Equal Power – Lasting Peace

Armenia and Azerbaijan.
Stuck in conflict over
Nagorno-Karabakh.

Kvinna till Kvinna

Equal Power – Lasting Peace
Obstacles for women's participation
in peace processes

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introduction

How are transitions made from war to peace? Who has the power to build peace? Who decides what peace should entail? Peace matters to everyone living in conflict regions, so who decides the content of that peace?

Equal Power – Lasting Peace is a study about women's participation in peace processes and the particular challenges of building a gender equal peace after a violent conflict. *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* explores obstacles to women's participation in peace and democracy processes, in regions affected by armed conflict. The report addresses the gaps between words and practice in peace building by gathering experience and knowledge from 79 female peace workers in five different contexts: Armenia/Azerbaijan/Nagorno Karabakh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, DR Congo, Iraq and Liberia. They have a wealth of concrete experience of how exclusion manifests in practice and how windows of opportunity may open. The aim of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace* is to investigate the intimate connection between gender, power and peace and in addition contribute to a better understanding of the power gaps that prevent women from participating in peace processes.

Summaries of the five conflicts/post-conflicts have been produced, based on the study *Equal Power – Lasting Peace.* This brochure addresses the topic "Armenia and Azerbaijan. Stuck in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh."

For the complete study of *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*, please visit www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org

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3.1

Population of Armenia in millions
(The state of world population 2011, UNPFA)

9.3

Population of Azerbaijan in millions
(The state of world population 2011, UNPFA)

Armenian Apostolic

Main religion in Armenia
(www.infoplease.com)

Islam

Main religion in Azerbaijan
(www.infoplease.com)

99.6%

Literacy rate in Armenia
(Ages 15 and above, 2009 UNESCO)

99.8%

Literacy rate in Azerbaijan
(Ages 15 and above, 2009 UNESCO)

29

Maternity mortality
per 100.000 live births in Armenia

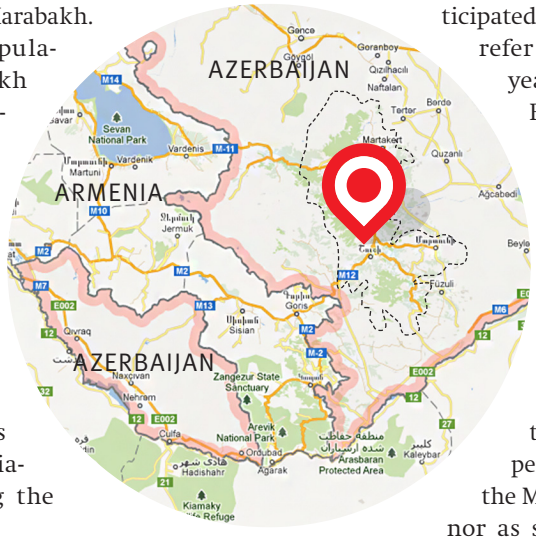
38

Maternity mortality
per 100.000 live births in Azerbaijan

In Armenia women are granted equal rights under the law, but the implementation of the law is poor and the mechanisms for monitoring are very limited.

Armenia and Azerbaijan. Stuck in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh is still a subject of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia with territorial integrity and self-determination of the region at the heart of the dispute. When Azerbaijan was internationally recognized in 1991, the borders also included the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the Armenian population living in Nagorno-Karabakh claimed the right to self-determination, and declared themselves independent.

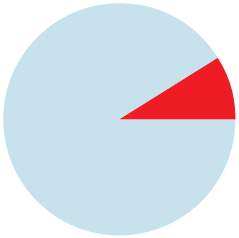


The disputed region is internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, and no state (including Armenia) has recognized its declaration of independence. The conflict is officially considered "frozen" [1], however sporadic gunfire is still heard along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and along the "line-of-contact".[2]

The actual war over the region started in 1988. Following the ceasefire in 1994, an internationally mediated peace process known as the Minsk Group was established with three co-chairs: the United States, Russia and France. Today, the negotiations take place only at the top level with talks between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, followed by meetings at which the Minsters for Foreign Affairs and representatives of the Minsk Group are informed about developments.[3] During the war and in the years just after it, some women contributed to and participated in peace negotiations. Women refer to this period as 'the golden years for women's participation'. Female parliamentarians from both sides participated in peace negotiations. Also, a de facto woman Foreign Minister was appointed in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1995. She regularly met with women's groups, and brought the information they provided to the negotiation table.[4] However, throughout the peace negotiation period, no women were included in the Minsk Group, neither as co-chairs nor as special representatives of the OSCE's Chairman-in-Office on the conflict.[5]

