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**WAR AND PEACE IN KARABAKH:  
AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS**

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## WAR AND PEACE IN KARABAKH: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS

*Women, as full-fledged members of society, are considered to be active participants in post-conflict settlement and peacemaking. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the negotiation process has produced no significant results, and women's experiences have been missing from this agenda. Thus, this article aims to reveal the experiences and perceptions of war and peace of Karabakhi women. A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. Forty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with Karabakhi women and eight interviews with experts possessing professional and practical knowledge of this topic. The research results show that although women contribute to war, they see their role more as connected to the peacemaking process. The results also provide evidence that women would like to participate in formal as well as informal sectors of decision-making and peacemaking processes. However, they are excluded from these processes and have little access to power.*

**KEY WORDS:** Nagorno-Karabakh, war, peace, peacemaking, gender

### INTRODUCTION

Many researchers and policymakers have drawn attention to the role of women in war, but they have done so mainly by highlighting the risks and consequences threatening them (Goldstein 2001; Prugl 2003; Rehn/Johnson Sirleaf 2002). Over time, the focus has shifted from women in war to women in peace, highlighting women's potential value for peacemaking and peacebuilding processes. As a result, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 (2000). It should be noted that women and men experience conflict differently and therefore understand peace differently (Salman 2016). In fact, women are more peace-oriented regarding nurturing international understanding, building consensus through cooperative efforts, open and regular communication, reducing military budgets and desiring a more equitable distribution of resources (Brock-Utne 1989). Thus, to build comprehensive images of both war and peace, the perceptions of women, as full-fledged members of society, must be considered.

The leading theories are focusing on the revelation of the role of women in times of war fall within the frames of feminist discipline (Buzan/Hansen 2009). Ann Tickner's (2007) views deserve special mention in this context. According to her, security issues should be observed at the micro level, and the sectors to which security is applicable should be widened. This means that the referent object of security is changing, including gender as well (Hudson 2010). Giving importance to women's lives also helps to create a more objective and comprehensive image. Women are considered to be active participants in, and contributors to, conflict prevention, peace negotiations, conflict mediation and post-conflict reconciliation (Marshall 2000; Nilsson 2011). A focus on women can assist in the process of devising new structures and ultimately improve the chances of building a lasting peace (Dolgopol 2006). Therefore, women's role in peacemaking as part of post-conflict reconstruction is crucial (McKay 2004). Certain international examples support the effectiveness of women's participation in peacemaking. The case of Liberia shows how the Women's Peace Initiative managed to reach a peaceful resolution by pushing for the disarmament of the fighting factions before a peace agreement was signed to end 14 years of conflict. Furthermore, in countries such as Guatemala, Burundi, Cyprus, Bosnia and South Africa, women's peace organisations and coalitions have played a significant role in reaching peace (Women and Conflict 2007). A unique success story of women's involvement in peacemaking is that of Anahit Bayandur and Arzu Abdullayeva, heads of the International Helsinki Citizens' Assembly representing Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively. Working in the informal sector, they organised the exchange of 500 prisoners of war (Abdullayeva 2011). This example emphasises the necessity of studying the experience and potential of Karabakhi women, taking into account that the context is a low-intensity conflict marked by periodic escalations. Though the Nagorno-Karabakh case has been studied extensively, less research has been done on women's role in the peacemaking process and their perceptions, opinions and attitudes relating to the conflict resolution process. Also, when discussing events during wartime via mass media, for instance, the primary emphasis is always on the role of men. This creates a masculine image of heroism that marginalises women, ignoring their experiences and excluding them from direct participation in peacemaking. Hence, this research is aimed at filling that gap.

### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. The method of qualitative interviews allowed for conducting an in-depth and comprehensive study of women's social experiences of war and peace. It also allowed for interpreting their lives while taking into account their social context by addressing the following themes: women's experiences of the "first" Karabakh war, the four-day war, real and expected

forms of women's participation in war, perceptions of peace, participation in peace-making and decision-making processes, and visions of, and concerns about, the future.

