

Pushing the limits

YOUNG WOMEN'S VOICES ABOUT WAR, PEACE AND POWER



KVINNA TILL KVINNA

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© **PUSHING THE LIMITS**

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RESEARCH AND INTERVIEWS: KARIN TIDESTRÖM

EDITORS: ANNA LITHANDER AND AGNETA SÖDERBERG JACOBSON

REFERENCE GROUP: CHRISTINE BENDER, ÅSA CARLMAN,

LIV FJELLANDER AND EVA ZILLÉN

DESIGN: LOUISE BÅÅTH

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIA STÉEN



THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

SLAKTHUSPLAN 3

S- 121 62 JOHANNESHÖV

SWEDEN

TELEPHONE: +46-8-588 89 100

FAX: +46-8-588 891 01

E-MAIL: INFO@IKTK.SE

WWW.IKTK.SE

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Preface

YOUNG WOMEN ARE at risk even during times of peace. They are often subjected to violence and denied sexual and reproductive health and rights. More than any other group in society, teenage girls are forbidden to move freely and to meet with friends. This often causes depression and undermines their self-esteem. Thus while patriarchal structures, that retain double standards and discriminatory morals, permit and encourage teenage boys to take up space, both with their bodies and minds, these same structures force millions of teenage girls into seclusion and into their role as custodians of the clan or family honour and chastity.

During war and conflict patriarchal norms are reinforced and aggravated and they tend to both increase and legitimise male violence. Teenage girls are particularly at risk. Evident from a number of reports, girls suffer violence from both enemy forces and traumatized males from within their own groups who feel entitled to take out their anger on their females. This can continue in societies where the violence of male perpetrators goes unpunished.

This report clearly illustrates the connection between the right to one's own body and democratic decision-making. A person unable to claim the right to one's own body is clearly unable to sense the right to achieve self-esteem and dignity, and even less chance of claiming the right to be heard or the ability to influence the surrounding environment.

In this report we demonstrate the solutions: experiences from organizing and strengthening teenage girls so that they can use and build on their own strengths, learn to cooperate across all borders and be part of the change urgently required to stop the violence and denial of basic rights.

Images of girls or women are often used to illustrate poverty or victims of war. In contrast, analysis and strategies aimed at eradicating poverty or enhancing security tend to focus on men. This tendency is basically explained by the fact that presumably gender-neutral interventions, in areas such as economic reforms and conflict resolution, tend to use men as the norm and point of departure, and thus the benefits are primarily for men. This is a description of existing power structures. Power is established to retain advantages and

privileges notably in the form of access to resources and decision-making. To do so, violence and other sanctions are applied both within families and for societies at large.

Transparency is important when attempting to investigate and reveal “real” power and discrimination and the resulting costs for girls and women in terms of death, violence and lack of respect. Poor women often suffer simply because they are women.

Gender discrimination generates economic costs for society by inhibiting the opportunity for individuals and groups to escape poverty. Discrimination is a major obstacle for development and peace and often an impediment to the effective use of societal resources.

Understanding the causes of powerlessness and discussing power is a precondition for work on “empowerment”. These efforts are critical for the reduction of poverty and in the argument against violent and militarised methods of conflict resolution. Today, when using a gender perspective or gender mainstreaming, the spotlight often casts upon women. However a comprehensive gender power perspective needs to include an understanding of men and men’s actions and interests. This is no less evident when combating trafficking in human beings, HIV/AIDS, and in the construction of alternative methods of promoting economic development and peace for all.

The fact that power is a construction means that it can be altered.

Another world is possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gerd Johansson-Latham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gerd Johansson-Latham - president, Board of Directors
Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

Madlena Kvaratskhelia

Madlena Kvaratskhelia, 24, and her sister Maia, 27, founded Avangard, an organisation for young women in the conflict stricken town Gali in Abkhazia Georgia¹.

– Girls generally have a low self-esteem and they are afraid to break social rules that restrict their lives. That's why it is so important to organise girls. When you give them the opportunity, they start lobbying and work to protect their rights, says Madlena Kvaratskhelia².

There is a risk that the girls' low self-esteem causes them to become shy and passive. Avangard works to motivate and activate the girls through lectures and training seminars.

– In the last three or four years we have seen great change. The most important changes have taken place within the girls themselves. They have changed their views and become more engaged in social life. Many girls realised that they can make a difference and have formed their own organisations, says Madlena Kvaratskhelia.



”If you can’t control and make decisions about your own body and life, then it is difficult to be a whole person.”

THE ABKHAZIAN TOWN Gali is situated close to the border and is connected to the Georgian town Zugdidi by a narrow bridge over the Inguri River. In Gali, Avangard provides a gynaecological clinic and conducts lectures and training seminars for young girls.

The unresolved stalemate between Abkhazia and Georgia has brought the region to a standstill. Economically the situation is very difficult, and the society is unstable. There are a lot of weapons in circulation, even among civilians. Moreover, there is limited access to education; Internet, independent media and most people cannot afford to travel.

– *The society is isolated and closed. This causes a lot of problems. The youth is a great potential; they can play a huge role in the development of the country. It is very important for them to study and get influences from abroad, says Madlena Kvaratskhelia.*

The traditional gender roles prevail. The strict rules governing the girls behaviour works to restrict their freedom in many ways. One normative custom that forbids premarital sex also affects other social interactions such as prohibiting girls from being alone with boys, and further still, a girl must always be accompanied by a male relative when leaving the home at night.

– *If a girl goes out alone she will get a reputation. If you are considered a bad girl, no one will marry you. I myself never go out after seven o’clock in the evenings. Also, because of the unstable situation, it is not considered safe for a girl to be outside.*

As a young woman, Madlena Kvaratskhelia has been confronted with many obstacles that make it difficult for her to enjoy an active social life.

– *If you can’t move freely, it is very hard to be active in politics. For girls there are so many obstacles and barriers. If I want to attend a seminar in another town, I have to plan the trip very carefully. I have to know exactly who will be there and if it will be safe. All young girls here have the same dream. They want to be able to move freely and feel safe.*

All these restrictions diminish the girls self esteem.

– *It is a form of psychological violence. If you can’t control and make decisions about your own body and life, then it is difficult to be a whole person. You are not self-confident. It makes you passive. If we want young women to be active in social life we must first give them the opportunity to develop as persons.*

Madlena Kvaratskhelia’s own activism started when she was a student and worked as a volunteer for various organisations.

– *I went to a lot of seminars and training courses. It really made my life change. It made me active, and it made me change my ideas and my point of views. Unfortunately, very few girls have the same opportunities as I had.*

She dreams about a safe and just society with equal rights and opportunities for women and men and she believes that women’s organisations play an important role in this development. 🌸



Madlena och Maia Kvaratskhelia.

1.

Introduction

ACROSS THE GLOBE young women and girls face the risks of being discriminated against, on a daily basis, simply because of their gender. Young women and girls are physically and psychologically abused. They risk being kept out of school and their exposure to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are greater than that for young men due to their anatomical make-up.

War turns the bodies of young women into targets. Conservative and patriarchal norms, prevalent in all societies, take a stronger hold in conflict-stricken societies that especially affect young women and restrict their lives. Young women are deprived the rights to their bodies, their freedom of movement and the opportunity to meet and organise.

However while young women and girls become vulnerable victims of war, they also constitute an invaluable resource for society and the work for peace and stability. They together with young men are the protagonists for the future goal of securing sustainable peace and participating in decision-making. Therefore, they must be heard and the barriers to their development counteracted. Otherwise there is a great risk that the capacity today's generation of girls from conflict affected societies might be lost.

Like young men, young women retain experiences, ideas and thoughts that society cannot afford to ignore. During war and armed conflict young women are often forsaken by their own societies. Therefore the burden of responsibility of creating opportunities for young women to develop rests also with the international community.

Young women are to some extent already identified as a vulnerable group in international efforts, but are still often overlooked. Many international programmes are constructed without taking into account the special needs of young women.³ Gender and youth issues during armed conflict straddle two parallel UN agendas – one is devoted to child protection and the other to the protection and advancement of women. Adolescent girls face the double discrimination of being both female and children.

A post-war society using the participation of both women and men in the reconstruction process is a prerequisite for peace and stability. The UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and The Beijing Declaration from the Fourth UN Women's Conference in 1995 both illustrate the need for the participation of women in conflict prevention and peace building. Supporting young women in war and conflict is one method of ensuring that these UN goals are reached.

The right to one's self

During armed conflicts young women are, first and foremost, denied the right to themselves. Their rights to their own bodies are restricted. They can seldom decide over their own sexuality or their movements and whom they meet. Young women and girls need support in order to take control of their own bodies. They need space and the possibility to simply exist and feel they have the right to decide over themselves. They need support in developing their skills and knowledge, especially where it is not seen as necessary or appropriate for girls to attend school. They need their own rooms and meeting places particularly in societies where there is a lack of natural places for young women to be themselves. They need spaces and places that enable them to meet others and to formulate themselves. Devoid of the power over oneself young women can hardly be expected to feel the sense of a right to the surrounding society.

Restricting the freedoms of young women is a loss for a society. Teenage girls are intelligent and have the power to be agents for positive change; they have their own specific experience to contribute. If their voices are heard they have an opportunity to participate in the construction of a sustainable society.

Backlash and new opportunities

Pushing the limits focuses both on active conflicts such as Israel/Palestine and stalemates such as in Georgia and post-conflict societies like the Balkans. The different stages of conflict determine different circumstances and challenges for young women and girls, but there are also similarities. Generally, in the aftermath of armed conflict, the gender roles tend to become more polarised. The underlying acceptance of violence against women is reinforced due to the ruling norms that subordinate women. For women, their range of mobility in public spaces decreases, control over their behaviour increase, and the rate of male violent behaviour towards women increases.

At the same time, conflict can signify new possibilities for women and girls. As old structures in society break down the opportunity to create new gender roles emerges. During a conflict women assume the role of breadwinners and therefore the role of young women and adolescent girls can also be reconstructed. They gain self-esteem and status that is an important element for the rebuilding of a new post-conflict democratic society.

Girls and women in a post-war society are usually coerced into resuming traditional gender roles, instead of seeking broader opportunities by using the skills and knowledge they developed during the war. Many of the issues concerning the rights of young women are entwined with strong patriarchal concepts. It is therefore imperative to work at developing an environment that nurtures a change of attitude among and within families and in conjunction with other members of society.

Young women's voices

With *Pushing the limits* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation aims to raise the voices of young women in armed conflicts. We wish to highlight the problems that young women face in times of conflict but also the possibilities that the young women possess.

Pushing the limits is mainly based on interviews with young women, aged 13 to 24, conducted in the conflict affected regions in the Southern Caucasus and in Israel/Palestine during the spring of 2006. The report also builds on other voices from these regions as well as other conflict areas together with experiences and conclusions drawn from The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's cooperation with women's organisations in conflict regions during the last decade.



Najyeh Hamad el-Naim

Najyeh Hamad el-Naim is worried. She married at 17, and now at 22, she still doesn't have any children. She consults a doctor, but finds it difficult to understand what is wrong. Najyeh Hamad el-Naim left school when she was ten years old.

NAJYEH HAMAD EL-NAIM talks and laughs a lot. She is open and energetic. It is difficult to believe her when she says that not long ago she was tired, sad, shy and insecure. She lives in the Bedouin village Arab el-Naim in the Galilee in Israel. The village is not recognised by the Israeli state and is not marked on the map. The 300 inhabitants are not allowed to erect permanent housing. They live in temporary shacks. Until recently they did not have electricity.

Jewish Zionist activists erased the road sign leading to the village. The road is not maintained and there is no public transportation.

The village is isolated from the rest of society. Traditional values are still strong and the women retain a very low status. They are not allowed to work outside the home or



Najyeh Hamad el-Naim

leave the village. The men have a dominant control over the women including prescribing their dress and what they watch on TV.

Najyeh Hamad el-Naim describes her life as very boring. She works in the house all day long.

– I cook for my husband, clean the house and burn the garbage. Sometimes I go to my sister's house and watch TV. That's what my life is all about, she says.

For many years, she was very depressed. But today, through the women's group initiated by the organisation Al Tufula, she is beginning to enjoy life again. In the group the women talk, learn about women's rights and go on excursions. Against all odds, they have also managed to open a library in Arab el-Naim that includes children's books.

– The women's group has brought happiness to the village. Before I felt so much pain. I wanted to sleep all the time. Now we actually do things. We feel like we can make a difference.

