

Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia

## ***Women in Conflict and Reconstruction***

Summary



Eurasia Forum presented a seminar in Stockholm on 11 May 2012 on the topic Women in Armed Conflict and Reconstruction.

This seminar is part of an autumn 2012 thematic series on the topic *Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia*.  
More information: [http://www.forumeurasien.org/en\\_currentprojects.htm](http://www.forumeurasien.org/en_currentprojects.htm)

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## **Women and Conflict: a question of increasing importance**

In today's wars as many as nine out of ten victims are civilians<sup>1</sup>. Women suffer heavily both from the direct effects of war, which sometimes include the deliberate use of sexual violence, as well as from the devastation of social services and means of subsistence. Despite this, women are often excluded from decision making in preventive work and post-war reconstruction. In the last few years, however, the international community has started to pay more attention to the question of the role of women in conflict.

In receiving the verdict of the Special Court for Sierra Leone in April 2012, Liberia's ex-president Charles Taylor was sentenced for war crimes and crimes against humanity, among them sexual slavery. It was seen as a breakthrough against gender-related violence, as it is the first sentence against a former head of state, and in addition without the responsible perpetrator being physically present when the crime was committed.

The Nobel Peace Prize for 2011 focused on the constructive role of women in the transition of a country afflicted by war or oppressive governance to peace and higher popular participation. In their own different ways, Leyma Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia and Tawakkul Karman in Yemen demonstrated that women are not only active participants in society, but can also act as leaders in the transformation to peace and democratic participation.

## **The Caucasus and Central Asia: conflict, tradition and renewal**

### **Two regions stricken by conflict**

In parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia violent conflict erupted during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in the 1990s, all of which have left unsolved issues even today.

The two wars in Chechnya not only left tens of thousands dead, but resulted in the North Caucasus today being Russia's by far most violence-stricken region. All the three republics of the South Caucasus have been involved in armed conflicts, most recently in the 2008 war over South Ossetia. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh started under Soviet rule and then turned into a violent interstate conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and around one million refugees and IDPs.

In Central Asia, Tajikistan was badly affected by a prolonged civil war in the 1990s, leaving the country the poorest in the region with remaining fear of renewed instability. In Kyrgyzstan, two presidents have been forced out of the country in popular uprisings, most recently in 2010, when nearly one hundred people died. In the resulting power vacuum, ethnic and region-based violence erupted, claiming the lives of several times that amount. The violence also opened up old wounds, stemming from similar events in the early 1990s, which will now heal with even greater difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> There is of course considerable variation between conflicts, and the number depends on whether those injured, raped, forced to flee their homes, or die of poverty, disease and other effects of war are included. It is clear, however, that large parts of the population suffer, directly or indirectly, in most armed conflicts.



### Women in society

Before the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia from the early 18th century until the end of the 19th, there existed, using an oversimplification, two types of traditional society. Nomadic tribes inhabited the steppes, the deserts east of the Caspian, and swathes of the mountains, while sedentary agricultural societies dominated in the South Caucasus and the fertile areas of Central Asia. The sedentary societies were usually centred around patriarchal ownership of land resources, where religion - Islam or Christianity - played an important role in sustaining tradition. In nomadic societies, by contrast, women were often more equal contributors to sustenance. The seclusion of women, which came to characterise some of the sedentary societies, were not developed among the nomads.

The Soviet period meant far-reaching changes. Gender equality was officially proclaimed and women would participate on equal terms in society. In the Islamic societies in particular, the question of women's liberation became an element in the fight against religion and an active campaign, the so-called *hudjum* ("assault"), was conducted in order to make women remove the symbolic veil and become full participants in the economy. The clash with traditional society was profound and in a great many cases led to personal tragedy. At the same time, reforms such as public day care and near complete literacy rates for both sexes, gave many women the freedom to pursue alternative paths. Women also entered the (albeit often toothless) decision-making bodies through affirmative action.

Independence from the Soviet Union 20 years ago meant a partial return to preserved traditional patterns. Although religion in several of the countries today is under strict central control, customs such as bride kidnapping and polygamy have returned. In most countries the economy was ruined and along with it large parts of the social safety nets. For women, this meant a double burden of responsibility for subsistence as well as for family matters. As the affirmative action policy was abolished, personal power and networks became more important, which in general rendered men an advantage. Increased foreign influence, both in the form of liberal western practices and new, more conservative, Islamic movements, have also come to influence the position of women.

## Hesitant change

In 1995, the World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. According to *Eva Zillén* the timing was opportune for a women's conference and the Beijing platform contained statements with far-reaching consequences in a number of areas. At this time, after the fall of the Berlin Wall but before the "War on Terrorism", there was a focus on individual safety rather than state security, and the result was a twelve point programme on women's rights, not likely to have been approved today.

