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CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS,  
DEALING WITH THE PAST, AND  
PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT  
Community-Driven Conflict Transformation  
in the South Caucasus

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# Women Challenging Gender Norms and Patriarchal Values in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation across the South Caucasus

**Milena Abrahamyan, Parvana Mammadova, Sophio Tskhvariashvili**

This paper looks at the ways in which women's peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution focused organizations and groups in the South Caucasus challenge and/or reproduce gender roles and patriarchal values in their work. The authors aim to capture the challenges faced by women's organizations and groups when carrying out the work of resisting against these norms. In addition, the authors aim to draw out success stories where women's organizations and groups have incorporated creative approaches to peace and conflict work that do not reproduce patriarchal values and traditional gender roles.

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, women in the South Caucasus have stood at a crossroads of nation building on the one hand, which has often depended on the reproduction of traditional gender roles and patriarchal values, and a global movement for women's emancipation on the other hand, which has encompassed demands for equality, rights, and respect. The break-up of the Soviet Union not only introduced open market economies, but also opportunities for the international donor community to promote democratic values through support to already established groups and organizations, in addition to helping develop new organizations with the goal of fostering an open and democratic civil society in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (Walsh 2015). As a result, in the South Caucasus three republics alone, there are now thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although not many of these registered NGOs are active, a good percentage of them are actively pursuing social justice goals in a number of different spheres. Of those, a small number of NGOs focus on women's issues and women's rights, and another small number of NGOs focus on peacebuilding and conflict resolution or transformation<sup>20</sup>. The number of organizations that combine the two – women and peace/conflict – are even fewer and crucial for both the women's movement as well as the establishment of sustainable peace in the region. In addition to women organizing through institutional support, there are even fewer independent grassroots movements and activist groups combining women and peace across the region. In an increasingly globalized and neoliberal context, these groups are often even more crucial for a critical reflection and the praxis of conflict transformation, anti-militarism, and feminist resistance to violence dominating across all public and private domains of life in the wider South Caucasus region.

This paper looks at the ways in which South Caucasus women's peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution focused organizations and groups challenge and/or reproduce gender roles and patriarchal values in their work within peacebuilding. Given the ongoing prevalence of patriarchal, misogynist, and militarized norms with regards to how people in these contexts relate to themselves, to one another, to institutions such as the state, education, family and

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<sup>20</sup> Conflict resolution and conflict transformation stem from two different schools of thought where conflict resolution aims to achieve negative peace often by facilitating for an agreement among conflicting parties through third party mediation, whereas conflict transformation aims to tackle root causes of conflict in order to achieve positive peace. In this regard, the conflict transformation approach to conflict is more of a feminist approach to achieving peace than conflict resolution.

vice versa, we aim to capture the challenges faced by women's organizations and groups when carrying out the work of resisting against these norms. In addition, we aim to draw out success stories where women's organizations and groups have incorporated creative approaches to peace and conflict work that do not reproduce patriarchal values and traditional gender roles. Through in-depth interviews conducted between August 2018 and November 2018 with 15 women's organizations and groups, we have drawn out the values that these organizations and groups hold and operate from, and the agendas that are shaped by those values. We center a feminist, anti-militarist, and decolonial perspective in looking at the question at hand. Thereby we ask: To what extent are the values and agendas of women's organizations and groups serving processes that challenge and/or reproduce gender norms, roles, and stereotypes as well as patriarchal values? What are some obstacles to doing peace work as a women's organization and groups in the region? What are some of the ways, if any, that these obstacles are met with creative solutions?

Looking at these questions and the answers generated from women working within and outside the NGO sphere for the ultimate goal of social transformation, it has become clear that challenging gender norms and deeply ingrained patriarchal values is often more nuanced than theory might suggest. Understanding the complex histories, struggles, and geo-political contexts of the South Caucasus, as well as the importance of deconstructing ways in which patriarchy and militarism work together to maintain the subjugation of women and men who deviate from the norms set up by hegemonic masculinity is a crucial first and continuous step in approaching the question we delve into through this paper. As such, the findings and analysis here can provide deep insight for practitioners, academics, activists, state actors, regional and international stakeholders and donors who work with or wish to work with women who combine the struggle for women's emancipation with questions of peace and conflict in their organizations, groups, and in their activism.

## Theory

This paper employs an intersectional and critical analysis of gender, patriarchy, and systems/structures of violence that permeate ordinary life. As such, the gender system, which is utilized for the benefit (or profit) of patriarchy necessarily connects to war and militarization. We start by positing that it is not enough to perceive gender as the interpretation or social attributes of one's biological sex, which is the way that gender is often defined in women's rights circles especially within the South Caucasus but also elsewhere. To understand the way in which

gender relates to war, gender must be conceived of not as a noun, but rather as a "doing" incontinently connected to "the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (Butler 1990). In contexts of violent conflict, gender is necessarily produced and maintained through war as an extension of violence manifested within society, politics, economy, culture, family, etc. To arrive at a deeper analysis regarding the ways in which gender is produced and maintained through perpetual war, the binary perception of war and peace must be deconstructed from a decolonial lens. We understand that coloniality is a system of dominance justified by classifications of race "encompassing all control of sexual access, collective authority, labor, subjectivity/inter-subjectivity and the production of knowledge from within these inter-subjective relations" (Lugones 2008). Framed through a decolonial lens, war connects to systems of dominance where violence is utilized for control of populations, including all social relations, based on Eurocentric modes of being and knowing. According to decolonial academic Tarak Barkawi "force and war together make and sustain social orders" (Barkawi 2016) such as class, race, gender, heteronormativity, which function as norm setting categories for and within the nation-state.

