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Ethnic Conflict and Forced Displacement: Narratives of Azeri IDP and Refugee Women from the Nagorno-Karabakh War

By Mehrangiz Najafizadeh¹

Abstract

The region that now constitutes the Republic of Azerbaijan has witnessed a lengthy history of conflict between Azeris and ethnic Armenians living in Azerbaijan. This longstanding conflict has had severe consequences for Azerbaijan, and Azeri women have been especially affected as hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes and now live as refugees or as internally displaced persons (IDPs). In this article, I examine Armenian-Azeri ethnic conflict and the plight of Azeri IDP/refugee women both in social historical context and through fieldwork that I have been conducting in Azerbaijan. I first establish the broader sociopolitical context by providing a social historical overview of this ethnic conflict, including the Nagorno-Karabakh War, which began in the late 1980s and which has continued under cease-fire since 1994. I then elaborate the qualitative field research that I have been conducting in Azerbaijan to explore issues related to the forced migration of Azeri women who became displaced as a result of this ethnic conflict. Through compiling narratives and oral histories, I provide Azeri refugee and internally displaced women a “voice” and I capture, through their own thoughts and words, the essence of war and of living in displacement, the essence of the difficult and challenging life experiences that they confront and the ways in which they cope with displacement.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, women, refugees, oral history

Introduction

Azeris and Armenians share a lengthy history of ethnic-based territorial conflict. The most recent episode of this on-going ethnic friction began in the late 1980s and subsequently erupted into a full-scale war in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent districts within the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. In this article, I focus on Azeri women–refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)–from the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Although there is an extensive body of published research and commentary pertaining to various aspects of the war, which has continued under cease-fire since 1994, there is no substantial sociological literature in English that provides detailed accounts and insights into the experiences of *Azeri IDP/refugee women*. My research, in turn, is especially timely and significant as I examine IDP/refugee women’s experiences and their perceptions of the war and of forced displacement as expressed through the women’s own words, through their own personal narratives and oral histories.

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In the *first section* of this article, I set the broader context with an overview of Nagorno-Karabakh, a social historical account of Armenian-Azeri ethnic conflict, and a review of significant events in the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Given this social historical backdrop, in the *second section* of this article I focus specifically on fieldwork that I have been conducting with IDP/refugee women in Azerbaijan, and I employ Azeri IDP/refugee women's narratives and oral histories that I compiled to explore how women perceive the war and their forced displacement and how they deal with their continuing plight as IDPs/refugees.

Section One: Nagorno-Karabakh and the Social Historical Context

Geographic and Demographic Overview

Central to Armenian-Azeri ethnic conflict is the Nagorno-Karabakh region located within the southwestern borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (See Map-1 below.) Referred to in English as Nagorno-Karabakh, "Nagorno" is a Russian word meaning mountainous, and "Karabakh" is an Azeri word meaning black garden (fertile or fruitful land). The Azeri name is Daghliq Karabakh (or Daghliq Qarabagh), and Azeris frequently refer to this region simply as Karabakh. Approximately 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers) in size, Nagorno-Karabakh is mountainous, surrounded by lower plains used for agriculture. Indeed, prior to the war, the broader region accounted for about one-third of Azerbaijan's agricultural land. As an enclave within the Republic of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh is separated from Armenia on the west by the Azerbaijani districts of Kelbajar, Lachin, Gubadly, and Zangilan.



Map-1. Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan. Source: Euronews (2012).

Although formerly part of the Persian Empire, Azerbaijan's current borders were established as the result of two wars between Persia and Czarist Russia (1804-1813 and 1826-1828) and two treaties (the Gulistan Treaty of 1813 and the Turkmanchay Treaty of 1828) which included the region of Nagorno-Karabakh within the borders of Azerbaijan. In the 1830s, an

estimated 34,000 Azeris populated Nagorno-Karabakh, compared to an estimated 19,000 ethnic Armenians. By 1845, Azeris numbered 62,000, whereas Armenians numbered only 30,000. However, in subsequent years, Russia encouraged additional migration of Armenians, and the proportion of ethnic Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh increased significantly.

Throughout, although most Armenians have been Christians and most Azeris have been Muslims, the various conflicts have been fueled by *ethnic-based* political, nationalistic, and territorial issues, rather than by religion. Indeed, Armenian and Azeri ethnic conflict existed in Azerbaijan *prior* to the Soviet era, *during* the Soviet era in which religion was repressed, and *following* the collapse of the USSR. Further, it is crucial to emphasize that Armenian-Azeri conflict is colored by intense emotions and cultural and historical claims and that each ethnic group views and interprets these cultural and historical claims through their own particular perspectives (Altstadt, 1992, pp.15-28; Batalden & Batalden, 1993; Dudwick, 1993; Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1992, p.vii; Rasidzade, 2011a, 2011b; Swietochowski, 1995, pp.10-12; Tchilingirian, 1998, 1999; van der Leeuw, 2000, pp.90-103; Yamskov, 1991, p.650).

Armenian-Azeri Conflict

Whilst still part of Czarist Russia, conflict between Armenians and Azeris, including clashes in the Nagorno-Karabakh city of Shusha, became quite intense in 1905 and 1906, with estimates ranging from 3,100 to 10,000 Armenians and Azeris killed and with 128 Armenian and 158 Azeri communities destroyed (Swietochowski, 1995, pp.39-41; van der Leeuw, 2000, pp.145-149).

