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# A 'WOMAN'S WORK'

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO BENEFITS  
AFTER THE SECOND NAGORNY KARABAKH WAR

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We would like to dedicate this Policy Paper to the memory of Avaz Hasanov, a long-time peacebuilding activist, who died tragically a short time after providing his valuable input as a key informant to this paper.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The consequences and impact of the Second Nagorny Karabakh War on women have largely been neglected at the research and policy level.

The exclusion of women's perspectives and priorities at the policy level in turn contributes to the lack of action by international actors and local decision makers to protect and promote women's rights and implement gender-responsive policies.

To respond to this gap in research and policy, Kvinna till Kvinna brought together a group of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), researchers, activists, and experts working on the Nagorny Karabakh conflict to identify and explore critical issues facing women in the region. **Women's access to benefits was highlighted as a pressing concern for women.**

By making the effects of the conflict on women visible and providing gendered analysis of the most pressing issues, Kvinna till Kvinna aims to promote sustainable rehabilitation, where women's needs and priorities are included and contribute to women's meaningful participation in dialogue and socioeconomic recovery processes, confidence-building, and conflict-transformation efforts.

This collaborative policy paper is based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with a total of 38 women, and a comprehensive desk review. It focuses on a variety of post-war benefits of differing amounts and duration across the Ar-

menian, Azerbaijani and Nagorny Karabakh contexts.

A key finding of this research is that **across all three contexts, it is primarily women who apply for benefits on behalf of the family, reflecting the prevailing norm that these applications are considered 'women's work'**. Cultural patriarchal norms often inhibit men from applying for state benefits, while placing the burden on women to maintain the family and the private life, especially during and after conflict.

Despite the key role that women play in seeking benefits, **women face multiple barriers to accessing information about these benefits**. This includes cultural barriers for many women who are confined to the private sphere, particularly those with limited digital literacy, an overly bureaucratic and gender-blind approach to the distribution of the benefits, and, for some rural women who live in the areas bordering the conflict zone, a lack of sense of agency leading to a passive approach.

At the same time, patriarchal norms dictate women's duty to accessing and receiving the benefits. For example, in Azerbaijan, many state officials prioritise women in the allocation of benefits, even if women do not, in turn, control the money that they receive. In addition, in these militarised contexts, some women experience greater ease in accessing benefits, as their societal value lies in being mothers to 'heroic sons' who fell defending the nation. Moreover, women who may choose

to break out of these constraining gender roles and seek other social status (e.g. through re-marriage or employment) may run the risk of undermining their social value as a widow/mother of a 'fallen hero', thus compromising access to associated benefits.

Despite some public information provided by mayors, local non-governmental organisations, and some limited public campaigns, across all three contexts, **most women consulted with do not have adequate comprehensive, and updated access to information about the benefits.** This lack of public information from the authorities means women are highly reliant on others in society, which further undermines their agency and independence.

This paper further highlights the **lack of consultation by the authorities with displaced and conflict-affected persons, and especially women**, on their needs which in conjunction with an overly bureaucratic approach, leads to a gap in support and benefits required to meet their needs. In all three contexts, there is an absence of a unified civil society able to strategically and sustainably lobby and engage with the authorities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to promote access to benefits for conflict-affected and displaced women in the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, Kvinna till Kvinna proposes that key international actors in the region, especially the European Union (EU), provide political, technical and financial support to:

1. Establish regular, effective, meaningful consultation mechanisms between the EU and women's organisations located in Armenia and Azerbaijan, including those representing the Nagorny Karabakh context;
2. Provide political, financial, and technical resources to civil society organisations to mobilise, strategise, build solidarity and undertake evidence-based advocacy and messaging efforts;
3. Work with the local authorities to strengthen transparency and accountability in distributing benefits, including through the implementation of anti-corruption measures;
4. Work with local authorities to strengthen consultations with conflict-affected and displaced populations, including with women, as well as women human rights defenders (WHRDs), and women's organisations, to ensure an accurate mapping of evolving needs, the distribution of benefits tailored to these needs, and monitoring of distribution and impact of the benefits;
5. Encourage the local authorities to increase the number of women working at all levels in government structures, including social workers, to ensure gender parity so that women feel safe and comfortable to engage with officials in accessing their rights;
6. Work with local authorities and other responsible entities, including the media, to raise public awareness of the availability and processes to access benefits using ways, means, and spaces targeted at different populations, including to meet the different needs of women, including those who cannot access the benefits, e.g., women with disabilities, single mothers, women with children with disabilities, women working full-time, etc.;
7. Provide financial and technical support to civil society organisations to capacity strengthen women's leadership, voice and economic and entrepreneurship opportunities, including through providing education, training and re-training options, and strengthening digital skills; providing access to finance and technical know-how to support women's businesses; building and strengthening women's organisations to support women; and providing psychological support and services to women affected by the war, especially those living in the border region; and
8. Facilitate, through *inter alia* resources and funding, ongoing research with affected populations by women and women's organisations, to build and expand upon the findings of this Policy Paper as well as other priority issues impacting women arising from the Second Nagorny Karabakh War.