Najyeh Hamad el-Naim's depression started when she married. She describes it as a very big step for her as a 17-year-old girl to leave her family and move to her husband's house. She was scared and didn't know what was expected of her.

Before the marriage, her aunt tried to talk to her about sex, but Najyeh el-Hamad refused to listen.

– I didn't want to hear about it. I said "shut up" and ran away, she remembers.

She describes her first sexual experience as very traumatic. She had never seen a man naked before and didn't know what was going to happen.

– It was a very scary experience.

Today she has become "used to it", as she puts it. But she doesn't enjoy it.

– That is what married life is all about. I have to accept it, she says.

Since the marriage, Najyeh Hamad el-Naim has had two miscarriages. She still doesn't have any children.

According to the doctor she suffers from an infection. But Najyeh Hamad el-Naim sometimes has problems understanding him. Like most girls in Arab el-Naim, she quit school when she was 10 years old. By that age, it was not considered suitable for her to leave the village alone and therefore she could not take the bus to school.

Today, Najyeh Hamad el-Naim is very frustrated.

– I feel very bad. Neither I nor my husband understand what is wrong with me. I want to study so that I can talk to the doctor. I have a lot of questions, she says.

She believes it is very important for girls to be educated.

– I want all girls to study so that they can understand what is going on around them. 🌸

"I cook for my husband, clean the house and burn the garbage. Sometimes I go to my sister's house and watch TV. That's what my life is all about"

2.

Young women's right to their bodies

IN WAR AS in peace, women's bodies are surrounded by patriarchal images and subjected to patriarchal restrictions that limit the scope of their lives in many different ways. Women and girls seldom have the power to command themselves and often their bodies are seen as belongings owned by their: fathers, brothers, boyfriends, husbands or the male population in general. Consequently women are unable to make decisions regarding their own bodies and therefore, because of their sex, they are at risk of being mistreated, abused or raped.

The right to decide over their own bodies is among one of the first rights violated in times of war and armed conflict. As society becomes increasingly more violent, the threats against and violations of, girls and women's bodies escalate.

For example, on the West Bank and Gaza, women's organisations describe a clear connection between occupation, patriarchy and gender based violence. The patriarchal norms characterizing the society and legitimacy of men's violence against women are enforced by the militarisation and violence of the conflict. Men are described as increasingly more violent due to the pressures of the occupation and the harsh economical situation. Their roles as traditional providers for the family have been eroded and in turn this results in men using increased violence against those who are already subordinated in society i.e. girls and women.⁴

Following an armed conflict, the prevailing instability affords the previous conservative and patriarchal norms to take hold. Subsequently these sequences of events limit the rights of women and girls via the reconstruction of sets of rules that determine the patterns of behaviour for the female population.

The right to decide over their own bodies is the most basic condition for girls to be able to develop as free people and enjoy equal rights and responsibilities. Discrimination against girls and young women renders them less equipped to demand their rights in society. This implies a risk not only for the

girls themselves but it also impedes the development of a democratic society.

By allowing all individuals to control and make decisions about their own bodies and lives, society gains access to the full participation from all its members, regardless of ethnicity or age. This, in turn, renders the conflict-affected society more democratic and provides better opportunities for peace and reconciliation.

Madlena Kvaratskhelia believes: “If you can’t control your own body it has consequences for your health, both physically and psychologically. When you are not independent, when you can’t make your own decisions, then you are not a whole person. You can’t be active in social life and influence others, because you are not self-confident.”

Self esteem

Self-esteem is a prerequisite for dignity and it is strongly connected to the sense of retaining control over ones body and the rights and possibilities to make ones own choices. Lack of self-esteem is a problem for many young women. Targeting the issue can therefore contribute to substantial changes for both young women and the societies they live in.

Similarly Lia Nadaraia, President of The Women’s Political Resource Centre in Tbilisi, says: “The sexual moral in our society has a great negative impact on girls. It is directed to control women. It deprives them of their freedom and their choices, and it puts them in a very troublesome situation; either they are in conflict with society or with themselves. It affects their self esteem and their whole lives.”

Following the war in 1999, the women’s organisation Motrat Qiriazi from the Kosovar village of Krusha e Vogel arranged an initiative that focused on the self-esteem of its young women. Krusha e Vogel suffered greatly during the war when 80 percent of the men were killed. In order to assist the women and girls of the village during the crisis, Motrat Qiriazi trained women to drive cars and tractors so that they could provide food for their families. Motrat Qiriazi also formed a girl’s volleyball team and registered it in the National Volleyball Championship. Igballe Rogova, co-founder of Motrat Qiriazi:

“The team meant a lot to the girls, they felt empowered and gained self esteem. It helped them feeling less alone and they could concentrate on doing something instead of staying at home and grieve. The team affected the whole society and helped to break the isolation after the war.”

The Krusha e Vogel volleyball team still participates in the National Volleyball Championship and is funded by various local enterprises.

The denied right to sexuality

Globally, the right of young women to their sexuality is restricted. Restraining the sexuality of girls is a means to control their lives. Often young women are denied the right to say yes or no to sex. In many societies the issue of women’s sexuality does not exist.

Fighting for sexual and reproductive rights challenges the prevailing power structures. Sexual and reproductive rights are core components of the gender equality issue. The goal is to eradicate the risk of being abused and objectified in a patriarchal society and instil the notion that women and girls are independent actors. As discussed previously, armed conflict causes

”The sexual moral in our society has a great negative impact on girls. It is directed to control women. It deprives them of their freedom and their choices, and it puts them in a very troublesome situation”

THE RIGHT TO ONE'S own body is essential for every human being.

It is a basic human right that is stated in many international declarations. In 1994 the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo established that all people have the right to decide if, when and with whom they want to have sex and if, when and with whom they want to have children. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence. Full attention should be given to promoting mutually respectful and equitable gender relations and particularly to meeting the educational and service needs of adolescents to enable them to deal in a positive and responsible way with their sexuality.⁵

increased control of young women's bodies and behaviour due to the patriarchal norms in place. Conflict and displacement also have a negative impact on the reproductive health of women and adolescents. Poverty, breakdown of services and social support systems, and acts of violence all combine to the detriment of the inhabitants' health. Young women face numerous life-threatening risks such as the dangers associated with early pregnancies, illegal abortions, the spread of HIV/AIDS and the increase of other sexually transmitted diseases.⁶

An estimated 25 per cent of the twenty million unsafe abortions performed every year are on adolescent girls.⁷ In total, an estimated 68 000 women per year die from unsafe, often illegal abortions. Unsafe sex is the second most important cause of morbidity or untimely death among the world's poorest populations.⁸ In 2005, young people between the age of 15 and 24 constituted more than half of the estimated 5 million people with HIV worldwide. The majority of these were young women and girls.⁹

Adolescents that lack information and adequate knowledge about their bodies and access to health care services have difficulties protecting themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Manana Vengrighanovich, a gynaecologist at the organisation Democratic Women in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, provides free gynaecological care for women and girls unable to pay. According to Vengrighanovich, the knowledge among the girls in the region about reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases is generally very low. Many women are deliberately denied information about sex.

"In our district the girls know practically nothing. Generally it is considered that the less women know, the more faithful they will be. Often, women come here without telling their husbands. We give the women information about sexually transmitted diseases and how to prevent pregnancies."

Since the women don't always have adequate information and may not have the power to say no to their husbands, they have problems protecting themselves from diseases. Maia and Madlena Kvaratskhelia from the organisation Avangard, run a gynaecological clinic for young women in Abkhazia:

"Many of the young girls that come to our clinic to meet with the gynaecologist, especially those who are married, have sexually transmitted diseases. When we ask them why they don't protect themselves they say that their husbands don't like to use condoms. They can't say no to their husbands and they are used to them having different partners outside the marriage."

The need for a change in behaviour among young people is often discussed when it comes to preventive measures concerning sexual and reproductive rights. Important to consider is that young women and girls often do not have the power to say either "yes" or "no" to sex. Unfortunately much of the sex instruction is still restricted to calls for chastity; that women, not men, are called to follow. Measures to strengthen young women's power and self esteem can therefore be more effective than invitations to say no.¹⁰ For example, girls who receive education are more likely to start having sex at later age and higher levels of education are related to higher levels of condom use. Education instils self-esteem and thus more power to negotiate safe sex. The knowledge gained through school can also enable girls and women to apply messages that they learn about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.¹¹

Avangard arranges lectures for adolescent girls in Gali to supply information about reproductive health. Maia Kvaratskhelia:

"We have a psychologist and a gynaecologist who help educate the girls. The girls find it very interesting and ask a lot of questions. I can already see change from our work. The young girls of today are more open, they talk about freedom and sexuality in a way that was impossible when I was a teenager."

The women's organisation Al-Tufula works to support and empower young Palestinian females in Israel. One of their strategies for gender equality is to utilize sex education training. Gosayna Karam is the Resource Development Coordinator at Al-Tufula:

"Sex is a taboo subject in our community and there is a great deal of misconceptions. We meet very young girls, 11-13 years old, who have started to experiment with sex. They expose themselves to severe risks if they do not get education and increased knowledge about sex. By working with the young girls, we empower them by providing them with life saving knowledge. At the same time they get empowered to work towards gender equality and women's rights".

Gosayna Karam claims that sex education has to be dealt with in a holistic manner. Parents, educators and children must be reached.

"We are not providing only the biological information on the subject, we deal with social attitudes including gender perspectives, psychological and cultural aspects. Without addressing all these areas, social change relating to gender divisions of roles in the society would be more difficult. Women would continue to be socially considered as objects rather than independent respected individuals. We want to offer young men and women the opportunity to review their own belief systems and work towards new positive pictures of themselves and gender equality."

Al-Tufulas programme "Sex education as a vehicle for social change" targets teenage girls, boys, and adults. Different workshops deal with issues like body image, stereotypes, attitudes and norms, contraceptives, homophobia, love and relationships. Gosayna Karam again:

"Many of the participants during the project in 2006 felt that their awareness was raised and that many misconceptions and misinformation were corrected during the project. Among the girls and women, it is clear that they felt empowered. For many of them, the project meant that for the first time they were given the opportunity to ask personal questions regarding sexuality and begin to understand their rights as women."

In Chad, educational campaigns run by international staff contributed to a changed attitude among the local population regarding female genital

"We have a psychologist and a gynaecologist who help educate the girls. The girls find it very interesting and ask a lot of questions. I can already see change from our work."

“I am not allowed to go out of the house. As soon as I open the door people start to talk. Since I am not a virgin they say that I have nothing to protect.”

mutilation. Åsa Ekvall, who previously worked for Christian Children’s Fund in Chad, explains:

“Generally it is really difficult to work with women’s issues in Chad because women are not in any way considered to have equal value to men. The situation hasn’t become worse because of the conflict – it was just as bad before. On the contrary, in the camps the girls have at least some access to education. The international community has had a quite successful campaign against female genital mutilation. Now, in most cases they only perform the light version. Before, one hundred per cent of the girls were mutilated in the of mutilation worst way. There have been many information campaigns by international medical staff about the medical complications.”

The institution of virginity

“I am not allowed to go out of the house. As soon as I open the door people start to talk. Since I am not a virgin they say that I have nothing to “protect”. The men harass me in the street. They think that they can have sex with me. And the women are afraid that their husbands will be unfaithful. Life as a divorced woman in Arab el-Naim is very hard.”

Smah el-Naim is the only divorced woman in the Bedouin village Arab el-Naim in Israel. Her husband left her a couple of years ago when she was 22. Now she is a single mother with two children. Discriminated against, her life is limited due to her single parent status.

The system of controlling young women’s bodies and behaviour can be referred to as the institution of virginity. It originates from a concept of women and girls as subordinated to men and boys and where the female sexuality is a threat to both families and societies and therefore should be controlled.

The Palestinian organisation Women’s Studies Centre describes the institution of virginity, using an historical perspective, as a strong patriarchal system where men guard and protect the women whose roles are reduced to simply producing male descendants. This makes reproduction a political and economical issue with the ensuing result being the strict control of women’s sexuality. Women are only valued if they are pure, if they have not had any sexual relationships with any man.¹²

In Palestine male superiority is the dominant ideology that emphasises male honour, male dominance and male physical strength. This reactionary attitude has been strengthened further by the conflict itself and the occupation. The integrity of male honour is connected to the strong control of women’s bodies and sexual behaviour, resulting in the stained honour of the husband and family if a girl or women is suspected of a romantic or sexual relationship.¹³

Hadeel Abdo works at the Women’s Studies Centre in Jerusalem:

“There are double standards. A man can have as many sexual relationships as he wants. If a girl is not a virgin she may be killed. Although the great emphasize on the importance of virginity, girls are never taught what it means to be a virgin. Even when a girl is about to get married, she does not know what it means to lose the virginity.”