Following the 1917 revolution in Czarist Russia, Azerbaijan gained independence and established a Democratic Republic on May 28, 1918. Yet, Armenian-Azeri ethnic tensions erupted again, with thousands of casualties on both sides between 1918 and 1920. In 1919, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh initially accepted Azerbaijani governance, but by March 22, 1920, Armenian-led ethnic conflict reemerged. Shortly thereafter, the Bolshevik invasion and occupation of Azerbaijan brought the fall of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan on April 28, 1920, and the establishment of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Two years later, the three Soviet Socialist Republics—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia—were combined into the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. With Azerbaijan now fully under communist governance and with the intervention of Joseph Stalin, the extended period of ethnic strife was eventually resolved on July 7, 1923. Through negotiations, the Nagorno-Karabakh region remained within Azerbaijan, but it was given the special designation of “Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast” (NKAO), and its borders were intentionally redefined to include as many ethnic Armenian communities as possible (Cornell, 1997; Dragadze, 1989; Hovannisian, 1971, 1993; Najafizadeh & Mennerick, 2003; Rasidzade, 2011a, 2011b; Swietochowski, 1985, pp.41-46, p.160; Yamskov, 1991, p.644).

For most of the Soviet era, Armenian-Azeri tensions remained relatively suppressed in part because of the broader Soviet ideology that emphasized the primacy of a unified “Soviet identity” to the detriment of ethnic or other identities. In 1936, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was abolished, and Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia again became distinct Socialist Republics within the Soviet Union. In 1945, Armenia requested that Stalin transfer the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, and in 1948, 50,000 ethnic Azeris were deported from their homes in Armenia. Yet, overall, ethnic tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh remained relatively dormant until ethnic Armenians initiated petitions and other efforts in 1966 and again in 1987 to claim Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh argued that the Azerbaijani government did not provide adequate economic resources, while Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh alleged discrimination by the ethnic Armenians. Furthermore, significant demographic changes also occurred during this period. Whereas the number of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh had increased significantly in the 1800s and early 1900s, the trend was reversed between 1921 and 1987 as ethnic Armenians *declined* from 94 percent to 74 percent of the population and Azeris *increased* from 6 percent to almost 25 percent of the population. Such dramatic demographic shifts did not go unnoticed. Rather, Armenians became increasingly concerned that this trend might eventually lead to the demise of ethnic Armenian predominance in Nagorno-Karabakh, and therefore members of the Armenian intelligentsia again called for the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (Altstadt, 1992, pp.128-129; Batalden & Batalden, 1993; Swietochowski, 1995, pp.181-182; Yamskov, 1991, pp.644-654, 1992, p.135, p.138).

The Nagorno-Karabakh War: 1988-1994

Armenian-Azeri ethnic hostilities escalated in the late 1980s, and in January 1988, groups of ethnic Azeris were forced to leave Armenia. By February 1988, ethnic tensions had increased even more as large Armenian demonstrations occurred in the Armenian capital of Yerevan and the Nagorno-Karabakh capital of Khankandi (also called Stepanakert). On February 20, 1988, the governing body of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast voted to secede from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan and to become part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia. This resulted in a fierce reaction from the Azeris, and on February 22, ethnic Armenians fired on Azeri protestors and killed the first two Azeris of the war. In turn, anti-Armenian demonstrations, often referred to as the "Sumgayit pogroms," erupted in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgayit on February 27-29 resulting in the deaths of at least 26 ethnic Armenians and 6 Azeris. In March, Central Committee General Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow denied the NKAO's request for unification with Armenia, and in June-July the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium in Moscow similarly denied the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic's endorsement of the NKAO request. Between September and November 1988, ethnic clashes escalated substantially, and Azeris began to flee from the NKAO as well as from Armenia, thus marking the beginning of the largest forced migration of Azeris. In June and July 1989, mass anti-Armenian demonstrations, reflecting popular anger at the calls by ethnic Armenians for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, were held in the Azerbaijani capital city of Baku and many ethnic Armenians were forced to flee their homes in Baku and elsewhere in Azerbaijan. Indeed, during the period of 1988-1990, an estimated 167,000 to 300,000 ethnic Azeris were deported or otherwise forced to abandon their homes in Armenia, and an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan were subjected to forced migration (Cornell, 1997, 1999, pp.13-30; Dragadze, 1989; Heydarov, 2009; Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1992, p.5, 1994, pp.58-59; Melander, 2001; Rieff, 1997; Swietochowski 1995, p.196).

January 1990 marked the beginning of the most dramatic events of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict as the Presidium of the USSR's Supreme Soviet ruled the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia to be illegal and as the Soviet leadership declared a state of emergency in the NKAO and along the Azerbaijan/Armenia border. On January 13-15, 1990, Anti-Armenian demonstrations in Baku led to an estimated 90 deaths, and more ethnic Armenians fled Azerbaijan. The latter months of 1991 also brought dramatic changes. On August 30, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union; on

November 26, Azerbaijan annulled the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh; and on December 10, the ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh again voted to secede from Azerbaijan and to form the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) (Batalden & Batalden, 1993; Hofmann, 2009; Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1992, pp.5-10; Melander, 2001; Rasidzade, 2011a, 2011b; Swietochowski 1995, pp.193-210).

