Transformative gender narratives in South Caucasus
v2

Conversations with NGO women in the Armenian-Azeri conflict

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the role of women as intermediaries, mediators and arbitrators in conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the de facto region of Nagorno-Karabakh. It is highly relevant to comdev due to several reasons. First, it is an active issue. The number of deaths from border clashes has increased in 2014-2016 despite a ceasefire signed in 1994. Second, women and civil society groups are oppressed. This thesis explores the question of women’s contribution in solving conflicts considering masculinity, gender complex and war. Are women better at solving conflicts? Third, new media has become an important tool for cross border communication. Focus is given to use of social media by women in an attempt to facilitate change of discourses. Critical discourse analysis, hermeneutics and social constructivism are considered as methodologies to evaluate this. However, there is a number limitations here including use of English language, limited participant numbers and response bias.

Background information on conflict is presented and includes analyzing the role of national and international organizations such as parliaments, the Minsk Group (OSCE) European Commission (EPNK) and the UN (1325). A brief literature review is then conducted focusing on conflict area, historical discourses and peace building narratives. This is followed by an examination of post-soviet literature on masculinity, nation-building, feminism and changing role of active women, centering on Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh. Topics explored are women’s rights, political involvement, language, religion and cultural turn. Next stage is a summary of research questions for qualitative interviews with five women participants who are or work with active women in Transcaucasia. From available data, main premise becomes new role of active women as peace builders in conflict acting individually, in NGO’s and in government and attempting to facilitate discussion with lawmakers and negotiators in conflict.

After research, primary and secondary data is analyzed. Responses are evaluated over the methods mentioned and main contributions are considered to be on grassroots activism funded by international NGO’s. It is not clear whether women would be better at resolving complex but their contribution to nation building has been proven. New media becomes a tool for activist communication and propaganda. Women find themselves dealing with nationalism, marginalization and breakdown of democratic institutions. They turn to international NGO’s but this often backfires as Armenian and Azerbaijani society and government sees this as Western intrusion. Progress is slow and daily lives are ruled by uncertainty, discrimination and faint hope of resolve.
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2. Choice of research area

This degree project follows a discourse analysis in my Research Methodology paper on post-soviet Caucasus nations and decline of women in parliaments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was written from the Eurocentric gender perspective and followed notion of gender equality as defined by CEDAW (Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and MDG3 (Millenium Development Goal 3) Millenium Development Goal 3 (MDG3). It explored post-war gender narratives, social inequality, gender based violence and barriers to entry. It concluded that women are not fairly represented in parliaments across Caucasus due to discrimination. However, it also concluded that there are now more active and visible women’s groups in civil society working with national or international NGO’s. They found new roles working on grassroots’ issues and have gained noticeable physical and virtual presence.

This particular thesis will explore these new roles in light of growing border tensions over the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK). NG border conflict started in 1988 and lasted until 1994 until a ceasefire was agreed. Region is recognized as part of Azerbaijan by majority of other countries but is governed and protected by Armenians resulting in political and physical clashes. Women are seldom seen on these fronts so it is important understand if they have any active rather than passive role as mediators and arbitrators. This area is currently under-researched socially, culturally, from a gender, religious and new media perspectives. Najafizadeh (2013, p. 161) states that “Although there is an extensive body of published research and commentary pertaining to various aspects of the war, there is no substantial sociological literature in English that provides detailed accounts and insights into the experiences of women”.

My thesis focuses on participatory representation and empowerment of these active women. Can women actively and positively contribute in solving this conflict? It explores the history of conflict, masculinity, femininity and women’s input into the NK peace process. It also assesses the political influence of other nations and bodies (Russia, UN, and EU). This second world region is rarely explored in this way, but there is a lot noteworthy marginalization of civil society. Women’s active involvement in wars, conflict resolution and nationalism can be compared to other post-Soviet or even post-colonial countries. Can active women find empowerment and representation in NGO’s and community groups? What is the role of the EPNK project, UN resolution 1325 and international NGO’s such as Kvinna till Kvinna? Their efforts appear to be hindered by gender inequality, violence, corruption, emerging religious influence and struggle to generate decision making power in a society underlined by ruling men.
3. Aims of Thesis

The aims of this thesis are linked to exploring the role of women in conflict resolution. They will be examined against available secondary literature on the Armenian-Azeri history, conflict, nation building, gender and new media alongside primary data:

- To define role of active women as intermediaries and mediators in the Armenian-Azeri border conflict in 21st century by conducting and studying qualitative interviews and performing discourse analysis

- To investigate how this role is represented in new media, including Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, blogs and websites (considering security intervention from governments)

- To review the successes and limitations of OSCE, EPNK, UN resolution 1325 and work done by international partners and NGO’s to allow women to contribute to the peace process

It is important to note that the conflict is escalating at the time of writing and situation can change affecting active women and their input. At the time of writing, EPNK project phases 1 and 2 have been completed, and EPNK phase 3 is about to start (April/May 2016). But there’s uncertainty over when this will happen due to this fragile geopolitical state. This can affect the ability to obtain sufficient and reliable research data to fully satisfy the aims. In April 2016 another 60 people were killed on the border.

4. Limitations

Several limitations exist that may challenge the findings of this thesis. One is the conflict situation and escalation of border tension. Language is another. Armenian, Azeri Turkish, Russian or English are spoken locally, but this study is conducted in English only. This limits the choice of sample and excludes certain sectors of society. Similar bias exists in available English literature where data is limited and may be skewed by Western ‘school of thought’. Third limitation is the technological gap as interviews are done through Skype restricting the choice of participants. The limitations are countered by selective and analytical choice of secondary sources and of interviewees. Secondary sources are from accredited research bodies and primary subjects have been selected to be from both sides of the conflict, from academic background and from international NGO’s. Therefore it is possible to conclude that findings are sufficiently representative and valid as much as they can be.
5. Designing the Methodological Approach
   i. Methodology Spectrum and Application

Research methods were chosen to satisfy research aims and adequately assess the situation in the region. They are widely used in communication for development literature and have been utilized to investigate gender discourses. Any approach needs to explore post-Soviet gender narratives and look into the theory of masculinity, femininity, forming of nation-states, war and women's role in wars as defined by historical examples. In order to properly examine the unique situation of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the de facto region of Nagorno-Karabakh, a constructivist approach is needed. It consists of a discursive review into available literature on the above topics as well as interview responses. It will investigate how women are represented in Armenian and Azeri politics, peace process and their role in international organizations. Literature review includes assessment of new media outlets that are originating or aimed at women in Armenia or Azerbaijan. New media includes blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and other discussion groups and forums. Interviews are conducted through Skype bringing perspective into the use of new media to communicate with researchers, academics and local women.

In interviews it is important to read socio-cultural meanings. According to Somekh and Levis (2005, p. 155), doing this is key as it allows the researcher to investigate how meanings are produced. It aims to find social conventions in interviewee answers. Choosing interview candidates already allows the researcher to explore women's groups and NGO's. There are several. Kvinna till Kvinna (Caucasus), Young Women's Network, South Caucasus and Women Connect Across Conflicts are of particular interest. They all have strong social media representation on Facebook or Twitter and are active in online discussions in English. Their members are not necessarily from Nagorno-Karabakh but have experience working there. There are also a number of universities that have done research in the region, such as Malmo University. Finally there are women politicians, student researchers and other active local women.

Qualitative interviews work as part of discourse analysis and seek to analyse written and vocal language use. This combines secondary literature (books, publications, newspapers) and new media (blogs, social media group profiles). This then links together to assess role of active women as integral to conflict resolution. It will answer the question about the changing role of women. There are still many limitations here as mentioned. Larger assessments should be done on gender, masculinity and war, sociolinguistics, ethnography and role of international bodies.
ii. Introduction to Discourse Analysis

‘Discourse analysis looks at the way texts are constructed and is concerned with the social contexts within which the text is embedded’ (Myers, 2013). This works well to examine both traditional media, new media (blogs, websites and social media pages), and interview transcripts from NGO women working in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It looks at sociological interpretations and meanings of language. It also examines textual or vocal characteristics and denotations. Critical discourse analysis is a vital tool to assess dialogue using social perspectives, multimodality and context of post-Soviet narratives in both countries. According to Van Dijk (2001, p. 352) it assesses whether new media texts and interview responses present ‘social power abuse, dominance and inequality’ views and their reproductions. It looks at examples of gender discrimination in society of Nagorno-Karabakh and between the borders of established states of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A separate note can be made on semiotics within discourse analysis. Semiotics looks at signs and symbols that are used in traditional and new media channels. Sociolinguistics is also important as there is variation of meanings when different languages or dialects are used. It depends how people access language resources and what meanings they are trying to convey to the reader or listener. Examples here can include posts made by women’s groups that appear to portray a dynamic and accurate story. They may document instances of abuse and intolerance towards women in the context of conflict. Interaction style in interviews is also important as it may influence by gestures, turn-taking, coherence and topics of choice. This is summarized by Van Dijk in his review of discursive methods of textual analysis. In addition to discourse analysis, there are other important methodological approaches that will be used and can help to understand research data in this context.

iii. Hermeneutics in Interviews

Interview answers can be deconstructed using hermeneutics. According to van Manen (1997, p. 98-99 cited in Friesen et al, 2012, p. 49) ‘a hermeneutic interview is an interpretive conversation wherein both partners reflectively orient themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view. The art of the researcher in the hermeneutic interview is to keep the question (of the meaning of the phenomenon) open: to keep himself or herself and the interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned. The art of questioning is that of being able to go on asking questions’. This means that interview design won’t be as important as being able to understand responses and follow up with
open questions. It prompts the researcher to orientate oneself on interpersonal grounds and understand historical and social contexts sufficiently well to produce meaningful responses.

iv. Contribution to Social Constructivism Theory

Social constructivism plays an important part in understanding human relationships that are formed through historical and cultural processes. In other words, it can help establish meanings and knowledge that is constructed by people interaction. It can thus produce different realities. Situation may appear to be different in power, and to active women who construct their reality through interactions with NGO's and community groups. Yet another different view of reality may be constructed by foreign NGO workers who only see or hear about situations in the region through third parties and later present this as facts. This is important as it is seen in secondary literature and helps develop cognitive understanding of social dialogues in Caucasus. It helps to understand the meanings behind these dialogues. It is important to remember the question of role of women and whether social constructivism plays a role in their perception of what this role should be. The perception from men politicians, governing bodies or active women can significantly differ over what the role of women in society is.

v. Other considerations

There are also other methods that have to be contemplated here. Ethnography of communication is a qualitative method of analysis that helps determine social and cultural practices and beliefs of a community. According to Saville-Troike (2003, p. 2) it is "directed at the description and understanding of communicative behaviour in specific cultural settings" and deals with findings patterns in language use. Comparing primary and secondary sources will establish which communication codes are important to active women in this conflict. This will not form the focus of the study but will remain an important consideration. The emphasis will remain on a comprehensive discourse analysis, hermeneutics and looking at social constructivism. It will be complemented with theory of masculinity, nationalism and evidence of women in conflicts and conflict resolution. This set of mixed methods will help understand communications between active women. It will help answer whether women have or should have a strong contributory role to the peace process.

6. Background Information

The territory of Caucasus is home to “some 50 different ethnic groups” (Krüger, 2010). Nagorno-Karabakh is currently governed by Armenia, but has been internationally
recognized as belonging to Azerbaijan. Its territorial status dispute has prompted a conflict lasting from 1988 to 1994 (Appendix i) and subsequently continuing through border clashes after ceasefire. Violence has intensified through 2014-16 with at least 201 soldiers and civilians killed. This is the basic premise behind the conflict. However, there are many other additional factors to explore and investigate why this recent resurgence has occurred. Has it been spurred by political change or social change, and has it intensified or been mitigated by influence of various international groups getting involved? Nagorno-Karabakh dispute is sometimes used by Armenian politicians to prompt the return Nakchivan exclave (managed by Azerbaijan) to Armenia stating that Azerbaijan is occupying it illegally. But many Armenians do not regard Nakchivan as part of Armenia or as contributing factor to this conflict.

In context, it is also worth remembering that all of these states are in different socio-economic levels of wealth (global 2014 GDP trends by UN indicate Azerbaijan at 81 and Armenia at 121). Azerbaijan has invested a lot in infrastructure and showcased itself on the global stage by hosting 2012 Eurovision and 2015 European Games. It was able to achieve this by exporting oil. Armenia has not achieved similar successes but has still seen growth over last two decades. However, both countries have a lot of poverty in rural areas. Can Transcaucasian women’s influence networks, such as the Women’s Resource Centre, South Caucasus Women’s Congress, YUVA, Azerbaijan’s Women’s Committee and others reach out to all women? This needs to be looked at through region’s economic and social discourses in conjunction with emerging new media trends that connect rural population to global information sources. It will be affected also by the freedoms that civil society groups have to access information.

According to the Equal Power Lasting Peace 2012 report on the conflict (Carlman et al, 2012, p. 5), Nagorno-Karabakh remains heavily guarded by Armenian security forces. Following the ceasefire in 1994, negotiations take part in the Minsk Group only. Female participation is negligible. This is despite the fact that OSCE is an international group. In early talks there was at least one prominent female, the Foreign Minister of Nagorno-Karabakh Naira Melkoumian. According to the report, women’s participation in parliamentary politics and decision making declined during 90’s and 00’s, and women started experiencing more gender discrimination. Report also states that women’s participation in political processes declined due to local government clan culture in both Armenia and Azerbaijan and that many active women therefore choose to take roles in local or international NGO’s as they felt that they can have a more independent voice.

7. Elaboration on question/problem, i.e. exploring significance of cultural and background trends
Why is role of women important in nation building, war, peace process and governmental politics? What is the role of masculinity in wars?

How are any new roles (e.g. NGO activism, grassroots community level) contributory to cultural landscape and overall development of the region?

Conflict is engrained in contemporary Transcaucasian history and ethnography. There is a variety of historical narratives concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Such narratives often include discussion on role of Russia, EU and USA. It concerns the creation of recognized states as well as regions such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nakchivan. This interlinks with post-soviet discourse and people seeking a new post-soviet identity. It often discusses the building of nations, establishing new state capitalism, receiving international funding, Westernization of youth culture and other factors. There is also a set of literature that discusses war and gender. Cooke and Woollacott (p. xiii, 1993) quote Theweleit who said that “men have used war and violence to rival women’s power to give birth”. It is an attempt by man to ‘create’. Creation of new power structures is very relevant to new countries emerging after the end of Soviet Union. It could also be a display of masculinity. War is associated with men and peace is associated with women. But it may not be as simple. It is worth investigating where women have been in terms of political representation, society (e.g. employment and education) and where they are now.

There has been a change on the political spectrum and women’s membership in parliaments has declined as Soviet quotas were abolished. It has dropped from 30% in the 1980’s to 10-15% currently across Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Situation in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nakchivan and other de-factor/de-jure autonomous regions is similar but more complex as they struggle for recognition and self-governance. Women have also seen drops in representation in top jobs and education sector as Soviet infrastructure collapsed. There is evidence of an anti-feminist discourse, abuse and societal exclusion. However, there is also evidence of more active women being visible. This suggests that some women can be treated as marginalized peacemakers. Communication between these women is difficult due to security interference. This is particularly visible in Azerbaijan. At the same time, there’s intervention from international bodies and organizations (EPNK, UN 1325, other NGO activity). They attempt to influence politicians and allow more women to take part politics and activities related to conflict resolution. But why is it important? Can women govern better and
can they influence the course of war? Can women really make an impact if they are only active in civil society movements working on women’s rights or peace activities?

This investigation can start by looking at role of women in the Soviet Union followed by nationalist movement of the late 1980’s and emergence of new state. This needs to be combined with theory from literature on gender, war and politics. According to Heyat (2002, p. 3), the aim of the Soviet government was to diminish class distinctions. Women were widely accepted into industrial labor roles after the Second World War. Soviets also introduced 30% quotas for women in national parliaments. Heyat sees this as removal of distinction between gender and socialism (p. 4). As Soviet Union was secularist, religious activity diminished and it temporarily stopped playing an important role. But different ethnic groups did not always get along. Throughout the 20th century ethnic disagreement and territorial disputes remained. People also moved back and forth creating ethnic dispersion. After independence was achieved, conflict restarted.

Media communication networks such as TV and newspapers were new and irresponsible. They were drawn to biased stories and created a further divide between populations of both countries. Participatory media communication was non-existent until 2000’s when blogs and social media became available. Only then there was a realization that broken links could perhaps be re-established in the region.

![Figure 1.1 Current situation in 2016 (extracted from Wikimedia Foundation database)](image-url)
8. Elaboration of key traditional literature, notably the theoretical framework and how it contributes to understanding conflict and role of women in it

vi. Historical and Legal sources of conflict

It is important to start with historical theoretical framework from key literature that gives access to background on the conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Legal Analysis (2010) by Heiko Krüger reviews the historical sequence of events and highlights legal significance of the conflict that spurred the wider border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This book is helpful to assess the facts, formulate questions and know the timeline and background to conflict management. Krüger (p. 12) elaborates on the Armenian homicide by the Turks in early 20th century and the Armenian and Russian retaliation. He also presents a legal idea of Armenian responsibility for conflict and occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. He signifies the importance global recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijani territory.

Another such book is the Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War (2013) by Thomas de Waal that deals with historical figures and their decisions. It chronicles the dialogue that took place between nations. It particularly focuses on the events of 1994 and the ceasefire agreement. What is important here, and will be later in the primary research, is that de Waal (p. 272) argues that it is not a conflict born of “ancient hatreds” where homicide, historical wars or religion could be of significance. He also states that it is wrong to assume that the top-down Russian influence spurred this conflict in the first place. And lastly he says that socioeconomic factors did not necessarily play a role either. He tends to suggest that it was political ambition, display of masculinity and nation building gone wrong. De Waal believes that conflict continues to be fueled by propaganda and nationalistic showmanship of political leaders.

vii. Fallout from conflict: gender narratives and displacement of women

Farideh Heyat provides the refugee and displaced persons perspective in her book Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan (2002). Women here are portrayed as narrators and storytellers. They can be victims or heroines in their socio-communal groups. The author does not consider women in power, but rather looks at women in culture. Heyat sees those characters preserving tradition and driving cultural narratives in civil society. This book also gives a good insight into soviet and post-soviet context of gender relations in the region. It focuses mainly on Azerbaijan and brings religion into the equation. Heyat (p. 51) talks about the weakening of religion and strengthening of the secular elite. She states that “for nearly
a century since the Russian conquest, the religious establishment has been greatly weakened”; however, she also signifies that “nevertheless, religion remaining a social and psychological bond between the Azeri masses and their elite, and as such could not be dismissed”. Whether this plays a role in conflict is another matter, but it can be argued that Azerbaijan has resisted Russian influence since independence occurred and that may be to do with a stronger national identity where religion is a factor.

An article from Mehrangiz Najafizadeh also explores similar narratives. Ethnic Conflict and Forced Displacement: Narratives of Azeri IDP and Refugee Women from the Nagorno-Karabakh War (2013) gives focus to Armenian and Azeri ethnicity. It states that “various conflicts have been fueled by ethnic-based political, nationalistic and territorial issues, rather than religion” (p. 163). Najafizadeh talks about Soviet Ideology suppressing this ethnic tension during the Soviet times and it resurfacing in the late 80’s towards the breakup of the USSR. On the role of women, she presents several first-hand accounts of how they were displaced and were left vulnerable with deaths of husbands, sons and fathers in conflict. They are dramatic accounts and construct an emotional narrative towards the formation of civil society relations. One (p. 170) describes a vivid account of a woman escaping from Armenian bombs with a dead baby on her back as she did not want to bury it in the fighting zone. An important section is about rebuilding and displaced women taking lead (due to loss or due to strong commitment for their children) to create and shape new family lives.

viii. Masculinity and nationalism in theory

The next set of literature deals with connection of women to conflicts and conflict resolution. There are many sources that deal with masculinity and nationalism and evaluate whether women play a different role than men. The first book is Gender and Nation (2008) by Nira Yuval-Davis who deals understanding of nationalism by examining gender relations. She argues that (p.47) women “often symbolize the collective unity, honour and the raison d’être of specific national and ethnic projects like going to war” but “they are often excluded from the collective ‘we’ of the body politic”. Yuval-Davis points out those major studies on nationalism do not examine gender at all. Whilst she says that women can be social constructors of a nation by building its culture and identity, they should not be referred to as a collective group who think alike. Yuval-Davis points out that it is important to remember that elite, Western or active women involved in social life of a nation may not represent other women. But in conclusion, the author recommends that a dialogue between women of different social standing can help a collective struggle for gender equality.
Another book that touches upon gender, nationalism and war is *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* by George Mosse (1996). It looks upon the identity of a man and a woman in a marriage and the exclusion of women in civic affairs throughout history. The author examines some of the reasons including family duties, break-up of established order or even anarchy in family or public life. War and conflict, on the other hand, has helped men portray themselves as warriors, shape their character, demonstrate their strength, build the reputation of a nation as well as enjoy freedoms away from domestic life. Stereotyping always played an important role and “men were supposed to conform to an ideal masculinity”. If this was not achieved by certain groups they were marginalized. Masculine war-hungry men had the power of decision making and excluded others from any form of government. This started to change in the 19th and 20th century with arrival of ‘modern’ woman and socialism where solidarity with a fellow man stood against competitiveness and showmanship of strength. With a greater emphasis of giving a voice for members of civil society women were granted certain rights. These concepts will be very relevant to understand why Armenia and Azerbaijan struggle with fair representation of women in society.

*Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations* by Joane Nagel (1998) is an article that further explores ideal roles of men and women in a nation. She identifies the gender gap of what citizenship and national building entails. Nagel states “We are more adrift from the nation, less likely to be called to ‘important’ and recognized public duty, and our contributions more likely to be seen as ‘private’, as linked only to ‘women’s issues’, and as such, less valued and acknowledged” (p. 261). This can be seen as an injustice and is explored in detail by Fricker (2009) who calls it ‘epistemic feminist injustice’ . This can center on government, politics, law or even life and dialogue in civil society. She asks important questions about rebellion by men and disloyalty of women who stand up for women’s rights. In a conflict situation this opens another front and can be seen as ‘compromising’ political aims of the governing men. Nagel also explores the idea that promotion of rights of women, LGBT and of racial minorities may challenge the ‘conception of self’ of masculine ruling men. But is it as simple as ruling men having an ‘insecurity’ if we speak of nations such as Russia?

