


Women-to-Women Diplomacy in Georgia: A Peacebuilding Strategy in Frozen Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This research explores strategies led by women's grassroots organisations and discusses how they can offer opportunities for peacebuilding in frozen conflict settings such as Georgia and the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These conflicts are related to separatist aspirations which are based, on the surface, on ethnic differences. However, the precedent of inter-ethnic dialogue shows that there is not an inherent 'us-against-them' narrative separating Georgia from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, it is possible to create alternative arenas for dialogue and mutual understanding among the parties. To this end, this study adopts a broad approach to peacebuilding as a process of social transformation of hostile attitudes and exclusive narratives. I argue that women-to-women diplomacy is a peacebuilding strategy with the potential to address the roots of polarisation by humanising the other and identifying common ground for cooperation and inter-ethnic dialogue. The empirical research based on the experiences of women's organisations in Georgia illustrates the contribution of women-to-women diplomacy to peacebuilding as an alternative platform for coalition building based on the common goal of achieving equal rights.

Introduction

Can women offer particular opportunities for peacebuilding in frozen conflict settings such as Georgia and the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Recent scholarship has identified that more equal participation in peace processes is beneficial for the settlement of civil wars as well as stability in the post-conflict society (Banerjee 2008, Noma *et al.* 2012, Olsson and Gizelis 2014). Still, there is a gap with regards to women's ability to facilitate dialogue in stalled processes and where inter-ethnic trust is low or non-existent. This paper contributes to theory development in three main areas. First, it draws attention to the context of frozen conflict and identifies specific challenges for peacebuilding in this conflict setting. Second, this study analyses the benefits of community-based peacebuilding strategies and people-to-people diplomacy in this kind of conflict. Third, it introduces

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the concept of women-to-women diplomacy as a particular form of bottom-up peacebuilding and illustrates its use through the experiences of women's organisations in Georgia.

I argue that there is particular potential for identifying common ground for cooperation and inter-ethnic dialogue by people-to-people diplomacy's initiatives led by women given their leaning for inclusive agendas and a wider understanding of the nature of the conflict and its implications across different levels of society. Further, women's participation in peace initiatives allows understanding of gender dynamics in conflict and its gendered effects (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016, Tickner and True 2018). Therefore, women-to-women diplomacy represents an alternative peacebuilding strategy aimed at challenging conflict narratives and creating platforms for dialogue and cooperation by facilitating encounters between women who share experiences of conflict and the goal of achieving equal rights (Cardenas 2019). This research introduces this concept, not merely as a descriptive variation of the term 'people-to-people diplomacy' or to make the strategy exclusively female but to highlight the comprehensive role that women play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

The conflicts between Georgia and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia constitute prime examples of frozen conflicts. In the aftermath of independence in 1990, the nationalist regime in Tbilisi wanted to distance itself from the Soviet legacy by aiming for a western-inspired political model. In doing so, state building efforts quickly transformed Georgia into an over-centralised regime based on legislation that promoted nationalism and created difficulties for the inclusion of ethnical minorities (George 2009). This was opposed by separatist movements in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia leading to active civil conflict in South Ossetia during 1991–92, 2004 and 2008, and, in Abkhazia, from 1992 to 1993. Ceasefires were agreed but the structural issue regarding the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain unresolved and the conflict have since been frozen. After the 2008 war, the so-called Geneva International Discussions¹ and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism 'IPRM'² were established as international mediation process in order to guarantee the stability and security in the region. However, they have not produced tangible results in terms of conflict resolution.

I argue that in this conflict setting it is relevant to explore alternative approaches where peacebuilding can be used despite a lack of formal conflict resolution. To do so, this study goes beyond the conventional conception of peacebuilding³ which places it primarily as a post agreement strategy and conceptualises peacebuilding as a long term process of social transformation of hostile attitudes and exclusive narratives (Lederach 1997, Mac Ginty 2014). Based on this view, I analyse alternative arenas for dialogue

outside the current deadlocked negotiation process taking place between Georgia and the breakaway territories.

Consequently, this paper explores the space available for women-to-women diplomacy in Georgia to address the societal underpinnings of the frozen conflicts and how attempts have been made to improve cross-community interaction and dialogue. The contribution of women-to-women diplomacy is the ability to foster reconciliation processes by challenging the 'us-and-them' dichotomy, which leads to the creation of a new arena for belonging. In this way, shared gendered experiences can serve as a platform for coalition building and encourage mutual understanding as women acknowledge the experiences, challenges, and aims that they share as a result of the war regardless of ethnicity.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework related to frozen conflicts, people-to-people diplomacy, and the role of women in peacebuilding. Secondly, it presents the methodological strategy and the empirical material. The third section analyses the role developed by women in peacebuilding in Georgia. In order to present their contribution, I illustrate the concept of women-to-women diplomacy through initiatives developed by women's organisations such as Fund Sukhumi, Women's Information Centre – WIC- and Consent IDP among others. My analysis shows that while existing efforts have been able to improve cross-ethnic dialogue and have benefited women's agency as activist rather than victims of conflict, there have still been limited opportunities to link these processes with the official negotiations. There has also been issues with regards to uneven social and institutional capabilities between the Georgian and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, creating problems for long-time sustainability of promising initiatives. In my conclusion, I discuss how this study contributes to policy and scholarship on transformation of conflict narratives and intercommunity dialogue as well as the challenges for peacebuilding in frozen conflicts.

Peacebuilding in Frozen Conflicts

The global decline of war during recent decades (Goldstein 2011, Pinker 2011) does not mean that all formerly active wars have been resolved. Indeed, the most common outcome of conflict after the end of the Cold War is neither a victory nor a peace agreement but that fighting ceases while grievances and sometimes the armed actors remain in place (Kreutz 2010). Such situations have been referred to as 'frozen conflicts' or a 'cold peace' where – despite talks which may be ongoing – decades can pass without any tangible progress towards conflict resolution. Frozen conflicts are primarily territorial and related to separatist aspirations, often leading to

the establishment of a *de facto* regime, which is not recognised by the central regime or the international community (Nodia 2015).

