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# **Feminist vision(s) of peace in frozen conflict settings: the case study of Georgia**

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## **Abstract**

Since the early stage of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict in 1992, women's organisations have been active in providing humanitarian support and in pursuing reconciliation efforts between Georgians and Abkhazians. Thirty years after the beginning of the conflict and with official negotiations stalled, women's organisations have continued to operate, especially at the grassroots level.

This research project seeks to understand the gender dynamics in the frozen conflict settings of Georgia and Abkhazia by looking at how the gendered impacts of the conflict influence women's engagement in peacebuilding. The peace efforts of women's organisations are examined from a gender lens to determine how gender is deployed and whether it affects the reconciliation activities between the parties. These initiatives are compared to feminist peace concepts, characteristics, and practices. In particular, the aim is to understand to what extent these initiatives explicitly or implicitly embrace and connect with feminist concepts of peacebuilding. In this regard, the research also explores how feminist peace is envisaged and realised at the grassroots level and in the context of the protracted conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia.

The research method chosen is a case study on Georgia, using a qualitative approach, specifically qualitative semi-structured expert interviews with five women's organisations involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation at the grassroots level in Georgia and Abkhazia.

Using thematic analysis, the thesis draws on the data collected to argue that, although with some differences between them, women's organisations in Georgia draw on feminist peace concepts and practices, but with some differences related to the protracted conflict situation: they adopt the conception of peace as an ongoing and constant process and in their peace initiatives they promote gender equality and women's empowerment among the women of the conflicting parties, rarely engaging in dialogue on a political solution.

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## **Introduction**

This research project aims to examine gender dynamics within the frozen conflict areas of Georgia and Abkhazia. The focus is on understanding how the conflict's gendered implications affect women's involvement in peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, it will explore the ways in which women participate in peacebuilding efforts within their communities and whether these actions align with feminist peacebuilding principles. To evaluate these practices, it will consider gender and peace understandings as key factors.

The research questions guiding these objectives are: (1) How do women's peacebuilding initiatives in the frozen conflict setting of Georgia contribute to conflict transformation? (2) To what extent do women's grassroots organisations and activities explicitly or implicitly embrace/connect with feminist concepts of peacebuilding?

Adopting a feminist perspective is relevant because, in both conflict and peacebuilding settings, women's issues and the dynamics of power and oppression are rarely integrated into the mainstream policies and programmes whereby the male experience is the standard (Stiehm, 2001). However, the impact of war on women's security is profound and far-reaching (El-Bushra, 2007, p. 134). Understanding the gender dynamics in conflicts and their gendered effects and explaining the intersecting oppressions women face in militarised contexts helps us to understand how women engage in peacebuilding processes within their communities.

For this purpose, the main focus will be on so-called frozen conflicts, or protracted conflicts, a condition for which there is no formal peace agreement, but at the same time, the level of hostility is minimal. This particular context, a hybrid between peace and war, is particularly interesting as it simultaneously presents characteristics of both settings. In these contexts, in the absence of formally elaborated reconciliation plans, individuals and communities resort to their own self-managed strategies (Ginty, 2014).

Therefore, in frozen conflict settings, peacebuilding operates through a bottom-up dimension as it is essential to work “at the most fundamental human levels to change the relationships involved” (Cárdenas, 2022). In such contexts, adopting a feminist and gender perspective is even more relevant as women’s peace activist organisations tend to be deeply rooted in the local social fabric and at community level (El-Bushra, 2007). A prime example of a frozen conflict is the one between Georgia and the breakaway territory of Abkhazia.

The clashes in Abkhazia began in the aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet Empire. When Georgia gained independence in April of 1991, Abkhazia became divided into two groups. The majority, composed mostly of Georgians and Armenians, were in support of Georgian independence. Meanwhile, a minority of Abkhazians demanded the creation of an independent republic separate from Georgia. In February 1992, Georgia abolished the old Soviet-era constitution and reinstated the 1921 constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. However, this move was seen by the Abkhazians as a threat to their autonomous status (Sotiriou, 2019). As a result, they declared their independence from Georgia a few months later. At this point, an outright war broke out between Abkhazian rebels and government troops sent from Tbilisi to retake control of the region. The full-scale war between Georgia and Abkhazia lasted slightly over a year and resulted in the loss of at least 12,000 lives before a ceasefire was signed in 1994 (Conciliation resources, n. d.). The war caused the displacement of almost a quarter of a million ethnic Georgians from their homes, and Abkhazia subsequently declared its independence from Georgian control. However, its independence was not recognised. The Geneva International Discussions' peace negotiations aim to resolve the conflict between Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the US. The talks have been co-chaired by the EU, UN, and OSCE since 2008, but progress has been slow. As a result, civilians continue to suffer (Rondeli Foundation, 2023). In these decades, the people most affected by the conflict have developed strategies

and ways to deal with its consequences. From the very beginning, women's organisations have provided support and promoted peace initiatives.

The literature on the intersection of gender, grassroots peacebuilding and feminist peace specifically dedicated to the Georgian case is limited. In the past ten years, few authors have published analyses in English on the subject.

This thesis, therefore, starting with an extensive literature review, illustrates in Chapter 1 the contributions that a gender perspective has made in expanding the concepts of war, peace and security and then elaborates on the main concepts of Feminist Peace Research. Chapter 2 explores the methodology utilised in this research. This includes a detailed discussion of the field research conducted to gather the testimonies of women's organisations based in Georgia. Finally, Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the analysis of the data collected. Specifically, the former investigates the practices and activities that these organisations prioritise in their efforts towards peacebuilding, while the latter discusses the principles on which these initiatives are based and what conceptions of peace and gender are held by the women interviewed and the organisations they represent.

# **Chapter 1. Setting the Context for the Research: The Literature Review**

To better understand the peace efforts of women's organisations in Georgia, it is essential to recognise the importance of focusing on gender when examining conflict and peace dynamics. The literature review proposed in this chapter will indeed serve this purpose. Initially, it will be illustrated how war impacts women and men differently and how militarism and patriarchy are mutually reinforcing systems. From this reflection, it will be concluded that there are various forms of violence and insecurity, and thus, violence does not end with the cessation of war but is rather a continuum. This leads to a new approach to understanding peace: feminist peace. It involves employing a gender perspective to enhance the concept of positive peace. The chapter then illustrates feminist peace by describing it in its main characteristics, namely being inclusive, extensive, and transformative, and reserving particular importance for the issue of gender equality. Finally, while explaining why the post-conflict moment is crucial for transforming power and gender balances and dynamics, the last two paragraphs will discuss how women enact peacebuilding and how feminist discourse fits into peace practices.

## **1.1 Gender and War**

To fully understand how gender impacts and shapes peace practices, it is necessary to analyse how it also plays a role in war dynamics. Indeed, it is essential to understand the gendered nature of war: how war is experienced and has different impacts on men and women, and how the dynamics of war reinforce gender norms, binding militarism and patriarchy together.

As Joshua Goldstein points out, 'both genders lose in war, although they lose in somewhat different ways' (Goldstein, 2001: 402). These ways are described in depth by El-Bushra. The impacts of conflicts on women are visible in all aspects of their lives, including physical security. Women are directly targeted as



victims of rape and other forms of violence (sexual, physical, and psychological). They are also more vulnerable to losing their social resources, such as healthcare, financial, and educational services, due to the war situation, which may lead to forced displacement. Women's vulnerability is also increased by the fact that, socially, they are the ones who have to care for and maintain their families and communities. As war usually brings radical social change, it exacerbates women's family responsibilities and workload through demographic imbalances and the redistribution of labour. For all these reasons, El-Bushra concludes that “war threatens women's security at the deepest levels and in the broadest ways” (El-Bushra, 2007: 132-133).

Once the different impact of war on gender has been outlined, it is necessary to deepen the analysis of the gender-war relationship. Indeed, many studies have been conducted on the role of gender in fuelling and supporting the war system, as it is based on 'relational power dynamics' (Duncanson, 2009: 29). As Goldstein notes - 'it is difficult to "do war" without "doing gender" and vice versa' (Goldstein, 2001). For this reason, it can be argued that there is a co-constitution of gender and war.

There is, thus, a real connection between militarism and patriarchy. The former is an ideology that subjugates all kinds of relationships to military power and the use of violence; the latter is a system that envisages and legitimises the holding of power exclusively by men over women. Furthermore, both phenomena operate within the same framework, in which patriarchy and war are mutually reinforcing systems of dominance. Indeed, as noted by Tickner, the debate on women and war contributes most to the essentialisation of genders, centralising their separation and hierarchisation and ascribing specific traits to each (Blanchard, 2003). As Duncanson notes, militarism is based on the explicit gender norms patriarchy provides: at the foundation of warfare are the concepts of complementary femininity and hegemonic masculinity that entail a clear gender division between the 'protected' and the 'protector' (Duncanson, 2009: 25). The underlying power dynamics between males and females are

based on essentialist notions regarding the innate roles of each gender. Women are often portrayed as helpless, passive, and vulnerable, while men are seen as protectors, warriors, and decision-makers (Willett, 2010: 144). This gender distinction has been analysed by Elshtain, one of the first feminist scholars in international relations: narratives and imaginaries of war include the passivity and vulnerability of women who require the protection of men (Welland, 2018: 130). In analysing how war and militarism make use of gender, Cynthia Enloe has developed the concept of 'militarised masculinities' (Welland, 2018: 131). These are developed within military apparatuses based precisely on the dichotomy with femininity, legitimising the hierarchical opposition of genders and exalting an ideal masculinised warrior at the expense of others based on gender, race, or sexuality (Eichler, 2014: 83).

Thus, in this militarism-patriarchy system of domination, anyone who does not adhere to gender norms or does not fit into the normative roles becomes subject to control and violence (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 63). The use of violence is necessary for the system to restore the gender hierarchical order. Thus, "war, violence, and weapons become both a significant factor in masculine identity and a crucial factor in the functioning of patriarchy" (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 51). Hence, it is a reinforcing and self-enforcing system, keeping power unchallenged in the hands of a specific segment of society (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 63).

## **1.2 Violence as a continuum**

Criticism of male-dominated concepts of security has prompted a reassessment of the concept of security, leading to a more inclusive approach to peace and security. This inclusive approach empowers previously marginalised groups, ensuring their visibility in both the discourse and practice of security. The aim is to create a more egalitarian and comprehensive path to security, no longer exclusive (Willett, 2010: 144). The development of feminist peace is, therefore, crucial as it works to deconstruct the way patriarchy and militarism support each

other (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 47). At the core of this is the understanding that the end of the war and the cessation of fighting between the parties involved in a conflict often does not mean and does not coincide with the cessation of violence, nor a return to pre-war normality. In fact, "certain gendered, sexualised and variously othered bodies and lives face both a continuation of the aggression endured during the war and new forms of violence" (Wibben et al., 2019: 4; Duncanson, 2009: 24).

In this sense, Cynthia Cockburn conceptualises violence as a continuum, in which gender is linked to violence on various levels, from the personal to the international, and in different types and degrees, from psychological to physical violence, from domestic violence to conflict-related sexual violence (Harders, 2011: 36). Framing violence as a continuum makes it possible to recognise the connections between different forms of violence and how they mutually support one another (Wibben, et al., 2019: 4). This approach thus departs from the dichotomy between war and peace, but rather highlights how various forms of violence can coexist simultaneously in peaceful environments (Wibben et al. 2019: 87). In light of this, in peacebuilding, it is necessary to understand which conditions cause the perpetuation of violence and which intersecting oppressions shape these conditions. Otherwise, peace continues to be conditioned and influenced by violence and is, therefore, a 'negative peace' (Harders, 2011: 36).

The broader spectrum of violence includes not only physical violence but also symbolic and cultural violence. Johan Galtung argues that structural violence occurs when the potential growth of an individual or group is restricted (Harders, 2011). He argues that eliminating these subtle, non-physical forms of violence is necessary to achieve a comprehensive notion of 'positive peace'. However, feminist research criticises Galtung's notion of structural violence because it is based on binary and oppositional thinking, which neglects to recognise the inherent gender and power imbalances in these relationships (Cardenas, 2022). In particular, Confortini, in this debate, examines which

contributions feminism might add to Galtung's work. She argues that conceiving gender as a power dynamic leads to recognising how gender-based traditions and expectations perpetuate violent behaviour (Alexander, 2018: 30). Furthermore, considering violence and war as 'the cause and consequence of the structural violence that denies the human rights of women', Reardon was an early contributor to feminist peace research, emphasising the importance of women in the creation of peace (Reardon, 1993: 71; Alexander, 2018: 28). Women's agency and resilience in coping with such realities play a key role in women's peacebuilding practices since they thus engage in reshaping the political context in which they live (El-Bushra, 2007: 132-133).