*The remasculinization of Russia? Gender, nationalism, and the legitimation of power under Vladimir Putin* by Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova (2014) aims to answer this question. Riabov and Riabova have written extensively on gender and
culture, masculinity and femininity. They suggested that power correlates with masculinity, i.e. strength, stamina, will, intelligence and reliability whilst submission correlates with femininity, i.e. softness, inactiveness, emotional decision making, and manipulability. Therefore the Russian narrative has been to identify friends as ‘real men’ who are masculine and strong and foes as feminine and weak. This has been extensively used in Russian political infighting and foreign-policy propaganda. Putin is identified by a majority as a symbol of masculinity and a leader who deserves power.

ix. Role of women in armed conflict – gender-war nexuses

*The women and war reader* by Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (1998) brings together several texts and explores women in war. It touches upon the concept of war as the “business of men” and roles assigned to women as caretakers and mothers, whilst some women rebel and others suffer from sexual violence. In an article by Carter, she makes a case (p. 36) that women have a more substantial interest resisting the war given this role in society. If they are caring for children or family whilst men are at war, their interest is to avoid casualties and maintain domestic routine. In another article by Ruddick, she explores the concept of a ‘woman of peace’ and in another article by Neugebauer, the author investigates female activism in a political sphere. The majority of articles deal with abuse and torture rather than activism and nation-building. This is relevant as sexual violence is an issue in the Armenia-Azeri conflict. But it does not review women’s role as negotiators between opposing sides.

A book that looks into a more active role is *Women and wars* by Carol Cohn (2013) in her chapter about women and peace process. Cohn suggest a fully inclusive role of women into peace negotiations. Cohn states that gender matters in conflict resolution and civil society groups should be consulted for input. Author explores how gender parity plays a role in security a stable state. She suggest official roles as peace builders in local or international governing bodies can speed up the process and ensure greater security for the most vulnerable. Leaving women out will affect stability and prosperity. However, Cohn also warns against generalizing on women as it is not a single group but a very diverse medium. Therefore it is important to narrow down the emphasis of the research. Active NGO women groups that use new media as a communications tool and attempt to secure their role in peace building activities will be the focus of this research.
Finally, it is important to review specific texts dealing with women transitioning from socialist USSR to capitalist independent states after post-Soviet breakup. Putting conflict aside, what is the role of women in a newly formed independent state such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and others? A strong account of this given in *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia* (1997) book by Mary Buckley. It deals a woman’s role in society and in government and provides data for comparison from all 15 of ex-soviet republics. The Baltic States have seen integration into the EU and a rise of women parliamentarians in 2000’s. The Caucasus, however, suffered from conflict, displacement and gender inequality which manifested into a decline of women in government. Moscow has also retained a lot of influence. The book goes into detail to understand the importance of women’s contribution as ministers, MP’s, their involvement in peace process, entrepreneurship in business, education and civil society roles. *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition* by Rick Wilford and Robert Miller also appear to dwell on this shift on government structure but power remaining with Russian partners. It explores nationalism in newly formed states and marginalization of ethnic minorities. Women may not be a minority but form part of civil society which is sidelined in time of war.

Figure 1.2 Banner at Gender Equality Fair in Yerevan. Source: KvinnatillKvinna.se
A book by Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias entitled Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism (2004) identifies a gap where women are not selected for official government roles. It deals with finding alternative spaces in post-war societies and women activism in ex-soviet states. It argues against strict division of labor and presents a reoccurring theme of the return of ‘traditional families’ and growing abuse of women who want power and gender equality. This is also applicable to other minorities in the region and corresponds to earlier literature on nationalism and on the case of Russia. Voices in Armenian and Azeri civil societies become restricted if they don’t respond to nationalistic views of their leaders. As stated above, nationalistic views are important to allow the display of ‘national values’ in conflict. It becomes about Azeri men not wanting to be seen as ‘soft’ in the eyes of the enemy and vice versa. Dovile Budryte wrote a similar book dealing with trauma versus empowerment entitled Feminist Conversations (2009). Here she makes comparison to other post-transitional societies and reflects on harsh views on gender equality, feminism and traditionalism. She states (p.4) that “literature suggest that women are most likely to be marginalized during the time of socio-political transition”. And this appears to be the case with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

9. Elaboration of the key new media: exploring blogs, websites, social media accounts and forums where women discuss Armenian/Azeri border conflict

xi. Equal Power Lasting Peace: blog and project

EqualPowerLastingPeace.org is a resource blog created by an initiative from the Kvinna till Kvinna foundation. It produces and stores yearly reports from conflict situations around the world, notably South Caucasus, Congo, Iraq, Liberia and Bosnia. According to the 2012 Kvinna report section on Armenia and Azerbaijan (p.28, equalpowerlastingpeace.org) people in government “are selected rather than elected to their positions. This naturally means that women who traditionally have less money and contacts have almost no chance to advance in politics. They are “accepted” into the system only if they stand on the “right” side, refrain from challenging the power hierarchy and keep to issues typically considered to be women’s domains such as culture and health care.” It talks about the return of traditional values to society with ‘real men’ making decisions in family and state. In some cases it is considered ‘dirty’ for women to get involved in political decision making. It also presents a historical
perspective on this and discusses how women’s role has changed since the Soviet and the Post-Soviet 90’s era when women had more governmental roles.

Kvinna till Kvinna is very active in this region and has their main office in Tbilisi, Georgia. Three representatives from this organization will be interviewed at a later stage. It partners with women’s rights groups and local NGO’s in Armenia and Azerbaijan and connects them to each other and to international partners. The leadership is Swedish, but there is strong local representation. It connects well with universities in Europe for original research and is well known in academic circles for presenting data from the Armenian-Azeri conflict. It aims to have budget ownership and manages fund allocation to partners. It encourages and supports local participation, but there should be greater leadership and visibility of such participation from local women in conflict. Once this is visible, it can help them develop and allow them to mediate in the conflict. This is difficult, but only strong cooperation locally can allow this to happen. Violence, gender inequality, lack of funding and other limitations are listed in Kvinna till Kvinna 2012 report as factors which are stopping progress. One of the key focus area is the implementation of UN resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and some progress has been made with Armenia’s new equality law passed in 2013.

Figure 1.2 Equalpowerlastingpeace.org blog by Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation 2016
South Caucasus Women’s Congress (SCWC) is a partnership between Women’s Resource Center Armenia (WRCA), the Association for Women’s Rights Protection Azerbaijan and Women’s Political Resource Center Georgia (WPRC). It launched in 2013 as a political discussion platform to connect women from three countries. It aims to organize events, have discussions and connect women on social media. It partners with the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

They launched their Facebook page in 2014 and it has been updated regularly with photos, videos and reports from meetings each year. Posts are mostly in English, but some are in Russian. Comments are usually in Russian, Armenian, Azeri or Georgian. It brings together academics such as Lia Nadaraia and activists such as Qnarik Mkrtchyan of Women’s Resource Center. Facebook site can be seen as a useful tool for keeping a regular record of events and meeting. However, due to tight security measures there’s not a lot of open discussion from women on the ground in Azerbaijan, Armenia and the conflict area. Very few posts have been made in 2016.
i. Twitter feed: Georgian Prime Minister Tinatin Khidasheli

Tinatin Khidasheli has been appointed as Georgia’s Minister of Defense in 2015. Having previously worked with human rights law, she has been active over the 2003 revolution and progressed well within politics. She is one of the most well-known women politicians in South Caucasus, having achieved a significant role as government minister. Tinatin is very active on Twitter. She has 3,116 followers and post several tweets daily. She has previously been tweeting on women’s activism, political activism and human rights, but her current tweets are more official. She often tweets about strategic EU/Nato/Georgian meetings and initiatives, meetings with other political or religious leaders. Her presence on issues of women’s violence, poor representation and views about women in society has somewhat diminished with her appointment. It is important to note that she is still a very good example of an active woman with progressive attitudes on gender equality who has obtained a significant government role. Tinatin has been interviewed multiple times and recordings are available on Youtube. She has certainly benefited from strong online support and has many favorable views from her social media presence.

ii. Youtube Channel: Heinrich Boell Foundation South Caucasus

Heinrich Boell Foundation South Caucasus foundation has at least a hundred videos online on its very active Youtube channel. They hold conversations and discussions with contributors in the region. They encourage local participation and local women are speaking in their videos. The foundation is part of a German Green Political group and is headquartered in Berlin. It has offices in Tbilisi which a popular destination for Azeri and Armenian civil society groups as they are able to hold more open discussions. Its videos include topics such as “How has civic activism changed local democracy?” and “Who is Afraid of Feminism in Georgia?” which presents street activism. They ask local public about feminism and interview women from Georgia too. It is a valuable resource to find firsthand information on feminist, gender inequality and civil society activism.

Figure 1.4 Heinrich Boell Foundation South Caucasus Youtube Channel.

Youtube.com
Interview questions are structured to evaluate several themes including history, identity, political representation, gender equality, women's rights, language, religion and influence from international organizations. As this is a diverse ethnographic study, questions can be varied based on interviewee profile. This is done to uncover new and interesting perspectives around regional situation, gender narratives and discourses. Interviews last 60-90 minutes and present a variety of different situations including storytelling, historical contexts and academic perspectives. Responses are then coded to find common themes and common denominators. These are used to evaluate interviews through critical open discourse analysis drawing on hermeneutics and social constructivism. It is also important to observe character modality (i.e. strength by which interviewee stands by her response), permission (social relationship with interviewer) and intonation (hesitation or emotion). This reveals whether interviews were answered in an honest and fair way as much as it is possible to do so.

Interviews are the most important tool. Conflict resolution, gender inequality and gender in relation to war are reoccurring themes. This is then connected to new media communication to answer research aims. As an interviewer, it is important to understand where the sensitivities are and manage them well throughout the conversation. Aim is to maintain stepped interview coding for critical discourse analysis picking up issues women face in public and private sphere. History, ethnography, masculinity, femininity, culture and linguistics are important to review. These are linked back to available secondary research data. These topics can be seen in distinct question themes in Appendix 1 – Interview Questions. Questions are adapted to suit and guide interviewees to reveal ‘a story’ of how they see the women’s active role in the peace process.

ii. Selection of a non-random sample

Selection of potential interviewees was made through the typical-case quota sampling. It was organized by contacting NGO organizations and education institutions that conducted work or research within Armenia/Azerbaijan. This includes Malmo University, Kvinna till Kvinna and a variety of local NGOs from these Caucasus states. It was important to know that each potential candidate has worked or conducted research on
either the peace process or women’s rights and women’s role in conflict, society and politics. Initial candidate selection was found by contacting researchers that have published work in the last 2-3 years or NGO organizations that are active on new and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Blogs or websites). Active women were preferred to give their views. They would be the best candidates to suggest reasons why women should be given an opportunity to participate in the peace process.

**Interviewees Chosen:** (chosen sample)

Annika Karlsson, Kvinna till Kvinna  
Milena Abrahamyian, Kvinna till Kvinna  
Aygun Janmammadova, Kvinna till Kvinna  
Sinead Walsh, Trinity College Dublin  
Dr. Märta-Lisa Magnusson, Department for Caucasus Studies, Malmo University  
Qnarik Mkrtchyan, Womens Resource Center  
Pervana Mammadova, YUVA Center

All candidates had a chance to view the research proposal before the interview. Based on the initial conversation by email, a selection of final candidates was made for 60-90 minute interviews (see below). They include one academic researcher who has conducted research in the region (Dr. Märta-Lisa Magnusson, Department for Caucasus Studies, Malmo University), three researchers and employees of an international NGO which is part of EPNK project (Annika Karlsson, Milena Abrahamyian and Aygun Janmammadova from Kvinna till Kvinna), one fellow student who has conducted similar research work in Caucasus around the role of women (Sinead Walsh, Trinity College Dublin), one Armenian local NGO representative (Qnarik Mkrtchyan, Womens Resource Center of Armenia) and one Azerbaijani local NGO representative (Pervana Mammadova, YUVA Center of Azerbaijan).

This represents a fair and reasonable qualitative sample from various institutions and groups that can help answer the main aims of this research project. They are all women as was chosen for this ‘conversations with women’ project. They are all interviewed through Skype video/audio call in April and May with full transcript to be recorded by audio and with later text typed up with a word processor. After research analysis there will also be a section on reviewing my role as researcher - what worked and what didn’t in this qualitative research project. It is worth noting again that this is an open primary research activity and aim was for women to guide each conversation to relevant issues present in the region concerning women’s activism and peace process.

For full interview transcripts, scroll down to Appendices (section 15). Full audio transcripts are also available upon request.
11. Coding qualitative responses, discourse analysis, hermeneutics and theory of social constructivism

Epistemological premises inform post-structuralist Discourse Analysis, namely the ‘linguistic turn’ with its major ramifications, phenomenology, hermeneutics and their critical appropriations in the terrain of social constructivism. (Bennett, Frow, 2008, p. 680)

Below discourse analysis codes the meanings of texts and vocal responses. Combining responses with available literature presents three potential discursive formations: role of women (gender-war nexuses), challenges of women’s organizations and current state of the peace process over Nagorno-Karabakh. Questions were kept open and responses became reflective on interpersonal relationship between interviewing parties. This is based on the principle of hermeneutics. But coding was still necessary. According to Saldana (2012), “a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytical processes”. Responses are coded into five themes presenting women’s role in politics, role of international governing bodies, masculinity and war, role of NGO’s and role of new media. This develops into a thematic structure - a ‘staircase’ which examines each topic step by step and links back to research objectives.

Combination of these methods of research analysis will present a good overview of situation of women in the region. It will reflect on their understanding of gender inequalities, their involvement in peace process, their work on new and social media and challenges that they are encountering. It is worth noting that in discursive practice several organizations working together utilize similar language and form similar theories influencing their overall views of the situation. This makes distinct responses harder to find. E.g. work conducted by Kvinna till Kvinna in the region has influenced the views and practices of local NGO’s such as Women’s Resource Center of Armenia or Yuva of Azerbaijan. Their interview responses may contain similar language. Some terms may have been appropriated from international media use. Some examples include terms such as “women as peace makers”, “peace building activities”, “feminist perspectives”, “nationalistic viewpoints” and so on. Women who use this international language are subject bias. On the other hand this signifies unity, common thought, common objectives and social harmony between these groups that engage with women’s empowerment. It creates common knowledge from combined values.
i. Women’s representation in power structures: politics and peace process

Women’s political representation in power structures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of seats</th>
<th>Women MPs</th>
<th>% of women MPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.5 Parliamentary Elections in Armenia: an Overview (Shahnazaryan, p. 10 Caucasus Analytical Digest (71))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of seats</th>
<th>Women MPs</th>
<th>% of women MPs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.6 Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: an Overview (Walsh, p. 6 Caucasus Analytical Digest (71))

Yuval-Davis (2008) says that parliament as a body of a ruling central state can differ in different nations and this should be considered. Local governments can have more or less power and the same applies to other institutions. Even so, the body of lawmakers in a parliamentary democracy can be considered to be of substance when discussing gender representation. Above statistics confirm that women’s membership of parliament has remained statistically low in both countries from 1995 to 2014. Armenia saw bigger % change (from 4 to 14 MP’s) but Azerbaijan maintained higher overall numbers of women parliamentarians. This data is significant but there are a couple of key considerations if this was to be fairly assessed. First is a comparison between gender quotas in Azerbaijani and Armenian SSR versus both as independent states.
In sociological hermeneutical research context is critical to comprehension (Willis and Jost, 2007, p. 106). This suggests that women’s political representation can be comparatively and critically assessed in independence years but cannot be linked to gender quotas in USSR. According to Heyat (2002, p. 4), what happened in the Soviet Union was a modernisation of society aiming to integrate women into the economic and political life of the state. This required building a lot of infrastructure which no longer exists. Soviet Union was also a secular state whilst Armenia and Azerbaijan observe ethnic custom stemming from religious principles (whether Christian or Muslim). This may be due to the community continuing to expect that women will “observe strict sexual standards and carry out onerous domestic duties”. And there is an argument that women’s role has largely returned to this ethnic convention after independence.

Aygun Jamammadova from Kvinna till Kvinna (KtK) stated that politics are very “male centric and male dominated” and Marta-Lisa Magnusson from Malmo University (MAH) said that “hard-core politics is men’s business” and that women are only given ‘soft-power roles’ in sectors of care, education or children. Fricker (2009, p.1) relates to this and calls the concept “epistemic feminist injustice”. This stands for a deflated credibility of women in roles of authority. Such roles as economy or foreign relations may not be given to women. Women’s opinion may not be regarded as credible to govern and make decisions due to prejudice. Milena Abrahamyan (KtK) uses sarcasm to insinuate that the new minister of justice gained here role as she is “young, beautiful and ‘very good’ at doing her job”. Abrahamyan says that “I see her as a mouthpiece for the president of Armenia”. Abrahamyan used this form of humour to suggest that the minister is sexualized and serves as a ‘puppet’ to other individuals or forces. This is another form of gender inequality. It can be referred to as objectification of women.

The other argument is that women in parliament do not necessarily represent women in civil society. And Knarik Mkrtchyan from Women’s Resource Center of Armenia is in agreement that. She suggested that the % change did not increase women’s ability or women’s activity in law making function in any way. Pervana Mammodova (YUVA center for women in Azerbaijan) also stated that whilst “we are happy that we have women there” (Azerbaijani parliament), they “are not doing anything” for women in
society. It appears to suggest that active women struggle to find a common platform with women in government roles. The only exception given by Mammadova is that of an Azerbaijani parliamentarian Genya Pashayeva who “considers herself a feminist”. Mammadova mentioned that in the event that EPNK phase 3 started as planned, YUVA center would seek to work with her on displacement of women and refugees. In summary, women interviewees speak of inequality and injustice in politics and misrepresentation of women in civil society. But some of these views may be constructed by sociolinguistic interaction between active women (Kvinna till Kvinna working with Women’s Resource Center and YUVA) and may not necessarily be views held by majority of civil society in Armenia or Azerbaijan.

**Women’s political representation in peace process:**

![Figure 1.7 OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs before meeting with foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia in early 2015. Source: aravot.am (30th April 2015)](image)

Interviewees expressed cynicism, scepticism and doubt when asked about the impact on the peace process by women’s MPs or ministers in Azerbaijan, Armenia and the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh. They were of an opinion that women in governing roles and as MP’s do not or cannot get involved in a political discourse over Nagorno-
Karabakh and the surrounding border conflict. Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) and Annika Karlsson (KtK) suggested that women were never previously involved and are still not involved at any official level. Karlsson called it “a very male dominated negotiation process”. Sinead Walsh (Trinity College Dublin) has also highlighted that there’s “no official status for women’s groups even as observers to the negotiations or a formal space where they can be consulted by the co-chairs” of the Minsk Group. But according to women interviewed there were times when some women did appear to get close to gaining official status and made a recognizable impact to the discussions.

Karlsson suggested that the peace process started off in a much more open format involving ministers and parliamentarians from both governments early in the 90s. Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) stated that all representatives in the Minsk Group (OSCE) have remained men, but there has been one high profiled woman, Naira Melkoumian. She was the foreign minister in the 90’s and was highly ranked and respected by many parties. On the other hand she has continued to be accepted as a minister of an unrecognized state thus limiting her powers. The state of Nagorno-Karabakh has never been granted access to negotiations over Armenian-Azeri conflict meaning that neither men nor women from there could make a substantial change.

In secondary research the role of women in political activism has been linked with women’s inclusion in independence movements but marginalization afterwards. Wilford (2005, p.2) states “fighting alongside men to achieve independence does not provide a guarantee of women’s inclusion as equal citizens.” Milena Abrahamyan (Ktk) has recognized this trend and states that “once the revolution has come, women are told to go back to their homes and families. This is the role that they play as mothers and wives, increasing nationalism”. Whilst this does not explicitly deal with conflict, Marta-Lisa Magnusson (Malmo University) speaks of need to “demonstrate strength” once conflict arises exploring the concept of masculinity as described by Mosse (1996). She says women “are denied power” and this is done “to not show any sign of weakness”. Women can be seen as more liberal towards the enemy. Mammadova explains that whilst she would be happy to work with women parliamentarians and ministers more, she fears that this perceived feminine weakness may compromise the position of those women in government.
ii. Role of Russia, Turkey, EU, UN and other power structures

**Conflict and management of territory of Nagorno-Karabakh**

All five women interviewees saw the role of international stakeholders as important, particularly in the power vs control discourse. To review their role it is vital to look at the history of the conflict and how they were involved. Through history Nagorno-Karabakh has always served as a conflict ground between ethnic groups in the area. According to De Waal (2013, p. 11) this particular encounter started in 1998 with a request made by the Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh to be transferred from the Azerbaijani SSR to the Armenian SSR. Both sides refused to accept this transition and tensions intensified. Clashes already began before the breakup of the Soviet Union which prompted loss of control and more violence. Russia and Turkey were involved with a controlling interest in population and resources. In the 90’s an international group called CSCE (now OSCE) was put together to aid resolution.

Milena Abrahamyan (KtK) was categorical about its purpose and intentions. She said “I would say that they are doing nothing. It is a stuck process and there are people that would say that there may be a purpose to that”. She was referring to Russia in particular pointing out the fact that Russia supplies both sides (Armenia and Azerbaijan) with arms. Whilst the legality of this is hard to challenge, the moral view of Russia from civil groups is that it aids escalation of the conflict. Both countries remain at war and not enough effort is made to deescalate it. The role Russia can be considered as a sensitive topic. A neutral stance by NGO’s is often preferred to ensure it is not accused of fostering foreign policy (resulting in threat of removal). When this question was being answered by Abrahamyan, her superior Karlsson quickly stated that “as Kvinna till Kvinna, we don’t take sides”. But Howell and Pearce (2000, p.83) sees this as a concept of ‘masked distribution of power’. An NGO acting as an impartial group may represent some groups from civil society but it also creates a self-derived authority as a broker of funds. It administers support to some groups but not others creating imbalance. This is why it was interesting to hear whether Kvinna till Kvinna would speak out on Russia’s role and examine its affairs in the region.
Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) was more confident in criticizing Russia stating that “Russia tries to have as big of an influence as possible”. This is again linked to the concept of masculinity and Russia as the ultimate source of strength (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). Mkrtchyan suggested that Russia may send peace keeping forces to Nagorno-Karabakh again over these recent tensions and that having these forces before “was the worst outcome and the worst alternative”. Armenia has recently joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union whilst Azerbaijan is keeping close economic links with Turkey. Walsh has therefore expressed a view that “Russia vs Turkey narrative is becoming dominant again”. According to Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) there’s a new discussion in Azerbaijan hinting that Russia stopped its activities in Syria to re-start an active role in the Caucasus. This is a particularly significant if true but this has yet to be proven. Russia did pull out its troops from Syria but did not actively interfere apart from continued sale of arms. Mammadova also stated that “it is just a conflict between two countries. We see involvement of certain powers that can escalate it”.

