

Chapter 11

Women's Transformative Power in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict



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Women often see beyond the 'abstractions and deceptions' of borders and boundaries which enflame the intertwining, swirling circles of violence and are able to identify overarching symbols of unity and shared values that transcend those artificial divides. (Afshar, 2004, p. 55)

11.1 Introduction

The process of securitization in Armenia and Azerbaijan, following the protracted ethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, has made the military sphere the mainstay of the political and economic system of the two countries. According to securitization theory, threats to national security are not necessarily given but rather constructed through discourses and practices (Buzan et al., 1998). Feminism entered the debate about securitization by stressing that gender does not play a neutral role. Rather, securitization and militarization policies reflect a masculine agenda and generate many sources of insecurity for women (El-Bushra, 2018; Hansen, 2000). A militarist culture affects people's lives, especially women's, in the form of a patriarchal and restrictive society that imposes strict gender roles. As stressed in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325/2000, which inaugurated the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, women are disproportionately affected by conflict and, for this reason, they should be involved in building sustainable development and peace (United States Institute for Peace, n.d.).

This paper focuses on women's experiences of conflict and of militarist culture. As their role as peacebuilders is usually overlooked not only by their own society but by the international community at large, comprehending the local dimension of the conflict and understanding how it intersects with gender might engender new forms of Confidence- and Security-building Measures (CSBMs). The central point of this

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study is that, drawing from personal experiences of the effects of militarism and the protracted war on everyday life, some women are likely to build a counter-narrative to the conflict and to promote a culture of peace. These narratives are based on the refusal of patriarchal values and, as such, on the deconstruction of militarist discourses. For this reason, women are well placed to work in promoting dialogue, cooperation, and the establishment of communities of practices in development projects across borders. Such a perspective is relevant in a post-conflict scenario like the Armenian-Azerbaijani one. There, the governments' top-down conflict management has limited the space for dialogue between the two societies, generating two crystallised and isolated communities. It is important to break through this isolation and implement spaces for women's agency. The literature on gender and conflict suggests that shifting the paradigm from "women as victims" to "women as agents of change" is not only a matter of justice, but also an opportunity for development and conflict resolution.

The following section describes the relation between militarism and patriarchy and the modalities by which this relation affects women's rights. The third paragraph illustrates the processes by which some women in society react to the restrictions given by militarism and embrace an inclusive perspective of conflict resolution. Relying upon select case studies from around the world, I also explain how the Azerbaijani-Armenian case is encompassed in a global dynamic, by which conflict affects gender roles and vice versa. Accordingly, the third paragraph proposes several scenarios and perspectives regarding the design of bottom-up processes that might contribute to both women's empowerment and conflict resolution. In the final paragraph, after reviewing the OSCE's historical mandate in the region and its current tasks and responsibilities there, I refer to gender-based policy reforms and new perspectives that the OSCE and ODIHR can adopt to implement bottom-up and gender-sensitive projects in the specific case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Even though the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the focus of this paper, the concluding remarks allow for the possibility of generalizing results with regard to the OSCE region at large.

11.2 Gender Based Militarism in the OSCE Region

Militarism consists in the constant maintenance of a strong military capability and preparation for defence against enemies. Militarization consists of the progressive centralization of the military sector in society. This process is reflected in increasing military spending at the expense of other sectors and, on a rhetorical and ideological level, in a *securitization* process, that consists of the daily instigation of the conflict. Governments that are engaged in protracted conflicts, such as in Armenia and Azerbaijan, perpetuate military discourses and practices in society through public events, mass media, and historical textbooks. This process also entails actions of ostracization and labelling as "anti-patriotic" opinions that encourage a peaceful settlement of the conflict. According to Akhundov (2020), in Azerbaijan, the militarization

process happens along ideological, sacred, and practical trajectories. The ideological trajectory consists of the dissemination of national-moral values and of a specific historical, cultural, and religious narratives; for example, the teaching of youths how to conform to the role of a “real patriot.” Young students are reminded daily of their duty to combat enemy forces and to sacrifice their lives for a better future for the nation. The ideology is formed especially in schools and civil society organizations controlled by Government-organized Non-governmental Organizations (GONGOs). The sacred trajectory entails the creation and sanctification of symbols of the motherland through representations and rituals. Examples are the cult of dead heroes, facilitated by the Shiite culture in Azerbaijan, and the consecration of the trinity by the state, the army, and the people. The practical trajectory is constituted by trainings, such as the participation of youths in military-style drills, military-sports games and military-patriotic camps (*ibid.*).