Patriarchy is one such order where the set of beliefs and values regarding gender roles and relations are defined by enforcing "'proper' relations between *men and women*, between *women and women* and between *men and men*" (Elster, 1981 as quoted in Reardon). Often "war deepens already deep sexual divisions, emphasizing the male as perpetrator of violence, women as victims" (Cockburn 2010). These relations do not simply come into being through "tradition" or mere "cultural norms", but rather are contingent on systems shaped for the benefit of a select few with authority to shape and maintain those same systems, which make it possible for power to go unquestioned and unshared. One mechanism through which authority maintains itself is through repression, which entails "the threat of force, the knowledge that surveilled and repressed subjects apprehend if they step out of line, they will suffer violent fates" (Barkawi 2016). This does not only refer to citizen subjects within states, but also to bodies in relation to the gender order, which when "stepping out of line", or rather – stepping out of expected gender norms and roles– become subject to violence.

It is clear that patriarchy and war are mutually reinforcing systems of dominance where deviation from the established gender order is punished through violence. Within both systems hegemonic masculinity serves as the norm and all other forms of gender expression and relations are suspect, other, foreign, abnormal and subject to elimination. For the purposes of this paper, we have employed a feminist conceptualization and approach to peace, which entails a deep analysis of violence

as a construct in all spheres of life. In line with feminist peace ideology and praxis, connections between "domestic violence and war, between economic oppression and militarism, between women's rights and environmental concerns" are made (Gnanadason, Kanyoro and McSpadden 1996). Further connections are made between the war system and nationalism with all of its repercussions on deepening gender norms and roles within society. Gender norms in this sense comprise of the burden to conform to categories of expected masculine and feminine representation and roles, which are often based on misogynist relations to oneself and to others. According to Brock-Utne, "misogyny is not only an expected condition but in fact a form of self-hatred in which both men and women are conditioned to despise the feminine and thereby, to some degree, women" (Brock-Utne, 1981 as quoted in Reardon). As such, complying with gender norms within patriarchal and militaristic contexts often means that the feminine and anything that can "effeminize", especially men, must be rejected from public and political grounds. This rejection often takes place through violence, whether emotional, mental, physical, or structural. As a result, war, violence, and weapons become "both a significant factor in masculine identity and a crucial factor in the functioning of patriarchy" (Reardon 1985).

We acknowledge that in actual practice, women's organizations and groups cannot be expected to adhere to mere theoretical ideology when it comes to their different approaches in relating to gender norms and patriarchal values within peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution. At the same time, we hold firmly the conviction that when working to build peace and transform conflict, the question of patriarchy and its intersection with gender, violence, and militarization cannot be overlooked by any organization, group, and/or movement. Although we pursue a feminist analysis throughout this paper, we do not rely on women identifying themselves as feminist in order to measure how well gender norms and patriarchal values are challenged within different organizations and groups. Rather, we look for an in-depth analysis and recognition of particular structures and institutions as violent, including war. We look for an in-depth analysis and understanding of power relations, hierarchy, and the ways in which these factors contribute to deepening divides within conflicted societies. We expect that women's organizations and groups working with peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution will first and foremost have a value-based approach where violence is necessarily rejected in all its forms. In addition, we expect an approach that is based on the rejection of war as inevitable and that is anti-militaristic, anti-nationalistic, and anti-discriminatory.

## Methodology

The methodology for this paper comprised of three processes agreed upon by the researchers – desk research, in-depth interviews, and collective work. Desk research looked into both context and theory of the question we wanted to delve into. Mainly we looked at critical thinkers' works around feminist understandings of gender, patriarchy, war, peace, and militarization. These texts provide the basis for the theoretical background of this paper, which is outlined in the section above. The in-depth interviews provided the necessary information regarding women's organizations and groups working within peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution in the South Caucasus. The organizations and groups in each country were chosen based on two criteria: that they worked with issues pertaining to women and peace and that they were actively implementing projects and programs in their respective contexts. The aim of the interviews we held with each organization or group was to draw out conceptualizations about gender norms and patriarchal values from women practitioners themselves, in addition to understanding how peace is perceived and envisioned. Furthermore, we wanted to understand how – if at all – patriarchal and militarized realities are being challenged and/or reproduced within the work that these women's organizations and/or groups do. And finally, we wanted to understand the challenges these organizations and/or groups face when challenging gender norms and patriarchal values within the work they do, in addition to the ways in which they overcome those challenges.

To guide the interview process we created a set of open-ended questions so as not to direct answers in any particular direction. The questions could be divided into four categories, one being to understand better what the organizations and groups do (activities); the second being to understand the methods with which these organizations and groups address women's issues in conflict, primarily drawing out agendas and visions for peace; the third being to understand the values that these organizations and groups hold with regards to working with women and peace, and the ways in which they practice them; and finally, the fourth being to understand how each organization and group conceptualizes gender norms and patriarchal values as well as the ways in which they challenge those in their work. One limitation of not asking more direct questions to understand whether or not these organizations/groups do indeed link patriarchal structures with the war system is that we do not obtain direct and clear-cut answers to the opening questions of this conversation. At the same time, the in-depth analysis of these interviews provided important insight into this question when looking at the

values that organizations and groups hold and the ways in which they practice them.

Lastly, the collective work method of the group was a unique one given the strictly bordered geography we live within the South Caucasus. Our process was mainly a collaborative one where we held Skype meetings to familiarize ourselves with each other and the three contexts we come from, brainstorm ideas with regards to the question we wanted to delve into, and agree on the methods and theoretical backing of this paper. All of us have worked and/or continue to work within the NGO field in our respective contexts and have experience with the intersection of women, peace, and security. To ensure that we were all on the same page, after each of us held their first interview, we reconvened via Skype to discuss the questions we had come up with previously and whether or not they needed rethinking. This method provided the space for us to adjust our questions and tactics to fit the common context we share, while taking into account differences, which needed to be addressed based on the needs of each context. Once all of the interviews were completed, we each summarized our findings and made an analysis. All three summarized and analyzed findings were combined to look at the regional context as a whole, drawing out similarities and differences across the work that women's organizations and groups do within the South Caucasus to challenge gender norms and patriarchal values within peace work.