These conflicts are common across the world. According to the Conflict Barometer,⁴ there were 223 violent and 186 non-violent conflicts in the world in 2015 (HIIK 2016) including China-Taiwan and Somaliland, but the phenomenon is particularly common in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet states. Despite their prevalence and the importance of dealing with these situations, the study of institutional and diplomatic mechanisms for conflict resolution has been the foremost research subject in the field of frozen conflicts giving little or no room to the idea of peacebuilding in this particular setting.

In much of the international relations literature, frozen conflicts are viewed as relatively positive and stable situations as they at least limit human suffering compared to a full-fledged war. However, the continuance of the underlying conflict affects the livelihood, economic development, security, and human rights situation in the involved countries. The greatest threat lies in the immediate border areas, where competing territorial claims often occur, and rival states often sponsor violent opposition groups to fight against their neighbouring regime (Conrad 2011). These territories may not necessarily be resource rich or strategically important but are often claimed to be symbolically important by a self-defined ethno-nationalist community (Toft 2005).

Political leaders and military bureaucracies increasingly institutionalise the conflict situation as a 'zero sum' game where defeat constitute a high risk that the ethnic community would disappear as an entity. Such ingrained institutions further the polarisation and security dilemma between the parties (Ohlson 2008), which affects all dimensions of daily life in the country including every activity in the public sphere. As Bar Tal (2013) argues, 'society members live a normalized conflicted life, often even without realizing its tremendous effects or being aware that there are other ways of life'. Thus, communities deliberately (or forcibly) suppress historical narratives of interethnic cooperation as opposed to the narrative of conflict and the idea of primordial enmity which becomes the core of national identity.

As the factors that perpetuate these frozen conflicts include the inability to progress with talks about the conflict issues and the absence of military domination on either side, the logical approach to seek peace is to start by challenging the forces of polarisation within and between the parties through perceptions of gains from peace and joint development. According to Coleman (2006) these types of ethno-political struggles are linked to local belief systems, that is why 'the way to intervene protracted conflicts is by altering the general patterns of interactions among the parties of the conflict in a more constructive direction'. Likewise, Bar Tal (2013) stresses the need of set peacebuilding's aims in terms of achieving societal

change which involves 'persuasion, learning, reframing, re-categorization, and eventually acquisition of new societal beliefs and patterns of behaviour'. In brief, research suggests that in order to unfreeze these conflicts, it is necessary to address the local societal processes that reinforce polarisation.

Public Diplomacy: A Bottom-up Approach in Practice

Peacebuilding as a long-term contribution to social change needs the participation of a wide range of actors⁵ (Gawerc 2006, Lederach 1997, 2012, Mac Ginty 2014) to understand both the grievances and the aspirations of the warring parties and to find alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution. It also provides the parties a greater insight regarding each other's needs, fears, priorities, and constraints; and to understand the motives and the ways in which the conflict-driven interactions among the parties tend to escalate and perpetuate the conflict (Chufrin and Saunders 1993, Kelman 2000, Handelman 2012). Hence, peacebuilding understood as a process of social transformation implies to acknowledge the local level as the 'microcosm of the bigger picture of conflict's dynamics' (Bar Tal 2013).

In the context of protracted conflicts, a bottom-up approach to encourage peace is by challenging the forces of polarisation within and between the parties through perceptions of gains from peace and joint development. Both in frozen conflict settings and in active conflicts with deadlocked peace negotiations, given their historical grievances and mainstreamed hostile attitude, it is critical to work 'at the most fundamental human levels to change the relationships involved' (Chufrin and Saunders 1993, Darby and Mac Ginty 2000). Along similar lines, Paffenholz (2013) argues for the importance of locally owned peacebuilding efforts, as this contributes to conflict transformation by addressing the personal, structural, relational and cultural aspects of conflict. To illustrate this claim, Paffenholz analyses the experience of northern Somaliland in a long process of locally owned, bottom – up consultations, which led to successful peacebuilding and reconciliation. Another example of community-based peacebuilding infrastructure was developed through the Peace Rings initiative in northern Uganda (largely composed by women and youth), that was able to raise awareness and enhance local capacity to facilitate dialogue, mediation and reconciliation services to conflicting parties (Kamatsiko 2015).

Another form of bottom-up peacebuilding consist of public diplomacy initiatives that aims to build relationships among ordinary people as a means to achieve peace at the societal level (Yilmaz 2005). This is often referred to as people-to-people-diplomacy and the ambition is to implicate civil society, both networks and grassroots level, in every stage of the processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. People-to-people diplomacy facilitates dialogues that offers the opportunity of humanising 'the

other' and encouraging momentum for peace and reconciliation as well as join projects and advocacy (Davies and Kaufman 2002, Golan and Kamal 2005). This mechanism has been used in Israel-Palestine throughout several experiences such as the 'Minds of Peace Experiment -MOPE-'. As Handelman (2012) argues, the various rounds of the MOPE indicate the effectiveness as a strategy for people-to-people diplomacy by involving ordinary people in peace-making efforts and coalitions and preparing them as a constituency for change, and in creating pressure on the leadership of both sides to conclude agreements.

These initiatives cannot substitute or be substituted by an official diplomatic process and have often been promoted as an add-on to formal negotiations. Rather than seeking to settle strategic positions or conflict issues, they are intended to challenge the widespread zero-sum rationale. People-to-people diplomacy contributes to strengthen civil society and encourages a critical mass by situating citizens within the context of public debate. Therefore, it represents a window of opportunity for the creation of new patterns of belonging and identity, including the development of common grounds of interests and potential cooperation where citizens can identify themselves as individuals rather than parties of the conflict. For the very reasons that people-to-people diplomacy are seen as 'low politics' that does not deal with the specific conflict issue, these may be the type of initiative that have the greatest potential to establish even some dialogue across the divide in frozen conflicts. In what follows, I elaborate on this factor and suggest that specifically interactions between women may offer opportunities both as a space for dialogue and as a platform for sharing experiences, motivating women-to-women diplomacy.

