



LISTEN TO HER

Gendered Effects of the
Conflict over
Nagorno-Karabakh and
Women's Priorities
for Peace

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IDP

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON

LGBTQI

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, QUESTIONING AND INTERSEX

NGO

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION

WHRD

WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER

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FOREWORD

For 25 years, Kvinna till Kvinna has worked together with and supported women human rights defenders in conflict affected regions. We have learnt a lot from the women we are working with, and we continue to be astonished that women's voices are so often unheard – especially when it comes to issues of war and peace.

Over the years, the message has often been that “now is not the time to deal with women's issues, we need to solve the conflict”. As if women were not part of and affected by the conflict. Because of that attitude gendered dimensions are often neglected in peacebuilding work, as if women and men do not have different experiences of conflict, nor different solutions and needs. The question is rather “Is there a better time than right now to discuss the reality of half of the population? How they view peace, and what their priorities are?”

Kvinna till Kvinna has worked in South Caucasus for more than 15 years, and women have yet to access the roles they need to contribute meaningfully to peace negotiations in any of the conflicts in the region. When it comes to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, women are almost entirely left out of the peace processes. It has been labelled a frozen conflict, and regarded as such since the 1990's. But for many living in the region, there is nothing frozen about this conflict.

This is why Kvinna till Kvinna have produced this report. Women's voices need to be heard, so we spoke with women activists, but also with women most affected by the conflict. We listened to women who are just trying to survive, and younger women who hope for a better tomorrow. What we found is that the issues prioritised by these women have more to do with livelihoods and survival, education, employment, health and security, than militarisation or a military end the conflict.

Everywhere we went, women talked about the “image of the enemy”, fully aware of the propaganda they are subjected to, and suggested peace will require compromise. But despite this, all the women expressed that “their own” side was more willing to reach that compromise and produced less propaganda. While most women we spoke to did not believe that peace would come, they also did not see their own role in building peace, attributing this task to men. Even so, everyone raised the need for safe spaces, to discuss and exchange experiences with other women.

Many of the stories we heard were underpinned by clear gender stereotypes: women talked about loss and grief, but only in the context of losing male loved ones, while their own lives and health were given far lower priority. We heard about the great lengths women went to in order to survive, the sexual favours demanded to access benefits within the military, about survival sex, sex-selective abortions, gender-based and domestic violence, and unpaid domestic labour. Despite such a wealth of information, this report has only just scratched the surface, and we see a great need for further research to fully understand all of the gendered dimensions of the conflict and their consequences.

Following the Velvet Revolution in 2018, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan have resumed meetings, stating that the time has come to “prepare the populations for peace”. If these are not just empty words, Kvinna till Kvinna has a suggestion to the relevant actors on what needs to be done: Talk to the women! Listen to them and ask what they need to start believing in peace. The very best way of hearing and raising the voices of different women is to fund and work with women's organisations. They are the ones that know how to create safe spaces. They are also the ones that have solutions. Their voices must be heard and counted for!

Petra Tötterman Andorff
Secretary General, Kvinna till Kvinna

INTRODUCTION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation wants the knowledge and experience gained through our work in conflict-affected regions to benefit others, that is why we regularly publish reports on women's rights, conflict resolution, and peace and security. We draw our analysis from fieldwork, desk research, and the grassroots knowledge of our long-term partners as well as in-house expertise.

This report represents the first in-depth examination of the effects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on women, their livelihoods, and agency. The research sought to explore the gendered effects of the conflict, and give voice to the priorities that women, isolated from official processes and decision-making, identify for peace. Inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding requires the voices of women to be heard. Women's perspectives are also an essential component of successful strategies to **"prepare populations for peace"**¹.

The release of this report coincides with renewed dialogue between regional actors, precipitated by the political changes in Armenia in 2018. This welcome development follows deadly clashes in and around the context of Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016, when Armenia and Azerbaijan were characterised as 'closer to war than at any point since the 1994 ceasefire'².

However, after almost 30 years of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the number of women negotiators, witnesses and vocal peacebuilders in Armenia and Azerbaijan remains astonishingly low. Most local women peace activists are engaged in Track II and III diplomacy, drawing on their personal and political convictions to courageously tackle questions of social justice, human rights and gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is a prominent feature of all violent conflicts and remains unaddressed in most peace negotiations and agreements. The work of local women's organisations and individual women peace activists on GBV, social justice, and other peacebuilding issues has no formal mandate and is very often not linked to the official peace process.

Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia, which brought Nikol Pashinyan to power as the new Prime Minister and led to the deposition of the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), a considerable thaw has been



An understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security."

(UNSCR 1325, October 2000)

observed in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The new conflict dynamics include both the persistent rhetoric from the Armenian side, supporting a shift in the negotiations format to include Nagorno-Karabakh as a party in the peace talks, and potential new platforms for discussion from the sides' agreement on the need to establish direct channels of communication and "prepare populations for peace".

Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Aliyev now hold regular meetings where both make clear commitments to a constructive peace process and the prevention of escalation. This provides a window of opportunity to increasing women's meaningful participation in peace processes and enhancing their role in "preparing populations for peace". It is hoped this report will help raise women's voices in discussions held within the ongoing peace process.

Although Armenia's Velvet Revolution was driven by domestic concerns, the emergence of a leadership that has come into power on a democratic platform holds repercussions for foreign policy in general, and for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular. De-escalation, demilitarisation, and support for a lasting settlement, both locally and internationally, have never been more urgent, yet few voices can be heard to advocate for peace³.

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Press Statement by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, Paris, 16 January 2019.

² International Crisis Group (ICG), Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds, Report No. 244, Europe and Central Asia, 1 June 2017.

³ Anahit Shirinyan, Zaur Shiryev, Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Discourses in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Aftermath of the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, Caucasus Journal, 13 December 2018.

Women were an especially powerful force in Armenia's Velvet Revolution. Photo: Woman protesting with a sign that reads "Take your step. Reject Serzh" echoing the slogan of the Revolution.

Photo credit:
Society Without Violence



For over two decades, peace talks have been conducted at an elite level, with little effort to communicate their substance to the public, or to include the views of various constituencies affected by conflict and violence. One such marginalised group is women, whose participation is further limited as a result of patriarchal tendencies in society. The conflict has been dissected and unpacked multiple times by numerous political analysts. However, the needs and priorities of women affected by the conflict have not yet been sufficiently investigated. This report explores women's perspectives on conflict and peace-making, in order to understand:



The range of women's positions, interests, needs and values, relating to their experience of conflict and violence, taking into account their diverse social positions;



The extent to which women constitute (or have both the potential and desire to constitute) an organised collective which can exert influence on the peace process.

- The following chapters explore the impact of militarisation and patriotism on identity and agency, including collective agency; grief and loss; women's stress and gender-specific health needs; the effect of patriarchal gender norms on women's participation; the gendered economic impact of the conflict; gender-based violence; women's perspectives on peace and conflict; and the overlooked potential for transforming the conflict narrative in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh. By raising the voices of women and surfacing the gendered effects of the conflict, this report aims to inform future policy, programming, and decision making, and argues for greater participation

of women in all levels of the peace process. Moreover, based on the findings, the report provides concrete recommendations for the international and local communities working towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The report prioritises the views of women who have been directly affected by conflict, including women in border regions, women who are internally displaced and refugees, and women who have lost loved ones in the conflict. It also seeks as much as possible to involve women who are not currently engaged in peacebuilding, but also with women activists. Gender relations play a part: across the region, women's civic and political participation is viewed as incompatible with traditional gender roles. Young unmarried women face particular restrictions to participation. However, those that do have the freedom seem to be more vocal, raising critical issues and questioning established norms. Many are willing to share their problems in groups to identify common issues. We found that older women were less willing to open up to the researchers, which respondents attributed to a prevailing culture of silence. Generational differences in responses were found throughout the study; interestingly, these were greater than the differences across contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This report was guided by two core questions: how has the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh impacted women, and what are their priorities for peace? From the outset, it aimed to involve women from key target groups: women who had lost a family member in the conflict, women who were refugees or internally displaced, and women living in areas currently affected by violence. In practice, a significant portion of participants fell into more than one of these categories, and sometimes all three. Additionally, the research sought the views of women who were engaged in peacebuilding or other forms of civic activism, particularly those who came from or worked closely alongside conflict-affected communities.

The first round of in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions for the report was performed by an international researcher and two local assistants. Primary data collection took place in October and November 2017 across a range of locations: in Baku and

Yerevan, in border regions (West Azerbaijan and Northeast Armenia) and in the Nagorno-Karabakh context. Participants were identified with the assistance of local contacts and using a snowball sampling strategy. Researchers employed a flexible approach to data collection, responsive to the sensitivities of the topics and contexts. Semi-structured interviews were held with women in locations they felt comfortable to talk, this included homes, offices, cars, and in the street.

The research team ensured a balance between urban and rural participants, and the representation of women from different age groups. Participants included women who were married, single, divorced and widowed. The occupations of participants also varied, including housewives, students, teachers, school principals, psychologists, cooks, cleaners, accountants, farm labourers, NGO workers, and those without formal employment.

After initial data analysis in early 2018, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation conducted a second round of interviews with women activists. In total, 150 women across the contexts of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh were interviewed for this report.

The research design followed Moser's (2001) framework⁴ for understanding gender in conflict and violence, which posits:

- ≡ women and men experience war differently, whether they be victims or perpetrators;
- ≡ men and women have differential access to resources, including decision-making powers, during and after conflict;
- ≡ women and men are often differentially positioned in relation to peace-making and peacebuilding;
- ≡ men and women involved in conflict and negotiations have underlying strategic interests related to gendered power relations.

The flexible approach to interviews had another benefit, which was that of giving participants the opportunity to control the conversation. This approach can mitigate some of the effects of unequal power relations when dealing with groups that are perceived as vulnerable. It can also give a more accurate insight into the dynamics of self-censorship and social taboos, such as when participants themselves raised topics that had previously been classified as 'sensitive' by the research team. Owing to the sensitive and confidential nature of these discussions, names and identifying characteristics

⁴ Moser's Gender Planning Framework, International Labour Organisation (ILO), South-East Asia and the Pacific Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (SEAPAT), ILO/SEAPAT's Online Gender Learning & Information Module, Accessed on 14 April 2019.

of participants have been changed throughout the text.

The report has also been informed and enriched by the accumulated knowledge that Kvinna till Kvinna has gained over the last 15 years of working in the region.

Throughout the report, gender refers to various forms of identity, behaviour and status that have been socially ascribed on the basis of biological sex. It also refers to power relations based on these phenomena, primarily between men and women, but also between women and women, or men and men, based on their level of conformity with socially prescribed gender roles. Gender is not a synonym for women (or for sex); however, given that the report focuses on women, it mostly explores how certain roles, experiences and practices are gendered as female or feminine in the society of the South Caucasus. An intersectional feminist lens has been used to account for factors such as age, class, ethnic or religious affiliation, political status (e.g. refugee or IDP), sexuality, physical ability, and urban/rural location, all of which contribute both to general diversity, and to specific inequalities, among women as a social group.

The main findings from the fieldwork were validated with Kvinna till Kvinna's local partners and subsequently analysed by the research team following desk research relating to gender and peacebuilding in the local and international contexts.

LIMITATIONS

The research was constrained by the political climate in some key areas where fieldwork was undertaken. Following a detailed risk assessment, the team adapted the research questions in order to proceed in locations where simply the use of the word "peacebuilding" would have raised a red flag to participants. However, it should be noted that even in places where respondents did not practice self-censorship, participants were often reluctant to engage with the word "peacebuilding", preferring to focus on everyday concerns. This was anticipated by the conceptual framework used for the research design, which advocates a broader understanding of peace that is more deeply rooted in the everyday practices and priorities of women.

Other limitations include the unexpected changes in the political climate, which, despite their generally positive nature, rendered some of the analysis and information inconsequential, while simultaneously introducing the need for additional information.

The research was also affected by the identity of the lead researcher, as it took time to establish the level of trust required for focus group participants and respondents to share information in the presence of an external actor.