Other international forces acting in the region are the UN and EU. UN has created Resolution 1325 which is “promoting women in particular political roles, whether as negotiators or mediators” (Sinead Walsh (TCD)). Whilst there’s no clear evidence to suggest that women are better at resolving conflict, they can be viewed as promoters of peace (Lorentzen and Turpin, 1998). Cohn (2013) was of an opinion that any peace process should be inclusive of women and that gender does matter in securing a stable state. But Walsh and others were critical of the progress of 1325. Walsh stated that “many women struggle with the roles prescribed by it”. Mkrtchyan was also doubtful that 1325 is creating any additional powers for women. She stated that this or other resolutions are not being enforced well. But ‘enforcement’ as such is a controversial term as it can be seen as undue interference. The EU has therefore taken a different approach via the EPNK (The European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh). It handed acting powers to five NGO’s (one of them is Kvinna till Kvinna). Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) was also disappointed with progress here in context of renewed tensions. She stated that “we don’t have any clear statement from these international organizations that used to cooperate with us” about restarting EPNK.
As interviews were taking place (March and April 2016) fighting across the border intensified and 60 new deaths have been reported. Mammadova expressed her disappointment declaring that “many years of building peace in the region were destroyed in a day”. This inflammation led to feelings of uncertainty over the future of the peace process and the development of an active role for women in the peace process. It refers to a diminished prioritization for implementing 1325 as well as a further crackdown on open communication channels between these civil groups. Mkrtchyan stated that “ten days ago we had some hope” – “now we are back to early 2000’s” referring to propaganda war over social media and political statements and hate speeches made on traditional media. On the other hand she said that “this month is a transition period to start something new, either negotiation or fighting”. Concept of transition is a traditionally marketed way of accepting ambiguity in discourse of conflict management. Mkrtchyan may have been expressing fear as well as hope. But it can facilitate political indecision slow any progress with tackling economic, social or political inequalities.

Influence on women’s rights and gender equality

Effects of the conflict and of the stalled peace process are impacting daily lives of women in both countries and the de facto region. Zimmerman et al (2016, p. 351) reviews this stating that state social services are affected and women must return to looking after households. This certainly is an issue for women’s empowerment but it is not the only one. According to Walsh, in Nagorno-Karabakh itself “women have been granted more of a voice in society” but there is uncertainty about any decision making power this creates. Ones left out of this are the Azeri IDP’s and refugees who are living on the outskirts of Nagorno-Karabakh waiting to return home. Considering the peace process and women’s involvement in it, there is no “legitimacy for civil society peace builders” according to Walsh. If such legitimacy is not granted then their voice is disregarded. Culturally it is also becoming a norm to exclude women from decision making powers creating clan structures that are led by ruling men. As democratic institutions remain weak, women are forced to stay at home reducing their capacity to interfere or contribute to the debate.
Milena Abrahamyan referred to a woman living in NK stating that “she is aware she is oppressed in an unrecognized territory which has links only with Armenia”. She defined her life as “poverty and lack of ability to move”. Evidence of women’s activism is present but minimal. Naira Melkoumian opened and led the “Women of Nagorno-Karabakh for Peace and Peaceful Coexistence” conference in 2002 but similar events have not happened since. There is limited public discussion on civil inequalities according to Abrahamyan. She was certain that women in NK “would be seen as traitors if they exposed so called ‘dirty laundry’ under a really precarious fragile situation”. It plays into many theories explored by Sjoberg (2014) and Goldstein (2001) about gender and war and femininity as a weakness in conflict management. Nagorno-Karabakh saw the development of its own private army and defending its population against the 2016 resurgence of conflict. All members of such a force are men. Women are therefore a minority here and in many institutions across the de facto region and rarely have a chance to speak out. This can also be said about Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

There are many other examples of how this failed peace process impacts women’s everyday lives and powers of NGO’s in the region. It restricts the rights of civil society voices in politic, law and public communication. In interviews, candidates can be heard expressing what changes are needed. They desire more support from international political groups, more rights as women and more funding from international NGO partners. It is a call into action to change the public discourse and it is clearly expressed by Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) and Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) who are the two representatives from local groups. They see the current situation as a shrinking space for both traditional (face to face) meetings as well as meetings over social and new media (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, etc.). This creates a new divide and allows propaganda messages to spread instead creating division and convincing activists to turn against each other. The building of nation-state with democratic voice is failing. According to Mkrtchyan, there have been many peace builders that came up with nationalistic propaganda over 2016 clashes. This is a sign of social media having an effect of perception of conflict and of conflict stakeholders. And this is a very negative consequence shaping societal views of the ‘enemy’ that are misguided.
iii. Masculinity, femininity and women and war nexuses

**Masculinity complex – men at war**

All eight women interviewees agreed that there is an issue with equal gender representation in the region. Sinead Walsh said that “when you look at the negotiations and you look at the elite level of politics in the region and you see almost always male faces and hear male voices so there’s an issue around women being represented and women’s voices counting”. This is applicable to nation’s political government, law makers and war. Azerbaijan and Armenia are male centred and male dominated societies. Marta-Lisa Magnusson highlighted the importance of the Aliyev clan in Azerbaijan where women only gain status by association with its powerful members. This plays into the narrative described by George Mosse (1996) where civil structures have failed and the only way to demonstrate strength is by conforming to “ideal masculinity”. Decisions can only be made, or are prescribed to be made after a showdown of power and masculine gestures. When socialists lost control, nationalists employed a tactic of showmanship involving military attacks and difficulty to concede defeat. Where women got involved to promote peace they were dismissed.

**Gendered war narratives – women as peace builders**

Milena Abrahamyan suggested that women’s role may be defined by nationalistic tendencies and the ‘ideal' outlook on society life. She said that threats to preserving a nation are critical in undermining the role of civil society. This is especially true in a fragile newly created government. When there are external factors present (such as armed conflict, economic uncertainty, etc.), women find it harder to be given decision making power. But it is clear to point out that not all women are pacifists and not all men are hungry for war. Women do not represent women as each group is as diverse as another. However it is obvious that women are often promoted to ‘soft-power’ roles in government only due to certain reasons. These roles involve child care and social care, rather than foreign relations or economy. So what would happen if women were at the forefront of government and peace negotiations? According to Lorentzen and Turpin (1998) women will seek a more peaceful solution to preserve family structures and domestic routine. This is not true in all cases, but especially true if majority of active women are in grassroots civil society positions.
iv. Role of local and international NGO's, activities and challenges- civil society influence in peace process and women’s rights

Women activism in civil society, local NGO’s

According to Annika Karlsson (KtK), “women are more active in civil society” now than before despite a crackdown by security services and marginalization of women groups. But there are a lot of difficulties. Budryte (2009, p. 27) refers to Western NGO’s which aimed to liberate post-Soviet women from Communism in 90’s and 00’s and failed to do so. Neither side understood each other well. Some women only worked with these NGO’s to get financial aid. Others developed an anti-Western narrative considering them as intruders. Karlsson thinks that this also played a role in “increasing nationalism” as people struggled to understand what the role of woman in a perfect society should be. Aygun Janmammadova (KtK) links this with the “crackdown on civil activism” in Azerbaijan during 00’s. Even so, Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) believes that women continued to find roles in conflict management working with refugees and IDP’s on the grassroots level. If we consider this to have value in peace building, it is progress. But online media is rarely used for this purpose. Walsh states that “when local groups are identified as being funded by outsiders that can be used against them”. So communication is often hidden from public view.

A recent example of social or organizational exclusion of a women’s group was given by Mkrtchyan. She said that Yerevan University threw their organization (WRCA) out as “they found it inappropriate [for us] to speak about sexual and reproductive rights”. She suggested that there has been a “misunderstanding, misperception and mis-illustration of our activity”. “We were threatened to be firebombed, my co-workers were threatened to be killed”, Mkrtchyan said. In summary she stated that “civil society does not have any access to peace processes. We can only make impact advocating and lobbying.” Threats are made by nationalistic activists who fear or disdain civil society groups asking for gender equality rights. This can be spurred by government led propaganda airing through traditional media. It plays to the previously referenced theory of femininity as a ‘weakness’ and communication from civil groups as displaying lack of strength for ‘enemy’ to witness.
Another important factor is the relationship between active women and their perception of the situation. Mkrtchyan remains mindful of the fact that there was always tension between both countries over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian narrative is that even during Soviet times power balance was held by Azerbaijanis despite majority of the population there being Armenian. But any conflict was suppressed by Moscow. Mkrtchyan states that this disproportionality finally gave reason for NK to want to accede from Azerbaijani SSR to Armenian SSR 1988. Even so, Mkrtchyan stated that “women who were directly affected by the conflict tend to be friendlier towards Azerbaijani’s”. It is the new propaganda and hate messages that make younger women angry towards the other side. Mkrtchyan finds that “elder generation [in Armenia] has good memories about each other” living as neighbours. Younger women who come to meetings need time to adjust to before they can listen to arguments from the other side. They are not as accepting of Azeri women and their opinion. This highlights the success of hatred propaganda. This has become a communication challenge that needs resource to tackle.

Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) discusses the positives of continuous work carried out by the Yuva Center in getting more women active. She says that were one of the first organizations to talk “about feminism and to want young women to do something”. It has recently progressed into an official cooperation and the “aim with Armenians was to have common statement (as part of EPNK) and arrange meetings with national policymakers”. This was seen as a breakthrough but it didn’t happen. There’s uncertainty whether it can happen due to resumed tensions. Mkrtchyan expressed a need for more “awareness rising” to help bring positive changes in 2016. She still sees progress compared to 2010 and hopes that recent border clashes will not erode the trust built between the WRC of Armenia and their Azeri and international partners. This civil society activism where communication between both countries is strictly controlled created new innovative ways of keep in touch. But it is fragile when considering the threat of security forces for these women. These forces work for governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and also foreign states such as Russia. They play into the narrative held by nationalistic political activists with an anti-equality and an anti-peace agenda. Nationalism as a concept is thriving in a divided society.
**Involvement of international NGO’s in decision making**

Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) suggests that international NGO’s “can put pressure on the official structures of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia” to make policy decisions and aid conflict resolution. Whilst all sides officially agree that conflict needs to be stopped, NGO involvement is a controversial topic. Meaning of ‘pressure’ is important here as Kvinna till Kvinna and other international NGO’s said that they want to remain neutral. If a statement made by them suggests that their neutrality towards political decisions is false this can be seen as undue interference. Governments will ban such NGO’s and society can turn against them (Howell and Pearce 2000, p.83). Particular issues arise with Western NGO’s (EU or American based) and Russian NGO’s. The fear from Armenian and Azerbaijani parties is that access to state decisions for local or international NGO’s and can reveal weaknesses and expose them to the ‘enemy’.

Aygun Janmammadova states that the official role of Kvinna till Kvinna is “following up, monitoring and evaluating projects that local NGO’s and groups implement”. This reveals that they control local financial assets. They monitor local groups and report to donors if money was ‘well spent’. It brings the question of ‘vested interests’ of these NGO donors and how this is viewed on the ground. International organizations need to see results from each project where they contribute. But Walsh states that as project ends activity stops. So there are issues with authority and control over local NGO’s and then there is a question of benefits that their activities bring. If there aren’t any visible short term benefits - there is frustration and anger. This narrative can be used in propaganda to support nationalism and discount NGO work. Nationalism is power to take local decisions. Kruger (2010, p. 18) sees nationalism as an important factor that allowed states to secede from Soviet Union in the first place.

NGO funding by Russian based organizations was also mentioned. Milena Abrahamyan (KtK) gives her view suspecting that an organization called ‘Parents’ Committee’ was set up to oppose activity from women’s equality groups. She also states that it is involved in accusing NGO’s of LGBT activity when tolerance for LGBT rights is low in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) also references this organization and accuses them of perverting the term ‘gender’. This is important for
sociolinguistics. Word association is an easy activity for anti-western propaganda and can be very strong in new media. Mammadova, however, is adamant that “role of international organisations is very important” and will remain so despite any commotion against it. Both the WRC and YUVA work with Kvinna till Kvinna and receive funding for their activities. Mkrtchyan and Mammadova are in local NGO’s that would not receive such support locally. But this effectively creates satellite versions of western NGO’s.

According to Laruelle (2016, p. 8) the “current revival of bellicose narratives on both sides, the growing military spending of Azerbaijan, and the inability to reconcile Turkey and Armenia shows that the impact of European policy is limited at best”. Led by EPNK NGO’s, this reconciliation has brought about a new law in Armenia called “Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women”. This law was developed under international NGO pressure including strong participation from Kvinna till Kvinna. It aims to allow women to take an equal role in society and government. The word ‘gender’ has been purposely excluded to prevent negative word association, but this is has still inflamed tensions all over Armenia. Certain parties blamed Western groups for wanting to destroy their traditional ethnocultural values.

The debate over gender and role of women in society has had a definite influence over people’s opinions. The situation in the Soviet Union was arguably different and has substantially changed over independence. Women activists that want to have a strong public voice face threats, abuse, blackmail and even physical violence. This has been highlighted by several interviewees. Before the 1990’s Armenia could have been considered to be part of a secular and gender-neutral society in the USSR. And this is a very quick reversal to the ‘traditional’ ethnic custom. It has succeeded despite international NGO efforts to empower women. Civil society is therefore overlaid by contradictory activity from internal parties in Armenia and Azerbaijan versus efforts and resolutions brought in from outside to secure the rights of women. Nationalism aims to establish a masculine and secure nation-state meaning that women have become even more marginalized. EPNK phase 3 is due to start soon but the prospect of it changing the state of affairs is bleak at best.
iv. Role of religion and language

**Role of Language**

Figure 1.8. Russian Population in Soviet States in 1989 who have out-migrated. Adapted from Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001, p. 51)

Landau and Kellner Heinkele- (p. 52) refer to language as an important element in community politics and suggest (p. 65) that states went through ‘derussification’ to increase the value of titular language. Russian minorities did not particularly fight this and avoided confrontation by stating that they are well-integrated to accept this transition. Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) agreed “there has been a derussification of Caucasus” but “Russian [language] has remained the lingua franca facilitating cross border communication” after secession from USSR. Although still dominant in all social circles, there’s now a divide between the younger and older generation in their preferred international language (Turkish/English over Russian). Comparing this to the de facto state of Nagorno-Karabakh, Walsh states that the population there “are surrounded by Russian discourses around issues of culture and gender”. Walsh says that she found it “surprising how necessary Russian still is” when in NK.
One very different example is Georgia where Russian language is very unpopular due to criticism over Russia’s 2008 involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Azerbaijanis have also become more connected with Turkic languages whilst Armenians still prefer Russian. English is used when it comes to international communication. It is considered necessary if local NGO’s are working with Western partners. This does create a further divide with local government politics, between different age groups and between different ethnic minorities. Women activists themselves stated that they don’t see language as a major factor preventing good communication as they have representatives that can speak each of the key languages and can connect with any local populous well. But there’s also another problem. Should key words such as ‘derussification’ be used at all? Does it have a negative connotation?

Many in the older generation still recognize it as a key tool for connecting communities. According to Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (p. 63) language is part of a personal identity and remains an important link with those who speak it. Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) therefore highlights that Russian language can help with “eliminating enemy image and building bridges” between these various socio-demographic groups. It is often used in cross-border meetings too. And according to Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) it forms the “language of memory”. Language helps “remembering the times when they used to live together” and communicate as neighbours in the Soviet Union. According to Mammadova “language shouldn’t be a barrier to participation” in meetings and no language should be excluded. Participation is a key word highlighting the use of a communication space to get involved in grassroots social support activities, civil society lobbying or decision making. Despite unfavourable Russian politics towards minorities, the language itself remains an integral part in public and private communication in Transcaucasia.

**Role of Religion**

Croissant (1998, p. 4) says that religion and language have contributed to forming a strong Armenian self-identity. This is despite secularism which was enforced by USSR. 95% of Armenians follow Christianity whilst 99% of Azerbaijanis refer to themselves as Muslim. Alongside the ethic or cultural conflict origins links can be made with the
Armenian Genocide in early 20th century by the Ottoman Empire. Affiliations between Azerbaijan and Turkey remain strong and spur further debate. According to Sinead Walsh (TCD) “you can trace it [ethnic conflict] back to a religious discourse”. Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) states that “religion is part of the traditional cultural value system” in the Caucasus region and cannot be excluded. Whilst USSR remained officially secular, the citizenry of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia refer to themselves as religious. Magnusson also states that there are “political entrepreneurs, actors, who are politicizing religion”. She says “religion is a factor that has been manipulated and instrumentalised” for political reasons. But Milena Abrahamyan and Aygun Janmammadova (KtK) reject the idea of religion influencing the current border clashes.

The other aspect of religion is whether it interferes with the rights of women and the empowerment of women to gain roles and make decisions in the peace process. Walsh refers to an argument between the conservative Church and liberal feminists over the role of women in active political or social roles. Messages from the Church in Armenia can be politicized. This remains a barrier for activists campaigning for equality. With such high percentage of population classifying themselves as religious this factor has to be considered in this conflict and society discourse. But most interviewees appear to suggest that the Armenian Church is not as strong as the Georgian Church and is not the main factor here when political deliberations take place. In summary, religious morality and justice can feature in political/historical narratives and can divide groups in society over its role. However it has not been prioritized by women’s groups as a vital factor that they need to address in their activist activities.

v. Role of new media in peace process and women’s rights

Power of new media

Geukjian (2014, p. 40) notes that social media was excessively used in Azerbaijan to promote hate messages against Armenia often containing masculine references of strength and power against the weak feminine enemy. There were also posts made about the supposed Armenian brutality towards Azerbaijanis and calls to go to full scale war. Interviewees said they used websites, resources, blogs and social media sites to
communicate cross-border but were careful to do so openly. Aygun Janmammadova (KtK) suggested that “social media is very powerful at hindering the peace process on the grassroots level. People can propagate nationalism and spread hate speech. But you can also virtually bring together nations amongst the conflict divide”. Annika Karlsson (KtK) contributed by stating that “there’s hate and slander and threat campaigns around activism sometimes from other activists or from politicians” on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Sinead Walsh (TCD) agreed and made allegations that negative social media propaganda is coming from all angles of society and has been very detrimental. “It would be helpful if there would be another force to counter ridiculous extremes”, Walsh said. She added that “Past attempts to engage in peace journalism had really a very limited audience” as it did not appeal as much as nationalistic propaganda. It can be linked back to the belief in ‘traditional’ values.

But according to Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) the focus on these new media messages remains strong and she believes that “in general, Facebook and the social media play an influential role”. Allen Nan et al (2011, p. 484) did see a positive influence of social media in helping to raise alternative views and provide a public and private space for debate. It is clear that a new social media sphere has formed and it is going to continue to grow even against security efforts to block it. This research has also seen several examples of social media pages formed together with international organizations. Some of these are written about in the social media review. They include the South Caucasus Women’s Congress and the Equal Power Lasting Peace blog and provide evidence of a system of active cross-border communication. South Caucasus Women’s Congress has images and texts referring to various meetings in Georgia between the women of Armenia and Azerbaijan. It sets a positive precedent of what can be achieved using online media for participatory women’s empowerment.

Knarik Mkrtchyan (WRC) also talks about traditional media and states that in Armenia “mass media can provoke and doesn't give clear and trustworthy information”. However Mkrtchyan also states that there has been a change and some forms of “mass media [have] started to illustrate more domestic violence, sexual abuse and child abuse” which made people more aware. In her view, new media contributes “both negatively
and positively” to traditional media messages. It can be a strong tool for cross-border communication but it can also be a vehicle for anti-feminist propaganda. She said that there are posts claiming that WRC conducts “family abolishing and as gay propaganda activity” and this makes it a challenge to spread positive messages online. She used emotive language to express her disdain. Pervana Mammadova (YUVA) agreed by stating that “I was shocked to see human rights activist what he published on his Facebook videos”. Alongside this epistrophe she also stated that “I’m very shocked with what is happening”. She was very disappointed with poor accountability held by activists and argued that social media messages “have to be written with respect”.

Security, safety and concept of “shrinking space”

‘Shrinking space’ is a concept that accurately describes the current state of new media activity in the region. Interviewees suggested that the security threat affects their ability to communicate cross-border. This stems from a narrative focused on masculinity and nationalism to bring back ‘traditional’ family values. Face to face meetings in Georgia became one of the few remaining options. According to Annika Karlsson (KtK) some donors question whether these meetings are valuable. She was of the opinion that human encounter is important for civil society to make a strong united case to lobby their national governments and international organisations. Aygun Janmammadova (KtK) was therefore disappointed that official ties between Armenian and Azeri NGO’s do not exist Governments have therefore been successful in aiming to block such relationships.

All participants mentioned incidents where security restrictions have been very visible and caused concern resulting in threat and blackmail. Abrahamyan (KtK) suggested that “a lot of people in Azerbaijan would [now] be wary of keeping in touch with me because their Facebook might be followed” by Azerbaijani authorities. Janmammadova gave a specific example about Eurovision in 2011. She said that it has been known for national security officials to interrogate Azerbaijanis who voted for Armenia during the contest. This is an extreme example of how the security threat is made by following citizens and using technology to impose controls on the population. New media is also used to find and contact activists who attempt to communicate online.
Marta-Lisa Magnusson (MAH) said that “some women’s organizations have tried to break that [trend] with the help of international organizations and NGO’s” looking for innovative ways to open more communication channels. But any local woman involved “risks being perceived as a traitor”. Walsh therefore states that “social media is a double edged sword”. On one hand it is “an essential tool for organizing and maintaining connections” but it has recently become “a virtual blackout” due to safety issues “best that women can do is keep silent” to prevent harm. In her view, several previously active blogs and websites have therefore become abandoned. Walsh goes on to say that new media resources are important, but international support ends too quickly when a project ends. Knarik Mktchyan (WRC) gives an example stating that “if you look through our website you will not find any information about our peace building activities because there’s a danger” for activists. This is a new discourse on power and control versus new media knowledge.

