

Mapping and Analysis of Peacebuilding Initiatives in Armenia

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Global Network of
Women Peacebuilders

women's
agenda

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MAPPING PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

In September 2020, the protracted armed conflict between the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides escalated into a full-scale war. After six weeks of fighting, which resulted in over 6,000 casualties and over 75,000 displacements, a Russian-brokered ceasefire deal was signed on 10 November 2020.

In order to understand the challenges and gaps facing women in Armenia, comprehensive research and analysis have been conducted. The focus has been on identifying factors that lead to insecurity and hinder women's equal and meaningful participation in decision-making and peace processes.

This mapping report has the following goals:

- Analyze peace and security-related needs and challenges faced by local communities in general, and women in particular, in Armenia;
- Provide an overview of the initiatives conducted by different actors in Armenia, with a particular emphasis on gender components;
- Identify obstacles and challenges that women face in the socioeconomic and political spheres and in negotiation processes; and
- Examine the various implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace and peacebuilding processes.

This mapping utilized a qualitative research method to analyze the challenges facing women. Sixteen civil society actors that closely work on gender issues and peace agenda were interviewed. Relevant categorical and qualitative data were collected through structured interviews to accomplish the above goals. The age and gender disaggregation of respondents is presented below:

| | Under 35 | Over 35 |
|--------|----------|---------|
| Male | 1 | 3 |
| Female | 7 | 5 |

While the findings of this mapping are not necessarily generalizable for the entire populace, they do provide unique and in-depth insights. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local and national peacebuilders and project beneficiaries — including local women and young women. These interviewees' involvement in various peacebuilding projects brought valuable experience and perspectives to the mapping exercise. KIIs also targeted government actors, the members of the National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) & the National Action Plan (NAP), the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Youth and Gender Affairs, representatives of the security forces and civil society organizations.

THE MAIN PEACE AND SECURITY ISSUES THAT LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND WOMEN FACE

GENERAL SECURITY PERCEPTIONS

Understanding local perceptions of security is a crucial first step, given the varying understandings of what security is for the expert community and the wider public.

The first observation identified in the mapping is that there is no detailed analysis of the causes of armed conflict in the region. Previous experiences and interactions with experts show that the reference to institutional security is limited to the army and military capacity. According to many, security and the concept of being secure are directly associated with armed conflict. However, insecurity is a more complex issue than just concerns of "physical" security; many triggers for insecurity were raised by respondents, ranging from socio-cultural concerns, difficult economic situations and lack of healthcare and education, amongst others.

Some of the respondents pointed out the importance of institutional guarantees that ensure the physical security of the public. For example, in Nagorno-Karabakh, the war itself causes insecurity, and locals are disillusioned with the armed conflict and peace process. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war created a level of insecurity that locals had not previously felt.

This mapping research reveals positive transformative notions regarding

perceptions of security, as many respondents underlined factors that are the baseline for human security.

For example, beyond the physical threat of ongoing war or conflict, some respondents mentioned the importance of living a life free from domestic violence. Many respondents also mentioned the importance of freedom from fear, which is one of the core values of human security. Additionally, human rights protection was considered by respondents to be an important prerequisite for security.

It can be concluded that due to recent emergencies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, over half of the mapping participants demonstrated a more comprehensive approach to security, emphasizing human security concerns rather than simply "hard security."

THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF SECURITY

Women and men have different lived experiences, particularly in patriarchal societies. Respondents agreed that both men and women are affected by armed conflict, albeit in varying ways. Many female fetuses are aborted in sex-selective procedures due to a preference for a son.¹ Due to this practice, women's security in

¹ United Nations. (2011). Brief on disproportionate sex ratio of newborns and sex-selective abortions in Armenia. UNFPA. Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://armenia.un.org/en/134850-brief-disproportionate-sex-ratio-newborns-and-sex-selective-abortions-armenia>

Armenia is jeopardized even before their birth.