Even though the war over Nagorno-Karabakh was happening at the same time as the Bosnian war, unlike the latter, women were not victims of systematic sexual violence. According to local women's organisations, rapes of

Much thanks to persistent lobbying from women's groups a law on domestic violence was adopted in Azerbaijan in 2010. **However, domestic violence is still a widespread problem in the region.**



9%

Share of women in parliament in Armenia.

women did not happen often, however local aid workers sometimes demanded sex in exchange for food (packages). Nevertheless, women's organisations reported that the level of domestic violence as a direct consequence of war is likely to have risen, but no official statistics are available to confirm this trend. Today however, domestic violence as a consequence of post-traumatic stress caused by the war persists and is sometimes even excused by the victims themselves.

Experiences of power and participation

The findings presented here are a result from field research conducted in Armenia and Azerbaijan in November and December 2011. Eight women from Yerevan and ten from Baku representing key women's organisations from the region were interviewed. Individual interviews were also held with key representatives from the civil society, as well as a with a few key actors at national and international formal levels.

Closed doors. Lack of legitimacy for peace negotiations.

"In the 1990s, women were participating openly in the peace negotiations. Today, women do not even get close to the process. The (representatives of the) Minsk Group meets only with high-level governmental officials. It is a very dangerous way of running a process in this region where the presidents are not very legitimate."

Lack of gender awareness in the ongoing peace negotiations and its effect on the outcome of the process was the central theme for the focus group discussions in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Women in this region were very active during the movement for independence in the late 1980s and during the war in the beginning of the 1990s. At the end of the war, women were regarded as more qualified to solve practical matters, and this is how the participants explained women's increased influence in peace negotiations in the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, the strong feeling of national identity made it less important "if a man or a woman said something".

However, the participants reported that as the time went by, the peace negotiations had increasingly become exclusive to men.

"Little by little there was a process when they (the Minsk Group) alienated themselves from civil society. When they do have meetings, they still choose to meet with official structures, instead of inviting women's groups, or other civil society actors, and sit and talk to them."

During the period referred to as the "golden years" for women's participation, the exchange between the civil society and formal actors in the peace process was excellent. Women had a strong position in the civil society and often met with representatives from the Minsk Group. However, as the region saw growing polarization and change to increasingly authoritarian regimes towards the end of the 1990s, NGOs were less and less included in the negotiation process. Furthermore, the governments in the region began founding their own NGOs, the so-called 'GONGOs'. Both focus groups considered GONGOs a significant problem that contributed to the division of the sector itself.[6] Unlike ordinary NGOs, GONGOs enjoy official protection and are invited to meetings with authorities and visiting international officials. GONGOs also compete with traditional NGOs in attracting funding from international donors. According to the informants, women are more prevalent in NGOs. Also the scope of their activities differs:

"If you have a look at all the statutes of the NGOs, they all actually have provisions for protection of human rights. In our society, this is kind of an opposition to the existing government. GONGOs are not involved in peace making activities at all. Unfortunately NGOs are currently in the shadow of the GONGOs."

While the conditions for the civil society organisations were getting worse, peace negotiations also saw a change in format. The interviewees described the Minsk Group structure as an elitist men's club: at present, the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia meet for talks, and then they meet with the Minsk Group co-chairs[7]. In addition, the co-chairs visit Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents for individual talks.

Even though the Minsk Group is not obliged to consult the civil society organisations about the peace process, the informants believed that the Minsk Group limited its scope of action because of political considerations. The

Armenia and Azerbaijan are both **source countries for trafficking,** with girls ending up mainly in Turkey or the United Arab Emirates.[82]

Armenia: A new Electoral Code was adopted in June 2011, with provisions for some of the most progressive quotas in the region. The Code stipulates that **20 percent** on a party list must be women, and that at least every tenth position in the list must be reserved for a woman.

informants stressed that the Minsk Group should instead try to expand and anchor the process.

A number of Armenian and Azerbaijani organisations were invited to meet the co-chairs[8] in Vienna in 2009, and even though NGOs appreciated the invitation, the meeting was considered to be too ad hoc to make any real difference.

"This meeting was arranged on request from civil society. We wanted to get to know what the Minsk Group was doing. The meeting was good and we got a lot of information. Unfortunately, this was the first and (so far) the only meeting. This was 18 months ago. After that meeting several co-chairs have been replaced."

The interviewees thought that the CSOs from the region should regularly meet with the Minsk Group. In avoiding consulting the civil society in general and women in particular, they thought that the Group was missing out on an option that would be 'quite effective when it comes to calming down the opposite sides'.