# INTRODUCTION

## a. Background

In 2019, Kvinna till Kvinna produced a [report](#) on the gendered effects of the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh and women's priorities for peace. This report was unprecedented in its scope and scale, exploring the effects of the conflict on women. It was a counterweight to the multitude of gender-blind studies, articles and analytical literature produced on the conflict.

Following the Second Nagorny Karabakh War in September to November 2020 and under the conditions and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, gendered analysis remains largely absent from academic and political consideration of conflict issues.

By making the effects of the war on women visible and providing gendered analysis of the most pressing issues, Kvinna till Kvinna aims to promote sustainable rehabilitation where women's needs and priorities are included and contribute to women's meaningful participation in dialogue and socioeconomic recovery processes, confidence-building, and conflict-transformation efforts.

The absence of a women's rights perspective continues to result in the lack of a holistic approach to rehabilitation efforts, including when working with communities on the ground, civil society, and actors on the Track 1 level to address the root causes and consequences of the war. This absence further undermines sustainable post-war and post-Covid-19 rehabilitation, particularly through the lens of human security<sup>1</sup>.

To respond to this pressing gap, Kvinna till Kvinna has developed this Policy Paper, which aims to be the first in a series of papers investigating the effects and impact of the Second Nagorny Karabakh War on conflict-affected and displaced women. The paper was designed and fully researched by and in collaboration with WHRDs and women researchers from the region. The authors identified **women's access to benefits as the first policy area of consideration**. The rationale for this selection is that the process of making benefits available illuminates in practice the authorities' ranking of priorities. It also sheds light not only on the authorities' resource management process, but also on the prevailing cultures and values of society.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The study participants regard security as an inclusive process and outcome, dependent upon the fulfilment of mutually reinforcing elements. This includes physical, psychological, political, governance and justice, economic, social, access to services, and environmental aspects. Such an approach reflects ongoing international policy discussions on the concept of "human security" as opposed to "national", "state" or "hard security". ... The multidimensional definition of security includes the following elements: everyday physical security = the absence of physical threats; psychological security; political security; governance and justice security; social security; economic security; access to services security; environmental security; and security to return in dignity and safety.' *A Right Not a Gift: Women Building Feminist Peace*, Kvinna till Kvinna, 2020, pp. 23-24



Photo: Maja Brand

## b. Objectives

The objectives of this Policy Paper are two-fold:

- ▶ To provide a snapshot of conflict-affected women's access to benefits in the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorny Karabakh contexts after the Second Nagorny Karabakh War; and
- ▶ To provide recommendations addressed to international actors, and, where possible, local authorities, aimed at safeguarding women's rights and ensuring access to benefits and support for conflict-affected and displaced women in the contexts of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh.

## c. Methodology

Kvinna till Kvinna aimed to play a catalytic, facilitative, and collaborative role in the development of this

**Policy Paper. Kvinna till Kvinna did this by bringing together a group of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), researchers and activists from the conflict contexts to develop this paper.**

**In concrete terms, this means that the women researchers and activists have, through collaborative efforts:**

- ▶ **determined the topic of this Policy Paper;**
- ▶ **determined the specific set of benefits to focus on in the paper;**
- ▶ **identified the scope of the paper through clarifying key issues, questions, experts, and participants of focus group discussions;**
- ▶ **carried out the focus group discussions;**
- ▶ **generated analysis and recommendations; and**
- ▶ **reviewed and revised drafts of this paper.**

As mentioned above, the group of local researchers, through a series of collaborative discussions and contextual comparisons, deliberated and agreed on a set of benefits that the paper would cover.

A rapid desk review of recent English-language literature of the Second Nagorny Karabakh War was undertaken. This was followed by key informant interviews with relevant experts. After this, seven focus group discussions took place, in November and December 2021, with a total of 38 women as follows: 10 women displaced to various locations in the Nagorny Karabakh context (mostly Stepanakert); five women displaced to various locations, as well as the border regions of Armenia; 20 women displaced to various locations as well as the border regions of Azerbaijan; and three women relatives/family members (primarily widows, wives and mothers) of men killed in action displaced to various locations in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The desk review, key informant interviews, compilation, coordination, and some of the analysis were conducted by an international researcher, with the support of Kvinna till Kvinna.