The commonly used expression “lose ones virginity” is also a consequence of the myths concerning women’s virginity. It imputes a negative and shameful view of a woman’s first sexual experience when it should be looked upon as something positive. The institution of virginity and the stigma for girls who have experienced or are labelled with the reputation of having had sexual



Smah el Naim with her two sons.



Tea Chitadze, Akhaltsikhe, Georgia.

partners outside marriage is often used as an excuse for violence against young women or as a reason to render women and girls housebound. It is the root of many common forms of discrimination against women and girls. Apart from being a threat to their health and lives, it greatly reduces their self-esteem.

The presumed protection of their virginity, faithfulness or reputation is used as an argument to control their movements, acquaintances, dress, actions, and decision-making. To be a “good” girl, you have to follow a complex set of rules. A bad reputation, actual or not may be sufficient to completely destroy a girl’s life. The fear of getting a reputation limits the girls’ life in all possible ways.

The organisation Centre for Roma Initiatives in Niksic, Montenegro, has studied the attitudes about virginity in the Roma population in the Balkans and the consequences for young Roma women. Among the Roma population, the custom of establishing a girl’s virginity prior to her wedding night is a deeply rooted tradition. The study shows that a clear majority among both old and young males and females consider that a girl should be a virgin when she gets married, yet the same rule does not apply for males. 80 percent of the girls questioned claimed that a girl who is not a virgin when she enters marriage would be subjected to both physical punishment and insults.¹⁴ The study also illustrates the consequences for the Roma girls. Only 26 percent of the girls polled claimed that they could plan their leisure activities, while almost all the boys polled said that they could.¹⁵

Women who have, or get the reputation of having, sexual partners outside marriage often receive severe threats. Madlena Kvaratskhelia describes how the unstable conflict situation in Abkhazia increases the problem:

“In our society a woman who has had more than one partner during her life is considered a prostitute. Towards such a woman men are very rude. They think they can do what they want with her.”

These types of norms create conflicts within societies. Although many girls have accepted and often agree with the rules, they feel restricted by them.

Tea Chitadze, Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, says that although she has a university degree and now supports herself, she still cannot meet or talk to whom she chooses.

“Ever since my childhood my parents, especially my father, didn’t like that I talked to boys. Today I don’t have any male friends. I don’t know any boys. I’m afraid that it will be difficult for me to get married. I know that my father did what he did because of society, because he wanted the best for me. But I would really like to change how people gossip and spread rumours.”

Although she doesn’t always want to, she still chooses to comply with the community’s normative traditions.

“I have accepted the tradition. I’m used to the idea from my early childhood. I never question it. A good girl is someone who accepts and respects the tradition. Bad girls will get a reputation and will lose many opportunities. They will have problems finding good husbands. Agree or disagree – I have to follow the tradition.”

In Georgia and some other Post-Soviet countries, at least in the rural areas, bridal abduction is still a common practise, often for economical reasons. A man who can’t afford to pay for a wife kidnaps a young woman or a girl and often rapes her to force her into marriage. Furthermore the girl’s parents might not accept their daughter back into the home for fear that society will question her virginity or that it could also harm her future marriage prospects.

Often domestic violence increases in families as a result of bridal abduction. Bridal abduction is an example of a cruel and gender discriminatory practise with roots in the institution of virginity. The popular perception that prevents the unveiling of the grave consequences for women is still romanticised.¹⁶

Maia Kvaratskhelia from the organisation Avangard, Abkhazia:

“For many women and girls in our society, bridal abduction is seen as something normal that has always been there and something you just have to accept. Now, women’s organisations have started questioning the “tradition” and talk about bridal abduction as one of many forms of gender based violence that exist in our society.”

Early marriages and young mothers

“Early marriage is a form of sexual violence. In my opinion, the Israeli occupation contributes to the raising of early marriage inside the Palestinian society.”

Hadeel Abdo at The Women’s Studies Centre in Jerusalem sees a clear connection between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occurrence of early marriages. In Palestine, 50 percent of the women get married during childhood, at or before the age of 18.¹⁷

Mari Mörth a former Save the Children representative in Côte d’Ivoire have a similar analysis: “As a result of the conflict the families gave their daughters away earlier and earlier. They couldn’t afford to keep them at home.”

The forced marriage of a teenage girl exposes her to sexual abuse that is condemned by the United Nations Convention of the Child.¹⁸ Child marriage is a human rights violation that prevents girls from obtaining an education, enjoying optimal health, bonding with others their own age, maturing, and ultimately choosing their own life partners. It is driven by poverty and has many effects on their health: increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, maternal mortality, and obstetric fistulas.¹⁹

Societies that practise early marriages often have high maternal mortality rates, as the young girls are not physically ready to give birth. The girls are expected to become mothers soon after they are married. Globally, more than 15 million girls aged from 15 to 19 give birth each year. Pregnancy and childbirth in adolescence carries considerable risks. For girls aged 15-19, the most common causes of death are related to pregnancy or child delivery. The girls are twice as likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20’s. The children of young mothers also have higher levels of mortality.²⁰

According to statistics from Afghanistan, forced marriages account for 60 to 80 percent of all marriages in the country. 57 percent of the girls are married before the age of 16. During an eight-month period in 2006, more than 100 women in the province of Kandahar were reported to have attempted suicide, mainly due to forced marriages.²¹

Early marriage can be used as a security measure when safeguarding the girl’s virginity. It is important for the family honour and social order. In an unstable and conflict affected society, allowing a girl to be married before the age of 18 can be a way to minimize the parents burden and to guard her from being raped or simply of questioning her virginity. The parents of young girls and the young women themselves can chose to marry to receive the husband’s protection. For instance in refugee camps girls and women are vulnerable to rape and other gender based violence.²²

Another effect of early marriages is that young girls are denied their childhood, the right to attend school and consequently a basic education. A married girl is expected to assume the role of a woman with all the duties that ensue: sex, motherhood and household duties traditionally expected of a wife. All too often it is the gateway to a life of domestic and sexual subservience. Early marriages control young girls' sexuality and are a convenient way of eradicating the adolescent period. The independence that naturally emerges during the teenage years is, in many societies, seen as an undesirable attribute for women and they should remain subservient.²³

A married girl's main priority is her family and children. This is the image presented by Madlena Kvaratskhelia, Avangard, Gali, Abkhazia. According to her, early marriages is a serious problems in the area: "Sometimes the marriages are forced. The girls are often very young and accept their parents' decision. After a girl is married her main duty is to feed her family and raise children. Studies don't put food on the table. If she doesn't have an education, the only way to make money is by trading in the markets."

For many girls living in patriarchal societies, the notion of not being married is a greater concern than the thought of being forced into a marriage by their parents. Single women are stigmatised and not accepted by society. Marriage can also be seen as a survival strategy for girls in poor families to guarantee them a provider.

Nino Makhashvili is a psychiatrist who works with Chechen refugees in the Pankisi Valley, Georgia. "To not be married is a big problem for women in our society. Society doesn't accept women who are not mothers. Many young men in conflict and post-conflict areas do not feel ready to marry. They have no homes, no education, no money, no future. The number of unmarried young women in the refugee camps is very high. Many of them, even the ones who have jobs, have a very difficult life in Georgia."

Women's organisations play an important role in empowering women and girls and changing the tradition of early marriages. Supporting the girls and teaching them about their rights helps to dismiss the unquestionable acquiescence of their role as a homemaker. It may also help them to handle the pressure to get married early.

In societies where strong taboos against premarital sex prevail the early marriage of a family's daughters might appear to be a desirable option for parents. Efforts to prevent early marriage must therefore involve the parents, the community and the girls themselves.²⁴ Initiatives must also target boys and young men. Girls are unable to change strong patriarchal society patterns on their own. Through the work of women's organisations and organisations for girls, the institution of virginity and the disparate rules regarding sex, are slowly starting to be questioned. The organisation Imedi in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, arranges discussion groups where young girls talk about gender equality and women's rights. Londa Londaridze describes how a meeting at Imedi influenced her views:

"In Georgia it is very important that a girl is a virgin when she gets married. At Imedi we had a foreign lecturer and I learned that this is not the case in all other countries. I don't like the Georgian tradition. If two people love each other the boy shouldn't care if the girl is a virgin or not. When a girl loses her virginity, it doesn't mean that she is a bad person, it doesn't affect her personality."

“As a result of the conflict the families gave their daughters away earlier and earlier. They couldn't afford to keep them at home.”



Fidaa Adel Jabari

Fidaa Adel Jabari, 19, lives in the Palestinian town Silwan near Jerusalem. The 50 houses in the area are under demolition order. The road is in a very bad state.

– I am afraid to go out. I never go anywhere, she says.

Fidaa Adel Jabari is in her last year of high school. Since she was a child, she always wanted to go to university. But now she tries not to think about it anymore. She knows that it is very unlikely to happen. Her family doesn't have the money for her studies.

The Israeli government deem the neighbourhood illegal and every month her parents are forced to pay large fines. They don't have running water or public transportation. Demolished houses with cement blocks and sharp metal bars sticking out of the ground has become the playground for children.

Recently, taxis stopped going to the neighbourhood because of the bad roads. The only way to get there now is by jeep.

Everyday Fidaa Adel Jabari walks back and forth to school, but she feels very unsafe.

- The road isn't paved and full of bumps and holes. I'm always afraid of falling. It is very far and there are no people in the street. I am scared of being harassed. I still go, but I walk in terror, she says.

Apart from going to school Fidaa Adel Jabari hardly ever leaves her house.

- I don't see my friends. I never go on excursions. I feel so sad. I don't think that I live in a way that a person my age should.

When she leaves the house, Fidaa Adel Jabari puts on a veil and a gown to cover her hair and clothes. It is her own choice; she says that she wants to follow her religious beliefs. Underneath, she wears light blue, shiny fashionable trousers and a tight t-shirt and make-up.

According to Fidaa Adel Jabari there is still a lot of discrimination against girls in the Palestinian society, although things are slowly starting to change.

- We cannot go out alone and we have to dress conservative. Even when we go swimming we have to wear a lot of clothes, she says.

Since Fidaa Adel Jabari is the youngest daughter and the only one still living at home, she also has a lot of responsibilities in the household. Her mother has diabetes and suffers from a depression triggered by their living conditions.

- I do all the work in the house except the cooking. I am my mother's arms and hands. She won't like it when I get married.

The inside of Fidaa Adel Jabari's house is in contrast to the environment outside. Everything is perfectly clean. Every morning, Fidaa gets up early. Before she leaves for school she sweeps the floors, dusts and does all the dishes. Usually it takes her around two hours.

- We have a lot of visitors, so I clean all the time. But I don't mind. I like it. As soon as I am worried or sad I start cleaning. It makes me feel better.

Earlier this year, Fidaa Adel Jabari's fiancé broke their engagement. He said he had his eyes on another girl. Fidaa was really worried about what other people would say.

- It is a social thing. People talk. He was not a nice guy. He told me that I was not a decent girl, although I never leave my house. I just wash dishes and clean the floors.

Today, the whole neighbourhood is more or less paralysed by the conflict and the destruction orders. So is Fidaa.

- I don't want to do anything, I don't eat, I don't drink. I stopped caring about my studies and myself, she says.

Fidaa Adel Jabari's dreams are of a Palestinian freedom and money so that she can get her driver's license.

