

NO TIME TO GIVE UP  
**BUILDING FEMINIST FUTURES  
IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**



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COVER PHOTO: A woman during the Velvet Revolution in Armenia, 2018 PHOTO: Nelli Shishmanyán

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### **Disclaimer**

For ease of reading and applying conflict-sensitive language, Kvinna till Kvinna does not use qualifiers such as 'breakaway region', 'occupied territories', 'de-facto state', 'unrecognised', or 'partially recognised' when speaking about the Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia contexts in this report. This does not imply a position on their status. All other place names in this Report are presented in a neutral manner, acceptable for all conflict parties, for example we use Gal/i and Sukhum/i, as for the Abkhaz side these place names are Gal and Sukhum; for the Georgian side, they are Gali and Sokhumi. Shushi/a, Stepanakert/Khankendi, the first version of the place names is used by Armenians and second by Azerbaijanis. All quotes from our partners and women human rights defenders are unedited to reflect their views, therefore some place names and language may differ from context to context.

### **Photographic content**

The photographs in this report are meant to illustrate the faces and lives of women affected by the conflict, not necessarily to indicate their involvement in the initiatives described. Any place names attached to the photographs were those used by the people depicted in the images to describe the places they live in. They are not intended to imply a particular position on the status of those places.

### **Abbreviations**

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

KII: Key Informant Interview

LGBTQI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer Intersex and other gender and sexual identities

NAP: National Action Plan

NGO, INGO, GONGO: Non-governmental Organisation; International Non-governmental Organisation; Government-organised Non-governmental Organisation

SGBV: Sexual and Gender-based Violence

SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

UNSCR 1325: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security

WHRD: Women Human Rights Defender

## FOREWORD

This study, conducted in the South Caucasus – a region marked by historical grievances and geopolitical shifts – pays tribute to the struggles and achievements of women amidst war, political instability, societal changes, and challenges to women's rights. It is not merely a collection of pages; it is a testament to the courage, resilience, and unwavering spirit of women human rights defenders, peacebuilders, and feminist activists across the region.

Since the start of its operations in the South Caucasus in 2002, Kvinna till Kvinna has supported local women's organisations and activists across various communities, focusing on enhancing women's political and socio-economic participation, combating gender-based violence, and fostering intersectional feminist movements that are inclusive and consider that women experience discrimination and privilege differently depending on intersecting factors such as disability, race, age, economic status, nationality and sexuality.

These women's rights activists' journey has been one of profound resilience and solidarity. This report highlights their collective resolve and creativity in tirelessly working towards gender equality and peace. It reveals the strategic shifts and adaptations made to confront and navigate the myriad challenges to women's rights movements that have emerged over the years.

This report highlights the invaluable role of solidarity, feminist partnership practic-

es, wellbeing, flexibility, agency, lifelong learning, and the importance of supporting grassroots engagement with activists. It also calls attention to the need for a more robust approach to ensuring their security and protection in the face of escalating challenges.

Looking ahead, we envision a feminist future for the South Caucasus rooted in non-hierarchical governance, intersectional knowledge, and transparency – a just future where a comprehensive women's rights agenda leads the way and corruption has been eradicated, characterised by constructive cross-context dialogue, greater confidence, and conflict transformation.

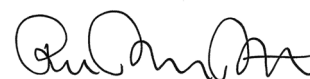
We are filled with a sense of pride in our collective achievements and a renewed commitment to our cause. The journey ahead may be fraught with challenges; however, we have the strength, wisdom, and determination to shape a more equitable, inclusive, and peaceful future together. Through collective action, strategic engagement, and unwavering dedication, the vision of a feminist future is not just a possibility – it is within our reach.

It is no time to give up.

**Petra Tötterman Andorff**

Secretary General

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation







Maria preparing coffee, Georgia; Photo: Natela Grigalashvili, 2023

## SUMMARY

This report has been produced by The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation to understand the impact of women's movements in the South Caucasus across a period of over 20 years. It aims to identify lessons learned through international support and programming in challenging environments for women's rights in the region.

The recommendations in this report, voiced by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) living and working in the South Caucasus contexts, are intended for the region's women's movements, peace and human rights INGOs, and donors and policy actors. They lay out a roadmap for sustaining and advancing feminist and peace-building efforts in the South Caucasus and focus on the following issues:

1. **Sharing power within women's groups through diverse and inclusive leadership practices**, avoiding 'gatekeeping' and supporting diverse expertise;
2. **Spreading feminist activities and resources beyond urban settings**, and proactively and meaningfully facilitating peripheral contributions to decision-making;
3. **Creating spaces that engage inter-generational contributions** and collaboration towards joint strategising, and address fragmentation for a more concerted and robust advocacy strategy that builds on existing knowledge and encourages innovative perspectives;
4. **Creating and sustainably resourcing safe(r) and brave(r) spaces for transformative, often difficult, discussions** and (re)strategising, fostering trust and solidarity within movements and across divides;
5. **Rethinking the nature of international support** and forging specific messages on decolonising the aid agenda and supporting bottom-up approaches. This would ensure agency and ownership for local feminist actors and conflict-affected WHRDs, acknowledging their knowledge and expertise, ultimately contributing to meaningful and impactful transformation;
6. **Guaranteeing the safety and security of WHRDs and feminist activists**, especially in conflict-affected areas, through a holistic approach geared towards human security in the physical, psychosocial, and digital dimensions, including through supporting local expertise;
7. **Providing flexible funding modalities**, including to smaller-scale women's rights organisations, initiative groups, WHRDs and feminist activists, especially in high-risk settings and conflict-affected areas. This flexible support should shift the focus from short-term output-based deliverables to longer-term more sustainable, strategic, meaningful, and impactful transformation and lasting change;
8. **Creating and supporting regular consultation mechanisms to bring feminist peace and justice narratives** into peace and conflict-transformation processes.



Cards and publications at Women's Fund Armenia; Photo: Nelli Shismanyan, Armenia, 2023

## BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The South Caucasus, a region with a complex history, stands at a crossroads of significant political and social change. Aspirations for peace and women's rights in the region have been persistently challenged by the rise of militarised narratives and territorial ambitions. These have included the 2020 Second Karabakh war and the subsequent displacement of the entirety of the ethnic Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia in September 2023, a discernible rollback on women's rights across the region, and the increased pressure on and targeting of women human rights defenders. These challenges

are diverse and deeply ingrained, making the pursuit of peace and equality in the region particularly complex.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation commissioned this paper to understand its impact in the region, and identify and share lessons on international investment in feminist support and programming in challenging environments for women's rights. This was done by collecting data and stories from activists themselves. The analysis was guided by Kvinna till Kvinna's two pillars of women's rights and peace, and delves deeper into a holistic and in-



tersectional interpretation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and feminist peace, including as a precondition for democracy.

Kvinna till Kvinna has worked in the South Caucasus since 2002, marking the start of our dedicated support to local women's organisations and activists across the Georgian, Abkhaz, South Ossetian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Nagorno-Karabakh contexts. The Foundation works on many fronts, from increasing women's meaningful political and socio-economic participation to combating gender-based violence and supporting intersectional<sup>1</sup> feminist movements and enhancing capacity development, networking, and advocacy. All these efforts are aimed at boosting women's and LGBTQI+ people's involvement in making and building peace, transforming conflicts, and fighting for their rights and safety.

The research methodology for this paper was primarily qualitative and included:

**1. Desk review:** a thorough examination of existing literature and reports to establish a foundational understanding of the context and identify key themes and areas for exploration. It also drew on Kvinna till Kvinna's own knowledge and experience of working on women's rights for three decades, and in the South Caucasus for more than 20 years.