## Context

A thorough understanding of the context/s within which women's organizations and groups function in the South Caucasus can provide significant insight into the challenges that these organizations and groups must contend with, as well as give due appreciation and value to the ways, however small, that these challenges are overcome. To understand the question at hand with regards to challenging gender norms and patriarchal values within the work of peacebuilding and conflict transformation or resolution, three factors are taken into account. War, violence, and militarization as a conglomeration is one factor, which has a strong influence on all segments of society and politics in the region. Notions of gender and patriarchy, as well as the ways in which these structures influence attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors is another factor, which is necessarily interlinked with war, violence, and militarization. Finally, the institutionalization and professionalization of organizing, mobilizing, and activist work with regards to the women's movement and any movement for social justice in the region is a crucial factor for understanding how change occurs and/or is stifled in the region as a whole.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the violent conflicts over break-away regions Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh and the development of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian nation-states have worked in tandem to maintain a sense of insecurity, which has been utilized to make populations complacent toward nationalism. On the one hand, each South Caucasus nation, similar to former Yugoslav states, has become established in some way or another through the discourse of war, which "demanded there to be a fear of people with other ethnicities or religions, a fear of 'the Others', grounded in a feeling that one's own group was under threat" (Hamrud and Wassholm 2014). On the other hand, it can be said that Russia's influence over the region has had and continues to have "the capacity to subdue or escalate tensions as needed to maximize its political influence over the relevant country" (Puddington 2017). Of course, Russia's influence over the region is not divorced from the influence that Eurocentric ex-colonial states have within the binary construct of neocolonial geo-political power struggles over the South Caucasus. While in Russia's case the South Caucasus states are kept under tight militarized control, in the case of Eurocentric ex-colonial states, South Caucasus states have to contend with neoliberal economic and political policies that keep their populations indebted to national and international financial institutions as a result of structural adjustment policies.

Within the Georgian context the "Other", which is perceived to constitute a threat to the Georgian nation is the Russian "other". Nationalist narratives are widespread throughout Georgia and these narratives include not only Russians as "other" but any other minority groups that live within the borders of Georgia. Similarly, nationalist narratives are present in both the Armenian and Azerbaijani contexts and in both nation-states the "other" not only constitutes the "enemy" across the conflict divide, but also the "enemy" or perceived threat from within own borders. Within the militarized contexts of these nations, nationalism becomes not only about defining and preserving identity along ethnic lines, but also along gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, and class lines. Any deviation from the hegemonic national identity of each context threatens the "security" of said nation and casts all non-conforming people as "enemies" or "traitors" of that nation. Among these groups are women, LGBTQI persons, religious minorities, poor people, and those with a lower status within society such as sex workers, homeless people, the displaced, people with disabilities, and so on.

To be a woman in such a context is to carry the double burden of motherhood and victimization as can be seen through the nation-army concept adopted by the Armenian government in 2017, which promotes "closer integration of Armenia's military and society" (Abrahamyan 2017). Within this context, women are cast as

weak and victims in need of protection from men. Thereby, women are expected to birth male soldiers, who will be able to "protect" them, while those same men serve the patriarchal system, which encourages domination over "others", especially women. Women in Georgia and Azerbaijan are also expected to take on similar gender roles of all-sacrificing mothers, submissive wives, and victims in need of protection from so-called external forces. In the past decade of increased liberalization in Georgia and to a significant degree in Armenia and Azerbaijan, "European values" get cast as the "external forces" which threaten the "traditional values" of the South Caucasus societies. Traditional values here imply heteronormative, patriarchal, and nationalistic norms, which often rely on women taking on and maintaining acceptable feminine gender roles in relation to men, family structures, and the state apparatus. In many ways, the gender roles expected of women living in the South Caucasus are similar across the board. Nayereh Tohidi writes of the characteristics attributed to an ideal Azerbaijani woman, which include "'honor (namoos)'; feminine shame (haya); chastity and modesty/prudery (ismat); virginity before marriage; beauty and tact; high education (especially in urban areas); self-sacrificing motherhood; docility and subservience towards her husband; home-making skills; endurance; ethnic loyalty; and endogamy" (Tohidi 1996). Most of these attributes are also relevant for women living in Armenia and Georgia today, especially those living in the regions and peripheries to the capital. These gender norms manifest through limitations on women's lives, which escalate to violence against women if any attempt to break free from those limitations is made.

Since the early 1990s with the advent of violent conflicts that swept the South Caucasus, women have often been at the forefront of peacebuilding. Some of the roles they have taken on include "organizing protests such as the Women's Peace Train in Georgia, to negotiating prisoner-of-war exchanges on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, [through which] they demonstrated that the politics of war and peace was not an exclusively masculine domain" (Walsh 2015). Since then, women have also been involved within a number of peacebuilding efforts mainly through civil society efforts with a clear barrier, however, to any meaningful participation at the political level of negotiations. As a strategy to break through this barrier, women's organizations in the region have utilized international agreements around the Women, Peace and Security agenda and rallied for the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women's participation in peace processes. Despite the importance of this resolution to balance the heavily male-dominated elite level of political decision making with regards to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, criticism over how the resolution is

being militarized is important to consider. Anna Nikoghosyan argues that the resolution associates "gender with 'women in need of protection'" for which the military is a necessary institution to uphold, perpetuating gender stereotypes based on patriarchal notions of gender (Nikoghosyan 2017). Furthermore, the focus for implementing the resolution has centered primarily on "the increase of women's inclusion into the security sector and armed forces in the name of women's 'participation' in post-conflict reconstruction", which merely adds women to an already militarized, masculinist, and patriarchal institution that reproduces violence against women and other sectors within society (Nikoghosyan 2017).

