

Voiceless Warriors: First Karabakh War Female Veterans' Post-War Experiences

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2.300 women participated in the First Karabakh War.^[1] These women held multiple different posts as nurses, fighters, assistants, heads of department, liaison officers and cooks. However, in the post-war period, they experienced various problems in returning to their normal lives because they failed to have undergone any reintegration program. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 is considered the main international document detailing procedures states should adopt for returning women and girls adversely affected by armed conflict worldwide to normal life. Azerbaijan has not yet adopted a national action plan for the implementation of that resolution. In this article, I will discuss the most common problems encountered by women fighters who participated in the First Karabakh War and propose a comprehensive approach to solving these problems based on paragraph 4 of the above resolution.

This article is based on face-to-face or video interviews conducted between October 2022 and February 2024 with 17 women who participated in the First Karabakh War. Each interview lasted about two hours. I got in contact with two of the interviewees through social media, and with the others through those two women. My interviewees live in different districts and villages across Azerbaijan. Audio recording was done only after obtaining consent from each interviewee. Numerals have been used to identify the interviewees in this article to protect their anonymity.

UNSCR 1325

On 31 October 2000, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 was passed unanimously. Its passage represented a milestone because it is an innovative political framework to address gender issues during conflict, as well as in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction processes. UNSCR 1325 contains four pillars: participation, prevention, protection, and resolution and recovery.

The resolution is legally binding on state signatories to the Charter of the United Nations. This was the first time that the UNSC had devoted a resolution to directly address the topic of women and armed conflict. It focuses on a gender perspective, including, inter alia, the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction. The UNSC encourages Member States to develop a national strategy in line with Resolution 1325. So far, 109 countries have adopted a National Action Plan based on this resolution. However, Azerbaijan, which has lived under war conditions for almost 30 years, does not have a national action plan. The results of interviews with female veterans living in different areas of Azerbaijan show that in order to return to normal life, it is important to adopt this resolution and have a resolution and recovery program. The inclusion of community and family members in the program as well as support from state institutions could address the social and financial problems that women face most often.

Female and male fighters adapt to normal life upon return from conflict in different ways. Female fighters may face a tension between the powers they wielded during the war and the constraints stemming from patriarchal structures in the post-conflict period. In other words, women who get the same power as their male counterparts in the military often must adapt to the rules of the post-conflict society and obey traditional gender roles. Women combatants are more likely to face specific challenges because of their gender, culture, ethnicity, location and other identities in the post-war

period unless gender-inclusive programs are in place.^[2] Below I describe the gender-based problems encountered by women who participated in the First Karabakh War.

Considered ineligible for marriage

Although women's roles expanded during the First Karabakh War, this did not mean that gender norms and social power relations were structurally changed. For example, income inequality and gender roles remained intact in Azerbaijan in the post-conflict period.

Azerbaijani women who participated in the First Karabakh War also faced discrimination in the post-war period. One of the issues where this discrimination manifests itself is marriage. Women veterans were considered *ineligible for marriage* by society. These women attribute their ineligible for marriage or their post-war divorces to their participation in the war. Of the 17 interviewees, two were unable to marry because of their participation in the war and another seven divorced their spouses in the post-war period.

Women veterans are marginalized at both the micro and macro levels. *Interviewee 1* served a year in a reconnaissance group during the war.^[3] She states that in the first years of independence from the Soviet Union, voluntary self-defense battalions formed in the Karabakh regions. She visited the regional organization of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party in the area where she lived and enlisted in a reconnaissance group. Although she did not know how to use a weapon, she learned it easily after training in a military unit. After the war, she reports that she had considerable trouble justifying her soldiering to her family and society.

Neither society, nor family, nor relatives welcomed me well. They disapproved of my being in the army: "What does a female do in war?" they questioned. Men during the war were not welcoming to women in the military either. Such women were

regarded as immoral. I was told that a battlefield was not for women, and I should go back. But I said no. I couldn't go back now that I had already signed up. Otherwise, people would say that I got scared and deserted. After the war, men who were aware of my participation in the war, did not approach me with good intentions.

Interviewee 1 reports that she separated from her husband after 4 years of marriage. Her participation in the war deprived her of her role as a wife. According to her, even though her husband knew that she had participated in the war before marriage, his resentment of the fact grew during their marriage, and they separated.