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war induced a change in perceptions among participants about vulnerabilities to insecurity. Due to the nature of the violent armed conflict, where soldiers were the primary target, the physical jeopardy that conscripted men were put in was extreme. The fact that the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh remains unsolved also creates fear for future men and young men conscripts. In addition to physical harm, the psychological impacts of serving in an armed conflict remain unaddressed, as open discussions of such issues are considered taboo, due to militaristic and patriarchal societal norms. Women do not serve in the army; only men do. The Armenian army is viewed as a fundamental institution for men's socialization, and being a "real man" is intrinsically tied to military service. Women's physical security is most often jeopardized in different ways. The armed conflict has led to higher levels of displacement, shelling, gender-based violence (GBV) and domestic violence — not only by the partners but also by other family members.

The division of traditional responsibilities in Armenian society has been identified as another factor. Traditionally, men and husbands take over more responsibility in the realm of family security and support. This, in practice, means that men provide financial income for their families, and they are considered responsible for providing the physical security of their family members. Some women reported that because of this, even when faced with

adversity, they feel more secure because they know that "there is a man by their side." Women can become dependent on men, and their status in society does not normally allow them to demand additional responsibilities in family security. However, there is a drastic change during armed conflicts, as the primary caretakers (men) are conscripted, and the women have to take over the roles of both men and women. Women become the primary caretaker for their families during the toughest circumstances. This jeopardizes both the physical and psychological security of women.

Men and women also have unequal self-defense capacities. Underrepresentation in power structures, especially in the army, prevents women from gaining self-defense skills as well as having access to weaponry. Hence, during armed conflict, women have taken over family care and childcare amid hardship and chaos without proper protection mechanisms, skills or knowledge.

FACTORS CAUSING INSECURITY AT NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

Both male and female respondents agree that there is a general lack of trust in the Armenian government, which causes a sense of instability and insecurity. This lack of trust relates to governmental strategies and policies, as well as the government's overall ability to provide a sufficient level of social services necessary for human security (physical, health, socioeconomic, educational, etc.).

State-supported media propaganda and misinformation comprise another factor for insecurity and conflict. According to one of the respondents, state-driven propaganda can trigger inter-communal and cross-border tensions. They also added that the public could be manipulated due to their lack of political and media literacy.

While Armenia has continued improving its position according to the Global Corruption Barometer, expert interviews noted that corruption still exists, especially in local power bodies.² Experts believe that corruption weakens the power balance and control in Armenia, allowing foreign powers more room to escalate the border conflict. In such cases, civil society actors feel powerless to impact these processes.

Due to women's underrepresentation in decision-making,³ policies mostly lack gender sensitivity. As such, issues like GBV, sexual violence, harassment and security of women human rights activists, and peacebuilders remain poorly addressed in policy and practice. Women and men are able to offer different perceptions on the same issue due to the ways women and men experience the effects of conflict and crisis differently. Because of this, the strategies and policies do not necessarily project women's real needs and priorities when women are not involved in their creation.

FACTORS THAT CREATE A SENSE OF SECURITY

The pool of needs mentioned by respondents can be classified into three parts:

1. Ensuring and protecting human rights:

To have security, it is important to ensure the fulfillment of human rights with the consideration of varying challenges that people face due to their intersecting identities. Awareness-raising is indispensable in this area. Cross-border dialogue and discussions over the significance of peaceful coexistence are key to ensuring a shared understanding of the importance of human rights.

2. Political stability, accountability and transparency:

Political leadership should develop and adapt specific policies and strategies for security in consultation with local stakeholders. Ensuring the rule of law as a guarantee for security was also mentioned by many respondents. The transparency of government actions plays a crucial role in security, as lack of transparency leads to distrust. One of the respondents highlighted the role of diplomatic relations with neighboring states as an essential factor in increasing security. The creation of diplomatic relationships becomes urgent in the case of Armenian-Azerbaijani and Armenian-Turkish relationships.

² Armenia. Transparency.org. (n.d.). Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/armenia>

³ National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia. (2022). Retrieved

December 27, 2022, from <http://www.parliament.am/deputies.php?lang=eng&fbclid=IwAR3AF9kAUjyW4rPZHUGHyHbC7KJSN4H3fweUCEasWxii0mmjKO2AGcsB03s>

Even though the role of Russia in Armenia has become increasingly ambiguous, good diplomatic relations with Russia are necessary, as their presence can be a deterrent to possible external aggressions.

