POLICY BRIEF

LOCAL VOICES, GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS:
REIMAGINING WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

FEBRUARY 2026
www.kvinnatillkvinna.org

KVINNA KVINNA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research paper has been produced by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation within the framework of third EU4Peace programme, an EU-funded consortium initiative, led by Conciliation Resources. Responsibility for its contents rests entirely with the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. The European Union and Conciliation Resources do not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

This paper was written by Neno Charkviani, with support from Sarah Davies, Anne Nemsitsveridze and Charlotte dos Santos Pruth. Research data collection support was provided by Elen Grigorian and Lika Margania, and publication support by Cecilia Ferrari.

We extend our gratitude to all the women and others who took part in the research, for their stories and insights.

KVINNA TILL KVINNA

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993. For every woman and girl's right to be safe and to be heard.

Today, we are one of the world's leading feminist women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen the influence and power of all women. We work closely together with more than 100 partner organisations in 20 countries to defend women's rights, achieve gender equality and justice, and reach lasting feminist peace.

BACKGROUND

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has worked in the South Caucasus region supporting women's rights defenders and women peacebuilders for more than 20 years. In 2019, we published the report Listen to Her – Gendered effects of the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh and women's priorities for peace, which explored women's perspectives on conflict and peace-making. The aim was to understand women's needs and experiences of conflict and violence, as well as the extent to which women can meaningfully contribute to peace negotiations in relation to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.[1]

Since that publication's launch, significant changes have occurred, notably the war in 2020 and the mass displacement of the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023, as well as the announcement in 2025 that the text of a peace deal had been agreed by Armenia and Azerbaijan. To reflect the new realities of the context, and to ensure that women's voices are heard as part of inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding processes, Kvinna till Kvinna has conducted a new study, building on the methodology and lessons of Listen to Her.

The research is based on fifteen key informant interviews (KIIs) and one focus group discussion in Armenia, and seven KIIs in Azerbaijan. Those interviewed included women living in frontline areas, displaced women, those who had lost family members to the conflict, as well as women peacebuilders, women human rights defenders and queer activists. The text of the peace deal was initialled by the Foreign Ministers and publicly released mid-way through the data collection phase of the research, and thus later interviews and the focus group should have had more opportunity to respond to its contents. It is important to note that women's perceptions of risk and security may have influenced both the range of participants and the tone of perspectives expressed, particularly in Azerbaijan, where civic space has become increasingly constrained. While we were able to gather valuable insights from women based both in-country and abroad, participation and levels of openness may have been shaped by safety considerations. As such, the findings reflect the voices of those who could safely engage at the time of research and may be influenced by varying degrees of self-censorship.

[1] A conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, primarily over the status of the Nagorno Karabakh region. The First Nagorno Karabakh war between 1988 and 1994 killed 17,000 and 25,000 people (although the governments have reported and continue to refer to higher numbers) and displaced around 353,000 Armenians and 750,000 Azerbaijanis. This included the wholesale departure of the Armenian population of Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani population of Armenia, as well as the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno Karabakh itself. More than a thousand civilians were reported missing. (Statistics from de Waal, Thomas, Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War, 2003, New York Press, pp.284-285.) For thirty years, while recognised *de jure* under international law as belonging to Azerbaijan, the territory was *de facto* controlled by ethnic Armenian forces, with the support of Armenia. In 2020, Azerbaijan launched a 44-day war, which ended in a ceasefire agreement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, and which brough the majority of the territory under Azerbaijani control. In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a short military offensive, reclaiming the remaining territory, and displacing at least 100,000 Karabakhi Armenians.

This paper represents the findings and recommendations directed to the European Commission and funders, particularly European Union (EU) institutions and Member States with a focus on programming and implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. By placing the women's voices in the framework of United Nation Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its four pillars: participation, protection, prevention and relief, the paper emphasises both the opportunities and limitations of applying the WPS agenda to local realities. While it provides a powerful advocacy tool for accountability and amplifying women's inclusion in peacebuilding[2], its relevance depends on how effectively reflects the lived experiences of women in Armenia and Azerbaijan. This paper therefore calls for European actors to support peacebuilding processes that are not only gender-sensitive in principle but also grounded in the priorities articulated by women themselves.

Armenia has committed to the Women, Peace and Security agenda through the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs) on UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Its first NAP was adopted for 2019-2021[3], its second for 2022-2024[4] and its third was presented in 2025[5].