### **1.3 Feminist Peace Research**

Feminist peace research (FPR) has two clear and essential goals: 'gender equality for feminism, a world without violence for peace research'. It is based precisely on three main pillars: the first is to conceive violence and peace as gendered and as a continuum; the second key element is the transformation of power relations and gender imbalances within society to make it truly peaceful; finally, feminist peace research is positioned as 'transdisciplinary, intersectional, normative, and transnational'. Gayatri Spivak addresses the value of being a transversal field through the concept of epistemic violence. It refers to violence that aims to eliminate the knowledge possessed and developed by marginalised subjects. On the contrary, a conception of knowledge as emancipatory counteracts epistemic violence by raising consciousness about common forms of oppression and tactics of resistance (Wibben et al., 2019: 6).

The feminist version of peace originates from positive peace. This concept is well articulated by Paarlberg-Kvam in their study on feminist visions of peace in Colombia: "[We have to] seek a positive peace that does not just silence the weapons but guarantees conditions under which the war will not begin again at any moment [...] it has to be a lasting peace" (Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019: 206).

Understanding gender as a social construct that influences power dynamics and underlying sources of violence facilitates the inclusion of a gender perspective in the concept of positive peace. This approach expands the definition of peace and widens the range of actors involved in promoting peace (Reardon, 1993: 73; Cárdenas, 2022: 9). Building on Galtung's work, Confortini (2006) presents a feminist perspective on positive peace that challenges binary distinctions such as war/peace, woman/man and violent/non-violent in pursuing holistic and just peace (Harders, 2011: 138).

Despite the substantial amount of academic research dedicated to women's encounters with war, there needs to be more investigation into the specific visions of peace women strive for or advocate for when they engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities. It is vital to undertake such analysis, as how peace is conceptualised significantly influences the structure of post-conflict societies and their political and economic systems (Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019: 195). Whether their appeals are acknowledged or not, women and feminist peace advocates have contributed to a more profound comprehension of peace than previously held by those in positions of authority. Feminist discourse on peace interweaves an analysis of patriarchy, militarism, racism, classism, and economic exploitation as fundamental components of warfare. It asserts that these issues must be tackled to develop a peaceful society (Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019: 198).

Given that feminism concerns emancipation from gender discrimination and other types of subjugation, feminist peace discourse typically places gender equality at the centre of the systemic changes that are essential for achieving lasting peace (Harders, 2011: 140). Given that the post-conflict moment is a crucial site of society-building, this transformation is framed as a necessitating and comprehensive approach to peace because it challenges the fundamental elements of power structures and inequality and eradicates the conditions that foster violence and domination against women, girls, and those who do not conform to gender norms (Wibben et al., 2019: 3; Cárdenas, 2022: 9).

### **1.3.1 Feminist Peace: inclusive, expansive, and transformative**

There is no unified definition of feminist peace. It is highly context-dependent and can assume many forms: feminist peace strategies and visions develop in conjunction with women's roles within the power dynamics of conflict (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 10; Väyrynen et al., 2020). However, there are some features on which feminist and peace activists and scholars agree. Scholars such as Claire Duncanson and Judy El-Bushra have tried to sum up the main concepts of feminist peace in three words: inclusive, expansive, and transformative (Duncanson, 2016; El-Bushra, 2007). Being inclusive involves not only embracing intersectionality but also encompasses that "individuals and communities must be empowered in order to realise their own peace and security" (Duncanson 2016: 59). Viewing peace through a feminist lens is most effectively envisioned as ongoing and continuous progress which is context-specific and localised. It is indeed a process which links political and power relations involving different actors such "as people, communities, economic subjects, state actors, global agencies, and other players" (Abrahamyan et al. 2018: 9). Accordingly, feminist peace challenges the privileging of male perspectives on security threats and responses advocates for comprehensive approaches and alternatives designed within the local context, drawing on the community's experiences, needs and resources (Donahoe, 2019: 92).

Secondly, feminist peace is expansive in the sense that feminist analysis adds complexity to our understanding of the world, showing that it is not as simple as binary oppositions such as male and female, war and peace (Donahoe, 2019: 92).

Thirdly, feminist peace has to be transformative. As we have observed earlier, for many women, war is a continuous experience rather than a mere event (Duncanson 2016: 62). Regarding the case study examined, the historical conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, which has been ongoing since 1993, is a matter of great significance. Despite being described as frozen, it is actually an ongoing and unsolved conflict, as its resolution remains a pressing concern

for all involved. In this regard, experts and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who collaborate with women in areas impacted by conflict emphasise that achieving social equality and creating lasting peace requires a diverse set of crucial components that are interwoven. Among these, they have identified social justice, women's rights, coexistence, tolerance, participatory democracy, transparency, and non-violent communication. Additionally, fulfilling basic material needs is essential for creating a sense of security (Duncanson 2016: 62). This approach identifies areas of privilege, acknowledges the compounding effects of intersecting inequalities, and pays attention to marginalised voices; it reveals sources of oppression and endeavours to establish equality (Donahoe, 2019: 92).

### **1.3.2 Gender Equality as key to Feminist Peace**

Indeed, a cornerstone of feminist peace is gender equality. However, there are variations in the way gender equality and peace are intertwined in feminist peace agendas and in the way social change is envisioned and pursued (Cárdenas, 2022: 10). Liberal feminism interprets it as equal consideration and status, while for radical feminism, it means the eradication of gender hierarchies and oppression (Duncanson 2016: 49). A gender perspective in peacebuilding implies integrating gender equality issues into practices and decision-making while promoting opportunities for women and men to participate at various levels in the peace process. Moreover, it enhances our understanding of how gendered individuals can engage in peacebuilding more fully (Duncanson 2016: 14). Valerie Hudson and her co-authors' argument in "Sex and World Peace" has gained significant attention in recent years on this matter. They contend that gender equality is a prerequisite for peace. According to Hudson et al., one of the most reliable but overlooked indicators of a state's inclination toward peace or war is the amount of violence perpetrated against women within that state (Duncanson 2016: 54). In Hudson's approach, there are, however, three main problems. The first one is that it considers gender as a relatively fixed attribute limiting and reducing it to a biological or binary concept that overlooks its

complex and fluid nature. Poststructuralist feminists like Judith Butler argue that gender is not fixed or stable, but a socially constructed category continuously produced, performed, and contested in everyday life. Gender, therefore, should be understood as a multifaceted and fluid concept shaped by social norms and practices and subject to change over time (Duncanson 2016: 54-55). The second issue with Hudson's approach, which relates to the first, is the "risks of essentialism, instrumentalism and inadvertent racism" by isolating gender equality as a variable to test its relationship with peace. On the contrary, envisioning gender equality as an inseparable and integral aspect of sustainable peace allows us to acknowledge the reciprocal construction of gender relations/hierarchies in international relations. This viewpoint recognises that gendered identities shape international relations just as much as international relations design gender ones, as these are mutually constitutive processes (Duncanson 2016: 58). Third, recalling the idea of positive peace, there can be no meaningful and sustainable peace (understood as the total elimination of all violence) for all unless the root causes of violence itself and war are addressed; hence, the eradication of gender-based hierarchies and oppressions. From these three issues in Hudson's analysis, it is possible to articulate the conceptual revisionism feminists have contributed to the discourse on peace and security, namely that gender equality and peace are mutually constitutive (Duncanson 2016: 56). In realising feminist visions of peace, the shared experiences of women in conflict, the empowerment of women's agency and the achievement of gender equality are key. Women's agency, in particular, is central to the women-to-women diplomacy agenda, which involves a range of ways for women to participate, including leadership at the grassroots level, everyday practices, and the performance of gendered roles (such as motherhood) as a means of collective action (Cárdenas, 2019: 392).



#### **1.4 The Post-War Context as Crucial Site for Transformation and Empowerment**

Having thus described the relationships between gender and war and gender and peace, it is necessary to analyse how women enact peacebuilding and how feminist discourse fits into peace practices.

To refer to Galtung's concept of peace, conflict resolution or transformation ought to be a tactic to satisfy fundamental needs. Instead of merely managing violence through formal diplomatic means, it strives to tackle the underlying causes of violence. In terms of gender, despite recognising their close ties to conflict dynamics and the escalation or de-escalation of violence, a simplistic "add women and stir" approach has traditionally been employed (Harders, 2011: 134). This entails either that women's security demands were treated as supplementary to the overall peace process and integrated as a component of the larger peace platforms; or dealing with gender issues as if they conflicted with the broader peace demands creating a perception that the two are competing with one another (Ellerby, 2018: 325). Nevertheless, the participation of the individuals who represent the status quo is counterproductive; rather, women's voices and perspectives must be heard and incorporated into peacebuilding processes in order to transform inequalities (Women Mediators, 2021: 21). According to Louise Olsson's observation, there is a notable discrepancy in the security situation and opportunities for political participation between men and women, as well as potential differences in their access to judicial rights and economic opportunities. As a result, the substance and quality of the established peace can vary considerably for men and women (Gizelis and Olsson, 2011: 521).

According to feminist scholars and activists, addressing gender concerns requires a transformative approach that involves changing power dynamics associated with masculinity, war, and militarisation. These concepts are closely tied to feminist notions of security, which encompass multiple levels and dimensions, as the cessation of war is often complex and nuanced. From this

standpoint, the aftermath of war presents an opportunity for either positive or negative transformations in gender relations. Understanding the intersection of gender and international relations is crucial in comprehending how gender is shaped and replicated through post-conflict reconstruction practices and processes. Feminist scholars acknowledge that the post-conflict period has far-reaching gendered consequences as it can perpetuate existing exclusions and oppressions or reshape the relationship between women and men to foster a more secure society (McLeod, 2018: 346-352). Not all reconstruction efforts aim to restore a perceived past state. Instead, the aspiration for transformation that drives these initiatives entails a commitment to social, economic, and political progress that considers gender-related concerns. This involves using a gender lens to enhance understanding and leveraging the potential of new regulations, institutions, and resources to address gender inequalities (McLeod, 2018: 349). Furthermore, the potential of the post-war reconstruction context has, in many cases, proven to be a source of empowerment for women. This stems from the transformation of power and gender relations in society that open up the possibility for women to express their agency (Penttinen, 2018: 257).

### **1.5 Women's Peace Activism**

The current body of literature exploring the relationship between women and peacebuilding has examined how women can establish alternative platforms for dialogue in situations where formal peace negotiations occur and in situations of stagnant or unresolved conflicts (Cárdenas, 2019: 401).

In the case of Georgia, since the early stages of the conflict in the 1990s, the creation of women's organisations has been growing, and their work has been fundamental in providing humanitarian support and in pursuing reconciliation efforts between Georgians and Abkhaz.

Mainstream scholarship tends to overlook the fact that care work, which has historically been gendered, has equipped women with skills and resources that are crucial not only for human survival but also for human development and, as a result, peace (Wibben et al., 2019: 5). Feminist peace research, on the

contrary, emphasises the potential for women's activism to contribute to peacebuilding efforts that prioritise goals of gender equality and women's empowerment.

When women enter the political and public arenas intending to promote peace or democratic change, it often means breaking away from traditional gender roles. Cynthia Cockburn has identified three reasons women choose to organise separately from men. The first reason is to draw attention to women's different ways of experiencing war. Second, it is a reaction to the male-dominated peace movements, with some women seeking to establish alternative leadership styles and activist approaches. The third reason is to develop a feminist perspective on war, which acknowledges the crucial role of gender ideology in promoting militarism and associating masculinity with aggression and femininity with vulnerability. According to Cockburn, due to this last reason women peace activists are developing a distinct standpoint on war and conflict (Duncanson, 2009: 49). However, Harders points out numerous female activists employ positive notions of femininity and motherhood in their peace activism. This has led the literature on gender and negotiation to incline towards essentialism, as it emphasises the differences between men and women in their negotiation skills, their approach to issues such as peace, security, and power, as well as their perception of their own power relative to others. Some scholars have offered a range of reasons, from gender role socialisation to situational power (access to resources and power affecting each gender differently) to personal and societal expectations about each gender (Harders, 2011: 145). Although the explanations mentioned above may be relevant, it is essential to note that there are variations in power dynamics among women (just as among men) and different approaches to using or responding to power during negotiations (Golan, 2011: 172).