Armenia, despite stronger independent civil society institutions than Azerbaijan (Civicus, n.d.), is not unaffected by the process of militarism. Slightly before the breakout of the 2020 war against Azerbaijan, and following the heavy fighting in 2016 and the new tensions in the summer of 2020, the Armenian government launched a proposal to create a nationwide voluntary militia to supplement the national army that would be open to both women and men. Back then, local media broadcasted plenty of reports about volunteers ready to join the front. Another parallel programme for young women was promoted by the First Lady Anna Hakobyan in September 2019 as a precondition for joining the regular armed forces. As a consequence, some civil society organizations feared that the programme might herald a new militarization process in the country. Those fears were not groundless. According to the Bonn International Centre for Conversion, as of 2018, Armenia was ranked as the third most militarized country in the world (Mejlumyan, 2020).

Adding gender quotas to the army has little to do with promoting women's rights in a conflict-affected scenario as this formula still perpetuates a militarist society with all the consequences that come with it. According to feminist theory, militarism is a hegemonic process, influencing not only geopolitical dynamics, but also the intimate sphere, exacerbating gender stereotypes in society through the promotion of a patriarchal culture. As argued by feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, militarization consists of the “diffusion of military ideas into popular culture” (Enloe cited in Shouten & Dunham, 2012, p. 10). Militarist ideas centred on glorification of violent masculinities encroach on women's and men's everyday lives in the form of a patriarchal and restrictive reality that intensifies in times of conflict. In societies in which militarism is the ordering principle, gender and conflict intersect to create structural inequalities (Lauren & Betancourt, 2018; Rooney, 2018). Indeed, gender stereotypes and militarist ideas are in a mutual reinforcing relation that determines a “continuum of violence” for women at both a physical and psychological level during the conflict as well as after the cessation of violence (Cockburn, 2012). Understanding this intersectionality is useful in comprehending the local and internal dimension of the conflict, in addition to the geopolitical considerations. This would allow us to understand how women become victims not only of the direct effects of the war (e.g. loss of loved ones, displacement, destruction of properties and resources, presence of mines, and

pauperization), but also of the indirect effects of the protracted conflict over time, namely patriarchal society.

Patriarchy assigns specific roles to women and men within society which function to maintain a strong military apparatus. Such distinctions include that men's role is to defend the homeland from a constant enemy and, accordingly, women are in need of protection as they are needed to give birth to future soldiers. In many romanticized representations of people's collective imagery, the nation is always embodied by a female figure and never by a male one. According to this vision, women are perceived of as passive *incubators* that must perpetuate and maintain the ethnic purity of the nation. Indeed, both Armenia and Azerbaijan rank as two of the top-ten positions worldwide for sex ratio at birth, revealing a clear son-preference at birth (The World Bank Data, 2019). The vision also entails that son's sacrifice in war is the price many Armenian and Azerbaijani women must be willing to pay for the homeland, as they must choose to be "mothers of the nation" over "mothers of a soldier" (Twum et al., 2019, p. 26).

Among the negative effects of patriarchy on women's economic and social security, Handrahan (2004) outlines the limited possibility for women to access proper education and Lauren and Betancourt (2018) stress how women fall victim to the black market and illegal activities to escape economic insecurity. The pauperization of women due to war exacerbates the marginalized position of women conflict scenario. The lack of resources adds to the general subordinated status of women to men. In patriarchal contexts, widowhood downplays women's status and their possibility for a stable income (Handrahan, 2004). In Armenia and Azerbaijan, women who became the only provider of a single-headed household following the loss or injury of men are forced to turn to survival strategies (Twum et al., 2019, pp. 27–28). There are indeed testimonies from local residents in both countries regarding "cotton buses" that instead recruit young girls for the sex trade (ibid.). Armenia and Azerbaijan are classified by the IOM as tier 2 countries. This means they do not meet minimum international standards to protect people from falling victim to trafficking. It is for this reason that many families decided to marry off their daughters, even at an early age, as parents perceive marriage as the only way to guarantee their daughters economic security. Once again, this practice is facilitated by a patriarchal culture that persists in the everyday life in the Caucasus, especially in rural areas (Twum et al., 2019, p. 26). According to a report from UNFPA Azerbaijan, the minimum age at marriage for men and women is currently 18. However, this may be reduced by a year if permission is granted by the local executive power. According to the state statistics agency (SSCRA), the number of married underage girls is on the rise (UNFPA Azerbaijan, n.d.). According to a similar report from Armenia, the legal minimum age for marriage is 18 for both men and women. However, it is possible for underage adolescents to get married once they have permission from their parents or a legal guardian. According to the official Demographic Survey, girls aged 15–19 made up 7.9% of all married women in 2010 (UNFPA Armenia, n.d.).