In total, 48 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with women living in Nagorno-Karabakh. The sampling procedure accounted for the interviewee's age (18–36 years, 36–55 years, 56 years and older), place of residence (close to the frontline, non-frontline) and involvement of a family member in the armed forces (a family member serving in the army, none of the family members involved in the armed forces). As the research results show, the women's opinions differed only in relation to their age. That is why the younger and elder generations are distinguished in the analysis, where the younger generation comprises women between 18 and 35 years old (who were born during or after the war) and the elder generation comprises women 36 years and older (who were mature enough to remember the war). In addition, expert interviews were used to contribute an objective assessment based on the experts' professional and practical knowledge of this topic. Eight expert interviews were conducted with representatives of NGOs, media and foundations working in the field of peace-building, and scholars. The interviews were conducted in October and November 2016.

## FINDINGS

The beginning of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh (1991–1994) can be traced back to the Karabakh Movement which was initiated in 1988. After three years of clashes, on 5 May 1994, both sides signed a ceasefire agreement in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which went into force on 12 May 1994. However, the ceasefire did not defuse tensions across the border. Indeed, in some cases, the situation escalated sharply. Particular prominence should be given to the latest events that occurred at the beginning of April 2016. Tensions peaked during this period, even in the political discourses of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the conflict was considered a four-day war. This short-term war had severe effects on the region in general, dividing the history of the low-intensity Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into two parts: from 1994 to April 2016 and from April 2016 to the present. As the April clashes are officially the latest escalation of the conflict, in this article, we will refer to the four-day war as the “first”<sup>1</sup> Karabakh war.

The primary focus of wartime is on men as active participants (subjects), leaving women marginalised. However, women engage in war as well, and they experience it

1 The name is given conditionally to distinguish between the fighting in 1991–1994 and the clashes in April 2016.

uniquely. In the case of the April escalations, it should be considered that the main clashes were far from places of residence, thus ensuring the physical security of women. Consequently, this research underlines the social-psychological effects of women's experience of the war, including the perceptions, attitudes, perspectives and visions of these women.

To consider the experiences of the four-day war, the background of the war in the Nagorno-Karabakh region should be re-examined, since some of the interviewees witnessed the “first” Karabakh war, and this affected their perceptions and expectations. Thus, the elder and younger generations of women should be distinguished. In the case of the elder generation, it is important to mention the direct and indirect ways in which they participated in the “first” war. Regarding direct participation, on one side, women could be found on the frontline as nurses, cooks, etc., while on the other side, women were directly involved in the fighting. In fact, some even held positions as military squad commanders (Osyan/Ghahriyan/Babayan 2014). According to the Encyclopedia of Liberation War, in Karabakh in 1988–1994 (Ayvazyan 2004), more than 200 women performed combat roles. Their indirect participation was no less meaningful, because by staying in their places of residence and tending to the household, women supported their men, giving hope and a reason for the fighting.

*“When the war started, I was involved in one of the military squads... the men asked me to go to military positions with them [...] I was a nurse, and then I became a shooter...”*  
(Askeran region, 56 years old)

*“One day, I was going home from work and met Artur Mkrtychyan<sup>2</sup>, and he told me that the men had liberated one of the villages and were hungry and tired. So, I told other women, and we cooked a meal and sent it to them [...] and women's participation in the war started from that point [...]”*  
(Hadrut region, 54 years old)

The younger generation did not see the war but has been socialised in conditions where everything reminds the public of the war, and everybody talks about the war. Therefore, despite not having been directly involved in the war, or not having been born by the time the war occurred, the young generation has an experience and perceptions of the first war through agents, such as family, school and media. Thereby, the younger generation's experiences are formed through collective and historical memory (Halbwachs 1980; Marutyan 2006) transmitted from generation to generation.