Women's Contributions to Peacebuilding

Existing literature on women's involvement in peacebuilding has primarily focused on their participation in formal negotiations, while this study aims to explore alternative peacebuilding strategies at the grassroots and community level. Although numerous efforts led by women have been documented, there is no theory that specifies how they differ from other types of bottom-up initiatives with regards to the patterns of mobilisation or coalition building. This research aims to address this gap by introducing and illustrating the concept of women-to-women diplomacy through strategies by women's organisations which can be 'off the radar' compared with conventional peacebuilding strategies.

Most institutional mechanisms devoted to conflict resolution and peacebuilding still inhibit women's participation or consider it as a formality based on a restrictive view of gender dynamics that perpetuate the assumption of women as primarily victims and/or natural pacifists given their nurturing

and caring roles within society (York 1998, El-Bushra 2007, Sjoberg 2014). Feminist scholarship combined with peace studies has challenged this marginalisation of women's experiences and drawn attention to women's agency in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. International experiences worldwide have illustrated the work women organisations have done to broaden participation on peace issues. For instance, the experience of women's initiatives in Liberia showed the potential of informal domestic networks that can also escalate to decision makers (Gizelis 2011) while the role of Naga Mothers Association NMA in the nationalist struggle for an independent Nagaland illustrated how women creatively shaped their social functions as an entry point for political activism (Banerjee 2008). Further, scholar's work has also challenged the idea of women as primarily victims of the conflict to analyse how women survivors mobilise to shift gender power relations. Tripp (2000) analyses the contribution of local women's movement in the creation of new spheres of social and political incidence in post-conflict societies. Similarly, Berry (2018) explores women's mobilisation in informal political space after war in the cases of Rwanda and Bosnia.

As Manchanda argues (2001), focusing on women's experiences 'sheds light not only on the gendered aspects of social and political life but provides acute insights into other forms of structural inequalities at the heart of conflict'. Thus, women bring different insights into the structure of power relations and different values to the process of peacebuilding. Further, Gizelis (2011) and Anderlini (2007) argue that, women not only reclaim space, but create their own scenarios to influence peace negotiations, and even more, to push the societal change needed for a sustainable peace. This, I contend, is not only the case during and after official negotiations are taking place, but is also possible when conflicts are frozen or deadlocked.

Activism in the form of women-to-women diplomacy help create new scenarios for peace initiatives across conflict lines through the recognition of commonalities both from personal experiences of the conflict and a shared goal of achieving equal rights. To do so, women-to-women diplomacy can be deployed in a wide scope of activities and target different groups of women including rural women, IDP, community-leaders, students, among others. Therefore, it does not imply a homogeneous category of women. On the contrary, women-to-women diplomacy embraces women as a multidimensional category. In the words of Spelman (in Yuval-Davis 1997), similarities among women exist within the context of macro-social differences of class, ethnicity and race. Likewise, Fearon⁶ argues that beyond structural differences, women have a strong sense of overcoming exclusion from social and political life and a sense of fairness and equality.

Further, this concept embrace the objective of engendering peacebuilding which makes it possible to analyse not only the impact of getting women involved in peace efforts but to further explore what kind of

peace women pursue and what kind of peace can be reached in a process in which women actively participate. I propose three components to characterise women-to-women diplomacy: Shared experiences of women in the conflict, the promotion of women's agency and the common goal of gender equality as a key aspect of peace.

Firstly, women recognise both shared aims and the prevalence of restrictive gender roles beyond the ethnic or religious group to which they belong (Giles and Hyndman 2004, Cockburn 2007, Enloe 2000). Thus, women can cross lines of division and demystify notions of the 'other' in order to include all parties in conflict resolution (Noma *et al.* 2012). For instance, the experience of the Athwas Initiative in Kashmir is relevant to illustrate this argument. This initiative gathered Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs women with the aim to 'visit each other's realities and to identify and strengthen values of trust and coexistence that had historically been part of Kashmiri society' (DasGupta and Gopinath 2005). By personal encounters, roundtables, role-playing activities, the participants reflected on the idea that there is no one but different 'truths' with regards to the conflict. As DasGupta and Gopinath, (2005) claims, by developing this project 'attitudes have softened, women have reached across the divide, they are prepared, sometimes for the first time to listen to the "other", and a thirst for vengeance has been supplanted by an urge to reconcile'.

Secondly, women's agency is at the core of women-to-women diplomacy agenda and incorporates a wide scope of means of participation. From women's leadership at the grassroots level (Kumar Das 2008) and everyday practices to performance of 'female' roles such as motherhood as a platform for collective action (Stam 2009, Helms 2013, Tripp 2016). For instance, Yuval-Davis (1997) analyses the experience of the Argentinian Mothers of the Disappearing Children to illustrate how motherhood became a common field of activism not as a 'women-only issue' but the promotion of the antimilitarism campaign. Consequently, women have contested the mainstream narrative of the 'irresolvable nature' of the conflict and explored the potential of interethnic solidarity. Moreover, the shared aim to confront this lopsided gendered order and the structures that perpetuate violence allows women to establish long term alliances by seeking not only the promotion of women's rights, but a comprehensive agenda of human rights and equality.

Finally, women-to-women diplomacy is driven by the common goal of gender equality as a key aspect of peace building on the concept of equal peace or gender-just peace. Björkdahl and Selimovic (2016) argue that introducing a gender dimension in the analysis of positive peace not only broaden the conceptualisation of peace itself but the scope of peace agents. Likewise, Björkdahl (2012) aims at the transformation of gender relations and the enjoyment of women's human rights as a precondition for peace.