**2. Key informant interviews (KIIs):** detailed interviews with 25 women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and peacebuilders across the South Caucasus and five international interlocutors. These interviews were strategically distributed across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Staff of Kvinna till Kvinna were also interviewed, as were representatives from two other peacebuilding organisations operating in the region, International Alert and Conciliation Resources. KIIs allowed for the collection of rich, first-hand insights into the evolving landscape of women's rights and feminist activism in the region.

**3. Focus group discussions (FGDs):** FGDs in Armenia and Azerbaijan fostered collective dialogue and deeper exploration of specific issues and trends. These discussions provided valuable spaces for participants to share experiences, perspectives, and strategies alongside their peers, enhancing the study's understanding of communal and shared challenges.

This qualitative approach had limitations due to its small sample size (because of human resources available and time constraints) and to asymmetric input from the various contexts. This was a result of security challenges to organising FGDs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and logistical

<sup>1</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna's intersectional approach consists in being inclusive and remembering that women experience discrimination and privilege differently depending on intersecting factors such as disability, race, age, economic status, nationality and sexuality. We approach gender justice in a comprehensive way – supporting allied movements for justice that are, for example, based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. <https://kvinnaatillkvinna.org/way-of-working/our-approaches/>



constraints in Georgia. As such the respondent pool was small; however, the feminist and WHRD community in these contexts is indeed small.

Nevertheless, we believe that this methodological approach offers a deep dive into the individual and collective experiences, achievements, and challenges of WHRDs in the region, informed by the perspectives and insights of those at the forefront of these efforts. The paper is not just about data collection, but about putting feminist research in context and into practice, telling a detailed story that shows the varied and complex feminist efforts in the South Caucasus. It ensures that the voices of those directly involved in feminist movements are heard and prioritised. For the sake of WHRDs' safety, quotes have been anonymised.

The original timeline for the report envisioned a much earlier release, which was subsequently delayed due to a variety of factors. Thus, most of the desk review, fieldwork, KIIs and FGDs, as well as initial analysis, were done in the early stages; these were subsequently supplemented by several additional KIIs, including those focusing on thematic issues, at a significantly later date.

This methodology allows for the presentation of the significant yet often under-rec-

ognised contributions of feminist communities in the region, and Kvinna till Kvinna's role in strengthening those movements. It acknowledges the challenges but also highlights the resilience, solidarity, and progress that define feminist movements in the South Caucasus, offering valuable lessons and insights for global feminist advocacy. This report is more than an academic exercise, it is a heartfelt endeavour to celebrate the courage, resilience, and unwavering determination of women's rights movements in the South Caucasus. This is our way of paying homage to the tireless efforts of women and LGBTQI+ people who have navigated political instability and societal shifts with grace and tenacity. It is not just about documentation, but a tribute to the collective power and the indomitable spirit that continue to drive feminist movements forward. Through their stories, we seek to highlight the evolution of strategies, the landmark achievements, and the indispensable role of solidarity and feminist partnerships in sculpting a future where feminist ideals are deeply interwoven into the fabric of societal progress. We also identify avenues for strengthening and empowering sustainable feminist movements for peace and women's rights in the South Caucasus.

## FROM THE GRASSROOTS

### THE GROWTH OF FEMINIST AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS OVER THE YEARS

In the early to late 1990s, against a background of violent ethno-nationalist conflicts across the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union, women led local peacebuilding processes and a number of networks that initiated meetings across conflict divides. Women raised concerns on particular issues, such as the immediate impacts of conflict and the plight of missing persons, and engaged in prisoner-of-war exchanges. They were, however, excluded from any official peace negotiations; their insights and analysis that responded to human security needs were not considered. Women were directly engaged in planning and delivering humanitarian aid, a practice which remains today in responses to contemporary crises.

Following initial humanitarian efforts in contexts of active violent conflict, social collapse and economic hardship, the international community began channelling funds and resources to support the fledgling civil society sector, much of which was organised and led by women. Women focused on providing access to education and healthcare, working with communities on leadership and political participation, identifying and tackling socio-economic issues, and combating sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Entrenched militarised masculinities, untreated war trauma and increased substance abuse among war-affected men forced many women to become sole breadwinners and caregivers in a context of increased SGBV. Women were the ones standing in

overnight breadlines and obtaining other humanitarian provisions to provide what security they could to their families, frequently at risk to their personal safety.

In the 2000s, feminist movements gained momentum through women's rights organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and grassroots activism. Kvinna till Kvinna first began to work in the region when campaigns for gender equality and women's empowerment were surging, focusing on issues such as domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), education, and political participation. This period saw the emergence of feminist publications and digital platforms; however, given limited or time-bound financial support, their lack of sustainability posed challenges for the movements' continuity. Women journalists were at the forefront of conflict-sensitive reporting during the 2003 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia, the first peaceful transition of power in the region's history, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, largely without a safety net of resources for their mental health and psychosocial



Activist from Azerbaijan

**I am proud of the 8 March [International Women's Day] protest, we shifted the perception of this day from flowers, perfume, and lingerie shop ad campaigns to a day of protest.**

support. Georgian, Abkhaz and South Ossetian women faced multiple stresses related to the safety of their families, in particular for sons called up to fight on the frontlines.

The 2010s were marked by successes in advocacy for women's rights and increased resistance to patriarchal norms. In some contexts, new laws against domestic violence were enacted (e.g., Georgia in 2006, Azerbaijan in 2010, and Armenia in 2017), offering better protection for women (although this protection varied depending on the location and the identities of those women). In Armenia, civil society engagement was instrumental to the non-violent transition of power during the 'Velvet Revolution'<sup>2</sup> and included the peaceful protest of women's rights and queer groups. Armenian WHRDs were quietly optimistic that there would be more opportunity for women's voices to be heard in decision-making processes. In both Armenia and Georgia, efforts to increase gender parity in politics saw the implementation of quotas for women candidates; that said, women's political influence remained constrained.

National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security were developed in Georgia (2012) and Armenia (2019). In both countries, this was a process that was coordinated by governments and leading women's rights and peacebuilding organisations, but without wider inclusivity and intersectionality. A NAP on UNSCR 1325 for Azerbaijan has been in development for more than a decade but has yet to be adopted.



Activist from South Ossetia

**Today, women may feel 1325 is an old document that doesn't mean much today. That said, it has given us (women in conflict) a sense of dignity and made women understand their role.**

The 2010s also saw a significant deterioration in the Azerbaijani context, where a law introducing new restrictions on NGOs was enacted in 2014. Increasingly severe crackdowns began the slow but progressive closure of civil society spaces. Civil society organisations were replaced by male-dominated government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) that took only a superficial approach to women's participation.

The South Ossetian context saw even more serious deterioration following the adoption by the authorities of a 'Non-profit Organisations Law' styled after Russian legislation. Civil society organisations receiving funding from foreign sources were labelled 'foreign agents' and both structural and societal pressure against them increased dramatically. As a result, civil society in South Ossetia was almost completely destroyed.

The 2020s have been a time of conflict, instability and change: the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the mass displacement of the Karabakhi Armenian community in 2023, the full-scale invasion of and war in Ukraine, and other conflicts. These have had profound

<sup>2</sup> A peaceful transition of power in Armenia in 2018 after several weeks of protests and civil disobedience, where women held leading roles.

impacts, sparking debates on the direction of feminist movements (which, alongside peacebuilding movements, had failed to prevent war) and a shift among WHRDs to focus on humanitarian aid for displaced women and children. Feminist movements have grown and diversified, embracing intersectionality and broadening their agenda to include the impacts of Covid-19, LGBTQI+ rights, and male engagement in feminist activism, signalling an ongoing evolution that allows for tackling contemporary challenges head-on. Since the field data was collected for this paper, we have also witnessed significant new hurdles in the region, such as Georgia's new 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence', and Azerbaijan's arrest of pro-peace activists in the run-up to COP29 (which it dubbed the 'peace COP').