Women claiming space

With the current exclusive focus of the peace negotiations on territorial borders and the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, interviewees thought that very little attention was being dedicated to the human dimension of the conflict. Women therefore saw it as their task to raise questions about the situation of refugees and/or IDPs, women's rights, etc. Finding channels for communicating these issues and getting them integrated into the official peace process was one of their top priorities. In this, they thought, the international organisations could play a crucial role and act as mediators who could help connect the civil society with the formal peace negotiations.

"We rely on support from international organisations, because they are able to make arrangements for such meetings to happen. If the government doesn't do anything, they can do it! Then, if international organisations are able to arrange those meetings on a regular basis, then tomorrow hopefully the Minsk Group will request from the government to arrange such meetings."

The interviewees thought that in order to achieve an inclusive peace process with a gender-just peace, the international community must do more. Women saw a rather limited understanding among the international actors about how women's rights and empowerment can contribute to a peaceful conflict resolution. Armenian participants described how the international donors generously supported specific peace building activities, but limited funds to tackle underlying causes of women's exclusion.

"Donors expect us to start talking about peace building, but we can't do that if we do not talk about gender issues first. These women first need to know about women's rights and what civil society is."

In contrast to Armenia, Azerbaijani participants explained how international actors avoided supporting explicit peace-making activities, because they wanted to avoid annoying the Azerbaijani government.

"In chasing instant and tangible results, donors prefer to support short-term projects, focusing more on selling and colourful reports. Although we all know that peacemaking — it's a long process consisting of daily work with the public. Such projects might not be as easy to measure, because they aim at changing people's minds, to get rid of the harmful image of the enemy."

The women described the existence of 'artificial' gender awareness. National institutions adopted certain gender equality measures only to please international organisations. At the same time, many informants thought that the local branches of international institutions were not sincerely engaged in gender issues.

Instead of waiting to be invited, some of the organisations took the own initiative to create their own spaces for exchange with formal actors. For example, an Armenian organisation trained women in human rights, refugee issues and conflict theory — so that the women would have a good knowledge base when they met with national politicians and representatives from the international community. When they finally got the chance to meet political officers from the Minsk Group's three co-chair countries (the United States, Russia and France) they got their message through.

"These were rural women, who know what would happen if the war starts, they know the suffering. We talked about why women are not let in to the process; of the

fear of foreign troops coming. Would they have a code of conduct? We also discussed the return of refugees... The officials understood that the decisions taken up on high level are not tailored for women's needs. They were amazed and said that these women raise questions that have not been discussed on higher levels. One embassy representative said: I could never imagine that women had so much to contribute!"

The meeting was about making the official representatives see and hear that there were 'women ready to participate in peace negotiations'. The next step in the process will be arranging a meeting between these women and the co-chairs of the Minsk Group.

Women from both focus groups also spoke about their joint initiative: The Network for Caucasian Women; Peace starts at home. Meant to create a parallel to the official peace process, The Network united women from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia[9], who were trained in women's rights, UNSCR 1325, and have been given the opportunity to discuss what the peace process means to them and how women in general could participate.

"We have divided into groups, and one of the groups will be working on contacts with the Minsk Group. We raise the issue — if the conflict would be solved, where are women? Once the peace agreement is signed, are there any programs for reconstruction, where are women in this reconstruction? No one has thought about it. We want to lay the ground for a gender-just peace."

However, most of the organisations' activities are instead focused on tackling the underlying obstacles to women's participation.

"It is very important to achieve economic independence for women — it can certainly contribute to higher involvement of women in the society and in the peace process — that is what we try to promote. We also educate our female population on the issues of democracy and participation. Only with an increased involvement of women in these areas will we achieve peace in the end."

Political participation – The (dirty) culture of politics.

"Women can't play that game. It is impossible. Many national assembly deputies are corrupt and come from a criminal background, to sit with them and explain the role of women is not easy… These men can listen, but in their political agenda they do not accept women at all. They think that politics is a men's issue, it is about money and corruption, they can go with a gun to somebody's house, they can shoot — it is power. Like my friend, she's a former deputy; they came to her house with guns. To be in the parliament with such people it is extremely tough. It's getting more and more dangerous."

This is how an Armenian participant describes difficulties that women who work in formal political institutions are faced with. Their stories give a picture of deeply corrupt and at times violent political systems in the region. Even though both women and men are affected by such systems, it is obvious that their effect on women and women's participation is much more significant. With the total of nine percent of women in the parliament, Armenia joins Ukraine and Georgia at the bottom of the list in terms of women's representation in national parliaments in Europe.