12. Conclusions: answering aims of thesis
   i. Role of women in wars – gender in building of nation-state

From the evidence of secondary and primary research it is not possible to conclude that women are better at resolving wars. Due to the fact that women have never had fair representation in foreign relations or negotiations between or Armenia and Azerbaijan no data exists to satisfy such a premise. However, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that women’s involvement is crucial to a successful building of a nation. Civil groups offer grassroots support to refugees and IDP’s and actively campaign for women’s voice to be heard in society. Research suggests that they have already contributed to the social and cultural landscape of the region. They helped generate new communication channels online prompting support from international NGO’s and starting a debate on rights for women, for LGBT, for ethnic minorities and for disabled people. It is not clear that women negotiators in the OSCE would resolve this conflict. But there is a case to suggest that women have a right to be on this panel. There is a perceived threat by men that concessions in peace talks would undermine their strength and masculinity and result in loss of power and land. But women could bring new perspectives and new solutions over the Nagorno-Karabakh case.
Building and shaping this de facto state remains challenging and women are not involved. There are difficulties in seeing progress in a society where interests are split between many international factions and equality is not a recognized value. Western organizations and NGO’s would like Armenia and Azerbaijan to conform to Western ideology whilst Russia and religious organizations differ in their take. Russia demonstrates the strength of Putin and his ideology with strong national support. Under the threat from EU and NATO expansion, Russia’s society has accepted nationalism as a retaliatory mechanism of strength. Civil society groups that are fighting against this have been dealt with in an often brutal manner. Activist protests are happening, but Russia is quickly turning into a full autocracy. Gender relations there are therefore difficult to examine. In comparison to Russia, Caucasus nations appear to have a ‘softer’ approach to forming Western partnerships and accepting investments. There is a lot of infighting, propaganda and gender violence, but some women are seeking a way to find official representation and be involved in the NK conflict resolution.

ii. Role of active women as intermediaries and mediators in conflict

There are many parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict discourse that appear to have a stake. Active women see it as a pathway to achieve peace and start building a nation-state based on recognized civil rights. They also support the Azeri diaspora of IDP’s and refugees that once lived in Nagorno-Karabakh. International organizations such EU (EPNK), EEU and UN (Resolution 1325) as well as NGOs such as Kvinna till Kvinna, International Alert and Conciliation Resources can be argued to have strong geopolitical and socioeconomic interests. But there’s also evidence of them working with active local women to ensure basic human rights and living standards. Women of Nagorno-Karabakh suffer from exclusion and inability to move and women of Armenia and Azerbaijan suffer from gender violence. They are not able to contribute to the peace process due to this and several other reasons. These often include the decline in welfare and removal of state infrastructure prompting families to return to traditional management of households. There is also a lack of resources for active women who aim to make a contribution. Only support comes from international partners but this is often controversial due to perceived ‘interference’ from those with foreign interests.
Gender inequality has certainly become recognized by active women as a number one reason that prevents a recognized contribution to the negotiations. This is also widely documented in secondary research. But there is also a case to make here that Armenians and Azerbaijanis in general contribute little to conflict resolution. OSCE Minsk Group is cited as being a closed negotiation space. Neither men nor women from local governments participate in negotiations. It consists of international members from countries such Russia, USA, France and Germany. This is controversial amongst the local population. They are also all men. There has not been a single women member. Interviewees were adamant that the Minsk group have not made much progress in the last 20 years. This is evident from continued border clashes in 2014, 2015 and particularly 2016. Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan have released statements threatening use of more security forces which could trigger a new war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This is possible and highly likely as both countries continue to purchase war weaponry from Russia. Interviewees saw this as controversial considering Russia sits on the negotiations panel.

Both secondary and primary research therefore point to a lack of substantial contribution by women to official negotiations. But there has been some recognized activist events connected to conflict resolution that have been held by local women. One such event was the Nagorno-Karabakh Women for Peace and Peaceful Coexistence conference in 2002. It has been organized and led by Naira Melkoumian who was a minister in the NK during the events of the 90’s. Melkoumian is known as the only woman who participated in negotiations. She is remembered by interviewees as having a strong opinion and as able to speak out on the NK issues. In the present day there is no equivalent. The only high-profile woman politician who can contribute to the debate in some way is Arpine Hovhannisyan, the Armenian Minister of Justice. But Milena Abrahanyan from KtK Armenia has rejected her as unable or unwilling to make her own decisions and conforming to the wishes of the president. In Azerbaijan, the most visible woman in top country politics is the president’s wife Mehriban Aliyeva. She is very active in social media and is often photographed in charitable events. But due to prominence of clan politics in the ruling Aliyev family, Aliyeva is also expected to behave in certain manner and say certain things which she may or may not believe.
So the issues for wider women participation in the NK peace process are threefold. First is the gender inequality stemming from the masculine nationalism. This leads to the exclusion of women in important processes of building the nation-state. It is clearly visible in parliamentary elections where only 11% of MP’s in Armenia and 16% of MP’s in Azerbaijan are women. Second is the realignment of infrastructure and role of women in society. Some women may not see themselves as mediators in any military or political conflict. And even if there was a way to counter these reasons women would still encounter a block for participation through OSCE as local governments do not sit on the panel. But it is not possible to discount the role of women in peacebuilding as there is strong evidence that they offer grassroots support to IDP’s and refugees. They also lobby for equality and human rights. There is progress with new gender neutral laws and more reporting on gender violence in traditional media. However there are two important problems here that need to be mentioned. Local NGO’s such as Women’s Resource Center of Armenia and Yuva Center of Azerbaijan are accountable to deliver and meet the targets of international NGO’s such as Kvinna till Kvinna to receive funding. Another problem stems from blackmail and hate activism against them.

iii. Role representation in new media

Whilst women activists struggle to find roles on the political spectrum and in official conflict negotiations, they are able keep cross-border communication channels open thanks to new media. Women activists can be said to play an important role in the development of alternative communication methods in the region. Despite the ban of cross-border travel and a threat from security forces, women have found public and private communication spaces online. Women discuss, post photos and even arrange meetings in Georgia through social media channels. Evidence of this is presented in the social media review. Such communication help women advocate the rights of self-determination, freedom from abuse and freedom from undue government influence. It helps them share tips on dealing with other social problems, empowering minorities and allowing women to become more active. But the narrative and discourse analyses does reveal that some women are pressured into assuming these roles and do not understand them fully. For some these activities do not fit their profile and others can be put in danger by participating in them. But overall there is substantial positive evidence that women have found a new voice that they were looking for.
One of the key new media domains is Facebook where women post on open or closed group pages. They can share, comment and debate articles that may not be reported in Armenia or Azerbaijan. They can also post photos from meetings and events. There is evidence to suggest that activists can quickly organize protests using Facebook as a platform to gather momentum. Facebook also enables one-to-one communication. It may help create a shared identity for women groups and allow women to feel empowered. However activists may get attacked and trolled. Hate campaigners have successfully used Facebook to post propaganda and nonsensical articles to distort the new media news spectrum. The other negative is that it may allow women groups to construct an alternative reality that is not reflective of real-life events. Facebook have admitted that they filter news to suit a particular person’s profile. Facebook is also easily tracked and can be a risk to personal safety. Another similar tool is Twitter and here activists also face a dilemma whether to reveal identity and put themselves at risk or hide and not be recognized. Blogs can be more private but their use is decreasing. There is certainly a potential to utilize anonymous mobile applications but the more secretive they are the lesser is their reach to women who may need support.

There is also a lot of evidence to suggest that many blogs, websites and social media accounts have been left abandoned following the security scare. Interviewees told of a perceived threat that is felt by women activists following more attacks on the border. They see a new media ‘blackout’ caused by interference of the security forces, hate propaganda and blackmail towards civil society organizations. Some feel they are left without international support and that makes them vulnerable and exposed. Online abuse is growing in Armenia and Azerbaijan and there is no force to counter it. Governments do little whilst they are preoccupied by the physical threat to national security. The internet space has therefore been abandoned and hate activists, abusers and trolls are never caught or prosecuted. Women find themselves dealing with threats from the physical and online worlds. Role of the new media therefore remains controversial. Local groups may find new partners cross border but they may also get into trouble if they reveal too much information. Staying anonymous is difficult if they want to be credible in exposing inequality and violence. It is a constant challenge.
iv. Successes and limitations of OSCE, EPNK and UN resolution 1325

It can be argued that the UN, EU and major international NGO’s have made some impact towards promoting gender equality in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Their success can be rated by examples such as the introduction of the Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for men and Women law in Armenia (enacted May 2013). It will probably have a much more limited effect to women situated in the Nagorno-Karabakh. In any way the main issue here is that there is a strong anti-Western narrative that may counter the positive effects. The word ‘gender’ has already been associated with promotion of LGBT rights and this is even a bigger problem in Armenia. This word has therefore been removed from the name. Even so, it caused protests in Yerevan in 2013 with opponents arguing that such laws will breakup Armenian families and erode tradition and culture. Situation in Azerbaijan is very similar. Some media networks fuel further violence by calling this law as a ‘Western’ law and meddling in their country life. The success of this law can therefore be seen on a political level but not necessarily in societal values. But it also cannot be called a complete failure as women member of parliaments increased in 2015 election to 11% (it was previously as low as 3%).

The UN Security Council resolution 1325 aims to get more women to contribute to the official peacebuilding activities. It has, however, failed to make a significant impact so far. This was partly due to the government and societal resistance which stems from strong masculine nationalistic views. But it was also partly because of resistance from women activists themselves. Some women failed to recognize their roles in the peace process as negotiators. Historical discourses in other post-Soviet and post-colonial countries show that women who were able to create active roles themselves rather than be pushed into them were more successful. But 1325 has not been fully adopted yet. It has only succeeded into engaging local NGO’s such as WRC and Yuva where representatives are happy with tasks that they have been assigned. Other parties continue to struggle with 1325 and its gender mainstreaming initiatives. Interviewees said that local governments do not know what to do with 1325 and are subject to conflicting messages from the central government. It is particularly difficult in rural areas where gender inequality is stronger and influence from NGO’s working with them is weaker. Interviewees have therefore rated the success of OSCE as poor as EPNK and 1325 as limited. They are also not optimistic for the future in light of the masculine and nationalistic propaganda. They can only rely on their own grassroots activities but they do want international organizations to continue their efforts.
v. Contribution to the theory of comdev

The main contribution here is towards the masculinity and nationalism theory and role of women in armed conflict. Several secondary authors have been discussed including Yuval-Davis, Mosse, Nagel, Riabov and Riabova in addition to primary sources from interviews. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is a strong contributory example over the return of male dominated societies in light of conflict, uncertainty and loss of infrastructure and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been subject to an alternative ethnocultural, economic and military development in the building of their nation-states. This is in comparison to some other post-Soviet countries, e.g. Baltics that have recognized a more equal role for women in social or political life of a nation. Some of the concepts explored here include the feminist injustice (women’s opinion being less valued), the marginalization of civil society groups, the remasculinization of national processes and others. Conflict is partly to blame as it has influenced the political, social and economic decision making in both countries. Women have been denied an equal opportunity in making these decisions even if both the secondary and primary research points to the fact that they can and are willing to make this contribution. Instead, active women have been subjected to inequality, isolation, threat and marginalization as a group.

This research has also tested the limited success of the OSCE negotiations as well as Western and international intervention aiming to give stronger roles for women in society. It has looked at the influence of Russia itself undergoing a process of masculinization under Putin, but also at the concept of ‘derussification’ from the political and social processes in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It can conclude that women did make a significant contribution to looking after refugees and IDP’s during and after the war and actively campaigning to recognize gender violence and abuse. Active women have been clear that they were making progress prior to resurgence of border clashes in 2016 and that they still have hope that they will have official recognition and input into peace negotiations. The war-gender nexuses have been very important and interesting to research and draw comparison to some post-colonial states that have undergone or are still undergoing conflict. The state of Nagorno-Karabakh is itself unique and under researched in development, so there’s a need for it to be explored further in finding out how civil voices aid the improvement of the quality of life for its residents. Nagorno-Karabakh remains an unparalleled examples when considering role of Russia, language, ethnocultural people movements, refugees, involvement from international NGO’s and the bleak future of ever being independent or part of territorial Azerbaijan.
vi. Role as researcher

The role has allowed me as the author to explore new literature, new theory and new concepts in detail. It has also allowed me to conduct a significant and complex primary study with five distinct parties of women that have given extremely interesting and valuable perspectives into this region and its people. Despite several limitations of language and travel, this research is very relevant and contributory to the comdev field. It is particularly noteworthy during the time of resurgence of border clashes and threat of further escalation of conflict. In light of new opportunities with new media, it aids understanding over how civil society groups communicate with each other despite security threats and blackmail. As a researcher, it will be important for me to continue to work in this field and with these countries to see progress and any new developments that will happen in the next few years. All interviewees have asked me to contact them in the future for further questions or to catch-up with them regarding their future roles and the roles of their organizations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh.

13. Final Considerations

Transcaucasian conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains integrated into the political, social and economic life of both nations. Both countries are relatively young and it will be interesting to see how society shapes in the next decade in light of global communication developments and global trends. However, both also have strong cultural heritage that is distinct from Soviet socialism. This heritage is historically and culturally significant. It needs to be explored further in light of growing nationalism and growing masculinization of both societies. It is clear now that the conflict is not over, but both nations have been at peace and living together only thirty years ago. Legal considerations are interesting but have not been able to make a contribution in solving this conflict, and the same can be said about religion. The peace process is at a standstill and aggression between both countries is growing. Only grassroots activism by women and other civil groups appears to be looking for solutions and improved communications. But they face oppression, marginalization, threat and violence.
14. References and Bibliography

16. Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Education: Method and Practice edited by Norm Friesen, Carina Henriksson, Tone Saevi


http://www.rferl.org/content/Do_Central_Asias_Gender_Quotas_Help_Or_Hurt_Women/1977535.html [Accessed 18th Nov]


15. Appendices

i. Initial Karabakh Conflict Chronology – adapted from Euronews.com, 27th April 2016

**December 1-2 1987** A protest by the inhabitants of the Armenian-populated village of Chardakhly against the firing of the head of the village is suppressed by the Azerbaijani police.

**February 13 1988** Protestors in Stepanakert, the centre of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), demand the re-unification of NKAO with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR)

**February 20, 1988** An extraordinary session of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) Soviet of People’s Deputies passes a resolution to unify the region with Armenia. No representatives of Azerbaijan attended.

**February 26, 1988** A large number of people rally in Yerevan in support of NKAO’s re-unification with the Armenian SSR.

**February 27-29, 1988** Armenian population of the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait is forced out during a wave of violence. The causes of the trouble are disputed.

**June 15, 1988** The Supreme Soviet of the Armenian SSR gives its consent for NKAO’s inclusion into the Armenian SSR, on the basis of Article 70 of the USSR Constitution. The equivalent body in Azerbaijan responded by rejecting the decision.

**July 18, 1988** The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR rules that Nagorno Karabakh should remain part of Azerbaijan.

**September 21, 1988** Moscow introduces emergency measures to restore order in NKAO.

**August 1989** Azerbaijan starts an economic blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh. Tens of thousands are deplaced from their homes and many thousands die.

**January 13-20, 1990** Many members of the Armenian community in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, flee the city as tensions mount. Soviet troops move in and scores die in the ensuing violence.

December 10, 1991 A few days before the official collapse of the Soviet Union, Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum, where a majority of 99.89% voted for full independence from Azerbaijan. Most Azeris in the region were unable or unwilling to vote. Baku described the action as illegal and ended the autonomy Nagorno-Karabakh had enjoyed under Soviet times. In the violence that followed, Armenia troops supported the breakaway movement as Azerbaijan attempted to restore its control. Around 25,000 people were killed and many times more forced out of their homes.

January 26, 1992 The Azerbaijani Army suffers a reversal near the village known to Armenians as Karin-Tak and Azeris as Dashalti.

February 25-26, 1992 The Khojaly Massacre, also known as “Khojaly tragedy” (or as the “Khojaly Genocide” by ethnic Azerbaijanis) takes place. Anwhere between 160 and 613 civilians are killed by ethnic Armenians and Soviet troops from among the 7,000 inhabitants of Khojaly. A recent Turkish report claims thousands of buildings were demolished. This, and other subsequent actions, effectively forced out significant portions of the Azeri population into refugee camps in Azerbaijan.

May, 1992 Armenian forces take territory forming linking Armenia with Nagorno Karabakh. They will extend these gains in the coming year.

June 12, 1992 The Azerbaijani forces begin large-scale offensives resulting in the taking of the Shahoumian region, the northern part of the Martakert region, and the eastern part of the Askeran region.

April 1993 The UN Security council adopted the first of a series of resolutions calling for the withdrawal of pro-Armenian forces

May 9-11, 1994 A Russian mediation team draws up a comprehensive ceasefire agreement. The defence authorities of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno Karabakh sign the document. The agreement became effective on May 12, 1994. A “demilitarized zone” is defined to limit conflicts. Both sides have crossed for attacks that have caused deaths since 1994.
- While a ceasefire has been in place since 1994, no peace treaty has been signed.
- The region is a strategic area for oil and gas pipelines
ii. Interview Questions


[key questions]

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<tr>
<th>Interviewer</th>
<th>Interviewee response</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thank you for agreeing to answer a few questions about women in conflict zone of Nagorno-Karabakh border region. What is your role/role of your organization? How are you involved the region?</td>
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<td>How would you describe the situation of women who live in the region, in terms of their roles, their responsibilities, any threats and any opportunities for them?</td>
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<td>This question concerns women in politics. How would you describe the political/government situation of Armenia/Azerbaijan and particularly in the Nagorno-Karabakh region? Are there any women in power?</td>
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<td>Comparing this to time during Soviet Union, has the role of women changed? Has it changed because of conflict, or is there additional pressures on women?</td>
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<td>In your role, looking at this particular region do you see a strong aspiration of women, and especially young women to go into politics? What are their dreams? Do they see themselves as involved in resolving this conflict? How could you describe young women in particular?</td>
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<td>Social media - Facebook/Twitter/Google+/YouTube/e-mail/blogs - Are these women from Nagorno-Karabakh represented, how do they go about voicing their views? Do they have a voice about issues that matter to them?</td>
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<td>Your organization. Tell me more about the work that you do in the region? Do you work with other partner organizations? What are your main aims? How involved are the women that you work with? Have there been any successes you can share?</td>
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<td>Does language play a big role? Do women speak Russian/Armenian/Azeri? Do they learn any other foreign languages? Do they and how do they communicate cross-border?</td>
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<td>Does religion play a big role?</td>
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<td>Are there any other aspects to communication to resolve this conflict?</td>
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<td>What do you think needs to happen to reduce the number of deaths and increase feeling of peace and security to the region/to women in the region?</td>
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<td>Is conflict influence any other aspects of women’s life – discrimination of any kind, work opportunities, social life, social media communication, leisure, etc?</td>
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[closing] Thank you very much for your time
iii. Interview Transcript: Annika Karlsson, Milena Abrahamyan and Aygun Janmammadova, Kvinna till Kvinna

Please note: These transcripts have been compressed and edited to remove unnecessary introductions and informal conversation data. They have been edited to fit the structural format of this thesis. Full audio transcripts are available upon request.

Malmo University
24th March 2016

Respondents:
Annika Karlsson, Milena Abrahamyan and Aygun Janmammadova, Kvinna till Kvinna

Good afternoon,

Annika Karlsson: You have sent us very good, insightful questions. I am the original manager for our programme here at South Caucasus, which also covers Georgia, including South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Milena is the program officer for Armenia and Aygun is the same for Azerbaijan, part of our programme for Armenia and Azerbaijan. As you can hear from their names, they are from the region here, but that also limits their possibility to travel to the other country. So naturally, Milena will talk about Armenia mostly and Aygun about Azerbaijan mostly and maybe I can bring some regional perspective to it.

Thank you, are you currently located in Georgia, in Tbilisi?

Yeah, we all sit here in this regional office. We have one colleague in Sweden, but otherwise we have a regional office here.

Can you tell me a little bit about the involvement here of the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and your role on the day to day basis and supporting local organisations and women's groups?

Annika Karlsson: Kvinna till Kvinna is a foundation supporting women’s organisation in regions affected by conflict, we also do communication work and collaborations with research institutions mostly from our Stockholm office. Within the first mandate, Kvinna till Kvinna has developed a method where we are a grounds making organizations, so we channel funding to women’s organisations here based here in the region and other regions as well, where we have situation of post-conflict or on-going conflict. It follows from our strategic papers and programmes which we are running related to women peace and security and gender based violence. Also a little bit on civil society activism and also we give support to MBT organisations on human rights activism. We do administration of grants. We don’t implement projects ourselves, and our contribution except for financial support is capacity development. And we also provide opportunities for networking.
It is application, reports several times a year from our Stockholm office. Colleagues here do the administration and follow up of how the funding is used.

**Milena and Aygun, how did they get involved with the organization?**

Aygun Janmammadova: I am the programme officer for Azerbaijan, working with partners in Azerbaijan. We have five partners, and what I do is to work with our partners on administration of their projects. That involves following up, monitoring, evaluation of the projects they implement. Every year, we have this cycle where we assess the applications in order to award grants. Part of my task is to be present in Azerbaijan to monitor events and activities of our partners. There has been some tight control and crackdown on civil society, so I have been in charge of following developments and trends in terms legislation and political situation in general.

Milena Abrahamyan: I have the same position title for Armenia. I have similar responsibilities with the Armenian titles with the administration of grants and reporting and monitoring. And how I got involved with the organisation - I knew of Kvinna till Kvinna for some time, I was volunteering with one of the partner organisations and then I was employed there. I knew of Kvinna's work in Armenia. That's how I got involved. I was studying in Sweden for two years, studying peace of conflict. I was going to Kvinna till Kvinna events also.

**Going to the border conflict and situation in Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2016. Has there been any progress in conflict resolution from the political and geographical basis?**

Abrahamyan: I can give you my perspective. I don't think there's any progress. There have been escalations in the previous years and there are constantly clashes at the border. Sniper fire has become normal. In terms of work of Minsk group, I would say that they are doing nothing. It is a stuck process and there are people that would say that there may be a purpose to that, this uncertainty of resolution. It is in an uncertain state, it keeps populations of both countries and de facto region in uncertainty which seeps into every layer of their lives.