Against a backdrop of rising threats to democracy and shrinking civic space, activists and their networks are employing a range of innovative methods to advance their cause specific to their contexts – from the subtle yet potent symbolism of graffiti and themed clothing in environments where outspokenness is not an option, to the digital frontier where online platforms serve as both battleground and rallying point. Advocacy by women's rights and feminist activists has resulted in significant legal and social achievements in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Abkhazia, each reflecting a commitment to challenging societal norms and enhancing public discourse around gender equality.

## LOOKING AHEAD

At the heart of this feminist advocacy is the understanding that real change requires a multifaceted and long-term approach. Ac-

tivists highlighted education initiatives as a cornerstone, aiming to plant the seeds of equality and justice within the minds of children and young people, ensuring fertile ground for future societal transformation. They stressed the poignant power of personal narratives, with survivors of violence turning their stories into catalysts for awareness and dialogue, bridging the gap between individual experiences and broader societal implications.

While innovation is welcome in this dynamic landscape, it does not mean that traditional methods of activism are any less critical. Direct actions, legal advocacy, and public campaigns for WHRDs' role in challenging and reshaping systemic barriers remain important, as well as documentation and storytelling. These are not just means of amplifying voices but crucial strategies in enriching public discourse through sharing diverse perspectives.

Together, these methods paint a picture of activism that is as varied as the challenges it seeks to address. The advances of feminist movements should not be understated. Feminism is no longer an alien concept as it was perceived to be in the 1990s; however, it continues to be met with scepticism and hostility. Nevertheless, women activists have a vibrant community and remain dedicated to their missions and ambitious goals – goals their societies may deem rebellious. They dare to imagine their societies differently, societies where women and LGBTQI+ people can find their voices and claim their rights.

Narratives of exclusion do persist across the region, particularly related to supporting LGBTQI+ rights. An activist provided a story



which highlights the ongoing struggle, not just in society but within the feminist and WHRD community itself. In the earlier years of civil society in the country, her organisation's proposal to support LGBTI women was met with considerable, immediate backlash within the organisation – members of the organisation's advisory board withdrew support and staff resigned. While this is a stark example, the belief that the struggles for LGBTQI+ and women's rights are not intertwined is still common, suggesting that civil societies and women's rights movements in the different contexts are not necessarily as liberal and progressive as they are portrayed (both by themselves and by international allies).

Nonetheless, women activists have seen the transformation of social discourse in the South Caucasus on topics related to women's rights and queer rights. What was once taboo is now increasingly part

of conversations outside of WHRD and queer circles, with more people showing their support openly, including on different media. One activist noted that journalists are slowly shedding stereotypes and embracing more inclusive narratives. Despite early resistance, activists are seeing attitudes change over time. While different societies move at different speeds, the stories told in this paper share themes of growth and acceptance for other marginalised and excluded groups – a stark contrast to the situation 20 years ago.

**Armenian activist**

**I think I was a human rights defender even before I knew what the term meant, because I have always been rebellious.**



Photograph at Women's Fund Armenia; Photo: Nelli Shishmanyán, 2023

# REBELS WITH A CAUSE: THE MANY FACES OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

## GRANDMOTHERS, MOTHERS, SISTERS, DAUGHTERS: MULTIGENERATIONAL MOVEMENTS

For many women's rights defenders in the South Caucasus, their path to activism began at home. *"What took me most to the feminist path was my anger against inequalities and injustice,"* said one Armenian activist, recounting seeing the difference between her mother's exhaustive balancing of work and household responsibilities, her and her sister's confinement to their rooms, and her father's unburdened leisure. Though small in isolation, pieced together, the larger pattern of systemic inequality propelled her, like many others, onto a path of feminist activism. It was not just about challenging norms; it was about dismantling the very structures that upheld them, inspired by the quiet battles of countless women who remained unnamed heroes in their own stories.

The influence of maternal figures emerges as a consistent and powerful theme, threading resilience and inspiration through WHRDs' stories. They highlight the value of intergenerational dialogue in enriching feminist activism and the broader struggle for women's rights, demonstrating how the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and support across generations not only strengthens individual resolve but also fortifies collective movement towards a more equitable and peaceful future. However, the journey is

not solely about drawing inspiration and learning from one another. It also involves navigating and countering stereotypes and harmful behaviours, particularly from women who were raised under different societal norms.



Armenian activist from  
Nagorno-Karabakh

**I started my activism with my mother when I was 12 years old, I didn't have much choice [as] my mum is the leader of a civil society organisation. My motivation was that there are things as a woman I didn't have the right to do and my activism allowed me to push.**

Relationships between women can be an inspiring force for activism, but women can also be enforcers of strict societal norms and patriarchal values. Many women in the South Caucasus encounter the pervasive influence of the 'institute of mothers-in-law', challenging their autonomy, wellbeing, and feminist ideals, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of family life and the challenges women face within it.



Activist from Armenia

**We should understand the patriarchy as a system perpetuated by both men and women.**

Activists highlighted the examples of the women in their families who had navigated traditional expectations and forged their own path, guided by subtle yet potent mediation between tradition and identity.



Activist from Azerbaijan

**The capitalist patriarchal system pushes women (and other members of the population) to be competitors. [...] Popular culture positions women against each other (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, jealousy among women friends, women collectives being snakes).**

This complexity in relationships between women underscores crucial dialogue across generations, revealing that there is the capacity for both older and younger women not only to confront and challenge existing patriarchal structures but also draw lessons each other's generations' efforts to navigate their realities, blending resilience with the pursuit of autonomy and identity.



Activist at a rally in Tbilisi; Photo: Regina Jegorova-Askerova, Kvinna till Kvinna, 2024





Activist from Georgia

**My inspiration and feminist teacher is my daughter, I have learned about all the different angles of feminism from her.**

Many are inspired by the global feminist movement, while others are motivated by the specific needs and challenges of their communities. Despite differences in their starting points, approaches and areas of focus, the women activists with whom we spoke share a common goal of advancing feminist principles and practices in their respective societies.

The interaction between generations within feminist movements is not always seamless. As in families, conflicts are inevitable, and can either be channelled for progress, or allowed to fester and become

toxic. The need for intergenerational dialogue within movements is a clear area for study and action. It could be particularly effective in assessing and rejecting the myth of women as 'natural' peacemakers – acknowledging that women, including WHRDs, are as capable of structural violence and exclusion as they are of inclusion and peaceful conflict transformation.



Activist from Abkhazia

**I started as a young WHRD, I observed strong Caucasian women who were role models but in joint spaces they dominated the space, made young women's narratives invisible and belittled them. We need to change those norms in the movement. We need to share our collective power.**



Photo: Woman at a market, Abkhazia, 2023



## CHALLENGING DEEP-ROOTED PREJUDICE AND AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

### DISPLACED WOMEN

Women's rights movements in the South Caucasus have long challenged the accepted patriarchal structures that dictate when, how, and whose voices should be heard. One Azerbaijani activist who was working on the rights of internally displaced children noticed that mothers were entirely absent in terms of representation. Her engagement with displaced communities, initially through child-focused work with international NGOs, revealed stark gender disparities and the invisibility of women in public and decision-making spheres. This exposure, coupled with cultural norms silencing women's issues, was a starting point for her work as a WHRD.



Activist from Azerbaijan

**The men would come to the meetings while the women would be in the kitchen or be present in the meeting with a man. We realised that we live in different worlds.**

This was a story reflected across the region, where women are catapulted into the field of women's rights protection after noticing glaring gender gaps or the shadow pandemic of SGBV, made worse by the legacy of violent conflict in their communi-

ties or households. This is particularly true for displaced women.



Azerbaijani activist from Nagorno-Karabakh

**We need the skills in the country to engage in dialogue and conflict resolution. Particularly when it comes to the need for intercommunity dialogue between IDPs and host communities.**

Displaced people, especially displaced women, continue to be overlooked in mainstream narratives and by decision-makers. Historically, they have not been considered as political actors, which has made it very difficult for displaced women to carve out a niche in which they can wield influence and establish themselves – this includes in civil society in the host communities in which they reside. Tensions, stigma, and discrimination between displaced and host communities were and continue to be detrimental factors that make it difficult for this integration or adaptation to take place, and for many displaced women to occupy meaningful space and contribute to shaping narratives and key processes.