- My dream is to study and to have a car. To be free, to come and go as I want. 🌈

Gender based violence

Gender based violence takes many forms. It includes forced marriage, rape, sexual harassment, demanding sex in return for favours, denial of the right to the use of contraception or to adopt other measures for protection against sexually transmitted diseases, forced abortion, violent acts against the sexual integrity of women, forced prostitution and trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation.²⁵

Gender based violence, a result of the unequal structures in society, is enforced by armed conflict and generally more accepted in conflict areas. The collapse of the economy, infrastructure and legal systems, and the breakdown of social structures and protective mechanisms, are discussed as factors that makes gender based violence, particularly sexual violence and sexual exploitation, more likely in conflict. During and after armed conflict, adolescent girls are reported to be particularly vulnerable to rape, mutilation, trafficking, forced prostitution and forced marriage.²⁶

Rape committed in war is usually regarded as the ultimate symbolic humiliation of the male enemy. Rape of women in war is an act of aggression against a nation or community. Sexual violence continues to be practised even in post-conflict communities as a way of reinforcing or reasserting lost power or ‘glory’ of the perpetrator. In the war in Liberia, as in other war zones, sexual violence was used to violate a person mentally, physically, emotionally, economically and psychologically. Many women and girls were raped in front of their families, as a sign of victory or ‘conquest’ – an ultimate expression of power over the enemy. Interviews with community members suggest that around two thirds of all women and girls in Liberia experienced some form of sexual and gender-based violence during the war.²⁷

Nino Makhashvili describes how rape is used as a part of warfare.

“Young women are the most vulnerable group during war and in prison camps. When enemy soldiers are entering a city they search basements and attics for fighters, but also for women and girls. Rape is an official war strategy. There is evidence of everything from eight-year-old girls to old ladies being raped. There is a widespread strategy among soldiers, to dishonour the enemy, by making their women pregnant.”

Girls subjected to rape often have great difficulties being accepted back into their communities. The social stigma attached to the girls’ experiences may also make them reluctant to seek necessary medical assistance or emotional support.

Nino Makhashvili: “Many of the women I worked with were raped. When they eventually came to peaceful areas, they had severe physical and psychological

”There is evidence of everything from eight-year-old girls to old ladies being raped. There is a widespread strategy among soldiers, to dishonour the enemy, by making their women pregnant.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KVINNA TILL KVINNA

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL give support to the local community and organisations that:

- ▶ Provide sex education for girls and boys and education for reproductive health and rights.
- ▶ Provide education for girls and boys regarding gender roles and power relations.
- ▶ Inform girls of their rights. Provide boys with the tools to reassess their preconceived notion of masculinity.

problems. Many thought that they were infected with HIV. Many were afraid of being isolated. The women were ashamed and thought that everyone knew. Many young women were not able to marry. If they were married, there were several cases where the men left them. Even their children turned their backs on them.” Pregnancy after rape deepens the social stigma and implies a great risk for the abused girls and their babies. Minja Peuschel, former UNICEF representative in Sudan:

“Many women and girls who were raped didn’t dare to tell anyone because of the risk of being rejected by their families and by society. To get pregnant as a result of rape made the situation worse. Sometimes the stigmatisation was so heavy that they felt they had no choice but to kill their babies, often with the help of their families”.

Sexual violence in armed conflict produces grave social, cultural, domestic, physical and psychological repercussions, which are only just beginning to be understood. The need for psychosocial support for women and girls is not always seen as a priority among the international community in conflict and post-conflict societies. But initiatives to support women victims of rape or other forms of abuse are important contributions for the healing of the population. These initiatives are a prerequisite for sustainable long-term democracy and reconstruction work.

Following the genocide in Rwanda, where it is estimated that between 250 000 and 300 000 women and girls were raped, and after the war in the Balkans, the international community finally began to discuss rape as a war crime. The breakthrough for both international law and the prosecution of rape as a war crime materialised during the mid 1990s as result of the ad-hoc tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

In November 1998, the first conviction for rape as an act of genocide transpired following the verdict against Jean-Paul Akayesu in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). According to the statutes of The International Criminal Court, (ICC) established the same year, rape, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilisation can be labelled as crimes against humanity and war crimes. However, despite the progress, there are complaints that the international justice community is still allowing too many sexual violent crimes to go unpunished and therefore forsaking the victims.²⁸ Another problem is the lack of support for victims that testify. For many young women this is a severe security problem. The stigma attached to the abuse means that they require support and protection even after the completion of the trial. This is an unfulfilled issue due primarily

UN SECURITY COUNCIL Resolution 1460 addresses the issue of sexual abuse in paragraph 10: Notes with concern all the cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children, especially girls, in humanitarian crisis, including those cases involving humanitarian workers and peacekeepers, and requests contributing countries to incorporate the Six Core Principles of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Emergencies into pertinent codes of conduct for peacekeeping personnel and to develop appropriate disciplinary and accountability mechanisms.⁴⁰

to both a lack of awareness and resources. The abuse of women in armed conflict has its roots in a global culture of discrimination that denies women equal status with men. Social, political and religious norms identify women as the property of men, conflate women's chastity with family honour, ethnic identity, and legitimise the violent appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends.²⁹

Often the violence is seen as an inevitable, even if tragic, consequence of conflict. However, as Kemal Dervis, UNDP Administrator expressed on the International Women's Day 2007:

"This attitude virtually guarantees impunity for perpetrators and effectively silences the survivors." In this speech, Kemal Dervis also highlights the continuing repression of women and their rights as part of the unequal social structures and the lack of freedom that sets restraints on human development.³⁰ In most conflict areas, the need to address the problem of sexual assault and abuse is indeed acute. The Women's Studies Centre in Jerusalem has noticed an alarming increase in sexual assaults against young women on the West Bank. The Women's Studies Centre has begun to educate school children in order to deal with this increasing problem. During 2006 they conducted sexual education courses for a number of schools in Jerusalem and Hebron. Hadeel Abdo:

"As sex, and talking about sex, is taboo in our society, we decided to start educating children about sex, with focus on protection against sexual assault."

The Women's Studies Centre are also working on influencing both parents, educators and the Palestinian Legislative Council on the need to focus on sexual assault and how to protect young girls and boys.

On the other side of the conflict, in Israel, the situation concerning sexual abuse is also alarming, according to Einav Morgenstern, who is doing her military service in Israel and gives lectures on sexual harassment to her fellow soldiers. Sexual abuse and militarisation go together, she emphasizes.

"In the army, the stereotypical situation of the male commander and the female secretary is a fertile ground for sexual harassments. This is not only a problem in the army; we live in a deeply militarised society. I don't feel safe in Israel. Let me put it this way: Where you see 18 year old boys with weapons in the streets you probably have a very violent society."

"Where you see 18 year old boys with weapons in the streets you probably have a very violent society."

Domestic violence after conflict

Sexual violence is reinforced in domestic relationships, partly due to men's inability to handle the altered gender roles that conflicts produce. The altered identities leave many men feeling powerless. A report from post-war Liberia identifies how many men admit to shame and the inability to live up to the hegemonic model of masculinity after they were forced to watch helplessly as their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters were raped and sexually abused. To regain their power they exert control over their women through sexual and physical violence.³¹

War traumas that has not been treated and men's frustration concerning lack of control or at not being able to support their families are often discussed as contributing to the causes of men's violence against their family members. The problems must be addressed taking into consideration the latent patriarchal patterns. Men are traumatized by conflict, but it is the women and girls targeted by men's violence that are the most vulnerable victims and

they are often neglected when initiatives are discussed that intend to support the civil society during and following war or armed conflict.

The organisation Forum Zena in Bratunac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducted a large study on domestic violence in post-war Balkans together with the Foundation for Local Democracy in Sarajevo. 3726 women from urban areas were questioned: two thirds of the women had experienced some form of abuse from a family member or relative.³² This indicates that domestic violence is widespread, long after the cease-fire.

The increase of domestic violence during and after a conflict is a pressing issue of the utmost importance. Post-conflict planning and assistance should always include a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to men's violence against their families.

Many women's organisations working in conflict areas prioritise gender-based violence. Activities vary from hot lines, shelters for abused women and girls to educational activities and the dissemination of information.

Avangard meets many abused women and girls. In 2007 Avangard surveyed 500 women where 98 percent claimed to have been physically or mentally abused. Maia Kvaratskhelia: "Many young women in our region, especially in the poor villages, live under very bad conditions. For them, marriage is often seen as the gateway to a better life. They have no idea about what marriage can imply and often suffer from stress and shock when their husbands start being violent towards them. They need both support and information and education about their rights."

Avangard also produces material and conducts workshops for young women relating to sexual and reproductive rights. Maia Kvaratskhelia highlights the need for international support for organisations that work to empower and educate young women about their rights.

"Preventive measures are the only way if we really want to tackle the problem of gender based violence."

Girls in armed forces

Estimates suggest that 40 per cent of the 300 000 children associated with armed groups are girls. The girls are rarely acknowledged and often kept hidden by the armed groups. They are also often reluctant to identify themselves because of the risk of being stigmatised or rejected by their communities.³³

Like boys, the girls take an active role in the fighting, but they also take on other military duties, such as cleaning, providing medical assistance, gathering information and serving as porters. Most of these girls are sexually violated by members of the armed group, and commanders will often take a number of girls as their "wives".

According to recent research the majority of girls associated with armed forces have experienced gender-based violence. A Save the Children's programme conducted in West Africa, reported that 32 per cent of all girls in the armed group were raped.³⁴ 38 per cent were treated for sexually transmitted diseases and 66 per cent were single mothers.³⁵

These girls of the armed forces are also forced to replicate the traditional tasks women and girls undertake in larger society. However, armed conflict sometimes provides new opportunities. Girls may achieve new positions of power and learn new skills. This window of opportunity risks being closed in the aftermath of war. Therefore it is important that international efforts

aiming to assist children in armed forces are aware of both the oppression and the expanded possibilities that war can bring about for girls connected with armed groups.³⁶

Despite the high number of girls in armed groups, a very small number participate in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programs (DDR). DDR aims to release combatants from the armed groups and reintegrate them into civil society. In Sierra Leone, only 4.2 per cent of the girls known to have been members of fighting forces completed the DDR-programmes.³⁷

Minja Peuschel, former UNHCR representative in Liberia, says that the DDR-programmes have to be adjusted to meet girls' needs.

“Humanitarian workers don't always have the knowledge and the capacity to handle girls in the DDR-programs. These are generally designed for male soldiers over 18. The girls may be both children and mothers at the same time. What do you do with a 17-year-old girl who already has a family of her own? Maybe she doesn't want to go back to school.” Mari Mörth, former Save the Children representative in Côte d'Ivoire: “The DDR-workers do not see the girls special needs, they are much more focused on reintegrating and supporting boys and young men. We must learn more about the situation of the girls, give them more resources and give them the support they need.”

Attending a DDR program conveys two messages to the community. It illustrates the fact that the girl has been in an armed group. Secondly it identifies the possibility that the girl may have had sexual contact with her colleagues in the armed group. Therefore, many girls reject the programmes because of the risk of being stigmatised. Girls who return home from armed forces are often marginalized and excluded from their communities. Mari Mörth comments:

“It is difficult for a girl to come home and say that she has been the wife of a rebel leader and now has his child. Often, the girls chose not to tell anyone. They don't want to go back to their villages. It is also very difficult for them to talk about sexual abuse and prostitution. They don't have anywhere to go with their experiences. This makes them more vulnerable for further abuse.”

During interviews conducted by Save the Children, the girls themselves identified a number of ways that the international community could help them, particularly with long-term rehabilitation. They requested mediation work with their families and communities in order to help explain how they were compelled to join the armed groups. They also requested job hunting assistance, wanted access to education and skills training and networks that could provide emotional support, medical tests and health care, especially related to reproductive health and sexually transmitted diseases.³⁸

Abuse by the international community

During armed conflict and displacement, women and girls also face sexual violence and exploitation at the hands of their supposed protectors – peacekeepers and aid workers. International personnel create a demand that fuels markets for trafficked women in brothels. Women and girls also enter sexual relationships with international staff in exchange for food and shelter.³⁹

In recent years, the UN and other international organisations have started to prioritise efforts that respond to and combat the exploitation of women and girls. However, despite codes of conduct and courses relating to gender studies, international personnel are still using their position of power to abuse girls

”Before the war, visiting brothels was something that people were ashamed of and did not talk about. Now, among the male population it is considered even modern.”

and women in conflict societies. Refugee women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by armed forces and groups, peacekeepers and international personnel.⁴¹In armies men are conditioned to values of aggressive masculinity. Oppression and dominance over all facets of life, including women, is implicitly or explicitly part of their training. This can explain to some degree the sexual abuse of women by forces whose presence is designed to keep the peace or protect the population. Military misogyny has often taken precedence over the protection role that soldiers were intended to perform.⁴² A Save the Children UK report from May 2006 indicates that girls in Liberia as young as eight years old have been forced to have sex in exchange for food by workers from local and international agencies.⁴³ Among the local population in Liberia, many tolerate the fact that young girls and women have ‘offered’ themselves to humanitarian workers in order to secure much-needed household income. Interviews with parents showed that some had encouraged daughters to go in search of food, using their bodies for trade. Reports indicate that by the age of 13 four out of five girls are either pregnant or have had a child.⁴⁴

Minja Peuschel, former UNHCR representative in Liberia:

“I saw male colleagues who had Liberian girlfriends within a week after their arrival. They bought food and clothes for the young women who were between 20 and 25 years old in return for sexual favours. But because these women were not our beneficiaries we couldn’t do anything.”