2 Artur Mkrtychyan was the commander of a military squad and the first Chairman of Supreme Council of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

*"I even remember [...] I was born in 1987 [...] some things that my family told me, but very vaguely... but the first time Martuni [the city she was born in] was bombed, and we escaped to the cellar... I remember that clearly. I was four or five years old at that time [...]"*  
(Stepanakert, 29 years old)

According to Luhmann (2000, 1), "all we know about our society or the world in which we live, we know through the mass media". That can be applied to the April clashes, as the media was the primary source of information from the frontline for civilians. Thus, since the media provides the first response to any event that occurs, thereby forming initial notions about the event, this research was partly dedicated to revealing the main sources of information. During the April escalation, the internet (including social networks and news websites) have been particularly important for Karabakhi women. Before the news was disseminated from the border, those who had a family member serving in the army learnt about the clashes later that night. Aside from the mentioned sources, women also discussed the events with their family members and neighbours. This discussion, according to women, had a sedative effect, though such a function was not pursued intentionally.

Since the elder generation of women survived the war, its members were mainly concerned about the lives of soldiers and the consequences that the war could have on those who did not directly experience it. Thus, these women were thinking about the possible ways to support those involved in clashes, rather than leaving for their own safety. For the younger generation, this escalation was new; thus, their notions were more militaristic in the emotional context. Moreover, members of the younger generation mentioned the clashes that happened in August 2014<sup>3</sup> as their first experience of war, contributing to the collective memory which shaped their attitudes towards the situation.

*"The only concern was about the young generation. We [the elder generation] all experienced war and saw many hardships. I was 24 when the other war started [1988-1994], but I was the mature person at that time [...] our children now face war as well, and they have not seen a peaceful life. This is one of the biggest worries for me [...]"*  
(Askeran region, 54 years old)

*"We saw the escalation in August [2014]... the war [...] we know what it is, but my main concern is that my sister's child is four years old – the same age as was my sister when the first war started... It seems like everything is repeating itself."*  
(Stepanakert, 29 years old)

3 At the end of July 2014, clashes broke out on the Armenian–Azerbaijani border, as did the line of contact between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, which lasted until the beginning of August. The clashes were the most intense since the ceasefire agreement (1994).

To sum up, when discussing the "first" Karabakh war and the four-day war, all respondents mentioned some apparent similarities and differences. Regarding the similarities, it was mostly mentioned that the April war was the subsequent escalation of the same conflict. The most remarkable difference was the fact that unlike the "first" war (1991–1994)<sup>4</sup>, which had been anticipated since the beginning of the Karabakh Movement (1988), the April clashes (2016) were unexpected after 22 years of ceasefire.

*"The difference was that the April war, to be honest, was unexpected. For instance, in 1988 [when the Karabakh Movement started], we were preparing [...] we felt that the war was inevitable. But in April [...] It was at once and unexpected."*  
(Shushi, 56 years old)

Other differences included the period, the military equipment used and the ways of communication (sources of information). Significant differences were the types of weapons used by both sides. In particular, the Karabakhi side did not have a regular army and appropriate equipment during the "first" war. However, this was not the case during the April events. As for communication, it should be noted that today, the most widespread source of information is the internet. It provides opportunities to obtain detailed information about events as they occur. The internet and telecommunication provide a connection to the external world. Thus, it has become easier to access necessary information even for those in a conflict zone, whereas during the "first" Karabakh war, people had to wait for days to receive information. The "first" war lasted four years, while the second one just four days.

*"The only difference is in time [...] four years and four days. When the April war started, there was such a feeling that we did not have peaceful years."*  
(Hadrut region, 53 years old)

The "first" war, which lasted four years, forced women to shoulder responsibilities undertaken by men. On the contrary, during the April war, which lasted only four days, there were no role changes in families.

As mentioned above, the April war was short; hence, women did not have to go to the frontline, in contrast to the "first" Karabakh war, where there were some notable examples of women directly involved in the fighting. However, women found an alternative way to have an impact on ongoing processes, taking secondary functions and ascribing new responsibilities to them. These secondary functions comprised cooking and baking, preparing necessary supplements for soldiers and sending provisions to the military.

4 Although officially, it is stated that the Karabakh war started in 1991, people date its outbreak back to 1988 – that is, the beginning of the Karabakh Movement.