The wars and military escalations that have ravaged the region in the 1990s, 2008, 2016, 2020 and 2023 have left their mark not only on the displaced, but also on those who have remained in conflict-affected areas or returned after displacement. Despite difficulties, however,



An IDP settlement, Azerbaijan; 2023

some displaced women have indeed succeeded in becoming influential and have worked tirelessly to raise, analyse, and address their needs and priorities of their communities.

## WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Wars have left societies deeply scarred, with ex-combatants and their families, as well as civilians, dealing with disability and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their experiences during the armed phases of the conflicts. Women in these families have had to take on a role of both caregiver and breadwinner, often not being able to address the additional trauma that this caused them, further hin-

dering their public participation. One activist noted that it was her work with people with disabilities that opened her eyes to the broader canvas of societal inequalities, guiding her evolution into a fervent advocate for women's rights and social justice.



Activist from Abkhazia

**I was married to an ex-combatant, and I saw how the conflict influenced all of us and our mentality. It is crucial to do everything to prevent conflict from happening again.**

One disability-rights activist told us of the high level of respect and appreciation that society holds for those who have disabilities as a result of war, and that these individuals receive more privileges and benefits than other people with disabilities. She highlighted that, while ‘a disability is a disability’, and that this is not necessarily a fair approach, the level of regard for veterans is so high that everyone, including other people with disabilities (herself among them), accepts this status quo.

WHRDs working for the rights of women with disabilities have fought for their place within women’s rights movements, bringing an additional lens with their work. One activist (herself a woman with a disability) told us that initially, she did not differentiate between the problems of men and women with disabilities, but then she saw how many specific gendered problems women with disabilities face, including in terms of socialisation and independence – this inspired her to work specifically on this issue. Traditional attitudes about women’s independence (or lack thereof) are amplified: when disabled men attend meetings, they come alone; when disabled women attend, they are chaperoned by parents or other family members. Women and girls with disabilities are often ‘hidden’ by their families, because of the perceived impact this will have on the standing of other members of the family<sup>3</sup>. Reaching these women and girls and overcoming the stigma against them is an enormous challenge.

Women with disabilities also face difficulties accessing SRHR services or receiving support in cases of SGBV. This is, in part, due to belittling attitudes across society, including within the health sector and law enforcement. For example, it is perceived or assumed that that women with disabilities do not have sexuality, and thus do not need access to gynaecological services; that they do not want or are not able to have children; or that women with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, cannot be victims of rape. One activist told us of police officers mocking women with disabilities who reported sexual violence, thus discouraging them from coming forward to report the crimes committed against them.

The barriers facing children with disabilities are also large in the region. These are an additional burden on families, particularly on women, as they are usually the primary caregivers. They are burdened with the obligation to obtain information or other equipment to support their dependents. Mothers are the ones that participate in all group meetings as well. This in turn can be a factor in depriving disabled people of their agency, since these women speak on behalf of their child or relative.

<sup>3</sup> Disability activists were not interviewed in every location covered by the study, but anecdotal evidence from other contexts suggests this is common across the region.



Activist from Georgia

**Mothers of children with disabilities lose their own identities. When they grow up and want to take their own independent decisions, the mothers protest and attempt to restrict their access to different aspects of independent living.**

Even among people with disabilities there can also be tensions: one activist highlighted that people with intellectual disabilities and mental health disorders face discrimination from other people with disabilities. Often, they are left out of conversations, or are represented by carers, rather than being allowed to raise their own voices. The disability-rights activists interviewed stressed the importance of a 'nothing about us without us' approach.

Inclusion of disabled people requires a holistic approach: disability-rights activists working outside capitals spoke of the additional empowerment they gain from being involved in a variety of social discussions, rather than simply being seen as topics for discussion. However, they spoke of the difficulties of accessing platforms and discussions that take place in capital cities, which provide no support to those from outside to take part. This is especially difficult for those activists with fewer financial resources and those with childcare duties. As a result, attempts to be inclusive of women with disabilities have only involved a very narrow circle, with the same faces present at every discussion.

Engagement with whole families can be more productive than just engaging with individuals with disabilities in terms of rights protection. Frequently, family members of people with disabilities also require psychosocial support; by working with the whole family this can have more positive knock-on effects of empowering the individuals and increasing their independence and mobility.

On a more positive note, WHRDs with disabilities noted that international frameworks such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have contributed to a changing situation in the region. Joint efforts by WHRDs working on disability rights, local authorities and international partners have helped improve understanding of disability rights and strengthen their protection. By partnering with media, WHRDs working on disability rights have been able to bring disability-rights questions to the fore, bringing attention and support to women with disabilities, and helping bring perpetrators of violence against them to justice.



Activist from Armenia

**I can afford to go to Yerevan to participate in critical policy discussions but not all women with disabilities can travel from the regions [...] Women with disabilities who are mothers have a burden of care, and no services are provided for their children when the mother is participating in other spaces.**





A colleague at "Agate" NGO, a disability rights organisation, Armenia; Photo: Nelli Shishmanyana, 2023



Activist from Georgia

**Before, cases of violence against women with disabilities were invisible. But our contribution and our fight for our own rights has changed that.**

Nevertheless, activists noted that, often, the mechanisms for the implementation of policies and frameworks to protect PWD are weak or non-existent. More work needs to be done on addressing this structurally and more sustainably.

## THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

In an environment of multi-layered hostilities, organised queer movements have emerged, amplifying the voices and advocating for the rights of the LGBTQI+ community across the region with varying degrees of freedoms and legal protection. Conversations about trans and non-binary people and communities are often narrow, framing them as a security threat rather than addressing their unique needs and rights. Largely, the voices of LGBTQI+ people themselves are silenced. This marginalisation is palpable: one activist noted feeling detached from security issues due to her own personal experiences of not feeling safe or protected.



A bowl of stickers at WISG, Georgia, Photo: Julia Lapitskii, 2012

In the absence of formal support systems, LGBTQI+ activists rely on each other for protection, even resorting to physical defence when necessary. They navigate a society that prefers their invisibility, facing delayed responses or inaction from the authorities meant to protect them. Queer activists have learned over the years that a separate space is a necessity for their movement's health and safety due to the specificity of their lived, continuous experience of being made invisible, both in the legal system and within the mainstream women's rights and peace movements.

Queer activists interviewed as part of this research continue to align themselves with broader feminist and social justice movements, as they consider the rights agenda inseparable. For them, queer rights and women's rights are human rights – structural challenges obstruct not only the queer community's progress, but different societies' progress as a whole. One trans woman activist noted the surprise, and at times admiration, that her presence in social-justice spaces outside of queer spaces elicits, highlighting the pervasive underestimation of trans people's capacity and will to fight for broader social justice.

## ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

The South Caucasus is a region noteworthy for its high level of ethnic diversity, even within contexts: more than a tenth of Georgia's population belong to ethnic-minority groups<sup>4</sup>, and half a million people in Azerbaijan belong to ethnic minorities, according to its most recent census<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, these groups, especially the women that belong to them, are often ostracised and excluded from broader social discourse, including participation in key socio-economic and political processes. Ethnic- and religious-minority women have less access to information and services. They are not seen as full-fledged members of society, which is an especially difficult burden. Because of inaccessibility of services or relevant information in local minority languages, men are usually

the ones who tend to speak the principal/dominant language, while women are left to depend on interpreting. Discrimination and ethnocentrism ostracise ethnic-minority communities, and this exclusion is also seen in feminist movements. Ethnic-minority groups are barely represented and tend not to be involved in directing and crafting discourse; they are often only involved in discussions when they directly target ethnic-minority rights, rather than feminism more generally.

