

## Written evidence from Kvinna till Kvinna South Caucasus (CAU0004)

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is a Swedish non-profit organisation that supports women in conflict affected areas to increase women's power and influence. Kvinna till Kvinna's approach is based on strong local ownership and long-term support. We support more than 130 women's organisations in five conflict regions in their work for women's rights and peace.

Kvinna till Kvinna has supported women's organisations in the South Caucasus since 2002. Today, we support 24 entities in the Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Abkhazian contexts through several programmes, focusing on women's increased and meaningful participation and contribution to peacebuilding, gender-based violence, women's rights movements and advocacy, LGBTQI rights, as well as support to partner organisations' capacity building and networking.

Throughout our long-time tenure in the South Caucasus, we have amassed unique and valuable knowledge on the wider region and developed methods on how to support women's organizations and movement-building from the regional perspective: bridging similarities, challenging the cross-cutting problems and inspiring new networks to amplify women's voices from South Caucasus to contribute to the transformation and resolution of conflict-related, socioeconomic and human rights challenges.

With this, we welcome this opportunity and would like to contribute to the UK FCO inquiry on South Caucasus on the topics and issues relevant to our expertise:

### *Women's meaningful participation in peace processes*

There is a varied degree of women's participation in peace processes across the different conflict contexts in South Caucasus. In order to enhance and drive women's meaningful participation in peace processes and conflict transformation, it is essential to ensure the **strengthening and capacity building of women human rights defenders (WHRDs)** and networks on all sides and in all conflict contexts, going into Tracks 1.5 and II.

In order to realise the objective of women's meaningful participation, both women human rights defenders and women from conflict-affected communities should be **provided with tailored capacity building and safe spaces** to come together to strategise, collaborate and share experiences. Such support would counteract the shrinking space across the region for civil society and women activists.

**Concrete and pragmatic joint initiatives, local solutions and messages** (as opposed to higher-level political action) at the regional/crossconflict level are more effective and achievable as a first step towards women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding. Women can serve as advocates for their communities' common needs (for example trade, watershed management, etc.), which are also gender sensitive and gender-specific.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that peacebuilding in South Caucasus is often understood as a matter of elites and closed groups of people, who meet each other in third countries. Societies and local communities lack information about the peacebuilding narratives, processes and actors. We believe it is extremely important to **bring messages from formal negotiations and narratives from peacebuilding actors to the grassroots level**, providing relevant

explanations and facilitating discussions with communities. This process is both a reality check for the Track I stakeholders and a true preparation of populations for peace.

It is essential to **create and maintain safe spaces and platforms** for women from across the divides to come together and engage in dialogue, identify mutually beneficial solutions and ways forward in terms of strategic thinking. Successful dialogue across conflict borders requires a long-term approach with multiple meetings over several years. These discussions and their outcomes can then be used to inform policymaking and discussions on a higher level.

A **generational shift** is required to ensure sustainable peace processes, and actors should ensure the empowerment of younger women with diverse backgrounds who can build upon the experience and lessons of the older generation of peacebuilders.

**Structural barriers**, such as early marriage, sex-selective abortion and the pressure to have children resulting in insufficient/incomplete education, enforce and reinforce limits on women's meaningful participation in public life. Without a conscious effort to dismantle systems of violence and discrimination against women, efforts to fully engage them in peacebuilding will remain partially successful at best.

### ***Peace processes/conflict transformation/confidence-building***

International actors should support opportunities to **widen dialogue across the divides** in the entire South Caucasus region and beyond, through **identifying crosscutting regional issues** such as gender-based violence/domestic violence; women, peace and security; sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); women's political participation; early warning systems; and other methods geared towards transformative peace.

**Gender-responsive early warning systems (GREWS)** can be supported to build confidence and improve trustful relations between women in the conflict-affected societies across South Caucasus by increasing cooperation to confront common challenges and transform societies towards peace, gender equality and human rights. GREWS application and implementation across conflict divided areas to monitor, analyze and provide early responses to address risks of violence at local level, transform the roots of the conflict at regional level and advocate for peaceful resolution and/or conflict transformation, feeding into the Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy processes.

### ***Propaganda/disinformation/media***

Exposure to militarised propaganda, biased media, and state regulation of civic space intersect to create an environment of suspicion towards peacebuilding activists and ordinary citizens with perspectives contradictory to the prevailing narratives of peace, security and the nation.

In order to counter propaganda and disinformation and ensure access to objective, gender- and conflict-sensitive information, it is **essential to build the skills of researchers and the media in gender-sensitive reporting**. Journalists, analysts and other opinion makers must be given access to diverse sources, there is a need to hear the voices of women from different backgrounds and age groups.

### ***Human security***

**Shrinking space** for civil society, women human rights defenders and LGBTQI community members and activists presents a growing challenge across the region, given increasing mobilization of far rights and extreme right-wing groups.

Neutral, safe and secure spaces can also be supported as platforms to provide **holistic safety and security measures for women human rights defenders (WHRDs)** and LGBTQI activists and community members, an issue that is frequently overlooked and not properly addressed, especially given the increasingly hostile context and hate speech that WHRDs are experiencing on and offline. These safe spaces should be forged both across (through dialogue format) and within the contexts, to exchange experiences and share lessons learned and good practices on thematic issues. It is an essential precondition to address security challenges posed by the far-right groups and the anti-gender narrative and implement risk assessment and mitigation measures.

Mechanisms and measures addressed towards **Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)** should include a gender component, as these measures are frequently viewed in a general sense and do not have a gender-specific angle, which would facilitate the exploration and mitigation of violent extremism and associated narratives on women.

### ***Women's human rights***

Women's political participation, women's economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, including sex-selective abortions and access to safe abortions, gender-based and domestic violence, including early marriage, are issues that are cross-cutting across the region, and are especially problematic in spaces, such as the breakaway regions of Georgia and *de-facto* Nagorno-Karabakh context, where legal mechanisms to address these issues are frequently not in place and are often taken on by women's groups and civil society actors.

### ***UK support towards states in the region in multilateral fora***

The UK can be instrumental in influencing actors, including large-scale donors, in the South Caucasus region to advance women's meaningful participation in peace processes by engaging more women in consultations, e.g. through the EUSR and addressing the women's human rights/gender equality issues highlighted above. Moreover, it is important to provide efficient long-term financial support to the grassroots actors who would be able to challenge existing narratives through working on community level, "translating" the formal language and concepts to grassroots understanding. This is extremely important to create a pathway to sustainable peace and encourage understanding and critical debate in terms of the overall concept of peace.

Importantly, **gender mainstreaming** in all programming and activities should be a priority when planning and implementing programs or selecting funding opportunities in the region.

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