The notion that simply adding women to heavily masculinized institutions will somehow alter those institutions to become more women-friendly or even feminist is based on sexist beliefs about women as a singular category capable of softening the edges of harsh masculine structures. Referring to the Georgian context, Eka Agdgomelashvili states that when she "analyzed the pre-election rhetoric of female politicians [...she] concluded that none of these women were interested in representing women as a social group" (Heinrich Böll Foundation 2011). Indeed, it is not surprising that "when a woman is let in by the men who control the political elite it is usually precisely because that woman has learned the lessons of masculinized political behavior well enough not to threaten male political privilege" (Enloe 1989). To challenge such masculinized political behavior, if not the patriarchal systems as a whole, is to open oneself up for a set of obstacles and challenges that can potentially threaten one's livelihood and/or ability to continue living safely in the South Caucasus. As mentioned by Gohar Shahnazaryan from a well-known women's NGOs in Armenia, obstacles arise "in large part because we are always positioning ourselves as feminists, which automatically makes us 'radical' and 'women who are challenging the traditional patriarchal family'" (Shahnazaryan 2011). Indeed, the organization and women human rights defenders from this particular organization actively challenging gender norms and patriarchal structures in Armenia have been subject to smear campaigns, threats to their lives and loved ones, and general violent backlash. In Azerbaijan, the well-known case of female journalist Khadija Ismayilova is a case in point with regards to how challenging corrupt patriarchal states can lead to public shaming and imprisonment.

Faced with the challenge of increased militarization in Armenia and Azerbaijan, a growing nationalist movement in Georgia and the region as a whole, as well as violent backlash when challenging gender norms and patriarchal values, women's organizations, groups, and activists keep resisting and continue advocating for gender democracy, peace, and feminist justice in the South Caucasus. The next and

last section highlights some of the ways this is done, including the challenges faced, and the ways in which these challenges are overcome.

## **Key Findings and Analysis of In-Depth Interviews**

### **Overview of the Work Focus, Visions, and Methods**

In total 16 organizations and groups in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have been interviewed, all of which work through NGO structures. Only one group working outside of the NGO structure was interviewed in Armenia, which is indicative of the predominance of professionalization and NGO-ization in the field of women's rights and peacebuilding in the region. Due to the limited number of organizations that combine women and peace in their work, most of the organizations that have been interviewed are based in the capital city of the respective country. One organization interviewed in Armenia is based in Gyumri while the rest work with women all over Armenia, including regions close to conflict divides. All of the interviewed organizations in Georgia have branches in the different regions of Georgia where their work is mainly concentrated, although their headquarters are in Tbilisi. All of the organizations interviewed in Azerbaijan are also based in the capital with some focusing on working with women in the regions.

In Georgia, the interviewed organizations work towards lobbying for peace on the political level, supporting the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, economic and social empowerment of displaced women living near the conflict divides, providing different social services and aid, collecting and publishing the stories of women affected by conflicts, providing small grants for women's initiatives. In Armenia, the activities of the interviewed organizations and groups range from raising awareness about women's situation in conflict regions (particularly villages close to conflict divides and women living in Nagorno-Karabakh), to non-formal educational activities focused on building capacity for conflict transformation or resolution, conflict management, protection of human rights, women's empowerment, gender equality and self-care, to conferences, public events, women's support groups, collection of oral histories, research and making films. In Azerbaijan, the interviewed organizations focus on human rights, sexual and reproductive health, women's participation in political decision making, advocating for the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, civic and peace education, trust building and dialogue, empowerment of young women, culture of peace, improving the lives of displaced women, democracy building, and conflict transformation or resolution.

The common thread that runs through the visions of all interviewed organizations and groups is the social, economic, and political empowerment of women and marginalized groups from the grassroots to the level of government. On the grassroots level, several organizations in all three contexts use non-formal education, economic empowerment programs, and service provision for the attainment of the abovementioned vision. The theory of change here is that through raising the awareness of women about their human rights, gender equality, and harmful stereotypes, in addition to providing them with opportunities and access to resources for their lives to become more livable, women on the margins will rise up to levels of decision making for the benefit of their own and their community members' lives. On the civil society level, several organizations in all three contexts employ people to people methods and confidence building for preparing young people, women, and conflict-affected groups for dialogue meetings across conflict divides. This is also a way to build capacity for the women that learn confidence building skills and practice them with women across the conflict divide to advocate for the inclusion of these women in peace processes at higher levels. Several organizations based in all three contexts also have a direct focus on advocacy at the higher level to push for women's participation in peace processes.

## **Key Values in Theory and in Practice**

In order to draw out the values that the interviewed organizations hold with regards to their work with women and peace, we first focused on the values that the organizations claim to have and the ways in which they practice them within their work. There were many values that were repeated by organizations both within country contexts as well as across contexts. Here we underline the main values that were expressed along all three contexts.

Inclusion, especially of marginalized groups, for the purpose of attaining sustainable peace was mentioned by several organizations in all contexts. This value encompasses broad processes of inclusion at all levels, including advocating for bringing more women and groups directly affected by the issues at hand to decision-making processes. Here a connection can be made with representation and participation. In this sense, inclusion is not only about adding marginalized groups to the mix but ensuring that they are given the space to actively take part and represent themselves as was mentioned by one Georgian organization with regards to rural women. The conviction that someone with more institutional privilege and access cannot speak for those whom she claims to represent was quite strong for this particular interviewee. Meaningful participation through inclusion as a value was mentioned by several other organizations across the three contexts,

yet the reality of structures such as NGOs, which plan and implement projects on behalf of beneficiaries creates a dilemma for truly practicing inclusion in non-hierarchical ways. After all, simply by saying "inclusion", a power relation is created where certain people in positions of power "include" those who seem to have been left out. Of course, in many cases the organizations that value inclusion understand the limitations of this concept in practice and choose to find the best ways to ensure that the voices of those who do not have institutional power can reach higher levels. As mentioned by one Georgian organization: "We take the ideas which our colleagues from the regions have, and we help them with advocating these ideas on the central governmental level or in local government".