Women's physical security is affected by a general environment of impunity against perpetrators of violence. As the entire system is male centred, and both the production and the decision-making sectors are male dominated, violence against

women and domestic violence are not priority issues in the government agenda. Rather, domestic violence is perceived of as a private matter and, in some cases, even justified as men's duty to demonstrate their authority within the household. Neither Armenia, nor Azerbaijan, nor many other conservative countries have thus far ratified the Istanbul Convention Against Violence Against Women. The convention obliges signatories to prevent violence against women and to protect and support them, and the conservative fringes of the society still oppose its ratification (JAM News Editorial Staff, 2020). Nonetheless, both countries show high rates of domestic violence and require concrete steps to prevent gender-based violence (GBV) (UN Women, n.d.).

It is also important to mention that economic and physical security are indirectly affected by the large number of resources that are periodically diverted from the welfare state into the military budget. Healthcare and education—sectors that employ mostly female workers and which represent important sources for the prevention of violence and protection women from abuses—are affected by such expenditure cuts to the welfare sector (Pankhurst, 2004). In Azerbaijan more than in Armenia, as the former has focused mostly on oil production, GDP expenditures for health care are half of the GDP expenditures for military, and, in general, the military is larger than the welfare sector (Institute Stockholm International Peace Research, 2021; The World Bank Data, n.d.).

11.3 Challenges for Peace Building

Understanding the relationship between gender and conflict in unstable contexts is fundamental to understanding certain dynamics that remain often overlooked but which can contribute to formulating effective trust-, security-, and confidence-building measures in divided places. The protracted ethnic conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh have generated a sense of constant existential threat. The failure of international community to build peace in the region has thus far instilled in the local populations the idea that a zero-sum game is the only solution to the conflict. As long as the international actors involved in the process overlook the importance of bottom-up dynamics and the urgency of giving locals greater ownership over the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh, the security dilemma will persist. This persistence inevitably leads to new tensions, prevents Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from coming back to their houses, and impedes the construction of crucial infrastructural projects in the South Caucasus.

Given the premises illustrated in the previous section, it is reasonable that some women in society are likely to develop an anti-war narrative in such a conflict scenario. Women do not oppose militarism because they are “beautiful souls” or “peaceful by nature,” but because they must refuse militarism to the extent that they refuse patriarchy (Afshar, 2004; Handrahan, 2004). Women from Armenia and Azerbaijan, given their similar experiences of the conflict, represent an important glue for the creation of spaces for cooperation and dialogue across borders. Addressing

the gender dimension of the conflict from a constructivist rather than an essentialist perspective can shed some lights on how women are potential agents of change and representatives of a culture of peace.¹ In this regard, in 2019, the Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation published a report entitled “Listen to Her,” which is the result of ambitious work in the field which collected a series of oral accounts from women in Armenia and Azerbaijan (Twum et al., 2019). The report outlines the commonalities in women’s narratives about the rejection of a war that is no longer worth it, and the advantages of cooperating with the other side instead of fighting. In the region, women are leading informal humanitarian initiatives, with little engagement at the official negotiations level (Avonius et al., 2019, pp. 28–30). Evidence from the region shows that women are increasingly active in assisting victims of GBV. They also improvised service delivery and shelter management during the COVID-19 emergency. In Azerbaijan and Armenia, women volunteered in shelters for victims of violence and in bordering communities to provide basic services to women and children in need in order to fulfil the vacuum left by the state authorities (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al., 2020). As Irina Grigoryan, President of the NGO Artsakh Institute of Popular Diplomacy, mentioned in an interview for Community of Democracy, many women participate in regional and local initiatives in the Caucasus, such as trips, training sessions, seminars, and social initiatives, to create confidence building between Armenians and Azerbaijani (Community of Democracies, n.d.). Local NGOs address multiple levels of issues affecting women in the post-conflict scenario. As indicated in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, women mobilize across borders to improve their peacebuilding skills and combat violence against women (ibid.).

