

## Gendered Impacts of the Lachin Corridor Blockade

### Background/Introduction

Over two years after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, and several months after yet another large-scale escalation in September 2022, a humanitarian crisis is currently unfolding around the Nagorny Karabakh context<sup>1</sup>. For already two months, the Lachin corridor – the only road, which connects Armenia with Nagorny Karabakh, a region primarily populated by ethnic Armenians - has been blockaded, sealing off both the primary and alternative routes in and out of the area and indefinitely suspending mobility for people and goods.

While the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, several discussions and analyses have been released, focusing on the geo-political, state-security, historical, and economic root causes, and humanitarian effects of the blockade. However, it is evident that these analyses are devoid of a gender lens.

As the population is effectively in survival mode, striving to secure basic necessities, such as food, medicine, and heating, and fearing a total forced depopulation of the territory by the Azerbaijani government, it is frequently difficult to prioritise 'women's issues' since combatting hunger, poverty/economic and energy crises, maintaining adequate care for the sick and elderly, and sustaining children's education and nutrition take first priority. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that all of the above concerns are highly gendered.

Mobility restrictions and existence in survival mode heighten already acute feelings of instability and compromise human security along a variety of vectors, including food, social, economic, physical, mental, and digital security, as described in the sections below. These human security challenges impair women's meaningful political and socioeconomic participation on all levels, especially for women and girls experiencing various forms of oppression based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnic background, disability, displacement, economic status, etc.

As has been the case<sup>2</sup>, women's perspectives, voices, and experiences remain outside the scope of analysis and, once again, human security aspects are seen as external to the political domain and secondary to national security. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation calls upon key actors and stakeholders to shed light on the gendered impacts of the blockade and the ensuing humanitarian crisis on women, girls, and other marginalised groups.

In order to draw attention to this issue, Kvinna till Kvinna has compiled a brief analysis of the gendered impacts of current blockade, based on several conversations with women's rights organisations and women human rights defenders on the ground, representing all involved contexts. In compiling this brief, Kvinna till Kvinna has relied on its long-standing presence and experience in the region, as well as experience from the Second Karabakh War. However, this is a preliminary assessment and more comprehensive analysis is needed.

In terms of limitations, the challenge of accessing and analysing widespread information and evidence directly from Nagorny Karabakh should be mentioned.

The recent expansion of the civilian EU monitoring mission<sup>3</sup> in Armenia is a welcome step towards maintaining security along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. While this mission will not have a mandate to affect the situation in the Lachin corridor, the European Parliament has recently issued

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<sup>1</sup> A conflict-affected enclave, populated by ethnic Armenians, under the governance of *de facto* Nagorny Karabakh authorities that experienced an influx of displaced persons and constant challenges to human security post-2020 Second Karabakh War

<sup>2</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna, *The Missing Peace*, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Missing-Peace.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Fabbro, Robin. *EU approves 2-year monitoring mission to Armenia–Azerbaijan border*, OC Media, <https://oc-media.org/eu-approves-2-year-monitoring-mission-to-armenia-azerbaijan-border/>

a resolution<sup>4</sup>, where it calls for a negotiation on the deployment of OSCE international peacekeepers under a UN mandate, the granting of 'unimpeded access to Nagorno-Karabakh by international organisations', and a 'UN or OSCE fact-finding mission to the Lachin corridor to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground'. Moreover, the mandate of the EU monitoring mission could be more flexible to 'permit monitors to play essential roles in fostering communication and coordination between the two sides'<sup>5</sup>.

In view of a longer-term, more sustainable focus on human security, there is now also the momentum to consider a possible practical format, such as the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)<sup>6</sup> in Georgia, or the recent initiative to support multidisciplinary Citizen Advisory Groups (CAGs) along the Romanian-Ukrainian border<sup>7</sup>. The purpose of these groups is to conduct regular meetings, 'in which police, local authorities, activists, doctors, teachers, and entrepreneurs meet to discuss and find local solutions to local problems'<sup>8</sup>. There is an acute need to consider and discuss a similar format on the ground in relation to the Nagorny Karabakh context and to ensure that at the planning and design stage, these formats are gender-responsive.

It is thus imperative that were these measures to be put in place, that this process be conducted in consultation with women's rights organisations and women human rights defenders to ensure its gender-responsiveness.

### **Women's/human security concerns**

As mentioned, the current situation has already deteriorated into a humanitarian crisis in nearly all socioeconomic domains. The crisis has resulted in the separation of families and increased security concerns and challenges. The impact of the humanitarian crisis on intersectionally marginalised groups, e.g., LGBTI persons, women and children with disabilities, persons living with HIV, single mothers, elderly women, women living in remote/rural settings, has been amplified as these groups face additional challenges in terms of specific needs and priorities, as well as access to resources, goods, and services.