Three NAPs for Azerbaijan have been drafted, the latest being for 2020-2023[6]. Although this latest was formally approved at a technical level, Azerbaijani women note that it has not functioned as an operational, government-owned policy framework. There is no evidence of systematic implementation, dedicated budgeting, inter-agency coordination, or meaningful civil society engagement, and state-level action on WPS remains extremely limited.

In both countries, implementation, particularly regarding women's meaningful participation in peace and security decision making to this date has remained limited. The planning and implementation of these NAPs were severely limited by war in 2020, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor between 2022 and 2023, and Azerbaijan's military

[2] Rhinehart, Bridget. *Meeting the Moment: Women, Peace and Security in 2025*. Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2025, https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/meeting-the-moment-women-peace-and-security-in-2025/.
[3] 2019-2021 NATIONAL ACTION PLAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Armenia-NAP-2019-2021.pdf accessed 26 January, 2026.
[4] The Decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia 2022 year N – Լ On Approval of the Second National Action Plan of the Republic of Armenia for 2022-2024 of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and its Implementation Schedule (draft) https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2nd-NAP-on-WPS-Armenia_English-version.pdf accessed 26 January, 2026.
[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, "Statement by Ambassador Andranik Hovhannisyan at the UN Security Council," MFA of Armenia, 19 May 2025, https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2025/05/19/Abisoghomonyan_UNSC/13233?accessed 26 January, 2026.
[6] Republic of Azerbaijan, *National Action Plan on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2020–2023)*, draft, WPS National Action Plans (pdf), https://www.wpsnaps.org/app/uploads/2022/12/Azerbaijan-2020-2023.pdf accessed 26 January, 2026.

offensive in September 2023 which brought all of the territories of Nagorno Karabakh under Azerbaijani control and displaced more than 100,000 Karabakh Armenians.

The WPS agenda remains inaccessible. Its language and framing are perceived among ordinary women and women human rights defenders as formal and elitist, disconnected from ordinary women's realities and developed by exclusive groups of privileged civil society actors, excluding community-based women's organisations, other marginalised groups and individuals affected by conflict.[7]

The NAPs, and the WPS Agenda more generally, have difficulty finding resonance in local communities, which reinforces the sense that the formal WPS infrastructure is an external tool, rather than a locally owned strategy. Moreover, in the cases of Armenia and Azerbaijan, like in many other contexts, the WPS agenda has played a role in reproducing militarism due to a narrow understanding of each UNSCR 1325 pillar, focused on refreshing defence systems and security infrastructure.[8]

Witnessing the never-ending crisis and power shifts in the world has led to losing hope in such efforts and also a sense of civic agency among women activists, like one Azerbaijani woman noted: *"In countries on the periphery, like Azerbaijan, women and men in power don't change things in the real world, when you depend on big powers like Russia, Turkey and Iran, and US."*

WPS NAPs in both countries share several weaknesses: both reinforce militarism in society, lack dedicated funding for the implementation of objectives, have weak monitoring and evaluation systems and, importantly, do not engage civil society meaningfully. The following sections provide a clearer picture of women's realities viewed in the framework of the four pillars and offer guidance on how the agenda can be better localised and implemented.

The following analysis is relevant far beyond Armenia and Azerbaijan, as it exposes the complex layers of peace processes in many conflicts. By illustrating both the constraints and potential of localised WPS implementation, the Nagorno Karabakh case highlights patterns that resonate across diverse conflict contexts, particularly where geopolitical pressures, unresolved status, crises response and collective trauma issues, as well as shrinking civic space marginalise women's peacebuilding roles. These lessons can inform more grounded, context-responsive approaches to WPS localisation in other conflicts.

[7] Julia Vassileva, "Reasons for the Exclusion of Women from the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace Process in Armenia," *Nationalities Papers* (2025): 1–19.
[8] Ibid.

PARTICIPATION

Women's participation in peacebuilding cannot be understood without first acknowledging the diverse and often overlooked ways in which women engage directly and indirectly in war and conflict. Public discourse, shaped by patriarchal and militarised cultures, continues to frame conflict as the domain of men as soldiers, commanders, political elites, while women's roles remain invisible. Yet the lived experiences of women across three decades of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict demonstrate that war is not fought by men alone. Ordinary citizens, especially women, constitute the majority of those affected and those who sustain life within conflict.