**From both sides of the conflict, is there an ultimate visible aim? Is that over the de facto region, or are there additional reasons?**

Aygun Janmammadova: Perspective of peace is as bleak as ever, and now actually there’s not a lot which is done to settle the conflict or to make the peace come closer. Work is being done to prevent clashes; efforts are being put to prevent these clashes. I don’t know how efficient the Minsk group are; maybe they are efficient in preventing conflict resurgence, rather than solving it. Solution of the conflict should be done with involvement of two countries and I don’t think other countries really need it. It is just a conflict between two countries. We see involvement of certain powers that can escalate it.

Karlsson: As with most conflicts, it is about power, and they are being used for political reasons by political players. There’s a lot to read on that. Laurence Broers (SOAS) can contribute on the conflict and the region.

Milena Abrahamyan: It is much more complicated, whenever we are discussing this conflict it is important to take into account the geopolitical situation, there’s so many actors involved.
Looking into role of women, are women’s views being represented in parliaments in both countries and de facto region? There are some women that are known, including Georgia’s foreign minister Tinatin Khidisheli and wife of Azerbaijani president Mehriban Aliyeva. Are there any strong or powerful women’s characters that are involved in the Minsk group, in governments or any party that can bring about women's views into legislative decisions?

Annika Karlsson: As for the so-called peace process, in the beginning it was a much more open format. It has closed to ministerial level and it is not open to parliamentarians and wider circle. Only ministerial and government secretary level are involved, and they are all men. And the sad thing also is the Minsk Group as such, the negotiators or mediators; there hasn’t been one single woman, during all these years. Not from France, United States or Russia. It is a very male dominated negotiation process.

Abrahamyan: Armenia is very poor with representation of women in parliament and government. It is very few women parliamentarians, about 9%. There are 3 MP’s, there were two until recently, so it’s good that there’s one more. But when you have women, does this mean that they necessarily represent women? In fact with this new minister of justice, it is a woman. She deals with issues that you deal with as a woman in politics, she is sexualized, she is young, she’s very beautiful. At the same time I see her as a mouthpiece for the president of Armenia, imagine doing so as a minister for justice, so she is very good at doing her job.

Janmammadova: In Azerbaijan, there is the first lady of Azerbaijan who also holds other key positions. There are no high profile women politicians in Azerbaijan. There is a state committee on women, family and children’s affairs, it is headed by a woman. It is quite a prominent women in Azerbaijan. Women’s representation in parliament is 17% or 23%, in municipalities as well. There’s this positive trend, and the number of women increased. It is still very male centric and male dominated.

Abrahamyan: I just want to say something about the post-soviet reality of women in politics. In case of Armenia, and this is also similar of other ex-soviet countries. During the Soviet period, there were quotas for women in politics, and whether this was working well or not, still it was something. It was a way to ensure that women have some kind of a voice. Post-independence of Armenia, you can say that this number has decreased and this has gotten worse in terms of women’s representation.

And, Milena, in your view, why do think this has happened. Why would the numbers have decreased after independence?

Milena Abrahamyan: You can say that it is the same trend when you have ‘revolutions’. You have women at the front lines, which was the case with Armenia as well. Once the revolution has come, women are told to go back to their homes and their families. This is the role that they play as mothers and wives, increasing nationalism. I am not trying to idealize the Soviet period, but you can see that this is the trend, that there’s increasing nationalism and what the woman’s role in the perfect nation is. Especially, when you have what are seen as external factors or threats to preserving your nation. This makes it harder for a woman to aspire to be in politics.

Aygun Janmammadova: This quota system has been abolished in Azerbaijan and this might be the same in Armenia. There’s no quota system anymore. So for example, some of our partners in Azerbaijan, they advocate for the inclusion of quota system in the parliamentary elections. In Azerbaijan politics, it is ‘not
the business of women’. This is how society, community view, they think that woman’s role, okay, that she can hold certain roles but men are better in politics.

I would imagine that view is led by men, rather than women, which is a continuous circle. You are all currently in Georgia, what is the situation, does it follow a similar trend?

Karlsson: It is following a similar trend. Actually Georgia has been the worst; they have been the lowest in the world ranking. But then the parliament looks a little bit different and the systems are a little bit different. But I would say, on the other hand, women are more active in civil society and that is also established in research. So women were phased out of politics, of former political power, but they are active in political life as such through civil society. This is where many women found a platform, because they are more free to operate and start your own organization. This doesn't mean that you have political power but many women are still active.

This is exactly my topic about women finding that alternative platform. Upon my initial research I found a lot of women’s groups and community groups dealing with a whole variety of different things, conflict and violence and politics on Facebook and Twitter and Youtube and blogs and this exactly what interested me in writing about this.

Talking about social media, does it aid the peace process and does it aid women’s communication cross border?

Janmammadova: The social media is very powerful at hindering the peace process on the grassroots level. Through social media, you can instigate people, you can propagate nationalism and spread hate speech. But you can also virtually bring together nations amongst the conflict divide. Especially at times when it is not physically possible to meet otherwise. I would say social media plays an important role in aiding nations coming closer. Speaking from my experience, I have Armenian friends and I can keep in touch with them. When I was based in Baku, it was only through social media.

Abrahamyan: I have this view that a lot of people in Azerbaijan would wary of keeping in touch with me because their Facebook might be followed.

Janmammadova: It is always followed, it has always been like this. It is a valid point that there is perceived threat. That people might be cautious of keeping in touch with them on social media. Speaking from my experience, there has been some projects between Armenians and Azeris and the way they publicized this, and published it and spread it has been through social media. As for our partners, I wouldn’t say they are very active social users, for example, from Azeri partners, only one of them, they have blog posts, which they don’t really update. Otherwise it is just personal accounts, but if you speak about connections, about keeping Armenians and Azerbaijanis on a more human personal level, it exists. But professionally, from our partners, these ties don’t exists unless in special cases, which I am not aware of.

It is good that you mention security as a perceived threat before communication. Does this hinder the ability between groups and partners from meeting with each other? I know a couple of groups, such as the South Caucasus Women’s Forum, they publish photos and event details. They usually meet in Georgia, and there are representatives from both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In your view, does the interaction between NGO’s from Armenia and Azerbaijan happen?
Annika Karlsson: It does happen and it is part of what we do, to provide opportunities for meetings and networking. We have partners in Armenia and Azerbaijan who have collaborated independently, some did by us but they had their own collaboration projects. It is more difficult than a few years ago, they are more cautious now. Also what they publish on social media. Before, they used to cover each other posts on Facebook, just on friendship level, but now as I understood they are very careful, not to put the other person in trouble. It is a shrinking space that also affects this part. To bring together people we do and other organizations do. And Georgia is of course a point where you can meet and meet also with Georgian organizations which we do. Or in a third country. Georgia is one thing, and it is quite costly, and some donors question whether this is valuable or not. And exactly social media and cheap sources should be used, but it is not the same as the human encounter. But people need to meet, at least for friendship.

You mention the fact that is a shrinking space because of the security threat. Has there been an increase of examples where people have been persecuted, or prosecuted officially, or threatened or actually attacked because of their communications on online accounts?

Aygun Janmammadova: There are some people who have been interrogated or prosecuted for keeping in touch with each other, but unless they go public with it, you will never know. And normally when somebody is interrogated, they are asked to keep it private. Until it goes to court level or if there’s international presence, they will not speak up. If you know of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2009, some Azeri viewers voted for the Armenian contender using their home telephones. And the next day they were called up by national security and they were interrogated why they voted for the Armenian contender.

But this shrinking space is not just because of security, but it is also related to foreign funding of NGO’s. And this is happening in Egypt and around Russia. But we are not aware of anyone being prosecuted or interrogated in the past year.

Karlsson: But I think there’s another dimension to it. There’s the political level, but there’s also hate and slander and threat campaigns around activists sometimes from other activists or from politicians. From our perspective, what we know best is when it is against women, but it is also against LGBT activists. It can also come from other activists, political, human rights and green activists to women activists for being women. There are two dimensions to this, security side of it but also in civil society and media here. Media personalities and people with online blogs, they can spread slander, threats and hatred against women activists.

You mentioned Russia as an influence. What is the role of Russia in all of these different dimensions, if you can pick out the most relevant ones? What is the role of Russian in relation to women’s organizations or NGO’s acting in this region?

Abrahamyan: Besides the contextual things, such as Armenia joining the Eurasian Economic Union, which limits many things for Armenia geopolitically. In the past several years there has been funding by Russian based organizations. Specifically in Armenia there’s the Parent’s Committee and they are basically set up to attack women’s organizations that are trying to challenge gender norms. In 2012, there was something that activists on the ground are calling ‘gender hysteria’ in Armenia, when there were talks about passing this law on gender equality, which eventually passed. But the law is called Equality between Men and Women and they asked to remove the word gender from it because they were associating it with trans issues, trans people and LGBT issues. It was the lack of knowledge what this term means. And I think it
was very much influenced by what’s going on in this sphere in Russia. There was talk about passing this propaganda law that you can’t promote LGBT anything, but it hasn’t passed.

Janmammadova: As you know Russia is in the Minks group, but at the same time it is selling weapons to both sides. You can put the two things together.

Karlsson: Kvinna till Kvinna as an organization we don’t take sides in the conflict. We don’t have a lot of analytical writing on the conflict, we have the analysis with the gender lens, where Equal Power is one of the reports we did. So these observations are more as private people, but given our mandate it has been an ambition to reach out to women in Russia and we have, but Russia is not part of the budget as part of development aid. It is also getting more and more difficult to work with NGO’s there and our board has never prioritized Russia. Countries where we operate are based on border issues, but we did have some interaction, we have supported partners in Georgia in their collaboration with Russian NGO’s. And the same goes for Turkey, we don’t operate there but there’s an ambition to support the link.

Let’s talk about women on the ground, women in families, women working in administrative roles in government and not in government, not just activists and NGO’s. But women also living in Nagorno-Karabakh and border region, what is their day to day live, what is their experience?

Milena Abrahamyan: I am not qualified to answer it, it would be best to ask a woman living in the Nagorno-Karabakh so she can transfer her reality to you. I can only tell you what I know from particular women that I have met. One of our partner organization in Armenia partners with based in Shushi or Shusha. Basically she defers very much from many of the women there, she has more feminist views, more feminist perspective. She is aware of the ways she is oppressed in an unrecognized territory which has links only with Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh sees itself as being oppressed by Armenian even if it is linked with Armenia. Because they want to be recognized as autonomous, they want to have their own voices. She is aware of all these different pressures, also being based there and under heavy nationalistic propaganda. This is the reality, you are constantly being reminded that you have to defend yourself or you have to protect what you have gained. If there’s an issue specifically related to women or some of the spheres we work with such as gender based violence, and if this woman is to voice this she would be seen as a traitor because she is exposing so-called ‘dirty laundry’ under really precarious fragile situation. The enemy can say that these Armenian men are wife-beaters and it is strange because it is nothing to do with Armenian men. One of the main parts of the reality of women’s lives there is poverty and lack of ability to move. This is very important to know.

As part of this poverty and situation with situation with restrictions to move, how important are factors such as language or religion? Do they play a role in the ability to better their lives or understand more about the situation? Is it important to speak Armenian or Russian, or in fact English? Is it important to which religious group do you belong?

Abrahamyan: I think you are asking an interesting question, but I don’t really think its relevant. I think both in this and Azerbaijani case, Aygun and I talk about this being ex-pats in Georgia. We see that Georgia is much more religious of the three South Caucasus countries. So I think this is not as much of a question when it comes to factors that you are looking into.

Aygun Janmammadova: On the religion, and conflict, I think we should look at religion as an institution. There the church in Georgia which plays an important role. It is more powerful in some instances than the
president of Georgia. Whereas in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as an institution is strong but not as in Georgia. In Azerbaijan mosques are not powerful and religion has not played any role on the conflict or escalation of the conflict. There are some analysts that they say that this conflict arose between Christian population and Muslim population of Nagorno-Karabakh but it is totally irrelevant. As for Azerbaijani population, there is no Azeri living in Nagorno-Karabakh, so they are IDP’s living close to line of contact. And same holds for them, there’s high rate of poverty, unemployment among IDP’s. They don’t have access to healthcare, since healthcare is expensive, and when it is free it is not quality. But our partners they work with IDP’s and they include them in projects, especially when it comes to peacebuilding.

Milena Abrahamyan: What would be more relevant is the way in which history is told and passed down as stories, this has more of an influence to narrative of the conflict, than religion. Then you can say it comes to be an ethnic thing.

Janmammadova: It is more ethnicity than religion. In Azerbaijan, there’s a religious clash, but internally. Inside Azerbaijan there are strictly Sunny/Shia and there’s clash between them on a small scale. In terms of this conflict it has not played any role.

Abrahamyan: But it does play part in the way of a story/narrative told to Armenians. There’s this historical connection with the Armenian genocide and Turks. And how Turks are Muslim, and how Armenians were being killed because they were not believers. In many cases Turkish people get associated with Azerbaijani people in Armenia. And when they say Turk you have to ask them do they mean Turkish or Azerbaijani?

Do you have any other resources or any other people that I can speak to?

We can send you a list of academic resources and we can select some of our partners that speak English.

Thank you for your time
iv. Interview Transcript: Dr. Märta-Lisa Magnusson, Malmo University

Malmo University

30th March 2016

Respondents:

Marta-Lisa Magnusson, Malmo University Caucasus Studies

Good morning, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me and taking time out of your busy schedule. Can you tell me a little bit about your role in Malmo University and Caucasus Region?

Marta-Lisa Magnusson: Yes, actually I am one of the founding mothers of Caucasus Studies at Malmo University. I took this initiative together with Professor Karina Vamling; she is a professor of Caucasian languages. And there was a course designed to study Georgian at Malmo University before I entered the game. Karina Vamling together with two other teachers taught Georgian on web. It was web based instruction. This was quite advanced, the beginning of 2000’s, 2004 or 2003, the linguistic course has started. Karina and I, we applied for and obtained some grants to do the course development and establish the course called conflict and conflict resolution in the Caucasus. And based on that course, we offered it for 2, 3 years starting in 2006. It is not a programme, but a separate course that can be combined within established programmes. Until one semester ago, I was more or less on full time, 75% and now I retired, but I am still working 25%. I am in charge of module State and Nation Building and Conflict, and Conflict Resolution in the Caucasus. I am quite involved in the courses, and in this university activity. However, I must say that I have not been in charge of gender specific issues. We have no specific course module for gender related issues, but it is integrated as part of the social and political development. My interest in this conflict are separatist regions, de facto states, especially the Chechnya-Russia conflict and conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh where Armenia is strongly involved, but the conflict is originally Azeri issue. In this aspect, I have made my observations of women’s role. I have not made specific independent studies on this issue, but I have observed. I have, of course, studied the existing literature on this.

Actually I spoke to Annika Karlsson, and whilst you gave the link to her seminar, which I’ve watched, she also gave the link to an interview with you. You said you have been doing this course for a number of years, so what can you tell me on the role of women over the years in the region? Has it changed over the years, the Soviet time, 90’s and current state in 2016?

I can confirm what you can read from the Equal Power Lasting Peace report from Kvinna till Kvinna. Peace negotiations conducted under the OSCE Minsk Group, it is quite it is men’s business. There are main male representatives in the Minks Group. It is not a local organization, it is international organization. The Minks group ‘troika’, including the co-chairmans, they represent the United States, Russia and France – they are men, and have been. The key positions in this process, the personal representatives of the chairmans, they are male. This is at an international level and I can assure you that at the local, Caucasian level, the process, the functions within the process, it is just as much gendered. Women do have a function, but not on the official level. It’s also another complicating factor here that Nagorno-Karabakh is not fully involved in this peace process. The Minks group are working on official level. They are working on peace negotiations.
between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These two countries are state participants. But Nagorno-Karabakh is not recognized by the international community, or international organizations and not even by Armenia. So Nagorno-Karabakh is not fully involved in this peace process. If not even Nagorno-Karabakh is involved, it means that neither men nor women are involved. But I must say that in the 90’s there was a very profiled woman on the Nagorno-Karabakh, Naira Melkoumian, she was the foreign minister of this unrecognized state. She was there for several years, she was very profiled and highly estimated political figure. After that, on the Nagorno-Karabakh side, they have been men. And this process, peace negotiations in this conflict, as well as in the other conflicts, on the contested territories, separatists groups claiming independence, the contested issues in these conflicts all concern power related issues, control over territories, issues of international and political status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia – these are hard-core, power related issues. They relate to security concerns and security issues all over the world, and all over the world they are monopolized by men. They are men’s business. In this conflict this is not different. In this part of the world, women are even more marginalized because of other issues, so it is even harder for women in this conflict region and within the frame of this conflict, to influence on the official former peace negotiations. I am not speaking on the grassroots level, but of the formal, official level. It is twice as complicated for women to get access and to do something.

So would you say that you can connect any conflict situations or separatism, or any of these de facto states to the rule of men? And if there’s a peaceful state, is it more likely for women to get involved in official government roles, rather than conflict states?

Well, these conflicts are very specific. I would say that it is more difficult for women to make a difference in these kind of conflict, because the stakes are high and I do risk myself to say that women are not interested in power, but women are denied access to power in these conflicts and this has something to do and one can conclude that in these de facto state, at least the weaker part is on the alert to demonstrate strength and to not to show any sign of weakness. And therefore attributes associated with men are higher evaluated than attributes, loose characteristics attributed to women. And it is not only women, also civil society organizations and structures are marginalized in these conflicts because civil society is a signal of pluralism – different voices, women’s voices, minorities voices, youth voices, different interests have a voice in civil organizations. And that might be considered as a weakness in these kind of conflicts. Since it is very important for these separatists regions to demonstrate ‘we are united, we stand united’ behind war, our claims, demands are state of our own.

Also nationalism is prominent in this kind of context – ‘we are united people, we have no dissent, and the main issue and main demand for us is survival and obtaining a state of our own’. So this marginalizes, it develops, it supports unity and monism. That is one side, another side is that in these conflicts you also have traditional values. They have weak heritage of democracy, and democracy often at least, promotes gender equality. In the Caucasus, you have strongly anchored traditional thinking and traditional societies who have survived the Soviet Union, communism and they are still strong, and even became stronger after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And in these kinds of societies, formally Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and also Nagorno-Karabakh and to some extent Abkhazia and South Ossetia have developed formally democratic institutions, and they have constitutions and laws but applications and implementations of these democratic institutions are very poor. And also all these states, except Armenia, they have very weak national ‘we’, but they have strong regional and local loyalties to family and to clan, clan societies. In traditional societies attitudes to women are different than within a developed democracy.
So as states became independent from the Soviet Union, have they returned to this status of local clans and local families and nationalism is displayed in this specific way of a more traditional society. Therefore women’s role reversed back?

It is a complicated question. You are quite right, in the Soviet Union, officially there was gender equality. And the Soviet state system also supported women’s participation in politics, but as you know Soviet system was not normal politics – it was one party system and there was only one way of thinking and one way of doing politics. Besides the Soviet state also, there was some structures making it possible for women to participate. They have kindergartens, women had social rights, there was no political freedom, but there were social advantages. Women had the possibility to work, to function in public life, in political party life. That was possible and these structures, social welfare system, it doesn’t exist anymore or it has been weakened after the dissolution.

It is important also not to idealize what happened in the Soviet Union. Of course there was suppression not only in public life, but in private life. It was a man’s world and women often had to do double work. They were participated in the public life, they were working, hardworking – construction building, etc. At home they also work as house wives and do the work. From what I understood and from my research men did not participate in the private sphere. So it was double work and still is but then it was quite hard. Today the welfare system from the Soviet Union has disappeared, and that is a structural problem for women to overcome. Who is going to take care of the kids? And besides the official politics, even if laws are in place, supporting gender equality, politics isn't like that. Hard-core politics is men’s business in the post-soviet countries. You have women in power positions, but if you look to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, also Azerbaijan, if you look at structure of government, women who have obtained power positions and positions as ministers or equal to that, it is mainly in caring issue: healthcare, youth care, and children’s care. You can call it soft power issues. While ministers in foreign affairs, security, finance are dominated by men. In parliaments, national assemblies, role of women was high in the soviet times and then fell. In the independence movements women were active, but when it comes to power structures after independence – women’s share of seats in parliament fell drastically in Armenia and Azerbaijan. But in the last few years, there has been improvement. As regards to Chechnya, Abkhazia and South Ossetia situation is similar. In Chechnya Kadyrov has introduced headscarves for women for the first time, very different to the 90’s. Situation has deteriorated in Chechnya, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Nagorno-Karabakh it has not changed much, it is the same since the early 00’s.

One of obstacles for women to obtain power positions in the power structures, whether in parliaments or governments is corruption. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this phenomenon has increased. It was there in the Soviet Union, but not to the extent that it became after the Soviet Union. The classical definition of corruption is the merger between the public office and private business. Power positions are bought, you can buy power positions, you can obtain power positions, by manipulating, by corruption. Money is involved. Clan structures, or clan related networks, just think about the Aliyev clan in Azerbaijan. Why do you think there are so many Aliyevs in power position in this country? And the situation is not much different in Armenia, somewhat better in Georgia. And in these corruption infiltrated societies women are excluded because they don’t have access to money in the same way as men have. So this is not the main factor from preventing women to obtaining political influence or parliamentary positions, but it is a factor. And together with social norms of how women should be behave – decent women should not get involved in politics, politics is dirty business. You have to consider these factors. We have them in the West also, but not to that extent.
I wanted to talk now about the changing role of women. Going from participation in peace process and in parliament, and these numbers reducing, there has been a surge of visible new media activism. What can you tell me about that?

On grassroots level women have been involved all the time since the Soviet Union and also in the post-soviet development. I have met women especially doing conflict related difficulties and situations, refugees, IDP’s, the problems – women are working with these. And they are working quite hard with these contexts. And you can also see from the existing literature, that women are working and are increasingly involved in these social related networks and organizations. But again, these contexts aren’t directly related to the power structures. The fundamental structure has not changed, but on the other side, it is better that with time these efforts will result in something substantial and will change the gender situation. But when women are working, even at the grassroots level, they notice that ‘we can do something, we can make a change, we can’t have the power to decide at the official level, but we are working for improvements’. And this may translate to power structures for improving our influence in power structures also. You have the improvement of law, although you can say that this is down to pressure from the international community that you have to also guarantee the gender equality in your country otherwise you don’t have access to our organization, some things like that. But somehow there is linkage between these grassroots organizations working for improvement, for the bettering of the live of IDP’s, for refugees and these are conflict related and also for improving the situation for women also in general. So of course it is progress, but it is slow, that is my impression.