All sources and references have been fully anonymised in line with the principles of Do No Harm<sup>2</sup>. All names of individual women used in the paper have been changed to ensure anonymity. The analysis contained in this Policy Paper presents

indicative trends, rather than providing exhaustive information.

This Policy Paper focuses entirely on the experience of women affected by the Second Nagorny Karabakh War. It highlights some of the specific challenges experienced by rural women, as well as younger women and widows, thus attempting to incorporate intersectional aspects and reflect implicitly on the confluence of gender, conflict, and (in)security with elements of social identity. However, this integration was not done in an explicit manner, especially through the lens of specific characteristics, such as age, class, disability, economic status, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., potentially capitalising on the urban/rural and generational divides. While these constituted significant points present in focus group discussions with the researchers, they were not explicitly highlighted for the purposes of this Policy Paper. Reflections on these intersectional aspects will be a focus in forthcoming research.

#### **d. Limitations**

Given Covid-19-related and budgetary restrictions, all key informant interviews were held online. Clearly, online discussions often lack the fluidity, connection, and informality of in-person discussions.

While some focus group discussions did

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<sup>2</sup> The Do No Harm (DNH) framework is an analytical tool we use to apply conflict sensitivity in work. DNH helps organisations understand how their intervention will interact with a given context and helps them avoid doing any harm through their actions, for more, see: *CDA, Do No Harm and Gender: A Guidance Note*, <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/no-harm-gender-guidance-note/>

take place in person, most took place online. Technical difficulties in accessing and poor network connection may have impacted the quality and quantity of participation. On the other hand, given the size of the target communities, the participants of the in-person focus group discussion may have been known to each other. This familiarity may have acted as an inhibitor to completely frank and honest group exchanges.

The flare-up of hostilities on the ground in November 2021 delayed the convening of focus group discussions.

In some cases, male family members were present during some focus group discussions. This presence may have impacted the quality of contributions of participants.

## **e. Structure of the Policy Paper**

The Policy Paper provides an analysis of women's access to benefits in the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, and challenges in accessing these benefits. Following the Executive Summary, the Policy Paper goes on to set out recommendations addressed to key international actors and, where possible, local authorities, to safeguard women's rights and ensure access to benefits and support for conflict-affected and displaced women in the contexts of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorny Karabakh. The findings and analysis follow and support the recommendations.



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# ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S ACCESS TO BENEFITS IN THE ARMENIAN, AZERBAIJANI AND NAGORNY KARABAKH CONTEXTS

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# 1. BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO PERSONS AFFECTED BY THE SECOND NAGORNY KARABAKH WAR

## a. Introduction

This section focuses on the experience of women affected by the Second Nagorny Karabakh War in accessing benefits in the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorny Karabakh contexts. It does not set out the type of benefits available in detail, nor does it purport to compare the scope and content of benefits available across the three contexts.

**A variety of benefits of differing amounts and duration are available across the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorny Karabakh contexts. These benefits include:**

- ▶ **unemployment benefit;**
- ▶ **displaced person's payment;**
- ▶ **child-related benefits;**
- ▶ **utility payment;**
- ▶ **rent subsidy or accommodation subsidy paid to the host family or hotel;**
- ▶ **funds to reconstruct property;**
- ▶ **general social support, known as 'bread compensation; in Azerbaijan;**
- ▶ **compensation for the loss of property and income generation assets; and**
- ▶ **benefits to family members of those killed in action.**

## b. Access to information about benefits

In Armenia, displaced women access information relating to benefits mainly through:

- ▶ *Word of mouth: "Nareh finds out from Facebook groups and pages what benefits are out there and lets everyone know what programme is out there and what we can qualify for";*
- ▶ *Local humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who visit communities to assess needs and inform displaced persons about available benefits and application processes;*
- ▶ *Village mayors "sometimes call us and say 'there is some new programme underway, prepare documents and go'"; and*
- ▶ *The network of mothers whose sons have been killed in war share information with each other.*

The women consulted explained that there is very little public information available, due to poor campaigning and planning by the authorities: there are no public service announcements or advertisements on the streets. Where information is provided on Armenian Public TV news channels, *"the situation changes so often that you have to be glued to the TV. We are forever waiting for news as there is no long-term planning in the system"*. The continually changing benefits system deepens the precariousness



Photo: Maja Brand

felt by displaced persons. The little information available at the local municipality is often outdated.