Interviewee 2 repeatedly applied to the Ministry of Defense to join the army, but received no response. She ran away from home and joined the army in 1992. Although she had a secondary education, she registered in the army as a nurse and learned nursing from a doctor working in the military unit. About a month after gaining trust in the army, she was provided with weapons, trained and took part in battles. She also talks about the discrimination she has experienced due to her participation in the war:^[4]

Men think women who participate in the war are immoral. We consider ourselves strong, but the men in front of us treat us as if we are besmirching their names. Men who at first saw me as a potential wife refused when they learned that I had participated in the war. Even my peers reproached me when there were rumors about it. They say: "You went into the national army" – "Yes, I went, I went to defend your honor."

Interviewee 2 expresses disappointment that she cannot adapt to the patriarchal rules of a society presenting marriage as the primary marker of a woman's success, as well as the gender role defined by this view. She expressed this publicly several times during interviews: "I don't want to come home because I live alone, so I come home very late."

Interviewee 3 studied nursing and volunteered as a nurse in a military unit in 1991-1992. She also faced similar problems after the war.^[5]

My fiancé and I were childhood friends. My mother-in-law rejected me after I joined the army as a nurse. She said that she could never accept such a girl as her daughter-in-law. My fiancé and I called off the marriage. His family did not accept me because I had participated in the war.

Another female *interviewee 4* participating in the interview also found herself facing a choice.^[6] She had either to participate in the war or abandon her husband. She volunteered for military service in 1991. In the military, she first supplied clothes to military units located in the war zone and later became the head of the secret documentation department in a military unit. She attributes her reason for participating in the war to patriotism. She reports: "I wanted to do whatever I could for the country." "When I voluntarily joined the army, I didn't know anything, I learned how to use a weapon in the army," she adds. She had married before she started military service. When she joined the army, her husband was not happy. She too wasn't happy because, having become accustomed to a certain position and power in the war, she could not fulfill traditional gendered expectations as a wife. She preferred to stay in the army, as a result of which her husband left her.

Interviewee 5 worked as a nurse in the hospital of the area where she lived before the war. She says that in 1991, she received many wounded from the war zone in the hospital where she worked. After that, she decided to join the military as a volunteer. She notes: "The soldiers in the military service treated us badly from when they first saw us through even the last years." She emphasizes that she has struggled for many years with the social stigma she faced in the post-war period. She adds: "We bandaged the wounds of men who looked down on us

and called them brothers. Despite all the sacrifices we made in the military, the men did not accept us.”[\[7\]](#)

Interviewee 6 had secondary medical education and worked as a nurse in a military unit beginning in 1993. She emphasizes that people she knows do not maintain relations with her, and she is subject to discrimination. She notes that after the war, unmarried women are afraid to stand next to her, as they think they will also be made unchaste.”[\[8\]](#)

The lack of a government program to reintegrate women veterans into society is one of the main reasons for the social and personal problems they face. Thus, although society is quite traditional, a state reintegration program could provide financial and psychological support to women veterans in overcoming many of the problems they have faced and also contribute to raising awareness in society.

Employment problems

Many women who have served also face unemployment after being discharged from the army. Interviewees report that they live only on the veterans’ social benefits of 80 manats a month. They have suffered both psychological trauma and various physical injuries. There are also those reporting that their income is not enough for treatment. Interviewees claim that when they address state authorities with these concerns, officials repeatedly ask them in a derogatory tone: “What have you achieved by going to the war?”[\[9\]](#) Because they are women, their military achievements are ignored, they are not provided with jobs and they experience gender-based problems.

Interviewee 7 is now 60 years old. She says that she has faced many difficulties: She remained unemployed after her discharge in 1995, and she was not cared for by the state authorities.