Similarly Mari Mörth reports from Côte d’Ivoire.

“There were large UN-forces present in Côte d’Ivoire which lead to more abuse and exploitation of women and girls. We saw few cases with girls under 18 and couldn’t prove any of them, but there was definitely a lot of prostitution and sexual activities with young women over 18.”

Minja Peuschel also describes similar events from refugee camps in Sudan where she worked.

“When it comes to the international community in Sudan, I believe sexual abuse did take place, although UNICEF and other organisations conducted massive training for all humanitarian workers. Also some of the food committees, under the supervision of international staff, and consisting of the internally displaced persons themselves, were suspected to have used their power to ask for sexual favours in return for food. One of the problems is that the women don’t report the abuse. They don’t know that it is illegal for the food distributors, for instance, to ask for sexual favours in return for food. Training has to be extended beyond only the humanitarian workers.”

After the war in the Balkans, trafficking became a enormous problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was due to the combination of a large international community contingent that increased the demand for sexual services, a malfunctioning legal system, weak border control, corruption and the widespread presence of organised criminal gangs.⁴⁵ Apart from the obvious reasons, trafficking in human beings is also rooted in the widespread discrimination against women and girls in a patriarchal society.

Still today, the problem is considerable. More and more Bosnian girls are becoming victims of trafficking, according to Mara Radovanovic at the women’s organisation Lara in Bijelina. “Since last year all shelters in Bosnia noticed the trend of increasing numbers of domestic victims of trafficking. Trafficking increases corruption and insecurity. Also Bosnian women and girls that are not victims of trafficking are affected in several ways.”

The mere existence of human trafficking affects the entire Bosnian society, Mara Radovanovic explains. Parents are afraid of their daughters fate but there has also been a change in the attitude against human trafficking among the male population. "It has an impact on standards of moral. Women are generally treated as objects, not as persons. Before the war, visiting brothels was something that people were ashamed of and did not talk about. Now, among the male population it is considered even modern."

In late 2006, Lara started a project to increase young people's awareness of so called "rape drugs". The project aims at providing young people with the knowledge to protect themselves from the drugs used to force people into trafficking. "Since these drugs are relatively new, young people are unaware of the danger and do not know how to protect themselves", Mara Radovanovic says. Kosovo is facing the same problems as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international demand for sexual services still exists, despite the introduction of codes of conduct for the considerable UN presence. Igballe Rogova, Executive Director of the Kosova Women's Network, describes how organised crime has adjusted to stringent international control of the sex buyers.

"The United Nations Mission in Kosovo recently made a black list of the public spaces where they thought trafficking is happening. International staff are forbidden to visit these places. Therefore the traffickers have changed the method: instead of offering girls at these places, it is organised that women, followed by their pimps, visit international staff in their homes. Only a telephone call is needed to arrange this."

In order to combat the continuing abuse of young women by international staff, the issue should receive an elevated status on international organisations' agenda. Employees from all levels must be trained to understand gender issues and be more aware of the consequences of the abuse. There is also a need for harsher penalties for those involved in the sexual exploitation of women.

UN resolution 1325 highlights the need for more women in international missions. This can also improve the work against abuse and human trafficking. It is easier for female staff to foster relationships with young female victims of sexual exploitation. The goal must be to end impunity for sexual exploitation within the international community.

As long as sexual exploitation continues, it is imperative that local initiatives receive support. In all conflict affected regions women's organisations are working to oppose sexual exploitation and human trafficking and help those women who have been abused. These initiatives need and deserve support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KVINNA TILL KVINNA

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:

- ▶ Take responsibility for the abuse of power and gender-based violence committed by personnel working for international organisations.
- ▶ Challenge and work to remove the myths regarding girls and women's sexuality and stereotype gender roles.
- ▶ Ensure that the International Community do not contribute to the ratification/validation/advocacy of patriarchal structures.
- ▶ End impunity for gender based violence.

Laila Kharoufeh

Laila Kharoufeh, 18, lives in the Christian town Beit Jala near Bethlehem. The wall has changed her life drastically. Her plans to go to university in the West Bank are no longer possible.

– I can't go anywhere. All I can do is get married, have babies and cook, she says.

On their graduation day, Laila Kharoufeh and her classmates are dressed in purple and white gowns. The weather is perfect; the sun is shining through a clear blue sky. It looks like any normal, happy graduation ceremony, but the image is misleading. The future is not open to these students, especially not to the girls.

The wall that Israel is building to separate Israel from the Palestinian territories will soon encircle the town Beit Jala. The Kharoufeh-family can no longer go to Jerusalem without applying for permission. Travelling within the West Bank has also become very difficult.

*Laila Kharoufeh celebrates her graduation ►
with her family and friends.*



”In addition to all this bad life, the intifada and the wall, comes my lovely culture that doesn’t allow me to do anything but get married, have babies and cook.”

– I am locked in this town, says Laila Kharoufeh.

Her dream is to study abroad, but she gave that idea up a long time ago. It is not okay for a Palestinian girl to travel by herself. Also, like many Palestinian families, Laila Kharoufeh’s parents cannot afford the education fees.

Laila’s alternative plan was to study political science at Beir Zeit University on the West Bank. However since the wall was built, those plans are too difficult to realise. The trip that used to take 30 minutes in a taxi, now takes three hours.

For Laila Kharoufeh this means that she could no longer live at her parents’ house if she wants to study. And a young Palestinian girl is not allowed to move away from home.

– It wouldn’t be safe for me. I could be kidnapped or raped. If that happened I would loose my life. Also, living in Beir Zeit is expensive. My family doesn’t have the money.

Laila’s father is ill and doesn’t work. Her mother works as a cleaner in Jerusalem. Every day she queues to pass through the checkpoints, both on her way to work and on her way back. The permission to pass is hard to get, and Laila’s mother is under the constant threat of losing her job.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has affected Laila Kharoufeh in many ways. When Laila was younger, the whole family used to travel to Ramallah every weekend to visit relatives. Now they only see each other once a year.

– It is so complicated to go. It is our land, but we can’t visit it.

Also, Laila Kharoufeh hardly sees her mother anymore.

– Every day she leaves at five o’clock in the morning. She has to stand in line for two or three hours at the checkpoints. When she comes home, all she does is have a shower and go to sleep. Before we used to talk a lot, but since the intifada.⁴⁶ I feel alone, she says.

As a young girl Laila Kharoufeh must follow strict cultural rules. She is not allowed to go out after seven o’clock at night. She is not allowed to stay over at a friend’s house. She is not allowed to wear shorts or a short skirt and she is not allowed to make any decisions without talking to her parents first.

Laila Kharoufeh feels very sad when she ponders her future.

– In addition to all this bad life, the intifada and the wall, comes my lovely culture that doesn’t allow me to do anything but get married, have babies and cook.

She believes the conflict has worsened the girl’s situation.

– People here don’t have anything to do but to gossip. I think people are getting dangerous. We are a threat to each other. 🌸



Laila Kharoufeh and her friends at graduation.

3.

The right to freedom of movement

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT is a precondition for the successful participation in a society and the opportunity to influence it. Without freedom of movement it is impossible to receive an education or participate in other activities and it limits the chances for people to meet and organise.

For many women and girls, freedom of movement is not something that can be taken for granted. Women and girls are restricted by threats or rumours about the dangers of society, as well as by traditional and patriarchal concepts regarding the behaviour and actions of women and girls. Consequently women and girls do not enjoy the same possibilities as men and boys, in terms of education, information and other societal activities.

Restrictions concerning freedom of movement for women and girls are among the first indicators of an escalating armed conflict⁴⁵. As a society becomes more violent, the threats against civilians rise. Consequently the freedom of movement for women and girls become even more controlled. Due to the fear of kidnappings, rape or other abuse, families are unwilling to let their female family members, especially teenage girls, venture out alone.

Besides the visible security threats such as: the arms, military barriers, break down of infrastructure, girls and women's mobility is also restricted by the regression towards old traditions and patriarchal norms. Violence and the security risks work to enforce patriarchal values and embellish men's dominance over women in society. Women and girls are perceived as vulnerable and in need of protection from the dangers in society, which men interpret as their right to regulate women's freedom of movement. Thus, this creates further anxiety that threatens the rights of women and girls. Sometimes mere rumours about different threats that women may be exposed to can be used to

limit their freedom of movement or threats to their dignity and morals.

Human Rights Watch claims that since the US-led war and occupation in Iraq, widespread reports of sexual violence and abduction of girls have kept many girls out of school, and the public perception is that the abduction of girls and women from the streets has increased significantly. Interviews with girls and young women indicate that widespread fear prevents them from even leaving their homes.⁴⁷

Similar reports emerge from Afghanistan. Since the Taliban was thrown out in 2001 the increase in enrolment of girls in schools has stopped. Due to the many brutal attacks on schools by the armed opposition groups and harassment of girls on their way to school, parents no longer dare to send their children to school.⁴⁸

Many girls have internalised their fear. The fear is part of day to day life that they are not always conscious of or do not always identify as fear, but when asked if they feel safe in public places the answer is generally no. They have learned that it is unsafe to spend time outside the home. The girls set up a number of strategies in order to feel safe. The phenomena can be referred to as “everyday fear”.⁴⁹ Young women from the Southern Caucasus have described their everyday fear as thinking about everything from where to go and what to wear, where to walk and when. The girls expressed their greatest fear was gender-based violence and said they never felt safe alone outside their homes unless they were in crowded places. Ironically, the girls saw their homes as the safest places to be, or other places where they could be with other girls or women.⁵⁰ Worldwide, the home is the place where most gender-based violence occurs, which demonstrates that girls and women have few places in society where they actually are safe.

Importantly, girls are compelled to spend a disproportionate amount of time and effort on attaining security, both from real threats and from threats created by norms and rumours. Severe limitations on young women’s freedom of movement result in isolation. This isolation works to affect their self-esteem such as being unable to attend school or other meeting places where information can be gathered and shared. In turn, they are deprived of valuable human relations and knowledge. This increases the risk of being targeted by propaganda, which makes it difficult for them to independently and objectively analyse society’s events. Therefore, restrictions on young women’s mobility retain consequences for society as a whole. Young women prohibited from leaving their homes become isolated from the rest of the society and diminishes their role as active citizens.

The possibility of spending time outside the home in a public space is a precondition for women to act as members of society. School is one important meeting place for young people as well as cafés and other public spaces. Limiting their freedom of movement makes it complicated or even impossible for young women to attend these places. In many societies, it is seen as inappropriate for young women and girls to visit cafés for these areas are considered to be male arenas.

One way to address the problem of young women’s limited access to public spaces is to create new spaces for them. One example from Goychay, Azerbaijan, is the establishment of an Internet café for young women. The organisation Shirvan Resource Centre on Human Rights reported that women or girls were not visiting the large number of Internet cafés in the region because the cafés were attended by men and boys playing war games and

“To participate in politics, you must have a lot of time and you need to be able to move freely to attend meetings.”

“I’m sure that the militarised society affects us on a psychological level. It makes the society violent and reinforces stereotypical gender roles.”

surfing on pornographic websites that created an unwelcoming chauvinistic atmosphere. The cafés were not comfortable and secure places for women and girls, therefore they did not retain access to those opportunities that access to the Internet can provide. By opening an Internet café only for women, the organisation aims to ensure the active participation of women and young girls in the society. The café provides the young women with access to both the Internet, and importantly, a safe place to meet.

The international community could implement a number of activities that would guarantee young women’s freedom of movement in areas of armed conflict or post conflict. An alternative view of the definition of security and defence should be analysed thoroughly. Securing young women’s lives is not the same as removing them from public places and by confining them to their homes. Instead we need to consider the creation of the possibilities for young women to safely move within society despite the threats and obstacles brought by conflict. A rather simple solution is to consult young women regarding the support they require for freedom of movement. Amany Dayif at the women’s organisation Isha L’Isha in Haifa, Israel:

“Most women in conflict areas do not have any kind of freedom of movement. They need to be listened to when it comes to designing transportation and other kinds of infrastructure in society. Approachable public transportation is of very high value for many young women as it can imply their only possibility to attend school or university.”