Women in Armenia and Azerbaijan have developed similar coping strategies in times of conflict to cope with the distress generated by the war. These vary from dancing to drinking tea together, or to providing food for the entire community. During conflicts, women become responsible within their community for restoring and maintaining traditional patterns, taking care of vulnerable persons such as the elderly and children, and even providing the latter with education. In IDP settlements in Azerbaijan, some women have started small-scale businesses, such as preparing yoghurt or tea and teaching music or selling clothes, recreating a sense of “normality” amidst desperation (Twum et al., 2019, p. 17).

It is not surprisingly that many women advocate for peace and the cessation of violence in the region. In Armenia, the anti-militarist feminist platform *Women in Black* used regular peaceful vigils in front of government buildings and public events with the aim of raising awareness of women’s potential agency in the construction of peace (Tenuta, 2016). They stress the disproportionate impact of the war on women and girls in terms of gender inequality and the exacerbation of violence.

¹ According to an essentialist perspective, certain categories have a set true nature that can be observed directly. This vision, applied to feminist studies, necessitates that women be characterized by inner features, such as for example “empathy” due to motherhood. Constructivist feminists conversely believe that women’s features are modelled on the basis of identities and discourses generated by society. Hence, these characteristics may be contested and may change over time.

This evidence suggests that women, when it comes to issues of common concern, tend to develop solidarity that sometimes transcends national borders. This solidarity can have an impact on building trust and peace across communities. An example is *Women of South Caucasus for Peace*, a regional initiative that unites 13 women's groups dealing with peace building initiatives in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (ibid.). These organizations advocate for the ratification of the UNSCR 1325 in each country, build dialogue across the different nationalities, and assist female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence with legal, psychological, and training support (ibid.).

The international community should take into consideration the impact of these initiatives and support them with resources and training. It is necessary to involve the population in projects of common interest so as to establish forms of cooperation and dialogue that enhance reciprocal trust, as well as to empower women and to combat women's economic insecurity. During conflicts women take on many responsibilities while men are away, but their role is often minimized with the cessation of violence and the restoration of traditional gender roles (Justino, 2018). Including women's narratives for peace in confidence-building measures, apart from being effective in the construction of a sustainable peace, would mean giving a sort of continuity to women's agency, ensuring that there is structural change after the conflict rather than a simple relaxation of roles.

11.4 The Role of the OSCE

The potential of women's agency in confidence-building measures has not been prioritised in the OSCE agenda for conflict resolution (Avonius et al., 2019), yet the OSCE is in position to mainstream gender approaches in peacebuilding in conflict-affected scenarios, including in Nagorno-Karabakh. The OSCE has a long tradition of mediation activity dating back to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. In addition to this, the Organization uses a comprehensive approach to security that cuts across three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human security. Mediation activity is implemented in Nagorno-Karabakh through the Minsk Group, which is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, and has the scope of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict (OSCE, n.d.). Nonetheless, the OSCE Minsk Group's role as mediator, formulator, and facilitator of the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh has progressively decreased in the last years due to its failure to have its proposals implemented. From the Package Plan to the Madrid Principles, none of the several formulas proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group between 1997 and 2007 have found fertile ground for implementation. One of the reasons for this is that the populations were never prepared for peace or involved in bottom-up peace initiatives and so were unwilling to accept top-down peace solutions.

Women's agency can be at the centre of bottom-up approaches for conflict resolution. Gender mainstreaming which cuts across the three dimensions of security could constitute an essential part of the attempt to reassert the OSCE's pivotal role in

Nagorno-Karabakh. Gender equality is a cross-dimensional issue within the OSCE that should be applied when it comes to the implementation of concrete security-related measures in a conflict-affected scenario and, in particular, for arms control, CSBMs, and the protection of human rights (Loshchykhin et al., 2019).²

The OSCE Minsk Group could break through the political impasse with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by depoliticizing the peacebuilding process and investing in informal activities of confidence building. This can be done by creating, as well as monitoring, safe places for humanitarian and community-driven projects that put emphasis on women's agency at a Track III level. Community-driven projects are the ideal base to implement gender-sensitive projects according to John Paul Lederach's multitrack approach to conflict resolution and the social theory of Communities of Practices (CoPs). Together, these two approaches embody a connection between the official and unofficial processes of negotiations.