The informants from Azerbaijan, the country that currently has 16 percent women in the national parliament, spoke about a political system that feels more and more authoritarian — people are selected rather than elected to their positions. This naturally means that women, who traditionally have less money and contacts, have almost no chance to advance in politics, and when they do, they hardly get any media coverage and have no influence. They are "accepted" into the system only if they stand on the "right" side, refrain from challenging the power hierarchy and keep to issues typically considered to be women's domains such as culture and health care.

"We have one active woman MP, who is at least talking about women's issues and stands on our side. She's very competent and was lucky to have contacts. She has a non-confrontational stance, and doesn't pose any threat to the government. She never touches upon sensitive issues. She tries to work with what is acceptable."

Women engaged in opposition politics face another reality, and risk being discredited. As Azerbaijani interviewees reported, a woman's participation in politics depends on the influence that her family has in the society: if her family is influential, she will succeed, but her male relatives will want to use her acquired position. "If she is an independent candidate from a simpler background, she will definitely be accused of something bad," the women reported. All this points to the fact that there is no "independent civil society, no independent political atmosphere, everything is controlled," as the women put it.

Today, thanks to international commitments and effective lobbying by local women's organisations, women occupy 20 out of 125 seats in the Azerbaijani parliament. Women's organisations successfully used UNSCR 1325 as a tool in campaigns on both national and local levels: "We talked to women about the problems they have, what they were concerned about and the problems with not living in a democratic society."

However, although there are more women in politics, this, as both groups reported, does not necessarily mean that women politicians put women's issues on top of their political agenda: "None of them are connected to women's movement. They do not even understand that they should (be connected). They are representing a political party and do whatever they are told to." On the other hand, as participants pointed out, women's organisations have not done enough to avoid creating the current political system where women are used as "window-dressing" tools filling the quota, instead as champions of gender equality: "Women's organisations

should be proactive, they should call these women, invite them in, make them work for them, and monitor what has been done. You elected them, why don't you demand accountability from them?"

Thinking that the party system is a legacy from the Soviet Union, none of the women from the Armenian focus group ever held a political position: "Women do not want to be in a centralised system of power. They get involved in the NGO sector because they want to be independent". But in a personal interview, another activist accounted for her experiences of being a deputy mayor, and being the only woman among 13 city council members: "It was a men's club… I was sometimes put into a hard situation, but not because I was a woman, but because people wanted that position". The informant stated that she did not feel discriminated against as a woman, but the rest of her story points to hidden forms of power sometimes used to maintain or manifest a distorted balance of power.

"Of course it was very hard for me among 13 men. Even in certain discussions and jokes, everybody would weigh what they were saying when I was around. Sometimes decisions were made separately. You had to ask over and over again. There were situations when I did not vote. (But I did not feel it was because I was a woman). As a woman you have to be much more prepared in order to get respect. If you would make a mistake as a woman it would be like 'what is she saying?' it is not like that for men."

Financial independence is also one of the issues that both groups discussed as being crucial for a woman deciding to enter politics. Both Armenian and Azerbaijani laws support the principle of women's financial independence whereby women and men have the same right to property. In practice however, very few women own property because they earn significantly less than men[10], and many women are not employed at all. With less income and less influential contacts, women stand very little chance of actually advancing to political positions with leverage: election campaigns are becoming increasingly expensive and women can hardly ever cover those costs. The informants also pointed to the 'commercialisation' of the political system. One Armenian women's organisation that previously ran a project to get women elected as mayors described their experience: "We were extremely successful. Every village gave us three or four names, we trained them and managed to get 15 women elected to local assemblies. But that was in 2000, now we can't even dream about it, because these positions are now worth money".

Hindrance and opportunity in gender roles. The paradox of 'being a woman'.

"There's a risk that you end up being alone. A risk that few people want to take. I can't help thinking of how people perceive me, as a feminist and a founder of a women's organisation. It is a part of the devaluation, pointing out that you are not married because you are working on issues that men do not like. It is like a punishment system. You always have to be self-confident. It is very energy-consuming. Once in a while I collapse. Because I'm constantly monitoring myself. After ten years in the field — maybe it is some kind of a burnout. Who is going to protect me? No one."

Being a woman activist in the South Caucasus region is very risky. This is particularly true for women working with sensitive issues such as peace building and sexual and reproductive rights. Most of the interviewees experienced both open and overt discrimination and harassment because of the work they do. In addition, because of the prejudice and negative attitudes that they face, many women become mentally worn out because they have to defend themselves and the work they do.