In Azerbaijan, displaced women access information relating to benefits mainly through:

- ▶ State TV channels and newspapers;
- ▶ State Committee for Refugees and local state authorities and, particularly, a hotline for displaced persons;
- ▶ Social media; and
- ▶ Community exchange.

The women consulted explained that the mechanisms supporting benefits for displaced persons had not changed since the first Nagorny Karabakh War and that previously existing mechanisms, processes and benefits continued. However, one focus group participant pointed out: *“These documents should be as accessible as the Constitution of the country”*.

Women displaced to Stepanakert in the Nagorny Karabakh context access information relating to benefits mainly through:

- ▶ The mass media, especially television, and social media, including short commercials disseminated by the authorities to inform people about the benefits, which still does not amount to an information campaign;
- ▶ A hotline and website set up by the local authority;
- ▶ The village mayor; and, most commonly
- ▶ Younger family members: *“My hotline is my daughter who knows how to use the internet and finds information from social networks”*.

The women consulted reported that *“in the absence of a [well developed] public campaign to spread information, the burden has been on the public to find out about their benefits”*.



Photo: Ahmed Mukhtar

### **The gendered dimensions of accessing information on benefits**

- ▶ Across all three contexts, most women do not have adequate access to information about benefits, including updates.
- ▶ In Armenia, the lack of information in public spaces, for instance, public squares, and the lack of digital literacy impacts displaced women's ability to access information about benefits. This is reduced somewhat by the practice of humanitarian NGOs targeting women as their primary target for information dissemination.
- ▶ In Azerbaijan, a pattern has emerged whereby displaced formally educated women living close to capitals and other major urban centres are able and have

the confidence to access information, know their rights to benefits and access them. They seem not to experience a sense of dissatisfaction with the authorities. On the other hand, those living in the areas bordering the conflict zone, far away from Baku, and with less formal education, live more isolated lives and do not participate in public life. Men are traditionally more in contact with state structures: it is the men who attend public consultations and who, reportedly, do not share information at home with their wives and other female family members. This causes women to have to rely on rumours, neighbours, and relatives for information which, in turn, means they often have less awareness about their benefits and how to access them. They experience a corresponding sense of dissatisfaction with the authorities.



Photo: Ahmed Mukhtar

- ▶ In the Nagorny Karabakh context, as most information about benefits is found either in social media or obtained through the village mayor, women, especially older women, are immediately placed at a disadvantage. This is because women generally do not visit or interact with the village mayor, older women often experience a lack of digital literacy, and women living in rural areas have limited internet access.
- ▶ Hence, across the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, the level of awareness and knowledge among older and rural women of benefits is significantly constrained, reflecting the lack of public information available and lack of digital literacy and internet connections.

### c. Accessing benefits

Displaced persons in Armenia can apply for benefits online on the website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Where online applications are not possible, applicants – usually women travelling alone – apply in person at the Ministry. Assistance in completing applications may be provided by a social worker where present. Displaced persons living in rural areas are required to travel to the regional centre to submit their applications in person. Displaced persons must present documents as part of their application. Sometimes, displaced persons have not carried these documents with them when leaving the Nagorny Karabakh context, and so they need to return to Stepanakert to retrieve the documents, thereby incurring additional transportation costs at a time of already limited resources.

In Azerbaijan, displaced persons may submit an application for a residence permit at the regional centre of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. This residency document acts as an 'IDP certificate', entitling the person to access benefits and allowances.

In the Nagorny Karabakh context, displaced persons can apply for benefits online or in person with the local bodies in Stepanakert, through producing appropriate documentation, including passports and other identifying documents. Women generally apply for the benefits on behalf of themselves and their families and it is often young people who complete the online application on behalf of themselves and their family, as this group tends to be more digitally literate. The benefits are received at the post office (in cash) or transferred to the applicant's bank account.

Some of the women consulted raised concerns about the lack of organisation, transparency, and accountability at every level of the administration, which can thus translate into a hampered and protracted process.

Across all three contexts, Covid-19 and its consequences have directly impacted women's ability to access benefits, for instance, through the temporary closure of authorities' offices or systems and limitations on women's mobility.