On January 6, 1992, the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament, dominated by ethnic Armenians, formally declared independence from Azerbaijan. And although neither the government of Armenia nor any other government recognized the declaration of independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, the long-simmering ethnic conflict quickly expanded into a full-fledged war with ethnic Armenians receiving both Armenian and Russian material and military support. On February 25-26, Armenians—assisted by the 366th Mechanized Infantry Regiment of the Russian military—brutally attacked the community of Khojaly in Nagorno-Karabakh, populated by roughly 7,000 Azeris, killing 613 Azeris including 106 women, 83 children, and 79 elderly Azeris. Over 1,200 Azeris were taken prisoner (150 still remain missing), and the remainder fled for their lives. The “ethnic cleansing” of Khojaly continues to be widely referred to by Azeris and by independent international observers as the “Khojaly Massacre” or “Khojaly Genocide” because of the mass killing and brutal mutilation of Azeri civilian families including children. Fighting continued, and on May 8-9, ethnic Armenians seized control of the major Nagorno-Karabakh city of Shusha and then the neighboring district of Lachin on May 18, 1992, thereby opening a road between Nagorno-Karabakh and the Republic of Armenia. Fighting raged on in 1993 and resulted in the largest forced displacement of Azeris of the war as ethnic Armenians with support from the Republic of Armenia military gained control of other Azerbaijani districts adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh including the district of Kelbajar on April 2, Aghdam on July 23, Fizuli and Jabrayil on August 23, Gubadly on August 31, and Zangilan on October 29, 1993. (See Map-2 below.) Despite four major efforts at mediation between 1991 and 1994, and despite United Nations Security Council Resolutions approved on April 30, July 29, October 14, and November 11, 1993 demanding Armenian withdrawal from the occupied lands, the fighting continued through January and February 1994, and it was not until May 12, 1994, that a fifth attempt at mediation culminated in officials from the Republic of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Republic of Azerbaijan signing a cease-fire (Atun, 2011; Cornell, 1999, pp.31-44; Hedarov, 2009; Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1992, pp.19-24, 1994, pp.8-50; Kazimirov, 1996; Mooradian & Druckman, 1999; Muslum, 2007; Suleymanov, 2007; van der Leeuw, 2000, pp.154-184).



Map-2. Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent Azerbaijan Districts of Kelbajar, Lachin, Gubadly, Zangilan, Jabrayil, Fizuli, and Aghdam affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Source: The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2011).

To date, the war has caused economic damage estimated in excess of US\$53.5 billion, and Armenian forces continue to occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region as well as the seven adjacent Azerbaijani districts, encompassing roughly twenty percent of all land in Azerbaijan. And while reports of the human toll of the war from 1988 to 1994 vary, an estimated 20,000 Azeris were killed, 50,000 were wounded or injured, 5,000 are still missing, and 750,000 to one million Azeris were forced from their homes in Armenia and from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven adjacent districts within Azerbaijan (Heydarov, 2009; Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1994, pp.58-59; IDMC, 2010; Kazimirov, 1996; Najafizadeh, 2007, 2010; Najafizadeh & Mennerick, 2003; Rasidzade, 2011a; Rieff, 1997).

Despite the cease-fire of 1994 and subsequent ongoing international efforts—including efforts of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the OSCE Minsk Group with Russia, France, and the United States as co-chairs—to negotiate a permanent resolution, the Nagorno-Karabakh ethnic territorial dispute remains a “frozen conflict” or “no war, no peace” as hundreds of thousands of Azeris who experienced forced migration continue to live as displaced persons in rural regions and in cities throughout Azerbaijan (see, for example: Barry, 2011; Ciobanu, 2008; de Waal, 2010; Fall, 2006; Hill, 2010; Kapitonenko, 2009; Khankishiyeva 2011; Mooradian & Druckman, 1999; OSCE, July 12, 2011, December 6, 2011; Ozkan, 2008; Rasidzade, 2011c; Sawyer, 2007; The Economist, 2011; Tokluoglu, 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2009; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2010).

Thus, the Nagorno-Karabakh War—with its immense brutality, massive loss of human life, and catastrophic forced displacement—has been ingrained into the collective memory of all Azeris and its impact continues at the forefront in Azerbaijan as the twenty-year observance of the cease-fire approaches. Nagorno-Karabakh is an almost daily topic on Azeri television and radio and in Azeri newspapers, a subject of study in public school textbooks, the central theme in numerous Azeri literary and poetic writings, a frequent topic of conversation among families and

friends, the center-piece of memorials and public observances, and a non-ceasing theme in nationalistic and political discussions and speeches by Azerbaijani political figures and government officials. And throughout Azerbaijan, monuments—commemorating the “Khojaly Massacre” and honoring all Azeris who lost their lives in the war—serve as constant symbolic reminders of the brutality of war and of human suffering. Nagorno-Karabakh continues both as a vibrant *nationalistic issue* and as a vibrant *emotional issue* in Azerbaijan, as Azeris remain determined to reclaim Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent districts so that Azeri IDPs can return to their homelands and Azerbaijan can become “whole” again.

Putting a Human Face on the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Azeri Women and Forced Migration

Fieldwork Methodology: Narratives and Oral Histories of IDP/Refugee Women in Azerbaijan

As elaborated thus far in this article, social historical and statistical data provide a valuable context. However, in order to put a human face on the Nagorno-Karabakh War and its magnitude and lasting impact on people’s lives, in the remainder of this article, I focus specifically on the research that I have been conducting, between 2009 and 2012, among Azeri IDP/refugee women. *These women constitute seventy-one percent* of those Azeris who were forcibly displaced, and after almost twenty years of displacement large numbers *still live at the poverty line*. Further, despite continuing financial assistance and other efforts by the government to improve living conditions for IDP/refugees, of the roughly 600,000 Azeris who currently live in conditions of “temporary” displacement, *an estimated 400,000 still live in overcrowded, substandard “temporary” housing* such as converted schools, dormitories, and abandoned buildings, while roughly 120,000 have moved during the past several years from IDP/refugee “tent camps” and similar “temporary” housing into government-constructed settlements (see, for example: Hasanov, 2012; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2010, 2011, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2012; President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 2012).

Indeed, Azeri IDP/refugee women share certain experiences associated with having been uprooted from their homes and communities and with confronting physical, economic, social, and psychological hardships of forced displacement. Yet, these women also have varied personal and familial backgrounds, and their own particular experiences associated with the war and with displacement also may vary. Therefore, Azeri IDP/refugee women are not a homogeneous group, but rather reflect diversity. Two related points should be noted.