3. Military capacity:

According to some respondents, the country's military capacity is significant to feeling secure. Some respondents noted that a strong military power in border regions would allow the locals to continue their daily lives in a safe environment. The creation of a special border military service was of high interest; individuals stated that with this military presence, locals could farm, attend schools or walk on the streets without jeopardizing their physical security. It is essential to mention that after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, physical security has become a priority given the drastically high numbers of war casualties. While somewhat contradictory, other respondents felt that advocacy for antimilitarism and interventions against militaristic rhetorics and tendencies are what create insecurity. Given the reality of war, dismissing the need for military capacity, even when still advocating for antimilitarism, is difficult.

As respondents indicated, security is a complex issue requiring comprehensive sustainability strategies. Gender-sensitive policies and a proper representation of the needs and interests of different genders in developing these policies and processes play an indispensable role in achieving full security.

⁴ Ecolur. (2019, March 26). Highest rate of cancer recorded in Lori Region. Ecolur. Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://www.ecolur.org/en/news/sos/highest-rate-of-cancer-recorded-in-lori-region/10993/>

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE MISMANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND SECURITY

The mismanagement of natural resources is a direct threat to security. In the case of Armenia, the unsafe operation of mines and severe violations of environmental security, such as the discharge of mine waste into rivers or open spaces, are significant health risks. According to the respondents, the northern Lori province (marz) shows the highest cancer rates in the country, particularly lung cancer.⁴ The cancer rates are directly linked to the area's long-term use of open mines. Even if the main impact of mining mismanagement does not have gender distinctions, there are still important implications with gendered characteristics. The majority of the mine workers are men. Due to the lack of security measures, the physical security of workers is under direct threat. As women are the main caretakers in the patriarchal family structure, the burden of family care falls on their shoulders. This situation jeopardizes women's psychological well-being. The mismanagement of mining affects all genders, but differently. Mining has a particular impact on the socioeconomic situation as well. One KII participant emphasized: "...[the mining] makes the rich richer and the poor poorer."

Another security issue resulting from the mismanagement or lack of natural resources concerns water resources.

In particular, communities along the border do not have sustainable water supplies for farming. As revealed during the research, this is closely connected with the ongoing armed conflict. Since these bordering territories are away from the marz centers and are often under direct shelling, the private water supply services do not consider it cost-efficient to construct pipelines.

The communities do not have enough local funding to finance construction; the only option is the state budget. The lack of water resources makes the lands too dry to cultivate and support vegetation. Because of this, many families have lost their sources of income. These socioeconomic tensions often trigger domestic violence against women.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND PEACE AND SECURITY

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN

As with any crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has had particular gendered implications. One of the main challenges pointed out by respondents was the increase in GBV. Especially during the lockdown, the growing number of domestic violence cases made women's vulnerability in the home more apparent. Being in lockdown with the abuser, women had few opportunities to reach out to support centers and seek help. This was one of the rare occasions when the community police received more calls than the hotlines. As most of the respondents emphasized, GBV also increased because men were unable to earn money, sitting at home unemployed, and took out their stress on women through violence.

"Based on our coalition, in March-April 2020, the calls of the hotline increased by 30 per cent."

During COVID-19, few institutions were offering psychological support or satisfactory medical care, and those that did were often inaccessible. After the lockdown was imposed, the GBV hotline calls to women's organizations increased by 30-40 per cent compared to the pre-COVID period.

The number of reported cases of sexual violence remained the same during the pandemic. Violence against children also increased.

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war caused another wave of increases in GBV cases. Some hotlines found that GBV calls increased in families where members of the military had been injured or killed in the conflict. The respondents also noted that the number of GBV cases increased in the temporary housing facilities where the displaced women from Nagorno-Karabakh were residing.

THE POSSIBLE IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC ON THE OUTBREAK OF SECOND NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war completely changed the public perceptions of COVID-19. The mass casualties of the conflict made the virus secondary as concerns about the war became more prevalent.

“When the war and the battles started, we had completely forgotten what COVID was.”

In these circumstances, it is important to understand the correlation between the pandemic and the second war.