As mentioned above, young women’s freedom of movement is limited by a number of gender stereotypes and patriarchal images and views that governs what is appropriate for women. The home is often seen as the appropriate place for girls and women where they are expected to inherit prescribed gender roles from elder female family members.

During and following a violent conflict a society is militarised, flooded with arms and people are conditioned and desensitised to violence and fear. This affects the population in various ways. The militarisation and the normalisation of violence can make life difficult for women and girls who are subordinate to men. For instance research from both Israel and Palestine shows that men’s violence against women increased due to the conflict. The accepted presumption that the home is the only safe place for women and girls restricts their freedom of movement. If not challenged, this belief presents further risk that society will become even more insecure. Gender stereotypes tend to be reinforced when women and girls are homebound while men and boys retain access to the remainder of society.

Idan Halili, 18, from the pacifist organisation New Profile in Israel, claims that the militarization in Israel is a cause of sexual harassment and gender based violence in her society.

“I’m sure that the militarised society affects us on a psychological level. It makes the society violent and reinforces stereotypical gender roles.”

Gender stereotypes control young women

Tea Chitadze in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, describes how the norms governing young woman have consequences for her choices in life:

“When I was a student I wanted to go to university in Tbilisi, but my parents wouldn’t let me. My big dream now is to continue my studies abroad. I very much want to develop professionally. But I know it won’t happen. It is very

difficult and costs a lot.” Tea Chitadze describes how she feels controlled and limited by gossip. She is aware of the traditions that limit her possibilities but has come to the conclusion that she will still acquiesce and comply.

“If I talk to a boy, the next day everyone will know. If I go to a café with a boy everyone will think that we are getting married. It shouldn’t be like that. A person should be free to talk to whom she wants. As for me, it gives me complexes. Now I always try not to give people a reason to gossip. My strategy is to live in a way that is accepted in our society. I have to. It doesn’t mean that I want to, but I have to. The situation is the same for all girls in Akhaltsikhe. But there are some girls that do not pay attention. They are happier, I think. They are free. They can do what they want.”

Madlena Kvaratskhelia, Gali, Abkhazia, also describes how gossip restricts her life and limits her mobility: “Males think that if a girl is alone in the streets or in a café that means that she is not a good girl. They will start harassing her. If I go out alone and come back late, my neighbours will start talking. If I get a reputation it will be difficult for me to find a husband. I never go out after six o’clock. Of course this is a great limitation of movement for me. For boys it is okay to go anywhere, but for girls it’s strongly forbidden.”

Lack of communication

Infrastructure is among the primary intended targets during armed conflicts and war. Eliminating means of transportation and communications is a common war strategy that debilitates the entire society. When roads are blocked and public transportation ceases to function many women and girls are prohibited from moving within the society. Women rarely have access to cars and the risk of harassment at roadblocks also hinders movement.

Infrastructure in conflict areas is also used to hinder and control movement, as in the West Bank and Gaza where movement is limited by checkpoints and the separation wall built by Israel. For women and girls this means they cannot attend university, work or engage in organisations outside their home. Maha Aby Dayyeh Shamas reports how Palestinian girls lives, after the second intifada, were threatened due to the difficulties of travel. Both attacks of settlers and sexual harassment by young, armed soldiers at the military checkpoints caused female students to drop out of high school and college.⁵¹

Schools are important meeting places for adolescent girls and boys, and provide education that contributes to the future development of their societies. A study from Olga Shemyakina in Tajikistan examines the effects of one of the most devastating civil conflicts in the former Soviet Union during

EVERYONE HAS THE right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.⁵⁴

”The women in Arab el-Naim are not allowed to use the Internet. It’s not considered appropriate”.

the 1990’s. Shemyakina found that exposure to the conflict had a significantly negative effect on the enrolment of schoolgirls aged 14-16, while it had little or no effect on the enrolment of younger children or boys. The study also shows that school enrolment was considerably lower for those girls that lived in high intensity conflict zones.⁵²

Gender perspectives are seldom considered when designing new infrastructure. The gender specific impacts are rarely analysed when constructing new roads or other means of communication. In Kosovo, despite free public transport, few women used the railway system organised by UNMIK, the UN administration and SwedeRail. A gender analysis study from 2003 depicts women as unsafe passengers due to insufficient lightning on the trains. Few of the train’s toilets had doors and those that did were unable to be locked. This made women feel unsafe, which hindered them from travelling. The evaluation suggested the introduction of family coaches for women and children and also that women travel back and forth during daylight hours. The evaluation also highlights that women and women’s organisations should be consulted and included in the planning of projects such as new railways.⁵³

Arab el-Naim is a Bedouin village considered illegal by Israel. As such the roads are not maintained which in turn renders the women isolated from the rest of the world. There is no public transportation and the female inhabitants are neither able to drive nor have access to cars. Smah el-Naim describes it as impossible for her to leave the village and how that stops her from getting her weekly allowance.

”To get my allowance, I have to go to the employee office in the town Sakhnin once a week. But I can’t go on my own. I am not allowed to leave the village and there is no public transportation. Luckily my brother now takes time off work every week to drive me.” The isolation Smah el-Naim refers to also apply to information women and girls receive – it is often filtered or censored by men. This increases the risk of women being targeted by propaganda and biased views of the conflict. To be able to access information and construct personal judgements about the contents, women and girls require access to society, predominately via the right to move freely and also through other means of communication. Smah el-Naim describes how the men in Arab el-Naim deny her both telephone and Internet access.

”The women in Arab el-Naim are not allowed to use the Internet. It’s not considered appropriate. I myself don’t have my own phone. The men in the village even decide what we can and cannot watch on TV.”

**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KVINNA TILL KVINNA
THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:**

- ▶ Implement measures that promote security, i.e. free from gender-based violence that does not put further limitations on girls and women’s freedom of movement.
- ▶ Incorporate a gender perspective when designing new infrastructure.
- ▶ Actively challenge and work against normative cultures that cause women and girls to be prisoners in their own homes.
- ▶ Secure health care and education for girls and young women.
- ▶ *Listen to the girls and young women themselves!*



Smah el Naim in the village centre of Arab el-Naim.

Nana Gelashvili

Nana Gelashvili is one of five teenage girls that founded the organisation Imedi in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia. Today, 270 girls attend their meetings from the entire region.

– In a few years people will see the obvious results. I am sure that many of us will become active and successful in social life.

The name Imedi means, “hope”. The organisation rents a two-room office in central Akhaltsikhe where they conduct their meetings. They arrange lectures, discussion groups and language classes. In the basement under the office they have an art gallery where they talk about art and literature and organise exhibitions. And if needs be, it is possible to book individual or group sessions with a volunteering psychologist.

Nana Gelashvili and four friends decided to start the organisation a couple of years ago. They were inspired by the women’s organisation Democratic Women in Akhaltsikhe, of which Nana’s mother is a member. Nana and some other girls followed their mothers to the meetings and eventually decided to form an organisation targeting teenage girls.

One of the main reasons Nana and her friends started Imedi is the lack of access to education and meeting places for girls in Akhaltsikhe, according to Nana Gelashvili.



- Girls generally don't have anywhere where they can express their ideas. We don't have meeting places where we can work to become active in social life. We don't have anywhere where we can gather, learn, talk and discuss.

One of Imedi's most popular activities is the discussion group. The girls take turns choosing a topic and conduct the meetings themselves. The subjects vary and may be anything from gender stereotypes to problems with parents or conflict solving in relationships.

Londa Londaridze has been a member of Imedi for about a year. The first discussion meeting she conducted was about relationships and sex. She invited a psychologist and a doctor.

- The topic is very important, but teenagers in Georgia don't speak openly about it.

At first I was very shy, but then I opened up. Many girls attended the meeting and asked a lot of questions. Everyone learned a lot, she says.

For Gvantsa Grigalashvili, Imedi is very important. She comes to the meetings every day after school.

- We talk about girl's rights and problems in families. In our country, when a girl gets married she often moves to her husband's parents' house. Many girls have problems with their mothers and fathers in law. The organisation is a very beautiful part of my life.

It helps us very much. It makes us self-confident, she says.

One of the things they often discuss during their meetings are traditional gender stereotypes.

- We have a problem with gender equality in our country. The men have more power. There are many stereotypes of how a girl should behave and dress. We fight to break them, says Nana Gelashvili.

The old tradition of bridal abduction is upsetting the girls the most. It is a patriarchal practice that involves a boy kidnapping a girl and forcing her into marriage, and it occurs in the area.

- Every year we have new cases, says Nana Gelashvili.

Imedi also organises language courses in Georgian for Armenian girls, an ethnic minority group in the area. Through the activities for Armenian girls they try to strengthen the relations between Georgian and Armenian girls, that rarely meet outside the organisation.

Sometimes Imedi invite boys to their meetings. Last year ten boys took part in a discussion about gender roles. At first the boys and the girls disagreed on a many subjects, but soon the boys started to change their minds, Nana Gelashvili says.

- At first they said that they didn't want their wives to work. They thought that the women's duties were in the household. But in the end eight of the ten boys had changed their minds. They began to understand.

Nana Gelashvili can also see that her work has had an impact on her personal life. A few months ago she got married, and her husband has changed in many ways since they met.

- When we were sweethearts he didn't want me to work and he was against me driving a car. But now he has changed his mind. 🌸



Nana Gelashvili and her friends attending a meeting at Imedi's office.

4.

The right to meet and organise

THE EXISTENCE OF safe meeting places provides environments that nurture the presence of trust and peace building. It is during these meetings that taboos can be discussed and challenged. Meeting places make people strong together, which is in direct opposition to loneliness and isolation.

Young people formulate much of what will characterize them in the future and they need access to forums where they can meet others and discuss their experiences and opinions. They need spaces where they can test arguments and start to form strategies. For teenage girls and young women, the need for safe spaces is of uttermost importance. They live and act in societies that more or less are ruled by patriarchal norms. The creation of special meeting places for young women is therefore a valuable contribution to their development and in turn to the society they live in.

During and after an armed conflict, an organised meeting place may be the only place where girls can meet and speak freely and where their families will allow them to go. It may be their only free space in a society where it is difficult or even impossible to travel, to go to school or to take part in social life. Furthermore, organisations often play an important role as places for education and self-development.

Miranda Gvantseladze in Kutaisi, Georgia, participates in the activities for young women organised by the women's organisation Fund Sukhumi.

“When boys become teenagers they fight for their rights and their independence. But girls are not even aware that they have any rights. We must learn about our rights.”

Women and girls in conflict areas are often denied information and knowledge. The information they get may be filtered or censored by men, by the

church or by the state. The girls may even be denied the knowledge that they have the right to that information.

Elene Tskhakaya works for the women's organisation Gaenati in Zugdidi, Georgia. She highlights the need for young women to be able to attend meeting places and that they get support.

"Young women are not self-confident. They are under a lot of pressure from their families. With support they can achieve their goals. I work to include young women in active citizenship and social life through non-formal education and training programmes. The girls need education and support from society."

As self esteem and knowledge is gained the possibility for young women to develop is strengthened, which in turn will affect even their societies. The World Bank's World Development Report 2007 underlines the need for acknowledging young people and their views and actions. Youth are seen as important not only because they are future adults but because they can define and achieve positive change today.⁵⁵

Armed conflicts can provide new possibilities for young women, as the gender roles temporarily change and girls and women gain new power. This is a good opportunity to support girls and young women before a backlash in gender roles occur. Mari Mörth, former Save the Children representative in Côte d'Ivoire:

"When society collapses and you have to rebuild it from scratch, it is possible to change things. When we talk about children's right to education we also include girls, and we can raise issues like women's rights and fight patriarchal traditions, like female genital mutilation."

"When boys become teenagers they fight for their rights and their independence. But girls are not even aware that they have any rights. We must learn about our rights."

The importance of meeting places

"Everyday after school I go to Imedi. Here we learn about our rights. We learn about the world around us and the discrimination of women in our society. The organisation is very important to me."