**Nutrition:** Access to adequate nutrition, including for children, the elderly, and pregnant individuals, is scarce. According to the consulted women's rights organisations, there is an acute shortage of fresh produce, including fruits and vegetables, as well as dairy products, baby food, and quality formula for infants. While staple stocks are being assessed, there is no analysis and data on access to specific nutrition for children/new-borns and mothers.

The local authorities have launched a coupon/rationing system to provide limited quantities of goods and staples, e.g., one litre of oil, buckwheat, rice. However, access to these requires waiting in long queues, and is a task primarily assigned to women, which makes it difficult to follow daily routines and implement responsibilities.

**Healthcare:** There is a lack of medicine, and access to adequate healthcare is provided only through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Access of women, girls, and LGBTI persons to specialised sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), including safe birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), menstrual and sanitary products,

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament, *Resolution on the humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0075\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0075_EN.html)

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), EU Watch List, Europe and Central Asia, *The Pressing Task of Advancing Peace Talks in the South Caucasus*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/watch-list-2023#caucasus>

<sup>6</sup> Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, *Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)* <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/27/incident-prevention-and-response-mechanism>

<sup>7</sup> EU Neighbours East, *EUAM helps introduce Citizen Advisory Groups in Ukrainian communities near Romanian border*, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/euam-helps-introduce-citizen-advisory-groups-in-ukrainian-communities-near-romanian-border/>

<sup>8</sup> EUAM Ukraine, *How we support the Odesa regional police in building public trust*, <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/how-we-support-the-odesa-regional-police-in-building-public-trust/>

dignity kits<sup>9</sup>, and pain killers is crucial. Pregnant women and new mothers require specialised nutrition and post-natal care, which is currently limited. Essential hygiene products, such as toilet paper, are also in short supply and subject to rationing. Access to existing health services and medical supplies is further hampered by the scarcity of fuel (described below), which complicates mobility options.

It is worth noting that in conflict-affected settings, women's specific healthcare needs are frequently deprioritised<sup>10</sup>, and the issue is particularly exacerbated in humanitarian and other crises. Thus, especially under heightened conditions of militarised masculinities (please, see SGBV section below), awareness of and access to gender-specific health services is crucial.

Moreover, poor access of children, the elderly, and men to existing health services and medical supplies increases the domestic burden of women, since due to local customs and patriarchal values, nursing in the family in most cases is also a woman's obligation.

Education and employment: Many kindergartens, schools, and primary educational institutions are closed due to absence of stable heating, of electricity supply or adequate nutrition options. This has once again caused disruptions in the curriculum and the quality of children's education, which has already suffered setbacks due to the pandemic and the Second Karabakh War. School and kindergarten closures have also placed an additional care burden on women with minor children.

Moreover, working women who are unable to leave minor children without care may have their employment opportunities compromised, although some workplaces have embraced flexible schedules to support women with children.

Energy, fuel, and transportation: Fuel shortages and gas and electricity cuts are very frequent. Due to the sudden onset of the blockade and the crisis, most of the population had not stockpiled firewood and other materials to ensure readily available supplies, especially in urban settings. The crisis, compounded by the freezing winter temperatures, has forced most of the population to seek alternate sources of energy for heating and cooking, and because the society is highly patriarchal, largely endorsing traditional gender roles, the bulk of this burden is overwhelmingly experienced by women who take upon themselves primary domestic responsibilities.

Fuel shortages also cause limitations on public transport. Minibuses that would previously regularly commute from rural to urban settings and vice versa, have been suspended. This further exacerbates access to resources and services for rural residents; especially women, who frequently need to travel from surrounding villages to work and access medical and other municipal facilities in the cities.

Electricity is provided according to an ambiguous schedule and, when available, it is often supplied in an unstable voltage, which diminishes its efficiency in supporting household tasks.

Access to information: In terms of access to information, internet connectivity is frequently hampered, both by blockages and electricity cuts, and mobile data packages present an expensive alternative. This once again precludes access to quality information, connections to other contexts, and further complicates online learning options, aggravating the burden on women with school-age children.

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<sup>9</sup> Dignity kits contain hygiene and sanitary items, as well as other items explicitly tailored towards the local needs of women and girls of reproductive age in particular communities. GBV Sub-Cluster (GBV SC) *Dignity Kits Guidance Note*. UNFPA, 2015. Available at:

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/dignity\\_kits\\_guidance\\_note\\_en.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/dignity_kits_guidance_note_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna, *Listen to Her – Gendered Effects of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Women's Priorities for Peace*, p. 31, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/listen-to-her-gendered-effects-of-the-conflict-over-nagorno-karabakh-and-womens-priorities-for-peace/#:~:text=Listen%20to%20Her%20%E2%80%93%20Gendered%20Effects,the%20conflicts%20in%20the%20regio>

Another problematic issue that has been ubiquitous across the Nagorny Karabakh conflict context is propaganda, fake news, and gendered disinformation, something that becomes even more pervasive and amplified during times of acute crisis. While this has been a key concern for human rights and women's rights groups, and there are several specialised platforms working to combat disinformation and implement verifiable fact-checking, these resources are scarce and women's rights organisations and state agencies, or human rights mechanisms, such as public defenders' offices, have no structured capacity on how to counter propaganda and disinformation.