## **The gendered dimensions of accessing benefits**

- ▶ Across all three contexts, it is primarily women that apply for benefits on behalf of the family, as these applications are generally regarded as 'women's work', since women are considered as caretakers of the family and this work is seen as trivial, mundane, and time-consuming;
- ▶ In Armenia, not only does the lack of digital literacy impinge upon women's awareness of benefits, it also directly impacts many women's – especially older women's – ability to access benefits online. It slows down their access and makes them practically and psychologically reliant on others.
- ▶ In Armenia, women living with disabilities may not be able to process the application. Likewise, women who have children with disabilities may not be able to leave them at home in order to submit the application. Additionally, women who work full time experience challenges in submitting applications as they frequently work the same hours as the centre receiving documents.



Photo: Maja Brand

- ▶ In Armenia, as in Azerbaijan and the Nagorny Karabakh context, women usually submit applications to access benefits alone. However, when young women submit applications, they are usually accompanied by an adult male member of the family on the grounds that *“women do not often go out of the community, and it is therefore hard for them to travel alone”*. Some women identified this ‘accompaniment’ as another illustration of male control over women. Further, in circumstances where a woman does not have a husband, one of her male relatives communicates with local authorities on her behalf: she is not expected or able to communicate herself. These expectations change as women age; an older woman is expected and able to submit applications herself.
- ▶ As in the Nagorny Karabakh context, the cost of transport options in Armenia between locations of displacement, such as communities in Syunik and Tavush regions, and regional centres constrains women’s ability to submit applications in person.
- ▶ In Armenia, whilst recognising that it is not easy to deal with the complicated bureaucratic benefit system, there is a sense that it is a terrain where women govern, where engaging in the benefits process and receiving benefits feels empowering for them.
- ▶ In Armenia, women who have been living for a long time in a state of drawn-out displacement have lower expectations of change than women recently displaced from the Nagorny Karabakh context: the length of duration of displacement saps away women’s expectations and, possibly, sense of agency and resourcefulness.
- ▶ In Azerbaijan, similar to the process of accessing information, formally educated women living close to urban settlements are able to access benefits with greater ease than those without formal education living far from urban areas.

- ▶ In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the predominance of male staff in government bureaucracies makes the process of interaction for some women seeking benefits more stressful, due to mistrust and power dynamics.
- ▶ In Azerbaijan, internally displaced women and men are treated differently upon marriage to a non-IDP. If an internally displaced man marries a non-IDP woman, his IDP status and benefits continue. Where an internally displaced woman marries a non-IDP man, she loses her IDP status and corresponding rights and benefits.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ In the Nagorny Karabakh context, a sense of insecurity and associated travel costs restrict the ability of some women to travel within the Nagorny Karabakh context to register for benefits or to return there to retrieve necessary documents.
- ▶ Also, in the Nagorny Karabakh context, women's lack of connections to those in power, exacerbated by both patronage and corruption, impact their ability or perceived ability to access benefits.

#### **d. Accessing benefits for families of those killed in action**

Families, and especially mothers, widows, and children, of those killed in action, are ascribed a special status in all three contexts. Thus, these benefits were selected

as a point of focus due to the specifics of their accessibility or inaccessibility for the target groups.

In the Armenian and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, surviving family members (parents, wife, and children) of soldiers killed in action receive a lump sum payment, monthly payments, and tuition fees for children. Women family members find out about the benefits via mayors, local governors, the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Social Affairs. The women consulted said that the authorities have not been proactive in reaching out to them.

Overall, the women consulted informed that their applications for benefits have been quickly processed and that when submitting their applications, *“everyone is very nice and polite when talking to them”*.

In Azerbaijan, surviving family members (parents, wife, and children) of soldiers killed in action receive a lump sum payment, monthly payments, as well as monthly payments to children, a monthly payment to widows, and an apartment. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection informs surviving family members of these payments, which is supplemented by information shared by families of other deceased soldiers.

As in the Armenian and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, Azerbaijani women explained that they did not experience any specific obstacles in accessing these benefits.

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<sup>3</sup> *Listen to Her: Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Women's Priorities for Peace*, Kvinna till Kvinna, 2019, p. 21

## The gendered dimensions of accessing benefits as family members of soldiers killed in action

- ▶ Across all three contexts, benefits are distributed to those persons on a list of beneficiaries of the deceased. Where the deceased's parents and widow are both listed as beneficiaries, the parents often receive a larger share of the benefits than the widow. In Azerbaijan, where a power of attorney has not been prepared, all direct heirs are eligible to receive benefits. Again, often there is unequal distribution of benefits between the deceased's parents and widow, with the parents receiving more benefits.
- ▶ In the Armenian and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, many of the surviving female family members find it very difficult to talk about the benefits. Many of the mothers and widows initially refused to submit applications for the benefits and only did so after considerable convincing by the local authorities or social workers. Many families find it difficult to spend the benefits received. One mother explained that she had not taken a dram out from the bank: *"When my younger son grows up, and turns 18, he will decide how to use the money."*
- ▶ In Azerbaijan, when the widow of a deceased soldier takes up work, she loses the right to childcare payment, which may constitute a barrier to women's economic empowerment.