There are no in-depth studies or research about the possible impact of COVID-19 on the increase of tensions between the warring sides. During this study, around 10 respondents did not see COVID-19 as a leading factor for escalating tensions, which eventually grew to large-scale war. Three respondents believed that COVID-19 could be a complicating factor, as all the resources and international attention was directed to alleviating the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Only three respondents strongly believed that the pandemic was a primary factor in the eruption of the war as the world “was busy with COVID-19, and [Armenia] was weaker.”

EXISTING INITIATIVES ADDRESSING PEACE AND SECURITY

TYPES OF INITIATIVES, MAIN STAKEHOLDERS, AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THESE INITIATIVES

A few notable organizations, initiatives, or groups currently conducting meaningful work in Armenia named by participants were: Democracy Today NGO, Peace Dialogue NGO, Women's Agenda NGO, Women in Black and Frontline Youth Network NGOs, Caucasian Talks, and Caucasus Center of Peacemaking Initiatives. Other than those mentioned above, there are a few initiatives that mainly target women and promote women's cross-border dialogue. Given the sensitivity of the context, unfortunately, we cannot name them in the mapping.

The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) has launched the Building Resilience of Eastern Neighborhood project focused on WPS work, supported by the UK Government. The Future Armenian initiative works to address various security challenges. The US Embassy in Armenia has also launched a grant call on Track 2 peace processes.

Respondents also mentioned several suspended initiatives. For example, the Region Research Center, which engaged in peacebuilding, had to put its work on hold after 2016. This was because Leyla Yunus, their local partner in Azerbaijan, was imprisoned due to political persecution. A peace activist, A. K., was also conducting similar peace initiatives but had to suspend them due to protection concerns.

The respondents were knowledgeable about initiatives conducted by various civil society actors. It is worth mentioning that some respondents used to be part of these peace initiatives. However, for many, the second war limited their field involvement in civil society initiatives. Instead, a lot of their work is now confined to the national level, as they believe that there is a need to create peace at the national level, then uplift it to the regional one.

"I am in favor of these discussions taking place in the Armenian domain. Unless we have not discussed this internally, it is useless..."

Initiatives on peacebuilding have become increasingly less visible for several reasons.

First, the frustration and disappointment caused by the second Nagorno-Karabakh war have left many peace activists with no vision of peace.

Second, the increased security threats caused by the ingrained militaristic rhetoric pressure the NGOs and other civil society actors to keep their projects invisible to guarantee the security of involved actors and target groups.

Third, peace initiatives are mostly supported by foreign actors and donors, such as foreign embassies in Armenia, USAID, the European Union (EU), and the U.S. State Department, amongst others. However, the Armenian Government has not created a granting scheme for local civil society actors. A mechanism such as this would guarantee the sustainability of many NGOs and their work, and the absence is detrimental.

Finally, many peace initiatives do not have clear indicators for ensuring a gender-sensitive approach.

REQUIRED INTERVENTIONS

The initiatives mentioned by the respondents have two primary needs – post-war rehabilitation, and recovery and empowerment. Under the rehabilitation initiatives, psychological support is urgently needed to address war-related traumas caused by the loss of relatives, partners, and sons and displacement. Due to the lack of state-supported rehabilitation programs for combatants, in the family context, during and after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, women have taken over the responsibility of taking care of male family members with physical traumas. Women must also deal with aggression and abuse from their partners.

A comprehensive analysis is required to understand the linkage between the protracted war and the increase in domestic violence.

Due to the mass casualties, women have lost their partners and sons. Very few initiatives offering psychological support are available for these women.

Women's empowerment should be conducted through educational projects aimed at economic independence to increase women's competitiveness in the Armenian labor market.

The mass casualties from the armed conflict caused an economic crisis in many families, especially displaced ones because these families lost their primary providers and living environment. The entire economic burden fell on the women's shoulders. Women must be capacitated to become

economically independent in order to support their families and themselves. There should also be awareness and capacity-building on human rights; this has been noted as an important tool for women to recognize different types of GBV and understand their options for response and relief.