The interviews revealed other crucial latent functions of women, such as not leaving their homes, continuing to go to work and living their everyday lives, thus contributing to the minimisation of panic and maintaining a relatively peaceful atmosphere. It should also be noted that most of the interviewed women had liberal views towards women's participation in the war. According to them, whoever wants to fight should do so, regardless of gender or any other characteristic.

The representatives of both generations agreed that the whole population of Nagorno-Karabakh needed training in first aid and safety during the wartime. They also emphasised the importance of systematic social and, particularly, psychological consultation during the postwar period, since this time is as stressful as the war itself. The experts shared this opinion. As they mentioned, the postwar period has risks that may lead to violence in the family or other social groups. This affects men directly and is explained by the fact that by fighting for the land and taking heroic actions, men gained social recognition. In the postwar situation, the process of re-socialisation is not always smooth and, in some cases, does not happen because of issues associated with adapting to the new social life. This could be explained by the loss of social recognition men used to have, by facing challenges, such as unemployment, and difficulties regarding social integration, all of which may lead to an increase in violence in the society.

*"Of course, it is important for the people to know how to defend themselves during such situations, and psychological consultation is also necessary, as there are people who need such consultation."* (Hadrut region, 48 years old)

*"Yes, we require training. If the training is impossible, we all, at least, need a psychologist."* (Martuni region, 54 years old)

Also, the interviews revealed expectations about women's participation. In this context, there were differences regarding the desired participation mainly among the younger generation. Some interviewees mentioned that they would like to leave for the frontline, and others even wanted to be listed as volunteers, but they were not allowed. Such a willingness to be directly engaged in war is linked to the fact that these young women (who had not seen the war) grew up hearing heroic stories about the war and sought to experience it themselves and be in the situations described to them.

*"[...] even we had a friend [...] she lives in Stepanakert [...] who was thinking to go to the frontline with me and other girls, if we were allowed [...]"* (Shushi, 25 years old)

Those who wished to support men on the frontline, but could not, listed several barriers affecting their decision. Some of them had young children whom they cannot leave alone, some were taking care of their parents, and others mentioned that someone must stay and organise household chores. In comparison to the young ones, the elder women, based on their social experience, claimed that it is better for a woman to stay away from the frontline and provide support from home.

*"[...] if I had an opportunity [...] [children are underage; the little one is two years old] [...] if I could, I would rather go and participate in the April war and support my husband."* (Martuni region, 31 years old)

Nevertheless, the research results evince a tendency to see and highlight their participation more in peacemaking than in war. According to scholars, women are better positioned to trust conflict resolution initiatives and engage in activities that will further the prospects for peace (Burton 1990). Moreover, women's involvement in all spheres of society and access to power, particularly in decision-making processes, are essential for the achievement of equality, development and peace (Beijing Declaration 1995). To understand women's visions of involvement in the peacemaking process, it is essential to clarify their perception of peace. By peace, women of Karabakh mean, firstly, certainty concerning the future – which includes the wellness of their children and predictability of their lives – and, secondly, the absence of ceasefire violations and any loss across the line of contact. Overall, their notions of peace coincided mainly with negative peace (Galtung/Fischer 2013), which infers the absence of war. This shows that the situation is so complex, the absence of clashes and shootings is equated to peace. However, a non-war situation is not peace. Peace in its complete meaning comprises the absence of violence in all forms and solidarity in different aspects of social life (positive peace). It should also be noted that peace is a dynamic social construct requiring tireless efforts towards building a relationship and trust among conflicting parties (Ayunts/Zolyan/Zakaryan 2016).