A structured and strategic communication from the Nagorny Karabakh or Armenian authorities on the situation is lacking and there is a need for evidence- and fact-based data and information. Human rights defenders and organisations, including women's rights organisations require skills, knowledge, and methodologies on how to collect such data in humanitarian and other crises.

Access to funds: While monetary support can be transferred to cardholders in Nagorny Karabakh, many shops and other service-providers do not accept bank cards and require payment in cash. There are also cash withdrawal limits on ATMs, and high demand on withdrawals frequently leads ATMs to run out of cash.

SGBV and militarised/nationalistic sentiments: The Second Karabakh War and the upheaval of the status quo has led to an increased sense of aggression, and further expansion of militarised masculinities and nationalistic sentiment. According to women's organisations, 'men have become trapped by those very patriarchal stereotypes' that were designed to work in their favour.' Due to the political and economic uncertainties, men are frequently unable to adequately fulfil their 'masculine' roles of breadwinner and provider, which can manifest in domestic aggression and violence, predominantly against women and girls<sup>11</sup>.

These sentiments, and a potential associated increase in the incidence of gender-based violence, are further exacerbated in conditions of humanitarian crisis. Parallels can be drawn to the lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>12</sup>, where there was an explicit link between pandemic-related lockdowns and increased incidences of all forms of violence against women and girls<sup>13</sup>. It is essential to note that such humanitarian crises have the potential to increase the prevalence of physical, psychological, economic, and other types of violence against women and girls. Additionally, the current blockade prevents survivors of violence from hiding or fleeing to another region from their abusers.

While, due to taboos and other constraints, women refrain from speaking openly about increased instances of violence, women's rights organisations operating within communities have garnered sufficient trust and are able to discern warning signs.

Preparedness: Given the current situation, it is imperative to ensure a comprehensive risk assessment and mitigation, as well as targeted crisis and emergency response plans, including the provision of adequate conditions and resources to host a potential influx of migrants from the Nagorny Karabakh context to Armenia.

At the time of the writing of this brief, no public information was available regarding any specific measures or mechanisms to prepare for this scenario. While the political reasoning behind this is predictable, it is still crucial to encourage a comprehensive gender-responsive response plan. A potential influx of migrants is likely to exacerbate already existing tensions and discrimination

<sup>11</sup> Caucasus Edition, *Gendered Face of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*, <https://caucasusedition.net/gendered-face-of-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/>

<sup>12</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna, *Statement: A feminist perspective on the global response to Covid-19*, <https://kvinnaatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Covid-19-Statement-3-April-2020.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> UN Women, *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19#:~:text=Violence%20against%20women%20and%20girls,particularly%20domestic%20violence%2C%20has%20intensified>

between displaced and host communities. Such a development is also likely to create security risks and put an additional strain on already scarce resources, intensifying the triple burden on women<sup>14</sup>.

*Coping mechanisms and trauma healing:* According to women's rights organisations and women human rights defenders, due to the crisis, there is an increased demand on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in Nagorny Karabakh especially. However, these are largely provided by civil society organisations, and gender-responsive MHPSS services can essentially be accessed exclusively through women's rights and LGBTI organisations, which places an additional strain on their staff and increases the likelihood of burnout for staff, especially those delivering essential services. Additionally, these organisations are largely based in Armenia without access to Nagorny Karabakh, where such services are limited.

During such crises, while resources are distributed in a restrictive way, this scarcity affects women to a larger extent as the distribution is unequal.

Women in the blockaded communities self-organise and mobilise in safe digital and physical spaces. Joint self-help community groups exist where women share resources, both physical and mental, to support each other and express solidarity – from tips on cooking with restricted supplies, to advice on reusing resources (diapers, etc.). These groups are formed mainly on social media but also in professional settings (in clinics, etc.). Internet and electricity restrictions, however, create additional challenges for this type of self-support.

Women's rights organisations also report that women in Nagorny Karabakh have formed collective care networks through relatives and neighbours, where childcare and other support and care can be provided to free up women's time to go to work or stand in queues for ATMs or rationing vouchers. As per some women's human rights defenders, though, such collective care initiatives are becoming scarcer as people are concerned with their and their families' immediate individual needs and priorities.