KEY BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S FULL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

As mentioned previously, government strategies lack gender sensitivity due to women's continued underrepresentation in decision-making. As such, issues including women's economic empowerment, sexual violence and harassment, and security of women human rights activists and women peace activists stay poorly addressed in practice. According to respondents, women and men have different standpoints, perceptions and experiences on security.

"If you have a vision of security, it should be conditioned by the perceptions and demands of the representatives of your society of different sexes. For example, if you do not take into account the demands of a part of your society, then you cannot have an approach that meets the demands of all genders, people of all social roles."

Gender inequality and the lack of women in decision-making have a direct impact on conflict escalation as well. According to respondents, women's presence in conflict resolution and peace negotiations could help mitigate violence and combat the masculine culture that promotes war and

aggression. So far, small increments in the increased representation of women in decision-making have not provided any contextual change. Women decision-makers mostly reproduce the militaristic culture instead of widening the space for non-violent interrelations, especially regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

WOMEN IN OFFICIAL AND NONOFFICIAL PEACE PROCESSES

Women's leadership is missing in many spheres of public life, and women face different types of discrimination in their families, labor market and education. Women are underrepresented in decision-making and negotiation processes. The patriarchal system silences women and makes women's concerns less visible. As women's socialization has also been impacted by patriarchal societal norms, in many cases, women reproduce the same harmful stereotypes and contribute to silencing other women.

Women's representation in official state negotiations around the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict is extremely low; only a few female members of Parliament had the chance to attend high-level negotiation events. Women's engagement in peace-making is often limited to administrative work with no mandate to influence decision-making processes.

Respondents highlighted that at the non-official level, civil society actors, especially women's organizations and groups, have been involved in peace discussions and dialogues. However, these discussions and cross-border dialogues have been primarily initiated by donor organizations through grant projects. Women's engagement in peace initiatives has not received acknowledgment from the Armenian government. This is another reason why women's activism has not impacted decision-making.

As mentioned by the respondents, it has always been difficult for women's organizations and groups to openly speak and advocate for peace since they are doubly targeted — as feminists and peacebuilders. Due to very strong militaristic sentiments, peacebuilding narratives are strongly criticized.

Armenian women have long been part of the cross-border dialogue with Azerbaijani women. However, the research participants mentioned the failed character of the Armenian-Azerbaijani women's dialogue when it comes to having a tangible impact. All existing networks established before the second Nagorno-Karabakh war have ceased to exist during and after the war. The biggest challenge for the survival of these networks was hate speech and nationalistic notions of

certain Armenian and Azerbaijani persons involved in peace activism. Due to this, the peace agenda continues to stay quite fragile with no strategically well-developed action plan.

As mentioned by respondents, many women's national and cross-border initiatives involved women and young girls from urban areas. The failure to impact higher-level decision-making is connected to these women's perceived lack of practical experience in war and peace. This was found not only in Armenia but also in Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite the ongoing war, the dialogue and nexus between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh-based Armenian women were not strong. Many respondents prioritized the importance of this dialogue even more than Armenian-Azerbaijani one. This approach supports what other respondents hoped to achieve — a national dialogue and in-country discussions over key issues before relaunching the regional ones. Women's engagement in peacebuilding triggered the creation of discourse on peace-oriented sentiments in society. These processes had a transformative impact on an individual level. Women's activism increased the level of gender sensitivity in peacebuilding processes as they initiated discussions on feminist peace. The observations also show that in the post-second Nagorno-Karabakh war period, there were increasing discussions on the importance of women mediators.

However, in practice, no steps have been taken by the government to add a new format to official peace processes in order to make them more gender-responsive and inclusive.

Notwithstanding all the positive aspects, the respondents believe that, in general, the participation of women had no influence on the peace process nor in the outcome on a political level. Some established networks preferred to remain invisible for security reasons both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Therefore, they were unable to have wide public campaigns, and many international donors could not implement projects in Nagorno-Karabakh. Women's expertise is not recognized, and in many cases, men's expertise is preferred over women's. Another factor for the failure of women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes was the lack of open, consistent and honest conversations among the women representing various groups in Armenia. Local organizations were also unable to include local communities in their issues and work, and thus their scope of influence remained limited.