<sup>4</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/562740>

<sup>5</sup> [https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.stat.gov.az%2Fsource%2Fdemography%2Fap%2Faz%2F1\\_5-6.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.stat.gov.az%2Fsource%2Fdemography%2Fap%2Faz%2F1_5-6.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

# BUILDING STRONG MOVEMENTS: WHAT CAN WORK?

## INTERSECTIONALITY

Looking back, it is evident that women's rights are only one element of broader women-led activism in the South Caucasus, reflecting the complex intersection of identities in the region – gender, ethnicity, displacement, disability, language, social class, and many others. As part of its intersectional approach, Kvinna till Kvinna strives and encourages its partners to be inclusive in their efforts and to remember that all members of society, particularly women and LGBTQI+ people, experience discrimination and privilege differently depending on intersecting factors such as disability, race, age, economic status, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality.

Progress for women's rights in the South Caucasus has only been strengthened by the inclusion of myriad voices from different backgrounds and positions of privilege and marginalisation within society.



Activist from Abkhazia

**Collaboration with colleagues and partners through public councils helps ensure our voices are heard and respected.**

In addition to working on the so-called 'Triple Nexus'<sup>6</sup> of the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors, feminist movements in the South Caucasus are also dealing with the nexuses between women's rights, SGBV, peace, justice, environmental protection and many others. Activists highlight that protecting women's rights cannot be done in vacuum – this means working on human security, climate action, and access to justice as well as women's rights.



Activist from Georgia

**Peace depends on gender equality, [and] this fight against violence.**

The protracted nature of conflicts in the South Caucasus means the appetite of international donors to fund programming has often been weak and unpredictable, particularly for women's rights organisations. The short-term, stop-start nature of this support has diverted efforts from working on intersectional change agendas to issue-based activism. This has had negative impact on the potential for activists to strengthen movement building beyond capital cities, where resources are more

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/sites/www.un.org.internal-displacement-panel/files/idrp\\_hlp\\_submission\\_ws3\\_triple\\_nexus.pdf](https://www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/sites/www.un.org.internal-displacement-panel/files/idrp_hlp_submission_ws3_triple_nexus.pdf)



readily accessible. Politics or official peace processes are perceived as 'masculine' domains by governments (and societies) and are exclusive of women and WHRDs, despite the fact that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without women's participation at all levels.

Ending SGBV was and still is a dominant issue. This issue has traditionally been seen as an acceptable area of engagement for women by local authorities, and supported by international donors. More recently, however, WHRD-spearheaded efforts to promote women's rights and prevent SGBV have been seen in a more controversial, polarising light and politicised by different authorities. They are no longer 'safe' or 'fluffy' topics.



Activist from Abkhazia

**Recently, the strategic work done by CSOs has made it political and this put us under government scrutiny and surveillance. When we work on violence against women, we are under threat from anti-gender groups or the perpetrators themselves.**

This shift is echoed across the region, where Kvinna till Kvinna and our partners have seen how efforts to protect the day-to-day security of women are now under greater scrutiny and surveillance from authorities.

Environmental activism has emerged as a powerful tool for cross-border collaboration at the grassroots level, fostering unity and collective action within the region. Some of the activists with whom we spoke are leading the way at looking at how environmental justice and gender equality are interlinked, and the critical role women play in leading movements for sustainable and equitable change. This is not just a fight for rights but a commitment to societal responsibilities, where environmental protection and feminist movements are conducted with a sense of duty and respect for both people and the planet. WHRDs in the South Caucasus are not blind to how environmental and health consequences disproportionately affect women and children, often the most vulnerable in society, through economic exploitation, health risks, environmental degradation, and entrenched social inequalities. However, this is not yet widespread. Many WHRDs do not see this link and prefer to concentrate on other social issues; some even see climate action as a donor-driven requirement, not a need based on realities on the ground. Therefore, strong commitment is required to localise this issue.

Across the South Caucasus, WHRDs and activists, reflecting on the disappointments of living through the escalations and violence of protracted conflicts, see the vitality of looking at women's rights and peacebuilding through an intersectional lens. Without addressing the dynamics of patriarchy, militarism, and capitalism, sustainable peacebuilding outcomes cannot be achieved.





Activist from Georgia

**Opposing capitalism and the patriarchy is our joint call.**

**SOLIDARITY**

WHRDs across all contexts spoke about the importance of solidarity. They see solidarity as a way to create space for others who lack it, and as the capacity to use one’s power and privilege to support others. They also refer to the need for solidarity as a form of political empathy and of understanding how different collective and individual needs correlate. Solidarity, activists said, means “having a consolidated movement that considers the risks of our separate actions to the collective purpose”.

Some WHRDs warn that political empathy and solidarity must go hand in hand or there would be risks of them transforming into nepotism and clannism. The significant mistrust and fragmentation within and between different feminist groups, as well as between generations, has been caused by a lack of solidarity, especially in more restrictive environments where resources are scarce and feminist groups are in survival mode.



Activist from Georgia

**Movements and groups are different because you join a group to become more powerful while in a movement you don’t create the community to empower yourself, you put your power into the collective.**



A sign at Society Without Violence, Armenia; Photo: Julia Lapitskii, 2013



Activists from Azerbaijan

**Don't forget about solidarity. [It] should be a key in our brain. We can disagree on issues but in essence we have the same feminist values that transcend nationality.**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

In discussing their partnership with Kvinna till Kvinna, partners continuously stress the importance of local ownership of their work; this in line with Kvinna till Kvinna's priority that organisations in civil society receive support to realise their own priorities, allowing them to become more sustainable and effective. Each partner is an expert on their own context and addresses the rights and concerns of women in this context.



Armenian activist from Nagorno-Karabakh

**Kvinna till Kvinna listens to our concerns, and we feel they act upon what they hear.**

Navigating the complex landscape of international aid and gender politics requires more than good intentions; it demands a deep understanding of the realities faced

by communities in conflict. WHRDs believe that international agencies, despite their aspirations, often operate within the confines of donor-driven agendas that do not always match the nuanced needs of those they aim to help.



Activist from Armenia

**International organisations should learn from people in the field, on the ground. The [feminist] movement, globally, has been market orientated rather than issue orientated.**

In times of crisis and war, while women often face the brunt of conflict, it is women's issues that are relegated to the bottom of the list of priorities. One Armenian activist from Nagorno-Karabakh noted that, during the Second Karabakh war in 2020, even basic necessities like hygiene kits were forgotten when providing humanitarian aid. WHRDs recounted that, in desperate situations where survival of the family is on the line and male relatives are lost or injured, women can become ensnared in cycles of manipulation and stigmatisation in their tightly knit communities, for example providing sexual favours in exchange for food to avoid starvation. Regardless of this suffering, women's voices are silenced. WHRDs see women's meaningful inclusion (and particularly the inclusion of those

most directly affected by conflict) in decision-making as paramount. At all levels, including the donor community, it is vital that people listen, truly listen, to these women to recognise and address the nuanced and deeply entrenched issues they and other women face in conflict zones. It is these women who can most clearly emphasise the critical need for empathy, understanding, and action in humanitarian aid.