### **The role of ICRC**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is currently the only agency that has access to the blockaded region and is primarily tasked with delivering humanitarian supplies. The EU's humanitarian funding packet for 2022 in the amount of EUR 3.6 million has been entirely allocated to ICRC.<sup>15</sup> While the ICRC have been a crucial actor and a lifeline between Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia, the humanitarian assistance provided by the ICRC does not currently fully reflect the gendered needs and priorities of women and girls experiencing the crisis.

According to the women's rights organisations, gendered items, such as hygiene kits, menstrual products, birth control options, etc. are not an integral or regular component of the humanitarian aid packages. However, the ICRC have provided targeted support to pregnant and breastfeeding women<sup>16</sup>.

Women's rights organisations and experts can collaborate with ICRC to support the development of specific mechanisms for a systematic and structured data collection, synthesis, and analysis process among the target communities around gender-specific needs and priorities.

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<sup>14</sup> Zibani, Tonnie. *The Triple burden and triple role of women*,

<https://www.empowerwomen.org/en/community/discussions/2016/11/the-triple-burden-and-triple-role-of-women>

<sup>15</sup> Vălean, Adina. *EP Plenary: Humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh*, Speech delivered by Commissioner for Transport, on behalf of High-Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell

[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ep-plenary-humanitarian-consequences-blockade-nagorno-karabakh\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ep-plenary-humanitarian-consequences-blockade-nagorno-karabakh_en)

<sup>16</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Operational update – Situation along the Lachin Corridor*, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/operational-update-situation-along-lachin-corridor>

## **Recommendations**

While the lifting of the blockade and the resolution of the humanitarian crisis are not yet in sight, it is imperative to ensure the rights, safety, and human security of the blockaded population and that human security concerns are taken to the political level. In order to support this, the following set of recommendations are put forward:

### *To international actors, including the EU:*

- Systematically engage with civil society and women's rights organisations and activists, which provide gender-specific information and data; moreover, continue supporting local women-led community-based organisations as agents of first response;
- Provide mechanisms and resources to ensure the security of women human rights defenders and peace activists on all sides;
- Support specialised women's rights organisations in the introduction and integration of Gender-responsive early warning systems (GREWS) as a relevant tool to identify, systematise, document, and analyse community-based gendered data, which can then serve as a foundation for evidence-based advocacy efforts vis-à-vis decision-makers on multiple levels, as well as to determine gendered humanitarian needs and priorities;
- Support local authorities in designing gender-sensitive and inclusive emergency and crisis response mechanisms and plans, including targeted emergency response plans for marginalised groups;
- Support local authorities to understand the links between the scarcity of resources, structural violence, and security threats through research and analysis, as well as awareness raising by women human rights defenders, experts and women's rights organisations;
- Consider the introduction of practical and gender-responsive dialogue and incident prevention mechanisms.

### *To INGOs and funders, including the EU:*

- Continue providing resources and safe spaces to women's rights organisations, initiative groups, and individual activists, including mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services to address trauma and prevent burnout, and enabling them to conduct gender- and context analyses;
- Provide opportunities and facilitation for physical and digital safe spaces for the sides to engage in transformative dialogue initiatives, whose outcomes could then be upscaled to policy level;
- Serve as door openers towards decision- and policy-makers, including the EU, to enable gender-responsive and gender-sensitive inclusive and participatory processes in relation to a potential fact-finding mission, etc.;
- Provide capacity development and skill strengthening for women's rights organisations, monitoring mission staff, and ICRC staff on data collection, fact checking, and countering propaganda and disinformation;
- Support women's rights organisations' research and analysis into the links between the scarcity of resources, structural violence, and security threats;
- Provide resources to women's rights organisations to implement awareness raising campaigns among communities on the use of menstrual cups/reusable menstrual pads as safe and sustainable alternatives (and as a means to support reusable products less reliant on the supply chain), as well as birth control/contraceptive methods and awareness raising on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR);
- Provide resources to women's rights groups to conduct data collection and analysis on the prevalence of different forms of gender-based violence, as well as provide mechanisms of redress to survivors, including legal and psychosocial;
- Provide resources for, and periodically updated capacity development to women's rights organisations on holistic/integrated security, including physical, psychosocial, and digital security.

To the ICRC, humanitarian organisations, and donors:

- Ensure the systematic provision of gender-specific items, e.g., dignity/hygiene kits, menstrual products, including menstrual cups, and birth control/contraception options, as integral components of humanitarian aid packages in Nagorny Karabakh;
- Collaborate with women's rights organisations to develop staff capacity on gender-responsive data collection and analysis, including through GREWS methodology;
- Implement gender-responsive needs assessments among the communities affected by the blockade, including with a specific focus on the needs and priorities of marginalised communities, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV, etc.
- Implement detailed, gender-responsive needs assessments among communities affected by the blockade: including with a specific focus on the needs of LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities and long-term health conditions, and other marginalised groups;
- Work to ensure that people living with HIV in Nagorny Karabakh can have access to antiretroviral (ARV) medication.