KEY FINDINGS

This report maps women's experiences of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, from open warfare in the early 1990s to more recent militarisation and growing escalation, as well as shifting dynamics in the region following the Velvet Revolution in Armenia. The publication documents women's experiences of gendered violence and agency, in situations ranging from armed combat, loss and displacement, and anti-war activism. It pays particular attention to the prolonged insecurity experienced by those living with "frozen" conflict, in a state of actual conflict. The report's key messages are presented below:

≡ NORMALISATION OF WAR

The April War in 2016 marked a major shift in women's sense of their families' physical security and the levels of stress in their daily lives. Attitudes towards the "Other" have in general worsened since then. The desire for peace, despite a lack of trust in "the other side", is reported on all sides of the conflict. Gendered household responsibilities shape women's reflection on peace and their possible role in contributing to a lasting peace. The idea of maintaining a "normal life" against the backdrop of conflict is seen as a way of resisting the dehumanising effects of violence by taking control at an individual level. It reflects both the deadlock in the political negotiations and the anticipation of war. The unresolved nature of the conflict also keeps displaced people in limbo. They either legally, or through the stigma, retain their status as displaced and feelings of not belonging. There is a sense that displaced people are deprived of the right to individual self-determination – most fundamentally where they want to live. Questions of home and belonging are pertinent for both the younger and older generations of IDPs, including those born in displacement.

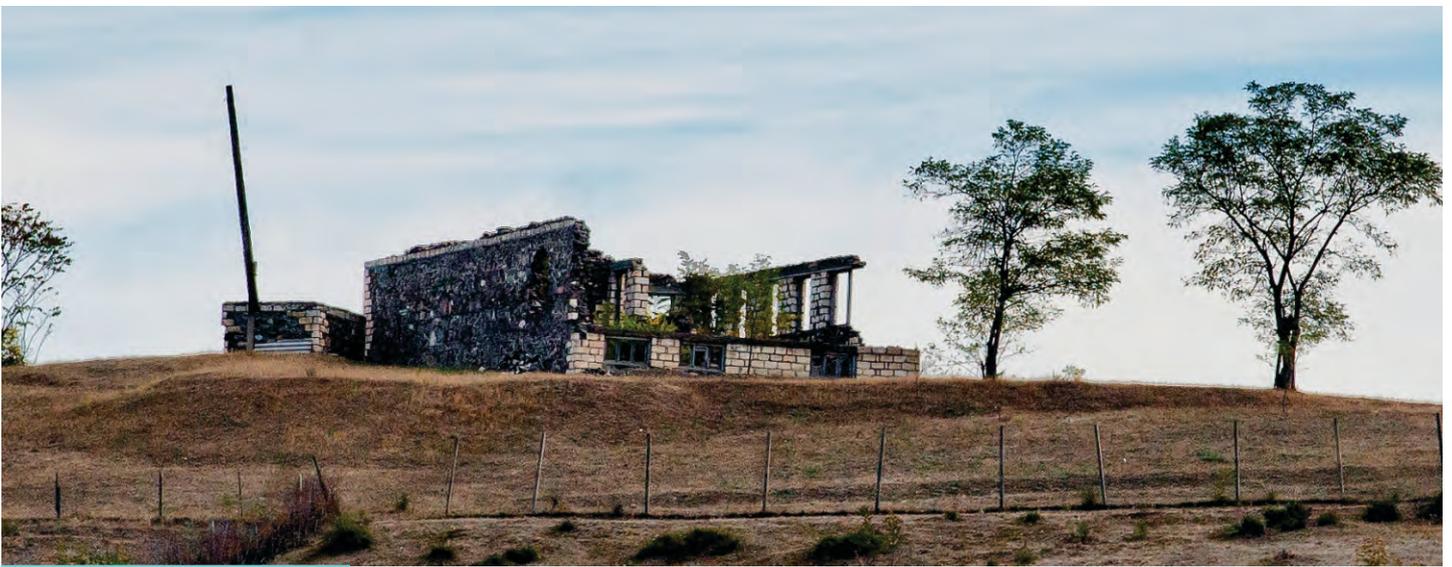


Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar

≡ PERCEPTIONS ON PEACE

The idea that one's own side is more peaceful and tolerant than the other is mirrored in Armenia and Azerbaijan. In a militarised patriotic nation, where the “Other” is universally portrayed as a threat, different, and less peaceful or unwilling to compromise, envisioning peace is a difficult task. The feeling of resignation is underpinned by a lack of trust and belief in the peacebuilding processes. For some women, particularly in the border regions, peace is therefore understood as a continuation of war: the need for more militarisation.

The findings suggest that concrete and pragmatic joint initiatives, local solutions and messages (as opposed to higher-level political action) at the regional/cross-conflict level are more effective and achievable as a first step towards women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding. Women can serve as advocates for their communities' common needs (for example trade, watershed management, etc.), which are also gender-sensitive and gender-specific.

Moreover, efforts are required to address the intra-community tensions between displaced and host populations within national contexts. There is a need to create safe spaces on different levels where women can meet, exchange experiences, and provide support to one another. This can in turn create a sense of collective agency, where women identify themselves as political agents that can demand improvements in issues that affect their lives, such as unemployment, education, households, safety and security. It may also contribute to transforming perspectives on what peace can look like and women's roles in contributing to peace. Moreover, these reflections can show the need for peacebuilding that goes beyond cross-conflict borders. Many women in the focus groups understood peacebuilding as something that happens across conflict borders, and therefore both distant from them and risky to engage in.

≡ EXCLUSION OF WOMEN'S VOICES FROM THE WORK ON PEACE

In thinking about peace, most women in the report saw themselves as outside peace processes, which they understood as an elite, male sphere, distanced from themselves and their daily lives.

Many respondents argued that ordinary people – especially women – are powerless to bring about real change. Women activists on all sides are also isolated from the formal peace processes. Given the widespread notion that successful peacebuilders are men (illustrated by the exclusive participation of men and the absence of women's voices in the official peace talks) as well as the risks associated with engaging in peacebuilding, women, even those with vast experience in the field, do not see themselves as “real peacebuilders” and their otherwise key contributions to the process are trivialised and disregarded because women peacebuilders are made invisible by others. Women need encouragement to embrace their true potential and role in the process, as well as tailor-made capacity building and support on devising joint advocacy messages and access to influential actors at the Track I level.



Photo credit: Kvinna till Kvinna

ANTI-GENDER PROPAGANDA

Many women human rights defenders and Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations report that the climate for their activities has grown increasingly hostile in the wake of April 2016. A number of factors intersect with and reinforce their marginalised status; beyond the fear of being labelled "traitors", public perception of NGOs as corrupt and/or western-oriented liberal elites, the persistence of patriarchal norms, and the rise of anti-feminist nationalist movements, which engage in hate campaigns against women human rights defenders (WHRDs). Gendered expectations of women limit their participation in social and political life. Women's political participation always comes with risks, particularly when politics is generally regarded as a dirty and corrupt business. Patriarchal norms intersect with an ever-shrinking space for civil society, particularly in Azerbaijan, where legislation has been enacted in recent years restricting the activities of civil society. There is a particular need to enhance IDP and refugee women's participation in local governance and in peacebuilding. All actors must provide alternative, gender-sensitive narratives for the resolution of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

SUPPORTING A GENERATIONAL SHIFT

The older generation of women peacebuilders – those who experienced the outbreak of conflict and began the first peacebuilding initiatives – are a repository of valuable experience and knowledge. However, some members of this group appear reluctant to pass the baton to a new generation of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and peace actors, who can bring innovative approaches to conflict transformation and represent the needs and priorities of younger women affected by the conflict. Young and middle-aged WHRDs and peacebuilders report exclusion from the circles of "serious talks" and "true peacebuilding". This exclusion is reinforced by international actors who maintain set narratives, and work with an unchanging network of prominent, established figures. Young and middle-aged women peacebuilders find there is no space to contribute to peacebuilding processes at a higher level, although these activists contribute as backstage actors and are active at the grassroots level. A generational shift is required to ensure sustainable peace processes, and actors should empower younger women with diverse backgrounds who can build upon the experience and lessons of the older generation of peacebuilders. Shining a spotlight on younger women who can become leading actors, as well as drivers of

change within the peacebuilding framework, can bring different narratives and avenues for conflict transformation to the region.

BUILDING TRUST AND CHALLENGING NARRATIVES

Focus group discussions revealed that many women engage with civil society, but that these interactions are characterised by a lack of trust in institutions and peacebuilding actions, and concerns of wasting valuable time and resources. This is particularly the case with cross-border initiatives, which are perceived as involving considerable personal effort with low likelihood of a positive outcome. Despite participating in peacebuilding processes, many women fear that "nothing will change". Moreover, negative propaganda contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty and powerlessness, while simultaneously fuelling distrust towards civic institutions that could provide opportunities for meaningful participation. Exposure to militarised propaganda, biased media, and state regulation of civic space intersect to create an environment of suspicion towards peacebuilding activists and ordinary citizens with perspectives contradictory to the prevailing narratives of peace, security and the nation.

Women are uniquely positioned to challenge existing narratives, as they promulgate them in families, schools, and the community. The findings suggest additional spaces for discussions that interrogate the terminology of "peace", "compromise", "life after the conflict", and "return" are desperately needed. We also found that successful dialogue across conflict borders requires a long-term approach with multiple meetings over several years.

WAR AND MULTIPLE FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence appears normalised in the region, perpetuated by a culture of silence around the topic. The research found a strong relationship between the experience of war and violence, whether at the frontline or at home, whether for men or women. Gender-based and domestic violence, in its multiple forms, is highly prevalent in conflict-affected settings, with women comprising the overwhelming majority of survivors. Despite this, women reported that the focus of their stress is not necessarily their own security and well-being, but that of their male relatives or sons and husbands in the army, deprioritising their own security.



Photo credit: Famil Mahmudlu

The burdens, both economic and societal, forced upon women render them obligated to do whatever it takes to survive and provide for their families. Stress can be manifested as violence; respondents described mothers who had become physically violent towards their other children after losing sons in the war. The public rituals of praise and tribute to the lost heroes leave very little space for private grief, outside of nationalist narratives of sacrifice. Moreover, women whose relatives are missing or whose death is unconfirmed are left in a legal and emotional limbo. These women do not receive the same legal status or benefits as widows or mothers of soldiers confirmed deceased during the war. In addition, the mourning and healing process is difficult for women who may anticipate the eventual return of their relatives.

≡ SHIFTING POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Despite recent positive developments in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, providing a window for women peacebuilders and WHRDs to contribute to sustainable and meaningful peace processes, numerous challenges and concerning trends remain. Shrinking civil society space remains a challenge across the region, manifesting, *inter alia*, in tightened

following the Velvet Revolution. The highly restricting legislation in Azerbaijan also precludes women activists from implementing their work efficiently and effectively, hindering women's contribution to the peace process. Across the region, WHRDs, women peacebuilders, and activists are increasingly targeted by ultranationalist and far right hate groups, which threatens their personal and professional security.

LISTEN TO HER

GENDERED EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT OVER NAGORNO-KARABAKH AND WOMEN'S PRIORITIES FOR PEACE

There is increasing international recognition of the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in the design and implementation of peace efforts, from grassroots initiatives to formal peace processes. However, there remain significant gaps when it comes to putting theory into practice⁵. The most visible evidence for this lies in the fact that women remain under-represented in peace talks and peacekeeping operations around the world, despite more than twenty years of global advocacy efforts that have led to a series of United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security⁶.

For peacebuilding to be seen as more than an elite pursuit, it needs to confront the daily struggles and insecurities that keep people from imagining an alternative to their current reality. Women in the South Caucasus are traditionally seen solely as “mothers and wives” and not as political actors, which has contributed to their absence in high level discussions. Conversely, this lack of political recognition provides a window for women to meet with the “enemy” and explore paths of reconciliation through non-formal peacebuilding actions. This report presents the everyday concerns and priorities of women in order to reconceptualise the notion of peacebuilding in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. It draws on feminist peace and security theory and the experience of women's organisations in the South Caucasus over the past thirty years to analyse the findings of primary research conducted across the region. The analysis below presents the impact of conflict and obstacles to peace that women identified as priorities in their everyday lives.