Gvantsa Grigalashvili, Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, talks about the value of the young women's organisation Imedi. Discussion groups about girl power, discrimination in families, art and human rights are organised by Imedi as well as courses in languages and in driving. "My favourite activities are the discussions about family life. We have many discussions about that. It is a very important issue. The girls that come to Imedi learn a lot. Many will choose active lives. Our goal is active girls and successful women."

According to Gvantsa Grigalashvili, Imedi impacts greatly upon the lives of girls and young women in the town. She says that the number of girls attending Imedi increases daily.

"I can see changes in many of the girls. They are shy when they come the first time, they have many complexes. They don't dare to speak. But after a while they start to speak. They learn about their rights. They become more free and open."

Imedi is a successful example of the importance of meeting places for young women and girls. The organisation creates a space in a society to accommodate marginalized young women that do not have access to natural meeting places. The organisation gives the girls a place and the tools to develop and a chance to work on their self-esteem, formulate ideas and question the norms that restrict them.



Young women from the organisation Imedi in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia.

Another similar example is the centre for young women that The Women's Resource Centre conducts in Shushi, Nagorno-Karabakh. Lara Aharonian:

"Young women need a place to meet and talk about "women's stuff" as they themselves use to call it. This includes health, their situation in this forgotten part of the world, isolation and desperation. We want women to be more involved in the decision-making of our country and to do that they first need a space to gather, where they feel safe and can cry, laugh and plan for the future."

Nadera Abu Dubey-Saadi, Al-Tufula, started a women's group in the Bedouin village of Arab el-Naim in Israel three years ago and has been working in the village ever since. It is possible for the women and girls to discuss issues of concern and take excursions to other villages. For many of these women it is their only chance to leave their neighbourhood without their husbands or fathers. Nadera Abu Dubey-Saadi talks about great changes within the girls and women that attend the activities.

"When we started many of the women didn't dare to talk to strangers, not even to me. I had to ask my questions in many different ways and only got very short answers. They spoke in a very quiet voice. Today it is so different. Now they are open and talk about their feelings, even to strangers or to the media. It feels very good to see them this way."

Najyeh Hamad el-Naim and Smah el-Naim take part in Al-Tufula's activities in the Bedouin village Arab el-Naim in Israel.

"The women's group has made life easier for many of us. Before we had nothing to do, we never left the village. Now we feel like we can make a change." Smah el-Naim points out how women in the village have strengthened their status and now look at the future in a completely different manner than before.

"If we unite we can do very much. We might get at least one woman into the village council. If we stay the way we are and don't do anything, then nothing will change."

Often organisations for young women offer educational activities to meet the needs that address their inability to attend school, due to restrictions in movement. This is the case for the women in Arab el-Naim. Smah el-Naim, with the help of the women's group Al-Tufula, recently took up her studies again after dropping out of school at the age of 10. Smah el-Naim learned about her right to an education via the women's group. That helped her to make the decision to return to school.

"Women have to learn about their rights. My neighbour has an 11 years old girl and she dropped out of school in the 3rd grade. I know now that there is a law that protects her rights. If her parents won't let her study, she can go to a social worker. I want to help her."

It is important that meeting places are organised in a way that is considered safe and suitable for young women and girls. In order to make it easier for women to attend Madlena Kvaratskhelia, Avangard, Abkhazia, is very careful when arranging meetings.

"Good meeting places are of great importance. We invite women from different parts of Abkhazia and choose our meeting places very carefully. It is important that they are safe and neutral, so that we can invite both Georgian and Abkhazian women and start building trust."

On the West Bank, young Palestinian women and girls are seldom allowed to leave their homes alone. The women's centre organised by The Jerusalem

Centre for Women is one of a few places that parents will allow their daughters to visit. Samar Dissi, Jerusalem Centre for Women, explains.

“We offer a safe place for young women to meet. Their parents know their daughters are safe here, we have a good reputation.”

In order to empower young women so that they may take their rightful place in society, the centre’s activities aim to raise the young women’s knowledge about their human rights. Samar Dissi:

“We want girls to get out of the vacuum of being shy and afraid, to learn to say no. We want young women to feel that they are important. They are silent but they are not speechless. When they start to talk you learn from them.”

Young women, democracy and peace

“Young women are open to change. They are more open to critical thinking than adults and willing to undermine and examine their own beliefs and truths. We need to reach them before their political views are totally shaped by the patriarchal values that prevail in our society.”

Amany Dayif at the women’s organisation Isha L’Isha in Haifa, Israel, points out that the occupation of the Palestinian territories is much easier to discuss with younger women.

“Young women are not ‘set’. They can change opinions about things.”

Often young people have not yet formulated themselves so it is critical that they have the opportunity to reflect over current affairs, which reduces the risk of biased and subjective propaganda taking hold. It is during the formative teenage years when their views on life and society begin to form and are articulated. Therefore it is crucial that young people are supported at this significant period of their lives. Youth also retain valuable knowledge that taken into account will benefit society.

Amany Dayif has been active in a project where young women and men from different parts of the Middle East meet to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The aim is to raise awareness of the situation they all live in, from all perspectives, and to provide young people with the opportunity to develop as activists for change.

“It has been very satisfying to see how the participants have developed. First, the question of ‘who is the victim most in need?’ was in focus, but after some time they started challenging their own perceptions about the conflict. We have seen young women, about 17-18 years old; develop from participants in discussions to activists and volunteers. They say they do it both for themselves and for society”.

Organising can provide young women with new perspectives and a more distinct view of the world or conflict. This may equip them with the tools to further analyse propaganda. Enabling and encouraging girls and young women to take part in politics and conflict resolution is a necessary investment in the future of conflict societies. It strengthens the UN’s goal that more women should participate in peace processes and ultimately creates stability for the future.⁵⁶

Eka Gamakharia from the women’s organisation Fund Sukhumi, Kutaisi, Georgia, explains her view of the involvement of young women in politics and peace building and its great importance.

“Young people are more open and flexible. They can forgive and change their views and opinions. Often they are more emphatic than the elder. Young

”When we have workshops with young men and women we can see that the attitudes have changed a lot. Both sexes believe that marriage should be built upon love.”

people are important in peace-building because they are the future.”

Maia Kvaratskhelia, from Avangard in Abkhazia, reflects on methods of organizing and international exchange of knowledge and how it affects young people. She explains that there are many organisations working with human rights in Abkhazia and how a group of young people get the chance to spend time abroad on exchange programmes. Thus the young generation in Abkhazia has become aware of human rights and they now tend to reject traditions such as forced marriages and bridal abduction. Maia Kvaratskhelia emphasise that this change in attitude does not concern only young women.

“When we have workshops with young men and women we can see that the attitudes have changed a lot. Both sexes believe that marriage should be built upon love. And young men do not want their future wives to stay at home and be passive. When I listen to these young people it gives me hope for the future. I am convinced that we do have to work with both men and women to really make a change!”

Exchange promotes peace

“I had the chance to meet with the other side and I understood that the situation is complicated. Now I know that peace building will be a long process. I understood the threats that the Abkhaz side see if the Georgian refugees would return.”

Eka Gamakharia in the Georgian town of Kutaisi had the opportunity to visit her former hometown in Abkhazia through a youth exchange programme arranged by the women’s organisation Fund Sukhumi and she describes what it meant to her.

To give young people the opportunity to meet over conflict borders is one way of dealing with the limited access to information in conflicts and the risk of propaganda taking over. Youth exchange programmes are in many cases a successful way of analysing and deconstructing the images of the enemy during a conflict – an investment that imbues fruitful consequences for the future.

“If you are a woman, you are not considered qualified to talk about the conflict unless you are a mother or sister of a soldier.”

In the Southern Caucasus, a dialogue project for young women has started between two women’s organisations from Armenia and Azerbaijan. The project aims at creating more tolerance and understanding among young women concerning the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian refugee women *from Baku*, now living in Nagorno-Karabakh, will participate together with Azeri refugee women from Nagorno-Karabakh, *now living in Baku*. Lara Aharonian, Women’s Resource Centre in Yerevan:

“We will start gathering oral stories from young women living in both regions and then publish them in a book, in order for both groups to discuss each others stories. This will be the beginning of a dialogue about the conflict.”

In a similar way The Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly arranges seminars on conflict resolution for young people in the Balkans. Nina Malovic, Secretary General of The Young Liberals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, canton of Sarajevo, has attended several meetings. At the seminars, young people with different ethnic backgrounds and religions meet to discuss the conflict. Nina Malovic believes the seminars have helped her to be more understanding and diplomatic.

“I have learned a lot about history, politics, social society and relationships. The point of the seminars is to speak openly about the conflict and try to see things from different sides. We often have open fights. I have learnt to be more diplomatic and to understand why people feel different than I do.”

Exchanging experiences over borders can be an effective way of reducing tension in conflict-stricken regions. In Jerusalem, The Jerusalem Centre for Women arrange meetings for young Palestinian women from both the West Bank and Israel. Samar Dissi gives an example from one group of young women:

“We gave them the opportunity to discuss the images they have of each other, focusing on identity issues. In the beginning the group was divided, they talked about “we” and “them”. After 18 months, they were all “we”. They had found their common identity.”

Whose knowledge counts?

“If you are a woman, you are not considered qualified to talk about the conflict unless you are a mother or a sister of a soldier.”

Yana Knopova, president of The Coalition of Women for Peace, Haifa, Israel, describes the value of women’s knowledge in her society. The Coalition of Women for Peace works to encourage women to raise their voices and promote women in politics. Yana Knopova claims women’s knowledge has generally lower status than men’s and is in many cases not taken seriously. One consequence is that women begin to censor themselves. The Coalition of Women for Peace focuses on breaking down the image of women as less qualified than men. Yana Knopova:

“We speak about the conflict as citizens, not as mothers or sisters. Among men there is a notion that you need to know about war to know about peace. But what they know is how to fight, not how to build peace. You don’t have to kill people to understand how to not kill and be killed.”

Young women live in a world ruled by patriarchal norms and where women’s knowledge is less valued than men’s. Being a young woman further reduces the legitimacy to talk and have opinions. Amany Dayif at the women’s organisation Isha L’Isha in Haifa, Israel, points out that young women’s voices

are often neglected even when it comes to discussions relating to their specific situation:

“Often we think that we know the needs of young women without asking them. It is the same structure as when men talk about women’s needs without asking. This has to be changed.”

In particular raising young women’s self esteem is central to the aim of getting more women involved in politics. Eka Gamakharia in Fund Sukhumi, Kutaisi, Georgia, educates women who plan to enter politics. A key issue is to raise their confidence.

“Women have no support, neither in the families nor in society. Our women don’t believe that they can reach high positions in society. Sometimes they are very oppressed by their husbands. I don’t want to see this low position of women. Women need to re-estimate their roles.”

Lika Nadaraia, Women’s Political Resource Centre, Tbilisi, Georgia, agrees and identifies the link between self-reliance and democracy.

“To get women into politics it is necessary to work on their self esteem. Women never think that they are good enough. We want to help women to find an identity outside the family and outside the stereotypical gender role.”

Young girls are an important resource for the proliferation of women participating in societal and political life. As the Georgian psychiatrist Nino Makhashvili points out many girls and women retain high aspirations.

“There are a lot of things holding women back. But many are also active. The young women of today have a great thirst for education and information. Sooner or later they will demand access to the societal body and to have power in society.”

An example is Elene Tskhakaya, a member of the organisation Gaenati in Zugdidi, Georgia, who plans to enter politics.

“It is important that the decisionmakers are both men and women. I plan to make a political career in the Georgian parliament. I want to change our political system and work for women’s rights.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KVINNA TILL KVINNA

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:

- ▶ Provide resources for young women’s meeting places.
- ▶ Arrange for women to participate in meetings, provide safe meeting places and a safe public transport system
- ▶ Demand female participation; refuse to conduct “men only” meetings.
- ▶ Promote the participation of young women during peace and democracy processes and security building.

DON’T FORGET - women’s human rights are never negotiable!

Nadja Duhacek

Nadja Duhacek, 25, was a teenager during the Balkan war. Today she coordinates exchange programs where young people from Kosovo and Serbia meet.

– It is very important to promote tolerance among young people. The young people of today will soon be voters and decision makers.

Nadja Duhacek was ten years old when the war broke out in 1991 and 18 years old when NATO led forces bombed Belgrade and the war finally came to an end. Today she works full time for The Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Belgrade. She is also active for the feminist and pacifist organisation Women in Black.





Women in Black demonstrate for peace.