According to the ideas of sociologist John Paul Lederach, peacebuilding can be reassumed as "a long-term and systemic transformation from war to peace" (Paffenholz, 2014, p. 15). This can be realized if communities involved in joint initiatives of common interest and mechanism of mutual accountability are established. According to this multitrack approach, the reconstruction scenario is conceived as a three-level pyramid. In this, the top leadership (governments and IOs) operates at the Track I level, the middle-level leadership (NGOs, academics, religious leaders, and any influential individuals in society) acts at the Track II level, and the grassroots population (common people including IDPs, women, children, and elderly people) operates at the Track III level. The essential point of Lederach's model is that the three levels are interconnected, every transformation at one level generating a transformation at another. In this perspective, community-driven projects act as a platform for cooperation at an informal level, keeping the reconciliation process going despite stalemates at the official level of peace negotiations.

Zooming in on the small-scale processes happening at the Track II and III levels, the CoP theory suggests the form these kinds of cooperative projects should take. CoP model is, in itself, transformative and inclusive. Developed by the anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger as a learning theory, a CoP is composed of "people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In other words, a CoP consists of a group of people that share a concern for a certain issue and, through repeated interaction,

² Gender-based approaches in conflict resolution are supported by a specific legal framework within OSCE. On the heels of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325/2000, which launched the UN agenda on Women, Peace and Security, the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality and the OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions No. 3/11, 14/04 and 14/05 treat gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting issue in conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Other documents reinforce the legal framework. The Mediation and Dialogue Facilitation in the OSCE includes a gender perspective, as do the OSCE Guidance Note on Gender-Responsive Mediation 2008 and the Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit (Avonius et al., 2019; Loshchykhin et al., 2019, p. 89). Other complementary decisions of the OSCE are Ministerial Council Decision No. 7/09 on *Women's participation in political and public life*, No. 10/11 on the *Promotion of equal opportunities for women in the economic sphere*, and No. 7/14 on *Preventing and Combating violence against women* (Loshchykhin et al., 2019, 90).

learn how to manage it better. The core elements which must be present for a CoP to be defined as such are: the *domain*, an interest shared by a great part of the community so that most individuals are willing to comply with specific tasks; a *community*-based approach, namely a group of people held together by interaction, accountability, and mutual learning; and a *practice*, or repertoire of shared knowledge, practices, and experiences built by the community for the community itself.

The potential of this model has already been investigated with regard to the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, though without any reference to the gender dimension. Broers already contested the liberal and post-liberal approaches perpetuated by the West which caused the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be stuck in a “post-liberal limbo” (Broers, 2019, p. 6). He suggests that the ineffectiveness of Western approaches does not lie in the scarcity of funds and numbers of peacebuilding projects but, rather, in the obduracy of the liberal peace paradigm which insists on the export of models of democracy, rule of law, market economy, and human rights as instruments to build peace (Broers, 2019). Conversely, Broers affirms the importance of so-called hybrid peace models and community-driven peace models as an alternative to liberal approaches (Broers, 2019, p. 15). Romashov et al. (2019) too have hypothesized the application of the CoP model as a peacebuilding strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They suggest that CoPs based on projects of common interest could be the lynchpin for engaging the populations in confidence-building activities. So far, instead of proposing solutions to tackle the basic needs of the population in a post-conflict scenario, the international community has opted for elite approaches, such as the organization of international meetings and conferences among civil society actors, academics, and journalists. These have fallen short of addressing the everyday problems and have not invited the grassroots population to build confidence and trust (ibid.). Romashov et al. (2019) have, to prove the effectiveness of the CoP theory, cited some positive experiences of Azerbaijani and Armenians living peacefully in the Southern villages of Tsopi and Shulaveri in Georgia. There, the heritage of the collective farms of the USSR incentivized people to cooperate on everyday issues, from reconstruction of infrastructure to weddings and funerals, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In other words, people there maintained the former intercommunal bounds and were able to create their own spaces and points of belonging to provide for their economic security through joint everyday practices. Those experiences of CoPs happened at a Track III level, and their strength lies in the fact that they remained depoliticized while focusing on basic needs at the grassroots level.