1. EFFECTS OF MILITARISATION ON IDENTITY AND AGENCY

Militarisation, the process by which a society is equipped and prepared for war, is deeply embedded in the political and social landscape of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In turn, it deeply affects identities and agency. This chapter starts by outlining the relationship between gender and militarisation in order to explore how norms of “womanhood” are appropriated, how identities are confined to construct the “enemy”, and the effects militarism has on agency.

1.1. GENDER AND MILITARISATION

Gender norms and roles are a key component of nation-building and, hence, militarisation. Women and norms of “womanhood” are important for the production and survival of militarism. Although there are a few women in combat roles and many in roles that support the military, one of the most important ways of including women in militarisation is through norms of “motherhood”.

Women relate to the military through their sons and other young male relatives, who undergo compulsory military service for a period of 18 months (Azerbaijan) or two years (Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh). Any woman can be incorporated into the process of militarisation through their relationship to men, but only if their roles are as mothers (and thus producers of future combatants), providers of cooking and cleaning services for the military, or teachers who instil patriotic values and the “truth”.

⁵ For a comprehensive review of the subject, see: *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, UN Women, 2015, available at <http://wps.unwomen.org/en>

⁶ UNSCR 1325 (2000) is commonly accepted as the major milestone in women's global advocacy for peace and security. It was preceded by the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and followed by UNSCRs 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013) and 2122 (2013). For a concise but comprehensive overview see Laura Shepherd, *Advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: 2015 and Beyond*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2014.

Women as mothers participate in the process of militarisation and nation-building by giving birth to and socialising male recruits by instilling patriotic values in male children. One respondent argued that **“The role of the woman is that she should raise her [male] child in such a way that the child serves the homeland...The fate of the homeland is in the hands of mothers.”** Women's reproductive labour is therefore central to militarisation. At the same time, women are mostly left outside of the decision-making processes within the masculinised militaristic nation. This reflects on the fact that women are not free to make reproductive choices. Moreover, respondents did not even mention the possibility of a woman who may choose not to have children. The link between sexual and reproductive rights, militarisation and power dynamics calls for a more comprehensive examination.

1.2. THE IMAGE OF THE “OTHER”

Militarism in all the contexts relies on depicting a specific image of the “Other”. The narrative argues that the survival of the nation depends on maintaining boundaries between the nation and the external threat, using military power and militaristic discourses. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the April War created grounds for patriotic mobilisation and a hardening of attitudes toward the other side of the conflict⁷. Women in several locations confirmed that attitudes towards the “Other” have worsened since the escalation in 2016. In all communities visited, there was a tension between the desire for peace and a lack of trust in “the other side”.



Photo credit: Nelli Shishmanyanyan

In the conflict setting and through the lens of militarism, women are frequently seen only in the capacity of motherhood and as “producers of future soldiers”.

The military is framed as the key component of social protection; yet it increases the risk of women losing loved ones. The research found an inconsistency in how many women talked about motherhood and militarisation. Several believed that “no mother should lose her son in war”, but at the same time thought that women had a duty to prepare their sons for military service. One woman captured this dilemma, arguing that women go through the pain of childbirth but are then obliged to raise their children as patriots, which – for males being conscripted and potentially going into combat – might mean literally sacrificing themselves for their homeland. “I dream of a world without borders”, she concluded.

Several of the women drew attention to the role of the media – including social media – in perpetuating hostile attitudes. Many said that they read both Armenian and Azerbaijani media, and that they are aware there is propaganda and misinformation in both countries. However, it was a recurring sentiment among both the Azerbaijan and Armenian women that

”**‘Their’ propaganda is worse than ‘ours’**”.

This aligns with a narrative relating to tolerance, with women on both sides expressing these beliefs:

⁷ Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds.” International Crisis Group, 11 Aug. 2017, www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/244-nagorno-karabakhs-gathering-war-clouds



We are more tolerant than they are,” and “we raise our children to be more tolerant than theirs”.

This perceived asymmetry and portrayals of the “Other” are used to justify a belief that the conflict cannot be resolved through peaceful means; militarisation was the default option for most of the women.

Construction of the “Other” can also occur within the nation. Those who transgress or contradict idealised identities (e.g. unmarried women, LGBTQIA+ persons, or dissenters from military ideologies) can be portrayed as “enemies” of the nation. Furthermore, some displaced women highlighted how language was used to signify their “otherness”.

CASE

One refugee interviewed in Armenia reflected on how she was perceived as different because she grew up in Azerbaijan. The language classes she received upon arrival in Armenia were not sufficient for her to master the language. Additionally, language was one of the most noticeable signs of her difference, associated with the constructed enemy.

Her difficulties with the Armenian language affect her sense of belonging within the nation; she does not feel fully accepted as an Armenian, and at the same time is not able to develop feelings of belonging because of the language barrier.

1.3. MILITARISM AND AGENCY

Militarism shapes women's conception of agency in different ways: agency as strength, but also feelings of disempowerment. Performances and rhetoric of strength regained potency as an effect of the April War. Across all the contexts, there were accounts from both younger and older women, from rural and urban areas, that all the men and boys wanted to fight without even waiting to be drafted. A teacher recalled how adolescent boys from 9th to 11th grade passionately expressed their wish to fight at the frontline and defend the nation, taking up flags and parading in the streets. The patriotism of schoolchildren stresses how the countries successfully integrate militarism into the education system. A young Azerbaijani woman summarised the readiness to fight as follows:



Photo credit: Kvinna till Kvinna

Militarism and nationalist sentiment are instilled in schoolchildren in many contexts. Here, a wall in a second-grade classroom in Azerbaijan is decorated with patriotic/nationalist paraphernalia, including military slogans and lists of locations affected during the conflict.

Contrastingly, militarism affects agency through feelings of disempowerment. Many women we met expressed a sense of hopelessness and an inability to influence the conflict situation. Many said they felt powerless to change the system, and that their main priority was the struggle for everyday survival and social and economic security. Women argued that socio-economic conditions made people more passive; people's energy and time are redirected towards employment and jobs in order to survive. Some women,



When the April War happened, I could not sleep at night. I was on Facebook all the time, following the news. Young people were writing that they would gather the next day to bury the soldier from Sumgayit who had been killed. At that moment, I felt like I wanted to fight. I wanted to go to the frontline: blood for blood. Up until the April War, we had a perception that we were calm and silent. The April war proved that we were so patriotic, so strong.”

cultural and gender norms when thinking about disempowerment. They argued that norms that position men as the ones that take charge dissuade women from resistance and activism. Additionally, they explained that women are too busy with childrearing to have time to access information on their rights, and subsequently claim them. However, one woman gave examples of women protesting for their rights, such as the pregnant women who demonstrated at the National Assembly for improved maternity leave. However, women in some of the contexts are unable to claim agency through protests, public gatherings or other types of visible activism due to highly restrictive political environments, not by their lack of will or competence.

The gendered disempowerment was also revealed in how women imagined their role in peacebuilding. Many said they were not qualified to work in the political sphere, and that men were more qualified in this arena. This undermining of women's qualification by the women themselves, illustrates the patriarchal views held by some women.

2. WOMEN'S INVISIBLE AGENCY

This chapter examines the different forms of burden taken on by women, focusing on how women attempt to make ends meet with limited resources and examples of collective coping strategies. It explores the ways in which women attempt to redefine their burdens as – largely invisible – agency and feel strengthened through surviving the precarious circumstances they endure. This invisible agency manifests itself in maintaining households through unpaid domestic labour, their role as sole “breadwinners”, and the strategies they employ to cope with these burdens.

2.1. MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

Many of the women's economic concerns were linked to maintaining home and family. Describing the creative economising that went into meal preparation, women said they sometimes took pride in “making something out of nothing”.

Women can literally “make something out of nothing” when it comes to providing basic subsistence for their families.



Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar



Although women tend to deprioritise their own well-being, they find support in coping with the effects of the conflict in sharing their burdens among each other.

Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar

However, for several participants, especially in the most conflict-affected communities, making something out of nothing represents their daily struggle for survival⁸. In one IDP settlement, the researchers spoke with a recently divorced woman who had returned to live with her parents, bringing three young children with her. Although she seldom left the house, she had begun a small business making cheese and yoghurt, which she sold to families in the local area. In another example, a single mother who worked as a music teacher by day bought and sold clothes at the airport at night. This extra income enabled her to raise her children as the sole earner in the household. We met with many women reclaiming their agency to find ways to provide for their families in a difficult economic situation; however, these precarious livelihoods were also associated with great stress and uncertainty.

2.2. COLLECTIVE AGENCY AND COPING STRATEGIES

The narrative of “we are not fearful, we are strong” expressed by women in all locations coincides with the overarching discourse of militarism and patriotism. It is a socially conditioned response to the conflict, reflecting the strength of nationalism in all the contexts. The women’s declaration of strength was described as a tactic for fear and stress management. In one interview, a woman explains that although it is impossible to overcome fear when they have seen atrocities and neighbours slaughtered in the streets, living in that region requires being strong and “keeping a weapon in our hands, as long as we live next to the enemy”.

The main priority for many women was the struggle for everyday survival and social and economic security. On the one hand, the preoccupation to maintain some form of security in the context of normalised insecurity exacerbates the stress these women face. On the other hand, maintaining a “normal life” against the backdrop of conflict is a way of resisting the dehumanising effects of violence by taking control at an individual level. Some of the other coping strategies documented include writing poems, dancing, getting out of the house, and meeting with other women to talk about their lives. Although women have identified these strategies, they rarely prioritised themselves as the subjects of their care.

Getting out of the house was important for many women, but this coping strategy is made difficult by geographic and social isolation; traditional norms restricting women’s movements, both for young/unmarried and older/married women; a lack of economic and social opportunities; and family and domestic obligations. Trainings, workshops, and safe spaces created between neighbours were highlighted as valuable opportunities for women to meet outside the home. An older woman in a border town explained that she copes by having discussions with neighbours over tea or coffee; a coping strategy reported by many respondents. Women use these gatherings to monitor one another’s moods, to help other women who are going through a difficult period, and as both individual and group coping mechanisms for emotional distress. A younger participant from a border town described how participation in NGO activities lessened her distress and made life more interesting.

The role of group support to cope with the effects of war was made visible during a focus group discussion in an IDP settlement. One of the women spoke about the importance of the community’s support after her son’s death and shared that she is in turn ready to support anyone else in need. The group discussions were frequently emotional, and women both laughed and cried together while sharing their stories. During the work with this report we have clearly identified a need to create safe spaces at the community level where women can meet, exchange experiences, and provide support for one another.

⁸ According to data from the Asian Development Bank, 4.9% of the population of Azerbaijan was living below the poverty line in 2015. In Armenia, this figure was 29.8%.

3. THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CONFLICT

The economic consequences of war are immediately visible in the communities directly affected by the conflict. Women in these contexts identified daily subsistence, employment, education and housing as their main priorities. This chapter explores the impact of high military expenditure on welfare and human development, cases of corruption and exploitation, the gendered system of compensation and state benefits, and intra-community tension as examples of the economic impacts of the conflict.

3.1. MILITARY EXPENDITURE AND ITS IMPACT ON LIVELIHOODS

In 2016, Armenia had the third highest levels of militarisation in the world, allocating a large share of government spending to the military in comparison to other sectors⁹. Azerbaijan was in eleventh place, falling six places from its former position in the Global Militarisation Index, due to a drop in oil prices¹⁰. Regardless of the impact of oil prices on Azerbaijan's state budget, the Government continues to make enormous investments in its armed forces¹¹. This militarisation, and in Armenia's case supporting¹² the local economy in the Nagorno-Karabakh context, has reduced trade (due to a lack of cooperation and closed borders) and foreign investments, and has also diverted resources from social welfare. Defence budgets are high at the expense of, for example, health and education expenditure.

A resolution to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, would potentially yield large economic benefits for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Conflict resolution would allow Armenia to increase spending on areas for growth and poverty alleviation; for Azerbaijan, an end to the conflict would ease the strained public finances generated by low oil prices¹³.