The stories of the women we spoke to demonstrate multiple ways women engage in active conflicts: preserving community life in conflict zones and border areas; caregiving for families; acting as social, cultural, and demographic reproducers of their communities; transferring and sometimes challenging the generational knowledge of history, national identity and culture, as well as popular narratives about "the collective enemy". As one Armenian woman remembered: *"my youngest one was coming from school saying: 'I am going to fight and kill all the Azerbaijanis'... he was influenced, so I said no, this is not the narrative we have".* Women also have carried the psychological burden of worrying about male relatives at the frontline, and have even taken on direct roles as snipers, reporters, medical personnel, and volunteers. An Azerbaijani woman we spoke to recalled that *"women participated in war as soldiers, as snipers, as reporters. But not much is told about them, it was mostly about men."*

One Azerbaijani woman described becoming engaged in humanitarian support thanks to her mother, who volunteered during the first stages of the conflict*: In the beginning it was humanitarian aid, and the first refugees came from Armenia, making applications, collecting things for them, in '89 or '90. I didn't understand in that period what the conflict was [...] I was a volunteer in an international organisation, again my mother's initiative, collecting information about missing people [...] That period was when we started to get information from the other side, it was the first time I thought that on the other side there are also people."* Despite this work over the course of decades of conflict, women's agency is rarely recognised in official narratives. Instead, they are portrayed as helpless, incapable of navigating wartime realities, which reinforces a cycle of invisibility. As one Armenian woman reflected: "*Not knowing what to do. Realising that we can only wait, was horrible... we felt that we didn't have any source of impacting the situation, [we had a] feeling of helplessness*."

These overlooked forms of agency during wartime lay the foundation for understanding how women participate in peacebuilding. Interviews with Armenian and Azerbaijani women reveal the gap between promises of inclusion and the reality of women's participation in peacebuilding. Formal negotiation spaces remain male-dominated, as

to this day the high-ranking political positions in the negotiations are mainly taken by men and women's presence is usually symbolic. Moreover, some women reproduce dominant militarist narratives rather than challenge them which illustrates the importance of socio-structural change in reaching the transformative potential of women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes. "*I don't see women in the negotiations, it's all men [...] Sometimes there are women, who are sitting there having no merits, they hold posts and you feel they're not worth that position. But there are very smart people out there*," one Armenian woman explained. Another added: "*Maybe women's participation in the process would be beneficial but then I don't know who these women will be, they might be patriarchal*."

Moreover, official peacebuilding processes are elitist, distant and irrelevant to ordinary women because they are not grounded in the realities of local communities. *"The Peace process and the future? It's no use to discuss [it] before we actually have it"* an Azerbaijani peacebuilder and women's rights activist noted. Women described that these processes operate with unfamiliar language and jargon, failing to resonate with those most affected. Frustration with international frameworks was also evident: "*I do not want to work anymore on 1325, I am sick of it, as [the] WPS agenda also gives tools [for the] government to use women in conflict. Not a single woman was protected or defended since this convention exists.*" Women we spoke to found that the WPS framework is unable to recognise and represent marginalised groups of women, such as queer women, women with disabilities, women from disadvantaged socio-economic classes, ethnic minority groups and so on. The formal agenda cannot find resonance with these women and therefore further alienates them. "*I think all the marginalised communities are mostly all the time excluded from everything, like when they talk about peace or when they talk about anything in this country, it's about an able-bodied cisgender, straight person and mostly a man*," explained one Armenian queer activist. It is important to acknowledge that women's and other marginalised identities' participation faces even greater challenges in Azerbaijan, where restrictive measures against civil society severely limit opportunities for these groups to engage meaningfully in peacebuilding and public life, as one Azerbaijani woman human rights defender and peacebuilder said: "*I don't think anyone regardless of their gender has a voice.*"

In envisioning feminist peace, Armenian and Azerbaijani women articulate participation in broader, more inclusive and localised terms that extend beyond formal negotiations. Women's participation is far from absent; rather, it is redefined and expressed through everyday acts of resilience and community care - forms of engagement that are often overlooked within the narrow framing of the "Participation" pillar. Many women, especially those living in border areas emphasise that their role in peacebuilding encompasses the preservation of families, communities, and cultural identity. As one Armenian woman notes, contributing to peacebuilding in practice means "*to live in my country, work in my country, develop the region where I live. For me it's very important to*

remain here, […] search for prosperity here. I'll do whatever, I'm ready to do it." This sentiment was echoed time and time again. They argued that participation must be understood as multi-layered, involving diverse societal groups and genuine representation.