Given all the different reasons women dedicate themselves to peacebuilding, the goals of their peace work are also different, which is why Cockburn divides women's peacebuilding organisations into three categories based on different theoretical positions. The first is maternalist feminism, which posits that women

are naturally inclined towards peace due to their position in conflict. The second is equality feminism, which advocates for equal opportunities for both genders in all fields, including decision-making, peacebuilding, and armed forces. Lastly, holistic feminism offers a comprehensive and intersectional perspective on peace activism rooted in opposition to militarism (Paarlberg-Kvam, 2019: 199).

As there are reasons for women to mobilise for peace actively, they also face obstacles in this process.

The acknowledgement of the worth of women, particularly in formal mediation procedures, is inadequate. Women's abilities to act may be restricted due to various barriers, such as 'macho' cultures, the expectations placed on them to comply with certain social conventions in order to perform their duties, and patriarchal principles that prioritise hierarchy and competition (Women Mediators, 2021:22). Specifically, a former Filipino government negotiator, Irene Santiago, identifies three main impediments to women's involvement in peacebuilding: conceptual, technical, and political barriers. The first hurdle is the "conceptual barrier", which arises when peace negotiations are solely focused on ending the war, resulting in only military actors being allowed to participate. Santiago suggests this can be overcome by shifting the talks' emphasis from simply ending war to creating a lasting peace. The second obstacle is the "technical barrier," which stems from the fact that women may have less experience in the activities required for participation in peace negotiations. Santiago believes this can be remedied through capacity building and better integrating women's informal peacebuilding abilities. The third is the "political barrier" which prevents recognition of the crucial role that women play in formal peace processes, resulting in limited involvement (Ellerby, 2018: 324). Indeed, women's significant contributions to promoting peace and reconciliation take place mainly at the grassroots level, and their efforts are usually informal and ad hoc. As a result, their stories often go unrecognised and unacknowledged (Duncanson, 2009: 23; McLeod, 2018: 353). Both feminist

scholars and activists have made significant efforts to incorporate gender perspectives into peacebuilding initiatives. Indeed, since the 1990s, there have been substantial changes in peace practices that acknowledge the importance of gender equality in peacebuilding thanks also to the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (Harders, 2011: 136). As Harders points out, "[This] forms of peacebuilding would be more likely to be participatory, empathetic, locally owned, and self-sustaining, socially, politically, economically, and environmentally speaking" (Harders, 2011: 137).

### **1.6 Integrating Gender Perspectives into Peacebuilding Practices**

Women involved in peace activism possess extensive localised knowledge and tend to approach their activism in a multifaceted manner. This approach involves addressing not only the political and economic aspects of conflict transformation but also the psychosocial and relational dimensions.

Scholars studying women's peace engagement have identified a common feature among groups involved in peacebuilding: they are localised, particularistic, and bottom-up. In addition, they are grounded in interpersonal relationships and people-to-people activities, mainly through the concept of women-to-women diplomacy (Wibben et al., 2019: 5).

The rise of local and grassroots women's peace activism has become a significant force globally, providing practical empowerment to "ordinary" people through their locally-rooted and unique contributions to peacebuilding efforts. This form of activism is often studied as an alternative to liberal peacebuilding projects, which have been criticised by feminist peace scholars and activists, as previously discussed (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 13). Local peacebuilding is based on the concept of social capital. Social capital can be understood as the resources within social structures that can be harnessed to achieve collective goals. These resources may exist within formal and centralised vertical social networks as well as in more informal, community-level horizontal networks. Unlike human capital, which is often visible and measurable, social capital is embedded within the relationships and interactions

between individuals and groups (Gizelis and Olsson, 2011: 524). Furthermore, women's peace efforts rely on people-to-people diplomacy, specifically, women-to-women. People-to-people diplomacy seeks to engage civil society in conflict resolution and peacebuilding by placing citizens at the centre of public discourse and dialogue (Cárdenas, 2019: 390). Women-to-women diplomacy is a unique approach to peacebuilding that seeks to challenge prevailing conflict narratives and foster dialogue and cooperation among women who share experiences of conflict and a commitment to achieving gender equality. It is important to note that the term "women-to-women diplomacy" should not be seen as simply a variation of "people-to-people diplomacy" or as an exclusively female strategy but rather as a recognition of women's critical role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts (Cárdenas, 2019: 386). This strategy provides a platform for conceiving new forms of identity and belonging by facilitating encounters between women from different backgrounds. Women-to-women diplomacy uniquely contributes to reconciliation efforts by challenging the divisive "us-and-them" mentality that often characterises conflict. By creating a new space for shared experiences and common goals, women can build coalitions and foster mutual understanding, regardless of ethnic or other differences. This approach recognises the power of shared gendered experiences in promoting reconciliation and offers a valuable tool for breaking down barriers and building bridges between communities. Abrahamyan points out that by building trust, identifying common interests, and fostering an environment conducive to peace, women's organisations aim to contribute to sustainable peacebuilding in post-conflict societies (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 12). For example, in the case of Georgia and Abkhazia, a women's organisation facilitated a dialogue between two groups from both regions. Each group first held internal discussions and round tables about conflict root causes and personal experiences, which were recorded and shared with the other group. Finally, the two groups met in person to discuss cooperation strategies based on

their common interests, jointly researching and drafting policy papers on people's attitudes towards conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

In order to achieve sustainable peacebuilding, it is essential to view it as a process of social transformation that must take place at the local level, which serves as a microcosm of the larger conflict dynamics. This is particularly relevant in protracted conflicts, where peace negotiations have a deadlock and no clear military advantage on either side. Thus, a bottom-up approach and women-to-women dialogue can effectively promote peace by challenging the forces of polarisation within and between the parties through initiatives that emphasise the benefits of peace and joint development. Furthermore, in frozen conflict settings and active conflicts with stalled peace negotiations, it is crucial to address the underlying relationships and historical grievances contributing to hostile attitudes. This requires working at the most fundamental human levels to effect meaningful change (Cárdenas, 2019: 389).

Considering the abovementioned characteristics, many women's peacebuilding practices fall within the "everyday peace" framework. Everyday peace pertains to the customary practices and norms utilised by individuals and groups in deeply divided societies to prevent and mitigate conflict and tense situations within and between groups. The concept of everyday peace is linked to notions of "the local" and "agency" in deeply divided societies. It is related to discussions on resilience and the capacity of individuals and communities to deal with stressful circumstances, thereby allowing for agency and innovation. Enhancing the everyday peace approach has the potential to go beyond mere conflict reduction to encompass more constructive actions associated with conflict transformation (Mac Ginty, 2014: 549-550). The notion of everyday peace offers a valuable framework to recognise the role of women in peacebuilding beyond formal structures. Women's participation in peacebuilding is often associated with everyday activities typically linked with care work. This means that women are frequently engaged in local and community-based peacebuilding efforts, referred to as everyday peacebuilding

(Donahoe, 2019: 99). Feminist Peace Research emphasises the importance of examining the everyday as a crucial study area. According to Annick Wibben and others, this emphasis helps to improve our understanding of everyday life and the potential for peaceful coexistence, conflict prevention, and transformation. Furthermore, by recognising the everyday as a critical site of analysis, FPR highlights the importance of considering human experiences and the intersectionality of various forms of oppression in feminist peacebuilding (Wibben et al., 2019: 4).

In conclusion, gender plays a central role in the (re)definition of security and peace. Expanding on these concepts, feminist peace aims to transform power and gender hierarchies. Therefore, the full achievement of gender equality is an imperative element in attaining peace. On this basis, the post-conflict moment is fundamental to the transformation of society. Therefore, women's peace efforts deserve special attention. In the case of protracted conflicts where there are no clear boundaries between war and peace, it is important to analyse to what extent and how feminist peace concepts are applied and reproduced. This is the starting point for this research, which examines the case study of Georgia.



## **Chapter 2. Research Methodology**

This research is the result of fieldwork carried out in Georgia, specifically in Tbilisi, between March and May 2023. During this period, I conducted five interviews with women's organisations that implemented activities aimed at promoting reconciliation and building peace in the context of the protracted conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. In particular, the data collected comes from conversations with women who hold senior positions in their organisations and have extensive field experience.

This chapter will delve into the intricacies of research design and the various methods used for conducting field research. Additionally, it will explore the methodologies employed for data analysis and the ethical considerations that must be taken into account, particularly in regard to the researcher's positionality.

### **2.1 Research Design**

This research is a case study on Georgia with a qualitative approach. Since the research question is framed through a gender lens, the Feminist Research Methodology approach is used, which is based on four core elements. The experiences and viewpoints of women have been placed at the centre through semi-structured interviews: hence, prioritising the possibility of meaningful engagement and empowerment (Erol & Cuklanz, 2020, p. 213). Moreover, the focus on power relations was deepened during the interviews and extensively discussed in the data analysis. Finally, considerable attention has been given to the researcher's reflexivity and subjectivity (Reiling, 2020).

As mentioned, the primary source for data collection were semi-structured expert interviews with women's organisations. Such organisations were selected using three main sources: (1) Peace Insight (a platform with a database that maps local peacebuilding organisations worldwide); (2) Women4peace.net platform (public independent media platform for civil peacebuilding in the Caucasus); (3) Cárdenas, M. L., 2019. *Women-to-Women Diplomacy in*

Georgia: A Peacebuilding Strategy in Frozen Conflict. CIVIL WARS, p. 385–409.

## **2.2 Methods: document analysis and interviews**

The nature of interviews is semi-structured, with a draft list of questions elaborated in advance and touching upon topics such as gender equality within the peacebuilding initiatives, the organisations' reconciliation projects, and priorities and challenges regarding such projects. The need to conduct interviews with women's organisations arises mainly for two reasons. The first is the lack of literature in this field, especially in the intersection of gender and peacebuilding in the context of frozen conflicts. The second is that being a bottom-up process, the strategies deployed by individual organisations to implement peace may vary and diversify, as their visions of peace itself. This has allowed me to carry out a more in-depth analysis of each organisation's characteristics, priorities, and challenges and to see if and how they come together into a collective approach. Concerning the persons interviewed, these were participants holding senior positions within the organisations. Since the primary objective of the research was to have a better and more comprehensive understanding of the projects and the activities of the women's organisations, it was necessary to interview those with the most experience in the field. On two occasions, it was also possible to specifically interview the person within the organisation who is in charge of peacebuilding activities or implementing the WPS agenda.

Additional sources of information, such as policy papers, online documents and reports published by the selected organisations, were used to complement this. Document analysis played a dual role by preceding and supplementing other data generation techniques. Its initial use involved gathering background information to enhance interviews and discussions with the participants regarding the research topics. By identifying contentious subjects or debates through document analysis, these findings could be incorporated into interview

questions to gain insights into various individuals' perspectives. Additionally, document analysis played a vital role in uncovering essential information for tracking the development of projects and the historical context of the organisations.

In addition, I was also able to speak with UN Women Georgia in the person of a senior analyst of the peacebuilding division. This conversation was not recorded and is not part of the dataset considered for the research. However, it was helpful to understand better the implementation framework of UN Resolution 1325 on the WPS Agenda, how the various local NGOs operate and contribute to the localisation of WPS Agenda and the relationship between UN Women Georgia and local women's organisations.

### **2.2.1 Recruitment of the participants**

To approach interviewees, I utilised email or phone communication. In the initial contact, I introduced myself as a Master's student and an intern at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation). I provided an overview of my dissertation topic and explained the objectives of the interview by sharing a Plain language document. Additionally, I clarified that total anonymity would be guaranteed in the research, meaning that no names of the interviewees and the organisations would be mentioned in the dissertation.

It was not always easy to find active or up-to-date contacts on websites. However, this research was part of a work placement at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) based in Tbilisi. This affiliation during the research period was beneficial for establishing initial and direct contacts with some organisations. Other organisations were identified and contacted through the intermediation of the first organisations interviewed.