One Azerbaijani organisation, however, endeavoured to resist the gender-related control mechanisms characteristic for the entire region. This organisation offers courses in sexual and reproductive health for young women, and fathers of the girls often come to their premises to check what their daughters are doing there. Young women are trained to become trainers and use their acquired knowledge to empower other young women. Some of them leave the organisations for practical reasons, others for family reasons, such as engagements when the fiancés (or their families) do not approve of their activism.

Women also reported facing different kinds of challenges depending on the kind of work that they do. Organisations working with social issues and women's participation seemed to be less troubled by social control and harassment. The informants from such organisations reported more acceptance in the community at large. They also expressed different views on how to utilise the 'biological identification' in their activism and in the women's movement in general. Having an innate capacity (as mothers) to resolve conflicts and being less corrupt 'by nature', as the informants put it, women are better equipped to be a part of any peace process.

"Women are more responsible than men. They are, by nature, better at building, in general, rather than destroying, as men are. Women are more of pacifists."

Some other informants thought that, because women working in NGOs are active on the community level, they also have a better picture of what the community needs. Although men are generally considered to be heads of families, it is indeed women who manage family affairs. This function gives the women a great opportunity to influence their male family members. As one informant put it: If a woman does not want war she can certainly persuade her husband and her son to be against the war.

So far, women's organisations have successfully used this picture of a woman as a peaceful mother figure to their advantage. It has been easier to argue for women's participation from this standpoint rather than from the human rights based perspective. When women took the

leading role during the war and in the years after it, the traditional role of women as caretakers engaged in humanitarian aid was combined with a more prominent role of them as mediators. An Azerbaijani informant underlined some specific experiences of women, which emphasised this connection with conflict mediation:

"In the context of our conflict, women are actually regarded as catalysts, because women are primarily involved in teaching, in schools they are surrounded by large audiences that they communicate with."

Today however, the traditional division of virtues between men and women has partly turned into a trap. Although women's organisations can utilise the picture of women being suitable for issues concerning family, culture and health in order to gain influence, this argument could also be used to prevent women from entering domains such as security and foreign policy that are traditionally reserved for men. This is also confirmed through the current ministerial division in the two countries: in Armenia, there is only one female minister, the Minister for Culture, and in Azerbaijan, all ministers are men.[11]

Whichever road Armenian and Azerbaijani women choose to take, they are expected to be impeccable, and must come from a 'good background' to be taken seriously. 'Common' women are not listened to. Such societal standards, where women's morals are judged, put women in a vulnerable position. The informants described this fact as catch-22: If they want to have influence in the peace process (and in the society in general), they have to get into politics and risk having their morals questioned; at the same time, they risk being discredited as individuals because they participate in politics and are thereby negatively judged by the society (due to the decline of legitimacy in politics). As a consequence, most women keep out of politics or become involved only at the local level. In both groups, the informants agreed that the prevailing macho-culture is a serious problem for development in the region. An Azerbaijani informant shared her view on the contradictory development in her country:

"On the surface, we are very democratic and liberal. If you look at the surface there is development. But it is all superficial. It is true that the government does not push that women should be veiled or something. Our problem is related to cultural things, that we live in a macho culture. (There) are all these stereotype things that people (both women and men) still do not want to get rid of."

Analysis

Exclusion

The fall of the Soviet Union and the war over Nagorno-Karabakh gave an opportunity to change gender stereotypes in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The years prior to and during the war saw a period of emancipation that was marked by women as the 'golden years'[12]. The urgency of war made gender roles less important, allowing for a number of women to actively participate in the peace negotiations. After the international organisations introduced the concept of gender, the momentum lingered on for some years even after the ceasefire was signed.

Such a scenario, where gender roles change but only temporarily, is well known from other conflicts.[13] Although women in Armenia and Azerbaijan took part in peace negotiations and helped dealing with the consequences of war, the window of opportunity for their participation was gradually shut. This supports the findings that women's mere participation in a patriarchal context is not enough for a sustainable change.[14] In this region in which men are still regarded superior to women, women have very few possibilities to enter formal power structures and/or to attain influential positions. Even though both countries have laws that promise gender equality, women are limited by the lack of their implementation. Politicians from both countries seldom discuss women's issues openly and policies are often made behind closed doors and without women. Due to prescribed gender roles, women who are active in politics are assigned to 'soft' affairs, have less influence, do not attain positions of power and influence, are neglected and risk their reputations. Furthermore, women are restricted by their own unawareness about their rights and the restrictions they put on themselves — like the informant (the former deputy mayor) who had to work twice as hard as her male colleagues in order to avoid being judged negatively by them, but still could not see that conditions were tougher for her because she is a woman.