First, despite patriarchal ideology that has long been a salient element in Azeri culture, significant changes did occur during the Soviet era as the government integrated women into both the educational system and the labor force and as many Azeri women assumed important public roles in addition to their traditional roles within the family. Similarly, many Azeri IDP/refugee women were highly educated and occupied major positions as physicians, academics, teachers, cooperative leaders, and managers in their home communities *prior* to displacement. These women brought these same attributes with them as IDPs/refugees, and some were able to acquire employment in their newfound communities. However, more often, IDP/refugee women either were only able to find lower-level employment or remained unemployed, while still others gained income through work in the informal economy. *Second*, given that many husbands and sons of IDP/refugee women were killed, continue to be missing in

action, or became physically disabled because of the war, and other IDP/refugee men remained unemployed or sought employment in Russia or in other neighboring countries because of the economic decline in Azerbaijan immediately after independence, significant numbers of IDP/refugee women—regardless of educational level or prior occupations—have become the core of their families and a major or the sole economic provider.

To gain greater insights into the plight of Azeri IDP/refugee women, I used qualitative interdisciplinary humanistic methodologies to conduct dialogues and to compile narratives and oral histories that focused on the fundamental research question: *How do Azeri women perceive and interpret their experiences as refugees and internally displaced persons from the Nagorno-Karabakh War?* I utilized a social constructionist theoretical framework that focuses on interpretive analysis with a comparative historical emphasis (see, for example: Najafizadeh, 2007, 2010, 2012). More specifically, these narratives and oral histories provide Azeri IDP/refugee women a “voice” and capture—through their own thoughts and words—the perspectives of IDP/refugee women and the difficult life experiences that they still confront, as the stalemate between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues. As such, my research focus on women’s narratives and on women’s “voices” also has implications for feminist participatory research (see, for example: Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; MacDonald, 2003; Tolhurst, et al., 2012).

More specifically, I employed informal open-ended dialogues during which I digitally recorded the women’s narratives and oral histories. To assure adherence to ethical standards and research integrity, the methodology for my fieldwork research in Azerbaijan had been approved previously by the University of Kansas Human Subjects Committee. Methodological approaches incorporating narratives and oral history have a long tradition within the humanities and related social sciences (see, for example: Armitage & Gluck, 1998; Bornat & Diamond, 2007; Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 2001; Sharpless, 2006; Thomson, 1998, 2006) and in research focusing specifically on issues pertaining to migration and to involuntary displacement (see, for example: Chamberlain, 1997; Eastmond, 2007; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2010).

Further, two notes of clarification: *First*, the distinction between IDPs and refugees in Azerbaijan frequently is blurred in everyday discourse, and the Azeri term, *qachqinlar*, is often used as a catchall term to refer both to IDPs and to refugees. Similarly, although I use the combined term, IDPs/refugees, the majority of women in my research are IDPs. *Second*, Azeris also frequently use the single word, *Karabakh*, as a catchall term to refer both to the actual region of Nagorno-Karabakh and symbolically to the adjacent Azerbaijani territories also currently occupied by Armenians.

I conducted the dialogues in the national language, Azerbaijani, typically two to three hours in length, with individual IDP/refugee women and with small groups of three to five women, ranging in age from their early twenties to their sixties and seventies. The dialogues took place in private settings in locations convenient for the women, ranging from their homes to schools to space provided by local NGOs. Given that IDP/refugee women are dispersed in various cities and regions and that there are no complete listings of all such women, I selected IDP/refugee women through referrals and a combination of snowball and quota sampling so as to include women of varying ages, marital status, occupation, and region. I conducted dialogues both in smaller communities and also in large urban areas—Baku and Sumgayit specifically—where an estimated 86 percent of IDP/refugees currently live.

The fieldwork dialogues were conducted during four trips to Azerbaijan ranging in length from four weeks to four months and also included follow-up communications upon my return to the United States. In the beginning of each dialogue, I provided background information about myself and my research. In many respects, this was the most critical point in the dialogues as I had to quickly begin establishing a bond of trust and an atmosphere of openness with the women. As was the case with the gender-related research that I had conducted previously in Azerbaijan, the fact that I am a woman, that I am fluent in Azerbaijani, and that I have an in-depth understanding of Azeri culture were crucial elements in this process of establishing rapport (see, for example: Najafizadeh, 2003, 2010, 2011, 2012). In turn, my prior Fulbright affiliations with Baku State University, both as a professor and as an academic consultant, provided additional credibility to my research activities. Following this introductory phase, the dialogues then focused on broad questions to set a context in which IDP/refugee women could discuss and share their experiences and perceptions in coping with the impact of the war and forced displacement on them, on their families, and on their communities.

Three Phases of Forced Displacement

Three major phases of the prolonged process of forced displacement emerged from the women's narratives as they spoke about their experiences: (I) The initial shock and trauma of war and of being forced to flee for their lives; (II) Finding a safe haven from the war, facing the reality of an uncertain future, and adjusting to their new identity as IDPs/refugees; and (III) Confronting the pains and challenges of prolonged displacement, developing resilience, and constructing the "hope" of returning to their homelands.

In the following, I use excerpts from these women's narratives to illustrate and document salient points regarding these three phases.