Initially, I planned to interview a maximum of six organisations as these were the ones I had selected through the above-mentioned online sources. Of these,

five were based in Tbilisi but operate almost exclusively outside the city with projects targeting the country's outermost municipalities, and the sixth organisation was based in the Shida Kartli region, on the border with South Ossetia. The first two interviewees provided me with contacts in six other organisations: three based in Tbilisi, two based in the municipality of Samegrelo (which is on the de-facto border with Abkhazia), and one Abkhazian organisation. While I did not encounter explicit refusals to answer interview questions, there were instances where individuals I contacted for interviews chose to ignore my requests, even after multiple reminders. Out of the three organisations based outside the capital, only two responded to me, but there was a language barrier as I do not speak Georgian, and they spoke little English. As for the Abkhazian organisation, contact would only be made through the organisation that had shared the contact with me, but due to time constraints, I could not arrange the interview.

In the end, I managed to interview five organisations, all based in Tbilisi. Four are local organisations; one is an international non-governmental women's rights organisation operating locally in Georgia and Abkhazia for over 20 years. Despite its international base, given its local presence, its long experience in Georgia, its many partnerships with Georgian and Abkhazian organisations and its commitment to conflict transformation, it was a good fit for my research.

I had prepared a list of questions and topics to guide the interview; however, the interviews themselves were conducted in a semi-structured manner. This approach allowed for flexibility and adaptability during the interview process, enabling me to explore additional areas of interest that emerged during the conversation. During the interviews, I asked follow-up questions to clarify topics like feminism and the impact of the war in Ukraine on the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. This helped me gain a clearer picture of the circumstances in which organizations operate. The interviews were conducted in English. An interpreter was not used to conduct the interviews due to practical reasons, namely not having the means and contacts to select a competent and

trustworthy person to act as an interpreter, given the limited time for fieldwork in Tbilisi (3 months) and the scarce financial resources. Finally, interviews were recorded upon the consent of the participants, then transcribed, anonymised. All quotations were quoted verbatim, exactly as the persons interviewed stated. Corrections of a grammatical nature have only been made in cases where comprehension would otherwise have been difficult. This decision was made in order to minimise any interference in the data collected. My main priority is to give the participants a platform to express their thoughts and feelings and to empower them through their words.

### **2.3 Ethics**

Total confidentiality and anonymity have been guaranteed to the participants. For security reasons, it was decided to keep participants and organisations anonymous. Since the research deals with sensitive issues such as protracted conflict and some organisations work in partnership with other NGOs based in Abkhazia, some organisations initially involved in the research work along the ABL (Administrative Border Line) or in conflict-affected regions, and other organisations contacted operate or are based in Abkhazia, it was decided from the beginning of the research to keep the complete anonymity of each subject involved. Since the core of the research is to analyse the peacebuilding and reconciliation activities put in place by women's organisations, I acknowledge that not naming the organisations does not invalidate the research itself.

### **2.4 Analysis of the data**

I analysed the data collected through interviews using thematic analysis (TA) with NVivo software through the creation of codes (Appendix 1). This decision is justified by the fact that thematic analysis offers a qualitative approach that allows for a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the data, enabling the capture of both explicit and underlying meanings. The analysis focuses on identifying themes which represent central ideas or meanings that unite the observations within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2023:3).

In this sense, it is possible to draw connections between the concepts characterising feminist peace and the data collected from the interviews, i.e. how women see peace and gender and how they implement them.

The data analysis from the interviews and documents investigates three main aspects: firstly, how gender equality and peacebuilding are implemented and intersect in practice; secondly, how each organisation relates to the parties to the conflict, and how and whether it challenges them and finally, to examine whether and how gender norms in patriarchal and militarised environments are challenged or reiterated within the activities of these women's organisations.

The interviews' data have been analysed to assess similarities and differences among the organisations, the practices implemented, and their visions of peace. When comparing organisations, two main parameters are used: gender and peace. Regarding the former, the analysis focused on how gender dynamics influence and are enacted in these contexts. As for the latter, the study seeks to determine to what extent peace prospects are perceived as viable, what characteristics and priorities they have, and whether they can be traced back to a feminist notion of peace (i.e., gender equality as an intrinsic element of peace rather than instrumental).

Since in thematic analysis, researchers inevitably bring with them assumptions about the nature of reality, about what constitutes meaningful knowledge and knowledge production, and about what their data represent, it is crucial to locate the use of TA from a theoretical perspective (Braun and Clarke 2023:4). Reflexivity is thus a point in common with the feminist approach (which has guided this research at every stage). My theoretical positioning, therefore, is rooted in intersectional feminism accompanied by decolonial thinking towards peacebuilding. Indeed, looking from a feminist perspective, it is essential to prioritise the voices and experiences of women and those who are marginalised in official contexts. This highlights women's agency and empowerment. Additionally, it involves acknowledging power dynamics in all social situations, including in the creation of authoritative knowledge (Dupuis et al., 2021:12).

Moreover, the decolonial interpretation of peace practices involves prioritising local agency and striving for positive peace and social justice (Schirch, 2022:19). Intersectionality comes from recognising the multiplicity of identities that subjects embody and act. Framing gender as a social construct that shapes power relations and structural causes of violence allows us expanding of the conceptualisation of positive peace (Confortini, 2021). Thus, this thesis in no way seeks to reinforce the essentialist conception of womanhood. On the contrary, it recognises the heterogeneity of the experiences of women and marginalised subjects in conflict contexts and indeed believes in the need for an intersectional approach that challenges stereotypes and categorisation. At the same time, the binary perception of war and peace must be deconstructed from a feminist and decolonial lens. Thus, even framing war and violence as opposed to peace and non-violence perpetuates a binary and hierarchical conception of the social realm (Confortini, 2012). Moreover, both thematic analysis and the feminist approach require an explicit effort on the researcher's reflexivity and subjectivity, namely the continuous questioning of the researcher's positionality within the context under inquiry (Reiling, 2020).

## **2.5 Positionality and Reflexivity**

The knowledge generated by scholars is not impartial or universally applicable; instead, it is influenced by power dynamics and colonial influences. Being a woman born and educated in the West, my perspective and way of speaking differ from that of a Georgian peace activist, or someone involved in local peace initiatives. As someone who analyses the activities of various organisations, my position is both privileged and problematic. Some may view me as an outsider interfering with their affairs. In contrast, others may see my work as a colonial intervention that cannot fully represent the diverse voices involved in promoting peace and resolving conflicts between the Georgian and Abkhazian factions. Although this tension may remain unresolved, it is crucial to recognise the impact of my positionality on the research process. Throughout the process, my identity as a female Italian researcher affiliated with a Scottish university played

a significant role. While I had some familiarity with the Georgian contexts, I cannot claim to be an "insider." My limited proficiency in the local language and first-time visit to Georgia impacted my interactions with informants, the power dynamics involved in the research process, and my role in the data interpretation.

My exploration of critical, postcolonial, and feminist theories raises questions about the existing power dynamics and representation. As a researcher, I had to consider my positionality and whether I could accurately represent the perspectives of local informants. I also had to question whether my research was perpetuating hierarchies of knowledge. In retrospect, I realise that my positionality was not fixed and varied depending on the context and the people I interacted with. For instance, my identity as a Western/European researcher, an outsider in the Georgian context, also meant a reiteration of my complete impartiality towards the parties involved in the conflict. Furthermore, my affiliation with the Rondeli Foundation as an intern further authenticated my position on more than one occasion as informants claimed to be familiar with the institute and appreciated its relevance in international policy research. Moreover, being Italian contributed to a sense of connection with the people I interviewed, as respondents noticed similarities in temperament between our nations. In a few cases, as a Western outsider, I had the impression that those I was interviewing did not take anything for granted. even the major historical facts about the war or the political situation in the country. For example, during my interviews about the biggest challenges in working with the different sides of the conflict, one answer highlighted the political situation in Abkhazia, especially the threat of the Foreign Agents Law. This law also caused controversy in Georgia, leading to large protests on the 8th of March 2023, covered by the international media, which I witnessed first-hand in the capital. When interviewees discussed these events, they provided their views and opinions and explanations about the law and the protests. The same dynamics happened when discussing the official peace negotiation forums and their latest



developments. In these cases, during the interviews, I noticed that my outsider identity influenced the topics that were discussed, and the answers provided by the participants as they linger on explaining historical facts or current events: being an outsider and not a Georgian may have meant that I may not have had enough information about the events, despite it being background information. Furthermore, in most cases, I perceived that, as a citizen of an EU member state, the interviewees assumed that I shared the same political views with them, for example, regarding the need for Georgia to shift its foreign policy more towards the EU instead of Russia.

## **2.6 Limitations**

Besides the language barrier that did not allow me to conduct the interviews in two cases, two other limitations are worth noting. The first is the small-scale set of interviews, and the second is the limited variety of interview participants.

As noted earlier, I only interviewed organisations based in Tbilisi (despite none operating in the capital). From a feminist and intersectional point of view, I ask myself whom I give a voice in my research, and this also involves reflection on power dynamics and knowledge production. At the same time, due to limited means, the lack of connections in Georgia, and the difficulty of accessing contacts in Abkhazia, it was not possible to interview organisations based in areas other than Tbilisi or organisations based in Abkhazia and thus include their visions of peace in my research. However, it must be acknowledged that including testimonies not only from Georgian women's organisations and IDPs but also from Abkhazia, would enrich the analysis on this topic in further future research.

## **Chapter 3. Data Analysis: peacebuilding practices of Georgian women's organisations**

In this chapter, we will explore the peacebuilding initiatives carried out by women's organisations in the context of frozen conflicts. Specifically, we will delve into the experiences and accounts of women involved in these organisations in Georgia. By highlighting their projects and methods, we will illustrate how they play a crucial role in transforming conflicts and promoting peace. Therefore, it is relevant to see how the interviewees perceive the relationship between being women's organisations (and thus having a gendered approach and lens) and the efforts at conflict resolution or transformation. Hence, looking at the peace practices of the organisations under review here, we will relate them to the practices often ascribed to feminist peace outlined in Chapter 1, namely women-to-women diplomacy and everyday peace.

### **3.1 Peace practices of women's organisations**

#### **3.1.1 Women-to-women dialogue**

The first part of the analysis will attempt to answer the first research question, which can be broken down into two sub-questions: (i) how do the organisations contribute to conflict transformation? (ii) how does the gender lens translate into peace practices and how does this correspond (or not) to feminist peace practices?

MacGinty notes that when there are no official plans for reconciliation in protracted or stagnant conflicts, people and communities tend to develop their own methods for dealing with the conflict situation (MacGinty, 2014: 550). From the interviews collected, it is evident that the organisations involved in the study work in different areas for peacebuilding and implement different and multiple strategies for conflict transformation and reconciliation.

Organisation 1, which initially dealt primarily with internally displaced persons (IDPs), providing humanitarian assistance, currently organises peace dialogues and advocates for the rights of conflict-affected women and girls and IDPs. Organisation 1 as well as Organisation 3, works at all levels of society, both with local communities, and by cooperating with municipal and national authorities, according to the respondent of Organisation 3:

We have several main directions: peacebuilding and working with counterparts in conflict-divided societies mainly in Abkhazia but also South Ossetia; another one is assessing situation of conflict affected women and coming up with recommendations, cooperation with officials at local and national levels and push forward the interests in documents and policies; fight against domestic violence, and the youth direction. (Respondent 3)

Organisation 2, instead, has a different strategy, working mainly with communities in rural areas of the country and close to conflict zones, with projects targeting women based on “trust-building, capacity building and resources sharing” (Respondent 2). Likewise, organisation 4’s “most of the work is advocating for the problems of those women who are living in rural areas. [...] Our main topics and scopes are women’s empowerment, Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, gender-based violence, and we conduct trainings where we are raising awareness campaigns” (Respondent 4). Organisation 5, with a more international outlook, not only organises spaces for women from Georgia and Abkhazia to meet and dialogue but also supports local organisations by various means.

Overall, regular and constant dialogue between women and between the conflict parties is a common activity among all organisations.