*"Peace is when I will be sure that the future of my children is ensured. This is the most important thing."* (Martakert region, 36 years old)

*"In our case, peace is so relative that the absence of shootings, not participating in soldiers' burials are considered as peace here."* (Martuni region, 22 years old)

Women's perceptions of peace should particularly be considered because women appear to be the primary agents of socialisation and identity construction. The latter suggests framing a model of thinking about the future generation. It can have constructive as well as destructive functions correspondingly, contributing either to the deepening of the conflict situation or leading to the establishment of peace. The opinions of women on this topic mainly fall within the frame of a constructive

approach. Two main opinions can be distinguished. The first one assumes that history should be told to children as it is, without exaggerations and myths. This also underlines the importance of not dehumanising the other side by presenting them as aggressors or enemies. According to the women in this study, this dehumanisation further spreads hatred and hostility. Yet they simultaneously claimed that it is necessary to be vigilant and always ready for unexpected behaviour. Moreover, of note is that the women did not differentiate between girls and boys in the early stages of socialisation, mainly when having discussions about the history.

*"The history should be told as it was, without distorting it; their misdeeds as well should be told, and then let the children choose what they want. However, we should always explain that in every nation, there are good as well as bad people, and you should not perceive the whole nation as an enemy."*

(Askeran region, 44 years old)

According to the second opinion, children growing up in a conflict zone, especially the after April clashes are aware of the situation, have formed an image of the enemy and, therefore, have an attitude towards the issue; thus, it is pointless to speak about it in general.

*"In my opinion, children should not be told anything as they know everything. You know, Karabakh is a country where nearly 80–85 % of children's fathers are serving in the army... So, what to tell the children? They see everything and know everything [...]"*

(Hadrut region, 54 years old)

However, the women expressed certainty that Azerbaijan presents its version of this history. Thus, there is dissonance between two different social realities that determine the formation of different attitudes towards the history of Nagorno-Karabakh. These differences in history may hinder the conflict resolution and reconciliation processes. Furthermore, the experts mentioned that the absence of intersections and interaction hampers dialogue and further communication between the two sides.

The women in this study also expressed a remarkable attitude towards how peace could be reached. To establish peace in the region, they thought that Nagorno-Karabakh should be involved in negotiations<sup>5</sup>, which would be possible only if Karabakh is recognised internationally as a sovereign state. They thought that such recognition would determine Karabakh's participation as an essential actor on a political platform. To perform as such, Karabakh should reach a high level of development (social, economic, educational, etc.) and have a robust civil society.

<sup>5</sup> Currently, Armenia and Azerbaijan are the chief negotiating parties, while Karabakh as a full-fledged party is excluded.

*"Today, the biggest guarantor of peace is sovereignty."*

(Martakert region, 53 years old)

*"Our society should educate itself. To create a strong civil society, every person, every citizen should fight for their rights and also fulfil their duties."*

(Hadrut region, 48 years old)

The success of the peacemaking process is partly dependent on women's participation in formal and informal sectors. In fact, women are usually excluded from the formal peacemaking process (Stewart 2010; Freizer 2014), though they have high potential. The failure to include women often begins at the ceasefire stage, and this makes it more difficult to broaden the range of participants at the peace negotiation stage (Dolgopol 2006). This exclusion later continues in the sectors of formal and informal institutional power. The exclusion of women from power limits their access to peacemaking and negotiation processes, and exclusion from such processes prevents women's empowerment.

The majority of the interviewed women thought that in negotiation and decision-making processes, priority should be given to knowledge, skills and competencies, rather than to gender or other characteristics. Moreover, as Ní Aoláin (2016, 8) mentions, *"if women become a code for 'doing' inclusion better, it disappoints precisely because sex alone fails to capture the complexities of women's situated political positions in violent societies"*. These interviewees stressed the importance of equal involvement of both women and men, as their attitudes and opinions can complement each other. At the same time, they pointed out several characteristics specific to women that can contribute to more efficient solutions. For example, they claimed that women are more flexible, peace-oriented and able to think of solutions in a short period. Also, women tend to seek peace because it is their fathers, husbands and sons that are serving in the army and participating in the fighting.

*"First of all, women should be educated and, in particular, they should get a political education."*

(Stepanakert, 19 years old)

*"Women see the situation differently from men, as their sons are on the front-line. Women know what their sons want and what will save their lives"*.