## e. Other benefits and support identified by women

*"There should be programmes of economic assistance to women. If women work, they will not need help, they will be more independent in the family."* – Azerbaijani focus group participant

The women consulted identified a number of other benefits and support required for them and their families at this time, more than a year after the end of the war.

In Armenia, the women identified the following needs:

- ▶ Childcare benefits
- ▶ Wider criteria for unemployment benefits
- ▶ For agricultural work to count as labour in the calculation of pension benefits
- ▶ Further education and requalification
- ▶ State health insurance

In Azerbaijan, the women identified the following needs:

- ▶ Faster/easier access to free medical services and more information to displaced persons on availability of health services
- ▶ Compensation for household items destroyed during the war
- ▶ Expanded utility payment
- ▶ Extension of childcare money paid to mothers for children aged under 8 to be extended to 18 years
- ▶ Transportation benefits



Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna

In the Nagorny Karabakh context, the women identified the following needs:

- ▶ Equality of accommodation benefits for displaced families: some displaced persons live in hotels and receive free meals, while others are allocated under-equipped or damaged housing and do not receive free meals
- ▶ Childcare benefits

Across all three contexts, the women identified the following needs:

- ▶ Safe spaces for women to gather, meet each other, share and receive information, apply for assistance and develop themselves
- ▶ Provision of mental health and psychosocial support which should take into account different cultural and other interests and options
- ▶ Integrated programmes of support to women's leadership development and economic and entrepreneurial empowerment, including through:

- Education and higher education, skills training and re-training, especially of those women who were originally involved in domestic agriculture and who have been displaced into urban settings, as well as ensuring that those who will return to the land as part of the resettlement and reconstruction process in Azerbaijan are able to work the land
- information about internship and work opportunities and how to apply etc; and
- provision of funds to invest in women-led businesses.

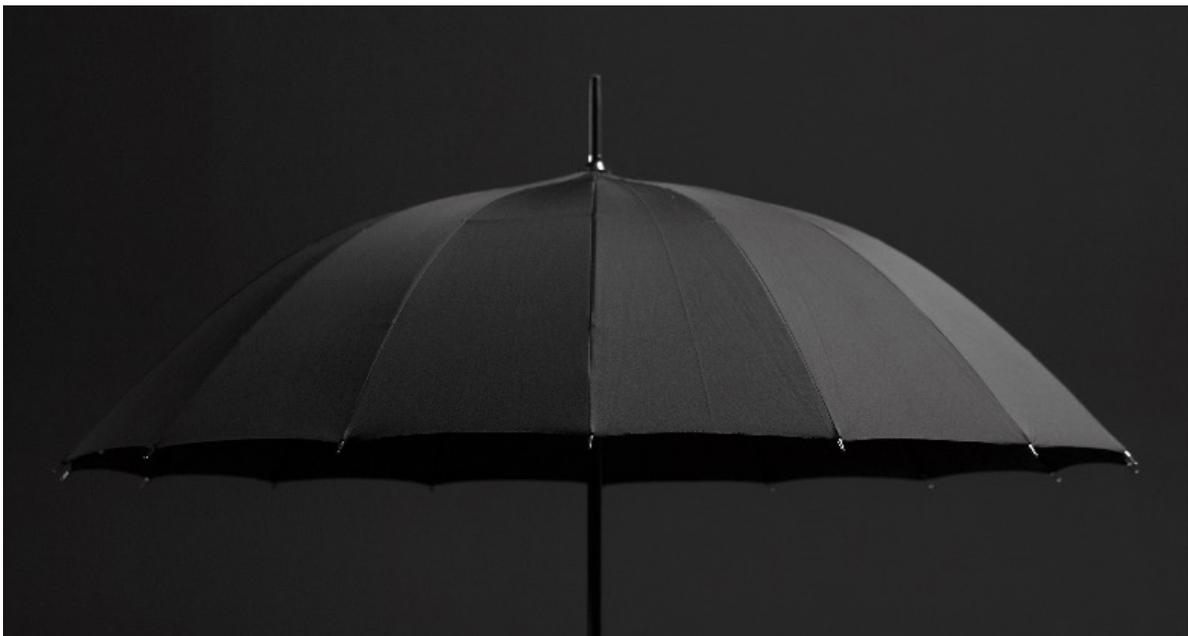
## 2. FACTORS IMPACTING CONFLICT-AFFECTED AND DISPLACED WOMEN'S ACCESS TO BENEFITS

Several factors influence, shape, and restrict women's access to benefits across the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Nagorny Karabakh contexts. These are primarily the patriarchal structure, systems, and culture; the lack of consultation between authorities and women regarding their needs; and the absence of a unified civil society able to strategically and sustainably lobby and engage with the authorities.