We have some contacts; we have some dialogue. [...] Last week we had a meeting, but it was not on a specific topic, it was more a general meeting of women, and we were discussing, we are trying to create a

comfortable environment where they will be not alone because if it will be bilateral, it can be very dangerous, but when it is mixed is less dangerous. (Respondent 1)

Indeed, in frozen or protracted conflict settings, where historical grievances and pervasive animosity prevail, the impasse in discussing conflict-related issues persists due to the deadlocked nature of peace negotiations, the dominance of one side over the other is absent, the institutional negotiation pathway is unfeasible. For these reasons, the essential aspect for conflict transformation and resolution in these cases is prioritising efforts that focus on altering the dynamics of relationships at the most profound and fundamental levels of human interaction (Cárdenas 2019: 389):

In our facilitated dialogues people speak about everything, they analyse the root causes of the conflict, they also think about the future, based on the day-to-day realities. So, for our Georgian partners is really obvious and clear that, ok, it will not be possible to go back like nothing has happened 30 years after, and it is very shocking. The transformative effect is to listen directly to the people who are from the other side, young ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia who do not want to be part of Georgia. That is shocking to hear for Georgians. (Respondent 5)

In such frozen conflict setting, an effective strategy for promoting peace is to utilise a bottom-up approach because it involves actively addressing the sources of polarisation within and between the parties. This entails promoting perceptions of mutual benefits derived from peace and collaborative development (Cárdenas 2019: 388):

Our peacebuilding activities is not dialogue for dialogue, it is finding solution for something, is helping people, have dialogue, cooperate and solve something for the wellbeing, to prepare them for the solutions on their own lives. (Respondent 3)

And we were speaking about peace, but it is not that there is the conflict and then we are going somewhere, making a dialogue, contracting with each other. But at organisational a foundational level, for us what we do it is for justice, economic empowerment or whatever it is needed but at the core it is for resolution in the long run. But what we do directly is to combine and advocate the conflict affected regions' needs. (Respondent 2)

As these testimonies show, the organisations' prominent role is to act as intermediaries and promoters of opportunities for dialogue between Georgians and Abkhazians. These spaces for dialogue involve young people, men, and especially women. As for the latter, this type of dialogue promoted by these organisations can be included in the practice of women-to-women diplomacy. Women-to-women diplomacy is a unique approach to peacebuilding that promotes dialogue and collaboration while challenging the dominant narratives of conflict. The objective is to bring together women who have experienced conflict and share a common vision for equal rights so that they can have meaningful interactions and progress towards cooperation (Cardenas 2019: 386). In particular, peacebuilding is acknowledged as a significant transformative social process that involves acknowledging the importance of the local level as a reflection of the wider dynamics of conflict (Abrahamyan, et al. 2018: 12 and Cárdenas 2019: 389). Therefore, to achieve significant change, addressing the basic human levels and actively transforming the relationships involved is essential. This can be done by taking steps that promote a peaceful environment, like establishing trust and finding shared interests, as explained by respondent 3:

They are just cooperating with each other, they are just having dialogue, we are constantly meeting each other online, but even we had meeting in Georgia, when Abkhaz women are coming to Georgia to discuss with Georgian women about the common problems, what kind of problems

they experiencing now, for instance now they are talking about problems of education of their children they could not go abroad and engage their children in higher education and in international universities because of sanctions. They are talking about economic problem, about alcoholism and drug abuse which is very widespread in Abkhazia. And we are discussion what to do together, this kind of interaction in constantly ongoing. (Respondent 3)

One interviewee from organisation number 2 effectively defines women-to-women diplomacy as the process of creating identities and collectively forming new understandings and meanings of belonging:

We were supporting them to have a space for meeting once a week and discussing not only what is happening new in their families but what kind of the problems they have. It was people-to-people communication but in a group to discuss their individual and community level needs. And how this women's group can do about that. So, it is a long-term process but social mobilisation gives this possibility to share. – We agree we want continue meeting, what is our aim, what we want to discuss and achieve, not only as a group but as representatives of the community. So, there are several months of work that the group has to undertake because it is about creation of group, concepts, values, name, about identity creation; it is an internal work. (Respondent 2)

In summary, from the informants' accounts, the gender lens in peace practices runs through dialogue; thus, listening to and, above all, taking into account the voices, priorities and problems of those who live the conflict situation on a daily basis but who are hardly included in official negotiations:

If you really listen to the women and to the girls, for them peace is very pragmatic, for them peace is about everyday security, for them peace is about having the public transportation on time, for them is street lighting,

about feeling safe in the place they are, being able to visit the graveyards.  
(Respondent 5)

### **3.1.2 Peace situated in the Everyday**

Dialogue at the grassroots level is predominantly exercised by women for several reasons. Among others, there is the fact that women tend to be deeply rooted in the local social fabric and at the community level (El-Bushra, 2007). Furthermore, their active participation at the local level may be attributed to their exclusion from official negotiation platforms. Respondent number 1 also suggests another potential reason:

Especially in areas of reconciliation, why there are much more women? Because is dirty work, in brackets of course, as when you have to wash the dishes, and you wash them and tomorrow you have to start again to wash from the beginning. Women are more patient to do this regular, routine work, which is of mediation, and you need to do it again and again, at least to stay on the same level and not to go back because if you stop for two month with reconciliation dialogue, you need to start again five times harder than at the beginning of the dialogue because then any statement from government, some escalation etc. [can happen] and we need to return back and start from the beginning. It is not very rewarding.  
(Respondent 1)

This understanding of the reconciliation process as a constant, long and ongoing work is also reflected in the meaning of peace:

Because peace is not something to achieve, to have, but it is a process, it is a never-ending process. At the beginning I was thinking of peacebuilding, that then we will have peace, and then what? It [peace] is about everyday actions, everyday speaking, sharing, and understanding what peace is. So, peace is a long-term process. Even though we are speaking about it, there is a frozen conflict. (Respondent 2)

This last testimony relates to the practice of everyday peace. Incorporating the everyday as a crucial aspect of analysis holds significant implications for feminist understandings of peace. Notably, this approach anchors feminist peace in the realm of human experience, enabling a comprehensive examination of intersecting oppressions (Wibben et al., 2019: 4). Since people are left alone to cope with the situation of living with the conflict, resolving conflict means, first of all solving the everyday problems it causes or has caused. As mentioned by Wibben in her definition of Feminist Peace Research, it “sharpens our analysis of the everydayness and possibilities of peaceful coexistence and conflict transformation and prevention” (Wibben et al., 2019: 4). The everyday can serve as a way to analyse politics and create a link between the particular and the universal, the local and the global. Feminist scholars have played a pivotal role in emphasising the connection between public and private events, leading to a new perspective on war as an experience rather than just a consequence of decisions made by those in power. Indeed, looking at peace practices from a feminist perspective helps us evaluate power dynamics and the connection between private and political aspects of everydayness. Hence, recognising the inherent power embedded within the everyday represents a form of empowerment in its own right, as it redirects attention towards the agency present in everyday practices and discourses (Kappler & Lemay-Hébert, 2019: 165). Interviewee number 3's testimony provides valuable insight into understanding the link between public and private aspects in the everyday lives of those affected by the conflict:

Conflict affected people are still facing a lot of problems related to their basic needs. They are lacking basic needs, there are plenty of IDP settlements that are destroyed, I am not even talking about absolutely forgotten and overlooked IDP that are living in private sector. [...] they are constantly facing to be homeless because they cannot pay rent, they do not have any attention from government. There are still problems



IDPs, and conflict affected people are facing, living close to the ABL [Administrative Border Line]. These problems have to be addressed; therefore, I am saying that these are still the priorities. In the Abkhaz side, the same: their economic situation is very down, their criminal situation is very bad, they still have problems of movement, lots of deprivation because of sanctions and this kind of stuff. And when we talk about conflict resolution, we need to talk about these problems that people are facing now, nowadays, in their life. Their normal wellbeing has to be ensured in order to prepare them for normal dialogue on reconciliation and conflict resolution. (Respondent 3)

The acknowledgement of local capacity and agency is fundamental in order to put people's priorities at the centre. To achieve justice and equality, it is important to not only promote it but also prevent direct and structural violence. This would mean shifting focus from hard security, territorial sovereignty, statehood, and institution-building typical of liberal peace to prioritizing the needs of individuals and communities on a local level. Such a shift could lead to a reevaluation of global state-building agendas with more attention paid to local contexts and everyday concerns. Ultimately, it would require the development of locally focused political, economic, and social strategies to address immediate needs (Richmond, 2009: 572).

### **3.2 The main challenges in women's peace initiatives between Georgians and Abkhazians**

Linked to these practices of dialogue, characterised by women-to-women diplomacy and situated within the framework of everyday peace, the people interviewed also highlighted specific challenges and problems. There are four main issues that need to be addressed. The first is the difficulty of working in

Abkhazia due to the current political situation<sup>1</sup>. The second challenge is establishing a trustful dialogue between partners. The third is the socioeconomic disparities that exist between the parties involved. The fourth problem is the power asymmetry between the two parties in the dialogue.

Undoubtedly, the greatest challenge the organisations face in their peace initiatives involving their Abkhazian counterparts is the political situation in the region, as noted by three organisations:

Because for them (Abkhaz side) it is more difficult, more dangerous. [...] And also, I personally very much respect Abkhazian NGOs because they are working in more difficult conditions and very honestly are serving society. (Respondent 1)

The main concern regarding the restrictive political situation in Abkhazia regards the draft of the so-called 'foreign agents' law, which would directly impact non-governmental organisations, as interviewee 4 explains:

Right now, Abkhazians are fighting against it [the foreign agent law] but they have started the process, but their participation in NGOs activities, studies, the process will be totally stopped (if this foreign agent law

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<sup>1</sup> The government's policy agreement with Moscow in 2020 included specific restrictions for groups receiving foreign funding. Although no legislation pertaining to this was passed by the end of 2022, Abkhaz civil society experienced increasing pressure from the state throughout the year.

The Abkhaz State Security Service (SGB) summoned several civil society activists for questioning. Despite objections from the local human rights commissioner, these interrogations persisted and later extended to include representatives from foreign organizations operating in Abkhazia. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs banned a range of projects implemented by foreign organizations and their local partners (Abkhazia: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report). In Abkhazia, the human rights situation has shown a consistent decline in various aspects (Amnesty International, 2022). Numerous reports have highlighted allegations of human rights violations occurring in and around these regions. These violations encompass, among others, restrictions on freedom of movement, livelihood opportunities rights to liberty, security, family life, and property (OHCHR, 2022).

would pass in Abkhazia), and this is the main challenge right now.  
(Respondent 4)

Secondly, a challenge is that brought by confidence-building activities like the women-to-women meetings discussed in the previous section, that are a time-consuming process, especially in cases where there is no physical coexistence or freedom of movement. On this matter, Respondent 1 emphasises that dialogue initiatives and projects often involve the same people or groups:

Then I think still politicisation is here, you cannot avoid this. It is maybe why it is more classical groups which are talking with each other because trust between them is already built, it is already passed through the self-reflection and many other things that are recommended in these cases and some questions are already solved and people can talk about more concrete things. (Respondent 1)

As noted by the Network of Women Mediators of South Caucasus in their publication “Is there a key to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus?”, the search for ways to overcome mistrust is still relevant, and one of the strategies to do this is to promote initiatives free from the political burden (Network of Women Mediators, 2023: 12). Indeed, using a status-neutral approach is a practical and effective way to engage with the Abkhaz side and address existing humanitarian and economic issues:

So, we are using these joint methodologies of assessment of human security and practically all seven directions of human security: physical, education, economic, social, political sometimes (but we try to avoid the political one, in order not to harm) but still we are using psychological security, food and we are trying to explore and assess the situation on the ground. (Respondent 3)

Due to differences in legal and institutional frameworks across borders, security concerns related to political positions, and limited options for official negotiations, a significant portion of activism has been focused on advancing

gender equality as a necessary foundation for peace rather than pursuing traditional peacebuilding approaches directly (Cárdenas 2019: 405). Even when confronted with fundamentally divergent perspectives on the final status, initiating a dialogue and, more significantly, implementing concrete measures are attainable objectives (Gamakharia, 2017: 24):

Even if we have different political views – they are for independence, we are for reunification – we respect their views because what we see is that they also do not want to join Russia; they want to be independent. It is portably a natural feeling, but they [the NGOs in Abkhazia] are doing a very good job in civic education and in supporting democracy. (Respondent 1)

During the interview, a representative from organization number 2 shared another challenge they face. They pointed out that socio-economic struggles in both Georgia and Abkhazia hinder support for peace and collaborative development efforts, as also part to the everyday impacts and implications of the conflict mentioned in the pervious paragraph and analysed in the “everyday peace” framework in chapter 1. She emphasized that economic constraints are preventing people from prioritizing peace efforts:

Even in our country the situation we have now, if you see I am always telling vocally we need to develop our country, ensure people are living in a dignify life, they have good social economic situation and then you can engage in any confidence building and reconciliation activities, because otherwise it is just difficult to somehow motivate people in engaging people in dialogue with the so-called enemy. Because sometime when it comes to conflict affected IDPs people they just blame everybody, the officials, on their bad situation. [...] For Georgians in order not to be aggressive and jealous that you are advocative for the wellbeing of Abkhaz while they are also struggling in their situation. [...] It is a very sensitive issue, and you should be very careful not only

because you do not want to raise aggression inside the society but you do not want to harm other ones, because we could not talk vocally about our activities, you could not find any specificity in our website about the cooperation even if we interruptedly tow decades working with Abkhazians but you cannot find any specifics anywhere because you could not talk about these vocally. From one side this hinder you, because you have results, you reached something, but you cannot talk about it, but you could have this opportunity, it could spark hope to society that something is evolving, is happening but you could not talk about it. This is the specificity of working in a conflict sensitive environment and peacebuilding. (Respondent 3)

Ultimately, one of the biggest challenges is the asymmetry of power between the parties in the dialogue. Women, including feminists, come together for various reasons, such as political strategy or the shared belief that women should have a say in important decisions made by leaders on both sides. However, the inherent imbalance between the two sides quickly reveals that there is no universal "sisterhood" approach (Golan, 2011: 182). The asymmetry of power between the parties is also found in the dialogue practices promoted by women's organisations and addressing women, as reported by organisation 5:

A month ago, we have been in Dubai with our partners of South Caucasus, we had equal number of women - it was youth peace and security, young women in peacebuilding - 5 from Abkhazia, 5 from Georgia, 5 from Armenia, 5 from Azerbaijan. And after the meeting, it was a really transformative very good space, Armenians were learning a lot from Abkhazians, Abkhaz young women were really open and vocal; and after the meeting young Georgians women, not one, a couple of them approached my colleague who is ethnic Georgian and they said to her: "you know we think you did a mistake in the design of the space, everything was interesting but the design of the space was not really

correct”. My colleague asked why, and they said: “It might create for Armenian and Azerbaijanis not a right understanding of our conflict because Abkhazians were so vocal so they might be treated as equals, as a separate entity”. For her, who was speaking, this is unconventional, so threatening, that Armenians and Azerbaijanis can listen to them, that they are part of the story. In a room 5 Georgians and 5 Abkhazians, they speak about the same conflict but very different sides of it. There, even a young Georgian were: “This is not true, we know”. She is young, she has never been to Abkhazia, but she explains to them: “In Gali people are bla bla bla” and one young woman from Abkhazia replied: “But could you listen to me? I am from Gali, I am sitting here, you can ask me, and this is how I feel being from there and this is how my reality is”. (Respondent 5)

A significant portion of Feminist Peace Research adopts a transversal approach, giving careful consideration to a range of perspectives influenced by identities, positionalities, and values. These perspectives are in a constant state of flux as the conversation evolves and the individuals involved continue to change. Transversal politics offers a framework for addressing intersectionalities and challenging assumptions of homogeneity and universality. It is grounded in the understanding that position, identity, and values are distinct and not necessarily aligned or static. Similar to feminist standpoint theory, transversal politics recognises the significance of individual perspectives while also complicating the notion of a fixed standpoint by acknowledging its dynamic and evolving nature. Crucially, it highlights the importance of difference not as a contradiction to equality but as a means of enabling justice by acknowledging power disparities inherent in diverse positionalities (Wibben et al., 2019: 4). This approach could be crucial in "unfreezing" the entrenched positions that have developed over decades of the protracted Abkhaz-Georgian conflict. However, the asymmetry of power, in conjunction with the development of

multifaceted and complex identities during the decades of frozen conflict, does not allow for a transversal and intersectional approach:

Just yesterday I had a conversation with our partner in Gali region and she said: “again they did the same, everyone is..., they see us as victims, in Tbilisi, in Sukhumi, everyone has an opinion on us but nobody speaks to us” and 30 years after the conflict they are actors, they have developed their identity that it is very interesting to observe that is very unpopular, that is very painful to Georgians to hear that in Abkhazia, in Gali regions, there are ethnic Georgians that do not feel part of Georgia, they are ethnic Georgians but do not feel anymore part of Georgia and that is very understandable if you know how they have developed their identity, nationalities and on those structures work and the propaganda issues, they are in this limbo in between and especially young people who do not remember times before the conflict they said very prominently that they are Georgians but their capital is Sukhumi, not even Sukumi but Sukhum and their country is Abkhazia. (Respondent 5)

In conclusion, in their peace and conflict transformation activities, women's organisations implement feminist peace practices such as women-to-women diplomacy and a strong focus on the everyday. The conversations they encourage often neglect discussing political aspects, the possible future administrative structure, or the complex identities that have evolved and transformed over the three decades since the conflict was 'frozen'. The feminist approach requires careful consideration of power dynamics and inequalities in different contexts, which is currently lacking in the context under investigation. Nevertheless, from the testimonies collected, there seems to be a lack of initiatives specifically aimed at overcoming this asymmetry between the parties. This, however, is a critical step towards achieving mutual recognition and establishing a sustainable and positive dialogue for peace.

## **Chapter 4. Data analysis: Peace, Gender, and their intersection**

Once having described which initiatives the organisations implement, it is necessary to analyse which visions and priorities guide their activities. This section of the analysis will consider the visions of peace developed by the organisations. In order to assess whether and to what extent these visions can be ascribed to the feminist notions of peace, two parameters will be considered. The first is peace, and the second is gender. Then, we will investigate how organisations position themselves at the intersection of the two. The analysis of the data concerning the peace parameter consists of highlighting which peacebuilding priorities respondents and their organisations have and in what ways the impacts of frozen conflict may influence how they view peace. Examining the perspective on gender will evaluate how organisations perceive the involvement of women in peacebuilding and analyse the gender norms and stereotypes present in their operating context. The intersection between these two parameters will show how organisations understand gender equality in peacebuilding and how and whether they relate to feminism and feminist peace principles. Therefore, when analysing organisations' practices and principles, it is possible to determine the correlation between their visions of peace and feminist peace.

### **4.1 Peace: definition, vision, and priorities**

This section on peace is divided into two parts. The first presents the priorities for peacebuilding indicated by the women interviewed and their idea and definition of peace. The second part deals with how and whether the fact that it is a protracted or frozen conflict has affected the way they see peace, and their future prospects.

For every person, the definition of peace is different. (Respondent 4)



Building on these words, an attempt will be made to give an overview of what peace means to the people interviewed in light of their activities within women's organisations.

Peace is quite fragile between the societies separated as a result of conflict if it is based on the inefficient principle of “playing on one side of the field”. Increasing the image of Georgians and Abkhazian societies as enemies is contra-productive and generates more violence than peace (Devidze, 2019: 9). Hence, it is essential to pursue a positive peace that goes beyond the polarisation and mere cessation of hostilities and ensures conditions where war will not reignite unexpectedly (Paarlberg-Kvam 2019: 203). Consequently, it is of utmost importance to foster a discourse on constructing and sustaining peace, along with developing strategies centered around human security, people's well-being, and prevention. Indeed, several individuals interviewed expressed ideas aligned with Confortini's concept of feminist positive peace, which builds upon Galtung's theories and seeks to challenge “binary categories such as war/peace, female/male, and violent/nonviolent” (Paarlberg-Kvam 2019: 203):

When we are speaking about conflict, it is not about we have war and armed conflict, and after we need peace. No. Peace is general and because there are a lot of things happening, especially war and armed conflicts, we are speaking about peacebuilding and security issues in in this direction, in this context. But peace is not about that only, peace is about community as well, it is about how people interact to each other, how we understand, it is about communication, shared resources. [...] But this is the idea we are believing in, and when we are saying that we are supporting peacebuilding, this is what we mean. And in these two regions, we are doing this, building peace through resource sharing, mobilisations program. Peace regards what is happening at community level and how people interact. There are a lot of things for building peace, everything, I guess, in a way. (Respondent 2)

Therefore, peace is not just the absence of war or violence, but a general sense of security, of human security. Moreover, given the context of protracted conflict, it seems that before actually talking about peace, the people interviewed focus particularly on the conditions that would allow the creation of fertile ground and solid foundations for discussing peace. In fact, some do not talk about peace or conflict resolution:

I am not even saying conflict resolution because I am far from the opinion that conflict resolution will come with such activities, not at all, it is just that we are promoting, contributing to conflict transformation and we need to do that before reaching the point of conflict resolution. It should be joint venture with the counterparts and South Ossetins and Abkhaz need to decide what will be preferable outcomes, solution but before you need to transform the conflict and there are some leverages [...] Everything should begin from the ground, from the people, from their needs. Therefore, it is too early to speak about conflict resolution because people are not engaged, their basic needs are not satisfied, they need to come up together on the preferable solution but beforehand you need to create the ground, to ensure their normal life, to create the will to think about conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is something that is mutually beneficial, not just for one or another, it is a win-win approach. Therefore, we need to prepare the ground, from the need of people. (Respondent 3)

Consequently, before considering any outcome or result that may emerge from the peace process, the dialogues, or the negotiations, all organisations see as a priority in peacebuilding, enabling people to build peace. This is evident from the three main meanings given to the word peace: understanding, empowerment and dignified life. In the first case, building peace means creating a space for dialogue, of which respondent 5 emphasises the importance:

We just believe that everyone is equal, and everyone has the right opinion to their own priorities, their own perspectives and let it be. The connector here is more to create the safe space to be able to speak with each other so we do not care much about what they say but we believe that it is important for them to speak. (Respondent 5)

At the same time, peace is mutual understanding. This is crucial at the grassroots level: only in this way, where one side understands the claims of the other (and vice versa), even if they do not share them, is it possible to create a solid basis for finding a point of contact on which to start building a constructive dialogue of peace:

First of all, there should be understanding, by all actors, including our state actors. Women have the right to discuss issues that is not against somebody but is for the profit of the population. [...] This understanding and trust is very important for future dialogues also in the formal level. Sometimes I joke saying that such separate republic which is created by NGOs for dialogue, and it's much more understanding sometimes among parties, and between NGOs and local populations in the same region. Sometimes I joke saying that such separate republic which is created by NGOs for dialogue, and it's much more understanding sometimes among parties, and between NGOs and local populations in the same region. (Respondent 1)

Secondly, interviewee 4 builds on the importance of dialogue, but emphasises that peace means participation and empowerment of people to make their voices heard:

For us peace is very general word and for every county and every context is totally different but one thing we can all agreed: when I advocate problems for IDP settlements, if they do not have water [for example], this is not the peace process for me, it is not the main core. When the IDPs, are empowered by us, NGOs, and when they are advocating their

problems: this is the peace process. [...] So for us we see this process. And they are also very motivated to be brought in the meetings, in peace talks, like GID, whenever it will be opened. (Respondent 4)

Third, peace is having a dignified life. Organisations in Georgia have adopted a human security approach, emphasising the importance of addressing the daily needs and rights of individuals, particularly women who have been impacted by conflict. This approach recognises the fundamental requirements and well-being of people as a crucial aspect of building peace (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 64). By prioritising human security, these organisations aim to bring about transformative changes that acknowledge and tackle gender-related challenges. Their efforts encompass social, economic, and political development, reflecting a commitment to creating a more inclusive and gender-responsive society (Gentry, 2018: 349). Particularly important in this respect are the testimonies of respondents 3 and 5, which explain why socio-economic development and ensuring a dignified life are the preconditions for peace:

And when we talk about conflict resolution, we need to talk about these problems that people are facing now, nowadays, in their life, their normal wellbeing has to be ensured in order to prepare them for normal dialogue on reconciliation and conflict resolution. Before their problems are not solved, I really doubt that people can talk constructively with each other. Before people's normal life is not ensured is very difficult to start talking with them on confidence building, direct dialogue with Abkhaz. [...] I personally believe that when it comes to peacebuilding, to reconciliation, confidence building it is very important to ensure dignify life for people who you are going to engage in reconciliation, who you are going to somehow build trust between, it is very important, therefore to work on development, on economic empowerment or somehow ensure that they are not subject of domestic violence;

everything is very important for peacebuilding because when there are problems, they could not just reconcile, talk (Respondent 3)

According to this statement, human security and having a dignified life is fundamental to making conflict resolution a priority for people, as also shown in interviewee 5's statement:

Peace is about dignified way of thinking. When women and girls are asked about peace, for them peace is social economic security. In this region, it comes as first priority. Is like "I want to feel I have a job, I have income, I have roof and heating and stuff like that". (Respondent 5)

Certainly, this meaning of peace, i.e. ensuring complete security of individuals and communities through development and a dignified life, connects with the practices of everyday peace. Indeed, the priority of implementing measures aimed at resolving everyday issues makes possible to bolster human security. Taking steps to address these concerns contributes to the overall well-being and safety of individuals, ultimately fostering an environment of enhanced security for all (Akaba, 2012: 325). Furthermore, it is interesting that socio-economic security and conflict resolution are seen as two elements that are temporally consequent, but not interlinked. Thus, economic development comes first and peacebuilding later, rather than being two processes that go hand in hand. In this conception of peace, therefore, one can see the effects of the 'freezing' of the conflict for three decades. While feminist scholars frequently highlight that the post-war period presents an opportunity for either positive or negative changes in power dynamics and gender relations, (Gentry, 2018: 346), this potential was neither highlighted nor mentioned by any of the people interviewed, given that the war never formally ended but just froze. To the question "How has this protracted conflict situation affected the way people think about peace or conflict transformation?" most of the respondents answered "nothing":

For 30 years of conflict and it is frozen for now, nothing is happening, nothing is changing there. We are stuck in one direction but also peace and security, this direction of conflict resolution is not popular at all among youth, and this is a problem. (Respondent 4)

Individuals have become accustomed to their current circumstances as a means of coping with the reality that this is their new normal.