Women also stress the importance of engaging across different spaces and levels of dialogue, noting that all tracks of peacebuilding are vital for ensuring their voices are heard – "*[in] official processes we need to have men with institutional memory; [… and] women experts who […] have perfect information about the current situation and security issues and can have great contribution to normalisation processes. […] Women peacebuilders with institutional memory of community, their needs and interests; […] Conflict-affected, IDPs, mothers of fallen soldiers, border communities. […] If there is political will from even one side of engaging these groups, I think there will be change*." Currently, civil society remains a relatively open arena for Armenian women to participate, whereas in Azerbaijan women face far harsher constraints of being forced into exile, or silenced altogether.

Interviews showed that women are already acting as peacebuilders, yet their contributions continue to be undervalued and structurally excluded. Without shifts in meaning and implementation, the Participation pillar will remain as aspirational rather than transformative. Genuine inclusion on different layers of official and non-official peacebuilding efforts is not only a matter of justice but a prerequisite for sustainable peace in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

PROTECTION

Through their testimonies, women showed that frontlines are only part of the story and true insecurity lies in the everyday realities of violence, marginalisation, and systemic inequality. War has magnified existing patriarchal norms and restrictive practices, therefore exposing women to multiple forms of harm. As one Azerbaijani woman explained: *"[There is] tension in the society, [a] lack of democracy. When you cannot stand for your human rights […] You come home and beat your wife, because you cannot shout at your boss at work."* In the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, the absence of democratic freedoms means that frustrations have been displaced into domestic life, with women paying the price as homes become sites of violence. Femicide and domestic violence are intertwined with the legacies of war and trauma. One Azerbaijani activist illustrated this with reference to a veteran *"whose second wife 'fell from a window'. Everything that happens in the country affects women most acutely and in the worst [ways]."* Furthermore, women emphasised that in times of war, the proliferation of weapons creates additional dangers, with reports of arms being misused and women killed as a

result: "*In war it's hard to control who is taking different weapons from where and then kills women, it's unofficial information, but there have been some cases."* For Azerbaijani women insecurity is perpetual, as the government persistently seeks to target, surveil and punish women active in society, yet there is no safety at home: *"All femicides happen in Azerbaijan at the hands of family members [...] Azerbaijani women are not secure anywhere."*

For Armenian women, protection has collapsed under the weight of political secrecy and poor infrastructure. During the war in 2020, no warnings, directions, or crisis protocols were shared. As one Armenian woman testified: *"I didn't get any message, I didn't know if there was any shelter in my city, what I should do,"* The lack of preparedness exposed women to unnecessary risks, as she continued: "*What is crisis? What is first aid? What are disabled people supposed to do? What about people who are blind and deaf? Women, even people in general, don't know what they have to do – elementary and important rules, they don't know."*

The burden of protection fell disproportionately on women human rights defenders and queer people. *"Being a woman human rights defender means that, in addition to protecting yourself, you must also protect your community and your family,"* one Armenian activist explained. One Azerbaijani woman described the acute anxiety she felt as a result of working with women who had lost family members in the war *"I realised I had anxiety issues, I was afraid to lose my baby. Too much interaction with the information and people who lost children in the war. When I was leaving [my 3-month-old baby] with my family for couple of hours, I thought something would happen. I would feel grief that those parents feel."*

One queer person we spoke to described how the war forced them into invisibility: *"After the war, I gradually became more hidden... I even got back into the closet... the pressure was like: why are you queer? [...]. Do this. Do that. Don't exist."*