Just like in other conflict areas, the war in Caucasus created a fertile ground for corruption that, combined with gender stereotypes, plays well into the process of excluding women. Women are rarely a part of corrupt networks, which also means that they have fewer connections and less access to funding. But even if they do get the opportunity to enter into politics (or commercial business), many are reluctant to get involved in the 'dirty corrupt business', or are influenced by relatives who disapprove of women in politics. In our study, the informants described how both women and men in the region are steered by gendered expectations: men end up in corrupt official power structures, and the evidently incorrupt and care-oriented women are given a task to deal with traditional women's issues — cultural and family affairs.

Unfortunately, in spite of their good intentions, the international community and their actions do not necessarily help putting an end to women's exclusion. For example, since the ceasefire in 1994, not a single woman has been in a leadership position within the Minsk Group.[15] Even on platforms like Facebook, the Minsk Group has a single-sex profile. Not a single woman is featured in the pictures of the photo album — only men in

helmets or men shaking hands. It seems that the Minsk Group is not doing much to avoid gendered division of politics in the region (and elsewhere), in which men are 'naturally' in charge of issues concerning security policy.

Neither the EU nor the OSCE practice a policy that is any better — none of their representatives in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process is a woman. And even though local EU delegations do have gender focal points assigned, they have little time or resources to deal with this specific task. The EU delegation in Armenia has limited contact with women's organisations[16] and is perceived by the participants as mostly working with GONGOs. In Azerbaijan, the local EU delegation was updated on women's organisations' activities in general, but did not know much about their ongoing peace-building activities.

Achievements

Despite the general backlash against women in the South Caucasus in the last ten years, women's organisations have made considerable improvements in some key areas. Nowadays, recognised by the authorities, some women's organisations regularly take part in conferences arranged by the governments in the region and are partners and experts to stakeholder groups. Women's organisations have also managed to improve women's representation in political assemblies and in higher administrative positions. In Azerbaijan, partly because of the pressure from the international community but also because of the support offered by women's organisations to women candidates, the parliamentary elections in 2010 resulted in an increase in number of female MPs from 11 to 16 percent. A women's league for election was set up. The league supported women candidates in writing electoral platforms, speeches, etc. This also improved the relationship between Azerbaijani women's organisations and women parliamentarians.

As women in both countries need experience in dealing with conditions at higher political levels, women's organisations are now directing their efforts towards the local level. At the same time, they are working to increase capacity within local women's organisations. Thanks to such support, women started their own groups, and as a result, the number of community-based women's groups has increased.

As a consequence, the role of women's organisations has changed: instead of being a service provider, they are now working for women's rights on a structural level. They have been a decisive force in adoption of laws on gender equality and domestic and sexual violence. Today, these laws are concrete tools in their work to strengthen women's position. For example, through successful lobbying, Azerbaijani women's organisations put the issue of early marriages on the government's agenda. In addition, by organising cross-border dialogue programmes, Armenian and Azerbaijani women have become bridge builders between the two countries. By creating regional networks, women's groups have achieved considerable success in this area. The fact that representatives from women's organisations in Nagorno-Karabakh have participated in such exchanges is an achievement in itself considering the complexity of relations between the affected groups.[17] Despite differing opinions on key issues, like the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh, the participants have managed to communicate and seek common language. A key strategy has been to unite on issues that have to do with women's rights and how women and vulnerable groups are affected by the conflict.

Women's groups are also key actors in raising awareness about discriminating gender norms. In Armenia, women's groups have managed to illustrate the absurdity of the tradition of 'the red apple', where the family of the groom is supposed to control the bride's virginity. [18] And in Azerbaijan, women's groups have successfully lobbied to change the discriminatory images portraying women and men in school textbooks. Thanks to women's lobbying, teenagers going to secondary schools in Azerbaijan now have the option to learn about the harms of domestic violence. In addition, a number of higher education institutions, both state-run and private, now have gender departments. According to women's organisations from both countries, their ground-breaking work on sexual and reproductive health has helped the public at large loosen their strict attitude, thus making those issues gradually more accepted.

Challenges

Since its beginning seventeen years ago, the peace negotiation process has taken many turns. Today, in 2012, the negotiations are deadlocked on the issue of timing the referendum on the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh[19], and the conflicting parties seem to be further apart than ever before. With such an impasse, the negotiating parties consider the issue of women's participation in peace negotiations totally irrelevant. According to interviews with official actors involved[20] in the negotiation process, the level of mistrust between the parties severely limits the scope of issues that are up for negotiation and rules out any possibility to discuss women's participation. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security has never been mentioned during the peace negotiations.