I. The Initial Shock and Trauma of War and of Being Forced to Flee for their Lives.

Although, the current Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dates back to 1988, the largest displacement occurred in the early 1990s when the Armenian military offensive moved through villages and towns forcing Azeris to flee. Often, Azeris had little or no advance warning of Armenian attacks, and they had no choice but to flee, in some instances only with the clothes that they were wearing. As a woman from a small village in Nagorno-Karabakh recalled:

"After the war started, we would hide every night in the basement to seek shelter from the guns and the bombs. However, one day, when Armenians raided our village and were all around us, people in the community had no choice but to flee. The bombs, the guns, the terror. We were forced out of our homes. It was chaos! Sheer chaos and so terrifying!! We got into a car but most of the road was mountainous and Armenian soldiers were shooting at cars. So, then we ran, and we kept running. It was so tragic; so many people were murdered in front of our eyes. Young people, old people. They all died." (Narrative, January 2012)

In turn, a woman from Shusha, commented:

"[In early May 1992] we began to hear explosions and gunshots during the night—some distant but others became closer. We were terrified but didn't know what to

do. Early that morning, my husband went to the gas station where he worked, but the Armenians had already destroyed it with explosives. He rushed back, and we quickly gathered our children together and fled in our car. Those who didn't have cars, fled on foot. We drove and drove and drove. When night came, we turned off the headlights in order not to be seen. Then we came to a point in the road where the Armenian soldiers had blocked the road. So, we abandoned our car and fled on foot. We even took off our shoes in order not to make any noise. We kept walking and walking through the forest until we came upon a group of Azerbaijani soldiers, who took us and other people from the same area away in trucks to Turshue and then to Lachin, where we stayed with relatives for a couple days. Then, as it became clear that Lachin was coming under attack, we and our relatives fled to Aghdam and eventually to Baku." (Narrative, October 2009)

Another woman, from a small community, described the horror of trying to escape through the mountainous snow and ice.

"As we were running away from the Armenian bombs, we reached the top of a mountain. I saw a woman bent down on her knees crying, and I asked the others why she was crying. They said that she had tied her baby on her back to carry her baby as they tried to escape. But with all the snow and ice, the baby froze to death. They wanted to bury the baby boy, but the mother did not want to abandon her baby there, even though the baby was already dead. She wanted to take her dead baby with her." (Narrative, June 2011)

And still another woman described the panic.

"We left Kelbajar during a terrible and very horrible situation. Helicopters were sent from Baku [to evacuate us]. We couldn't get on the previous helicopter because it was crowded. Children were crushed under people's feet, as people tried to get aboard. I had tied one of my sons—he was two years old—to my chest, another one—he was three—to my back. I tried to approach the stairs of the helicopter. I was in such fear that I couldn't recognize familiar faces. Every bomb thrown into the town made us terrified. I could hardly get on the last helicopter. The weight of the helicopter was more than normal, and it was very hard for it to take off. One of the helicopters sent to us was bombed. Another was too heavy, and it had fallen onto ground and exploded. Even though we were on the helicopter, the danger was still with us during every minute, during every second. It was April of 1993. I was 31 years old." (Narrative, August 2009)

Thus, the initial phase of forced displacement was characterized by psychological fear and terror, by uncertainty and chaos, by witnessing the deaths of relatives and fellow community members, and by personal physical injury and suffering. Indeed, an elderly woman summarized this initial phase quite succinctly: "It was horrifying! Sheer horror! What else can I say?"

II. Finding a Safe Haven from the War, Facing the Reality of an Uncertain Future, and Adjusting to their New Identity as IDPs/Refugees.

Some evacuees fled from their homes to neighboring towns or areas, to any location where they had relatives, friends, or acquaintances who could provide them with temporary shelter. In other instances, evacuees eventually found shelter in old railroad boxcars, mud huts, abandoned buildings, government facilities, and other makeshift housing. In some instances, displaced Azeris moved as individual families, and in other instances they moved as a community and re-settled elsewhere as a community or as a group of families from the same community. The transition—seeking a safe haven from the war—typically was a troubling and traumatic process.

A woman from Fizuli recalled:

“I will never forget when we had to evacuate. My baby kept crying and crying, he was hungry, but I could not breast-feed him. Then, an Azeri soldier, who was helping us, took a hard piece of sugar out of his pocket and gave it to my baby. My baby started sucking on the piece of sugar. He was only one year old. Now, I do not want to remember these things again. They are too painful. It is as if it was a film...a movie...like it was not real...when I remember it. And, now, my children are older, and when I describe these events to my children, they cannot believe. It seems to them like a horror film.” (Narrative, December 2011)

Another woman commented:

“As the fighting started, we fled to Ganja where my sister and her family lived. But that was difficult. She only had a very small house, but we stayed with her and her husband and their three children. Then, after two months, it was too difficult with both families living in such a small space. There was little money. So, we moved to Shamakhi, and later we moved again, this time to Baku where we were able to live in a single room in a school dormitory.” (Narrative, June 2011)

Quite frequently, living accommodations have been substandard and overcrowded, as for example, when 80 families have no choice but to share 54 housing apartments and when large families have no choice but to live in one or two rooms. The account of a woman from Lachin is typical of many women’s experiences:

“The situation is very bad. We live on the second floor here. There are children in the building, and they have nowhere to play. We have no yard, no place. So, they play in the corridors, but it troubles the neighbors. They shout at them, because maybe someone wants to sleep, someone may have a headache. What can they [our children] do inside four walls? Some neighbors hit them because of the noise. Besides, they [our children] can’t study [for school]. We have only one room [for our entire family]. How can they study in the room when we all live there?” (Narrative, September 2009)

Finding sanctuary and adjusting to their new identity of IDP/refugee has been a very difficult process for many women. Although IDPs/refugees received moral and material support from the vast majority of their country mates, some women who fled for their lives subsequently came to feel marginalized within their own homeland. These feelings were especially keen during the early period of displacement, a period during the 1990s when Azerbaijan had just gained independence from the Soviet Union and was beginning economic transition from the Soviet system. The people of Azerbaijan, as a whole, were experiencing extensive unemployment, economic hardship, and scarce resources. And in this context, IDP/refugee women indicated that they sometimes were subjected to disparaging remarks and treatment by some individuals who believed that the IDPs/refugees were receiving privileged treatment from the government and from aid agencies to the detriment of other Azeris. Similarly, in some instances, IDPs/refugees were viewed as lower-status or as “different” compared to other Azeris, as illustrated in the account below where a woman refers to an IDP/refugee woman disparagingly as a “refugee” in an effort to distract the woman’s crying child, and in so doing the woman implicitly communicates that a “refugee” is undesirably different from other Azeris.