I have carried several wounded and dead on my shoulders. I live alone, how can I live on 80 manats? I lost my health in

the war; my tears have not dried out yet. Do you know how much our conscience stings when dishonorable people defame us? I am looking for a job; they do not give me a job. I can't make ends meet; I badly need money. There are times when I can't even have curd and bread in my house. My pension has been cancelled. I have a heart disease. Wherever I go, they demand a bribe to fix it. I defended these lands for 4 years and 8 months at the cost of my health and livelihood. Am I to blame if I didn't die? If I had been a martyr, they would have decorated my grave and brought flowers.^[10]

Interviewee 7 grew up in boarding schools. She travelled to a war zone to see her fiancé. That's when she decided to stay and fight in a military unit. In the war, she used heavy weapons. After losing her fiancé to the war, she did not think of returning to civilian life for many years. She spent four years and eight months at the front in frequent combat. She says that she has not been married since then and lives alone. She was told by the district executive power in the area where she lived: "God has also forgotten those who participated in the First Karabakh War."

Interviewee 4 also complains about the negligence of state authorities:

I've had three surgeries because I was continually hungry under wartime conditions. They removed part of my stomach. I also suffer from problems in several other organs. With age, my health problems have gotten worse. They send an ambulance to my house at least once a week. I get a veteran's pension of 80 manats. I live in a small house, consisting of one room. The war ended 35 years ago, but I have been begging the state for 35 years to give me a portion of land. I have no income; I don't know what money to live on. If I get the opportunity, I'll leave Azerbaijan. How can the state forget us? After all, the most deplorable situation was in the First Karabakh war. In 1999, I was discharged for disability. There has been

nothing I can do since then. [\[11\]](#)

In accordance with an order signed by Ilham Aliyev in December 2021, many military servicemen, including the veterans of the First Karabakh War, are entitled to a lump sum payment as follows: 8,800 manats for the disability of the 1st Group; 6,600 manats for the disability of the 2nd Group; 4,400 manats for disability of the 3rd Group. [\[12\]](#) The implementation of lump sum payments started in August 2022. However, among the interviewees, people with disabilities reported that they had not received lump sum payments. Some noted that they did not know this law existed.

Conclusion

As we have seen, in the post-war period, state bodies have not taken female combatants' military experience seriously but rather marginalized them. Female war veterans have also not been accepted by society. Women who faced both financial and psychological hardships experienced problems in personal and social relationships. Reintegration has seen society institute new forms of exclusion, inequality and marginalization in the post-war context. The new roles women had gained in the war were devalued, relegating them to undesirable roles. Female soldiers' voices go unheard by society and state, and their post-war lives are often invisible. In addition, observations have shown that in most cases, Azerbaijan's traditional patriarchy has continued to work to the disadvantage of women. As a result, despite the 30 years since the end of the First Karabakh War, war trauma continues to influence former fighters' health and livelihoods.

[\[1\]](#) Interview – Rada Abbasova, head of the Public Union of Social Assistance to Women War Veterans (April 7, 2024).

[\[2\]](#) Elaine Zuckerman and Marcia Greenberg, “The Gender

Dimensions of Post-Conflict Reconstruction: An Analytical Framework for Policymakers," *Gender and Development* 12, no. 3 (2004): 70–82.

[\[3\]](#) Interviewee 1 (2024, 2 January).

[\[4\]](#) Interviewee 2 (2024, 20 January)

[\[5\]](#) Interviewee 3 (2024, 13 February)

[\[6\]](#) Interviewee 4 (2024, 22 January)

[\[7\]](#) Interviewee 5 (2023, 28 December).

[\[8\]](#) Interviewee 6 (2024, 22 January)

[\[9\]](#) Interviewee 1, 6, 7, 9, 12

[\[10\]](#) Interviewee 7 (2024, 20 January)

[\[11\]](#) Müsahib 8 (2024, 20 yanvar)

[\[12\]](#) *Azərbaycan Respublikasının ərazi bütövlüyünün, müstəqilliyinin və konstitusiyaya quruluşunun müdafiəsi ilə əlaqədar hərbi xidmət vəzifələrini (xidməti vəzifələrini) yerinə yetirərkən və ya həqiqi hərbi xidmət dövründə xəsarət (yaralanma, travma, kontuziya) alması və ya xəstələnməsi nəticəsində əlilliyi müəyyən edilmiş hərbi qulluqçuların və daxili işlər orqanları əməkdaşlarının, habelə onların ailə üzvlərinin sosial müdafiəsinin gücləndirilməsi ilə bağlı tədbirlər haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin fərmanı, Bakı şəhəri, 23 dekabr 2021-ci il № 1513 <https://e-qanun.az/framework/48722>.*