

Breaking the Glass Ceiling of Peacekeeping in Nogorno-Karabakh

The September 27, 2020 war in Nogorno-Karabakh was the latest in a string of conflicts since the turn of the last century (Washington Post, 2020), in an autonomous region that is 95 percent ethnic Armenian, but is officially part of Azerbaijan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). In a deadly brew of ethno-religious divides, nationalism, state-sponsored hatred, and international indifference, 37,000 soldiers from both sides have died, plus an unknown number of civilians (PBS, 2020 and LA Times, 2020). Past and present peace negotiations mediated by Russia, Iran, and the United States (U.S.) have only yielded tenuous ceasefires. In this time, only the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan and their mediators have ever been involved; resulting in 30 years of negotiations without the constituents of the disputed territory and without the voices of women.

Not invited to the table, Armenian and Azerbaijani women are getting around it. There have been a number of women-run grassroots peace-building organizations that have sprung up over the past 30 years in response to the growing violence. This paper will argue that these small, grassroots efforts by women are doing more to promote peace and security than large, international organizations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Amnesty International, and the Red Cross by discussing women-run, peace-building NGO's, grassroots negotiation efforts, and women de-miners.

Peace-Building NGOs: Everyone is a Peace-keeper

These small, peace-building organizations range from registered Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) to groups on Facebook, and ad-hoc community organizations. None of these organizations received government support or much media attention, but they all had one goal: ending the incessant violence in Nogorno-Karabakh by supporting dialogue between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and educating the public about the peace-building process.

The Azerbaijan Department of Transcaucasian Women's Dialogue (ADTD) is an NGO that specializes in educating women and youth about methods of grassroots peace-building. Their three-day training course, "Women's Role in Peace Building Process," has had over 1,200 participants thus far. With 60 chapters throughout Azerbaijan, they teach women how to be peace-keepers in their own communities and methods for inter-ethnic dialogue. Elmira, one youth participant from Baku describes what she learned about being a peace-keeper:

When I tell people that I am a peacemaker, they are surprised; they think that peacemakers are only military men. I always tell them about the student club that has become a part of my life. If more people knew about this, then we wouldn't listen to xenophobes for which conflicts are the goal and means of existence (ADTD, 2021).

The potential of empowering women and young people as agents of peace is enormous. Women are 48 percent of the population in Azerbaijan and children (under 18) account for another 25

percent (CIA, 2021); therefore, empowering women and children as peacemakers could normalize relations with Armenia.

The Coalition for Peace (CFP) in Armenia, integrates women's organizations and individuals into active peacemaking members. Founder Ilona Ter-Minasyan, publishes a newsletter dedicated to understanding peace values and highlighting women's contributions. CFP also facilitates an educational workshop for children called, "Peace Lessons," which familiarizes students with UNSCR 1325, which requires equal participation of women in peace and security efforts (UN, 2000). Nora Hakobyan, founder of CFP says, "We believe that joint participation of women of the South Caucasus in the process of regional conflict resolution will be fruitful and it will result in peaceful settlement and prevention of new conflicts (Personal interview, 2021)."

Armine Mikaelyan is the founder of Nor Luyce, a center for peace in Nogorno-Karabakh focusing on empowering young women. Their "Peace Center" is unique in the region in Gyumri, north-western Armenia. Girls learn peace-building and dialogue techniques at the Center so they can express themselves, understand other points of view, and become "peace ambassadors" (Nor Luyce, 2020). Mikaelyan says, "Peace not only means the absence of war but our relationship with the people around us. In order to secure this kind of peace it is necessary to seriously consider the issues of youth training in peacemaking" (Personal interview, 2021). Women in Azerbaijan and Armenia are already doing the hard work it takes to build and promote peace. They are succeeding where their governments have not in decades of peace talks. These grassroots efforts are proving to be powerful tools for the next generation of peacemakers.

Women in Grassroots Negotiations

Another vital segment of the peace-building process between Armenia and Azerbaijan are women in the negotiation process. Because women are not involved in formal negotiations, Armenian and Azerbaijani women lead in informal reconciliation: negotiating for the release of prisoners, de-mining efforts, and securing the safe-passage for refugees, journalists, and other civilians.

Arzu Abdullayeva of Azerbaijan and Anahit Bayandur of Armenia successfully brokered prisoner of war (POW) exchanges and promoted dialogue following the 1988 Nogorno-Karabakh war, for which they won the Olof Palme Peace Prize in 1992. Abdullayeva and Bayandur, before her death in 2011 (Åland, 2011), have been working in reconciliation efforts with Armenia for the last 26 years. Borne by the memories of times when Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived side by side as neighbors and friends, they created the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and co-wrote the textbook, "Gender and Peace" (Mehdizade and Abubekirova, 2018). Their partnership in peace-building efforts in the South Caucasus represents one of the most enduring and successful cooperations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis to date.

Research compiled by Joan Johnson-Freese in her book, *Women, Peace, and Security*, shows that when women are involved in negotiations, peace agreements are 20 percent more likely to last at least two years, and they are 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years (pp. 138). This is because women have higher risks when there is war: they are more likely to die of

the indirect effects, lose sons and husbands, and are more likely to suffer economic devastation (pp. 19). Women are also the foundation of society and are often the first to know if violence is around the corner (pp. 29). Without stakeholders of half the population in formal negotiations, Armenia and Azerbaijan run the risk of leaving out vital perspectives in their search for peace.

In 2013, young Armenian and Azerbaijani activists Zaruhi Hovanesian and Khadija Ismailova jointly won the Young Women Caucasus Peace Award. Hovanesian founded “The Army in Reality,” an organization dedicated to eliminating corruption in the Armenian army. Ismailova, a journalist, is actively working to advance human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan while exiled in Sweden (Martirosyan and Lapitskii, 2013). These efforts point to enthusiasm in peace-building dialogues within the next generation.

Women at the Forefront of De-Mining

Women are championing de-mining efforts in border towns, benefiting civilians in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nogorno-Karabakh has one of the worst mine problems in the world, with over 50,000 explosives left in the small territory after the 1994 ceasefire agreement (Borgen Project, 2021). The issue affects villages and civilians on both sides of the border, as mostly children become the victims of their destructive effects. Livestock is also informally counted in the casualties in a place where even the loss of one sheep, can have devastating effects on poor families. Filmmakers Emily Mkrtychian and Jesse Soursourian tell the story of the women de-miners in their documentary, *Motherland* (Motherland, 2019). Says Shabo, one woman de-miner “The fear is there, my comrades have been blown up; but one thing is for sure, we do this job with a lot of love” (4:13). This issue has serious effects for both Armenians and Azerbaijanis and could be the impetus for further inter-dialogue efforts.

Opportunities for Reconciliation

Though the resolution of this conflict appears unreconcilable, with both countries accusing the other of human rights abuses, war crimes, and the destruction of cultural sites; as in the case of Liberia, grass-roots efforts have the potential to drastically shift a society toward peace even in seemingly hopeless situations (Gini Reticker, 2008). Large international organizations have proven apathetic to the deterioration of the peace process and human rights, yet there is much potential for long-lasting peace efforts between Armenian and Azerbaijan. Each side needs to see the humanity in the other, circumventing efforts to paint one side as inhuman or as conclusively abominable. Armenians and Azerbaijanis need more inroads for community-level dialogue. Peace will be possible only when enough Armenians and Azerbaijanis decide that the amount lost through continued conflict is more than the amount gained through military victory.

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