Research Design

I combine a conceptual and theoretical discussion with a case study of how the work of women's organisations in Georgia illustrate the opportunities of peacebuilding in a frozen conflict setting and the concept of women-to-women diplomacy⁷. The aim of this research is not to directly test existing theoretical framework, meaning that the case is exploratory and instrumental without the motivation to identify a causal explanation towards a clear, predefined outcome (ie: "peace") (Baxter and Snyder 2008). Instead, the empirical investigation is a so-called plausibility probe, which serves as a 'preliminary study of a relatively untested theory to determine whether more intensive and laborious testing is warranted' (George and Bennett 2005).

The sources of this research encompass literature review in combination with original information collected through participant observation in Georgia between the 8th of March and the 22nd of April, 2016 based on a work-placement at the Women's Information Centre in Tbilisi. This experience gave me the opportunity to know first-hand the strategies developed by this organisation in order to address the agenda of women, peace and security and to get insight of the women's movement in general, the opportunities and challenges in the role of women as peacebuilders. The information was also collected through 23 semi-structured interviews conducted in two rounds of fieldwork, the first one in the period previously mentioned and the second, from June 4 to 20, 2019.

As an active participant observer, I was able to take part in the daily activities, interactions and events as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of the organisation's routines (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, Hintz and Milan 2010). Furthermore, by participating in conferences, workshops and by assisting the organisation with specific tasks I got more insight of the organisational dynamics, the relationship with other strategic actors. The information was recorded in field notes. In exploratory cases, such as this study, participant observation contributed a comprehensive approach to my unit of analysis – women's peace initiatives- and the different factors influencing them such as the dynamics of the conflict in itself, the structure for civil society interventions in that specific setting as well as the social dynamics bounding women's participation.

The semi-structured interviews took place mostly in Tbilisi, one interview in Kutaisi and four in Gori. The interviewees can be broadly classified in five categories. In the first category consisting of representatives or members of women's organisations and activists, I interviewed Women's Information Centre – WIC-, Fund Sukhumi and IDP Women's Association 'Consent'.

These organisations have been working on the agenda of women, peace and security in Georgia. These interviews gave me the opportunity to understand the goals and means of the organisation to play a role in peacebuilding, further, the dialogue with women leaders IDP themselves provided a personal narrative of the conflict and women's agency in Georgia. These dialogues were also critical to shed a light on the political constraints and the value of local initiatives to transform everyday realities. The second category were research centres including Taso Foundation, Caucasus Institute for Peace and the Institute for the Study of Peace and Nationalism. In the third category, I interviewed representatives of international organisations in the form of the European Union Monitoring Mission and UN Women in order to explore their role in the conflicts and their insights on women's role in peacebuilding. These interviews allowed me to identify the role of women's involvement in peacebuilding in the agenda setting and to identify to what extent local initiatives can impact formal processes. The fourth category focused on international non-governmental organisations, where interviews with project leaders of 'Kvinna till Kvinna' and 'The Institute for War and Peace reporting' provided another view of the conflict and analysis in the field of people to people diplomacy. Fifth, I conducted interviews with public officers such as delegates from the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, which is the main institutional actor in the ongoing negotiation with the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, were crucial to analyse the challenges in terms of conflict resolution and the extent to which women's rights and participation are considered in the agenda setting. In addition, the dialogue with public servants at the National Defence Academy provided important elements for an historical and political analysis.

Peacebuilding and Women-to-women Diplomacy in Georgia

The empirical section begins with a background of women's roles in Georgia as this is an important precondition for the space offered for potential women-to-women diplomatic efforts after conflicts had begun. This is followed by an analysis of strategies developed by women's organisations such as promoting inter-community dialogue, women's agency and creating a bridge to official diplomacy. These strategies illustrate the idea of women-to-women diplomacy and the aims that shape partnership among women from different sectors in Georgia and Abkhazia. The final analysis considers also the possible limits of women-to-women diplomacy in this context including problems brought up by the interviewees.

The Space for Women in Politics and Peace

During the state formation of independent Georgia, women's political viewpoints and feminist activism were encouraged (Ivecovic 2008) and women's rights were placed in Georgia's state building agenda as a crucial theme towards their goal of adopting western values. According to Chkheidze (2010), the advancement of women and gender, and their mainstreaming in policies were some of the objectives of the post-communist governments. However, the challenges of the institutional design, the economic recovery, and the emerging conflicts were prioritised while a progressive leadership and commitment to women's rights stayed solely in the field of rhetoric.

Nevertheless, the 1990s was crucial for the rise of women's organisations which acknowledged the potential of their activism and networking to develop alternative mechanisms of participation. In this context, the 'Organisation of Women of Georgia for Peace and Live' established in 1994 and primarily integrated by Abkhaz IDP women was one of the first initiatives oriented to engage women in active participation first in humanitarian assistance and then in conflict resolution. In 1997, this organisation adopted its current name Fund Sukhumi. Likewise, IDP Women's Association 'Consent', established in 1996 was created with the initial purpose of protecting the rights of conflict-affected communities, particularly IDP women. However, they soon realised that promoting women's agency was a crucial component not only in the process of integral reparation and in overcoming victimhood but in the processes of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. IDP women were founders of some of the organisations studied in this research. However, as the organisations evolved, the scope of members was expanded in order to implement more comprehensive projects incorporating rural women, students, young women, entrepreneurs, among others.

From the very beginning, initiatives of women's organisations made clear that their work and goals were not based on exclusive national aims. On the contrary, they have led a multi-ethnic dialogue towards peace and stability and have promoted regional initiatives based on the idea of creating transnational solidarity for conflict resolution. Examples are the 'Caucasus Forum'⁸ (Akaba 2012) and the regional platform 'Women of the Caucasus' which activism soon transitioned towards more politically-oriented issues and provided clear evidence of how networks of active women from the South Caucasus 'serve a dual purpose, pooling women's rights expertise and serving as a platform for peacebuilding and dialogue' (Peace Direct 2015). The effect of this activism made women's organisations aware about the possibility to escalate their initiatives to the official negotiation table and to present consonant and contextualised strategies to decision makers with regards to the protection of conflict-affected communities.