State and international structures are ill-prepared to protect at-risk groups, particularly during times of war, when focus is concentrated on hard security. Moreover, nationalist rhetoric and hyper-masculinised gender norms allow no space for differing expressions of patriotism. The psychological and health impacts of war and conflict are equally devastating. One Azerbaijani woman spoke of IDPs who "*for 30 years [...] are living with such huge psychological issues. [...] There are people in the IDP communities who cannot leave their homes because they are like, they are so scared or [...] not scared [but] it's something [t]hat is in their psychology, [...] it's transformed."* Mothers of soldiers spoke of paranoia and anxiety even before hearing of their child's death, one Azerbaijani woman noted: *"No one asks these mothers how they feel."* Women carry grief silently, *"without any support from family or society."* Women are pressured to embody symbolic roles such as the "wife or mother of a Shahid", carrying responsibilities of honour and sacrifice while their real struggles are ignored. If they do not adhere to societal expectations of these

symbolic roles, they have no security: to be the wife of a Shahid is to have *"[a] status used to manipulate others and shame them if they publicly show [their] struggles."* Others described psychosomatic and reproductive health impacts, including miscarriage-like symptoms, missing periods, and ovarian damage: *"As a woman I had this problem during the war."* These accounts show how protection must include psychosocial and medical support, not only physical safety.

Both during and after the wars, women's economic marginalisation worsened, and they acquired a second-class status. As one Armenian activist noted: *"I think in every militarised society women are second class citizens; Men after the war acted like they saved us. They call it protection, but it was limiting our freedoms."* The general economic situation in such instances left women who lost male family members, or whose husbands and sons or male breadwinners returned with disabilities, to carry the full burden of sustaining families without adequate support from the state. Women were forced into precarious, low-paid jobs that men refused to take, and simultaneously denied access to development in education and socio-economic mobility: *"For girls it was hard, some weren't allowed to study: you're a girl, why should we send you to the university?"*

Protection under UNSCR 1325 cannot remain a rhetorical commitment; it must be transformed into concrete measures that empower women rather than restrict them. The voices of Armenian and Azerbaijani women make clear that insecurity is not only external but deeply domestic, rooted in violence, trauma, and exclusion.

PREVENTION

Interviews prove that the Prevention pillar under UNSCR 1325 must address militarisation and invest in economic development, rights, education and the creation of pathways for co-existence. The women we spoke to stress the need for common projects that go beyond the frames of "peacebuilding" but, for instance, build cultural and social ties among communities; strengthen women's rights; focus on opportunities for education. One Azerbaijani woman said that a meaningful peace initiative could be *"if Azerbaijani students can get education in Armenia and vice versa."* At the same time, it was highly noticeable that narratives of war and enmity fill all aspects of life on all sides of the conflict, whether it is culture, economy or everyday life. This explained why women in border regions of Armenia believe that a stronger army is a guarantee of peace. Voices from both sides of the conflict call for an end to the cycle of sending children to war, urging governments to stop resorting to weapons and to listen to ordinary people who are tired of violence. One Azerbaijani woman noted that one of the few successful peace initiatives she remembered was "*during the war [in 2020] where from both sides people were signing [a] manifesto to stop the war. It wasn't [...] a lot of people,*

but this initiative […] showed both sides that not everyone in each society are such warmongers, desiring war […] We have different people who are against this war."

The younger generation described living in "autopilot mode," unable to imagine futures beyond survival, this was true on both sides of the conflict. As one Armenian noted: *"We don't make plans. As a young person, I don't see myself buying a house, having a family, no matter how much I want it."* For them, prevention should encompass all possibilities of realising their full potential in creating peaceful societies.

Women we interviewed also pointed to the structural barriers that prevent grassroots dialogue. Depending on international organisations for resources has created both opportunities and vulnerabilities: *"We were dependent on international organisations because we had no local resources. But then the government used this as an excuse, saying our initiatives were in favour of Armenia",* one Azerbaijani woman noted. Prevention requires investment in local capacity which guarantees that women can implement different activities without being delegitimised, and discredited.

Interviews illustrated the mother's role in preventing the reproduction of hatred across generations. Mothers' acts of teaching compassion, empathy and remembrance create foundations for sustainable peace. One Armenian activist (also a mother) explained: "*During the day, I worked on humanitarian issues, at night going back home discussing with my children not to hate anyone. That it is not regular Azerbaijani people who do this but governments deciding. […] There is a mother [on the other side of the conflict] and ordinary people who are suffering too. I was explaining this to my children."* She also noted that narratives of hatred are being taught at schools, underlining that schools as institutions with its schoolteachers (the majority of whom are women), pupils, curricula, play a key role in perpetuating conflict, and thus could be key actors in spreading peaceful message that transform conflict.