Somehow these women they meet with Kvinna till Kvinna, they meet with the EU organizations, local organizations, they meet with international NGO’s and through them also some influence is generated. They can put pressure on the official structures on Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. It is an intricate system of channels for influence.

Can you comment the role of religion, which was not very visible or present in the Soviet Union, also on language, which officially was mostly Russian and also the influence from Russia on the rights of women and on the state politics and decision making?

It is not my impression that religion has played a considerable role in these conflicts. They are not religious conflict. But you have different political entrepreneurs, actors, who are politicizing religion. You have seen that in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. And if you talk to Armenians there they always mention Muslim Azeris and vice versa. Fundamentally these conflicts are not religious, but religion is a factor which has been politicized, manipulated and intrumentalised. You can take the instrumentalist approach to this conflict and the role of religion. If you also involve Chechnya, this was a secular conflict in the beginning. It was secular conflict involving national liberation from their side and separatists seen from the mother state side – national determination versus territorial integrity. But at least in Chechnya and Russia conflict religion was coming to play a more prominent role. And this conflict has now entered into the international Jihad, part of it. Kadyrov has also radicalized, and he has used or misused the religious factor. And introduction of this covering of women has been legitimizied by religious conflict. So of course religion has played the role but these were not religious conflicts. Of course religion influences women’s position and women’s behaviour amongst the Muslims. They tend to be more bound to traditions and the traditional society is paying respect to religion in different way than secularized urban societies. But I don’t think that this religious factor influenced so much on women’s actual work or possibilities to obtain positions, except in the way that religion is a part of traditional cultural value system. But this traditional cultural value
system is as much based on local traditions as on religion. I wouldn't point to religion as a decisive factor, although it is there.

What about the role of language, women's rights and discrimination? There's an influence of Russia, of international organizations and local languages also. What can we say about that?

I would recommend for you to talk to Karina Vamping, my colleague. There has been a derussification of Caucasus. Role of Russia on the cultural level is diminishing, not on the political level. Russia was a mandatory language, it was taught in schools and universities and it was the *lingua franca*. This of course was power related, but it was also facilitating communication between the different communities in the Caucasus. Russia took over the role of Arabic and Turkic. Before the Russian revolution in 1917, people in the Caucasus spoke two or three languages. So with the decrease of the influence of Russian, this has become an obstacle for inter ethnic or inter communal or inter national/inter regional communication. And that is a negative factor of course. I don't think that Turkic or Arabic has regained their position. And English is still mainly spoken by young people, but that can change. Communication between Azerbaijan and Armenia earlier was conducted in Russian. But new generations have grown up who have not studied Russian, at least in Azerbaijan. If you go to Armenia, you will find that people still speak Russian. But if you go Georgia, you better not speak Russian. They will not talk to you if you speak Russian. They are not interested in speaking Russian. If I go to Georgia I haven’t spoken Russian to my Georgian friends in 10 years. You have to be quite cautious, as they are not very fond of Russians and Russian language. In Armenia it is quite different, and also in Nagorno-Karabakh.

But of course the language factor influences on the possibilities on the intercommunal interaction and communication.

What about connecting role of Russia to the role of women in the political society? In Russia, we have a lot of feminist organizations that are being threatened and pursued by government. Does this play an influence on South Caucasus?

Personally I have not noticed the same development, this hostile attitude to women organizations. We have talked about the influence of traditional thinking and traditional values and attitudes of women. Also amongst women you have these attitudes in this part of the world that they should ask as women – you have to be kind and caring and look good and make a mark on men. So this is widespread attitudes which don't necessarily mean that you have to be related to hostilities to feminism. Feminist organizations in the Caucasus as well as in the West are issues for intellectual women, and intellectual community all over the world are more open to influences than at the popular level. Maybe I haven’t studied this comparatively to the development in Russia with hostilities towards almost any dissent from the official nationalist Russian way of thinking nowadays and Putin. It wasn't that way in the 90’s under Yeltsin. I don’t think I have seen this hostility in the Caucasus, which is Armenia and Georgia. I have not been on the ground in Azerbaijan in some time.

Now talking about the role of social media in conflict resolution and/or women’s rights representing government or society, and thinking about women’s issues, how have you seen the role of new media develop? And what role has it played?

I have not studied this specifically, but in general Facebook and the social media play an influential role. You don’t have to speculate very much before you can conclude that. These medias are not so
widespread amongst the older generation, although if you go to Georgia you can see a technology leap. Almost everybody has mobile telephones in Georgia. They are of course not as developed as North European countries, but they have really made technological revolutions. And this of course is an instrument for mobilisation and communication here as well as in other places of the world. If you want to have intercommunal interaction, you must have money for that, you must be able to communicate on mobile telephone between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Another language that is more important is that it is not possible for ordinary Georgians to communicate to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. It is the same for Nagorno-Karabakh or Azerbaijan because the systems are closed.

Communication is almost totally closed by Armenia and Azerbaijan. Some women’s organizations have tried to break that with the help of international communities and NGO’s. There has been almost no communication between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan on community level. If you start to communicate with the other side you risk being perceived as a traitor.

Thank you for your time
Good morning Sinead, thank you for agreeing to have this call. I know you are currently in Berlin, what are you doing there?

I defended my thesis in February. I working for new paths for my research, you caught me in transition. I was in Trinity College Dublin for the last four years.

Can you describe your research in the Caucasus region, how you started and what research you have done?

I began my research in the region almost 5 years ago looking into women's role in peace building, particularly civil society level, not concentrating on political level. At the same time looking how the UN resolution 1325 is being promoted and spread through the region, and whether that was having a positive, negative or ambivalent impact on women's peace building initiatives. Throughout the course of my research, I spent 12 months in Armenia and Azerbaijan and interviewed about two dozen of women formally as well as having multiple informal interviews and I was a participant observer in several cross-borders and regional seminars and trainings connected to gender and peace buildings.

How would you describe the current situation in the region having done this work looking from the perspective of the conflict and peace process through the time of the 80's, 90's and current state? What would you say the situation is currently, both the geopolitical and looking into women's lives as well?

I think that the last few days have shown just how serious the situation is with regard to the peace process and how little progress has been made through the formula's put forward by the Minsk group for resolving the conflict and from my perspective from talking to women who are in Armenia, in Azerbaijan, in Karabakh at the moment, you can really see how this latest round of violence combined with the propaganda warfare is again undermining the trust that has been built between women over the last two decades. I would say right now is one of those moments where we are seeing that women peace activists are down but not out. This has been a serious blow to peace building and right now we have no idea of what’s going to change as a result of intensified negotiations and whatever the final positions are with respect to the ceasefire. And so we are in the difficult position – waiting position, but hopefully this will also provide the stimulus for change and I don’t think that it means the end of civil society peace initiatives. I think it means that we need to look really seriously into how we strengthen these and how we connect them to the negotiations and I think that 1325 is going to come into play in that respect.

Particularly looking now into official involvement of women in the peace process, have the organizations that you have worked with mentioned discussion the low participation of women in
the official negotiations? Or are they mostly concerned with civil society and violence against women rather than official governmental involvement? What do they talk about?

I can say what I saw in the last few years was that they are doing both. They are engaged in communities affected by the conflict and making efforts to strengthen the dialogue in the horizontal way, but they are also concerned with representation of women in negotiations and in that they were building on past efforts to promote women’s participation in politics more broadly. And now what we see with the women peace and security agenda is promoting women in particular political roles, whether as negotiators or mediators. And they have held meeting with different activists in the talks, but as of yet there’s no official status for women’s groups as observers to the negotiations or a formal space where they can be consulted by the co-chairs for example. So that’s something that needs continuous work.

The women that you have spoken to in your field research of various parties from both Armenia and Azerbaijan and the de facto region - how do they see themselves in society in regards to equality? What aspirations do they have in political or social role?

There’s huge variation, every individual woman has a concrete position, a reason why she has decided to get involved in this kind of activism and where she wants to go with it. On the organizational level, the more dominant narratives are women’s empowerment in society. Not all women involved in peace building would call themselves feminists, but I think for me I can see a feminist consciousness and awareness that there is a problem when you look at the negotiations and you look at the elite level of politics in the region and you see almost always male faces and hear male voices so there’s an issue around women being represented and women’s voices counting. But many women also struggle with the roles prescribed by 1325 and they don’t necessarily see themselves as negotiators; they want to pave the way for other women to be negotiators and for a lot of the women who began in the NGO sector whether it was five or ten or fifteen years ago – their primary concern was with community and it is still with community. So you see all kinds of variation: women who want to advance to maybe the top of the political chain and women who really feel themselves that the best work they are doing is with communities.

Now looking at 1325, what are the main aims and the main challenges of implementing it there?

The main aim is that women have are access to negotiations, in some form or other, and what that means is creating a two way street where women can feed information into the peace process from their work in communities). But also where they ca get a better sense to understand what is going on in the negotiations and can feed that back into communities. Consistent challenge has been the lack of transparency of negotiations and this kind of meeting with the brick wall when you try to get information. This has created a divide between politicians and the society and communities and the real lack of trust between those key parties. But another aim of 1325 is to protect and to legitimize the peace building work that has been taking place and to strengthen the dialogue between women and provide a real platform to come together and work for peace without fear.

If we talk about social media and the platforms that they have for this communication, what is your perspective? There’s perhaps a physical space in Georgia where it is possible for both Armenian and Azeri women to meet certain cases, but otherwise cross-border meetings are difficult. Can this problem be solved by social media?
I think social media is a very double edged sword. If you have asked me a week or two weeks ago I might have given a different answer, but seeing the use that the social media has been put to in the last few days – has reawaken my suspicions about how useful it is as a platform in this context. It is certainly an essential tool for organizing and for maintaining connections. Women who meet in Tbilisi or Istanbul five or six times a year can use social media to follow what's going on in one another’s lives, how things are going in different projects locally and so on. But in the context of heightened conflict it becomes very difficult to keep those relationships public. Even two years ago or a year and a half ago there began to be a shift where women stopped communicating so openly across platforms like Facebook. And, in the last few days it has become a virtual blackout. The best that a lot of women can do is keep silent. Silence in this case not meaning consent to what’s happening on the ground, silence actually being a kind of protest against propaganda that’s being circulated. Of course they can have private communication, but the question is how this can have an influence on the wider surroundings if it’s not able to be seen publicly.

Where, in your view, is the propaganda mainly coming from? How organized is it and has it had any effect on societal perspective and view on the issues? Has it been successful in any way from either side?

It has been very detrimental. It seems to be coming from all angles, and I think one of the difficulties is that you have to understand people’s motives in sharing certain things – whether they believe everything that they post, or they are trying to inflame tensions, or they are just trying to draw your attention to the absolute ridiculous extremes of some of this stuff. I think it would be very helpful if there would be another force to counter this, with something more positive, but the past attempts to engage in a kind of peace journalism and to promote positive stories about cross border cooperation and so on had really a very limited audience in comparison to the wide spread appeal of the militaristic and the nationalist propaganda that we see at the moment.

Looking at the work being done by international NGO’s (Europe, Russia, US) and perhaps their involvement in supporting local organizations and local women’s groups, what has been their influence? Has there been participatory involvement, or has it been just another party pushing their agenda? What have they brought into the dialogue?

I think that the involvement of international organizations has been important in terms of supporting local civil society and helping to keep them afloat during some of the more difficult times. At the same time I can’t say its altogether positive in terms of outcomes when local groups are identified as being identified as being funded by outsiders and this idea of sharing Western values; that can often be used against them and they can be stigmatized either for promoting outside values for simply being the recipients of grants. There are also huge questions as to the level of corruption in NGO’s and to what extent do they exist to further their own existence and have a limited impact on the situation. The fact that the peace process has been so stuck for 20 years also contributes to this lack of trust in NGO’s and civil society because they don’t seem to have had any impact on the political process even if they seem to have done good work at the community level. But just a final point in relation to international organizations is that it is quite interesting to see the autonomy that the organizations in Armenia and Azerbaijan have relative to some other contexts, where there’s a very heavy presence of international groups. When it comes to peace building in the Caucasus, most often organizations are headquartered in Tbilisi and they have representatives who travel to Baku and Yerevan, but really the local organizations have a great deal of autonomy and how they translate the messages to local communities and vice versa.
Would you rate corruption as a very important issue that's prevented conflict resolution? What do women in particular see as factors in the peace process being stuck where it is currently? Why would it not have moved forward in the view of the women that you have spoken with?

There are a few different reasons that tend to come out in the course of interviews. One is of course the geopolitical situation and that can be read either as competition between Russia and the West or now this Russia/Turkey narrative is becoming dominant again or it can simply be Russia wanting to keep a foothold in the Caucasus. But more and more people are turning to the local governments and seeing the lack of political will to compromise, to reach a peaceful solution and to help people finally move on from this conflict. And once you start looking at the question of political will, you get into the question of democracy and democratic institution and their weaknesses in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Talking about any of the other factors involved, let’s briefly mention Russia again. Would you say that it is still a major power contributing in this conflict? We may consider Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. What’s the contribution of Russia to the conflict or perhaps to the peace process? Is there both a positive and negative side to this?

I think that Russia’s influence is still huge. And it is both the presence of both the hard power and soft power. The presence of Russia’s military bases in Armenia is a very sore topic for many in the region in the recent days. Many people are saying that realistically if there was a peacekeeping operation in region it would draw primarily on Russian troops. A lot of people still fear that any resolution to the conflict might also increase Russia’s strength in the region. But in terms of soft power it is also a question of how the whole discourse develops around not just peacebuilding and conflict resolution but also democratic developments and gender equality and women’s participation and building an inclusive society and all of this is really starting to resolve into this question about traditional values versus maybe Western culture. And we saw that very strongly 2-3 years ago around the adoption of the gender equality law. This is a good example of how the discourses that took hold in Russia ended up seriously impacting the security of a women’s organization that is working both to end domestic violence but also to help resolve conflict in Armenia. And the same thing is happening in Azerbaijan, the fact is that there are a lot of Russian speakers in both countries and there’s also a very large Russian speaking population in Karabakh who are, whether they want to be or not, surrounded by the Russian discourses around the broader issues of culture and gender. And that’s also a factor, I think, in how women’s role is perceived.

Therefore into looking both Russia having a strong influence but more and more young people speaking English, what’s the role of language in both negotiations and understanding and comprehending the situation? Is Russian still a dominant language, considering Azeri language comes from Turkish and Russian being more prominent still in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh? What is the role of language in communication between women and in organizations and in countries?

It is a fascinating question in sociolinguistic perspective and throughout my fieldwork I think I relied more on English, but I certainly could not have done my research without Russian. It was quite notable, first of all in the generation gap, so of course there is an older generation that was educated in the Soviet period and often relies on Russian more than the native language, whether it is Armenian or Azeri. You find individuals in the certain age preferring to speak Russian and that has strengthened the understanding amongst the older generation of civil society activists. When it comes to younger generation it often can be quite surprising how necessary Russian still is. So although more and more young people are speaking
English, there is still a significant enough number of young women in both Armenia and Azerbaijan who speak Russian and in order for them to be included the language of cross border training seminars often turns to Russian, if not at the plenary level then at least within the small group discussions and one to one concentrations.

Looking at religion, it often comes back to me from previous interview responses that religion plays a role but there were different answer as to what role does it play or not play. What is your experience in regards to conflict and communication?

In terms of peace building I would say that I saw little evidence that it plays a big role. I think more Universalist discourses about human rights, human dignity are important. If you want, you can trace that back to a religious discourse, but I don’t think that this idea of a Christian/Muslim fault line is very helpful in understanding the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

More broadly in society, I think that it is something that women’s organizations, no matter what country in the world they are in, will always say “yes this is something we have to be aware of”. Coming from Ireland I can say that religion has played a huge role in how women’s activism has developed – much more so than in the Caucasus but still it is there. In Armenia, there has been a real clash between the conservative idea of a woman promoted by the Orthodox Church and the feminist liberal idea which is quite strongly promoted by a couple of women’s organizations there. There is this question about women’s freedoms and autonomy is something that doesn’t seem to be able to be reconciled with the more conservative church discourses. In Azerbaijan women’s organizations have been working for a long time to avoid that kind of clash, for example working with mosques and having imams speak out against domestic violence and right now I know that they are also concerned with a sort of growing religious discourse and a clash between secular and Islamic principles. If you want to talk about intersectionality or inclusivity in women’s activism then I think having women from religious backgrounds and religious communities involved in activism is very important. There’s has been an effort to more women from a more diverse range of backgrounds in social activism.

You mentioned violence and domestic violence. What is the role of that preventing some women from reaching their aspirations and goals both in civil society roles and careers, getting involved into politics and decision making in the last few years that you have been looking into the region?

My research has a blind spot about that because my work concentrates on women who are already active in civil society and so I can’t speak directly to the experience of women who have been unable to leave their homes or to become more involved in something like peace building and politically engaged and so on. Anecdotally I heard many cases of domestic violence and some women’s organizations are doing a lot of work to raise awareness on the issue, maybe even a bulk of their work goes towards that. It is also interesting that it is addressed in the monitoring reports on 1325 that were produced by civil society organizations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Domestic violence is in there as one of the reasons why women are not as involved as they could be in conflict resolution and peace building and governments are also called to account for failing to provide adequate resources or legislative measures to challenge domestic violence.

How would you compare the state of women’s rights in Armenia and Azerbaijan versus Nagorno-Karabakh? How is the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh different?
It is hard for me to say because I have less direct knowledge of the situation but the dominant narrative around women in Nagorno-Karabakh is that they are very strong because of their role in both holding families together and resisting conflict. They have been kind of granted more of a voice in society. That doesn't mean that they have more political representation, but maybe they feel that they have more of a right to speak and to be heard. Of course another issue in this whole discussion is that a woman having a voice in public does not necessarily mean that she faces no violence in private and so on.

**Looking into any aspects of the continuation of the conflict and peace building process? What is the view of women particularly and women’s organizations into how the peace process should develop in the next 5-10 years and whether there’s an open aim or achievement of peace visible in the future?**

I won’t really say what I think can come out of the current situation because who knows what it will look like tomorrow or the day after. If we go back to maybe a year ago when women were sitting together and talking about what they would like to see. Then there was definitely a call for more international involvement in conflict resolution. The idea of peace building commission was brought up that would include representatives from civil society and respected international actors and something that could really lend weight and legitimacy for civil society peace builders. That is still something that I would really like to see in parallel to any notification from the negotiations. It would be an equal voice in civil society and more dialogue between those actors and the negotiators themselves. I think that this is something that has to take place including everyone, but there’s also maybe a case for a specific women’s peacebuilding commission or something less prominent connecting women in civil society with women in politics with Track 1 actors would also be very useful for strengthening the communication between NGO’s and governments and helping to promote 1325.

**Would forms of new media contribute to that in any way? Or as you said before they would just hinder the process?**

More transparency would be very useful for NGO’s and governments. So if new media was being used to communicate the aims, the expectations, what was going on and also being honest about the challenges being encountered, it could be very helpful. The more inclusive the peacebuilding can be the better and also telling everyday stories of people’s lives as they have been affected by conflict. There have been some good examples of that in the past but in the end projects went out of funding, the cycle ends and these things kind of pewter out. So something somewhere that can gather this in one place could be a go to resource on everyday security narratives. It would be very helpful. But there’s always a danger with social media as it really depends on how much societies are willing to get invested into the idea that peace is possible and compromise is not the same as a loss.

**Are you able to comment on women’s groups in Georgia and their situation?**

Only to a very limited extent. There’s more work produced by the women in Georgia in the public domain so I consulted a few different sources while doing the preparatory work. Overall it’s clear that Georgian women’s organizations have been more supported by the international community and that the presence of UN women has had an impact there, so again if we go back to the UN framework on Women’s peace and security there have been much bigger advances in Georgia than Armenia or Azerbaijan. Two situations are very hard to compare because of how this has evolved.
Would Georgia's political narrative against Russia and being drawn closer to the EU have contributed to both government and society giving more freedom to women’s organizations?

I think the Georgia was perceived to be more stable and more welcoming to European presence and that resulted in many organizations and the larger international community to taking route there. That has had a big impact on how the women’s organizations develop. At the same time women’s organizations in Georgia face the same problems as in Armenia and Azerbaijan, in terms of being caught between these discourses of modernity and tradition. And certainly the role of the church in Georgia has much in common with the church in Armenia, particularly concerning LGBT friendly or feminist organizations having hard time finding their place in society.

Thank you
vi. Interview Transcript: Qnarik Mkrtchyan, Women’s Resource Center

Malmo University

9th April 2016

Respondents:

Knarik Mkrtchan, Women’s Resource Center of Armenia

Good evening, thank you for agreeing to have this call. What is the situation after the recent clashes on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan? (Two days after reported incidents again)

We are waiting for further developments on the situation. I think this month is a transition period to start something new, either negotiation or fighting, I don’t know. No one can say for sure, but now the situation is very tense.

I was very disappointed to find out that there has been a resurgence of attacks on the border. Can you tell me more about yourself? Your role currently and where you worked, and more about Women’s Resource Center in Armenia?

I will start telling about myself. I work at the Women’s Resource Center (WRC) as a coordinator of women’s peace building projects. I started my activity at the WRC when I was nineteen and I was really very much interested in women’s issues, women’s rights and it was a very unique place, the WRC, to find someone who thinks as I do. It was a discovery for me, a real discovery. I started to work there on a voluntary basis and then I became employee at that organization. My work experience is all about the WRC. As I told you, I coordinate peace buildings projects and I am also responsible for the club that I founded at the WRC – ‘Women, Peace and Security’. I am also engaged in research over the UN resolution 1325. I also work as a trainer on women’s peace and security agenda. Mostly my work is on rape as a weapon of war and the war crimes against women, mostly sexual crimes against women. So this is my role. I have a bachelor degree in Political Science and a master’s degree in Human Rights and Democratization, which was an international programme for post-soviet countries.

Please tell me more about the work that the WRC does?