This would be facilitated if more women were included at the different levels of negotiation. According to Walsh (2014), the OSCE Minsk Group, still characterised by traditional state-centric diplomacy, has failed to centralize women's agency in security-related matters. For example, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office (CiO) of the Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh should promote the inclusion of more women representatives within the mediation team.³ The CiO could also establish a women's

³ In the framework of the OSCE Minsk process for Nagorno-Karabakh, the CiO (Chairperson-in-Office) can appoint special and personal representatives dealing with conflict management that

delegation or a representative council of women to coordinate groups from civil society and the grassroots community in a multitrack perspective.

Alongside the OSCE Minsk Group, the ODIHR can play a role in enhancing gender-sensitive approaches in post-conflict reconstruction. Specific attention is devoted to the dimension of gender equality within the ODIHR's mandate, as it aims to increase women's participation in politics, as well as at the level of civil society, and to encourage women's recruitment in security ranks (ODIHR, n.d.). As such, the ODIHR is in the position to offer support to the Minsk Group and to coordinate its efforts in gender mainstreaming. With the support of the ODIHR, the OSCE should promote safe and neutral places to increase the participation of women from Armenia and Azerbaijan in combating gender-based violence and women's marginalization in social, economic, and political life. Projects in this direction, based on assessing basic needs at the community level, can encourage the formation of CoPs and can provide immediate relief to women.

In sum, initiatives should be concrete and prioritize the basic needs of the grassroots population in a post-conflict scenario, rather than being limited to influential actors in civil society or academia. There are many priority issues, in and outside of the post-conflict scenario, which can present a platform for the OSCE to design feminist peacebuilding projects.

11.5 Ending Gender Based Violence

Women in civil society can significantly contribute to diminishing episodes of violence, support victims of such episodes, and contribute to peace dialogue. However, the civic space in Armenia and Azerbaijan, especially for women, is restricted. Ultra-nationalist anti-gender groups discredit women peace activists as "traitors" of national and traditional values (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al., 2020). In addition, women from Azerbaijan in particular face general restrictions on civil society groups imposed by the government (ibid.). Moreover, services for victims of violence lack sufficient resources to function effectively (Twum et al., 2019). International humanitarian projects can fill this vacuum by creating opportunities for women to be engaged in managing shelters and hotlines for victims of domestic violence or supporting an early warning system to prevent violence. Women should also be provided with safe spaces for dialogues and for the exchange of information and good practices across borders.

Economic insecurity is another form of violence against women as it affects women disproportionately. Access to agriculture and water resources are of the utmost importance for women, especially during and after a conflict. Women are usually in charge of providing water and food to the household. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan, mostly in rural settlements, suffer from lack of water and, accordingly, an

directly report to the CiO and can suggest confidence-building and humanitarian measures (Avonius et al., 2019, pp. 12–15).

inability to cultivate lands (Twum et al., 2019). The Kura-Araks river, whose basin is an important source of water in the wider region, is one of many cross-border natural resources that have remained affected by the conflict dynamics (ibid.). As access to resources is a matter of concern for many women from Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, joint management of resources might constitute another platform for cross-border cooperation.

The presence of mines too can limit the access to supply of resources as well as access to arable lands for many women. Indeed, the issue of mines is gendered: although men and boys are the main victims in mine explosions, women are affected by the presence of mines in different ways. Women's freedom of movement is further restricted and their economic insecurity, due to the impossibility of accessing mined lands, increases. The presence of mines hampers agricultural and farming activity and access to essential resources for women. In addition, in patriarchal societies, female victims of mines have less access to medical assistance and are more exposed to stigmatization from the community than men are. Evidence from humanitarian de-mining projects show that women involved in de-mining activities might report additional areas for prioritization with respect to men, enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian mine action programmes (UNMAS, 2019). As of today, Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most mined areas in the world (Mine Action Review, 2020). After the latest war, the number of mines has further increased to a level that is currently unknown. Although de-mining activity lends itself to cross-national confidence-building intervention, the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan are treating the issue on an individual basis. Apart from the handover of maps from Yerevan to Baku in change for the release of some Prisoners of War (POWs), the two governments have not developed any kind of joint action to speed up the de-mining process, not even in the form of exchange of information and good practices (Herszenhorn, 2021). Thus, de-mining activities in Nagorno-Karabakh can be an occasion to involve civil society at large, including women (Clifford, 2018). According to a study from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies of Geneva conducted in Lebanon and Colombia, women who participated in de-mining activities felt empowered and acquired decision-making power not only within the respective communities but also within the household (Ehlert et al., 2015).