If lasting peace is established, both countries could save over 2% of GDP per year by cutting military expenditure. Economic benefits are predicted in public finances, trade in goods and services, energy and water sectors, and in financial markets and investments¹⁴.

In terms of trade, for example, conflict resolution and the opening of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border would restore traditional trade patterns and greatly benefit the impoverished population living along the borders. The diversion of high military expenditure from sectors such as employment, education, and housing were evident in our data collection, reflecting the issues women prioritised in our interviews.



Photo credit: Nelli Shishmanyan

The diversion of high military expenditure from sectors such as employment, education, and housing were evident. The image shows precarious housing conditions in Khachaghbyur village (called Chakhrlu in Azerbaijan) in winter.

Across the contexts, the weakened economic situation was exacerbated by a lack of employment for both men and women. Respondents in the border regions described the impact of limited local employment opportunities: **“People are leaving because there is no production. This has been the case since the war years”**. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, women have suffered from a downturn in economic and social life following the closure of Soviet-era factories and a lack of investment in job creation. Women are particularly affected by unemployment if managing single female-headed households. Many sons and husbands leave their villages for construction work and other jobs in the capitals and Russia and send money home to support household economies. However, some sons choose to stay at home rather than migrate for labour. The burden of unemployed adult sons and unemployed and unmarried daughters often falls on their families. Employed women shared concerns over shrinking salaries, poor working conditions, the physical effects of manual labour, and a lack of labour rights. All women expressed the need to supplement their income with additional formal or informal work in order to make ends meet.

⁹ Mutschler, Max M. “Global Militarization Index 2017”, Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), 2017, www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/GMI_2017_EN.pdf. p. 5, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 9

¹² Saha, David et al. “The economic effect of a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict impacting on Armenia and Azerbaijan.” Berlin Economics, 15 June 2018. p.2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 20, 2.

CASE

Narmin is a music teacher who earns about €170 per month. Her husband died over twenty years ago, and she uses her teaching income to support herself, her son and his family. Her son is unemployed despite having a university degree, and her daughter-in-law has not worked since becoming pregnant. Narmin's salary, like that of many State workers, has been reduced three times in the last three years.

High levels of military spending across the contexts have diverted investment in the education system. There was broad concern among respondents regarding the quality of available education and training. Women across the region frequently criticise their education system, exemplified by unqualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, no opportunity to study subjects such as art or music, and poor facilities. Additional after-school classes are seen as essential to give children a better chance for the future, and the only way to enter higher education institutions. Pupils of all ages receive private tutoring for multiple subjects. There is a trend that if households have limited resources, parents invested in boys' tutoring as insurance for the family's future economic security. Girls' education is negatively affected by discriminatory gender norms and expectations that favour boys' higher education. However, in our data, there are a few striking cases where mothers emphasised the need for their girls to be educated.

CASE

Eleonora was 11 years old when she left her home town and stopped going to school. She hasn't studied past the 4th grade but wishes for her children to study. Her son is in the 7th grade, he is willing to study but she cannot afford to pay for private tutors for him, in addition to her daughter. Eleonora is prioritising her daughter's education both because she is a girl, and because of her own school and war experiences. She really wants her daughter to be educated".

The cost of these after-school classes places additional pressure on already strained family budgets. Some children benefit from free tutoring given by volunteers, but they are the exception.

High military expenditure has also reduced investment in housing and access to clean, safe water. In terms of accommodation, sub-standard living conditions are an issue for many women. In an IDP settlement in Sumgayit, the researchers met entire families who shared one room, with up to 30 people on a floor sharing one kitchen in an appalling condition, and one bathroom without a functioning light. In Yerevan, interviews were held with refugees who had lived in inadequate dormitories since their displacement. We identified one group of refugees that had received state funds to buy their own flats, but this was an isolated case due to the campaigning efforts of one woman refugee, rather than a nationwide programme.



These two women have been best friends since childhood and neighbours as well. One of them is catching a hen for "khangyal" dish. Khangyal is a common dish in Armenian and Azerbaijani cuisine.

Some displaced persons perceived the housing situation as a failure by the state to provide adequate housing and associated with the possibility of recovering homes lost in the aftermath of the conflict. Improving the day-to-day living standards of these groups is a necessary precondition for addressing the sensitive issues of the right of return and durable solutions.

The issue of access to safe and drinkable water was raised in several locations, with cross-border natural resource management affected by conflict dynamics. The Kura-Araks river basin is an important source of freshwater across the wider region, despite concerns of decreasing quality and quantity. In general, Georgia has access to sufficient water; Armenia faces some shortages; and Azerbaijan receives less from the river basin and experiences poor groundwater quality¹⁵.

CASE

A woman in an IDP settlement in Azerbaijan explained how water availability constrained her ability to grow crops. Irrigation water was limited through a metered allowance, and households had to buy drinking water from tanks. Plants did not grow well in the dry soil, and she lamented that the soil was richer back in Agdam.



Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar

Access to safe drinkable, as well as irrigation, water is a serious issue for many communities, affecting women's work and cross-border natural resource management.

In the context of Nagorno-Karabakh, women have campaigned for access to clean water from nearby mountain springs. In IDP settlements in Azerbaijan, women report that the water is undrinkable, and inhabitants have to pay for water to be brought in tanks. Women from border towns also describe the daily challenges of living without household water and gas connections. Conflict resolution would enable joint management of these shared water resources, grant the population living along the borders access to safe water and support improved agricultural production¹⁶.

3.2. CORRUPTION

It is difficult to gather accurate data on the corruption frequently mentioned by respondents. Some corruption is perceived as conflict related; it also contributes to feelings of hopelessness. Women state that if people had money, they could bribe themselves out of difficult situations, but this option was not available to poorer households.

Armenia is currently ranked 105th in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index¹⁷, while Azerbaijan has dropped from the previous year to 152nd out of 180 countries. Corruption hinders inclusive growth and diverts economic resources from investment in human development.

Respondents did not necessarily draw connections between their living conditions and corruption but highlighted the role of corruption in receiving official IDP or disability status, and the associated state benefits.

Weak economic conditions provide an enabling environment for corruption and new forms of exploitation. In recent years, the Government of Azerbaijan has promoted the cotton industry as part of an economic diversification strategy to reduce dependence on the oil industry. The restoration of the industry has been heralded for creating employment, but it also creates opportunities for exploitation and corruption. The most vulnerable groups, such as IDP women and children, are found working in cotton fields for very low wages. Furthermore, the cotton industry is limiting the land available for grazing and food production.

¹⁵ Saha, David et al. "The economic effect of a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict impacting on Armenia and Azerbaijan." Berlin Economics, 15 June 2018. p.42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.2.

¹⁷ Corruption Perceptions Index 2018, Transparency International, See: <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

3.3. GENDERED SYSTEMS OF COMPENSATION AND STATE BENEFITS

In all the contexts, participants discuss state benefits for IDPs and refugees. IDPs and refugees do not have special political status in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh, but do receive some benefits such as interest-free mortgages. In Armenia, internal displacement does not confer any entitlement; however, registered refugees receive support through state poverty alleviation and welfare programmes¹⁸. After Armenia adopted the 1995 law on citizenship, a process of "voluntary" naturalisation of refugees from Azerbaijan began. Refugee status and benefits were exchanged for citizenship, giving holders the right to vote and to be elected to public office, as well as the right to freedom of movement.



Families have lost communal grazing rights for their livestock and are now required to rent land, even if animals are for domestic consumption. Only the poorest accept wages of approximately 5 EUR cents per kilo to collect cotton in the fields: "No one is willing to do this work, so teachers and doctors are being forced to go into the fields as they were in Soviet times,".

A woman in Azerbaijan farming region

Twenty-five years later, 20,000 refugees from Azerbaijan still retain refugee status, while 83,000 naturalised citizens are convinced that Armenian citizenship was forced upon them¹⁹. Many of this group consider themselves victims of a trap set by the country's migration policy and are disappointed that promised changes to their social and economic situation did not materialise.

Both naturalised citizens and those who have retained refugee status remain the poorest, most marginalised, and vulnerable segments of the population. Many displacement-related issues, including housing, quality education, and employment remain unresolved²⁰.

In Azerbaijan, where IDP and refugee status are both formally recognised by the state, there are legal provisions for benefits such as access to temporary housing, subsidised utilities, a monthly allowance, a plot of land, tax privileges, health care, free higher education, and secondary school text books²¹. In reality, however, these benefits are not enjoyed equally by all IDPs. As mentioned above, some IDPs live in sub-standard settlements or have occupied empty houses or buildings, rather than have received state-granted apartments. Significantly, IDPs do not own the properties allocated to them by the state; residents are forced to leave their homes if they lose IDP status. The interviewed women provide detailed information on the type and volume of benefits they receive from the state. However, none of the recipients reflect on the gendered aspects of accessing those benefits. Women's rights activists draw attention to the fact that benefits are registered in the name of the husband. This gendered system of government compensation and benefits mean that women can lose their right to compensation through marriage. Male IDPs pass on their status to their family, even if their wife does not have an IDP status. Female IDPs, on the other hand, lose their IDP status and its associated benefits if they marry non-IDP men. This is explained by one interviewee accordingly:



If I marry a non-IDP, I will lose my IDP status, because in that case I will have to be registered at my husband's property. If an IDP man marries a local woman, she will be registered at his original address and receive IDP status along with her husband.

A young Azerbaijani woman

¹⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Global Report on Internal Displacement. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2018. p.46.

¹⁹ Oksana Musaelyan, Armenian Refugees from Azerbaijan are Treated as Second-Class Citizens in Armenia. May 2018. <https://hetq.am/en/article/89271>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Similarly, children acquire the IDP status of their fathers, therefore children of IDP women and non-IDP men do not receive IDP status²². Due to gender discrimination enshrined in law, these children are not entitled to IDP benefits such as monthly food allowances²³. This legislation is viewed as significant by some participants, but we were unable to find additional data on its contribution to structural discrimination of women displaced populations, or indeed if it influences who IDP women think they can marry.

The same frustration can be felt when talking to Armenian refugees. According to an Armenian woman from Baku, they are treated as aliens in society and as lacking a quality of “Armenian-ness”. There are misunderstandings and antagonisms at the local level, and refugees are blamed for the country's lack of socioeconomic success. As a distant goal she thinks there should be a national policy on refugee integration, something that is still lacking. Housing for the Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan remains as a main struggle.

3.4. INTRA-COMMUNITY TENSIONS

During primary data collection, it became clear that the state benefits received by displaced people was a source of tension in host communities. Both rural and disadvantaged urban areas experienced the influx of IDPs as a source of increased economic pressure alongside widespread de-industrialisation and unemployment following the collapse of the Soviet Union.



There is still conflict between locals and IDPs. Locals think IDPs are the reason for their unemployment or economic troubles. When IDP children study at the university for free, but locals who have worked hard throughout their life cannot afford to send their children to study, locals blame the IDPs. This is how the disputes start. The schools for IDP children are not integrated. They have their own schools; local children have different schools. IDP schools do not have good teachers or good conditions. There are also psychological difficulties; IDP children grew up in dormitories or kindergartens”.

Azerbaijani women from Sumgayit, the second largest city of Azerbaijan, which hosts one of the biggest IDP communities in the country

In some locations, participants occasionally express resentment of IDP support schemes, and view displaced neighbours as no worse off than their host communities.



Locals do not comprehend us as Armenians... Officials tried to convince people to take passports (citizenship) by telling us we (refugees) would have more rights, there was a verbal promise that we would get houses afterwards, but we never got them – we couldn't even get library membership”.

Armenian woman, a refugee from Baku, who came to Armenia as a child in 1990.

Likewise, refugees in Armenia report hostility from some “locals” who view them as competition for sparse resources. Refugees describe how they have been denied a voice in the peacebuilding process, and felt people were often judgemental towards them. Interviewees explained how they were treated as aliens in society and lacking a certain quality of 'Armenian-ness'. Refugees experience misunderstandings and antagonisms at the local level and are blamed by host communities for the country's socio-economic challenges.

²² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Azerbaijan: After some 20 years, IDPs still face barriers to self-reliance. A profile of the internal displacement situation. Geneva: December 2010, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/500158D8DCCDE252852577F5005E4849-Full_Report.pdf. p.9.