So, people living along the dividing lines, people living in the IDP settlements, people living in Abkhazia and south Ossetia, for them conflict is normalised part of their lives, they do not call it conflict anymore, for them is like of part of their life, which brings very different traumas inside so you for example many people in the bordering line with south Ossetia because the conflict, the second one was in 2008, so not very far away, people do not do reconstruction, they are still in this waiting mode of another war, of going somewhere, your life is in a suitcase mode basically, you wait for something, you never plan long-term, never invest money in your housing or something, because you waiting for something to happen. (Respondent 5)

People have adapted to their situation, which has made it challenging to find ways to move past it and develop solutions for resolution, rather than just transformation. Therefore, this is challenging also for the ones working on the peacebuilding at the grassroots level. There are two reasons for this; the first is that it is difficult to identify the main problems of unresolved conflict:

We have a problem of identifying the problems. People are only living ... used to be in situations what they're facing they don't have the need that something has to done, something has to be changed. (Respondent 4)

The second challenge is to get people to conceive and engage in discussions about future prospects, to imagine a future in which conflict is absent, because:

Protracted conflict is also in the heads of the people. They do not see in Georgia, nobody speaks under governmental level, in schools, anywhere about the future prospects, about the strategies, about some scenarios, what this could look like. Not in the illusional world (we will go back, living happily after) because for Georgians this is the narrative that has been build and constructed. If you ask educated people, older, younger, uneducated, whoever, everyone in Georgia, especially the ones directly affected, the resolution of the conflict is always going back, or being able to go back, to take back territory and that is it. (Respondent 5)

#### **4.2 Gender: being women in peacebuilding and challenging gender norms**

It is essential to recognise that women have diverse views on matters of war and peace. Like men, they are also influenced by their political beliefs and affiliations (El-Bushra, 2007: 134). However, gender plays a significant role in how both men and women perceive their experiences and actions in relation to war and peace (Goldstein, 2003: 49). The interviewed organisations provided insightful perspectives on the link between war and gender. It was observed that women's expected gender roles often lead to their exclusion from peace processes. Indeed, the inclusion of women in the realms of politics and public engagement for peacebuilding or democratic change often involves a departure from conventional gender norms, which necessitates specific validation. Women frequently employ legitimisation strategies associated with maternal roles (Harders, 2011: 145). Numerous female advocates, including respondent 1, utilise constructive notions of femininity and motherhood in their efforts towards peace:

This sphere [of peacebuilding] for women is more important than for men because if women feel responsible because due to their actions there will be some harm to their children, they are preventing this. (Respondent 1)

During the interviews, it became evident that two aspects were consistently present among all the organisations of women considered: shared experiences and localised knowledge. Indeed, women who participate in such organisations often testify that their dedication to peace activism stems from their firsthand experiences during and after war. While the initial drive to organise may arise from the urgent need to gather resources for the survival of families and communities, many of these organisations are sustained by the sense of empowerment women derive from this process (El-Bushra, 2007:135). The significance lies not only in recognising the work of women in conflict transformation and peacebuilding, but also in understanding how their experiences broaden the scope of peace-making itself (El-Bushra, 2007:131). Consequently, a feminist consciousness and the potential of women as activists have emerged through the sharing of individual experiences of the conflict (Cardenas, 2022), leading to the creation of a platform for cooperation as described by the interviewee 3:

Women are very brave, I think. Because as I remember in engaging especially this cooperation with their counterparts, because I remember when I was a child at that time and I remember there were women who came to Georgia to work with Georgian women and it was early 90s, after the war. They came, it was a round table in Georgia and they were brave enough to come and talk to Georgian women. I remember that and I remember that women especially who most of all hate this war, who lost their children, their husbands, and they really do not want this to be repeated, they were very very open and responsive to any cooperation. [...] Because all the women that are engaged in the dialogue do not want that someone decide for them. (Respondent 3)

Moreover, women's peace activist organisations often have strong roots in the local context and cultural specificity, thus, they possess profound localised knowledge (El-Bushra, 2007: 131) and their activism typically encompasses



multiple dimensions including “the psychosocial and relational and spiritual” (Gentry, 2011: 353):

They are unfreezing the conflict because women that lost their children and husbands could talk, forgive each other, speak about peace, help each other to find the graves and they were healing each other, if they can. It is just a good example that our people could start talking and cooperating. (Respondent 3)

Therefore, the participation of women in horizontal networks that focus on emergency relief or addressing everyday life concerns can significantly impact the prospects of successful post-conflict reconstruction (Gizelis, 2011: 525).

However, women who participate in peace initiatives often face challenges related to gender norms and stereotypes. All organisations involved in peace activities have identified such gender-related issues as a significant concern. The notion that women are inherently inclined to be peaceful and possess natural abilities as peacebuilders oversimplifies their lives. Additionally, including women at the peace table based on the belief in their supposed innate expertise can be seen as valuing them solely for their "use-value" rather than recognising their right to participate in security matters as equals. Furthermore, linking women exclusively with peace inadvertently devalues both women and the concept of peace. According to Ann Tickner, associating femininity with peace reinforces an idealised masculinity that relies on portraying women as passive victims in need of protection. The assumption that women are inherently more peaceful or peace-loving perpetuates an essentialist misconception that is detrimental to both peace and women. This portrayal of women as naive not only excludes women from participating but also disregards approaches to conflict resolution that are perceived as feminine, such as compromise, cooperation, and conciliation, in the field of international relations (Duncanson: 2009: 35) as indicated by respondent 1:

I do not like the statement that women are dealing with social issues, that we need to concentrate on pensions, disable people etc., it is not true but, of course, we need to deal with politics. I think that dialogue is not a political thing and what is necessary to understand for instance is that women from villages divided by boundaries are happy to meet, they have a lot of things to discuss upon governmental things, they need to discuss what issues they need. (Respondent 1)

Moreover, in the patriarchal context within which women operate, there is often a reinforcement of undervaluing and doubting women's abilities to participate in political processes (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 62) as explained below by Respondent 1:

There is a stereotype that I found a little bit harmful that in case of reconciliation. For reconciliation and for peacebuilding, you need women at the community and local level but as soon as it comes to negotiations at official levels then it will be men because are seen as more experienced. [...] Women are not seen as experts. When there was the war in 2020 in Karabakh, I participated in mediation meeting and dialogue and what I have seen is that all experts were men, even if I know women are much better at this than men. Women are not seen as experts, they are always asked about to care about social issues, but we can talk about other issues. And the same is with men, because men cannot talk about social issue because they are not aware. I was asking to these so-called experts in this 2020 meeting how was the situation of IDPs from Karabakh, because there were nine thousand. The war was also related to Covid pandemic, and so I was asking how the pandemic is influencing it, what was the situation, I was asking if there were cases of sexual violence and no one answered because they were not interested, they were talking about the influence of Turkey, of Iran, the influence of Russia, the influence of oil, all very important but they knew

nothing about people, and when you talk about war first of all, in my opinion, you have to talk about people, how to save people and give them right to go back, if they are displaced. The main aim of politics at the end is people. (Respondent 1)

Women's organisations are confronted with the limitations of gender norms, particularly those that bind women primarily and traditionally to their role as caretakers of the family. As interviewee 1 notes, the traditional family/community often prevails over women's lives:

Another stereotype is that women have already family and first they have to care about family, which is true. And here we need to work with family members, especially elderly members because in young generations men are already helping women. So, it is also family stereotypes that prevent women to be in politics or build professional skills. (Respondent 1)

Numerous organisations linked various systems to illustrate how women experience intersecting oppressions in militarised environments. Although they used different terms such as stereotypes or gender norms to describe the pressures and limitations governing women's lives, all organisations acknowledged that women face unique challenges that differ from those experienced by men (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 63). Three out of five organisations indicated how gender becomes a hindrance or even a barrier in engaging in activities promoting reconciliation and dialogue. Indeed, the fact that women engage in activities outside the family was indicated as a source of distrust on the part of husbands and the community.

Good communication is crucial because there are a lot of questions coming up when we work with women and communities, like why you are going to these meeting, why are you leaving the family to participate to the meetings, what is happening inside. (Respondent 2)

According to Interviewee 3, it's not just the information about community activities that matters, but also the results achieved by the organisations. These results, such as obtaining a small financial subsidy or community services from the municipality, provide benefits for households and communities and give women the legitimacy to participate in the activities outside of their home.

There are a lot of stereotypes, therefore I still believe that we could not overcome fully to these problems of domestic violence, there are a lot of facts, but it is just become more visible, this is the problem, now we do not face this kind of problems when men do not allow women to go (as before). On the contrary, now all people realised that economic strengths bring stability to them and to their family and nobody just restricts women from going. But at that time, it was a really crazy period because it was post-traumatic and post-war situation. (Respondent 3)

#### **4.3 The Intersection of Gender and Peace**

While feminism strives to achieve gender equality, peace research focuses on building a world free from violence. (Wibben, 2019: 3). In light of the two strands analysed separately so far, peace and gender, it is possible to understand how they interrelate and influence each other.

Taking into account gender perspectives can lead to a reimagining of peace, resulting in a more comprehensive and inclusive definition. At the same time, it allows for a better understanding of the gender that is acted upon in peace practices. On the one hand, gendered conceptions of peace often rely on the belief that achieving equality and freedom is crucial for peace. This includes realising both self-determination and human rights, which are key aspects of feminist ideals of peace. Hence, by incorporating a gender perspective into our understanding of positive peace, we can broaden our understanding of peace itself. (Cárdenas, 2019). The expanded understanding of peace, in light of the relationship between peace and gender, encompasses a wider range of practices.

This includes activities beyond the traditional peacebuilding measures, as explained by interviewee 3:

We are trying to address gender-based violence because we also notice that when gender-based violence is more widespread, there are more chance for instability and violence in general, and war occurrence. Because this aggression seems to move something; therefore, you need to mitigate that, to address that, somehow diffuse this tension, it is very important. So, there are correlation and we are trying to work on it from different angles. (Respondent 3)

Looking at gender as something that is not fixed but rather a practice, as most feminists do, helps to navigate the challenge of advocating for women's rights and opposing violence and war without reinforcing the idea of gender dichotomies. This approach has allowed feminist peace activists to redefine the meanings of peace and gender, leading to a new understanding of how gender equality and peace are interdependent. This conceptual shift is an important contribution to debates about peace and security, as it sees gender equality as a fundamental aspect of lasting peace rather than just a means to an end (Duncanson, 2009: 58):

Gender equality is very related to peace, and necessary for a society in peace. (Respondent 2)

Generally, feminist peace places gender equality at the centre of the changes needed to achieve long-lasting peace (Harders, 2011). However, feminist peace is not a simple or uniform idea (Wibben and Donahoe, 2020). In fact, there are many different ways that gender equality and peace can interact in feminist peace movements and different ideas about how social transformation should happen (Cárdenas, 2022: 7). Therefore, the interviews focused on the relationship between gender equality and peace. Specifically, the goal was to gather participants' views on whether gender equality is a fundamental component of peace, a requirement for peace, or a result of a fair and just peace.