Promoting Inter-community Dialogue

In the context of protracted conflicts, ethnic and religious differences as identity markers are portrayed as exclusive and therefore shape the narratives and stereotypes that perpetuate the idea of the enemy. Women's organisations have worked in reconciling these narratives by facilitating dialogues across ethnic divides in Georgia and Abkhazia.

The initiatives on inter community dialogue led by IDP Women's Association 'Consent' help illustrate this argument. One of the most remarkable initiatives in this field is the Peace Camps Project launched in 1996 which gathered hundreds of youth and children from Georgia, Abkhazia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Around fifteen camps took place from 1996 to 2007 facilitating the assistance of children and youth in need of urgent rehabilitation and also contributed a common goal for cooperation among the women organisations and other NGO involved in the project. Although, the impact of this type of initiatives is hard to measure, as Consent's representative argues, these personal encounters expand the possibility of knowledge and access to information for the participants, some of them already in strategic positions among their communities. Thus, the creation of individual relationships influence the transformation of narratives.

We can tell you that has been impact at least on keeping the network alive, these camps give them opportunities to be open to the other side and to keep some relations, to have information which is necessary to make decisions⁹.

Inter-community dialogue has been the platform for Consent to design and implement projects aimed at improving women's participation and advocacy for peace. Since 2010, Constant in partnership with International NGO has implemented projects aimed at strengthening women's participation in peacebuilding in the South Caucasus with peace activists from 20 communities in the region¹⁰. However, the political dynamics in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have shaped the operational conditions of partner organisations and therefore the sustainability of these strategies. While the intercommunity dialogues with South Ossetia are currently suspended, the dialogue with women organisations in Abkhazia faces several challenges including lack of security guarantees, in fact, 'organisations are unable to attend meetings with counterparts on other sides of the ABLs instead requiring third country meetings' (Kvinna till Kvinna 2018).

The socio-political context in Abkhazia disenfranchise women's organisations initiatives on building coalitions across border lines. In this matter, Consent IDP representative underscores how persistent psychical barriers limit possibilities of cooperation despite the fact of sharing common needs and agendas.

We have common priorities with organizations in Abkhazia. It is possible to do some meetings, discuss about future perspectives and main challenges because some challenges are common like human security, violence against women, there is also a challenge about more and more use of drugs ... so there are many factors that rise concern among women from both sides. The problem is that to organize coalition working on these issues there are physical distinctions ... The absence of common physical space very much influence opportunities to work together in such issues, because even communications are not very safe but also to have common actions you need physical presence, it's time to have meetings in a third territory but is very expensive¹¹.

Fund Sukhumi has also led several initiatives towards inter-community dialogue. Its approach was preparing the parties separately throughout a process of internal discussions and round tables concerning conflict origins, actors and personal experiences that took place simultaneously in Georgia and Abkhazia. These discussions were recorded and then exchanged to be analysed among the parties. According to Fund Sukhumi's member, direct knowledge of the other's view of the conflict was the point of departure to prepare the personal meeting.

It was really really difficult to see for us and for them as well. Even though at the beginning it was a huge resistance to everything that was said because we just faced the reality that people were blaming us in these recordings, there was a lot of mutual blaming. But at the end, it was very important because you couldn't start relationships without knowing what people feel, right?¹²

Consequently, the first personal meeting took place and allow participants to draft cooperation strategies, building on the topics that both Georgians and Abkhaz have identified as common interests. One of these strategies was the research and joint draft of policy papers on people's attitudes about conflict transformation and peacebuilding and the means by which women could influence these processes. Beyond the agenda of health, children, and other social affairs conventionally viewed as 'women's issues', women decided to advance their participation through a human security approach (Gamakharia 2015). The findings of these researches and consequent strategies illustrate women's search for different channels of participation in peacebuilding, as Fund Sukhumi representative argues, the dialogues allow them to think beyond the 'soft agenda' and to aim at participating in policy formulation.

We need to start addressing the problems that societies are facing in everyday life. And we just have to -if this is up to us- address these problems even together. There are so many common problems in conflict divided societies. We just started researching human security problem from a gender perspective. Therefore, we call it, women's human security¹³.

These dialogues have showed participants the cross-border nature of many of their most serious problems such as gender inequality and domestic violence. Further, beyond networking at the level of grassroots organisations, one of the important outcomes of this initiative was the rise of personal relationships among the participants, crucial in breaking the paradigm of ethnic antagonism and the destabilising narrative of 'us-against-them'.

International non-governmental organisations such as Kvinna till Kvinna, Conciliation Resources and the Institute of War and Peace Reporting have facilitated these dialogues both by capacity building and financial support. For instance, the 'Women peace net' introduced by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting built a platform for women leaders involved in peacebuilding. This initiative provided a stage for women to write about issues they wanted to be raised in the frame of the formal negotiations, such as the need for institutional responses against gender based violence. Furthermore, it was critical to challenge propaganda and hate speech. From 2012 to 2015, women shared ideas and were inspired by others' success stories. Furthermore, "new partnerships have been fostered through some ten third-country cross-boundary workshops in Yerevan and Istanbul. Contributors have also produced more than 320 multimedia pieces, including photo and video reports. From a personal dialogue, this initiative became an instrument for political incidence. The lessons learned by this strategy motivated a second phase 'Analytical women peace net' in which journalists were involved in order to gain the skills related to gender sensitive reporting (IWPR 2017).