A connection with inclusivity and tolerance is also made in our analysis. Many of the organizations mentioned the tolerance for people's differences as a key value for the shaping of democratic and inclusive processes. Tolerance also ties in to the value of anti-discrimination, which holds gender balance and equality at high regard. Although this value is meaningful and useful in the South Caucasus context, tolerance can also come at a cost for those whom society generally regards as in need of tolerating at best and intolerable at worst. A case in point was made by one of the interviewed Armenian organizations. By including diverse groups of people, the organization creates opportunities for others to learn more, interact with the "other" and better understand and acknowledge the other's presence in the common context, and thereby creates more tolerance for difference. The issue with this approach is evident in the way it was framed – in a sense giving a chance to the dominant group to become exposed to the marginalized group (for example, meeting a minority group, such as LGBTQI people helps the dominant group (perceived to be the majority) to tolerate the minority group). This is problematic from a power perspective: Who is tolerating who? Who has the power to tolerate who? There is a fine line here of "including" the "other" for the sake of the "dominant group" to learn, but it does not center those at the margins. This is an important dilemma to ponder for organizations and groups that wish to be inclusive in a truly empowering way. If the marginalized group is in the room to shift the dialogue from business as usual, especially when it comes to peace processes, to a transformative engagement, then their inclusion must be based on a transparent understanding of power relations and actions for collective power and resource sharing.

Feminist values were mentioned by several organizations, but not all organizations identified as feminist and/or approached the term in a welcoming manner. We link this mainly to two things: first, the term "feminist" is often misunderstood and holds stigmas of "man-hating" or "lesbianism", and as such, feminism can be

perceived as too "Western" or too "radical" for the context of the South Caucasus. To identify oneself as feminist is to challenge these stigmas, which can be difficult to do if you are invested in gaining institutional power in a patriarchal society. Secondly, there is a general lack of information and/or spread of misinformation surrounding this term, and more awareness is necessary for those people who certainly practice feminist values to feel empowered in claiming the term for themselves. Of those organizations in all three contexts that identified with feminist values, the key points mentioned were rejection of violence, non-violence, as well as anti-militarism. Rejection of violence includes rejection of hate speech, discrimination, and harmful stereotypes. Several organizations mentioned that by non-violence they mean a non-violent resolution of the conflicts in the region, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At least two organizations mentioned the principle or value of "Do No Harm", which falls under the category of non-violence as a method of relating to others as well as a value in the process of planning, implementing, following up, and carrying out all activities, projects, and programs.

The one key value, which had contradictory responses was the value of anti-militarism. In all three contexts, strong beliefs about the rejection of militarization were mentioned by several organizations. However, it was the perspectives of those interviewees who struggled with anti-militarism that give the most insight into the weight of the context on women's imaginaries regarding war and peace. Some organizations tie in human security with anti-militarization as in the case of one Georgian organization with the following analysis: "Conflict brings threat to a person's well-being and mental health and creates risks for each generation of the family – disadaptation, dysfunction risks, on all levels". A strong conviction that in an ideal world, we would not need armies was expressed by another Georgian interviewee who perceived the "involvement of women in the army as ridiculous". Yet another Georgian interviewee who expressed a similar opinion regarding opposition to the army and to war, went on to state that the option should be available to enter the armed forces if someone has the wish to do so. Here the value of anti-discrimination is relevant to mention, because from the perspective of gender equality, of course, women should have equal access to any and all institutions as do men. But if we go along this line of thought, we get tricked into accepting militaries as a given and as the norm, thereby conveniently failing to criticize the military institution from a feminist perspective as one that functions to—quite frankly—produce violence in the world. As one of the Armenian interviewees with a more critical position on the matter states: "The question is

about the whole chaotic cycle of violence, which is the reality we live in – and that cycle of violence is where women always suffer as a result".

It is also interesting to see similar patterns of speaking about war and anti-militarism that women's organizations across the Armenian and Azerbaijani context have. In two interviews – one with an Azerbaijani interviewee and another with an Armenian interviewee – both speakers used a similar method of speaking out against war and militarism, while at the same time ensuring that their political positions regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which reflected the accepted state positions of each country, was made known. As such their positions accepted war as the norm, while their speech expressed a desire for an end to the war. Given the contexts of the two countries, these contradictions can be understood as tactics for surviving as civil society organizations in militarized and patriarchal societies. This is not to say that interviewees responding in this way have not been affected by socialization in contexts of nationalist, militarist, and patriarchal reality and also do, in fact, hold these beliefs that normalize war and militarism. At the same time, however, given the increasingly shrinking space for civil society to act in more critical ways within the Azerbaijani context and given the increasing militarization and nationalism developing in Armenia, especially since 2016, the space for critical action, much less critical reflection is often evaded for the sake of security. This is alarming given the urgency of how the unresolved conflicts in the region continue to affect people's lives in general, but especially people living in regions close to conflict divides, the displaced, civilians living in the conflict zones, women, and other marginalized groups. And when considering the cost of war, the political and economic implications, as well as the deepening hatred across ethnically-framed lines, the last thing any civil society and/or group working toward social justice should do is contribute to maintaining the violent systems that profit from keeping populations living in fear and scarcity.