But within the area women, peace, and security, little progress was noted until the year 2000 and the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution for the first time mentioned women as actors in every phase of conflict. The Resolution had several goals; to increase the role of women in decision-making, to include a gender perspective in all peace and reconstruction projects, and to protect women and girls from gender-related violence.

Particular attention has been paid to counter sexual violence in conflict, a problem which was reconfirmed by the UN several years later in Resolutions 1820 and 1888, leading among other things to the appointment of a Special Representative by the General Secretary. Some progress has also been made regarding prosecution of perpetrators of sexual violence in armed conflict.

But when it comes to women's representation in politics and their participation in peace processes results are less convincing. Resolution 1889 (2009) stresses that all peace and reconstruction efforts shall include women. In practice, however, women are often excluded, in part because the negotiators often attempt to involve all warring parties to the conflict. The effect of this is that the interests of women, representing 50% of the population, are sacrificed in favour of those of marginal groups, often themselves responsible for war crimes. Today a common view is to treat peace negotiations and reconstruction work separately, with the argument that women's interests will be secured in the latter phase. But, as *Eva Zillén* points out, the important decisions are taken and resources allocated already in the peace negotiation with the actual result that women are often excluded.

## Hot and frozen conflicts

The lack of dialogue and awareness of the conditions of the adversary is a big obstacle to a solution of the conflicts in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the partner organisations of *Kvinna till Kvinna* in the region have had to spend some of their efforts just to establish means of contact. Women on both sides of the Karabakh conflict get the chance to meet on neutral ground, and it must be seen as a step forward that they do find common ground in their wish for peace, even if they cannot agree what peace should entail. For this reason it is especially important to focus efforts on young women, now that an ever larger fraction of the population has grown up with no memories of the war and in a highly polarised climate.



*Eva Zillén*



*Bonnie Bernström*

During and after the events in Osh and Jalal-Abad in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 there were reports of rape being used to intimidate the population, although it is not known to what extent due to deliberate under-reporting of the problem.

But women also frequently played an moderating role during the conflict with the result that violence could be avoided. This was possible since women, largely the driving force in the NGO sphere, were well organised. In the polarised post-conflict society, still looking to be rebuilt after the violence, women have also taken initiatives. *Bonnie Bernström* tells of how women, working with NGOs as well as in private enterprise, are taking steps to rebuild the ruined everyday life in Osh, but also about the importance of women being full participants in society before violence becomes a reality. Several domestic and international organisations working with reconciliation in the country now have women's participation on their agenda.

On paper, the odds are favourable. Women in Kyrgyzstan, as in large parts of the CIS, are over-represented in jobs requiring higher education. Despite this, salaries in the private sector of women performing equivalent work are lower than for men, and in politics women's influence is still low, particularly at high levels. At family level, women are often responsible for sustaining the household economically, a situation tolerated as long as the man formally remains head of the family. But this gender contract could come under pressure in the long run, in particular in a society with high unemployment and competition.

In the media, and to some extent within the population at large, there is still a scepticism towards women as decision-makers and entrepreneurs. This, as Bonnie Bernström points out, is obvious in the portrayal of female politicians, and in the risk of public slander.

For this reason, role models are important. Roza Otunbayeva became the first president of Kyrgyzstan after the events of 2010 - and the first woman to become president in the entire CIS area - and, even if her mandate was limited in time, her presidency became a clear sign that women cannot be excluded even from the country's highest positions.

## Further reading

A small selection of links for further reading.

### UN documents and Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security

About the Beijing platform: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/bfbeyond.htm>

1325: [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf)

1820: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No8/391/44/PDF/No839144.pdf>

1888: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No9/534/46/PDF/No953446.pdf>

1889: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No9/542/55/PDF/No954255.pdf>

## Women and conflict

EU External Action Service on women in conflict, peace and security

[http://eeas.europa.eu/human\\_rights/women/peace/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/women/peace/index_en.htm)

Operation 1325, run by seven Swedish organisations:

<http://operation1325.se/>

Kvinna till Kvinna project *Equal Power Lasting Peace*

<http://kvinnatillkvinna.se/>

<http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/>

Peacewomen, initiated by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, with plenty of information about implementation of the resolutions

<http://www.peacewomen.org/>

## The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

Conciliation Resources

<http://www.c-r.org/our-work/south-caucasus>

OSCE Minsk Group for the resolution of the Karabakh conflict

<http://www.osce.org/mg/66872>

## The conflict in south Kyrgyzstan

Final report from the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission

<http://www.kgzembind.in/Report%20%28English%29.pdf>

A more recent and detailed report from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Memorial, Freedom House

[http://nhc.no/filestore/Publikasjoner/Rapporter/2012/Rapport\\_2\\_12\\_ENG\\_net.pdf](http://nhc.no/filestore/Publikasjoner/Rapporter/2012/Rapport_2_12_ENG_net.pdf)

## Contact

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