The concept of gender equality being a fundamental element of peace is a shared aspect of the peace efforts of these organisations. Moreover, the experiences of these organisations demonstrate ways to mobilise based on shared experiences of women in conflict, with the goal of empowering women and achieving gender equality as a crucial aspect of promoting peace (Cárdenas, 2019: 392) because

Peace will not be without justice, it is a matter of justice: equal participation, equal opportunities. So, if you do not have it, it is impossible to have peace. Therefore, gender equality is justice and opportunity to have rights, to participate, to have rights, to have opportunity to do something and to gain something and give. (Respondent 3)

It is possible that the frozen conflict situation contributes to downplaying the significance of finding a political resolution (Cárdenas, 2019: 402). However, an interesting aspect of the study is how the pursuit of gender equality and peace are interconnected and shape the goals of women's organisations in Georgia, as evidenced here:

We just believe that by creating those spaces, by bringing different people, more people to take to each other, challenging their own narratives and perspectives that they happened to be in mind we create a more just and equal society, so it does not matter the political solution of the conflict, how to look like politically, territorially but the people need to be ready to live each other despite being different, despite having different approaches, that they want to care more... civic nation-building on equal terms, what we believe is in gender equality, (Respondent 5)

In the case of Georgia and the breakaway territories, women's organisations face challenges in their peace work due to security concerns and political differences (Cárdenas, 2019: 405).

As a result, the focus of activism has shifted towards promoting gender awareness and equality as a necessary step towards achieving peace, rather than solely focusing on traditional peacebuilding methods, as in the case of organisation 1:

About communities, I will talk about seminars with local authorities. I always start with gender seminars, before the ones on gender equality, I always start from war and I always ask question “how do you think war affected men and how war affected women” and then if they say that it is equal then I start to quote some of the people who they might know, from their community. [...] And we are trying to show how women and men were affected reflect also how men and women are managing things, and so this can be the issue why we need to talk about differences in gender attitudes, gender roles etc. and why we need to talk about gender equality, it is our tactics. (Respondent 1)

This statement highlights the significance of focusing on gender as a foundation for achieving peace. However, it also acknowledges the involvement of men in this effort, as is also the case with organisation 3:

We are not trying to distance ourselves from men, absolutely not, we are trying to parent with them, on equal basis and we do the same with youth as well. (Respondent 3)

All the organisations analysed recognise gender equality as a crucial aspect of peace, but research findings show differences in the relationship between the two. For instance, Organisation 4 highlights how gender equality is critical at the peace negotiation level and how gender inequalities have ramifications throughout all levels:

Also gender equality is very important and women participation is having backlashes right now in Georgia on participation level in international fora. For example, in 2003 among the twelve representatives in GID talks we had not half but at least women were

represented but for now it is only 3% so it means that among twelve representatives only woman is representing. Where is gender equality? [...]. You see, we have challenges at local level on national level as well. It is very important gender equality at all levels. (Respondent 4)

The representative from Organisation 1 clarified that while they also prioritise gender equality in their peace efforts, their approach and vision differ:

We work more on women's right than on gender equality, because I think it is a little bit different issue. And we from the beginning have chosen women's rights because in this way you can also explain gender equality. And also women's rights in Georgia is a very important topic because we are very far from the protection of the state and when you talk to people it is much easier to get the understanding on what you are doing. (Respondent 1)

The other organisations view gender equality as the foundation for establishing new social relations and promoting peace.

Without that it is practically impossible to achieve peace, and therefore we think, it is just legitimate for us to work with gender equality in order to say that you are working on peace. Without that it is impossible, therefore we are empowering women. (Respondent 3)

The concept of gender equality closely aligns with the ideology of feminists who work in the field of WPS. They believe that gender equality and peace are interdependent, just as gender hierarchies and war are linked. Therefore, to address the root causes of war, it is essential to address the unequal gender relations (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 56 and Cárdenas 2022: 9):

I am not saying that one training will change everything but we always say that at least when they go home (after the training) they start thinking differently. So that is a very good approach I think, and gender equality is also very important in peace processes. (Respondent 4)



Many organisations referenced feminist values, but not all of them identified as feminist. This can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the term "feminist" is often misconstrued and viewed as too "Western" or "radical". Secondly, there is a widespread lack of information and/or dissemination of misinformation regarding this term (Abrahamyan et al., 2018: 59). This is confirmed by respondent 5, who defines her own peace work and values as feminist peace:

In some areas it's just too dangerous to call it feminist but what they do in principle is feminist peace. We believe that feminist peace is started at your home and then if you feel safe and secure and you have the ability to work to exercise your rights and to be active, this goes and spreads in your community and then at the state level, at national level and then it is building a movement in the region and somewhere else, so each of these organisations or people that they work with, feminist peace is different thing. (Respondent 5)

Organisations two and five have openly declared their involvement in feminism and feminist peace. Upon analysing their activities and vision of peace, it is evident that they align with the definition of feminist peace as described in the literature. This definition characterises feminist peace as being transformative, expansive, and inclusive (Donahoe, 2019). The concept of feminist peace is transformative since it aims to achieve gender equality and subvert traditional power and gender relations (Wibben, 2019: 3). Furthermore, the respondent 2 explains the meaning of "expansive" in her feminist peace practices and vision: bringing complexity to our understanding of the world, overcoming the binary oppositions, such as male and female, war and peace (Donahoe, 2019: 92).

But when there is a crisis and thing change and you need to defend not only your values but also your people and yourself, what can be done as activists and feminists and organisations? So there is a need of more complexity in this discussion and contextual as well because every

context has their own understanding and ways to develop. (Respondent 2)

Moreover, this approach is inclusive as it advocates for comprehensive solutions and alternatives that are tailored to the local context, drawing on the community's experiences, needs, and resources (Donahoe, 2019: 92). This is explained in detail by the respondent 5:

This is how we tried to build up the peace: to include the invisible voices and to challenge the public narrative which are the mainstream narratives and we, from our side, we tried very often this people in the middle to challenge the multilateral state official, different institutional mind about those and creating some spaces where those people who are unconventional could speak or we would add a layer of analysis in bringing a gender perspectives to hard security issues, let's say, by applying and using and practicing intersectionality lens so people with disabilities, LGBTQI+, ethnic minorities, and stuff like that. It is not only about Abkhaz, for us gender and conflict analysis mixed huge urge or impact: the basis for our work is intersectional context, conflict, and gender analysis. And intersectional means that you really go and listen to people, you might not agree with what they say but it is their right to say it and see the reality like that. (Respondent 5)

In conclusion, based on the analysis and findings discussed, it can be argued that, albeit with different strategies and degrees of adherence to feminist peace, all the organisations considered in this study work towards peace by promoting gender equality and socio-economic justice for all groups because only by addressing the root causes of war, the continued violence and domination against women, girls, and non-gender-conforming individuals will cease (Cárdenas 2022: 9). Therefore, a holistic approach to peace is put into practice, challenging the fundamental elements of war, such as patriarchy, militarism, racism, classism, and economic exploitation, and thus, a feminist approach is

required to transform unequal gender relations and achieve lasting peace.

Therefore,

If we can speak about feminism, then we can speak about the peacebuilding. It is very connected we are not talking about how to connect them, it is about practice, we are practicing things and I do believe that feminism and our approach of doing things do not connect feminist and peace, because for us they come together within our practice. [...] For me peace and feminism do not have to be connected, it is very obvious for me that without each other, there both not existing. Peace is general idea, how we see peace it is different who sees how and what they are doing, and feminism also is very different in terms of approach but for me generally at the conceptual and contextual levels for me they are very the same in a way. But the strategies for that to speak about feminism and act as a feminist and to speak about peace and to act for peacebuilding, there're maybe different approaches. But for me, for us at foundation level, in what we are doing, feminism and peacebuilding are very connected and the same. (Respondent 2)

## **Conclusion**

The concept of feminist peace, as outlined in this thesis, is particularly appropriate for situations of frozen conflict. This is primarily due to its focus on positive peace, which means that it does not view the signing of a peace agreement as the ultimate objective. Instead, it aims to establish a post-conflict society founded on the principles of social justice and equality.

It can be observed that the organisations that were interviewed promote activities and visions that align with the principles of feminist peace, even though not all of them identify as feminists. They strive for peace by advocating for gender equality and socio-economic justice for all. It is believed that by addressing the root causes of war, including ongoing violence and oppression against women, girls, and non-gender-conforming individuals, lasting peace can be achieved. To accomplish this, a comprehensive approach is adopted, challenging the basic components of war, such as patriarchy, militarism, and economic exploitation. Therefore, a feminist approach is necessary to transform unequal gender relationships and attain sustainable peace.

It is important to note that these activities have been influenced by the changing prospects of peace over the past thirty years and the prolonged conflict situation, impacting their perception of peace. Indeed, given that negotiations and the peace process at the institutional level have been stalled for a long time, the only terrain that offers opportunities for reconciliation or conflict transformation is the local level, precisely because people and communities have been left to their own devices in developing strategies to live with and cope with the conflict situation.

In the last thirty years, people have developed new identities and senses of belonging. Women-to-women diplomacy has been instrumental in finding new connections, shared experiences, and commonalities. However, the dialogues being encouraged often overlook discussions about political aspects, the potential administrative structure in the future, and the intricate identities that have evolved and changed over the past 30 years since the conflict was put on

hold. A feminist approach necessitates a thoughtful examination of power dynamics and inequities in various contexts. Acknowledging and accepting diverse identities, perspectives, and values is essential for building new communities and prioritising knowledge and action.

During conversations with the women interviewed, it has emerged that the nature of conflict has changed, leading to a shift in women's roles and positions during conflicts. As a result, responses to conflicts must also change. Women face several dilemmas in a conflict setting.

Women face challenges to their empowerment due to both patriarchal norms and economic adversity, which affect both sides of the gender divide. It is crucial to prioritise women's economic empowerment as the foremost objective, before any kind of prospect of peace or future can be spoken of.

Though women are seen as key peace actors at the grassroots level, they lack the funding, skills, and tools to act efficiently. Furthermore, their efforts are often disregarded by more formal actors involved in these conflicts. It is vital to provide a safe space for women to exercise their skills and implement peace and economic initiatives. Women's initiatives should be respected, and their contributions to society should be acknowledged. Therefore, gender equality and empowerment remain high on the list of priorities of these women's peacebuilding organisations.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has and could have consequences for the fragile Georgian situation. Based on the conversations with the research participants, the Ukrainian war that started in 2020 has brought to light old traumas and new fears of clashes in Abkhazia. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has changed the Abkhaz population's perceptions regarding Russia, as it is no longer seen as a reliable actor. At the same time, the securitisation of the de facto Georgia-Abkhazia border has been dramatically strengthened by Russian authorities. These new dynamics and connections between the parties open up the possibility and possible new space for meaningful future negotiations.

## Appendix 1: Codebook

Name	Description
<b><u>PRACTICES</u></b>	
Initiatives	What initiatives and activities are implemented to promote reconciliation or conflict transformation.
Challenges	What are the main problems with these activities and practices.
Relation with Abkhazia	What is the relationship with the parties to the conflict is like. Since the organisations interviewed are Georgian, or at least based in Georgia, their relationship with their Abkhazian counterparts is examined.

<b><u>PRINCIPLES</u></b>	
<b>PEACE</b>	
What is peace	What peace is for informants in the context in which they operate.
Which priorities for peace	Which aspects or areas respondents identified as priorities for peace building or conflict transformation.
Impacts on being a frozen conflict on peace prospects	How and whether the context of conflict that has lasted for three decades influences the conception and perspective of peace.
<b>GENDER</b>	
Women in peace	How they see women's engagement in peace-building practices, what characteristics and what differences from men or mainstream practices.

Name	Description
Stereotypes	What gender stereotypes or norms they see perpetuated in the context or in their activities.
<b>FEMINIST PEACE</b>	
Peace and Feminism	Feminist Peace: what it means, how it translates into the organisations' activities.
Feminism	If Feminist Peace was mentioned, how they conceive feminism.
Peace and Gender equality	How gender equality is related to peace.

Ukraine	Some respondents mentioned the war in Ukraine and its impact on the peace-building process in Georgia.
WPS resolution	Some respondents have included their projects within the framework of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

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