## **Understanding of Patriarchal Values and Traditional Gender Roles**

For the most part, the organizations interviewed acknowledged and had a critical analysis with regards to gender norms and patriarchal values within their contexts. A general agreement can be made among these organizations that gender norms are composed of stereotypes that require of women to be mothers, wives, caregivers, and the "weaker sex", so to speak. For men, the requirements are different and link to expectations of men to be breadwinners, protectors, decision makers, and the "stronger sex". When tying these expectations to the realities, which arise in conflict and/or post-conflict contexts, we see that women often take

on traditionally "male" roles such as becoming the breadwinners in the family due to either the men serving in the military, having died in combat, and/or going abroad in search of economic opportunities. In all three contexts, this is spoken of as a negative development, because it puts an extra burden on women to not only continue with their traditional gender roles, but to uphold male gender roles as well. In Azerbaijan, the context with regards to men leaving their families to migrate abroad for work is the same as in Armenia. And the burden is the same for women to take on a double role, with "the most disadvantaged groups ... [being] rural women, second<sup>21</sup> wives and displaced women" (Tohidi 1996).

Tying this to the question of patriarchy, one of the organizations interviewed in Armenia asked a question when reflecting on patriarchal norms in her context: "How to understand patriarchy in our society if most men don't have jobs? What traditional Armenian family or relation are we speaking about if the household's fathers are outside of the country for 11 months for work?" For this particular interviewee, the question of gender roles and patriarchal values translated to a kind of reality which prevails for many women in smaller cities, towns, and villages where women have to deal with the burden of additional work by taking on men's expected roles. This, in turn, adds an additional burden for women who stray from the expected gender role ascribed to them as women and thereby, are looked down on by society as losing their feminine status. So, in a sense, they lose their "womanliness" in the absence of men to practice their "manliness", but without gaining any of the privileges that men have in their societies. Although this interviewee had reservations with regards to the term "gender" and whether or not it should be something to focus on, her perspective on patriarchal values and realities reflect a tension between a feminist narrative and an internalized patriarchal narrative of women's lived realities. This tension exists in several of the women interviewed across all three contexts who were weary of speaking about women's issues through a gender perspective or reflecting on patriarchy in a deeper way. Given the context of patriarchy and militarization, it comes as no surprise that women become instrumentalized in the continuation of their own oppression through denial of their experiences as women as being different from those of men. In a militarized context, it also becomes a project of upholding nationalism in the face of outside forces such as Russia and/or the West, which requires that women be in unity with their men, perhaps before (if ever) they

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<sup>21</sup> This does not refer to a legal phenomenon, but the informal practice of starting second families (Tohidi 1996).

should be in unity with other women, whether within their national borders or across conflict divides.

Yet, some of the thoughts expressed by these few interviewees in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia resonated with one of the more critical positions held by another Armenian interviewee who expressed that "to separate into women and men or any division does not make sense". While many of the interviewees focused on a more liberal position by stating the importance of gender equality, the more critical perspectives made connections to gender, patriarchy, and the war system in a more holistic way. Referring to the war system, the critical Armenian interviewee expressed the view that women and children are always suffering as a result of the violence, but the lines of victim and violator are not always so clearly defined along gender divisions. And in fact, men who are kidnapped during conflict are also subject to rape. In a sense "everyone becomes a woman" during war, according to this interviewee. Of course, the interviewees who did not have such a deep reflection of this system merely defended the position that it is not about women or men, but about humans. Unfortunately, such a position denies the fact that women are disproportionately affected by violence and men have certain privileges that women do not have, which often makes it necessary to speak of women separately.

Deeper reflections were offered by some of the organizations interviewed regarding the connection to war and gender. Links were made between the expected gender roles of women and how women are often excluded from participating in peace processes. Differences in perspective with regards to causes and solutions were mainly along two frameworks – one being an essentialist view of gender and the other being a constructivist view. Some of the interviewed organizations strongly held the belief that women were either by their nature or socialization more peaceful and able to ameliorate conflict situations. Others held strongly to the belief that women could not be placed in a simple, clear-cut singular category and that women should not be expected to only be peaceful. As part of this conviction that women cannot be limited by traditional gender roles, one of the Azerbaijani interviewees expressed a strong view that women should not have to prove that they are good enough, skilled enough, and/or knowledgeable enough to be part of peace negotiations. Yet, the patriarchal context in which women work often reinforces underappreciation and doubt of women's capacities to be part of political processes by using lack of women's skills and expertise in negotiation and mediation as justification for their exclusion. This was reflected by one of the Georgian organizations interviewed who mentioned how the perception that a woman's place is not in peacebuilding is one of the ways in which patriarchal

structures attempt to limit women's entry and meaningful participation in peace processes. Interestingly enough, another organization working in Azerbaijan held a different perspective stating that "The Azerbaijani society has an ambiguous attitude to women, but there are definitely areas, where women's role is accepted, and peace activities is one of them". It is very likely that both the stereotype that women's place is not in peacebuilding and the opposing idea that women's place is, in fact in peacebuilding are informed by gender norms and traditional patriarchal values. In the one case, it is not acceptable for women to be part of peace processes because they are expected to be at home and uninvolved in politics. In the other case, it is acceptable for women to be part of peace processes because they are perceived as peaceful by virtue of their sex. In either case, women's roles are defined by limited and limiting beliefs with regards to women as a singular category and leave no room for the full potential of women with all their diversity to be expressed and taken into account.

To conceive of the complexity of gender and patriarchal values in conflict contexts is not an easy feat for many organizations working with women's rights. Yet across the board, all organizations had done their own thinking around these concepts, albeit the levels of their critical consciousness varied. Although in some of the interviews, the positions seemed not to dive deeply enough into the roots of violence, which define and produce both the gender system and the war system. All of the interviewed organizations more often than not were able to articulate in meaningful ways the issues that women faced in their contexts and connect those issues to at least one oppressive system. For some, it was the gender system, patriarchy, militarism; for others, it was the economic system, authoritarian governments, and/or the traditional family/community prevailing over women's lives. And many still connected a number of those systems in order to explain the intersecting oppressions women face in militarized contexts. Regardless of whether they named the pressures and limitations ruling over women's lives in their respective contexts as gender norms or patriarchal values, none of the organizations interviewed denied that women deal with specific issues that make life difficult in specific ways that are different from male realities. Unfortunately, the deeper links between patriarchy and militarism were made by a select few organizations interviewed.