RELIEF AND RECOVERY

The women we spoke to made clear that recovery isn't just about rebuilding infrastructure and livelihoods, but rather a complex goal on which so far, they have not been properly consulted. During more than 30 years of conflict, both Armenian and Azerbaijani communities have lived with the status of "winner" and "loser"; they have witnessed deconstruction and construction; and have lived through displacement. Displacement was highlighted during interviews as the most traumatic experience, stripping them of dignity and safety. Azerbaijani women recalled how families lived for years in steel containers, which were freezing during winter and unbearably hot in summer, with up to 20 people crammed into a single unit. In parallel, Armenian women, displaced in 2023 (as well as many Armenians displaced in the 1990s, who still remain

in temporary "homes"), pointed to discrimination, stigma, exclusion from the host society, being told that they had "*run away*" and "*didn't fight*". These narratives were often mirrored in the stories that women told in Azerbaijan about displaced women in the 1990s. For women in Armenia and Azerbaijan then and now, displacement carries cultural wounds related to losing their dialect, customs, and identity. They were left with a feeling that history has been rewritten without their narrative. During this period of displacement, they must figure out their identity: on one hand defending their right to return; on the other having fear and reservations about coexistence.

Even in such hardship, women carried the burden of bureaucracy, rebuilding livelihoods and sustaining families as they were considered more practical than men, caring and had responsibility for their children. *"I know all the addresses to turn to; I know my rights [...] I know where I can go and where I cannot,"* one woman explained, highlighting how women became the navigators of survival in displacement. Yet, since policymakers assume men are the primary victims of war, rehabilitation strategies for women are absent. Women's stories show how they mobilised around existential needs: housing, social funds, prisoner return, education, and so on. One Karabakhi-Armenian woman highlighted that, while her community may be quite conservative, when it comes to questions of conflict and the rights of displaced people, or issues that both men and women face, such as social support or economic rights, women in her community make their voices heard: *"when it comes to conflict, when it comes to expressing your voice, I feel like women are pretty vocal here."* She continued: *"they're not forbidden to [protest or speak out], even by their families, by their husbands, because it's like an existential right to defend. But when it comes to other issues, like gender equality in the society [...] it becomes more difficult."* Women were also leaders in resolving issues through direct action and volunteering: One woman told us about women renovated a school after the First Karabakh War, restoring education for children, and yet they were not able to acknowledge their role as changemakers in their community and the importance of the work they had done, one Armenian woman told us: "*We asked these women, how is the work distributed in your household? And they would say, 'my husband is a hero, I can't make him do laundry*'."

Those we spoke to also touched on how conflicts have been used as an excuse to avoid working on women's and queer people's rights in general. Being occupied by resolving other "more important" issues the topics of domestic violence, sexual health and reproductive rights and many others, have been kept from the agenda: *"When is the right time to talk about women? They always use the war as an excuse to postpone everything that is related to equality: 'we are in a war, no time to discuss this. No time to talk about abortion, or about domestic violence'. [...] Whenever we start talking about women's rights or LGBTQ rights, they formulate it as we are weakening the society [...] They usually push the narrative 'if you want equality come and fight with us'."* An Azerbaijani women's rights activist noted that the daily realities of the unresolved conflict had stunted the

development of women's rights: "*We're busy [...] solving all these day-to-day problems and all the other women are like this [...] part of our capacity was always engaged in some [...] risk mitigation or something like this. If there was no conflict, probably these women would be more vocal. They could develop [...] their basic needs would be met and so they could like develop further protecting their rights and so on, but they were kind of pulled back to the basic needs".*

Inequalities are even greater for more marginalised women. Those we spoke to noted that disability for a man who lost a leg in the war would bring the status of being a hero, but for woman – exclusion and stigma; *"if a woman lost her leg, nobody cares. No one will marry her, she cannot take care of the house".* Queer activists faced exclusion and national humiliation too, leading to their civic devaluation: *"Being queer and a patriot doesn't fit into each other: I am going to love my country the way I'm loving my country, although they think I don't. Because I'm queer, automatically, I cannot be patriotic."* This sentiment was echoed on both sides, that queer people, and especially gay men were scapegoated, as "not real men", one Azerbaijani respondent noted that *"in the current climate, expressions of queer identity are often perceived as contradicting expectations of patriotism and sacrifice."* Such hypermilitarisation and aggressive nationalism in conflict-affected societies reinforces rigid gender norms and fuels homophobia and transphobia. This further marginalises LGBTQ people and those unable to live up to gendered social expectations and norms, exposing them to heightened violence, exclusion, and silencing in both public life and peacebuilding processes.