Another peacebuilding and gender-sensitive potential action would be to combat the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) as part and parcel of the patriarchal traditions of militarism. SALW proliferation, and the glorification of gun possession, corroborates the glorification of violent masculinities that justify a range of violent practices that are considered signs of manhood and pride within the community (Farr et al., 2010). Even after the cessation of violence, SALWs circulate due to diversion from the state stockpile to non-state actors. High numbers of SALWs possessed by members of a community, which tend to increase in proximity to a conflict, are associated with copious episodes of domestic violence and an increase in human trafficking of vulnerable persons, especially in the sex trade (Frey, 2018). Combatting the proliferation of SALWs is usually considered to be a male prerogative while the influential role of women in this issue is undervalued. However, in small-town in Uganda, women were involved in advocacy programmes

to combat the proliferation of SALWs. Ugandan women raised awareness regarding the nexus between gun possession and the glorification of violent masculinities, as well as regarding the risk this represents for the security of the entire community, eventually convincing some members to give up their weapons (Frey, 2018, p. 372). While there is no definite evidence that it is the case, given the consistency of the trend in conflict-affected scenarios, it is quite likely that a greater number of SALWs are circulating in Armenia and Azerbaijan following the last conflict. This topic requires greater investigation, especially in consideration of the alarming rates of GBV in the countries and the scarcity of services for victims of domestic violence.

Those are just few examples of practices that show how the paradigm of “women as victims” in conflict-affected scenario can be turned into “women as agents of change.” Apart from providing for their own security, women can be central actors in promoting a culture of peace and combatting gender stereotypes in patriarchal cultures. Every time International Organizations treat women as victims in need of protection, they reproduce a male-centred approach to peacebuilding. The OSCE could make a difference in the approach to conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh by appointing more women in leading positions and by cooperating with women in charge of peacebuilding practices at the civil society level. Instead of concentrating efforts on giving immediate relief to women so as to just “heal the symptoms” of the conflict, international organizations should target the root of the conflict, namely the aggressive nationalism and the glorification of violent masculinities that perpetuate the notion of a zero-sum game as a solution to end the conflict. Women are fundamental actors in this perspective and future research should be oriented towards detecting other potential cross-the-border platforms for cooperation between women in conflict scenarios.

11.6 Concluding Remarks

Militarism and gender are two sides of the same coin. Militarism reproduces gender stereotypes and gender stereotypes reinforce militarism. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the patriarchal system is the direct consequence of the protracted ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh which is perceived to be existential and is fuelled by governments through the constant representation of a *dehumanized* enemy. Elites in power maintain authoritarian monopoly over the management of the conflict and gain legitimacy from the rhetoric of securitization. Any attempt at reconciliation by civil society actors is condemned as treason, not only by governments but also by large parts of the population that reproduce nationalist discourses. Among civil society actors, women are further marginalised due to the spread of patriarchal culture.

Still, stories of resistance against militarist culture often feature women as protagonists. Some women contest the militarist culture as this affects their lives via support for a patriarchal society that forces them into restrictive gender roles. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, some groups of women have proven to be powerful agents of change of the conflict rhetoric and representatives of a culture of peace. When it comes to

common issues of concern, such as GBV and economic hardship, women show a kind of solidarity that breaks through nationalist boundaries. More or less voluntarily, these women are able to create confidence-building measures in a conflict-affected scenario, with great potential for the implementation of a multitrack perspective for the resolution of the conflict.

However, many are the limits to women's bottom-up peace initiatives. The intersection of male-centred politics, authoritarian management of the conflict, repressive environment for civil society, and scepticism towards the potential for a peaceful resolution of the conflict all play against the success of feminist initiatives. Indeed, few are the resources that are allocated to feminist projects, which then suffer from lack of safe spaces and continuity overtime.

Including a gender perspective in the design of communities of practices is an opportunity to promote a new humanitarian paradigm in conflict resolution, one in which women are not treated as victims but as agents of change. For this reason, the international community should investigate alternative approaches to the liberal peace approach, such as bottom-up and community-driven hybrid models in which local women have more ownership over the conflict reconstruction process.

These new perspectives can offer the OSCE a platform to relaunch its credibility in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which its historical role as mediator, facilitator, and formulator of a peaceful resolution of the conflict lost ground to authoritarian actors such as Turkey and Russia who have not shown any intention of involving the two populations in the peace-building process. In such a scenario, the security dilemma is likely to continue in the next decades, dispelling any hopes of constructive dialogue and integration.

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