## **Challenging Gender Norms and Patriarchal Values**

There are two formats through which organizations challenge patriarchal values and gender norms in the work that they do. First of all, it is through the projects that they implement. And secondly, it is within the projects that they implement.

The first part refers to the kind of projects that organizations implement. For example, where non-formal educational projects are concerned, women and young people gain the language, knowledge, and tools with which to reflect, analyze, and act upon their own lives, their families, friends, and decision makers. With oral history projects, women's stories of difficulties in their lives due to limiting patriarchal structures gain visibility and voice in society, thereby both attracting others with similar stories and influencing those with the power to change narratives, realities, and actions that continue to perpetuate violence against women and other marginalized groups. Some of the work that organizations do, where they bring women from across conflict divides, aim to challenge the isolation of women from other women based on differences in ethnicity or religion. Through projects focused on advocacy, for example with UNSCR 1325, organizations challenge the local, national, and international structures to accommodate women affected by conflict at all levels where decisions are being made for the resolution of conflicts and the future of peace. Yet, the question of how exactly this will challenge the actual structures, spaces, and formats where and through which decisions are made is not clear. In fact, there seems to be an underlying assumption that women, by virtue of being women, will bring something different to the table. Some of the ways that organizations, especially in Georgia have worked with this is to focus on the human security element, which encompasses daily concerns for basic needs and rights of people, especially women affected by conflict. In dialogue meetings with Armenian and Azerbaijani organizations, the need for agreeing on common issues and a common agenda is also acknowledged if or when the space opens up for women to sit around the negotiating table where they would be able to speak in a unified voice.

Although there is a lot of work being done with UNSCR 1325, which focuses primarily on the inclusion and meaningful participation of women in negotiation processes, some, although very few, of the organizations interviewed expressed the view that women should also be able to enter the military according to UNSCR 1325 demands. In this sense, certain patriarchal values are being reproduced, which view military structures and the war system as inevitable and ascribe masculine notions of strength to processes for achieving peace. Yet as was mentioned in the theory section of this paper, war, violence, and weapons are a significant factor in masculine identity and crucial for the continued functioning of patriarchy, a system under which women are devalued at best and eliminated at worst. If women are to enter military institutions and contribute to the perpetuation of war, their role will be merely supporting masculine ways of being for the benefit of patriarchy, which will continue to oppress women as well as men.

The way in which projects are implemented is equally important, if not more important to challenging patriarchal values and gender norms in the work that women's organizations do. This brings us to our second point regarding the methods that women's organizations employ to challenge gender norms and patriarchal values when implementing projects and furthering the work they do for women and peace in the South Caucasus. Many of the organizations in all three contexts that work with young women in regions, in areas close to conflict divides, and with displaced communities must contend with the prevalence of both the patriarchy of the home or village/community and/or the internalization of patriarchy within the young women themselves. One of the Armenian interviewees spoke of the difficulty with which she gets young women to attend seminars, workshops, and trainings: "They will think thousands of times whether to go somewhere or not. They question themselves on whether a good girl would do that or not. This is the question they have to consider with every choice they make". The way this particular organization deals with this difficulty is by reassuring the young women, for example by giving all details about the hotel, venue, and transportation, so they can feel safe to attend events. Once they actually come, the organization has a tactic of slowly exposing them to critical thought regarding human rights, women's rights, peace and conflict in order to draw them out of their comfort zones, so they can begin to question norms in their own lives.

In many cases, organizations working with particular themes of peace, women, security, etc. will not be able to speak about women's issues and peace right away when they go into a community. This is the case with all three contexts, especially with regards to rural areas. In these cases, organizations will start off by speaking about human rights as a starting point. In one case, an Azerbaijani organization states: "We use different strategies to make our target group understand their inner side – helping them to start with their personal transformation process first instead of blaming the 'other side'". As such, the core concept of conflict and its transformation or resolution are provided using non-formal education methods based on a human rights approach. Organizations create safe and supportive spaces for young women especially to reflect and think critically around the issues prevalent in their own lives. The conversations that get facilitated by organizations with a feminist approach will be geared toward questioning gender norms, femininity, masculinity, and the ways in which patriarchal values have become internalized. If the organization has made the connections to war and militarism, these will also be slowly presented as additional systems of oppression in addition to gender and patriarchy.

One of the other ways through which organizations challenge gender norms and patriarchal values is through setting examples of how the world can be approached and therefore organized differently. For several organizations, sharing of personal experiences whether of those organizing discussions, oral history projects, trainings or various other events or of those attending those events was an important way to set an example. Particularly when challenging militarism, one Armenian organization mentioned that they encouraged concrete actions in daily life, for example not using militaristic language, paying attention to ways in which people act, participate, or dress in militaristic modes of expression, and questioning media that promotes militarism. Organizations that work with personal stories of women also work with setting agreed upon ground rules and through this create safe spaces of confidentiality, which in turn builds and strengthens trust. In such an environment, women feel freer to open up, share their experiences, and exchange struggles, which directly impacts their sense of empowerment in a patriarchal society.