### a. Patriarchal structure, systems and culture

Patriarchy functions as both the canopy of an umbrella, i.e., the space, culture, and environment, as well as the rib of the umbrella, i.e., the structures and systems that govern women's access to benefits.

In the Armenian and Nagorny Karabakh contexts, women's contributions and status are often constrained by gender stereotypes and roles, reinforced by the patriarchal structure, systems, and norms. For instance, many women are busy at home caring for children and other family members, as well as attending to household duties. In the Nagorny Karabakh context, women are more aware than men about benefits because they hear about benefits through word of mouth from other women. In Armenia, women are largely confined to the private sphere; they – especially women with limited digital literacy – often lack access to wider information and, instead, are reliant on information provided and screened by male family members who are active in the public sphere and online. Likewise, these women often follow their husband's decisions.



In Azerbaijan, in accordance with prevailing cultural norms of protecting those considered vulnerable – that is women, children, and elderly people – many state officials prioritise women in the allocation of benefits. *“Only men are present at the meetings, any male relative of a widow or divorced woman. It’s our mentality and tradition, but I think that this mentality needs to be changed.”* The dominance of men in the public lives of women was evident when carrying out research to inform this Policy Paper: whilst the researchers were trying to conduct focus group discussions with women in order to understand their lived experiences, male family members prevented women from speaking up.

Gender norms of women and of men are replicated and reinforced when husbands send their wives to carry out the ‘bureaucratic errands’ of submitting applications. Men, and possibly some women too, assume that *“no one will offend a woman and reject the application”*. Many men hold this assumption whilst also fearing a judgemental, machist attitude if they, as men, submit an application: *“Are you not manly? Can’t you earn? Why do you ask for state money? Be a man!”* Thereby reinforcing the understanding that applying for benefits is ‘women’s work’.

Just as it is considered dishonourable for men to apply for benefits, so it is considered honourable for women to keep the family going. Changing the diapers, applying for benefits, and the like; it is all about the ‘woman’s work’ of maintaining the family. And even when it comes to so-called ‘women’s work’, the men in charge of distributing benefits do not actually understand what it means to do said ‘wom-

en’s work’: *“I applied for a washing machine and the men at the distribution point told me ‘Why do you need a washing machine, the laundry for only two kids is not much, you can hand wash it.’”* – focus group participant in the Nagorny Karabakh context.

The overall bureaucratic environment reinforces the view that women are not equal to men: *“When we [as women] ask for the documents required, the officials reply differently than if a man asks for them. They talk to us as if we are children.”*

This sense of isolation from the outside world serves to reinforce a mindset that sees women submitting applications for benefits with little expectation or self-belief they will receive the benefits. This outlook is particularly prevalent amongst women who have been living for a considerable time in rural areas along the border, where women seem to have become inured to a ‘passive’ life where this fear and uncertainty prevents some women from submitting applications, which in turn, prevents them from experiencing a sense of empowerment.



Photo: Ahmed Mukhtar

Across all three contexts, the prevailing gender stereotype is of women who are not expected by their family and broader community to participate in decision making or be active outside the family. The reality of women's lives is that it is uncommon for women to think about their own needs: instead, they are absorbed by family issues, problems of the house and family members. In carrying out the focus group discussions, the researchers overwhelmingly found that women were reluctant to talk about themselves and their problems.<sup>4</sup>

This funnelling – or strangling – of the role, place, and space of women leads to the organic growth of a variety of coping mechanisms, such as informal self-help groups and sharing. The groups of women resorting to such mechanisms include the self-reliant mothers and widows of soldiers killed in the war who do not turn to the authorities to resolve their problems. It covers the displaced women who travel alone and far, in wintertime, whilst military operations continue, to access benefits. And it also refers to women who develop informal networks of support.