(Hadrut region, 54 years old)

Although there are some examples of women's involvement in formal sectors, they thought that they should be involved more broadly in decision-making processes (e.g. formal and informal negotiations and discussion tables). The analysis of the findings shows that women of Nagorno-Karabakh have a willingness to get involved and

see the necessity of their involvement in such processes. These women are divided into two categories. The first category comprises those who claim that they have the proper knowledge and, thus, are ready to participate in negotiations. The second category consists of those who mentioned specific factors limiting their opportunities. On the one hand, there is a lack of knowledge and skills; on the other hand, women are the primary carriers of household responsibilities and cannot combine both. Interviewees indicated that because of their low representation in government, their voices would not be taken into account. Accordingly, they saw their role as being stronger in informal sectors. Once again, the question of power is raised. Being excluded from the peace process, formal sectors and institutional power since the ceasefire agreement, which was signed almost 23 years ago, women of Karabakh do not even think about the possibility of gaining access to power and managing and exercising it in various societal contexts. Moreover, this is the reason why, when talking about participating in peacemaking, they mentioned only being able to act in the informal sector.

As Lederach (2001) mentions, peacebuilding must be undertaken at numerous levels of society simultaneously. He states that when discussing reconciliation and settlement, we should not only reflect the objectives of the ruling body and formal negotiations. He suggests three approaches for reaching peace: top-down, middle-out and bottom-up. In the bottom-up approach, peacemaking is recognised as a multi-level activity carried out by different groups of people, such as women, who can become more active participants working towards peace and reconciliation in the region (Freizer 2014). In addition, women of Karabakh expressed that an alternative type of informal participation could be realised by forming a platform allowing the women of Karabakh and Azerbaijan to meet, share opinions, discuss issues and create new paths for peaceful solutions to the conflict. At the same time, they emphasised the importance of Azerbaijan being willing to do the same. They especially mentioned that the current political regime of Azerbaijan is authoritarian and stifles its citizen's initiatives for dialogue. Besides, the role of third parties (state actors) is no less critical, as they also have interests in the region and their own visions/versions of conflict resolution.

*"It is also important that there should be an Armenian and Azerbaijani women's, mothers' group in the negotiation process, because, in my opinion, there [in Azerbaijan], no one wants a soldier to be killed either. The role of women [...] although in Karabakh we have a female minister and there is a little discrimination towards women, I think that women should be more engaged in different spheres, at least in NGOs."*  
(Shushi, 26 years old)

On the whole, from the perspective of the women in this study, the future of the Karabakh conflict is unpredictable, especially since the April escalation, which has affected the planning of people's daily lives, thereby creating a sense of uncertainty. Besides, the constant fear of war does not allow for thinking about the future or making any long-term plans.

## CONCLUSION

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a low-intensity conflict, which means that the line of contact is in constant tension, marked by periodic escalations. The existing uncertain "no war, no peace" situation, which has been ongoing for many years, has become a part of everyday life. People in Nagorno-Karabakh continue to live such that they must predict when clashes and fighting will restart. Moreover, their future plans are always conditioned by the threat of war. The negotiation process has yielded no significant results, as peacemaking should be not only top-down but also bottom-up, engaging different social groups in the process. Both the literature and the analysis of the research results show that women have high potential in the peacemaking process and that potential should be harnessed properly. However, currently, women of Nagorno-Karabakh are excluded from peacemaking and decision-making processes, which, in turn, limits their access to power. Yet women's willingness to participate in peacemaking in both the formal and informal sectors is not enough, as the governments on both sides should also be willing to take a step forward. Moreover, a policy of inclusive peacemaking should be adopted, as the effectiveness of such processes is based on various experiences of different social groups affected by war. Inclusiveness means engaging various parties, such as women, representatives of civil society and other affected groups, in the peacemaking process.

Thus, to improve relationships, build confidence and establish sustainable peace in the region, tireless efforts and willingness are needed from both sides. The formation of a robust civil society and social and economic development in both countries could form a ground for the realisation of all the aforementioned goals. Furthermore, it would be desirable to conduct similar research in Azerbaijan and combine the data from both studies. This will provide a detailed and comprehensive image of the situation, which may lead to new alternatives for peacemaking in the region.

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