The conviction that more pressing issues need to be resolved before gender equality can be dealt with, is common in situations where there are conflicting needs. Women's organisations in the region continue to challenge such a standpoint, but they need support. Considering the current stalemate, getting the three presidents[21] currently running the negotiations to put women's participation on the agenda is unlikely to succeed. If the local parties in the conflict are ignoring these issues, does that imply that the international community should adapt to such behaviour? The international actors involved must abide by the resolutions that their countries have signed and consider what their responsibility is. They must consult women's organisations and try their best to put their perspectives forward. They, particularly OSCE and the EU, must also lead by example

and appoint women to important posts, starting with their missions in the two countries in question. Not only could the local women have a chance to identify with the international women in high posts, but such a move could also boost democratic values in general.

However, local women's organisations need to take initiatives that could make their peace-making activities more visible. Judging from interviews with formal key actors, little is known about the multifaceted peace building work that women's organisations do. Also, women's organisations need to put their work into context and explain how gender equality activities contribute to sustainable peace, how training for women's empowerment is linked to peace building, and how women work with peace building to create societies that can maintain peace. It is also important not to lose momentum or wait for an invitation, but to create your own invited spaces instead.[22] Armenian organisations training local women and arranging a meeting for them with local representatives from the co-chair countries' embassies[23] is a strong example of how women's groups can bridge the gap between formal and informal actors in the peace process.

Much can also be gained from dealing with the mentioned alienation between women politicians and women in the civil society. Women politicians are often perceived as not representing women and 'becoming like men'' or being used by men for 'window-dressing'. Women activists should overcome the challenge and build up relations instead of alienating themselves from women elected to political office. In this area, there are successful projects/initiatives to build on the above mentioned. Furthermore, it is critical that the women's organisations in the region strategically work to change the discriminating gender roles. In order to achieve sustainable change, men must be involved in this work and cooperation with mixed gender organisations must be promoted.

Finally, the informants' narratives show that the widespread corruption in the region is a big obstacle to women's participation at all decision-making levels and consequently also in the peace process. These gendered implications of corruption need to be further highlighted and addressed by all actors involved. Women's organisations are generally regarded as non-corrupt and thereby hold the moral high ground. This allows them to take the lead in such an initiative and build alliances against corruption — not by referring to essentiality, but to changes necessary in the society (transparency and a representative political system) that would benefit all. It is important to make the fight against corruption inclusive and stress that women are not less corrupt because of their nature — but because they don't have the same access to power.[24] In acknowledging such a non-biological stance, new challenges lie ahead: How can women gain power without adapting to the corrupt 'male' context?

things to bear in mind

To the international community

1. Finding

Closed doors. The exclusive and top-level format of the current peace negotiations hinders women's participation as well as civil society's. This creates a gap between the formal negotiations and informal structures in civil society, which threatens the legitimacy of the peace talks. The fact that the talks only deal with the technical aspects of the conflict further reinforces this, and makes a gender-just peace all the more difficult to achieve.

Recommendation

— The OSCE Minsk Group should expand the current talks beyond the present focus on territorial boundaries and status to include human dimensions of conflict. Further, the OSCE Minsk Group should improve its gender sensitivity by changing the gender balance of the mission, including appointing gender experts and establishing consultations with women's civil society groups.

— The EU should in accordance with the Comprehensive approach to the EU implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security support Armenia and Azerbaijan to develop and implement national action plans on UNSC Resolution 1325. The EU should also continuously underline the importance of women's equal participation on both sides of the negotiating table as well as in mediation.

2. Finding

Corruption and lack of democratic institutions hinders women's participation in all political decision-making processes in the region. Such systems obviously affect both women and men and their access to space for political agency, but because of cultural norms and hidden forms of power they have a more significant effect on women's participation.

Recommendation

The EU and other international actors should support and show commitment to women's equal participation in political decision-making in the South Caucasus. This can for example be done by pushing for stimulating efforts to increase women's representation, encouraging dialogue between women in politics and women's civil society organisations and enhancing support systems for female candidates.

3. Finding

Civil society where women often have a strong position is marginalized by the official political structures in the region. In addition, being a peace activist involves some tangible risks. Peace work done by women's organisations is thus not always visible. Artificial gender awareness and a limited understanding of the bigger context of how women's rights and empowerment can contribute to peaceful conflict resolution among stakeholders, further disregards women's contribution to peace work.

Recommendation

— The EU and OSCE Minsk group as well as other international actors need to recognise the peace building work carried out by civil society in general and local women's organisations in particular. In line with this the EU and OSCE Minsk Group should consider supporting capacity building measures to spur women's participation in peace talks and to realize the full potential of peace efforts by women's groups.

