA. And I am a proud graduate of the first Armenian day school in America, Holy Martyrs Ferrahian Armenian High School in Encino, CA.

These experiences led me to an early understanding of the Genocide and its devastating impacts. As I matured, I increasingly became cognizant of its existential threat to our existence and of our collective responsibility to ensure that our community remained strong and prospered. It is our promise to our survivors—now Saints—many of whom were women and children, that motivates our work today.

Having been blessed with opportunities both professionally and personally, I, along with my husband, Dr. Dennis Papazian, and our family, have been committed to supporting our fledgling Republic and our many communities throughout the Armenian diaspora.

Dennis and I have joined many others in helping to establish monuments and memorials, churches, Armenian studies programs, educational and cultural institutions, and events such as this conference.

It therefore was an easy decision to join you this week. This university, established at the time of independence, is an

essential educational, social and cultural asset for the Republic of Armenia and its surrounding region. It has the power—through teaching, research and service—to be an agent of profound social, educational, and cultural change.

This conference, therefore, is a critical step in unleashing opportunities for the women and girls of Armenia. It is an investment in this nation's future.

Here's why: As educators, we shape minds. We cultivate personal character. We ensure the talent needed to sustain a durable, thriving economy.

It is no secret to you that Armenia's path to stability is complicated by past and present geopolitical issues; by its complex history; and by many other variables.

This is a nation of three million men **and women**. It cannot afford to squander half of its intellectual and economic capacity.

Why not harness every mind, and every heart, in striving to build a better Armenia? A stronger Armenia?

That is why you are hosting this conference. That is why we all are here.

And before getting to work, it is important to remember that you are not alone.

Women the world over confront sexism and gender discrimination.

Women in positions of influence—including this Armenian-American university president—must stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you in seeking solutions.

We do. And I do.

Gender discrimination is not only a regional problem or an Armenian problem. It remains a deeply pervasive challenge in the West, including the United States.

I thought it might be informative if we examined briefly conditions in my corner of the world.

The Pew Research Center last year analyzed generational wage gaps in the U.S. labor market. Gender was one of the variables studied.

I'll start with a small bit of encouraging news: The wage gap for all women in the U.S. labor force is shrinking—slowly.

Because the U.S. is a diverse country, progress is uneven across different demographic groups. Indeed, data shows that in the U.S. progress is being realized somewhat more quickly for White and Asian women than for African-Americans or Hispanics—but the gap is narrowing.

But here is the *discouraging* news: in 2015, according to Pew, women in the U.S. labor force still earned materially less than men for comparable work.

A white woman earned 82 cents for every dollar paid to a white man.

For the same work for which an Asian man was paid a dollar, an Asian woman earned 87 cents.

Black women were paid 65 cents; Hispanic women earned 58 cents.

This makes no sense, and it is not conducive to strong communities and strong economic growth.

Gender alone does not account for these pay differentials. Researchers also believe the gaps are influenced by variations in education level; by one's career choices; by opportunities available to men versus women; and by degrees of workforce experience.

And these factors are among those that you will examine and discuss over the next two days.

But researchers also acknowledge that the wage gap, to an extent, is simply discriminatory.

According to Pew:

- One in four women said their gender alone has made it harder to succeed in life, compared to one in *fourteen* men.
- Men were far likelier than women to say that their gender made it easier to succeed.

- And, women were twice as likely as men to say they faced workplace discrimination based solely on their gender.

Meanwhile, the Institute for Women's Policy Research reported earlier this year that even though women comprise half of the U.S. college-educated workforce, the gender pay gap hasn't budged in more than a decade.

Based on current trend lines, women in America would achieve true pay equity in ... the year **2059**.

If this holds true, I'm unlikely to live long enough to see or celebrate it. My daughters probably *will* live long enough, but they will have spent most of their adulthoods fighting the same biases their mother encountered.

It's safe to say that *few of us* will be around to celebrate.

Why should this matter?

For one thing, the global impact of gender inequity is staggering. According to a McKinsey Global Institute study, true equity could add between 11 and 26 percent to global GDP by 2025. That equates to as much as a \$28 trillion dollar boost to the global economy.

For another thing, it is well-established that role-models meaningfully influence career choices among youth. Shouldn't we want to see young girls—*and boys*—understand that their

mothers, sisters and aunts are every bit as capable as their fathers, brothers and uncles?