Women's participation in peace processes is valuable for generating anti-militarism and peace concepts. Despite women's limited resources, women could still mobilize different groups to talk about peace and its importance. For example, there are movie screenings, trainings and peace-oriented small initiatives organized by women's organizations in bordering regions of Armenia. Additionally, there has been analytical research conducted by women experts to better understand women's narratives on peace. The creation of Armenian-Azerbaijan cross-border networks was also an achievement. Those networks were mostly among professional groups, such as journalists and teachers, as well as among groups sharing similar political

values (for example, liberals or socialists). Women also brought gender sensitivity to conflict through various research papers and discussions. In various texts, they highlighted the impact of conflict on women, as well as their inability to be meaningfully involved.

FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE CREATION OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Decision-making in Armenia is both male-dominated and male-centric. There is also a high level of self-censorship among women, as they are afraid of public opinion and thus abstain from involving themselves in many issues. In Armenia, to be an influential woman, one has to be economically independent and educated — in other words, privileged. Women with disabilities, women from minority groups and rural women are mostly deprived of economic independence and cannot develop ambitions for leadership.

"From an economic point of view, I wanted to say that in order to be involved in politics in our case, you have to be a little bit economically strong."⁵

The vulnerability of women is also linked with age, social status and other intersectional identities: single, married with children, married without children, divorced, sexual orientation, among others.

⁵ Expert Interview, female under 35

The second factor that acts as a major barrier is the public perception of the role of women in peacebuilding processes. Armenia's conservative and patriarchal society believes that women have no place in war or in peace, as it is a "man's business." Due to this public perception, many female peace activists have been targeted by local nationalists both online and in person.

The patriarchal government generally does not give women access to negotiation processes. Male representatives are unable and unwilling to share their power with women. If any exceptions are made for women to access these circles, they are made for women holding militaristic, neoliberal views of the war.

Unfortunately, after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, frustration and disillusionment among women peacebuilders became more evident. This has kept them away from wanting to engage in or further initiate cross-border dialogues.

FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

As indicated by respondents, the main factors hindering women's economic empowerment are harmful gender stereotypes and discrimination that exists toward women's working capacity.

Gender stereotypes and discriminatory patriarchal norms restrict women's employment choices. Meanwhile, it is commonly believed that "women are not allowed to" earn more than their husbands. This discriminative approach prohibits

women from having equal or better employment opportunities. They are also responsible for household chores and child and elderly care and in many cases, women do not have spare time for professional development and career growth.

Quite often women occupy low-range work, such as service provision spheres and education. Unregistered employment is also a huge issue for many women. Women lack the ability or capacity to seek career development.

The socioeconomic challenges facing Armenia result in fewer job opportunities. This creates greater competition and, considering women's inferior status, creates an unequal playing field. Employers, in many instances, prefer men over women due to ingrained gender stereotypes. For example, there is evidence that when unmarried women are rejected, it is because employers think that they will soon marry and take maternity leave. There are also prejudices towards married women and mothers, as they are expected to be more absent from work than men because of their familial responsibilities and child care.

Harassment against women in the workplace was also an issue highlighted by respondents. A comprehensive analysis to reveal the different layers of discrimination that exist toward women in the labor market is urgently needed. It is also important to understand the differences in challenges that exist across different regions of the country.

FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

Snap parliamentary elections, held on 20 June 2021, aimed at resolving the internal political crisis after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. These elections increased women's representation in the National Assembly to 35.51 per cent. The quantitative presence, however, does not impact the advancement of the feminist agenda, as very few women members of the parliament have shown a willingness to pursue a gender-responsive agenda.

Women activists and leaders are often subjected to verbal attacks and harassment, both in-person and online, because of their gender. The risk of abuse is well-known amongst women, and in many cases, women either withdraw from their positions or do not even attempt to take on leadership, especially in politics.

Interestingly, one of the main discriminative factors mentioned by respondents was the current political "brutal" or "thief" culture. They described it as a culture where decision-making and communications on a higher level are based solely on masculine values. This creates barriers for females as it is not "appropriate" for women to be in this culture.

Gender stereotypes and public expectations further aggravate discrimination toward women in politics. As public figures, women often receive verbal attacks and shaming because of their gender.