²³ *Ibid*

While some respondents in host communities hold empathetic views towards displaced people, they also question the benefits they receive and express concern over the pressure they have put on the local economy. In some locations, there is a perception that IDPs are economically better off than the host community.

The Azerbaijani system of benefits is designed to support the integration of displaced people in society, and all IDP households are entitled to benefits regardless of individual economic status. However, this approach may be counterproductive if it increases tensions between IDPs or with host communities as IDPs with higher incomes are perceived as not deserving state support.

4. THE CHALLENGE OF GENDER NORMS AND PARTICIPATION

Armenian and Azerbaijani women are constrained by a narrow set of expectations around gender roles and female sexuality, with a strong emphasis on virginity, heterosexual marriage, and motherhood; ideal womanhood is centred on these norms. However, gender norms are often thrown into confusion in times of conflict or social upheaval. On the one hand, war and militarism also rely on stereotypical notions of men as soldiers and women as mothers and caretakers. Women living under conflict may be forced or have the opportunity to take more responsibility both in the private and public domains, so it can either be seen as a window of opportunity or just an added burden. This chapter examines how gender norms shape women's social, economic and political participation in the conflict context, by focusing on women's mobility, early and forced marriage, female-headed households, and sex-selective abortion.

4.1. WOMEN'S MOBILITY

Young girls' and women's restriction of movement were a constant and repetitive theme throughout the data collection, in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In regions where the practice of bride kidnapping and forced marriage²⁴ are prevalent, mobility may be restricted by parents, or self-imposed by girls for their own security.

²⁴ Bride kidnapping is a practice where a young woman is abducted by a man for marriage. The man and his family pressure the captured woman to agree to marriage. The practice of bride kidnapping has historically been practiced world-wide but continues in few places, including the Caucasus region. Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or more of the parties, in South Caucasus mainly underage girls and young women, is married without his or her consent or against his or her will. There is often a continuum of coercion used to compel a marriage, ranging from outright physical violence to subtle psychological pressure.

In border towns, mothers would call their daughters repeatedly during our interviews to check where they were and when they were coming home. The control of women's mobility is linked to strong cultural and social norms centred on ideas of “purity”, “virginity” and “being a good girl”. These norms find parallels in the norms of motherhood. Mothers' reproduction of sons is essential for the preservation of the nation's honour; similarly, young women's purity and virginity also serve to preserve the nation's honour.



Photo credit: Famil Mahmudlu

A father says good-bye to his newly married daughter.

Women in both the cities and border regions experience forms of societal control that limit how and when they move around in public spaces. In an interview with a 21-year-old woman, it was made clear how these norms have limited her employment options. The most common jobs available to young women in her town require working until nine o'clock in the evening but staying out until that time attracts questions from family and community. The interviewee had been offered a job as a salesperson, but as she would be returning home late, her father forbade her to accept it. Another young woman, who had graduated with a diploma in finance, told researchers she was unable to find work in her local area. However, her parents would not allow her to move to find employment. The family were afraid that “something might happen” if she moved to the capital and even restricted the amount of time she could spend in the nearby town.

These restrictions also affect women's access to education. One parent claimed that the main problem in her village is the lack of vocational colleges.

For children to continue their education, they have to move 60-70 km away from home and parents are reluctant to send their children away. The respondent argues that it was both emotionally difficult for parents and “a matter of risk” to allow children to move alone to a different town. The “risk” may refer to physical security, but also reflects the honour culture and virtue of virginity, which becomes difficult to regulate if daughters move away.

Most girls and young unmarried women report their movements are restricted by gender norms, although these may be less obvious in urban areas. Families impose strict rules on daughters, and moving away from the family as a young unmarried woman is very unusual in the South Caucasus context. These restrictions greatly limit young women’s and girls’ economic, social, and political participation.

We found another restriction on mobility - one explicitly shaped by the conflict context. The gendered division of labour, with men leaving for the army or as seasonal labour migrants, has resulted in movement limitations for the women staying at home, whether to engage in unpaid domestic labour and/or to become the breadwinners of the household in the absence of men. We met with women from across the different contexts who rarely left their homes or, as described by one of the participants, “lived between work and home”. The heavy workload of women, paid and unpaid, limits their participation in other arenas of society. Responses from participants suggest that women are seen as not as entitled to self-care and free time. Many women stated the focus group discussions were a welcome reason to leave their homes and take a break from their multiple responsibilities. Indeed, the opportunity to come together and talk with other women was often described as a valuable stress relieving activity.

The conflict itself also generates isolation, particularly for those in border regions. Women express concerns about their communities dwindling, and about elderly people left alone and vulnerable.

Residents of border towns feel cut off from the capitals and neighbouring countries not involved in the conflict. Some women travel to Georgia to conduct trade, when the roads are open, but recent changes to import regulations have decreased participants' opportunities to travel and engage in business. Some women express the desire to migrate, stating that only the poorest of the poor were left behind. Others wish to remain and rebuild their fractured communities, explicitly framing this act as a form of resistance to the conflict.

4.2. WOMEN'S WORKLOAD

According to many respondents, women do most of the work (paid and unpaid) holding the family and villages together, while men are likely to be in the military or engaged in seasonal labour migration. In many instances, women also manage the household budget, composed of men's and women's formal and informal earnings, and any social welfare payments such as pensions and disability allowances. Men's contribution to the household economy is limited to financial inputs from any salary or social benefits they may receive.

One interviewee captured the gendered division of labour in a joke, describing a scene common across the contexts:

In a Karabakh home, you will find the woman bathing the children, cooking dinner at the same time, heating water for the baths, dragging in logs, and shoving firewood into the stove. In the meantime, her husband is on the sofa overseeing everything. When asked why he does not help the woman, the husband replies: “But what if there's suddenly a war, and I'm tired?”



It is rooted in Armenian males that they love their kids and support the family financially, but they do not change the nappies.”

A woman in Armenia

In other words, domestic work is not for men. The ongoing violence along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border shapes women's unpaid and paid labour. A dominant argument in the literature on women and war, is that conflict can provide a window of opportunity for women to take up forms of work that have previously been reserved for men. Although this was expressed by some of the women we met, most participants view new roles acquired through conflict necessity as an added burden, rather than opportunities for a change in gender norms. The conflict has indeed altered the nature of women's work, but most importantly, it has increased their workload.



Photo credit: Nelli Shishmanyar

One woman has shared that since her husband had died two years prior, she supports herself, her mother-in-law and two dependent children. While responsible for the majority of household tasks, she and her mother-in-law also work as day labourers in the cotton fields, earning €0.05 per kilo to complement the family income, the pension of the mother-in-law. At the time of this report, a loaf of bread cost around €0.40. When women work long hours outside the home, most often it is their daughters, sisters, or daughters-in-law who are responsible for domestic work. Young women college graduates across the contexts, who are unable to find employment close to their village, are also expected to contribute to unpaid labour in the home.

In addition to household duties and childcare, women provide an immense amount of emotional labour connected with the conflict, such as providing children with a happy and “safe” childhood and preparing their sons for military service. Most mothers prioritise the needs of the children, and face difficulties in considering and identifying their own needs.

Some women report that they would prefer to retire owing to age or health problems, but financially it is not an option.

Many respondents are unable to find work suitable to their qualifications and take whatever jobs that are

available such as in the service industry. Additionally, there are many women whose education was interrupted as a result of the conflict and who are unable to find any kind of employment apart from picking cotton or vegetables. Some of these precarious and low-wage roles are clearly gendered; economically disadvantaged women, who hold primary responsibility for household economy, feel compelled to take jobs that many men refuse to accept.



If men can't get a job that they want to do, they send women to work in any kind of low-skilled job that they can get.”

Azerbaijani woman

Masculinised pride prevents men from undertaking menial work or contributing to household chores and child-care; cultural norms reinforced by the militarised patriarchal identity. As women undertake an unequal share of both paid and unpaid labour, they report having neither the time nor the energy to engage in social or political activities unrelated to sustaining the household.

4.3. EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Early marriage in the South Caucasus is driven by cultural and social attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality, which are reproduced by both men and women. Early marriage is unambiguously a gendered phenomenon, which perpetuates the disregard of “girls’ education and future role in society, beyond domestic labour and child rearing.”

There is a strong perception among respondents that early marriage is only an issue among ethnic minorities, often referring to the Yezidi community, or in rural areas and not in the cities. Some young women residing in urban areas argue that girls in the city are more focused on career and education, while marriage is a higher priority for girls in rural areas. Nevertheless, most young women across the contexts reveal how they feel pressured to get married early. Many girls stop their education in the 9th grade, in most cases – under the influence of their families, and then get married. A politically active young woman in Baku states that her parents had pushed her to get married instead of acquiring an education. Living in Baku and away from her family provides her with more freedom to pursue her political career, even though she feels pressured by her family to get married every time she visits home.

4.4. SEX-SELECTIVE ABORTION

Both in Armenia and Azerbaijan there is a worrying increase in sex-selective abortions. The rhetoric of women as “mothers and bearers of the nation” is increasingly used, referring to women’s role as mothers of sons –future soldiers and defenders of the nation.

In the Women Peace and Security Index 2017/18, Azerbaijan was in the top 10 countries exhibiting son-preference ratios, with 116 boys born for every 100 girls. Armenia followed closely, with 114 boys to every 100 girls²⁶. Son-preference or sex-selective abortion is the result of social patterns and practices that value women for their role as mothers and wives, and less so as daughters. Sons have an instrumental and symbolic role. They are seen as future supporters of their parents. Adult sons stay home when married, while daughters move to the husband’s family after marriage. The sons that stay are expected to contribute to the household economy while their wives are integrated into the support systems of the households. Sons are seen as necessary to mitigate risks such as poverty and unemployment. In addition, sons have the symbolic role of continuing the family name.

The skewed ratio between new-born boys and girls has increased in the South Caucasus since the early 1990s. Access to ultrasound technology following the collapse of the Soviet Union, together with traditional patriarchal norms that value sons over daughters and the prevalence of abortions as a family planning instrument have all influenced the composition of families. Nevertheless, the prolonged conflicts and economic recession have arguably influenced rates of sex-selective abortion. The narratives of militarised societies, in a state of preparation for war, may contribute to an environment where sons are preferred based on assumptions of their ability to defend their nation.

In the World Bank’s report on son-preference in the South Caucasus, an elderly woman interviewed in Baku explained that families “want several sons in the family, so if they lose one at war, another stays with them. There will be a big abyss in the future because the number of girls has decreased²⁷.”



Photo credit: Famil Mahmudlu

Bordering village in Azerbaijan. Boys in the village are having fun around the wedding tent.

While a comprehensive examination of the topic is beyond the scope of this report, the practice of son-preference abortion in protracted conflicts requires further investigation. This research will ideally be conducted over an extended period, by local scholars who are sensitive to cultural nuances around the subject. It should be noted that women’s rights activists have expressed concern that recent moves towards restricting the use of prenatal sex identification methods, such as ultrasound, may lead to limiting abortion rights overall. In Armenia, initiatives by international agencies to reduce the practice of sex-selective abortions are seen as contributing to the curtailment of abortion rights as a whole.

²⁶ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo. 2017. Women, Peace and Security Index 2017/18: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women. Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO.

²⁷ Nora Dudwick, “Missing Women” in the South Caucasus: Local perceptions and proposed solutions. The World Bank. February 2015. p. 7.

5. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence was rarely explicitly mentioned as an impact of the war or important issue in respondents' lives. However, findings suggest that cultural norms accommodate the normalisation of gender-based violence and lead to a culture of silence. In addition, the war has provided a rationalisation for women to either not acknowledge gender-based violence (GBV is not seen as violence, or the burden of survival is the principal priority), or to justify it when acknowledged. This chapter summarises examples of gender-based violence revealed in the research, and substantiated from more than 15 years of experience working with women's organisations in the region.