I think so.

I was blessed to be born into a family that valued education. My mother was a wonderful role model—a career educator and deeply beloved teacher at an Armenian school in the Southern California community where I grew up.

I followed my parents to a prestigious American university, UCLA. After completing my studies there, I pursued what has been a highly fulfilling, deeply rewarding academic career that has led me to interesting assignments at several prestigious American colleges and universities.

Thanks to persistence and skill, I was afforded opportunities to ascend the academic leadership ladder, from dean to Provost, and subsequently to presidencies of two urban public universities.

But I, too, have faced gender discrimination and bias as I have ascended to more and more responsible positions in higher education. And so have many of my colleagues. And so I have been committed to creating a pipeline of women who will be skilled and ready to take on leadership roles in higher education as those of us presently in these positions move one by one toward retirement.

Given what I have been able to achieve, it may be hard to see me as a victim of gender discrimination.

I understand this. And in any case, I choose *not* to think of myself as a “victim.” But I know—and you know—that women in Armenia, in the U.S. and around the world have faced, and still face, many forms of bias and discrimination. I am pragmatic enough to realize that these challenges will not be solved quickly. And so I also think it is important to help women understand what these look like, recognize them, and have strategies to negotiate around them.

And as an Armenian-American woman leading one of America’s most diverse comprehensive universities—and the only public university in the Silicon Valley—I am afforded a unique vantage point.

From this perch, I see remarkably motivated, talented students from all walks of life.

San Jose State it is a university of uncommon *opportunity*—first-generation students make up close to half of each new entering class.

We know that four-year degrees are transformative for the students who earn them, as well as for future generations.

And we are transforming lives. San Jose State recently was ranked among America’s top ten universities for fueling upward economic and social mobility. I am immensely proud of this.

Most of our 35,000 students receive financial aid—public, private, or both. Many work part-time to minimize debt, even though it lengthens their time to a degree.

Our students are fiercely determined to succeed. And to many of them, success means landing a good job in Silicon Valley.

Every year, thousands of our graduates enter the workforce as engineers, nurses, teachers, artists, public servants, business and community leaders, together fueling the global epicenter of innovation.

You've heard of Apple? They make *these*. (Hold up iPhone.)

What university do you think supplies the most graduates to Apple's workforce?

UC Berkeley? Stanford? That would make sense; both schools are prestigious; both virtually are in Apple's backyard.

Actually, *San Jose State* is Apple's top supplier of talent.

And we are a top source of talent to hundreds of other companies not only across the technology spectrum, but also in the arts, entertainment, healthcare, and business.

We also are the top source of teachers in our region's public schools.

Every student and every graduate has an inspiring story. I wish I could introduce you to some of them.

Come to San Jose, and I will!

But these success stories also are right here, in Armenia, which as you well know has *its own* emerging technology and innovation culture.

There are valuable opportunities to leverage and lessons to learn from Silicon Valley. And our work must extend beyond Yerevan to the cities, towns, and villages throughout rural Armenia.

There also are cautionary tales.

A 2014 *Fortune* article reported on the lack of gender equity in the senior ranks of Silicon Valley companies.

At the time, more than 40 percent of the valley's largest tech companies had no female board members.

Tesla, the luxury electric car manufacturer, had no women serving in any of its 17 top leadership positions.

In fact, close to *half* of the top tech companies in Silicon Valley lacked even a single female senior executive.

And although there are as many college-educated women in the workforce as men, most companies employed significantly fewer females at all levels.

The *Fortune* article did identify some exceptions. Yahoo, for example, had a larger-than-average distribution of women throughout its employment ranks.

So did eBay.

These companies shared something *else* in common: they were among the few being led by female chief executives.

What we see in the leadership ranks in industry, we also see in the academy.

The *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings last August published its annual world rankings.

Of the top 200 universities, just 17 percent were led by women. And that represented improvement; the year before, only 14 percent had female leaders.

So that's something to applaud. I guess.

I served as the president of Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, CT, for more than four years before departing last summer to assume my current position.

San Jose State is the founding campus of the 23-campus California State University, which is the world's largest comprehensive public university system, with more than 450,000 active students.

I was one of five new campus presidents to join the CSU in 2016.

All five of the most recent hires were women. And, as of today, 11 of our 23 campus presidents are women.