— The EU needs to pay attention to the specific risks faced by female human rights defenders and ensure the implementation of the policy "Ensuring protection — European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders".

[1] The term 'frozen' is used to describe the current state of the conflict with "no real war – no real peace", although approximately 20–30 soldiers die every year from casualties at or near the line of contact (the ceasefire line).

[2] "For more than a decade the ceasefire line, or line of contact (LOC), separating Azerbaijan and de facto Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, has been observed by all parties without external peacekeepers or a permanent monitoring force. This self-regulating aspect of the ceasefire line is unique to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the absence of a permanently deployed force, OSCE monitors the LOC through regular visits." (Antonenko 2005, p. 42).

[3] Telephone interview, 5 December 2011.

[4] Personal interview, Yerevan, 24 November 2011.

[5] Personal interview, 5 December 2011.

[6] Participants spoke of a divided environment with on the one hand NGOs run by people with no official records (who have created their own non-official posts), and on the other hand government initiated GONGOs with well-developed contacts and protection and funding from official actors. Governmentally Organised Non Governmental Organisations.

[7] Personal interview, 4 December 2011.

[8] People from the disputed area Nagorno-Karabakh also participated in the meeting.

[9] The initiative brings together women peacemakers from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia aiming to coordinate their actions and policies in order to become important actors in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. Participants in the initiative include women refugees, IDPs from rural communities and other women activists.

[10] According to data from the UNDP, women earn less than men in all countries of the former Soviet Union. In some countries, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation, women on average earn approximately 50 to 60 percent of men's average wages. (UNDP, 2012).

[11] In Azerbaijan, a woman is appointed head of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs.

[12] Between the years of 1990–1996.

[13] El-Bushra, Judy, and Ibrahim M.G. Sahl. 2005, 98.

[14] For example, in her research Moss Kanter shows that women need to reach 30 of the leadership positions to influence the power structure in a corporate business (Kanter in Wahl et al 2004).

[15] According to personal interviews.

[16] The participants in the focus group conducted in Yerevan (Armenia) claimed to have very limited (or no) communication with the local EU delegation.

[17] "Personally I was very sceptical in the beginning. I did not think it would work. But I was wrong. Now I can see that there is a change in people. It was a real discovery for me when I saw that they can cooperate. Random women came together and could speak, laugh and talk about very sensitive issues. From the beginning they were literally yelling, why are we here, we do not want to be here, etc. But the last meeting was so different, now they said that we were so stupid in the beginning, now we can see that we have the same problems." Personal interview, Yerevan, 24 November 2011.

[18] The concept of 'the red apple' comes from the tradition of showing a bed sheet stained with blood from a bride on her wedding night to the relatives of the groom to demonstrate that the bride was a virgin. If the relatives of the groom are satisfied, they send back a bowl of red apples to the bride's parents' house.

[19] Conciliation Resources 2012, 3.

[20] Personal interviews, November and December 2011.

[21] The presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia.

[22] Personal interviews, November and December 2011.

[23] France, Russia and the US.

[24] An annual survey of more than 60,000 households in more than 60 countries has found that women are less likely than men to pay bribes. (Nawaz 2010).

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation supports women during times of war and conflict to increase women's power and influence in society. We collaborate with over 130 organisations that empower women to participate in working for sustainable peace and rebuilding.

In wars and conflicts, violence against women and girls is used as a method of warfare. Women are subjected to mass rape, they are mutilated and killed. Women are locked in their homes and girls are not allowed to attend school. Women's voices are silenced if they express what they think and feel.

But history shows that women are important actors in the struggle for peace. The world witnessed this in the Balkans, in Liberia and in Northern Ireland. Yet women are seldom allowed to play a part in deciding how to arrive at peace and democracy. This is why The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation exists. Our partner organisations educate people in women's human rights, they work with women's health issues and combat violence against women. They create meeting places for women, where it is otherwise difficult to meet. They wield political influence and create dialogue across the borders of conflict.

Kvinna till Kvinna is a Swedish Foundation which supports women's organisations in Central and West Africa, the Middle East, South Caucasus and the Western Balkans.

The role of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is to provide financial support and mediate contacts between organisations, in co-operation with our partner organisations. Our mission is to participate in empowering women's movements in regions of conflict.

We influence development assistance and security policies by contributing to increased awareness of the situation of women in conflicts and the importance of women's representation in peace processes. We spread information about women in conflicts to the general public, government bodies and organisations in Sweden, and at the EU and UN levels.

We support studies and research relating to women's conditions in conflicts and the positive effects of women's participation in peace initiatives.

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