Photo credit: Nelli Shishmanyán

5.1. SURVIVAL SEX

Survival sex is a sensitive topic, and it is difficult to collect and verify data on this issue. However, certain stories and examples were shared with researchers in private conversations across different settings, indicating it is an issue relevant in all the research contexts. This section discusses such information when received from multiple sources. In discussions with women human rights activists, sexual exploitation was identified as a component of military structures. Socially and economically disadvantaged women are reportedly pressured to offer sexual services in exchange for money. It is unclear whether sex work is an organised practice in the military, or occurs on an individual basis. Furthermore, it is rumoured that lower-ranking soldiers are expected to “offer their wives sexually” to higher-ranking officers in exchange for privileges. Should wives

refuse to submit to this form of violence, the husband's previously enjoyed privileges are revoked or not granted at all.

We also found that women within the military, primarily serving as cooks, cleaners, nurses, doctors, secretaries or administrative staff also face sexual expectations and pressure from military personnel.

CASE

One Armenian woman human rights activist recalled how she was treated differently in the military as she refused to provide sexual favours to higher-ranking officers. She was not allowed to take more than one day's leave for a family issue, despite another woman having been granted several days in a similar situation. The activist explained that the other woman provided sexual favours to the commanding officer, while she was discriminated against for her refusal. Sex is perceived to give women in the army leverage, a way for women to negotiate difficult living conditions and gain a better position, at the same time as leading to stigmatisation in a context of toxic masculinities and militarism.

Another example where sex becomes a means of survival is the buying and selling of sex in bordering regions and territories around military bases. In a bordering region, a gynaecologist interviewed argued that selling sex has become a common practice for some impoverished mothers. Observing that female patients also bring their underage daughters for abortions in his clinic, he concludes that some women sell their daughters sexually due to economic difficulties.

We have repeatedly heard of buses that visit communities to recruit women for a day's work in cotton fields; however, it is widely known to be an organised form of sex work. The women are paid around 2 euros for each trip.



We know that “cotton buses” are not going to the fields. Women are taken to another region or military base for sex. Single women, single mothers, single IDP women without protection from any man, or those who are extremely in need are usually the direct target of the drivers of these buses.

5.2. TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

Women human rights activists identified IDP women and girls and individuals living in impoverished bordering and conflict-affected areas at risk of trafficking. Many women in vulnerable economic conditions are promised employment such as nursing, domestic and child-care work in other regions or abroad, as a cover for trafficking. It was beyond the scope of this report to fully investigate the links between trafficking and conflict; however, it is hoped this brief analysis will inspire further research.

According to official statistics, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are classified as Tier 2 countries, meaning that the governments do not fully meet the minimum standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). However, both countries are attempting to comply with these standards²⁸. The Armenian government identified 13 victims of trafficking in 2017: 8 subjected to sex trafficking and 5 to forced labour²⁹. The low numbers may reflect that the Armenian government has reduced law enforcement efforts in relation to trafficking, lacks proactive methods of identifying trafficking victims, and relies on victims to self-identify³⁰. The Azerbaijani government identified 71 trafficking victims in 2017: 66 female victims of sex trafficking and 5 male victims of forced labour³¹. Over the past five years, Azerbaijan has been a source, transit and destination country for both sex and labour trafficking involving men, women and children³².

5.3. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

For many women respondents, domestic violence is viewed as a private matter; it occurs but is not seen in public. In the words of a woman in Armenia:



Men behave in a more peaceful way outside the families. We know that domestic violence exists, but we don't see it publicly."

There is also a culture of silence surrounding sexual violence. One woman argued that there were no cases of rape in her community as the women would never allow themselves to be assaulted, placing the blame on survivors for "allowing" themselves to be raped. A woman human rights activist explains that survivors of violence are often stigmatised, and their families can be forced to leave Nagorno-Karabakh to a place where they are unknown and where they are not perceived as a source of shame by neighbours and society. Perpetrators, on the other hand, are rarely exposed or punished.

CASE

An elderly Azerbaijani woman argued that resettlement and the prospect of repeated displacement created stress that could increase violence in households. Another shared that a brother-in-law had become violent towards his mother after witnessing his grandmother killed by "the other side". This woman connects witnessing trauma to an increase of domestic violence.

For some of the women, domestic violence is either not understood as violence or normalised. One respondent, working for an NGO in a border town, describes how she was criticised when she surveyed women about their experiences of gender-based violence. According to these women, it was an irrelevant question as "it is normal that men beat women". When domestic violence is acknowledged as violence, some women argue that the experience of war makes individuals more violent. This applied to men who have served at the frontline, and men and women who have stayed in conflict-affected communities. The women share stories of mothers who they believe had become physically violent towards their other children due to losing sons in the war. It is unclear what made these mothers exhibit violent behaviour; it is often shaped by an intersection of factors such as prolonged conflict, grief, trauma, or financial hardship.

The interviewed women rarely identify physical violence as domestic violence; other forms, such as psychological or economic violence, are never even recognised as such.

²⁸ The department of State, United States of America. TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS REPORT. United States of America, June 2018

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* p.83.

³² *Ibid.*

6. GRIEF AND LOSS

Grief and loss are perhaps the mostly widely shared experiences of women interviewed for this report. This chapter outlines how a gendered hierarchy of loss results in women prioritising men in their reflections of loss as well as the social, legal, and emotional implications of losing a male relative.

6.1. HIERARCHY OF LOSS

In women's reflections, the loss or fear of losing sons, fathers, and husbands is greater than the fear of losing their own lives or those of other women. This hierarchy of loss is influenced by the ways in which militarisation relies on women's reproductive and unpaid labour, making the loss of male relatives economically significant for households. It can also be understood as part of militarised discourse, with soldiers framed as national heroes. Men who are killed in combat are publicly celebrated as "martyrs" and "heroes", while they are mourned in private.

Though women, particularly mothers, are honoured for the patriotic sacrifice of their male relatives, this glorification is always connected with the men they have lost. It promotes an idea of the "holy victimisation" of mothers, combined with patriotic values and the belief that the "main purpose of the woman" is delivering more sons for the homeland. The public rituals of praise and tribute leave very little space for personal mourning separated from the narrative of sacrifice. Likewise, bereaved women are unable to denounce publicly the military institution that deprived them of their loved ones. This is captured by Armenian woman human rights activist:



There are families that say that they are proud of the fact that they have lost their loved ones in the fight for their country. However, when we speak with them in private, their true feelings emerge, their extreme negative attitudes to the loss and their pain."

We clearly found that women perceived young men at greater physical risk than women, shaped by the fact that it is primarily men who serve in the military.

CASE

Another woman argued that the escalations in April 2016 did not affect her as a woman: "If I am to die, I will die. If there is shooting and it hits me, then it will hit me. However, as for the young boys, I am very troubled by their deaths."

The perception that women are not direct targets of conflict-related violence means those women who are killed or injured in the conflict become invisible victims.

6.2. LIVING WITH THE LOSS OF MALE RELATIVES

Many women, especially those from conflict-affected areas, have lost their husbands or male relatives. This includes those who have received confirmation of death (or witnessed it directly) and those whose relatives are classified as missing persons. There are also deaths indirectly caused by the war, for example family members who have passed away due to sudden or protracted stress-related illness, or those who died slowly from injuries sustained in the war. Even when the death of a husband is confirmed, many women remain unmarried by choice or social convention. In traditional South Caucasian social norms, where women are held to represent family honour, remarriage can be seen as a disgrace to the family. Consequently, many bereaved women raise their children alone or with the help of the extended family. In addition, women heads of households often care for elderly family members and grandchildren, placing them in an economically vulnerable state, even with state allowances for family members who were killed or injured in the war. Other women continue to stay with their deceased husband's family, further affecting their opportunities to re-marry.

Missing relatives and unconfirmed deaths place many of the women in limbo. Women whose husbands have been declared missing are unable to remarry and are described as "mother and father" to their children. These women are deprived of both legal and emotional rights and needs. These "waiting" women are excluded from many state support programmes and do not receive the social pensions of their missing relatives. There are no policies or welfare mechanisms targeted at this social group anywhere in the region.

The “waiting” women feel they have been abandoned and forgotten. Emotionally, the loss of intimacy is a sensitive subject for these women, but one that has undoubtedly shaped their experience of the “post-war” years. Many in this situation spoke about waiting for their husbands, “always expecting [them]” in case they were to return home.

CASE

One woman explains that it is difficult to say goodbye without a grave; women with missing husbands do not hold a wake. “Who says that these men are dead? [These women] celebrate their [husbands’] birthdays.” This uncertainty makes grieving and healing more difficult for women, who feel they must be prepared for the possible return of their spouses.

7.1. LIVING WITH THE CONFLICT

The gendered division of labour in conflict positions men and boys at the frontlines, and women and girls mainly at home. Women are responsible for the work of caring and worrying for the family. It is important to reiterate that the focus of women’s stress was not necessarily their own security and well-being, but that of their children, and their sons and husbands and relatives in the army. For more on collective agency and women’s coping strategies, see Section 2.2.

The conflict has a profound impact on the daily lives of people, particularly those living in the border regions. Women from these regions described war as something they physically carry with them and feel deeply in their bodies. The women living close to the borders experience constant stress from the regular gunfire. Some women reveal that the sound of fireworks and aircraft now also triggers stress for them.

CASE

In order to cope, people try to continue with their usual routines or find small acts of resistance. One Armenian woman described dancing to Azeri music when they hear it played from a nearby military post. Her son is serving in Nagorno-Karabakh military and has 8 months left of his service. Although she deals with the situation with humour, she also said “It is impossible to live” in these conditions and is clearly experiencing psychological strain related to both everyday living conditions and her son’s absence.

For some internally displaced families in Azerbaijan, the reality of live fire at the Line of Contact is one of the main reasons for resisting the government’s IDP relocation programme. The aim is to provide those living in sub-standard conditions with better and more permanent accommodation; however, the properties on offer are situated closer to the frontline.

7. EVERYDAY STRESS

Since 2014, Armenia and Azerbaijan have exchanged heavier fire along the border between the two countries³³. This has caused a great deal of insecurity and anxiety for communities in the affected areas. The April War of 2016 described by one woman as “an earthquake”, marked a major shift in many of the respondents’ sense of their families’ physical security and the levels of stress in their daily lives. It was a reminder of the proximity of violence, different from the normalised state of “frozen” conflict. This chapter examines women’s experience of increased stress and anxiety as they anticipate war and its implications, particularly focusing on health. It also explores lives lived in “suitcase mode”: the stories of displaced people living in limbo, and women in border communities postponing plans in case of future escalations.



Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar

Before the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, Armenian and Azerbaijani people used this road without any problem. During the Soviet era, a public bus route went from the Azerbaijani village of Agdam to the Armenian village of Gala and back.

³³ International Crisis Group, ‘Nagorno-Karabakh: Risks of a New Escalation,’ 28th February 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/nagorno-karabakh-risks-new-escalation>



Photo credit: Kvinna till Kvinna

CASE

Arzu and her family already live within earshot of the frontline and hear artillery on an almost daily basis. As reported in other places, residents in that area say that if the shooting stops they worry something worse is about to start. They refuse to move to the new settlement the government is planning, as that would locate them even closer to the Line of Contact than where they currently are.

Along the Line of Contact, everyday tasks are disrupted by shooting or the anticipation of shooting. Some women share that they are not able to hang their laundry outside due to the risk of live fire. One woman walks her children to school every day, in case shooting suddenly breaks out.

Many women see a causal relationship between stress and fear and the occurrence of certain diseases, namely diabetes, tuberculosis, thyroid deficiencies, and diseases commonly associated with women such as breast cancer and fertility issues. Older women, especially those displaced by conflict, say that they still feel affected by the physical hardships of war. The combination of difficult living conditions, hard physical labour (inside or outside the home), and childcare bring women to the point of exhaustion.

Many women say that though they are concerned about their own health, they put the needs of children, spouses, or relatives with chronic illnesses or disabilities

first. When it comes to sexual and reproductive health, most women say that they do not have a “culture” of taking care of themselves. However, state workers in Armenia who received a mandatory annual check-up say they believe such a scheme would be beneficial for all women. Some younger women add that more comprehensive sex education is needed in schools as a preventative step for women's health.

The challenges associated with accessing health care include a shortage of equipment, distance, and the cost of treatment and medicines. Although some services are free of charge, local clinics in smaller towns are often in poor condition and understaffed.