“In the first years after I had been displaced, I was sitting in a metro train in [the capital city of] Baku. I saw a woman sitting with her child who was crying and unsettled. I think she was from Baku. She said to her child, ‘Behave yourself. Do not cry, I’ll show you a refugee.’ I was sitting on the other side. I stood up and said to the woman, ‘I am a refugee. What can you say? Show me to your child.’ Then, I said to her child, ‘Look, I am a refugee and this is your mother. Show me the difference.’ Everybody on the train was angry at that woman.”
(Narrative, December 2009)

Yet, Azeri IDP/refugee women also emphasize that the antagonisms of the early years have largely faded with the passage of time and with improved economic conditions in Azerbaijan.

“The situation is still difficult as you can see from this small crowded apartment where we live. But they [non-IDP Azeris] now accept us. They know that we had no choice, when the Armenian soldiers came, but to abandon our homes in Karabakh, and they know that we want to return to our homes in Karabakh.”
(Narrative, June 2010)

In other instances, many women with high levels of formal education and important positions within their communities during the Soviet era suddenly confronted a drastic change of status as they became “IDPs/refugees.” This abrupt change in a woman’s standing within the community has made adjustment to displacement and the identity of IDP/refugee even more difficult, as illustrated in the following narrative:

“I am from Lachin, and I graduated from the institute [university] and worked as a bookkeeper. I had a very good job in Lachin, but during the war we moved to Baku where the only place we could find to live was an abandoned school. It has been very difficult for us to live here. My mother—she also has a degree from the

institute [university]—always remembers our mountains, our rivers, our springs, our fruit trees in Lachin. But we have lost all that. We want to buy things for our children, but it is still difficult to find jobs. Unemployment has always been a major problem for IDPs. There were many educated people in Lachin. I graduated in 1979 from the institute [university] with an honors diploma. I want to work, but what can I do when there are not enough jobs. I have to pay for school and for clothes for my children, and I work when I can. But I still do not have enough money. And I am ashamed. I am ashamed that I cannot provide for my children.” (Narrative, June 2011)

In sum, the process of finding a safe haven and of adjusting to their new identity as IDPs/refugees has taken different forms. Yet, one salient underlying element is that it often has entailed a process of adjusting to changing traumatic experiences and of striving to create a new life under difficult physical, economic, social, and psychological circumstances. Although the government continues to actively work to improve the living conditions of IDPs/refugees and over 100,000 IDPs/refugees now live in government-constructed settlements, hundreds of thousands of other IDPs/refugees continue to live in “temporary” and often substandard housing. Furthermore, many IDP/refugee women who previously occupied high level occupational positions within their communities continue to cope with the reduction of social and occupational status that has been a major consequence of forced displacement and of forced designation of the role of IDPs/refugee.

III. Confronting the Pains and Challenges of Prolonged Displacement, Developing Resilience, and Constructing the “Hope” of Returning to their Homelands

Azeri IDP/refugee women are the most vulnerable of all Azeri women. In this context of crowded living conditions, giving birth to children in uncertain settings, issues of medical care and nutrition, and unemployment, women’s roles are precarious as Azeri IDP/refugee women have had minimal control over their social and physical environment and as they have continued to experience a prolonged state of “temporary” displacement—nearly two decades in length—that, in effect has become a state of permanence. Throughout this period, their lives have been dominated by uncertainty: when will the dispute with Armenia be resolved, and when will they be allowed to return to their homelands?

This strong desire to return to their occupied homelands consistently reflects both personal sentiments and nationalistic sentiments. For example, personal sentiments, such as:

“We dream of Khojaly at night. I do not want to wake up and stop my dreams. I want to always sleep and dream of my homeland, of Khojaly.” (Narrative, January 2012)

“We live with one hope. We hope that we will take back our homelands.” (Narrative, June 2011)

“What do I wish for? I wish to return to our land. I wish that my children can see their real home, Jabrayil.” (Narrative, May 2010)

And nationalistic sentiments, such as:

“Karabakh and Azerbaijan are one and the same. How can they [Armenians] talk about Karabakh belonging to the Armenians? It belongs to Azerbaijan, and someday we will take it back so that all Azeris can again take pride in one whole Azerbaijan.” (Narrative, June 2011).

Material issues such as unemployment, inadequate income, and substandard housing are central problems that many Azeri IDP/refugee women continue to encounter on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, psychological issues related to the death of their husbands, sons, and other relatives and friends in the war, being uprooted from their homelands, and being disconnected from their past also continue to impact these women. In the on-going hope that they will be able to return in the foreseeable future, some IDP/refugee women are still living in a state of limbo as they have not fully adjusted to their current situation and are reluctant to establish deep roots in their new-found communities. For these women, even relatively mundane decisions can be problematic. For example, as a woman, from Shusha, commented:

“Even though we have now lived here [in our present location] for many years, we are still ‘standing’ rather than ‘sitting.’ We don’t want to remodel our current apartment, despite the deteriorated condition, because we are hoping to return to our own lands. Why invest ourselves in that, when we hope to be going back to Shusha.” (Narrative, October 2009)

And still another woman, from Aghdam:

“Look around you. This building where we live needs repair badly. The paint, the walls, the rusty handrails in the stairwell. But some people say that we will be returning to Aghdam soon, and so no one wants to do the repairs. No, they want to return home [in Aghdam]. (Narrative, June 2010)

Indeed, even after many years of “temporary” resettlement, many women continue to make comments such as:

“We still feel that we are guests in our own [resettlement] homes; our real home is in Nagorno-Karabakh.” (Narrative, November 2009)

“Some think that by now we should have finally adjusted to living here [in the resettlement]. But this is not our home. Here is okay, and the living conditions have improved compared to when we first arrived. But no, this really is not our home. This is still only a place to stay until we return to Fizuli.” (Narrative, June 2011)

Yet, other IDP/refugee women, whilst hopeful of returning to their homelands, believe that “life must go on” and that they should seek to maximize their current situation and to improve their lives and the lives of their families. Therefore, many women have committed to starting a “new life” by buying a newer apartment or repairing and improving their current housing and therefore establishing long-term roots. In addition, some such women have played significant leadership

roles in working for the betterment of not only their own displaced families but of other displaced families as well. The following narrative is illustrative:

“My husband was killed during the war. We were in Karabakh and that was an extremely difficult period for me and especially for my young children. When we moved to Baku, we did not have even a plate to eat from or a glass to drink tea. But I did not want any organization to help us. I said I will struggle myself. There are a lot of people who live in worse conditions than me. I was a teacher. So, I started teaching at two schools and tutoring students in my own home after school hours in order to earn money. And I even tutored IDP children, for free, at my home after school. Eventually, I earned enough money to buy a small apartment for me and my two children. I was determined that my children—and other IDP children—would not continue to suffer because of the war, but rather they would have a good future. We are from Karabakh, we are Karabakhians. We worked hard. My children studied hard, and I worked hard, teaching and tutoring. And I tutored them. First my daughter earned admission to the university, and later my son passed the entrance exam. Now, they have both graduated, and thanks to God, they both now have good jobs.” (Narrative, December 2011)

Indeed, such IDP/refugee women have confronted the challenges of displacement with a degree of resilience and with determination to empower themselves and to change their families’ lives for the better.

More broadly, whether Azeri IDP/refugee women are in a state of limbo or have reconciled their situation and started a “new life,” their identity nonetheless remains intertwined with their homeland, whether their homeland is Shusha, Kelbajar, Fizuli, Khojaly, or other towns and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh and in adjacent occupied territories. And they commonly refer to themselves as Shushans, Kelbajarians, and so forth. This identity and hope for the future are central both to women’s coping with the experiences of displacement and also to the women’s empowerment. And various settings and activities are crucial in maintaining and reinforcing this identity and the coping process. In addition to the family and extended family, which are important elements within Azeri society, IDP/refugee schools and IDP/refugee community gatherings also are significant. Storytelling and poetry, in turn, are salient aspects of Azeri culture that complement the family, IDP/refugee schools, and IDP/refugee community gatherings and that play important roles in the lives of displaced women and their families. Furthermore, these settings and activities are especially significant in childhood socialization, in instilling family and community traditions, heritage, and homeland identity in IDP/refugee children.

IDP/refugee Schools

One central factor for reinforcing and maintaining identity is that IDP/refugees frequently live with or near other members of their extended-family and near other families from their home community. Furthermore, children from the same IDP/refugee community often attend the same public school and are taught by teachers from the same IDP/refugee community. Indeed, some schools have become a direct reflection of the community as they take on the name of the IDP/refugee community: for example, “Shusha School,” “Kelbajar School,” and “Khojaly School.” As one woman noted:

“How can I forget? I live next door to four other families from Kelbajar. Every time I step out my door and see them, I am reminded of home. And our children, they all attend the same IDP school. They all attend Kelbajar School.” (November 2009)

And another woman commented:

“We are Shushans, and we do not want our children and grandchildren to forget our past. Our children attend the same school with other IDP children, and we teach them in school about their homeland, about Shusha. The children learn to recite poems about Shusha and learn about how beautiful it is. My grandparents and my parents lived and died in Shusha. And when I look at my children, as they walk to school each day, I hope that someday they, too, will return to Shusha and live where our family has always lived.” (Narrative, June 2011)

Community Gatherings

IDP/refugee women’s homeland identity is also reinforced through community gatherings, organized by the women. Such gatherings provide a venue where women can reminisce about the past and share their sorrow at the loss of their homelands, while also talking about present-day developments and community affairs. Especially important are the community social gatherings commemorating the anniversary of the Armenian occupation of their homelands, as the women seek to keep the memories of their homelands alive and to teach this heritage to their children. As one woman stated:

“We want our children to be reminded of their heritage. These community gatherings are important. They bring us together. We talk and we mourn the loss of our lands, but we also celebrate our heritage, our togetherness. We gather together, and we drink tea and share food, and psychologically we feel good. We renew our commitment to getting our lands back.” (Narrative, June 2010)

Storytelling and Poetry

More specifically, Azeri IDP/refugee women convey determination and resilience and the hope of returning to their lands, and they express these emotions and sentiments both verbally and in written form, particularly through storytelling and poetry. Indeed, Azeris possess a rich history of poetry, literature, and music, and the writing, reading, and recitation of poetry have long been a significant element in Azeri culture. This heritage is reflected, for example, in the numerous monuments, parks, streets, and public buildings in Azerbaijan named after such prominent poets as Nizami, Fuzuli, Natavan, and Vurgun. Indeed, the Nagorno-Karabakh region—and the the area of Shusha in particular—is frequently referred to as “the cradle” of Azeri poetry and music because of the large number of cultural icons who were either born in Shusha or had other connections to Shusha. Thus, the use of storytelling and of poetry by Azeri IDP/refugee women is an extension of Azeri culture, and such poetry—written by both IDP/refugee women and men—frequently recalls the beauty of their homelands, their family memories of growing up, their pain and anger toward the war and toward the Armenian occupiers of their lands, and their longing to return to their homelands. Such storytelling and

poetry reinforces the homeland identity of Azeri IDP/refugee women, it is shared with children in the IDP/refugee schools where it plays a significant role in the socialization of IDP/refugee children, and it also is shared with both children and adults in IDP/refugee community gatherings and at weddings, celebrations, and other social events. The following verse from the poem, *If I Could See Kelbajar Again*, is but one example:

“See what I am going through,
See the pain that I have,
If I could drink its water, my internal fire would calm down,
Light would come back to my eyes.
If I could see Kelbajar again!”