Activist from Abkhazia

**No one knows better than the people with lived experience, they are the best experts, and your work should be informed by that.**



Workshop for young women in Azerbaijan, Photo: Anna Zamecnik, 2013

# NO TIME TO GIVE UP: CHALLENGES FOR FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

## DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING – DEMOCRACY AS A PRECONDITION FOR PEACE



Activist from Azerbaijan

**For any movement you need a basic foundation of democracy (freedom of speech, freedom to protest, democratic election mechanisms).**

While the previous decades have seen some progressive steps towards democracy in some contexts in the region, others have seen dramatic backsliding and increased authoritarianism. These negative trends have significant impacts on feminist activism, posing grave challenges to the progress made in achieving gender equality and women's rights. WHRDs have witnessed the erosion of fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech, assembly, and association. These restrictions limit the ability of feminist activists to express their views, organise peaceful protests, and advocate for their causes. Restrictive regulation is increasingly in effect, such as Azerbaijan's 'Legislative Amendments to NGO Law' passed in 2014

and Georgia's recent 'Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence', which was first introduced in 2023 before being retracted (only to be reintroduced and passed a year later). Alongside this legislation, authorities are erecting bureaucratic hurdles and enforcing limits on funding; this indicates a rapid shrinking in civic space. The number of voices in public discourse are limited by the authorities, preventing genuine inclusive peace processes that include those who are most affected by the conflicts and the most marginalised in society. Violence and intimidation are also used to suppress feminist movements and quash or manipulate their demands for gender equality. Peaceful protests are often met with physical violence from the authorities across the region, with many WHRDs speaking of selective justice and impunity for individuals or groups who attack representatives of civil society.

Democratic backsliding is also evident in the diminished policy influence of WHRDs, for example less transparent and inclusive decision-making processes. There is more talk of inclusion and consultation, but this has barely got beyond 'tickbox representation'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, consultative processes feel extractive and repetitive, lack feedback mechanisms, and are not leading to progress. Feminist activists feel marginalised in shaping laws and policies, which

<sup>7</sup> Where a group is invited to a process so that the organiser can appear to be inclusive – to tick a box – but is given no opportunity for meaningful engagement and agency within the process.



undermines their efforts to build peace and promote feminist agendas.



Activist from Georgia

**Sometimes I have déjà vu that we are repeating the same issues. The government response is very evasive, there is no exchange of information about what the government does with our input from consultative fora.**

As contexts in the region become increasingly undemocratic and authoritarian, it becomes more difficult for local civil society to receive international support. WHRDs feel that this is down to two opposite approaches being taken by the international community: a) there is less international pressure on national authorities to address gender inequalities as political stability is prioritised over gender equality and/or b) the choice to take a severe political stance and withdraw support to exert pressure. Both approaches limit potential backing for feminist activists, starving them of resources, alliances, and advocacy opportunities. In turn, this makes it even more difficult for local feminist activists to advance their agendas.

There is a prevailing sense among WHRDs that the world has turned its back on the South Caucasus. This has inspired younger feminists to start deconstructing the notion of anti-colonialism: localising this international theoretical framework; re-

vealing remnants of Russian colonialism and imperialistic ambitions; and questioning the supremacy of Western knowledge in conflict-affected contexts. Some WHRDs reject the notion of liberal peace that fails to address rising autocracy among states involved in peacemaking efforts. Undemocratic and authoritarian approaches to peacemaking undermine any possibility of bottom-up peacebuilding and the opportunities for activists and other grassroots actors to influence the crafting of peace strategies in their contexts. WHRDs stress the need for creative approaches to peacebuilding in restrictive environments. In Azerbaijan, the peacebuilding space is restrictive, with limitations on programming supported with foreign funding. The government only accepts engagement from civil society in areas related to cultural heritage and historical and cultural damage caused by war. Creating space for reflection and strategising is imperative for creative approaches to emerge.

Disillusionment with the West is widespread among Armenians and Azerbaijanis following the 2020 Second Karabakh War and the subsequent displacement of ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. Armenian WHRDs feel abandoned in a global political environment driven by *realpolitik*, militarism, and double standards. They have also come to realise that the true quality of democracy extends beyond mere participation in voting booths. On the other hand, Azerbaijani WHRDs have witnessed the normalisation of authoritarianism in society and its acceptance as a price for military victory; coupled with diminishing international support for preserving civic space, this is a dangerous trend. This has

led respondents to question superficial measurements of democracy, especially those primarily reliant on laws and performative acts, which provide a narrow and linear view of progress achieved.

## **FRAGMENTATION OF MOVEMENTS AND COMPETITION**

While solidarity is vital to sustainable and meaningful feminist movements in the South Caucasus, WHRDs note the dangers that come from its absence – fragmentation and rivalry.

In an environment where funding is scarce and increasingly commercialised, WHRDs, rather than being encouraged to cooperate with each other, are instead forced to compete for limited funding linked to donor priorities rather than sustainability or strengthening of feminist movements. Donors' recent tendency to move away from grants and flexible funding to commercial contracts based on deliverables has only exacerbated this problem. These commercial contracts often engage international consultancy companies with no prior knowledge of the region that exploit grassroots expertise to gain profit.



**Activist from Armenia**

**There is an inertia created by the funding hamster-wheel we are in, where we cannot add another meeting or another two hours to reflect and connect as a movement.**

A lack of solidarity was also seen through issue-based concerns and the urban-rural divide. For instance, one WHRD working on the rights of people with disabilities outside the capital commented on how, in the regions, people with disabilities attend all community meetings, regardless of issues, while in the capital, disabled people only participate in communal gatherings that focus on their rights alone. She feels that engaging people with disabilities in large-scale political or socio-economic issues and actions, ones which promote intersectionality, inclusion, and cross-topic solidarity, would counter this trend.



**Activist from Azerbaijan**

**Most feminists are based in Baku and have jobs and their own projects, we don't represent all Azerbaijani women. I am privileged [...] You take privileges for granted. [...] Women wearing the hijab, women with disabilities, we talk about them but we have no understanding of their realities.**

Low levels of resilience to propaganda and other conflict drivers are a barrier to solidarity. Propaganda in the region focuses on controversial issues that encourage further division and fragmentation within feminist movements, rather than fostering dialogue. One activist highlighted that propaganda reinforces the viewpoint that WHRDs and feminist movements



Feminist gathering in Batumi, Georgia; Photo: Ida Svartveten, 2015

are extreme – feminism is understood solely through the radical perspective of ‘man-haters’. Therefore, countering disinformation and propaganda are seen as important tools to prevent discord and lay the ground for solidarity.

Fostering solidarity and addressing the root causes of the movements’ fragmentation through dialogue and flexible support are paramount to overcome mistrust and generational and geographic divides within and between WHRDs and movements.

This will lead to a common understanding around social and gender justice.

## **ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS**

WHRDs also revealed growing concerns with anti-gender movements in the South Caucasus. While their ideology has been present for far longer, over the past decade, well-organised, well-resourced anti-gender groups have emerged and represent a new form of societal polic-



ing. These groups, primarily led by and involving men, are motivated by global anti-gender movements and are very sensitive to the fact that changing social norms would result in shifts in power dynamics (and their perceptions of a loss of power). They use a blend of physical and cyber threats towards feminists, women's rights and queer-rights activists. Anti-gender actors engage in cyberbullying tactics such as creating and disseminating fake sex tapes, hacking, leaking personal information, and slut-shaming. They also employ physical intimidation and violence. These strategies cause profound anxiety among WHRDs, peace-builders, political figures, and LGBTQI+ community members, highlighting the dangers linked with challenging established gender norms.



Activist from Abkhazia

**My former student said that I am a radical feminist, and that we're crazy. He told me he sees the women's liberation movement as a personal threat to his [...] privileges.**

There is growing solidarity between anti-gender groups and government-sponsored anti-democratic groups. It is troubling that they are reinforcing each other's agenda to benefit both – this collusion is most evident in the legal scapegoating of LGBTQI+ protections, aimed at appeasing patriarchal sectors of society. The limited response of law enforcement to intimi-

dation tactics employed by anti-gender groups against LGBTQI+ human-rights defenders and the community, along with the inadequate provision for LGBTQI+ protection needs, illustrates this dynamic. Anti-gender movements also have targets beyond the sphere of LGBTQI+ rights. In a region where patriarchal norms already create many taboos, the influence of anti-gender movements has made areas of activism that had previously been considered 'acceptable' now be seen as 'radical', such as work on SGBV, SRHR, and political participation. WHRDs are witnessing how their societies are responding to the actions of anti-gender groups and the dangers this presents to human rights, especially women's rights. Therefore, they are calling for a revitalised commitment to protecting and advancing these rights against systemic resistance to gender equality and other types of change envisaged by the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements.