These experiences are consonant with the idea of women-to-women diplomacy as a common ground to encounter different experiences of the conflict and narratives portrayed as irreconcilable otherwise. However, the disparity of conditions for civil society operation between Georgia and Abkhazia challenges the sustainability of common strategies. Further, security conditions imply that instead of joint activities, the preferable format is 'parallel activities' which are similar in the core objectives but may differ in the range of population involved. The transformation of individual's mind-sets and relationships influence community dynamics, however, these transformations are not observable in the short term and therefore the potential spill-over effect is difficult to measure.

From Experiences of Victimhood to Women's Agency

A core strategy of women's organisations in Georgia have been the focus on promoting women's agency and gender equality as a means to pave the way for meaningful participation in policy making and peacebuilding. An example of this is the work of Consent IDP, who have used the promotion of women's empowerment as a platform for coalition-building across ethnic

divides. The aim has been to transform individuals from the role as 'victims' to fostering the necessary skills to implement community-based strategies of action and subsequent political engagement.

We started from woman to woman, seeing their capacities and needs. I wouldn't say that we have really a women's movement or, I would say that we have a women's movement but more for gender equality and specific issues but not for conflict, but we try to work in coalitions ... Practically all women organizations working in conflict are doing the same: support, promotion, empowerment of women and girls affected by the conflict in different grades, innovation and capability¹⁴.

Since the earliest strategies, Consent IDP realised that a holistic attention to the needs of women affected by the conflict was required, and that directed them to introduce strategies oriented towards their overall empowerment. The projects provide organisational and leadership skills which allow population in conflict affected areas to establish associations as well as help strengthen capacity of NGO in the fields of advocacy, mediation and negotiation¹⁵.

Similarly, Fund Sukhumi' strategies evolved over time from providing women IDP the required skills for 'survival' to developing leadership capacities. To this end, the 'School of Young Women Leaders' was the first initiative developed by Fund Sukhumi to raise women's awareness regarding their rights and how to best protect them. Further, the School carry out trainings on conflict analysis and on the international framework of women's human rights. Women's Information Centre illustrates as well the idea of women's agency as a condition to meaningful participation in peace issues. Recalling her experience, a WIC member argues that the approach of the organisation in its work with conflict affected population has been empowering women and giving them visibility.

The main result working in ABL zones was discovering women leaders, not only women's leaders but we discover the potential of strong women groups, small strong organizations, they have motivation but they don't have information on how to create community organizations ... Now we have a big trust, every time they call us, they ask questions, and ask help, not only ask help, they already have ideas, for us that's more important. They have very good ideas and those ideas concerning not only to economic empowerment but their ideas concern to peacebuilding, for us that's the main result¹⁶.

While the organisations were formed locally, the importance of support from international donors in fostering initiatives on women's agency should not be discounted. Besides providing necessary financial support and capacity building within the organisations, they have also actively helped in the creation of networks at the local and national level. As a result of that, women's organisations have been able to act at different political scenarios and to affect legislation in their interest. Both partnership between the most

established organisations with grassroots as well as the emergence of women leaders at the community level influenced by trainings and leadership programmes have helped strengthening local capacities and facilitated access to both donors and decision makers. However, further efforts are needed to assure sustainability of women's agency initiatives in regions still dependent on Tbilisi-based partners.

Creating a Bridge to Official Diplomacy

Inter-community dialogue and promoting women's empowerment have been crucial themes on the agenda of women's organisations in Georgia and have constituted the platform for cooperation around peacebuilding issues. In the long run, this type of activities could potentially have 'spill-over effects' to also affect more conventional hard security issues and advance the official negotiations. In Georgia, women's movements have sought to promote the transformation of conflict narratives and the need for gender sensitive responses to everyday problems in conflict affected societies included on the agenda within the official peace negotiations. By doing this, the aim was to bridge the divides between official and non-official diplomacy.

Lobbying and advocacy helped creating a space for dialogue with the delegates of the GID and the IPRM. The latter registers more improvements than the political discussion at the GID which can be explained in the strategy of adopting a human security approach to get access to the agenda (Gamakharia 2015b). Women's organisations have also developed comprehensive proposals to address existing situations regarding Georgian and Abkhazian society such as water pollution, mobility and the right of Georgian minority in the de facto territories to receive education in their native language¹⁷.

However, after some initial progress, the format of civil society engagement with GID and IPRM delegates changed in recent years which has led to a reduced active participation of organisations¹⁸. Instead of being allowed to provide input to the GID and IPRM discussion, by 2019 civil society was only invited to informative meetings with delegates after the official sessions had concluded. These interactions are perceived as a matter of formality and not as a real opportunity for organisations to provide inputs to the process. A representative of a women's organisation reflects on this process,

Women's participation is possible, however meaningful participation not yet. For instance, we are invited to meetings with GID delegates, they are coming twice a year, convene events where they report to civil society, they can always say that we had opportunities to receive information and to ask questions, to suggest something but what I am saying is, you know, this is not meaningful participation, we couldn't actually influence. We need more

structural way of involvement. I am not against these kind of wide meetings but if they invited us before the GID in small working groups where we could have possibilities to share concerns, our beneficiaries' concerns because we are working with many women living along the ABL ... So, invite us ... in small groups, not in this big events that are completely politicized¹⁹.

In the same manner, WIC member highlights the importance of developing more consultations with citizens affected by the conflict and the inhabitants of the Administrative Boundary Lines' surrounding areas and coincides in the criticism of the limited opportunities for dialogue offered by the current format of meetings with civil society.

Beyond the context of the GID, it is important to analyse the work of women's organisations in order to be consistently engaged with the broad process of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. To this end, the implementation of Resolution 1325 and the process of monitoring its unfolding have played a key role within the women's movement and in particular within the agenda of the organisations interviewed. Resolution 1325 has been a frame of reference in the design of public policies both at the national and local level. In terms of public diplomacy, it has helped build a bridge between grassroots and governmental processes (Peace Direct 2015). In fact, women's organisations advocacy and involvement in public diplomacy initiatives contribute to the formulation of the National Action Plan 2018–2020 which incorporates specific stipulations on women's involvement through people-to-people diplomacy initiatives²⁰. Currently, organisations such as WIC has prioritised the localisation of the NAP in cooperation with civil society organisations and local governments.