This organization was founded in 2003, at first we used work at the Yerevan State University, but as soon as we started to speak about sexual and reproductive health and rights, the head of the University just demanded that the members of the organization to leave the university as they found it inappropriate to speak about sexual rights and reproductive rights inside the Yerevan State University. Now we are based on Moskovyan Street, Yerevan which is a very big and nice and safe place as used to say, a safe place for women who can behave themselves in the way that they are, if they are homosexual or with disabilities. We don’t differentiate. There are lots of organizations in Armenia that advocate for women’s rights that will never advocate for, e.g. lesbian women publicly. It is really very dangerous and very difficult process. Our organization is officially a feminist organization; there are three main directions that we work against. The first one is awareness raising and advocacy campaigns that can take different shapes and in different
places, I mean in the regions of Armenia or Yerevan, at schools, at universities and we can organize training, films and etc. The second is about sexual and gender based violence, we have a crisis centre which is like an independent organization but it was founded by the WRC. It is the first and the only centre on sexual assault unfortunately. The third direction is peace building and we called it ‘Women, Peace and Security’. We mainly advocate for empowerment and engaging women in negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict what we want is to have is active women in our communities who can positively impact on the current situation to have a positive reconciliation in the conflict. And we also have a base in Shushi, Nagorno-Karabakh that was founded in 2008 but in 2000 we already started to hold discussions and meetings with women who were directly affected by the conflict. And during that period we found out that there are many cases of sexual harassment, of rape and of war crimes that women were exposed to. But unfortunately after the conflict these kinds of problems were not addressed. So the biggest goal of WRC Shushi is to be as safe for women as possible to create a friendly environment where women could easily speak about their daily problems and have awareness of things they are exposed to. Another direction of our organization is sexual and reproductive health and rights. Again, by the help of the trainings, meetings, and discussions we try to educate young women and youth about their sexual and reproductive health and rights. These are the main directions of our organizations. We also have a radio station programme, this is a newly founded tool to speak about women’s rights and all people engaged on the radio are very enthusiastic about developing this branch of the WRC. We have clubs, for example film clubs, “Women, Peace and Security” club, career club, where we can organize language classes free for women, or IT classes to give them basic knowledge that is required by employers.

We have lots of networks, we are networking with organizations abroad, and we have regional networks with both Georgians and Azerbaijanis. We used to meet on a regular basis with Azerbaijanis and Georgians on different projects, or organize webinars. So we advocate for women’s rights, it is an organization for women. This is all very precise about our organization.

You do a lot of activities as you mention. What are the biggest challenges to your organization at the moment in all of these different areas?

The biggest challenge is the misunderstanding, misperception and mis-illustration of our activity. Generally gender issues are very negatively perceived in Armenia. Gender is mainly connected with the propaganda of gay and lesbian movements. So anyone who speaks about gender can be ‘blackmailed’ for advocating LGBT rights. So this is very challenging, because in 2012 and 2013 we were targeted by nationalistic groups and nationalistic organizations. We were threatened to be firebombed, my co-workers were threatened to be killed and this is our reality, this is challenging. Because of the current developments, nationalistic groups are very active, and our peace building initiatives can be misperceived and can be used against us. Because women’s role in the region is very low, we are mainly perceived as responsible household chores, we are not perceived as those who can lead and who can run higher positions in our government or in community, so this is really very challenging. Also, as we advocate for women’s rights and we educate them about sexual and gender based violence we are perceived as an organization who works against Armenian families, like an organization who wants to abolish Armenian families. These are the main challenges, there are others, but these are the main gaps that we always face and we will always face.

Also I want to especially emphasize our peace building activities because of the relationships that we have sometimes we give very little information of these activities. If you look through our website, you will not...
find any information about our peace building activities because there’s a danger to put activists in dangerous situations. It’s already two years that we don’t spread too much information on our activities on peace building, though we became more active – we are developing our club, we are developing our skills to be more skillful in this field. These are the main challenges.

**Let’s talk about the situation in 2016 with the resurgence of violence. Do you know anything about the current situation and impact on peace process, both political and historical perspective?**

I will only speak more about political perspective because civil society does not have any access to peace processes; it really has absolute and closed character. It takes place either on presidential or on foreign ministry level and this group is very much involved in all these processes. Russia tries to have as big of an influence as possible. Currently we have a ceasefire, but it is more verbal agreement rather than some documented agreement. And also the ceasefire is not respected. You know, I really don’t want to say it is not respected by Azerbaijan or it is not respected by Armenia because again, unfortunately, the only source to receive information is mass media and mass media can provoke and doesn’t give clear and trustworthy information. But there’s a lot of evidence that Azerbaijan is the aggressor and there is a lot of evidence, first source evidence, that Azerbaijan constantly breaks the ceasefire regime. And of course, Armenia’s side responds. So this is the current situation.

Also, on all sides, I mean civil society, government entities, regional networks or people involved in these processes make certain statements but this will not help to the current situation. Also I don’t know whether you know or not, and I don’t have much information about this, but Russia is going to insert its peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. I am not sure about the place, but apparently this is the word. Apparently the peacekeeping forces will be inserted into Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh cross-borders. I am not sure about this information; however this is the current development. The only outstanding news that I have received recently – we learned about these news two days ago that there is a possibility to have Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh. But no one knows anything for sure. But apparently this is something that’s going to happen. By the way for all sides – Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, having Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh was the worst outcome and the worst alternative. And the civil society is against this kind of situation. Even in in 1994 when the ceasefire agreement came into force, Armenian side rejected to have Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh. However only future developments can give more information, this will take time, only time will show what will happen next.

**If we talk about the leaders in Armenia and relate it to the number of women in Parliament that was 9%, now 14%, it is quite a low number. How would you describe the trend that you are seeing with women’s participation in parliament?**

It is approximately 14%. Unfortunately there is not too much to say about this because women are mostly active as peace builders and not peace makers. When we say peace makers we refer to official developments, I mean political developments. But women are mostly represented as civil society and unfortunately they don’t have any impact on the situation. Before this sudden escalation of the conflict, one of the biggest calls of Armenian/Azerbaijani women networks was to have a group of women who could equally participate in Minsk group’s developments, in the negotiations held by the Minsk group. But today as the situation is dangerous many women peace builders do not even have the right to voice their opinion, because it is really dangerous, even physically they can be killed. So what else can be said about this? You know the whole problem is that since we don’t have any political access we can’t have any impact on...
the situation. And currently women member of parliaments have not come with any statement about women’s issues during the conflict or women’s possible impact on the conflict, because women politicians – the biggest part of them are not gender sensitive and we don't expect them to be sensitive now. As for Armenia women’s organizations just two days ago we held a meeting to understand what kind of stakes can we have to have a positive impact on the overall situation. We received some suggestions to have some networking with our Azerbaijani partners, but it is really very dangerous for them, that is why we can't do anything for them. We just decided to organize ourselves and to create a fundraiser, crowd funding to have resources to directly help women and children in Nagorno-Karabakh. And this is in development; yesterday we also had a meeting at the WRC what are our further steps. But unfortunately today we can’t have too much impact on the situation.

Comparing with the early 90’s with the first peace process and even comparing to the soviet times, and talking to women in Nagorno-Karabakh and border region – has the situation change with regards to women’s involvement in the peace process and how?

You know we should have two approaches if we want to give a trustworthy answer to this question. The first thing is that after the ceasefire came into force in 1994 many Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as they used to live together, they had very good memories about each other. But this is more about elder generation. But the younger generation doesn’t have this memory and we mainly see these messages full of hatred towards each other. So I mean elder generation has this positive perception about the image of Azerbaijanis, of ‘enemy’, but the younger generation don’t have these perceptions. In the Soviet period, when the war hasn't yet started, Armenians and Azerbaijanis used to live together both in Armenia both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. And also in Nagorno-Karabakh people used to live together. You know but there’s also another problem, generally when they speak about Armenian Azerbaijani relationship doing the Soviet period people mainly speak positive aspects of the friendship, they mainly speak about the friendship about the neighbourhood that they have, but not all of them speak about the main reasons which triggered the war. So today when we go deeper and deeper many people start to speak about the hierarchy that existed during the Soviet period – mainly that the Azerbaijani’s had the power, had the management in their hands, but Armenians didn’t have too much influence in Nagorno-Karabakh. So this created this inequality between Armenian and Azerbaijani communities and it triggered a process of latent aggression amongst these two nations which finally led to the escalation of their relationship and finally lead to a situation when the war just erupted. So I mean that when we speak about Armenian Azerbaijani relationships there are some aspects that are not taken into consideration whilst speaking about the Soviet period.

The rest of my question was women’s official participation in the peace process, what was it previously?

There’s no change because you know we only have 5% increases in women’s political participation if we compare 90’s to 2016. This number is really very very low and the dynamics are really very very slow in this regard. And as women do not hold positions at foreign ministry or they are not involved in these processes – women’s official impact on negotiation’s processes is equal to zero. Unfortunately it is nearly zero percent. We can only impact by advocating why, meeting with representatives of different ministries, particularly ministry defence or ministry of foreign affairs, this is the only way to have an impact. Advocating and lobbying.
And talking about civil society again, what are the hopes and the dreams of the women that meet and participate in the WRC? Can we pay a particular focus to women from the Nagorno-Karabakh region? Do they see the oppression of rights and do they have hopes and dreams to have careers and political aspirations?

The perception varies from group to group, they are groups of women who really realize they have restriction of rights but in the same place they say that we can’t change anything because this is the way we have to live with. And also about the hopes, the hopes also vary from group to group, from one group to another one. I can speak about women who lost their sons because of the war after the 1994 ceasefire. I want to specify your question, make it more specific. I want to speak about women who have lost their sons, soldiers after the ceasefire came into force – their perceptions about the enemy and their attitude towards Azerbaijani’s. So interestingly women who were directly affected by the conflict, they tend to me more friendly towards Azerbaijanis. For example last time when I had a focus group with mothers of fallen soldiers they said they don’t agree that Azerbaijani’s are our enemies, because they have the same sufferings the same losses as we do. And as mothers they totally understand Azerbaijani mothers and they never call them enemies. So this is their perception, but there are lots of women who think that Azerbaijanis are enemies, that we should fights against them, this is all.

And when it comes to women’s rights also as I already mentioned different groups have different perceptions. There are lots of women as I already told you that realize that they are exposed to different kinds of violence, their rights are violated and restricted but they don’t want to take any steps to change this situation because they just don’t want leave their comfort zone. So this is the general picture of the current situation – lots of women are powerful, they are trying to change something fortunately, but also I really think it is important to mention that many things have been changed. If I compare 2016 with 2010 I feel lots of positive changes have happened with the level of awareness, with the level of female activity and etc. But however these changes are not that effective to have more women involved in peace processes and in decision making processes.

What factors would you put that positive change to? Has work of organizations or work of strong powerful women characters contributed to this?

Awareness raising, first of all, internet campaigns, online campaigns, trainings, work of organizations of course, influence from international organizations because even though many people call NGO’s as grant eaters, our government really receives too many grants to make it gender sensitive and to adopt gender sensitive laws. It also affects activities of local NGO’s and international NGO’s, the ability to outreach regions, the ability to have active groups in the regions help a lot. What else can I say? These are the main reasons. The change, the internet, everything has impact on the overall situation. And also, as mass media started to illustrate more domestic violence, on sexual abuse, child abuse, people became more aware. This also has certain impact on the overall situation.

Let’s talk briefly about the internet and social media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs, and all of these new media channels. How do they contribute to the situation?

They contribute both negatively and positively. As mass is not 100% free from governmental influence, so nationalistic groups really have access to many media sources. But as we independent sources such as Facebook and friendly media representatives YouTube, we can spread our messages by the help of these tools. We can organize online campaigns in Facebook or in YouTube, or we can spread some videos by
the help of some online services. Also we invite them participate in our meetings or judicial procedures as we have unfortunately many cases of killings of women as a result of domestic violence. They illustrate this. We also organize training for mass media representatives, as quite often they provide very unprofessional information. They reveal too much information about the victims or they give odd information. I mean all these services really have very big impact and the media has both the positive and negative impact. Quite often they illustrate our activity as family abolishing and as gay propaganda activity and this is a gap and this is a challenge but fortunately we also have friendly media representatives who help us a lot. For example recently if we look through the numbers we will see that numbers who have been investigated for domestic violence have increased as recorded by police.

But this doesn't mean that the overall situation is now worse, it just means that people became more aware about their rights and they know that there are some organizations or some forces which will stand for their rights. And they are more empowered and encouraged to speak the violence that they were exposed to. By the way, very effective and very influential factors were that women who were exposed to domestic violence publicly started to speak about the violence and the type of violence that they were exposed to. One woman spoke about her case, her name is Maidyam but I don’t remember her surname. She publicly started to speak about all types of violence that she was exposed to by her husband and by her mother in law. And these few cases triggered a process when women started to actively report the violence to the police. Also we work with police to make them more aware because quite often police reject to accept the applications by women because they can say – “ok this is your husband, don't worry about that, he is your husband, he can beat you and you have bear with it, you have to live with it”. And it is not only the policemen but also the whole family and the whole neighbourhood quite often have a very big input in the imprisonment numbers of domestic violence.

How are these cases reported in traditional media, such as newspapers and television channels, has that changed in any way?

As they know that we have some data, organizations are collecting data, they also have their statistics, they ask for it. And also they can ask the police to give all these cases, to give some information or data of all these cases. They ask for interviews, they ask for data, so this is the way that they work. Or we ask them to illustrate certain cases, we give them information, we invite them this is a very reciprocal process. They ask for it and we help them. They help us and we help them.

If we talk about the communication cross-border, you mentioned that you communicate with partner organizations in Azerbaijan. How is this communication currently working with the issues that you have talked about? How do you meet, online, face to face? Can you talk about that?

You know the situation in Azerbaijan always was very dangerous for human rights activists, especially for peace activists. However we manage to meet personally generally in very neutral countries, for example in Georgia or in European countries, to meet and discuss general topics. Generally we cover women’s issues, common issues, what kind of stereotypes do we have. To be honest we don’t talk about conflict too much, because generally whenever we raise this topic we can feel some tension from both sides. Generally Azerbaijanis are more sensitive when they speak about the conflict, there are certain reasons, firstly because Nagorno-Karabakh is now controlled to Armenia and they don’t have any access to Nagorno-Karabakh. This is the biggest reason that makes it tenser and more sensitive whenever we cover the issue of the conflict. But generally we cover very general topics when we used to work to advocate together for women’s right to make them more active in communities, to organize more peace initiatives locally and to
present them at the international level. We also organized webinars, Skype meetings and calls. But it is not that easy. Even online communication is not easy, because again it is very dangerous for Azerbaijanis as they are over controlled by governmental forces, by security forces. In Armenia we are not that safe either, but we are as targeted as Azerbaijanis are. And currently, today, now, unfortunately we don't have any information from our partners saved Facebook posts or official statements.

As I already told you we wanted to get connected with them but it's really very dangerous for them, we can harm them. This is the situation. Also, these four days I consider these recent developments as an examination for both sides, because unfortunately there are too many people, peace builders involved in processes that came up with very nationalistic viewpoints, very pro-conflict statements, anti-Armenian or anti-Azerbaijani propaganda. So this is a little bit frustrating and disappointing but fortunately we have people who are at least neutral and do not post any nationalistic posts or any anti-Azerbaijan or anti-Armenian posts.

What about the international organizations that you work with? How do you find their roles and how do you find their involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh? Do they have any kind of influence?

They don't have any kind of influence. They just came up with some statements, e.g. Global Fund came up with a certain statement and Conciliation Resources as part of the EPNK project also did. I don't whether you are aware of this project or not, but the EPNK is the European founded project – European Partnership for peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Five consortiums are involved in the project – Kvinna till Kvinna, Conciliation Resources, International Alert, Conflict Management Institute and I forgot the last one. These consortiums fund organizations based in Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and in Azerbaijan. We had two phases of the project: EPNK 1 and EPNK 2. And EPNK 3 was about to start in May. But we don’t have information about this programme, about the continuation of the project. We don't have any clear statement from these international organizations that used to cooperate with us. We also don't have any information about our partners in Azerbaijan, how are they, are they prosecuted, how are they trying to help their citizens, do they have some losses or not? Honestly I don't know - I want to ask you not to put this in your research: (deleted upon request – talks about poor response from one of the international partners and problems with limitations with project based initiatives such as the EPNK).

Do you have any involvement from Russian organizations or Russian NGO’s of any kind and what is their involvement?

We don’t cooperate with them. We just know some human rights activists from Russia but we didn’t receive anything from them. We don’t have any ties with Russian NGO’s.

Can you briefly speak about the role of Russia in this conflict and how are they involved when it comes to women’s rights?

Russian position regarding women’s rights is really very negative, because they have very non-democratic development recently, especially regarding NGO policy or women’s rights policy specifically speaking about sexual and reproductive health and rights. So Russia doesn't fund any NGO except for one. It is called Family Committee. This organization is a Russian organization; this is a very nationalistic organization. I don’t if it is Armenian nationalistic or Russian nationalistic or anti-democratic organization, I don’t know how to call it. This organization works against women’s rights organizations, the main goal of this organization is to prove that organizations working on women’s rights are gay organizations mostly
working for gay rights that want to abolish Armenian families and wants harass children’s rights. This is a Russian led organization and by the way this organization was really very active in Armenia on agreements about integrating into the Eurasian Economic Union. It gathered many nationalistic organizations and they started a big campaign against civil society in Armenia, especially against those working on LGBT rights and for women’s rights. So if we speak about Russian impact, it’s very negative. It never was and it never will be positive impact. And as for the peace processes, anyone knows that Russia has very big influence on the overall situation. But here I don’t think that the Russian influence is a positive for Armenians but Russia has very good ties and always used to sell weapons to Azerbaijan and Armenia. So many Armenians thought that Russia is a partner country for Armenia, but today there is a very big criticism against Russia in Armenian mass media and among Armenia’s civil society. We always criticized Russia’s impact on Armenia. As a country with a non-democratic regime it will never have a positive impact on human rights’ situation in Armenia. As for the conflict, who knows what more is happening behind the scenes?

You mentioned Georgia before, and how do you see women’s rights in Georgia? Is the situation any different?

You know, for example, we don’t have a law on domestic violence, but Georgia does. We don’t have a national action plan on the United Nations resolution 1325, but in the same place, Georgian church has a very big impact on the overall situation. So to say that women’s rights situation is better than in Armenia is not that correct. But in the same place the situation is much better because women’s political participation is higher than in Armenia. But to say Georgia has some impact on Armenia would it be wrong because they have some policies on women’s rights that do not work some strategies. And if we bring any example from Georgia on women’s rights, our government entities oppose us saying that they have policies that do not work. I don’t think that Georgia is too influential or Armenian women’s rights situation. We cooperate with women’s rights organizations in Georgia, but we don’t have so close ties with them either.

Looking therefore at your comment about civil society becoming more active, can civil society make an impact on conflict in the long term?

Ten days ago we had some hope, we had Armenian and Azerbaijani NGO’s working for peace, and today as many activist or organizations show their very nationalistic approach towards the conflict. Let’s say some organizations based in Nagorno-Karabakh told that they are not going to be part of civil society movements in peace building processes because they don’t believe in all donor founded projects. That’s why they are not going to be part of it. If we add to this situation the dangers that we wait by the side of the government, by the side of the security nationalistic forces, we have a decline in these processes. Unfortunately if we count, we are back to the early 2000’s. I am not really sure because too many things are dependant from the coming couple of days, from the ceasefire, who knows what will happen. On one hand maybe people just hand, but on the other hand many people became more determined to act in peace building processes and to be as active as possible. I don’t have an answer to your question unfortunately. It’s not that I don’t have some viewpoints, but it is because only time will show the further developments when it comes to the impact of civil society on the peace building processes.

I personally find it very important to say that I am somehow more optimistic about this because we did a lot and we have good results and I am pretty sure we still have these results and we can rely on these results and move forward whenever the situation will be more or less stable.
What are the main needs for more women to become more active? Do women that you work with see language as an important factor? Take into account Russian, English, Armenian, Azeri and Turkish

Yes of course. Not only the language but the language of the memory is a good factor. But for Armenian Azerbaijani women it truly makes sense because both of them speak Russian. Some of them don’t speak English which somehow quickly complicates the situation whenever we have meetings with our international partner organizations. Language matters, not only Russian but the language of the memory – for example they remember the times when they used to live together or they have some common memories to share with each other or to ask about something. Of course, language matters, the knowledge matters.

Does religion matter at all? In the past or in the future – resolving this conflict, resolving the differences between both countries – is that being used in any propaganda, is that an important factor?

No, interestingly. It is not that influence as a factor and generally we don’t use their religion as something to blackmail them. When it comes to blackmailing any feature can be used, but generally both in mass media and in nationalistic statements you will not find so strong statements against their religion belongings.

Briefly mentioning the essential things that you work with in the WRC – you work with sexual violence, domestic abuse, what are main needs to continue the positive trends? What are the main things that women want to happen in Armenia and women in Nagorno-Karabakh?

We really need more funding to be able to give help to as many women as possible, but our main demand today is about having a law on domestic violence because now we don’t have any law. So our government, particularly ministry of social and work affairs promised that this is year we are surely going to have a law on domestic violence. But recent developments over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cut the negotiation processes of our Armenian NGO’s and government entities. We are ok with this because we understand the situation, but we really need to have this law on domestic violence; there is also a need to have more shelters in Armenia and also in Nagorno-Karabakh. In Nagorno-Karabakh we don’t have any shelters for the victims of domestic violence, for women and children. In Yerevan we only have two shelters lead by NGO representatives. But we don’t have any staged shelters. We really need to have these shelters to be able to give space for women because quite often women can’t leave the abusers because they don’t have any other place to go. Even parents can often say don’t leave your husband.

So we need the law and also mechanisms to enforce the law in Armenia, more awareness campaigns and also what we need is the efficiency of the already existing tools. For example in many regions we have governmental gender committee’s which do not work. I mean they don’t do anything. And when we meet with them and ask what you do, they ask the same question. They don’t know what are they doing at all, what are they created for, what is their mission, what is their purpose? So there’s lots of things that we need today, but I want to highlight the law on domestic violence, more shelters, awareness raising campaigns, more gender sensitive police structure, effective justice system that can protect women’s rights and be unbiased because unfortunately even the judged are so stereotypical you can’t imagine. When we speak about harassment and wife was exposed by her husband the judge can’t even understand the situation, because for him as a male is ok when husband beats his wife. This is not widely spread but we
have lots of cases when we feel that the judge is not sensitive to issues raised during the judicial procedures.