According to patriarchal gender norms, women are supposed to stay indoors, and their activism is often either restricted or not supported. Because of these factors, women either withdraw their participation from elections and other political processes or do not engage in the field at all.

If women do choose to participate, another issue they face is the lack of resources. Men have always had dominance over women in politics. Their higher physical presence in politics has enabled men to acquire strong networks and resources, which women lack. These factors decrease women's chances of conducting successful political campaigns. The recent community enlargements and reassembling of districts⁶ further weakened women's positions because with fewer resources, women have more infrequent chances to impact larger communities and win political elections.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-BORDER DIALOGUES

As previously mentioned, the cross-border dialogue, its format and goals have changed during and after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Because of the failure to create preventive measures and to respond to the war and war propaganda jointly, many peacebuilding activists in Armenia are questioning the usefulness of the dialogue in its current form. One of the respondents mentioned that the cross-border dialogue and public diplomacy are important. However, it is still necessary to create sufficient conditions at the state and other official levels for the appeasement of border

⁶ Simonian, K. (2021, September 24). Armenian parliament approves community enlargement. "Ազատ Եվրոպա/Ազատություն" ռադիոկայան. Retrieved from <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31477009.html>

tension and the prevention of the reoccurrence of war. After this, building bridges of trust at all levels will be more feasible.

Several respondents believed that working with local communities is a higher priority at this point, and then it can be uplifted to the national and regional levels.

Many still attach high importance to cross-border dialogue and public diplomacy for several reasons. Even though the decisions are made at a higher level, without normalizing the relationships among neighboring societies, the official negotiations become useless, and coexistence becomes increasingly out of reach. The absence of public dialogue endangers security.

Meanwhile, there is an alternative viewpoint that the normalization of relations is unhelpful since it will not affect higher-level decision-making. However, it is apparent that most of the respondents saw cross-border dialogue as a solid foundation for security and lasting peace. In both societies, engrained hostility from the long-lasting misinformation and propaganda has almost entirely eliminated the chances of coexistence. Public diplomacy and geopolitical events often trigger changes in personal behaviors, but cross-border dialogue and local level diplomacy can be used to restore trust inside and among societies.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For political empowerment:

- Increase women's political participation by capacitating them with knowledge, skills and resources to increase their potential to run effective political campaigns.
- Product materials — research, audiovisuals, artwork — that challenge the rooted gender stereotypes of women's role in society.
- Conduct special human rights campaigns for both women and men in order to empower women and challenge discriminatory perceptions toward women's political participation.
- Collect and share stories of successful women politicians who will encourage and empower other women to engage in politics.
- Conduct awareness-raising and capacity-building for journalists and media practitioners on gender-sensitive reporting practices.

For socioeconomic empowerment:

- Provide training and mentorship opportunities for women so they can acquire the required skills for full integration into the labor market.
- Apply required amendments to the Armenian Labor Code and adopt anti-discrimination strategies to create a better working environment for different women — mothers, married women, and others. These measures should abolish the discriminatory working environment, prevent workplace harassment and guarantee equal pay for women.

- Share campaigns showcasing women's successful participation in the job market who overcame the gendered barriers and became successful in their respective fields.
- Increase women's educational capacity about venture funds, social entrepreneurship, management, financial management, etc.