“We are ill [and] it's because of all that fear, the stress etc. Many women here have diabetes, heart attacks, strokes, and so on. I think it is all a result of those war years. It is not an easy thing to endure all that. We, the women here, are very hardworking; every person has an orchard, a homestead garden, private land. Everyone is surviving somehow according to their capacity.”

Woman in Martakert/Aghdara

Some women state that it is necessary to bribe staff in order to ensure better treatment. The absence of public transport in many areas means that some women are unable to access health care services except by taxi, which they cannot afford. In addition, in some places the roads are in poor condition making it dangerous to travel. A woman from the bordering region describes the state of health care facilities in her community:



“I don't go to this hospital because there is just nothing there, the walls are in bad shape, there are no proper beds, no linen, nothing. So often it has happened that we needed care, but they only provide first aid there, or simple things like intravenous infusions. Whenever people need more serious treatment they go to the city.”

7.2. LIVING IN “SUITCASE MODE”

The unresolved nature of the conflict and the deadlock in Track I negotiations, keeps displaced people in a form of limbo. They either legally, or through the stigma, retain the status of displaced persons and lack a sense of belonging to the community they now live in. The sense that displaced people are effectively deprived of the right to individual self-determination – most fundamentally where they want to live – has emerged throughout the data, even if not explicitly voiced. The process of resettlement (or re-resettlement) is more visible in Azerbaijan and illustrates the sense of insecurity mentioned above. The majority of displaced persons interviewed live in a precarious and vulnerable state, including being settled close to the Line of Contact or in the most conflict-affected regions. When settled somewhere, they are only temporary residents of the space provided to them by the government and often lack basic resources, including plots of land to grow vegetables, clean and accessible water, or public transportation to access economic opportunities. This disproportionately affects women as they face social barriers to movement (for example, driving cars remains a very unusual practice for women) and are often the ones providing for the family, as discussed in the sections above on women's mobility and workload.

Furthermore, displaced persons report feeling in an emotional limbo. In discussions with women IDPs in particular, it became clear that the idea of returning “home” (the place they were displaced from) remains a fervent hope. Notions of home and belonging are paramount for the younger and older generation of IDPs alike, including those born in displacement. According to peacebuilding activists working in Azerbaijan, a majority of IDPs, regardless of age, believe that they will be able to return home one day, shaping their sense of not belonging and impeding integration.

Some women in the border regions anticipate future displacement, and feel they must be ready to evacuate at short notice. Interviewees reflect on their experience during the April War, expecting to be displaced yet again. Some packed their bags and slept in their clothes, ready to leave at a moment's notice. For many women, this expectation has resulted in putting some aspects of life on hold. Women share accounts of stalled house renovations, and a reluctance to buy luxury items in anticipation of the material destruction of war. As explained by one woman:



Before this [April] war...we had forgotten that we are in a war zone, we were doing renovations, buying luxurious things. Now I can say that the construction shops almost stopped working, because people started to flee again, people started to live in very scarce conditions...



Photo credit: Nelli Shishmalyan

8. PERSPECTIVES ON PEACE AND TRANSFORMING THE NARRATIVE

The research shows that women hold different conceptions of peace, shaped by militarised patriotism and the prolonged conflict situation. Regardless of the various perspectives, what unites many women across the contexts is how peace is understood as being distanced from themselves and their daily lives. This chapter explores transformation in the understanding of peace, from being seen as a remote, male-centric exercise to a concern in the daily practices of women.

8.1. PERSPECTIVES ON PEACE

In a militarised patriotic nation, where the “Other” is consistently portrayed as a threat, irrevocably different, and less peaceful or willing to compromise, imagining peace can be a difficult task.

The lulls in violence associated with “frozen” conflicts provide only a negative peace. This was articulated by one woman (but shared by many across the contexts), as when “the cease-fire is signed, the enemies shut up. I would like them to come and tell us: people, live your life safely, and my grandchildren would live peacefully.” We found all women desired full conflict resolution and positive peace, however remote they believed it to be.

Beyond the effects of militarised patriotism, the context of prolonged conflict has made peace unconceivable for many women. The April War renewed concerns that there may be no possibility of peace, as described by an elderly woman:



War is inevitable, and we have no hope of it ending”.

The hopelessness expressed by many older women results from experiencing many years of conflict, only to see their children and grandchildren live through it without any real progress towards resolution. This hopelessness is underpinned by a lack of trust in peacebuilding processes. For some women, particularly in the border regions, peace is instead understood as a

continuation of war: assured by militarisation and military deterrents. These women in areas directly affected by violence, insist that the army is crucial for self-defence and that unilateral withdrawal was unthinkable. They are unable to conceive of alternatives to a strong army, or counter the narrative that the military is the sole guarantor of peace. Nevertheless, other women in the border regions take a different position, arguing for a peace that is explicitly anti-war. They argue that by living in the border regions and experiencing both visible and invisible forms of violence, they understand conflict more intimately than those living in the capital, and could not be pro-war. These variations in how women relate to peace reflect fatigue, a lack of trust in conflict resolution, and the potency of militarism in shaping national identities. It highlights how prolonged conflict can shape how women envision peace and their role (or indeed, lack thereof) in peacebuilding.

8.2. PEACEBUILDING AS A MALE-CENTRIC CONCEPT

In thinking about peace, most women we talked to see themselves as being outside the peace processes, which they understood as a task for the male elite. Many argue that ordinary people – particularly women – are powerless to bring about real change. Consequently, when asked how women can influence the peace process, one woman argues:



There is nothing in our hands, we can't create peace, women can't do anything regarding this issue.”

Similarly, for one young activist, peace is an issue for the government and relevant foreign bodies. Another woman argued:



We say that we want peace, but we're only fooling ourselves. States are the actors to solve this [war] but they have to be balanced. We want it to be solved peacefully and we are waiting for the results.”



Photo credit: Society Without Violence

For this woman, individuals conceptualising peace is a futile task, particularly when individuals and populations have no impact on conflict resolution as their position is disregarded by those in power.

By viewing peace at the macro-level, women see themselves as disconnected from the peace process but also as powerless, unable to exert any meaningful influence. Gender relations and norms play a role in understanding ordinary women's positioning of themselves as unimportant actors. In the South Caucasus (as in many places) women's civic and political participation is viewed as breaking with traditional gender roles, which often define women in relation to their reproductive and auxiliary roles. It is therefore unsurprising that many women interviewed did not see themselves as potential agents in formal political processes. The women consistently refer to the "men" of peacebuilding, the political leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and Russia's Vladimir Putin. This self-exclusion is a consequence of the prioritisation of formal peacebuilding between state actors, making it difficult for the respondents to envision women, and in general most ordinary citizens, having a role in shaping the possibility for peace. Given the widespread notion that prominent and successful peacebuilders are men, with women peace activists and women human rights defenders isolated from formal peace processes, as well as the risks associated with engaging in peacebuilding, women, despite frequently having vast experience in

the field, do not see themselves as peacebuilders. This means that many important factors, and indeed people, are not considered, which can delay achieving peace.

8.3. PEACE IN THE DAILY PRACTICES OF WOMEN

The findings suggest that the daily practices of women can provide avenues to transform the narrative of peace. Such an approach takes conflict resolution outside of the militarist national framework, no longer solely a male-centric practice. As described in the section on coping strategies, many women offer support and show empathy towards other women to lessen the stress of life in a conflict context. Women emphasise the importance of speaking with other women over a cup of coffee or tea to break the isolation of a life lived between home and work. They also stress the need for spaces to meet each other, outside of their homes. It is within these spaces, locally constructed between neighbours, family members, and friends that women conceptualise peace in terms of their relationships with other women, and the support they provide for one another. There is a clear need for safe spaces in local communities, where women can continue this practice of mutual support and build trust among themselves. This can create a sense of collective agency, where women envision themselves as political agents that can demand improvements in the issues



Photo credit: Ahmad Mukhtar

Women attach importance to safe spaces and time for discussions over a cup of coffee or tea.

More importantly, it is within such safe spaces that empathy towards others can become empathy extended over borders. For example, drawing on what they believe was their shared experience as mothers, women express empathy towards all women affected by the conflict, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. Some women make statements such as **“I am sure that their mothers feel the same way we do”** and **“I would like to hear what their mothers think about this conflict”**. The fact that these issues were raised during focus group discussions suggests that maternalism provides a socially acceptable framework for articulating anti-war sentiments, such as: **“Psychologically, every bullet of the enemy, regardless of whose child it hits, passes through every single mother's heart.”** At the same time, the empathy many mothers express becomes difficult to maintain within militarist nationalism. This was expressed by some of the women through less empathetic positions, such as arguments for enhanced securitisation and greater military strength. These contradictions reaffirm the need for safe spaces, where attitudes and perspectives of peace that contradict the militarist narrative are possible.

8.4. OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING

Across the region, there is a challenge for civil society actors to exchange information on the different peace-related initiatives and processes in their respective contexts. These difficulties are compounded for communication across the conflict divide, and women activists on all sides express the need for more frequent

meetings and more direct dialogue across borders. Women activists require support to implement their creative approaches that enhance women's meaningful participation in peace processes, going beyond established networks and practices.



Photo credit: Kvinna till Kvinna

“If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair” – Shirley Chisholm, politician, educator, and author.



At the beginning, I failed to accept the other side and I kept accusing them of starting the war. However, during the negotiations, we reached a point where we realised that we were not the ones who started this or who should be solving the problem. I saw that they were exactly like us. We needed time to accept the 'enemy' as someone who is close to you. We have changed a lot thanks to the meetings, and our understanding of peace and war has solidified. At the time, peace, for me, meant living without the other side, but then I realised this was impossible and they are people that will always be around.

Armenian women peacebuilding activist

This example of individual transformation through participation in regional exchanges, captures the potential of cross-border activities as peacebuilding activism. When women from different contexts first meet, there is high tension and strong emotions, however, an understanding of shared issues can develop over time. The findings support the need for long-term cross-border engagement to unlearn deep-seated notions, and “accept the 'enemy' as someone who is close to you. At the same time, these entrenched ideas of the “Other” as hostile and a threat, can be addressed through peacebuilding activities that support intra-community dialogue within each country. This internal work is a necessary first step to reach the point where people can start envisioning possibilities for peace.

Moreover, while bringing a wealth of experience and knowledge, the older generation of women peacebuilders are sometimes reluctant to pass the baton to younger women human rights defenders and peace actors. This new generation should be encouraged to share their innovative approaches to conflict transformation and resolution, and ensure the needs and priorities of younger women affected by the conflict are also heard.



Photo credit: Kvinna till Kvinna

Young and middle-aged WHRDs and peacebuilders report exclusion from the circles of “serious talks” and “true peacebuilding”. This exclusion is reinforced by international actors who maintain set narratives, and work with an unchanging network of prominent, established figures. Young and middle-aged women peacebuilders find there is no space to contribute to peacebuilding processes at a higher level, although these activists contribute as backstage actors and are active at the grassroots level. A generational shift is required to ensure sustainable peace processes, and actors should ensure the empowerment of younger women with diverse backgrounds who can build upon the experience and lessons of the older generation of peacebuilders.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women have played a significant role in grassroots peacebuilding movements and in political negotiations and transitions around the world. Argentina, Northern Ireland, Liberia and, more recently, the Philippines, are frequently cited as examples of how women can be mobilised in times of transition.

Putting all citizens' rights at the heart of a revitalised and inclusive peacebuilding process offers the best chance of breaking the deadlock in negotiations, and legitimising future post-conflict political arrangements. Research suggests that greater engagement of women and civil society in peace processes has a transformative effect, leading to more sustainable outcomes. For such an approach to work in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict there needs to be a significant shift in public perceptions of peacebuilding and the associated risks. This is not as simple as increasing the visibility, transparency or even outreach of multi-level peace initiatives. In order to be truly inclusive, peacebuilding must be responsive to the needs and values of local communities, while remaining committed to the nonviolent transformation of a conflict that has already claimed far too many lives.