Donors and international INGOs are not perceived to have consistent, locally rooted understandings of gender, which in turn is used to justify anti-gender movements' efforts to undermine the feminist movements in the region. Gender is too often equated to women alone, which not only sends a misleading message to society but also fails to address systemic patriarchal violence. This feeds resistance to gender equality and decolonisation, as these concepts are considered 'foreign imports' intended to harm 'traditional values'. Gender work must be driven from contextual understanding of social norms, relations and customs.





Anti-gender graffiti over a feminist mural, Tbilisi; Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna, 2024

## RISKS, SECURITY, AND PROTECTION

WHRDs working across conflict divides are subject to particular social and political scrutiny in the South Caucasus. Dialogue and people-to-people peacebuilding work are looked at with great suspicion by both local and national authorities and society more broadly.



Activist from South Ossetia

**The government and society started perceiving my cooperation with colleagues (abroad) as treason. Everything was done to create a public opinion that NGOs are not trustworthy or loyal.**

WHRDs are attacked in many different ways: the release of financial documents, which are used to back up a narrative of ‘treasonous activities’ devoid of any context for the expenditure; additional scrutiny of activities that promote alternative narratives of the conflict; threats of violence from anonymous online profiles; release of personal information, in many cases of a sexual nature. These are not merely invasions of privacy, but calculated strikes at the foundation of WHRDs’ work. Public opinion, once perhaps ambivalent or even supportive, has been turned against them. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the fear of physical violence looms large, making activists question their safety and that of those close to them. Some have made the difficult decision to cease work altogether to protect themselves and their families.

Several activists told us of their daily realities in which they face considerable

hostility and feel neither safe nor secure. This is not just physically, but also psychologically. WHRDs are constantly exposed to heightened safety risks, fuelled by the intimidation of anti-gender groups. Corruption further erodes their physical, legal, and economic safety (see below), painting a grim picture of their daily struggles. WHRDs lack the resources to support their own mental health and psychosocial support needs, as well as those of their communities (which they often prioritise over their own), leading to high levels of burnout within feminist movements.

The women to whom we spoke highlight how both the state and the international community often overlook the need for psychological security and the collective healing of communities and individuals alike. They argue for a concept of security that includes dignity, particularly for women. The responsibility for ensuring this dignity is often deferred by the state to international humanitarian actors – a reactive measure rather than a proactive commitment.

WHRDs vividly describe shifts in their countries' social fabric. This has included the degradation of civil society (as mentioned elsewhere in the paper), and chilling silence from international bodies like the EU in response to anti-war sentiment during and immediately following the Second Karabakh war in 2020.

During the war, state channels monopolised communication and limited unfiltered information, underscoring the authorities' obsession with their own narratives over the wellbeing of their citizens. This approach not only stifled dissenting voices but also isolated and endangered those who dared to envi-

sion peace. One WHRD noted that the lack of solidarity and support from the international community made activists' anti-war statements even more dangerous, as they felt they had no support in standing up to the authorities and the authorities' monopolisation of what it means to be 'patriotic'. There are profound disparities between traditional security paradigms embraced by nation-states and the more human-centred approach advocated by feminists and peacebuilding movements. WHRDs' perspective is a testament to the faulty approach of viewing security through a solely nationalistic and militaristic lens, highlighting how such strategies fail to address the fundamental needs and wellbeing of populations. WHRDs are committed instead to security that encompasses economic stability, psychological health, and the freedom to express dissent without fear of repression – a vision far removed from the militarised and territorial obsessions of nation-states. Their reflections illustrate the urgent need to redefine security in human terms, prioritising negotiation, understanding, and common humanity over territorial conquest and political power plays.



Activist from Armenia

**Feminist understanding of security goes to self-expression, freedom from self-censorship, safety of the body, economic safety, psychological safety and security (particularly for border towns)...it is the bedrock of safety and security in general thought. Depending on the status of women in society, their security is multi-layered.**





Materials at an integrated security workshop; Photo: Kvinna till Kvinna, 2024

## CORRUPTION

Across the South Caucasus, fragile advancements in women's rights and conflict transformation are put at risk by the prevalence of corruption at all levels of society. The impact of corruption is a shared struggle – it emerges not just as a systemic failure but as a significant barrier to security and justice. By fostering a shadow eco-

system where justice is selectively applied, corruption undermines faith in the very institutions tasked with safeguarding the populace. Bribes, nepotism, and embezzlement divert funds and resources away from their intended purposes and make it difficult for policies aimed at promoting gender equality to have their intended impact. Corruption in law enforcement and judicial systems leads to impunity for per-

petrators of SGBV. For example, women, who are often victims of such violence, find themselves without recourse to justice due to corrupt practices that protect offenders and penalise victims. Corruption skews political participation and representation, often to the detriment of women, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups. Allowing money and influence to dictate political outcomes makes it harder for women, who are already underrepresented in political systems, to have their voices heard and interests represented.

Corruption impedes progress across all aspects of movements to improve women's rights, from women's economic empowerment, to SRHR, to access to basic services. Women in the informal sector, such as street vendors and domestic workers, encounter additional layers of vulnerability. The corrupt systems in place complicate their efforts to secure licences, permits, or legal protections, heightening their exposure to security risks. One ac-

tivist told us of religious leaders paying a politician so that he would convince or threaten others to adopt a law restricting women's sexual and reproductive health rights. Corruption also manifests through the eviction of the impoverished to accommodate urban development projects, with authorities failing to offer sufficient compensation or affordable housing alternatives. The situation is similarly dire in rural and internally displaced person (IDP) settlements, where women's access to public resources and economic opportunities is severely restricted. The opacity surrounding government programmes, combined with inadequate access to information, effectively sidelines them from participation in economic life. In turn, this reinforces the cycle of violence and puts those women, acutely affected by the conflict, in even more desperate situations, sometimes turning to sex work or finding themselves in abusive family situations with little recourse for financial independence and stability.



The inscription reads 'Stop violence!', Abkhazia, Photo credit: Julia Lapitskii, 2014





A woman at a summer pasture, mountainous Adjara, Georgia; Photo: Natela Grigalashvili, 2023

## **EMPOWERING THE SOUTH CAUCASUS WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND STRENGTHENING PEACE AND HUMAN-RIGHTS EFFORTS**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE LEGACY OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

The call to action is clear: for feminist, peace, and human-rights movements in the South Caucasus to thrive, a concerted effort from everyone – local activists, INGOs, and donors – is essential. By embracing diversity, building trust, ensuring safety, and mobilising resources, we can collectively work towards a future where women's rights movements not only survive but flourish, driving transformative change across the region and beyond. This requires resilience, solidarity, and a steadfast commitment to the principles of equality and peace, echoing the voices of

those at the heart of these movements.

The dynamic landscape of the South Caucasus presents both challenges and opportunities for feminist, peace, and human-rights movements. Drawing from collective wisdom and recommendations of those deeply embedded within these struggles, a clear call to action emerges, emphasising the need for a multi-faceted approach to foster sustainable change and resilience within these movements. The following are recommendations voiced by WHRDs on the ground. They focus on sharing power within women's groups, spreading feminist activities beyond big cities, making activism safer, and rethinking how in-

ternational support could work. Just like a strong web is made of many threads, this study shows how combining different approaches can create stronger and more inclusive movements for change in the South Caucasus, providing an overview of the strategic approaches recommended for strengthening women's movements and supporting peacebuilding and human-rights initiatives, aiming for transformative and inclusive impact across the South Caucasus.