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<sup>4</sup> *Listen to Her: Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Women's Priorities for Peace*, Kvinna till Kvinna, 2019, pp. 10, 17, 25, 30, 31

And for some in the Nagorny Karabakh context, it is manifested in a sense of utter despair, with no light at the end of the tunnel. A feeling of being held hostage by the various authorities. It also includes the often largely formally uneducated women living far from urban areas in Azerbaijan and Armenia, who may adopt a more passive approach hoping that someone else will solve their problems.

Many women consulted found it challenging to critically engage in self-reflection and identify a problem resulting from or tied to their gender. Many women do not articulate their experience as discrimination based on gender. They may believe that the system has many problems, but they do not analyse these problems as resulting from their gender. Alternatively, for some women, it is 'normal' for them as women to experience difficulties. Indeed, gender equality and gender sensitivity are often viewed in opposition. As mothers of 'heroic fallen sons', women are accorded a social value stemming from the national process of 'hero-ification'. In practical terms, this means that such women have their benefits applications processed quickly and are welcomed by staff dealing with benefits. Their value lies not in being women; but in being mothers to sons, fallen in war to protect the nation, the motherland.

And yet, even within this narrative, there is a two-tier system: mothers, i.e., those that 'reproduce fallen heroes' have greater social value than the widows of fallen

soldiers. This is evidenced in the practice across the three contexts of benefits being allocated in greater financial value to the mother and not the widow who is the 'mere partner of the fallen hero'. Indeed, any social value of the widow continues only for as long as she complies with that role and social status. If she seeks another role and social status – if she chooses to marry again or to work – she undermines her role and social status as the widow or mother of a 'fallen hero', thus losing eligibility for benefits.

Finally, the patriarchal system enables the flourishing of romanticised notions of militarisation and militarised responses to conflict, which, in turn, suppress women, women's needs, rights, and voices. This is amply demonstrated when a displaced woman from the Nagorny Karabakh context explained as follows: *"The state official told me: 'How dare you call me about social benefits? I'm standing here under shelling!'"* Such scolding is very much in line with militarised discourse, which attempts to delegitimise the experiences of women in conflict whilst glorifying the role of men in conflict, even of civilians. The woman responded: *"I understand you are in a bad place, but I can't feed my children. So, please be kind and file my data for me. It's more urgent than war"*.



Photo: Maja Brand

## **b. Lack of consultation between authorities and women regarding their needs**

In Armenia, the lack of a proactive and coherent government strategy to support persons displaced from the Nagorny Karabakh context is also seen as a reflection of the precariousness of the government's authority. The lack of a mapping of needs undertaken with affected populations, including women, has contributed to a highly reactive, constantly changing approach by the authorities where every few months, new benefits emerge.

*"I think they change the programmes all the time, because the state has underestimated the minimum living basket in Armenia. So, they give us some money, thinking that's enough to sustain life. But then they learn that it's not, and they add more. So, the benefit programmes keep changing, the duration of each is very brief, like three months. You*

*fill applications basically all the time, while the situation, the prices for goods, and work opportunities stay the same"* – Focus group participant in Armenia.

Likewise, in Azerbaijan, the lack of consultations with displaced persons and an overly bureaucratic approach leads to a gap in support and benefits required to meet needs.

In the Nagorny Karabakh context, there seems to be a lack of trust of the displaced population in the political elites who are generally considered as not open to consultation with the population regarding their needs. *"The Women's Council at the Parliament gather and discuss issues behind closed doors, and we are not aware of anything. We need to create our own initiative, but people do not trust each other to elect someone to represent themselves. We need to self-organise and not rely on others."* – Focus group participant.



Photo: Maja Brand

### **c. Absence of a unified civil society able to strategically and sustainably lobby and engage with the authorities**

In Armenia, many challenges exist within civil society today. These include, in particular, the different approaches to resolve the conflict between ‘nationalist’ NGOs and those NGOs that work on human rights and peacebuilding. These divisions contribute to the lack of a coherent civil society approach towards influencing the authorities. At the same time, the authorities are overwhelmed with responding to the many competing political priorities, thereby downgrading any interaction with civil society.

In Azerbaijan, the independence of civil society has considerably reduced in recent years, as a result of the shrinking of civic

space, and so, many civil society organisations are not interested in working with local communities. Moreover, *“the last two years have been spent on the global issues of fighting the war and fighting Covid. So, the fight for women’s rights has been lost”*.

In the Nagorny Karabakh context, a militarised environment, including the presence of a Russian peacekeeping force, the lack of human security experienced by much of the population, and anti-gender elements, contribute to shrinking civic space and discourse. This means that social forces are unable to exercise any influence over the authorities and encourage them to ensure provision of needed benefits and support to women.

**For all women's rights,  
in every corner of the world.**