Some of the key conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that women, regardless of their experience and expertise level, do not view themselves as peacebuilders or realise their capacity to contribute to the peace processes. This is often due to the roles that their male counterparts play and the general perception of the superiority of their agenda, but also due to the exclusion that younger women human rights defenders and peacebuilders experience from the older generation, reducing the opportunity for a sustainable generational shift. In order to realise the objective of women's meaningful participation, both women human rights defenders and women from conflict-affected communities should be provided with tailored capacity building and safe spaces to come together to strategise, collaborate and share experiences. Such support would counteract the shrinking space across the region for civil society and women activists. The recent shift in political dynamics present a vital opportunity to engage women from all sides of the conflict in a joint effort to “prepare populations for peace”.

A number of women are simultaneously engaged in the protection of women's rights and peacebuilding. Many of them report that the climate for their activities has grown increasingly hostile in the wake of the escalation of April 2016. A number of factors reinforce their marginalised status, including fears of authoritarian backlash and being labelled 'traitors' or 'enemies of the nation'; public perception of NGOs as corrupt and/or western-oriented liberal elites; and the persistence of patriarchal norms and the rise of anti-feminist nationalist movements. While some established women's rights advocates have achieved a level of protected status within their respective societies, they are still faced with regular obstacles and the obligation to compromise. Younger women activists often drive change at the grassroots level, but typically receive less protection and fewer opportunities to exert an influence on peacebuilding strategies at the national level. The very real risks involved in these activities is a major factor discouraging women of all ages from doing more to challenge the multiple barriers to their participation. Therefore, it is very important to protect and empower women human rights defenders on the ground.

The recommendations below have been derived from two sources: firstly, the recurring themes and priorities identified during fieldwork involving women across the contexts, and secondly, the extensive Kvinna till Kvinna expertise and analysis relating to gender and peacebuilding in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They emphasise the need for a holistic approach to peace rooted in women's everyday realities, in which gender is treated as a core component of peacebuilding rather than a separate sphere of interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

≡ TO THE OSCE MINSK GROUP AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

≡ **Remove barriers to women's participation.** When it comes to promoting women's sustained involvement in peacebuilding, further attention must be paid to gender dynamics at different levels of the peace process. Structural barriers, such as early marriage and the pressure to have children resulting in insufficient/incomplete education, enforce and reinforce limits on women's meaningful participation in public life. Without a conscious effort to dismantle systems of violence and discrimination against women, efforts to fully engage them in peacebuilding will remain partially successful at best.

≡ **Create inclusive multi-level fora for populations to discuss the conflict and peace negotiations.** The lack of objective media and the non-transparent nature of negotiations are strong deterrents to support for peacebuilding. Negative propaganda contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty and powerlessness, while simultaneously fuelling distrust towards civic institutions that could provide opportunities for meaningful participation. It is vital that the societies involved be made aware of the parameters of any potential settlement before they are engaged in substantive dialogue. It is equally important that peace efforts are informed by in-depth consultations with local communities, which can provide a more accurate range of opinions than that reflected in the media. This should include both mixed-gender and women-only groups in order to build up a more nuanced picture of the gendered impacts of conflict and its transformation. National governments involved in the negotiations need to consult with women peacebuilders to ensure that their voices are heard around the negotiation table.

≡ **Address intra-community tensions.** Local governments should take measures to diffuse intra-community tensions arising from perceptions of bias and unequal treatment between IDP and host communities.

≡ **Develop amendments to the GBV/DV legislation.** Local governments should put more efforts in developing and implementing local legislation on gender-based and domestic violence, including with regard to state-run shelters, psychological and legal support services, hotlines etc.

≡ **Ensure that adequate measures are undertaken to improve the living conditions/livelihoods of IDPs/refugees** on both sides of the line of conflict. This would open the space for discussions addressing the sensitive issues around peace and the right to return, as for the moment, the general sentiment seems to be that authorities are holding back due to expectations of recovering livelihoods prior to the conflict.

≡ TO THE EU, AND OTHER POLICY MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

≡ **Appoint qualified and experienced advisors on women, peace and security to the EU Special Representative,** who will be responsible for the coordination of on-the-ground consultations with women's groups, acting as a door-opener for the women's organisations, analysis, and incorporating the gender perspective into the work of the EU/EUSR.

≡ **Encourage quality, gender sensitive media and analysis.** In order to counter propaganda and ensure access to objective, gender and conflict sensitive information, it is essential to build the skills of researchers and the media in gender-sensitive reporting. Journalists, analysts and other opinion makers must be given access to diverse sources, there is a need to hear the voices of women from different backgrounds and age groups.

≡ **Establish a permanent advisory group of active women** to consult with the OSCE and EU and other major international actors throughout the peace process. The group would comprise a diverse set of inter-generational and intersectional voices, including women human rights defenders, women peacebuilders and grassroots activists with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and from different age groups and contexts, who would provide evidence-based information on a regular basis.

≡ **Systematically include women experts and WHRDs in all consultations /meetings.** Women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders possess unique expertise in terms of the peace processes, making them essential participants and contributors to any and all relevant discussions on the local and regional level. They are, however, frequently overlooked by international actors convening such meetings. Regular engagement of WHRDs in such consultations can ensure that the formal peace process is informed by women's voices and expertise. Moreover, it is crucial for EU representatives to meet with WHRDs when visiting the region and to invite WHRDs when discussing the security situation.

≡ **Encourage sustainable intergenerational dialogue,** knowledge- and experience-sharing. Support separate fora for older women to "institutionalise" their legacy, and for younger women (grassroots, initiative groups, coalitions, networks, NGOs/CSOs, and individuals) to become agents of change and gain in confidence, building upon the legacy of their predecessors.

≡ **Counter shrinking space** for civil society through advocacy and opening doors to relevant international actors and raising the importance of a vibrant civil society with national actors.

≡ **Support and build on existing initiatives.** A broad range of NGOs, informal associations, and respected individuals are already engaged in transformative work at the grassroots level. This includes groups that provide material and moral support to victims and survivors of the conflict, those working in the spheres of culture and education, and those working on specific issues such as

women's rights, children's rights, and the rights of people with disabilities. Their efforts should be recognised as a contribution to building peace from the bottom up, by creating and sustaining the structures required for everyday life. There is huge potential for broader cross-border engagement around specific themes and challenges, as has already been demonstrated by two decades of cooperation and dialogue among select women's organisations. There is scope for this dialogue to be both deepened and broadened to include a more diverse range of interests.

≡ **Support safe spaces for WHRDs in their respective contexts.** As described, the situation of women human rights defenders, especially those working on peacebuilding, is difficult and carries risks. Therefore, it is important to give protection to WHRDs and support their work, ensuring their efforts and achievements are visible. Neutral, secure safe spaces should be supported for women both across and within the contexts to exchange experiences, and share lessons learned and good practices on thematic issues. It is an essential precondition for women peacebuilding activists to have places to share and discuss common themes and problems, such as addressing the threat of far-right groups and the anti-gender narrative, and implementing risk assessment and mitigation measures. Dialogue meetings between WHRDs from different sides of the conflict can provide an important contribution to conflict transformation through sharing experiences, identification of common issues and messages, joint analysis, and questioning attitudes and perceptions of "the other side".

≡ **Create possibilities for dialogue across the conflict divide.** International actors should support opportunities to widen dialogue across the entire South Caucasus region and beyond, through identifying cross-cutting regional issues such as gender-based violence/domestic violence; women, peace and security sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); women's political participation; early warning systems; alongside "preparing the populations for peace" and conflict transformation.

≡ **Support the local government in passing legislative amendments** and other measures to better regulate gender-based and domestic violence.

≡ **Support civil society/peacebuilding actors in creating and maintaining the dialogue spaces** and establishing professional connection across conflict borders through a long-term approach over multiple years to ensure the sustainability of results and supporting conflict transformation and changing narratives.

≡ TO INTERNATIONAL ACTORS PROVIDING FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO THE REGION:

≡ **Ensure gender expertise in project budgeting processes.** Women human rights defenders and experts should be consulted when developing budgets and programming.

≡ **Introduce and implement flexible, yet long term funding schemes** when funding civil society, especially women's initiative groups and grassroots activists. Initiatives need to be funded for a sufficient length of time – at least 3 years – to create impact. These funding schemes should also include mechanisms to ensure the safety and security for human rights defenders, and specifically for women human rights defenders who continue to be targeted on multiple platforms and by various groups.

≡ **Identify the link between peacebuilding and livelihoods,** human rights, and gender equality when planning and implementing programmes. Make sure to include health care, security and well-being, as well as flexible emergency budgets when financing peacebuilding. The link between the gendered effects of the conflict on women's livelihoods and peace processes should be taken into consideration when designing peace-oriented initiatives.

≡ **Ensure sufficient funds are available to civil society actors working on cross-border dialogue** on a sustainable and flexible scheme to allow space for long-term dialogue between multiple diverse groups over a period of several years.

≡ **Support the local governments in allocating funds for the improvement of living conditions for IDPs/refugees,** which would in turn contribute to reducing the notion of “living in suitcase mode” and, as mentioned above, serve as a precondition to addressing the sensitivities around the right to return and sustainable solutions.

≡ TO LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS WORKING IN THE REGION:

≡ **Create safe spaces for target groups to discuss sensitive topics** such as the need for compromise and the meaning of peace, and how women can define their own priorities for peace. Support dialogue within different groups in order to promote a sustainable and sensitive generational shift, and be inclusive of urban/rural, IDP/refugee, queer, ethnic/religious groups, women with disabilities, and those with

different socio-economic backgrounds and status. It is important that the international community provide the funding for these actions – but it is the women's organisations in the region that are the ones creating the safe spaces. Local actors should also be encouraged to find alternative means for dialogue across conflict borders.

≡ **Create knowledge and develop analytical resources** based on regional experience to assist in advocacy efforts towards a localised agenda. It is important to support storytelling, including feminist storytelling, and to make sure a multitude of voices are heard. Women activists should be encouraged and supported to provide analysis and opinion pieces /messages/ reports/ policy papers to help guide other stakeholders and provide strategic vision, leadership, and reference materials.

≡ **Investigate links between gender and militarisation.** The relationship between gender and militarisation has been the subject of intensive scrutiny in feminist scholarship. However, although Armenia and Azerbaijan rank among the most highly militarised states in the world, and are routinely characterised as patriarchal societies, there has been a dearth of research regarding the implications for gender and sexuality. Various factors pertaining to women's rights, including the prevalence of domestic violence and rates of sex-selective abortion, need to be investigated in light of the norms associated with militarised societies in a state of preparation for war. Ideally, this research would be carried out over an extended period by local scholars who are sensitive to cultural nuances around the subject.

≡ **Adopt a gender and conflict sensitive approach in all programmes, activities, and publications.** It is essential that civil society organisations active in the relevant contexts ensure a gender- and conflict-sensitive approach in all programming and proposal development, even if they do not specialise in women's rights protection.

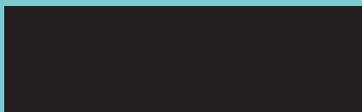
≡ **Analyse the conflict from a feminist perspective.** Local actors should be encouraged to conduct feminist analyses of the conflict, war, propaganda and the “enemy image”, and use the findings in their awareness raising actions.

≡ **Develop and adopt a communication and visibility strategy** that is inclusive, but still takes into account the security issues in terms of ensuring that increased visibility does not lead to an increased security risks. Communication and visibility strategies should include a multitude of different women's voices.

≡ **Contribute to reducing intra-community tensions** between IDP/refugee and host communities through implementing confidence- and trust-building measures.

≡ **Work with local government to address GBV/DV issues.** Where possible, civil society actors should cooperate with local government agencies to ensure adequate training in relevant service-provision, maintain databases, monitor the implementation of GBV/DV legislation and provide key expertise.

≡ **Develop and maintain long-term sustainable dialogue platforms and spaces** across conflict borders among various diverse groups over extended periods of



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DEFENDERS WHO LIVE AND WORK IN CONFLICT
AFFECTED COUNTRIES, SO THAT THEY CAN
CONTINUE FIGHTING FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS.**



European Union Initiative

European Partnership for the Peaceful
Resolution of the Conflict over Nagorno-
Karabakh (EPNK3)