### **EMBRACE DIVERSITY AND FOSTER COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

To truly celebrate the power of the women's movements in the South Caucasus, **it is imperative to share power within women-led civil society organisations, initiative groups and individual activists.** Recognising diversity within the movements acknowledges the varying needs and priorities stemming from this diversity. Investing in complementarity is not just about acknowledging differences but about harnessing these variations to strengthen the collective push for equality and peace.

It is crucial to **expand beyond feminist activism's urban-centric focus by intentionally supporting regional networks outside the capitals.** This broadening of scope will ensure that the movements' reach is comprehensive, touching upon the lives of those in the farthest, most isolated corners of the region.

**The creation of spaces and reflective environments that encompass inter-generational collaboration,** along with other forms of diversity in knowledge and

expertise will ensure the preservation and proactive development of feminist power, strategies, and wellbeing.

### **PRIORITISE SAFE SPACES FOR FEMINIST CONVERSATIONS**

**WHRDs need spaces that are safe(r) and brave(r) to advance transformative discussions and action on feminist issues.** These must be spaces where they can share their concerns and challenges frankly and openly, acknowledging conflicts (not only between contexts, but within societies and within feminist movements) and working towards their transformation. Safe spaces have significant potential for women to openly discuss issues of SGBV – women realise that they are not alone and that they are in an environment that respects trust and confidentiality. In these spaces they can receive support from civil society, gain awareness of different issues, and receive legal and psychosocial aid and support. Reflecting on this experience, there are too few of these spaces. There is a critical need for feminist activists to have access to safe(r) spaces that allow for exploration of and collaboration on more topics than only SGBV, particularly in contexts where everyday struggles and anxieties make it difficult to gather and brainstorm tactics for re-strategising in the movements. **Donors must appreciate and provide resources for feminist conversations (both on specific issues and on the nature of the movements) and the value that the time spent in such conversations has for creating meaningful and sustainable feminist movements.**

## **BUILD TRUST AND DECOLONISE INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT**

For peacebuilding and human-rights INGOs, the cornerstone of their efforts should be trust-building, both within the region and in their interactions with global partners. **There is a need to critically examine and decolonise the aid agenda, treating local actors as co-creators rather than mere implementers of Western strategies.** Trust is built and kept alive by supporting projects in a flexible and united way, offering safe environments for open discussion without strict agendas, prioritising and budgeting for wellbeing, and acknowledging the multi-narrative nature of conflicts.

There is a clear lesson: **a bottom-up approach is key for meaningful transformation.** When working with an empowered population on the ground, better results are achieved at the national level. True power lies in the empowerment of conflict-affected women whose voices cannot be ignored. While moving issues at the national level can be challenging, it can be more achievable at the municipal level. From WHRDs' experience, local officials and populations are in closer proximity, allowing for better access and communication.

Empowering local voices also means looking within local feminist movements for expertise: there is a wealth of knowledge and understanding within the women's rights movements in the South Caucasus that can be shared within and across contexts. **WHRDs and LGBTQI+ activists should be considered as mediators and experts, not only in their own circles, but also by other movements within their societies and by the international community.**

While there is still room for bespoke capacity-building work, this should be driven by needs on the ground and should tap into the breadth and depth of understanding that already exists across generations and geographies. Localising priorities also applies to donor relations. Grassroots activism is the driving force behind the women's movements – it represents the human capital that fuels progress. Feminist activists are learning to confidently demand the necessary resources for reflection and planning, without hesitation. Additionally, they strive to reject colonial donorship practices by asserting their right to choose and define their own path. It is important to have a clear understanding of the movements' identity and position on a global scale.

## **ENHANCE SAFETY, SECURITY, AND SUPPORT**

Acknowledging the risks involved in activism and supporting women's rights and feminist movements, especially in conflict-affected areas, **necessitates guaranteeing safety and security for WHRDs and the establishment of robust systems including digital, physical, and psychosocial security. WHRDs must be able to prioritise stress management and their wellbeing.** International allies and donors must prioritise and allocate sufficient resources to achieve this, accompanied by advocacy efforts to ensure these are 'must haves' and not 'would likes'.

## **MOBILISE DONORS AND POLICY ACTORS**

The role of donors and policy actors is pivotal – their leadership and commitment to



providing sufficient resources, flexibility in funding, and an inclusive approach towards peacebuilding and feminist activism can significantly influence the effectiveness of these movements. **Donors must have a higher risk appetite in taking decisions to fund WHRDs directly or the INGOs supporting them, shifting the focus from short-term outputs to longer-term, more sustainable transformation** and valuing more informal means of change, such as reflective spaces. When more sustainable resourcing models are in place, feminist civil society will be able to shift from survival to longer-term strategy development.

### ENSURE STEADFAST FEMINIST PEACE

The pressure of nationalism and militarism may seem insurmountable for WHRDs and peacebuilders, given how they are discredited in the South Caucasus and

targeted with hate speech. However, over the course of the past twenty years, feminist activists have not shied away from challenging pervasive conflict narratives and have called for initiating meaningful peace processes. They continue to show up in consultative spaces and committees to assert the priorities and visions women have for feminist peace outcomes, despite the severe lack of feedback mechanisms. Women peacebuilders from across the study contexts emphasised the following lesson from over two decades of conflict: military victory narratives are toxic, and **pro-peace and -justice voices should be raised and supported**, especially when peace seems to be out of reach. International actors, policy- and decision-makers should proactively create channels where pro-peace narratives and messages from feminist activists are regularly shared and integrated into consultations around peace processes.



WISG, Georgia, Photo: Julia Lapitskii, 2012



## CONCLUSION: ENVISIONING FEMINIST FUTURES

In such a volatile and unpredictable environment, it is sometimes difficult to think about tomorrow. When prompted to imagine a future that feminist movements are striving to bring about in the different South Caucasus contexts, WHRDs and feminist activists reflected on a variety of visions and perceptions of how they saw a potential feminist future unfold. While the responses were as diverse as the women who gave them, several overarching themes emerged:

- **A gender-equal future, devoid of gender stereotypes, with an equitable security model, where everyone, regardless of identity, would feel secure.** Freedoms of expression, assembly and manifestation for all are protected, and all individuals are visible, with independent and sensitised law enforcement and comprehensive access to justice.
- **Educational reforms and quality education for women and girls,** with an emphasis on a human rights, empathy, and solidarity, beginning with addressing harmful gender stereotypes in early education.
- **A feminist economic model,** with women-led cooperatives, with equality in labour and business markets, and economic independence and justice.
- **Equal distribution** of care work, affordable childcare and public transport infrastructure, as well as strong social security networks.
- **Guaranteed access to quality health-care, including SRHR,** for all women.
- The emergence of **green spaces and policies, alternative energy sources, and sustainable natural resource management** in which women contribute and participate equally.
- **Women would represent a larger segment of the public sphere, and those from grassroots communities would have a pathway to political participation.** A feminist vision and gender would be integrated into all policies across a variety of government sectors. Women and LGBTQI+ people would enjoy a high level of participation in policy- and decision-making, and the rule of law would be paramount, with women leaders consulted on a spectrum of political issues, rather than just those relating to women's rights.

- **Peace processes would be conducted with a feminist lens**, where women would be eminent voices in peace-negotiation spaces, and where a holistic national-level dialogue would include consolidated approaches to women's rights and women, peace, and security.
- **An intersectional and inclusive future, where all movements are connected and divides are bridged,**

**where the image of a woman goes beyond heteronormative concepts.**

This intersectional future would expand feminist movements beyond 'familiar faces' and conversations; view different issues through a lens of decolonisation; encourage and strengthen intersectional research and analysis as its bedrock; draw upon feminist solidarity and sisterhood, driving the understanding that feminism benefits everyone, as does peace.

WHRDs and the feminist community are committed to this future. Kvinna till Kvinna and our local and international partners will continue our efforts to reverse negative developments and make this feminist future a reality across the South Caucasus.

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