That is a positive trend line. It is a point of considerable pride.

And it affirms that progress, even in a deeply entrenched culture, is possible.

But meaningful change can only occur if one understands, objectively, what *needs* to change. And that is why we all are here for the next two days.

So, let us now turn from America to Armenia.

First, how are women in this nation faring relative to women around the world?

The World Economic Forum annually publishes a *Global Gender Gap Index*, seeking to understand how evenly resources and opportunities are allocated to men and women.

The index ranks nations solely on how equitably—or inequitably—educational, economic and political opportunities are available to men and women.

Health disparities based on gender also are examined.

A total of 144 countries are studied. Last year, Armenia ranked 102nd overall, just behind Hungary. The U.S. ranked 45th.

Within the overall data are some interesting and potentially relevant insights.

Armenia fared rather well compared to most nations for educational opportunity; according to the study, more females than males were enrolled in the country's primary, secondary and tertiary schools.

On the other hand, women were *less* well represented in the labor force—especially in the management ranks—and on average were being paid *far* less than men for similar work.

That, as I've already said, is a global trend, and it has real consequences in the lives of women, children, families, communities, and the country at large.

Perhaps most discouraging of all, Armenia ranked near the bottom—125th—for female political empowerment. That low ranking was based largely on the very low numbers of women serving in elected or appointed government positions.

This, *despite* legislation enacted a decade ago calling for more female political representation. Which, sadly, reminds us that words alone neither fuel nor assure change.

Again, you are not alone. Just 83 women serve in America's House of Representatives—comprising just 19 percent of the

435 members. Our upper chamber, the Senate, has 21 female Senators out of 100. That is an all-time high.

We know that conditions in Armenia are a function of complex geopolitical, economic, cultural, social, and religious factors, many of which will be addressed in the next two days of this conference. It would be naive to expect rapid progress to come overnight.

Many of you are familiar with the Armenian ritual called the “*agra hadig*,” or “*atam hatik*.”

As described in a recent *New York Times* article, the ritual involves placing within reach of baby boys and girls various objects representing different professions.

They might include a microphone for entertainment; a stethoscope for medicine; scissors for a tailor; money for banking; a book for writing.

So the theory goes, the object selected by the infant is a clue to her or his professional aptitude.

Yerevan State University cultural studies professor Yulia Antonyan told the *Times* that at one ceremony, the father of a baby girl asked that a ladle be placed beyond her reach, sparing her a destiny as a housewife, or at least giving her the choice to chart her own future.

So, I ask you: what—beyond relying on cultural rituals—might be done to help chart a path forward for all of Armenia’s women

and girls? And I say all, because the prospects of women and girls in Armenia's rural areas are more challenging even than those of women and girls here in Yerevan.

Let me offer a few thoughts.

First, the fight for equity must be multi-dimensional and must include both women **and** men.

I am impressed by the breadth and depth of the conference program, which will explore the role of women in families, professions, public service, the arts, the law, the classroom, the media.

You will hear from an impressive array of presenters bringing rich personal perspectives to the conversation. Listen to them. Question them. Learn from them.

Second, this fight must be multi-generational. In America, we cannot wait for women to arrive at universities to introduce them to opportunities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)—by then, it is far too late.

We are pushing science and math curricula down to grade schools. We are bringing science, technology, engineering and mathematics competitions to middle schools, where both boys and girls participate. So must you.

Third, this fight must be global. I bring perspective from America, where just fifty years ago, an executive order from

President Lyndon Johnson outlawed discrimination based on gender.

There is rich experience and context for Armenia to glean from other cultures, other societies. Your learning curve may be steeper; but your progress can be swifter. Learn from others' experience.

The astounding young Pakistani resister, Malala Yousafzai, co-winner of the 2014 Noble Peace Prize, visited San Jose State the year before I arrived. I leave you with her words.

“I raise up my voice,” Malala said, “not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

That, my friends, is a worthy mission statement that gives hope to girls and women throughout the world.

I am grateful for the opportunity to be with you, and I am honored to support you in this important work. Armenia's girls and women are talented and innovative. They are determined to be leaders in building our homeland in all professions. It is our responsibility—indeed our obligation—to do all we can to ensure that they have voice, opportunity, and success.

They will make us proud and ensure that our people—and our homeland—continues to thrive in the years and decades ahead.

Thank you.