During and after the war, women took on roles traditionally performed by men, proving that they could sustain families, protect households, manage survival without male presence. Yet, their labour was interpreted as *"just cooking and cleaning": "I think during this war it was a great time for women to [say] we can do this without men, because men were on the frontlines mostly [...]No one acknowledged that, [...] they were brushed off. [Men said] 'what have you done, even? We are doing the whole work.' But the emotional impact and physical impact [fell on women]",* said one Armenian. Therefore, it is important that women's resilience is recognised and considered, alongside understanding the hardships they went through, when planning post-conflict reconstruction. Women not only sustained life during war, they proved their capacity to lead and take initiative, but recovery processes failed to acknowledge or value their labour.

The urgent need to rebuild credibility in peace processes was noticed during interviews. As one Azerbaijani woman noted, the radicalisation of communities and mistrust towards international actors reached a point where Azerbaijani women saw war as the only resolution to preserve the lives of their sons who had not yet participated in the war, and also to justify or rationalise the death of those who were lost before: *"We conducted a survey after the war: 'Are women always for peace, is it a stereotype or reality?' The research showed that they just lost hope and didn't trust negotiations. War was the only*

resolution for them. […] it was the first time when I observed that people were united." Mothers are being militarised and radicalised: *[If we don't fight till the end] it means that my son died for nothing. So no one [in the society] said to stop the war, but [rather] to go forward and close the chapter. The big responsibility lies on international negotiators, because people absolutely don't trust them and the process anymore."*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PARTICIPATION

- **Support multi-layered, localised peacebuilding** led by grassroots women and inclusive of displaced populations, youth, queer people and women from diverse social groups. EU institutions and member states should provide flexible, accessible and long-term funding that allows community-based women's organisations to define their own priorities, be resilient and participate safely and meaningfully.

- **Elevate women into formal peacebuilding platforms as recognised experts**. This requires not only securing seats at the table but also investing in women's capacity development, and recognition as experts in conflict resolution and recovery. Women's lived experiences and grassroots knowledge should be valued as expertise equal to that of diplomats or negotiators and recognised as legitimate input for formal peacebuilding processes.

2. PROTECTION

- **Support governments and civil society to build inclusive crisis preparedness and protection systems that reach women from all social groups.** The EU should help strengthen early-warning systems, community shelters and crisis response mechanisms, drawing on women's experiences from past crises to ensure responses address gendered risks and barriers. The EU should implement rapid, easily accessible protection mechanisms for women human rights defenders and women peacebuilders, including emergency funds, legal assistance, risk assessments, and contingency planning**.**

- **Ensure that EU programming and budget planning envision a specific allocation for women's mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)**, including destigmatising and raising awareness about the accessibility of this support among conflict-affected and displaced women, recognising these measures as core resilience and protection elements, rather than add-ons.

3. PREVENTION

- **Support local resilience against militarisation**. EU actors should prioritise socio-economic opportunities, youth engagement and women's rights programmes that reduce reliance on militarised identities and enable communities to envision futures beyond survival.

- **Build pathways for coexistence** through supporting thematic joint cultural, educational and social projects, including cross-context learning and experience exchanges about environmental crisis, sexual health and reproductive rights and gender-based violence, which connect Armenian and Azerbaijani communities beyond formal peacebuilding.

- **Promote programmes that encourage the integration of the concept of peace education into school curricula.** Women highlighted the key role that women play in education younger generations, in their roles within families but also within the educational sector, and the importance of disrupting narratives of "the enemy" at a young age.

- **Ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services, psychosocial support, and survivor-centred SGBV prevention, particularly during displacement and crises**. The EU should resource women's rights organisations (WROs) on the ground and support capacity development of state officials in social work systems and MHPSS capacity to serve marginalised communities, in cooperation with WROs/women human rights defenders.

4. RELIEF AND RECOVERY

- **Ensure equality in recovery** through economic and social programmes for women of different socio-economic groups. EU actors should support recovery efforts that remove discriminatory barriers, recognise women's wartime and displacement-related burdens, and provide equal access to housing, livelihoods and social support. The EU should design these efforts in an inclusive and participatory manner through consultations and peer review.

For all women's rights, in every corner of the world.
Visit **kvinnatillkvinna.org** to find out more about our work.

Funded by
the European Union

KVINNA
KVINNA