**Would you imagine the situation would have been different in the past in the Soviet times, has it always been the same?**

In the Soviet times we didn't speak about gender equality and we didn't name husband's abuse – it was perceived as a normal family affair when husband has a right to beat his wife. If today we speak about domestic violence, it wasn't spoken in Soviet Union. We didn't raise it as violence or gender issues. In Soviet Union 'everyone was equal and everyone was happy'.

**What is the need from the international organizations? Considering resolution 1325 which you work, perhaps you can give me some more information about that and EPNK 3?**

In terms of women’s rights we have 1325 which states that women have a very big influence over peaceful settlement of any conflict and also governments must do everything to engage more women in peace building and in negotiations and in decision making processes to make their voices be heard and to make them active in peace processes. But unfortunately many regulations do not have enforcement processes – we can only implement this resolution by the help of international action plans. The resolution doesn't have enforcement mechanisms, it is not obligatory for the state. It is up to state to take steps to the realization of the resolution 1325. I would recommend to all these international organizations that instead of creating more resolutions or more conventions just to create the environment or just to apply new tools of enforcement to better enforce already existing international mechanisms. As for me this is the most important point regarding women's rights.

**Thank you for your time**
Good morning, thank you for agreeing to have this interview. You are based in Baku, are you from there originally?

I am from Baku, but my roots are coming from the region which is under occupation at the moment (Nagorno-Karabakh). I never lived there, only my close relatives and extended family.

I was interested in contacting you because of your YUVA group, online blog and activities. I also contacted your colleague Rena to give some information. Can you talk about YUVA and your role?

I am one of the co-founders; it is basically me, Rena, and one of my colleagues who founded YUVA back in late 90’s. It was 1998-99. And back in those years we weren’t a women organization, we established an organization to work with IDP children. That’s how we started our organization. But we had a strong background already of working in the field of peace building before we founded YUVA. This how I met Rena and the other colleague, working with the Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly. At that time in the 90’s it was one of the strongest peace building organizations in the region and had partners in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Actually, my activism started with volunteer work at the Helsinki organization. For five years working with young people from both sides, involved in many other projects is what Helsinki Assembly was doing – visiting many IDP communities. We then decided to establish YUVA; the project of YUVA came on working with children and teenagers, those who were engaged with our educational project YUVA magazine, that we started publishing. The magazine was basically open dialogue with those kids, children from those IDP communities. There was a food distribution tour amongst all the IDP communities and we would bring the dialogue between them and our editorial team and find all the interesting stories, and we would initiate some competitions. A lot of things related to how to develop the magazine, but then visiting those communities and interacting directly with families, talking to mothers we witnessed those violations or discriminations towards the women. They were so visible but unfortunately no one talked about that. So this how the deal started of having this type of transition from a youth/children organization to more feminist organization.

I am one of the board members, and of course one of the initiators of projects if necessary. Sometimes managing the project, but we have many angles that join our organization and on daily basis I am managing the work at YUVA. I went far back to explain the background.

Thank you, this was useful. Can you also talk about the current activities that you’re doing?

So basically the violations towards women driven us to initiate this organization, and I mean, to move to more the idea of feminism. It was some kind of unconsciousness; we didn’t realize that it’s so bad; this is
what the situation is. What bothered us interacting with those people was that young ladies, young women in the community that they were like absolutely unaware of any single woman rights that they had and that they could stand for. So they would get all this type of stereotyping, gender discrimination, they would just take it as granted. So then we decided we have to do something with that and I was also participating in many training courses by that time by the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe have training centres in Budapest and Strasbourg where they have many trainings, it is basically for soft skills training and personal development and different type topics they are covering – gender issue, conflict, women’s rights, education and so on. So I was part of long term training course on citizenship where I was involved as a participant, and then I was implementing local projects here in Baku. Later I was invited by the council of Europe to be in the team of trainers for the next course as a junior one. Then I gradually my mind and my understanding and meeting other people and also this communication and observation at the European level gave me lots. And I think again being a trainer later, and working professionally even later, plus meeting many young people from other countries. I gained a lot of cross-cultural competences and especially the ones that I needed in dealing with the gender issue, feminism issue and human rights and human rights education.

We decided with the team here that we need to apply those skills, that knowledge that we gained, some of my colleagues also participated in other courses, so what we did with the support of, and I think we were so lucky to meet Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna, it’s a women foundation, and they became a great partner for us since 2005 and we continue working with them. So they supported us in the project that we initiated which is called Young Women Empowerment, and by the ‘Empowerment’ we put a lot, it is basically self-confidence, self-realization, understanding of their basic human rights, women rights and ability to make decisions related to them. A lot of things were there by ‘Empowerment’. So what we did was initiated many projects related to this big name of empowerment, so we made a young women development centre, it was kind of a same space where we invited girls. Well basically we didn’t invite but there was a long journey where we were attracting them through universities or using personal contacts. Getting all the girls outside those are not active and made them active. And basically the idea was to kind of develop the concept of feminism, but it was so hard to take about feminism. Their understanding of feminism was very very sensitive I would say, people didn’t want to call them, we would attract them to the centre to talk about whatever they like – we provide the kind of the safe space for them to come and socialize, to learn from each other, just to talk. We had a great library, internet connection and then we would say let’s watch any movie you want and discuss. And then we would open for them – here’s the possible trainings if you want to attend and they would choose. And of course we also wanted them to do something, to initiative something, not only us to tell them what to do, we wouldn’t say them what to do but other than throwing other side of the coin, as a part of what they have seen some far and they would decide where to go, which training they want to know. We were kind of softly pushing them that way but not saying to them what to do. And we encouraged them, supported with some small grants for their own initiatives and the girls came up with plenty of ideas. It was depending on what kind of initiatives they like, if they are related to their studies t the universities, or what they want to do, there were plenty of projects. We had a couple of girls coming from the social psychology department and they wanted to work with some kids from orphanages, to help them self-realize. There were some girls that we engaged them in the projects we would do regionally and they participated, this kind of dialogue meetings with Armenian, Georgian girls and they wanted later to initiate their online (activities). There was a magazine they initiatives. It was up to them to decide what to do, so this is basically on women empowerment.
Of course having the background on the peace building, my first peace building initiative was back in 1997, when the first time I went to Georgia, maybe 1995, first time in Georgia I met with the Armenian youth network of the Helsinki Assembly that we worked with. From there we initiative the Transcaucasian Youth Network, which was a kind of a separate body that we decided that young from all these countries, Transcaucasian countries should come together and we stand for peace. And within that we did many peace building projects, like we did a peace bus to Hague, and there was the Hague appeal for peace which we went to. There was many others at the grassroots level. Back in those years it was much easier to do those activities, not easier, but in terms of political context in our countries.

Using those experiences that we had we definitely wanted to enlarge this and get more girls to this process and in the beginning we didn't call it peace but just wanted to find some common issues that we could discuss and work on. Not necessarily dealing with Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but like, you know, it was about eliminating the enemy image and building the bridges between these two, but not touching the conflict that was quite sensitive. And also if you're not ready experience wise, you need to be ready to enter the dialogue.

One thing that we believed in the organization that you can't push anyone to enter this space when we talk about building the peace or building the dialogue between these (countries). So our attitude and approach was always that this group of people that before meeting the other side, they need to get ready for that and for this you need to equip them with the skills. So what we’re doing in the organization was equipping them with those skills related to understanding of conflict, but at first we would start with the identity that everyone needs to understand themselves first. Understanding of whom you are and what is your cultural identity and when these two cultures, two identities meet when these clashes start. So we prepared a comprehensive programme, education programme of understanding the skills necessary for how to deal with being a young person, how do deal with the conflict, before entering the conflict situation or meeting the other side – what you need to do. We did work a lot on this and of course those who would come to our organization, the girls; we had many nationalistic minds, radical girls, girls who lost their very close members of their families during the war, or the ones who became IDP's. And when they came to us they had absolutely different opinions, there was the hatred of Armenians, also talking aggressively, basically they were kind of equipped with what they hear, and they were telling what they heard on daily basis from around. There’s TV which has great propaganda in both countries or either it is family who all the time talk about what’s happened in the war, so the young generation, those girls that came to our centre, they were very much under these influences of the surrounds and this is how they were. But of course we can see that we have very success stories how these girls changed later, that doesn't mean that they changed their mind, but they changed their behaviours, or how they perceive the other side.

I am talking and now I am thinking about those who are coming from IDP communities, the ones that basically directly suffered from the conflict.

**How would you describe the situation now in 2016, where would you say the situation is heading?**

Well you may be following the new war I would say, I don’t know how it’s called, but the latest events were happening and unfortunately it brought, what’s happened is that so many years of efforts of building the peace in the region just was destroyed in a day, in a minute. Well, I mean if you look at the Azerbaijani media, what they say on the daily basis that “we are for peace and we don’t want to have a war, but this is what the Armenians are doing and they destroyed this ceasefire and they are the ones that fight. They started the shootings and we need to protect ourselves.” So that’s the position of Azerbaijani government
and this is how they say, but what I hear from the media from the other side, from the Armenian side is the opposite, the Armenians say that the Azeris started and we are just protecting ourselves. So definitely someone wanted to start it and someone wanted to change it, there are lots of political games going around, so you know, I am sure you are also reading all this, there is a lot analytic articles, the views of some of the politicians, those who are blaming Russia, those who are blaming the other side, like it was a Russian game, Russia wanted to, I don't know... What they say is "when Russia stopped Syria war that was on purpose, they wanted to get Turkey just to show Turkey who you are, they wanted to start here". Definitely whoever started, whoever planned it, the thing is that both sides are engaged and they are doing it with, unfortunately, the things that... There is a kind of a moment that both sides are fed up with this status quo, that's being discussed a lot. Azerbaijani's are especially fed up, Armenians are happy to have this situation in terms of talking about this, peace for Armenians is so easy because the territory under their control and even though Karabakh is not independent as they wanted, it is not recognized, they are suffering with this, but the situation politically at the moment in terms of the peace is so in favour of the Armenians who talk about the peace. It is not the same for Azerbaijan, but Azerbaijan government and people are really really fed up with the status quo because it takes nowhere.

And if you look at the social media and in the media here – everyone, I don't know how much is true, everyone is ready to go for war unfortunately. But what drives it is that they are fed up with the situation, with this status quo, that it is taking us nowhere for more than 25 years now and they believe that international mediator groups, OSCE Minsk group is doing nothing, that they are not able to do anything, that Russia is too much there and here. So, well, to be honest it is a very hard time for us at the moment and especially for me, for us, those who have been involved in the peace building process is really hard, because what you gained for so many years it just was destroyed and now we need to start again from zero. I mean, can you imagine that we are going to have this dialogue meeting that we bring from this side, from the other side and we meet in some neutral territory, most of the time is Georgia but sometimes is Turkey or other places where we let them to start. I don’t know if you know about this EPNK project, so there was a phase 2 for EPNK project that we reached the moment already where we managed to come together from both sides to have a common statement that we wanted to go to international organizations. The common statement, I mean Azerbaijani young women that stand for something and we talked about regional security, we talked about women’s rights and that's what we wanted to present with the international community to do something with this. And especially the OSCE group that women are not present in, when they come to the region, they meet a bit with the civil society, of course with the politicians, with the government, but they never meet with women’s groups. Women are not being considered as one of the stakeholders for this process and their voices are not heard.

When we worked within this EPNK process, we managed to come to that level when we prepared a groups there and here, where they met at the national level with the policy makers, they talked about their issues and they raised their voices. That was very important for us and that was the achievement of the EPNK project for us, a part of raising awareness about women’s rights, peace building issues, there was many other things we did with EPNK. For me, one of the most important outcomes was to reach to the level where the young women feel so self-confident that they went to national policymakers that we arranged the meeting with and they talked openly and they started talking about their experiences meeting the Armenian girls and what they want to do. When talking about this, I started saying that at the moment I have this feeling that we need to start from zero again, I can’t even imagine what will be when we will get to this dial up meeting again. I mean they will start again from zero - "you did to as us and you did to us that". This is how we usually started many years ago, so I don’t know. And looking to the social media, the
way how those people how you trust and you believe that this is a person that you trust in doing the peace
or working or going together. So looking to their statements on the social media – Facebook or whatever,
and you say that how this society or these politicians can be so influential, or this nationalism can be so
influential to the people’s minds that they can easily be under these influences and change their mind and
put those type of statements. We’re the ones that are going through a very hard time at the moment, just
one example – one of our colleague, he’s not representing a women’s organization, he’s the guy that I’ve
known for many years, back to 1995 when I met his representative of the Helsinki Assembly, of his
organization in Nagorno-Karabakh. He’s not working on women’s issues, but he positioned himself as so.
Now he’s repositioned himself and I don’t trust this guy anymore. He used to be a human rights defender,
a peace activist, and now I was shocked seeing what he published on his Facebook profile, all these
statements, videos, and blamings towards Azerbaijanis. If you are doing this, what can we expect from
others? And this is a guy who is not a young guy; this is quite a mature person who has been through this
process. I would say the older the better in this peace building process and I don’t know. I didn’t have a
chance these days to talk to my colleagues in Armenia, I do hope that I won’t be disappointed, but we went
through couple of times. There was a case when some of the events in one of the countries that somehow
potentially could influence our relationships but we always stand together, so this didn’t happen. So I do
hope that the recent events will not change the mind of the people and their beliefs in what they are doing
and they will not behave inappropriately in this value framework that we believe and we work with.

You’ve talked about a lot of different topics here. How would see the role of the social media on
both sides, does it play an important role in the peace building, will it play an important role in the
future or does it hinder the process? What is your view?

Well, from one side this is how people... I don’t know, to be honest I’m very shocked with what is
happening with this and especially the role with social media. I am personally didn’t use any statement so
far. And I want to stay behind from this. So I don’t want, and I didn’t even say on my page about this. I
believe that there is a hard time and people need to... it is not that I am scared, or it is not that other side
that I am supporting one or other. For me, everyone who died doesn’t matter of nationality, it is a human
being and I have the same feeling to everyone who is dying. And it is really hard to take one of the other
sides, it is not about that. But unfortunately the role of social media today, it is more of the people are
showing where they are, and sometimes they need to watch what they say because of these influences of
the society or those groups in the society. To have a faith, and that is what is being used. I think social
media is important for at least being the first source of information, because TV in our countries is not
democratic or it is not free media, I would say the media is not free in present Azerbaijan. I am sure the
same is in Armenia. So we need to get some information what is going on, so in that sense social media is
important. And it also helps us understand and to know the people around you. But definitely there are
plenty of the provocations, so it is both; it is all about how you are managing. Unfortunately it is everyone’s’
choice to publish what they want. So I don’t know. For me social media is important, it is important, but the
people’s responsibility needs to be quite high for what they say and what they put. It is more about of how
to maybe teach or how to train how to use this social media, it is not that you can put everything that you
want. But of course it has to be with the respect to the other side. This is not being obeyed so far.

And if we look at international organizations like Kvinna till Kvinna and the political organizations,
the Minsk group, their response that you’re seeing currently and their work that they are doing in
the region, how has their role influenced the peace building process and the communication
between women from both sides? Consider work done so far and then the recent events
The role of international organization is obviously extremely important and it is there, I think the way international organizations, EU or Council of Europe or the others are doing – sometimes it is really hard because it is too much politics, especially with those organizations. They have a role of being intergovernmental organizations and they need to please both sides, sometimes the governments, and that is the danger with it. But for independent organizations, like Kvinna till Kvinna and many others that are supporting or doing, it is much easier. What they do is they are providing a great opportunity for us to decide and to work together and to deal with this issue. I mean it is not on their agenda to support any of the sides, and I think that so far we were very successful with working with those organizations and being able to reach or to help them understand the whole situation and providing us the opportunity. If it is not for them how would we know the first source of the information with this media we have? So we are going and meeting and talking with these people directly and getting the whole picture and they hear from us what’s going on. I think that so far we are going to continue with the phase 3 (EPNK) which is about to start. We haven’t been contacted yet and we don’t know exactly, especially with this recent development, what will be.

I know that two weeks ago, just before the war, they president of the EU was here and they talked with the government of Azerbaijan about the launching of EPNK 3 phase and they’ve got a positive answer from the government. And I am looking forward to that really especially. I know that it will be very very hard, it will be challenging for us, especially meeting the representatives of the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh community. They are the ones that challenge you all the time for us. We don’t have much challenge in the relationships with Armenian partners, with Nagorno-Karabakh community, but I think that by the end of this month, beginning of next month, we will know how we continue and what we are doing on this. My position is international community needs to be in the region and they to continue the work and they have to influence the government on getting the women in this process, engaging the women or at least the voice of the women need to be heard within the government.

Maybe if we look into aspirations of women that you work with, young women especially, I am very interesting to hear what are their hopes and dreams looking into their role in both civil society and their careers, do they have governmental, political aspirations, working officially in the peace process?

It is very fresh what is happening in these days. So far, I can talk about the experiences that we’ve had till the beginning of this month before we had the war. Well, yes, young women are very much, the ones that we work, they are very much engaged and they are very much inspired of getting knowledge and being able to contribute to this process. I mean, we have couple of success stories of the girls that came in from the IDP community, decided to go deeper and study. One of our girls who was involved in the EPNK 1, during the EPNK 2, she basically was studying in the UK, she went to the UK, she studied conflict and development in Sussex University. So this was a great story for us, how she came from being an IDP herself, she solved this and when she came to us she had hatred towards Armenians and the way how she changed and saw her role and decided to study this in order to be able to contribute much more to this process. And we have other girls, not necessarily coming from the IDP community, but those who decided to study or work on this. And then couple of other girls who after being involved in our projects, they have established their own organizations, women organization’s to work on this issue. All these facts showing that it is the girls and not us who are asking them or who are pushing them.
I can tell you the example. In one of those meetings with the policymakers within this EPNK project when we worked with the girls, we went to one of the MP’s and he also has a very good NGO background. He didn’t believe that these girls voluntarily work in this process, he was a bit sarcastic and he was a bit, you know, cautious. He was asking why they are here and what are they doing. He was asking provocative questions during the meeting, or like checking, if the girls are here because we asked them to come to this meeting, or we forced them to come or is this really what they want. So at the end of the meeting he was so surprised, and said that the way that he was talking provocative questions and the checking, like he really wanted to understand. And he was so happy to know and realizing to know that these girls are here because it is their decision. And they want to change, and they want to make a change. He even offered that he wants to support and work with these girls in the future. This is the type of the thing when you get these results it gives a lot to us. I mean especially when we work for these young girls and by these young girls.

And the participation of women as members of parliament is quite low compared to some other international parliaments and national parliaments. But it has increased a little – it is now 17%. Do you work with those women who are members of parliament? What can you tell me about them, are they influential in their roles, and are they good examples of what the aspiration can be?

It was 11% and now it is 17%. We are happy that we have women there, but to be honest, these women are just… Most of them are not doing anything and they don’t have gender agenda. They are not mainstreaming gender issues and they don’t have this issue in this agenda, or peace. But it is important to have women there, even if many people say that it is only for the sake of gender balance. We still believe they will make or they will work or we can at least use them to do something. But unfortunately none of those women in the parliament could be potentially considered that they are there because of this issue. We didn’t have any experience with the women in the parliament, only couple of men that we met and we worked with – those that are working on peace issues, conflict issues, NK issue.

There is only one lady I think, she is Genya Pashayeva, who considers herself as a feminist, she is the one who can potentially be used for us. And we are thinking if we are going to be engaged in EPNK 3, we are thinking of working with her closely.

What are the biggest challenges for your organization currently in civil society work, in communication, and looking into women’s rights, abuse, sexual abuse and violence, what are your biggest issues in getting your voice more prominent and better heard?

There are a couple of challenges. The ones that you mentioned are definitely all of them there. On the top of this is the attitude to civil society from the government side, for example we are going through some of the challenges last two years already. Already from 2014 and now, it was before, but there are more restrictions now in terms of operating, operational, being operational. There is the government ban to get any financial support from outside so they don’t want any international organization to support local organizations. They came up with a list of things that before they supported us with what we need to do. Most of these things are now impossible, in terms of registration; just the world registration means hassle. So there are plenty of barriers for those international organizations to work with us. For us it is a barrier to work with them and that definitely limits our possibility to do something and then we need to find other ways to be able to work. So this is one of the biggest challenges. From there it goes into more. All of this has been done in order to prevent our activities when it comes to women’s rights issues and when it
comes to civil society developments. It is going worse and worse every year and for this year we don't know.

You mentioned security as a factor, have there been any incidents during your activities in communication, perhaps communicating with your partners or other organizations in Armenia or Georgia? Is security very noticeable in your daily activities as a concern?

It is quite unsecure, we don't know, even all this when we go meeting with the other side, after that when we are coming back we are witnessing different type of either guests, or visitors or messages are being sent that “we know what you are doing” and these types of things. The target is the young girls that are not self-confident and we are losing our target audience. They can give up once they don't feel safe, but I think so far we could manage. There were cases where we needed to discuss with the girls, we explained and sometimes it is not only their decisions. They also target their family, family members, it is not the targeting, they haven't done so far anything, but the message is always there that it is not secure.

For young women especially to understand the situation, and taking into account the success stories, is language an important factor to advance? How is language important? Consider English, Russian, Turkish, local languages and combine this with working with international partners

Yes, but we always say that the language shouldn't be a barrier for participation. This is what we believe and we always support that the girls are coming from the region, even if they don't have Russian or English we are always there to support them. This is what we believe. Russian language used to be, not anymore, the young generation prefer to speak English. It is being replaced by English. Older generation they all speak Russian, but the younger generation do not.

If we look to international partners like Kvinna till Kvinna, what further support do you want from them to assure you and continue working with EPNK and the other peace process and communication? What support do you need in the next few years?

We definitely need their presence and this gives us a lot in terms of opportunity to work on these issues that we want to work on. That's a great support, that's a great framework. And then of course and also this is a great tool for us to send our message more at the international level, because do you know that Kvinna till Kvinna is a member of this consortium, EPNK. It is very closely linked to EU policy makers that they can also influence. So I think we definitely want to continue and we are very satisfied with how we have been working so far.

Thank you for your answer