Discussion

The strategies analysed in this research illustrate the opportunities for women-to-women diplomacy as a peacebuilding strategy in the conflicts of Georgia and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Women's organisations have led cooperation across ethnic divides as well as socio-political differences building both on similar experiences of the conflict and common challenges associated with predominant gender roles within the respective communities. The experiences of Fund Sukhumi, Consent IDP and WIC among other organisations in Georgia illustrate paths of mobilisation based on the aims of women's empowerment and gender equality as a key aspect of peace. The combination of these aims as the stepping stone for coalition building is the most salient characteristic in this case and within the concept of women-to-women diplomacy.

Existing literature on women and peacebuilding has analysed women's ability to create alternative arenas for dialogue when formal peace negotiations are taking place and also in post-conflict settings (Anderlini 2007,

Gizelis 2011, Berry 2018). This paper has advanced this discussion by exploring the possibilities of women's activism in frozen or deadlocked conflicts which are less known in the scope of peacebuilding initiatives.

In Georgia, the emphasis by the organisations to first improve women's empowerment and gender equality as a precondition to peacebuilding differ from what the literature have found in Liberia (Gizelis 2011), Rwanda, and Bosnia (Berry 2018). While women's mobilisation in those cases also aimed to increase gender equality in society, this has been argued as being a consequence of the peace movement rather than as a formative cause. It is possible that the frozen conflict setting contributes to downgrade the importance of immediate cessation of hostilities as in those cases, but an interesting feature of my findings is how the promotion of gender equality and peace are mutually re-enforced and define the agenda of women's organisations in Georgia.

The contribution of the strategies focused on promoting inter-community dialogue and women's agency can be analysed in terms of conflict transformation. The inter-ethnic encounters developed by the organisations included in this study have allowed women participants to become story tellers of different perspectives of the conflict and by doing so, they have paved the way for a spill-over effect of conciliatory narratives in the community level. However, the sustainability of these initiatives and the guarantees for women's organisations to operate are still challenged. There are political barriers for women-to-women diplomacy to succeed in its aim of straightforward inclusion in peacebuilding efforts. The barriers imposed by the de facto government actors in the breakaway regions control and restrict the work of NGOs by introducing new legal hurdles to international cooperation and fund management. The situation is particularly difficult in South Ossetia where many organisations have been closed. Although Abkhazia faces less restrictions, the lack of security guarantees for NGOs keep constraining the possibilities of networking (Kvinna till Kvinna 2018).

With regards to the strategies aimed at creating a bridge to official diplomacy, the experience of organisations analysed in this paper illustrate how women-to-women diplomacy has also contributed in the context of formal negotiations by providing a better informed view of social dynamics of the conflict-affected population, particularly within ABL zones. Therefore, a consequence of women-to-women diplomacy is providing a wider understanding of the causes of the conflict. Despite the assumption that women should primarily participate in discussions on social issues, the so-called 'soft agenda', the experiences of women's organisations in Georgia show how women-to-women diplomacy can provide space to also address 'hard' issues such as the return of refugees, economic recovery in ABL's surrounding areas and the promotion of a human security approach in the framework of the IPRM (Gamakharia 2015).

Differences in institutional and legal frameworks between Georgia and Abkhazia have limited the implementation of women-to-women diplomacy strategies. Consent IDP member reflects on the impact of this disparity,

To make some common actions, you need to have not only common needs but also a possibility to make advocacy commonly and to influence your government. As soon as women say they are doing coalitions with us they may have some problems, there are strong organizations there who try to fight for women's rights but it's more difficult than here because Georgia has a gender equality plan, has signed a NAP, CEDAW, Istanbul Convention, so we have legal instruments to work with the government. Abkhazia doesn't²¹.

The lack of legal and institutional framework in Abkhazia implies that security of participants cannot be guaranteed either. With regards to this issue, WIC member reflects on how despite of important improvements in trust building measures, the participation in peace initiatives can be accompanied by risks.

I am sure Abkhazian women are more interested, aware of political situation ... But political issues influence all of them, life of women, not only women but civil society organizations in general. Because they want to communicate with us but sometimes we can't because they have control from the government ... When we have people-to-people meetings they can be very open but after the meeting when they come back in Abkhazia sometimes they have problems²².

IDP Consent member shares this concern arguing that 'people-to-people diplomacy is very important but fragile in this political context'²³. However, women's organisation maintain their commitment to these strategies since their experiences have indicated how important women's interactions are for fostering an open space for dialogue towards peacebuilding.

Social attitudes regarding women's roles in public affairs have also negatively impact women-to-women diplomacy initiatives. Despite the evolution in 'gender speech' and the adoption of international instruments for the promotion of women's human rights during the last decade, there are still restrictions for women in Georgia and in particular the conflict zones to influence decision-makers, either at the community level or even more within high politics.

Finally, the sustainability of these strategies have been highly dependent on international funding, and therefore been sensitive to donor's agenda. While interviewees agree on the importance of prioritising long-term initiatives as well as investing in grassroots organisations, the implementation of this has not always been successful. Although important efforts have been made to help create organisational capacity at the regional level, it is the established organisations based in Tbilisi or other main cities that maintain the role as the primary proponents of projects.

Conclusion

This paper has identified a set of strategies developed by women's organisations in the conflicts between Georgia and the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia: promoting inter-community dialogue, women's agency and creating a bridge to official diplomacy women's agency in peacebuilding. By drawing on insights about these peace initiatives, this study has outlined theoretical arguments in three main areas. First, it has addressed the particular challenges of peacebuilding in frozen conflict. These are situations without large-scale armed activity, but where the polarised positions of the belligerents make official negotiations difficult. Therefore, initiatives aimed at the transformation of narratives and unequal relations as the ones described in this paper contributes new empirical evidences to existing literature focused on societal change as a way to intervene this kind of conflict settings (Coleman 2006, Bar Tal 2013).