Yet, while poetry is a key factor in renewing and reinforcing collective identity, it also serves as a coping mechanism for many individual IDP/refugee women, as illustrated in the following:

“During the day, I work and somehow I forget a little about my pain and problems. But in the evenings, it is difficult because I get depressed and homesick. There is a poem that I whisper to myself:

‘Evenings o evenings
Candles light evenings
Those who have home, go home
Where do those go, who have none?’

When I return home from work, I think of this poem.” (Narrative, September 2009)

In the end, both cultural and social structural elements come into play as Azeri IDP/refugee women continue to confront the pains and challenges of forced displacement and to construct the hope of returning to their homelands. This enduring desire to return to their homelands has both personal and nationalistic underpinnings. Yet, the persistent uncertainty of forced displacement has put many women in limbo as they continue to hold on to the dream of someday returning to their pre-war homes, while other women, in turn, have committed to building a new life in their post-displacement communities. Either way, their cultural identity remains intertwined with their homelands, whether the homelands are towns and villages in Nagorno-Karabakh or towns and villages in the adjacent Azerbaijani districts still occupied and controlled by Armenia. Such identity is reinforced and maintained through both social structural elements such as IDP/refugee schools and community gatherings as well as through vibrant cultural elements such as those connected to storytelling and to the writing and recitation of Azeri poetry about the homelands from which they have been displaced.

Concluding Comments

Ethnic-based territorial conflict between Azeris and Armenians, focusing specifically on the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, is long-standing. With ethnic clashes in 1905 and 1906, as well as between 1918 and 1920, these tensions again came to a head beginning in the late 1980s with the most recent sustained conflict occurring between 1988 and 1994 and resulting in the

massive forced displacement of Azeris from their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent districts within Azerbaijan.

In order to put a human face on this most recent ethnic conflict and to give Azeri IDP/refugee women a “voice,” I conducted extensive qualitative field research in Azerbaijan during which I engaged in in-depth dialogues with IDP/refugee women and compiled detailed narratives that captured the experiences of these women as they were forcibly displaced from their homes and homelands. As I have elaborated in this article, it became evident through my research that the experiences of these women can be more fully understood in the context of three different phases of forced displacement. First was the initial shock and trauma as these women and their families were forced to flee for their lives while often simultaneously witnessing the destruction of their communities and the killing of relatives and fellow community members. Second was the process of seeking shelter—a safe haven—from the war and a place in which to live with some semblance of security, while simultaneously confronting an uncertain future and attempting to adjust to their newly imposed identity of “IDP/Refugee.” Third was the continuing dilemma of how to confront the pains and challenges of prolonged forced displacement and how to construct the “hope” of someday returning to their homes, villages, and towns in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent districts within Azerbaijan that continue to be occupied by the Armenian forces.

Ultimately, Azeri IDP/refugee women have been subject to various constraints and challenges that have shaped their daily lives of displacement for almost two decades. Yet, despite these constraints, Azeri IDP/refugee women have not been passive but rather have been active participants in constructing and defining their own social reality as IDPs/refugees and in seeking to improve their future. And an integral part of their social world is the construction of “hope”—the hope of resolving the conflict with Armenia, the hope of returning to their homelands, and the hope of a better future for their children. For many Azeri IDP/refugee women, hope is empowering. As one younger woman from Lachin commented:

“We work together. We help one another. I told them to be patient. When there is life, there is hope. The hope dies last. We cannot live without hope.”
(Narrative, October 2009)

Yet another woman, from Fizuli, reflected:

“Too many have died. And now, many years have passed...what is our future? We want to return to our homes. We don’t want murder or war, we just want to return to our homes in Fizuli and raise our families. But we are still living day-to-day and month-to-month not knowing...just waiting and hoping.” (Narrative, December 2011)

And the words of one elderly woman from Shusha succinctly express the thoughts and emotions of so many women.

“What gives us strength to go on, it is hope. We hope that we will return there to our homes. Only this hope and wish helps us to live.” (Narrative, October 2009)

In the end, Azeri IDP/refugee women's narratives and oral histories provide a much more detailed understanding of the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh War and of forced displacement. They provide a mechanism through which Azeri IDP/refugee women describe and explain the realities of displacement from their own perspectives. And as uncertainty about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh and the other occupied territories continues, and as Azeri IDP/refugee women have shouldered the tragedies and burdens of war and displacement for the past two decades, many IDP/refugee women remain hopeful that a peaceful resolution will be found. A woman from Khojaly captured the emotions of many women IDPs/refugees as she commented:

“We are tired of waiting. We want to return to our homelands. But we are also tired of war and devastation. We want a peaceful resolution. The Armenians, they used to be our neighbors. We used to live side-by-side. We don't want war. Too many [Azeris] have already died or are missing. We want our homes, we want to get our lands back peacefully. No, too many children have already lost their fathers, and too many mothers already have lost their sons. We are tired of waiting, but we also are tired of the death and destruction of war.” (Narrative, January 2012)

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