Her activism started when she became a member of a high school theatre group called the Post-Pessimist. Through that group she was given the chance to travel throughout the Balkans and these experiences helped to promote her personal development.

– It was the most fantastic thing. We toured and arranged camps and workshops for young people. It was very empowering and rewarding. After travelling for example to Sarajevo it was impossible for me to deny the war crimes that were committed there. I met with people my age that had been under siege for two years without food and electricity. It made me want to make sure that it never happens again, she says.

Today, Nadja Duhacek tries to help young Serbs to begin to take responsibility for the war crimes that were committed by Serbs while they were children or teenagers.

– The denial process is very strong. Young people mostly don't think about the war at all. They don't want to hear the stories. But if we don't go back and learn about what

happened and take responsibility for what was done in our name, it might happen again.

Women in Black also try to fight the rising fundamentalism in post-war Balkans. They have studied similar trends all over the world and define fundamentalism as a political movement that misuses religion, ethnicity or tradition in order to gain political power, demonise others and increase social control, in particular the control of women.

– Typical for fundamentalism is that women often have to cover their bodies, says Nadja Duhacek.

Since the end of the war the Serbian Orthodox Church's power base is increasing and has now become an important political actor. It affects not only politics, but also educational, cultural, health and social institutions, as well intimacy and family life issues especially women's reproductive and sexual rights.

Nadja Duhacek is also critical of the Serbian Orthodox Church's part in the conflict.

– The Church contributed to the conflict while it was rising. It very rarely condemned the war and participated openly in spreading nationalism.

She is very worried about the consequences of priests teaching in schools.

– Young people don't get any information about for example contraceptives. And little girls come home from school and say that abortion is murder.

Nadja Duhacek thinks that it is very important to promote understanding instead of nationalism and fundamentalism, especially among young people who were children during the war and have never experienced a peaceful and tolerant society.

– Most of the young people have an image of the other side as nothing but violent, she says.

A good way to do that is through exchange programs where young people from both sides can meet and establish relationships. Without exchange, the only image of the other side they will get is from the media, and the media image is distorted.

– If there are peaceful meetings or exchanges it rarely gets any media attention. But any violent act will be covered in the media. What people get in their heads is that it is impossible to live together, she says.

According to Nadja Duhacek, non-governmental organisations play an important role in the promotion of human rights for post-war society in Serbia. They are particularly important for girls.

– Especially in the rural areas, they may be the only place where the girls can get information about reproductive health and contraception.

Another example is the large TV-channel B92 that recently sponsored a campaign to fund a safe house for victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence has long been a hidden problem in Serbia.

– The solidarity with the victims is largely an outcome of activist organisations, says Nadja Duhacek 🌸

Conclusions

MANY OF THE adolescent girls and young women from different conflict affected regions interviewed for this report have expressed that they themselves have low self-confidence. Lack of freedom of movement and resources for schools, increased control over girls and women's bodies and increased violence are all consequences of war and conflict that negatively affect young women and adolescent girls and diminish their self confidence and self esteem. Combined, these factors render young women as an obsolete resource, their potential as members of society is lost to forces that undermine their capabilities through the application of social control and fear. There are many contradictions in adolescent girls lives. They are often invisible, silent, kept at home to do the housework and as such often drop out of school early. At the same time they are very visible in society, their bodies and virginity is associated with the family's honour and thus guarded by male relatives which restricts the girls' lives and freedom of movement. Adolescent girls and young women are targets for sexualised violence as symbols for family honour for cultural, ethnical or religious purposes. They are laden with substantial responsibilities for the home and sometimes expected to shoulder adult's responsibilities. At the same time the opportunity to make decisions is limited, they are guarded like small children. Their individual rights are less respected in comparison to boys of their age.

The concrete fear of abuse, sexualised violence and threats is compounded by the fear of what might happen if they were to be spotted in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even rumours can be dangerous. When young women are excluded from participating in society, young men increase their power. This equation creates a society dominated by fear and instability and a struggle for power, which is in stark contrast to a society characterised by democracy, peace and respect for human rights.

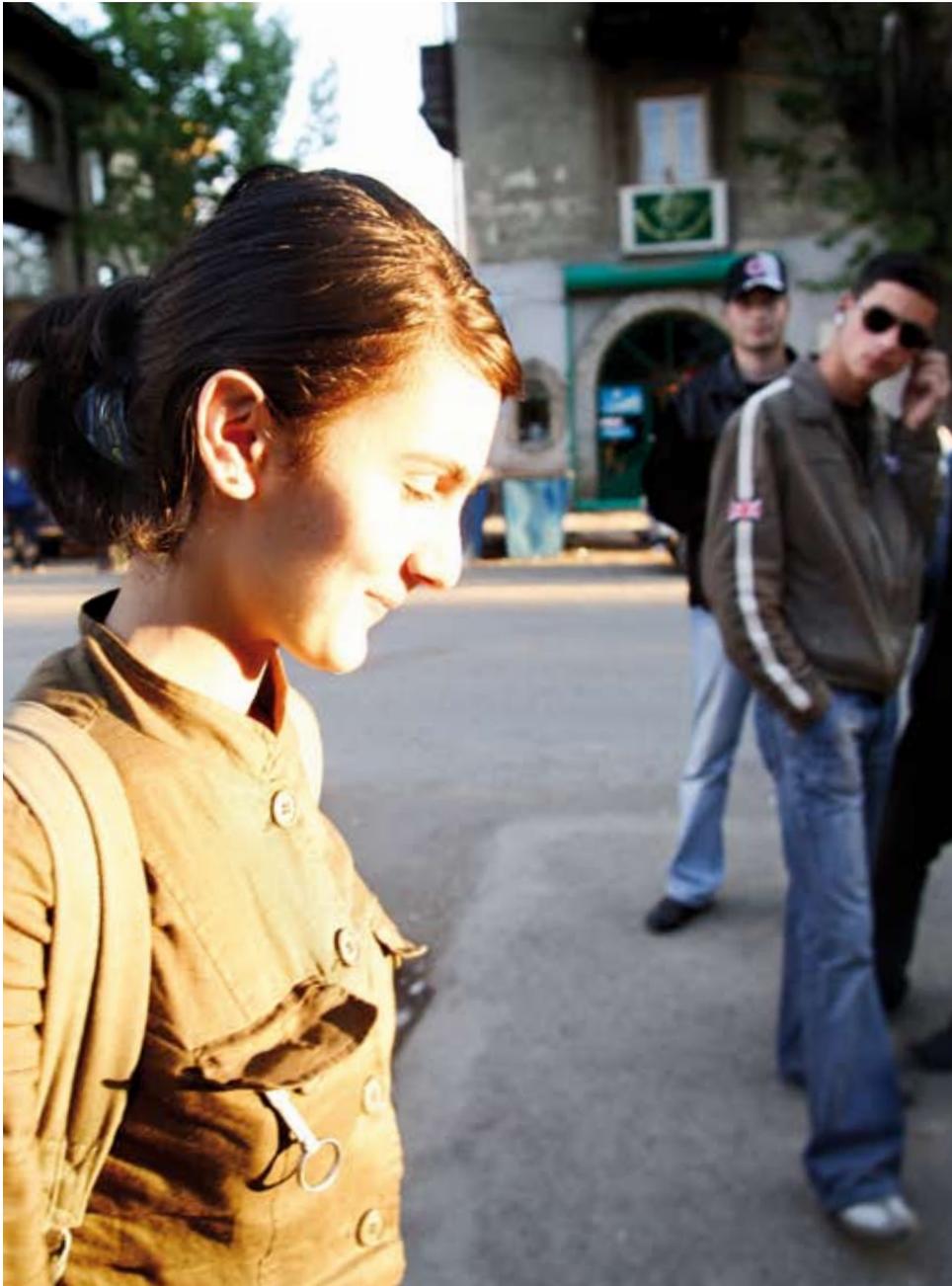
Armed conflict and poverty affect girls and young women in many ways and the consequences are other than that for boys and young men. The poverty that follows war and conflict causes girls and young women grave problems. One of the major problems for girls is that they might have to drop out of school because their parents are unable to afford school fees or their labour is required in the household. Armed conflict increases social control and decreases freedom of movement and thought. The level of violence in society and the potential dangers,

restrict the freedom of movement for citizens. The high level and acceptance of violence is also imitated in the homes where men's violence against women and girls is on the increase. Sexualised violence like rape or the fear of sexualised violence limit the lives of young women. If these fears are left unattended then Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression can have long term affects on the ability of young women's to participate in society and be self-confident individuals.

The problems and obstacles for young women in conflict affected societies such as increased control and restrictions are by no means a natural course of events, rather they are reversible. The international community's responsibility is to react and take a course of action. It is the surrounding society that restricts the adolescent girls and young women's lives but the international community, present in most conflict affected areas, have the responsibility to not support the forces restricting girls and women to take action to empower young women. It is vital that girls and young women are included in the decision-making regarding their lives and society. The international community can invite girls and young women to the decision making, acknowledge the existence of organisations aimed at promoting girls and young women's rights and give them support. The international actors must avoid compounding the problems facing girls and young women that emanates when abusing their power by committing sexualised violence, being involved in trafficking or using poor and vulnerable young women. It is also important that the International Community does not limit girls and women's human rights and freedom of movement. Women's human rights can never be "bargained with".

Girls and young women become more self-confident and attain a sense of value from participation in women's organisations and adolescent girls groups. The international community can support these groups financially, logistically and through publicly acknowledging their organisations. The organisations empower young women, provide them with tools to participate in society and urge them to demand their rights. The organisations create safe places for leisure activities, to talk and discuss freely and without the threat of retribution. Education in human rights, reproductive health and rights gives young women negotiation power in relationships with men. It gives them respect for themselves which also makes it easier for them to stand up for themselves.

The break down of societies during an armed conflict presents a window of opportunity for societal change in terms of gender equality. The international community are able to effect these changes. We need to challenge notions of cultural relativity that may include and promote the institution of virginity and girls and women's lack of power over their bodies and sex. These myths and values can only be changed if men and boys are involved in a dialogue that alters the misused notion of masculinity. Men and boys require education, knowledge about sexuality and reproduction and furthermore, knowledge about women's rights. They need tools in order to challenge the myths surrounding masculinity. Young women are unable to bear all the burden of enforcing their rights. The international community can support these processes to change gender roles and stereotypes. Most importantly, young women must be heard and respected so that conflict affected areas can move towards peace, democracy and the respect for human rights. They have the right to take part and change the future. As heard in this report, they have a lot to give. We have the duty to listen.



An understanding of the needs and interests of both women and men is necessary in the process of building democracy and sustainable peace. (To the left: Gvantsa Grigalashvili, Akhaltsiskhe, Georgia)

Recommendations from Kvinna till Kvinna

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL give support to the local community and organisations that: (Young women's right to their bodies)

- ▶ Provide sex education for girls and boys, education for reproductive health and rights.
- ▶ Provide education for girls and boys regarding gender roles and power relations.
- ▶ Inform girls of their rights. Provide boys with the tools to reassess their preconceived notion of masculinity

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:

- ▶ Take responsibility for the abuse of power and gender-based violence committed by personnel working for international organisations.
- ▶ Challenge and work to remove the myths regarding girls and women's sexuality and stereotype gender roles.
- ▶ Ensure that the International Community do not contribute to the ratification/validation/advocacy of patriarchal structures.
- ▶ End impunity for gender based violence.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:

- ▶ Implement measures that promote security, i.e. free from gender-based violence that does not put further limitations on girls and women's freedom of movement.
- ▶ Incorporate a gender perspective when designing new infrastructure.
- ▶ Actively challenge and work against normative cultures that cause women and girls to be prisoners in their own homes.
- ▶ Secure health care and education for girls and young women.
- ▶ Listen to the girls and young women themselves!

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHALL:

- ▶ Provide resources for young women's meeting places.
- ▶ Arrange for women to participate in meetings, provide safe meeting places and a safe public transport system
- ▶ Demand female participation; refuse to conduct "men only" meetings.
- ▶ Promote the participation of young women during peace and democracy processes and security building.

DON'T FORGET - women's human rights are never negotiable!

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THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA Foundation started in 1993 and is today supporting and working with women's organisations in the Balkans, in the Middle East and the Southern Caucasus. Women's participation is a prerequisite for development, peace and democracy. *The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundations work aims at increasing women's participation in peace- and democracy processes.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation received the Right Livelihood Award in 2002 for it's successful support to women's work for peace and reconciliation.

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