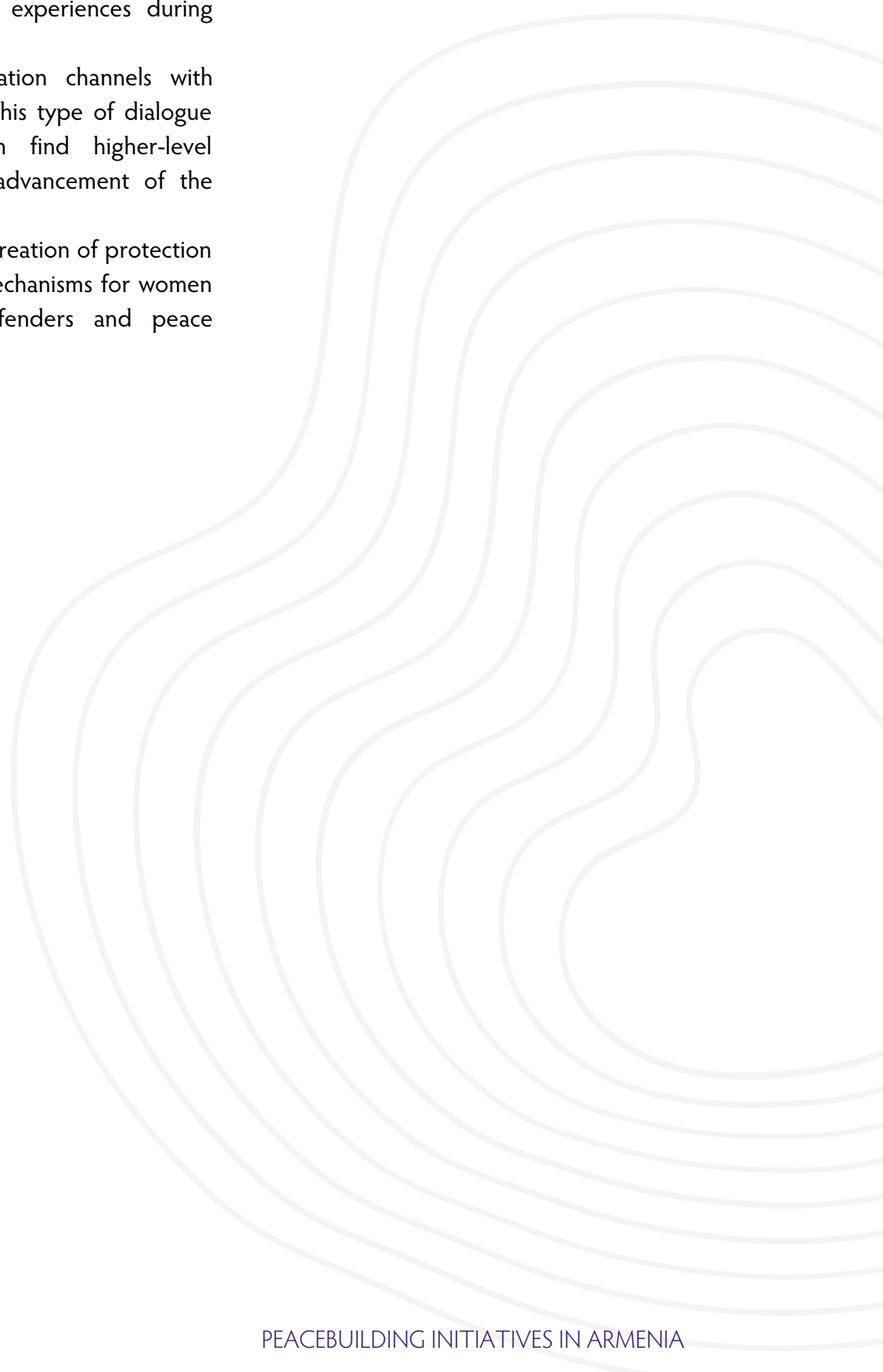
For advancing peacebuilding activities of NGOs and the community:

- Invest in peacebuilding civil society actors and organizations' human resources, fundraising capacity, and negotiation skills.
- Provide fundamental knowledge on peace and conflict transformation.
- Provide more flexible funding opportunities for civil society actors.
- Prioritize work with locally-based Armenian NGOs.
- Strengthen the cooperation among Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh-based NGOs.

For engagement in official and unofficial peace processes:

- Create more space for women's engagement in peace processes by investing more resources in women's participation.
- Change the negotiation structure by making it more transparent and adding a gender component to make women's meaningful participation in negotiation processes possible.
- Provide awareness-raising and confidence-building educational opportunities for women diplomats.

- Create in-country dialogues among women with different war experiences and provide opportunities for these women to personally speak about their needs and interests.
- Invest in the creation of materials that illustrate women's experiences during the war.
- Create communication channels with decision-makers. This type of dialogue will help women find higher-level support for the advancement of the women's agenda.
- Advocate for the creation of protection and prevention mechanisms for women human rights defenders and peace activists.





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women's
agenda



Austrian
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