Although there are many ways through which the women's organizations that we interviewed challenge gender norms and patriarchal values, there are also ways in which these are being reproduced. We could not draw on concrete actions through which these organizations reproduce gender norms and patriarchal values, and we can only rely on assumptions regarding the conceptualization of gender, patriarchy, and militarism that some of these organizations hold. As such, we can say that through the act of not placing significance on gender, patriarchy and militarism as systems of oppression for women, the few organizations with these views both cannot notice or criticize and cannot act upon oppressive behaviors that are of a patriarchal and militaristic nature in the work that they do. Furthermore, some, albeit few of the organizations hold on to the belief that war is inevitable, militarism is necessary, and women must be involved in the war system as a whole. This way of thinking and thereby working within the sphere of women's rights and peacebuilding can only benefit the patriarchal and militaristic systems, which keep women in fear, oppressed, and violated in their own homes, workplaces, and streets, in political, economic, and various other fields.

## **Challenges to Challenging Gender Norms and Patriarchal Values**

The different challenges and limitations that women's organizations face in their work kept coming up throughout the interviews and were often connected to the difficult contexts that these organizations work in. Often limitations to funding and restrictive donor criteria, as well as the wider limitations that states place on civil

society organizations, especially in Azerbaijan, merely exacerbate the challenges that organizations have when working to challenge gender norms and patriarchal values in their societies. In Georgia, for example where there is a national action plan for UNSCR 1325, the challenge often is that the implementation process is flawed and incomplete. To add another layer to this challenge, it is generally the case that connections, which were made within civil society across conflict divides, have been difficult to reestablish after the August 2008 war. And due to decreased funding, there are less and less opportunities to talk to one another across the conflict divide. Furthermore, on the civil society level there is no concrete strategy for peacebuilding, which is mainly due to having little access to these processes. Access to the peace processes, especially on the political level, is limited for women across all three South Caucasus contexts mainly due to the continued mentality about women's role in such processes, which perceives women's voices as insignificant and insufficient, keeping the process a rather male-dominated one. In cases when women do take up positions in politics and spaces of decision making, they are a minority and therefore unable to influence political processes for the benefit of the women's agenda of human security, peace, and justice. Not surprisingly, in these cases, women are "pushed to play the men's game", as was mentioned by one Georgian interviewee, and, as a result, they lose the values that are aligned with peace and feminism. In the case of Azerbaijan, as stated by one interviewee, "because of lack of democracy [there is an even] weaker influence of civil actors on official politics".

Another challenge faced by women's organizations in the South Caucasus regards the insecurity and low confidence of women to partake in any processes outside of the home and their expected gender roles. Here there is both the issue of actual security as well as generations of being told women are not good enough, not knowledgeable enough, not experienced or skilled enough to be part of any decision-making processes that can affect their lives. This is a typical patriarchal mechanism, which when brought to the family level translates to the parents, often the father as the dominant figure, deciding on behalf of the children, often the daughter, what she should say or do in her life. For organizations that work to bring young women outside of their usual environments into spaces where they can discuss issues pertaining to their lives, the challenge is not only the external limitations placed by families and society, not allowing these young women to attend, but also the internal processes taking place within the young women themselves that make them question their value, worth, and importance in being part of alternative learning environments. Often this can translate to women not even getting to the part of filling out applications for different programs that

organizations aim to carry out. But even when women do come to workshops, trainings, and other kinds of events, when it comes to the part of taking initiative, many women hesitate by thinking that they either cannot do something or that it is not their place to act. This was a challenge mentioned by organizations that work with small grants, especially with economic development programs where women have fears around getting it wrong, making mistakes, and failing to live up to expectations. Often, these organizations encourage women to take initiative regardless of their fears, and by actually taking initiative, women become empowered to see the achievements they reach and the impact they have in their communities.

## Conclusion

Critical feminist theory posits the existence of multiple feminisms, often by pointing to the fact that the category of woman itself is non-homogenous, thereby feminism is as diverse as women themselves. Referring to identity, Judith Butler argues that categories "are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (Butler 1992). Throughout this paper, we acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives regarding gender and patriarchy held by the different women's organizations and groups working toward peace, conflict transformation or resolution, and women's rights in the South Caucasus. All perspectives were important in getting a clear picture of the ways in which women's organizations working for women's rights, peace, and conflict transformation or resolution conceptualize gender norms and patriarchal values, in addition to the ways in which they face these. We saw that a critical few organizations interviewed held firm values with regards to rejection of violence and patriarchy. These were the organizations that also held critical views with regards to UNSCR 1325 and inclusion of women in the security apparatus as mere pawns for the continued functioning of war and patriarchy as business as usual. Yet, even those organizations that did not have this critical approach had some level of analysis of and worked with violence as it pertains to various structures affecting women negatively. For these organizations, it was interesting to see that while they challenged some facets of the manifestations of patriarchal and gendered violence, they still held somewhat nationalistic views, which in turn justified militarism and war as a means of defense. In this sense, some components of patriarchy are reproduced in the thinking of these organizations and can pose a challenge to other organizations working to challenge patriarchal structures within a number of spheres.

For one, given the limited number of women's NGOs in the region, this poses a challenge to collaborating for the women, peace, and security agenda in a unified manner. Perhaps ultimately, some common causes can be identified, while areas of disagreement can be dealt with separately. But additionally, this can mean that more women's voices become co-opted by the patriarchal, nationalistic, and militaristic systems currently operating and growing in the region. And given that in order to have any legitimacy even as a civil society organization in these three contexts is dependent on the institutional capital and the connections to donors, government officials, and international actors that organizations have, voices of women with unpopular demands for the eradication of war, weapons provisions, feminist peace and justice, and so on become even more marginalized, if not completely silenced. If structures such as patriarchy, the war system and gender are built in such a way so as to keep reproducing themselves within the state, society, politics, economy, and institutions, how can a transformation take place through the work that NGOs do? Perhaps one suggestion offered by an interviewee can get us to think in a more radical feminist direction: we must continue to problematize, question, and think critically. Let us also consider rejecting all authority.

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Women in Development

Women's Resource Center

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Advice Centre for Women "Sakhli"

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TASO Foundation

De Collective

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