Second, this study has advanced an argument that people-to-people diplomacy may be particularly advantageous as a peacebuilding strategy in this kind of conflict. The strategies described build on the idea of conflict transformation since they are primarily intended to challenge conflict narratives and restore trust at a low level between conflict-affected individuals (Darby and Mac Ginty 2000). The third theoretical contribution has been introducing the concept of women-to-women diplomacy as a peacebuilding strategy with great potential in these settings. Women's activism may provide a space for interaction across enemy lines while the projects launched are aimed at addressing the roots of polarisation by humanising the other and introducing gender equality as a common agenda of cooperation.

The concept of women-to-women diplomacy illustrated in this study through the experiences of women's organisations contributes to the theoretical discussions on gender-just peace (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2016). Further, this study illustrates how the mobilisation towards the promotion of women's agency and participation in the social and political spheres as well as the common goal of gender equality as a key aspect of peace can shape platforms for dialogue and cooperation across not only ethnic but socio-political divides.

Scholar's work on women and peace have also analysed the comprehensive role that women play in peacebuilding (Manchanda 2001). My findings reflect that argument in terms of women's organisations agenda and the actors engaged in their strategies. For instance, by adopting a human security approach in the peacebuilding agenda, women's organisations in Georgia have challenged essentialist assumptions that women can only address certain topics within the peace agenda. This approach has been one of their main contributions both to address everyday challenges within the communities located along the ABL and to get access to GID and IPRM.

The experiences of victimhood have not been embodied as identity marker but have helped women acknowledge the existing narratives across ethnic lines and to recognise similar patterns in traditional gender roles and challenges when it comes to becoming more influential in society. The personal experiences of women have been the entry point in this kind of dialogues which have facilitated confidence building at the early stage of the project and latterly have helped develop long term bonds of cooperation.

To conclude, this study has started to explore the theoretical underpinnings of women's involvement in peacebuilding through community based initiatives. As shown from the cases of women's organisations presented in this study, the agenda of intercommunity dialogue and women's empowerment may facilitate progress in a frozen conflict in the form of everyday practices and transformation of narratives. However, women-to-women diplomacy in practice also experience challenges in the cases of Georgia and the breakaway territories in the form of disparity of legal and institutional across border lines, security concerns related to political stands as well as the limited channels to address official negotiation. Consequently, much of the activism has been directed towards promoting gender equality as a precondition to peace rather than direct peacebuilding in a traditional sense.

The strategies analysed in this paper are described in terms of conflict transformation than in conflict resolution which make the 'result' difficult to measure at this stage. Therefore, further research is needed in order to track the long-term effectiveness of these approaches or how they can best be implemented to produce social transformation and sustainable progress towards equal-peace.

Notes

1. Established in the aftermath of the 2008 war in South Ossetia with the purpose to verify the conditions to maintain the security in the region and integrated by the European Union, United Nations, OSCE, United States, Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Geneva International Discussions also seek the accomplishment of the commitments related to the use of force and the protection of human rights for people living in the occupied territories.
2. The IPRM was created in 2009 as the operational branch of the Geneva International Discussions, designed to manage to ensure stability on the ground by avoiding incidents and preventing criminal activities as well as guaranteeing delivery of humanitarian aid to conflict affected population settled by the Administrative Boundaries Lines (ABL).
3. According to Boutros Boutros Ghali in the Agenda for Peace, peacebuilding takes place in the aftermath of international war, 'it may take the form of concrete cooperative projects which link two or more countries in a mutually beneficial undertaking that can not only contribute to economic and social development but also enhance the confidence that is so fundamental to peace'. Report of the Secretary-General, 1992.

4. While most conflict data collection focus on the occurrence of conflict and on violent cases, the Conflict Barometer produced by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research list non-violent 'latent' conflict situations, in addition to ongoing violent conflicts.
5. Lederach identifies three levels of actors which are needed simultaneously to achieve the goal of sustainable peace. The first level is represented by leaders and policymakers, the second by academics, opinion leaders, and representatives of key sectors of society who can influence decision making processes, and the third is constituted by grassroots leaders and organisations.
6. Interview Catherine Fearon, Tbilisi, 12 June 2019.
7. A case study can be described as a study of a single case – defined as a spatially demarcated phenomenon, or unit, observed at a certain time, consisting of one or more (within-case observations) – for the purpose of refining theory, clarifying terminology, or explaining 'a larger class of cases' i.e. a population (Gerring 2007).
8. Network of civil society leaders from Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Chechenia.
9. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, 11 June 2019.
10. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, 14 May 2016.
11. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, 11 June 2019.
12. Interview Fund Sukhumi, Kutaisi, 4 May 2016.
13. Interview Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, 14 June 2019.
14. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, 11 June 2019.
15. For instance, the project 'Finding Innovative Solutions for conflict affected communities' illustrates the comprehensive approach of the organisation.
16. Interview WIC, Tbilisi, 12 June 2019.
17. For instance, since 1 September 2015, the classes in Georgian language have been officially excluded from the schools of Gali district, occupied territory of Abkhazia. More information is available in <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/1111/Georgian-Language-Banned-from-Gali-Schools>.
18. Between first and second round of fieldwork differences in the dynamics of participation of women in this format.
19. Interview Tbilisi, 14 June 2019.
20. Target 1.3 Inclusion of IDP and conflict affected women, youth and women's organisations in the peacebuilding process is increased, and people-to-people diplomacy initiatives are supported (NAP 2018–2020).
21. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, 11 June 2019.
22. Interview WIC, Tbilisi, 12 June 2019.
23. Interview Consent IDP, Tbilisi, April 2016.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Vetenskapsrådet [2013-06334]; Vetenskapsrådet [2015-01756].

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