

CAUCASUS WOMEN AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

By Natella Akaba

As noted by many specialists on conflict theory, women, by their nature, usually prefer unarmed, non-forceful ways to resolve conflicts. According to global practice these are women who are more committed to peace and who usually undertake an important role in preventing conflicts that adversely affect the security of their family, the community and the country as a whole. As it is known, states and societies that are in a state of conflict are not able to develop successfully, and they usually demonstrate the worst results in achieving their development goals. In addition, it is clear that conflicts cannot be resolved by violent means. Based on this, it should be recognized that mediation and dialogue are the most effective methods of preventing and resolving violent conflicts.

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Many experts on the Caucasus note that due to a number of circumstances, the conflict potential of this region is quite high. The reasons include the geopolitical and transcontinental location of the region, its unique nature and rich biological resources, significant energy potential, as well as its ethnic and religious diversity.

Georgiy Anchabadze, a well-known Caucasus Historian, points out: “The internecine conflicts in the Caucasus were frequent, both in the lowland part and in the mountains. The wars with foreign conquerors penetrating the Caucasus from the south (from the Iranian Highlands, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor), as well as from the north (from the Eurasian steppes and Eastern Europe), were even more ambitious. Protracted and bloody wars with external enemies occupy a large place in the history of every Caucasian people and these wars played a significant role in shaping their national mentality. It is not by chance that weapons in the Caucasus became an attribute of the national costume, and even peasants who went to work in the field did not part with it.”

It can be confirmed by the fact that the majority of Caucasian societies are characterized by masculinity and a militarized way of life. Galina Starovoytova, a very authoritative and well-known politician, human rights activist, ethnographer, Caucasian historian and expert in inter-ethnic relations, noted in her study that Caucasian culture is characterized by increased importance of masculinity, which leads to more strict control over the development of boys.

A number of other researchers also mention that military culture played an important role in the life of many Caucasian ethnic groups. Life in conditions of frequent armed conflicts forced Caucasian men not only to learn martial art, but also to develop certain rules of warfare - a kind of military ethics. As a result, certain ethical and etiquette norms governing the relationship between the parties to conflicts were formed in Caucasian cultures. A number of researchers characterize these norms as the “culture of war”. In fact, it is a system of moral and ethical standards governing the relationship of people during a war.

It should be noted that at the same time in the Caucasus there has long been a rather developed institution of mediation and intergroup dialogue aimed at reducing the severity of confrontation and achieving peace. The role of mediators by the mutual consent of the conflicting parties was performed by the most authoritative people. As a rule, in traditional Caucasian societies they were elders or women. A number of ethnographers note that in traditional Abkhaz culture, the status of a woman depended on her age. The “older” woman (mother-in-law, eldest sister-in-law) had a higher status.

This woman supervised the household, distributed household duties between daughters-in-law, watched their behavior and the behavior of unmarried girls in the family, she also settled conflicts and punished the ones who are guilty. At the same time, at the family council, the “elder” represented the interests of all female members of the family, and usually all the men and the head of the family listened to her advice. Often, after the death of her husband, the older woman became the head of the family.

Speaking about the culture of communication between opponents during the armed conflicts in the Caucasus, many researchers emphasize that for a long time women were playing an important role in peacemaking. The Abkhaz scholar, A. Guazhba, cites an old legend telling about the peacemaking role of women: “Between the Ubykhs and the Abkhazians a feud broke out. There was no end in sight to mutual raids ... But in those days there were very wise people who "knew how to reconcile fire and water," and they decided to put an end to enmity. The most respected and revered old men gathered on both sides of the conflict and from all parts of the Western Caucasus. And what they decided: by the right mouth of the Psou River there was a vast plain. With their consent, 500 young Abkhaz women with infants and 500 Ubykh mothers, also with infants, were delivered there. They were placed in a row opposite each other with babies in their hands; the young women were blindfolded and were asked to exchange babies. Then women with the exchanged infants were immediately transported to their native villages. This was done in order to further the Abkhaz and Ubykhs, knowing that they have their own children on each side, stopped taking revenge and raids... To celebrate the successful reconciliation, a feast, “dzhigitovka”, horse racing, target shooting and other games were arranged. ”

Perhaps the above case is just a legend; however, many researchers also note the peacekeeping potential of women, which aroused special respect for them from society. As the well-known Abkhaz ethnographer, Yuri Argun, pointed out, the peacemaking activity of the representatives of the weaker sex was highly valued by the people. About such women peacemakers respectfully say: "a woman who alongside with men can sort out any cases."

The same scientist cited the following case as an example of female peacemaking, about which the descendant of Abkhaz mahajirs, Iaver Agrba, told him in the summer of 1999. In one of the Turkish villages between the Abkhazians living in Turkey, a conflict broke out. In order to reconcile the warring parties, elders and judges were invited to find out the causes of conflict. However, it took three days, but the solution was never found. Then one of the outside observers approached the elders and judges and suggested inviting a woman to settle down a conflict, and all those present agreed with this.

When the invited woman found out what is the cause of the conflict she suggested that two members at the court representing one side of the conflict and two members representing the other side of the conflict leave the court, since she was convinced that with their participation reconciliation of the warring parties was impossible. Then, instead of them, she suggested including other representatives. The judges at court agreed with the woman’s suggestions. The indicated persons were withdrawn from the court and replaced by others. The case was reviewed again and soon the warring parties were conciliated. As a result, it was decided to name the village, where the case was peacefully solved out, in the honor of this wise woman - “Esma Khanum Lokey”.

Respect for a woman is inherent in many peoples of the Caucasus. Mother in the family is no less respected than the father. Sex crimes in the Caucasus is rightly considered one of the most serious. The law of the mountain peoples provides severe punishment for rapists. A woman in

the consciousness of the Highlanders is associated with the peace, and during hostilities, the opponent's women are immune.

Many people know the wonderful legend about the white headscarf, thrown by a beautiful woman-highlander to stop the bloodshed. Interestingly, in many historical sources and folklore texts, when describing this kind of episodes, the emphasis is put not on removing the headscarf, but on exposing woman's hair. As an example one can cite the words of Shteder, the lieutenant colonel of the Russian army, the author of the historical-ethnographic description of the mountain regions of the North Caucasus of the second half of the 18th century: "...When they (women) interfere in bloody fights with screams and flowing hair, then all men, ashamed, sheathe their sabers and disperse to meet later on under more favorable circumstances".

It should be noted that this custom was established among many Caucasian ethnic groups to cease the civil strife, bloody fights or clashes between fellow villagers or tribesmen. A woman throwing a woman's handkerchief between warring men stopped their enmity. However, this custom was not used with external enemies, but only with tribesmen, fellow villagers and relatives.

Since the headscarf in the North Caucasus symbolized women's honor, publicly disrupting a woman's headscarf was equal to a violent act and entailed a severe punishment on adat. Therefore, a woman could publicly take off her headscarf in only one case — if she intended to reconcile the warring parties and to stop the bloodshed. People believed in the magical properties of the woman's headscarf, which symbolized the peace, and accordingly responded to it. Historically, the women's headscarf has become a necessary attribute in the regulation of human relationships. And sometimes it was the last opportunity to reduce the tension of confrontation and to stop the fight.

As many researchers point out, the Caucasian mountaineers highly appreciated the intelligence, beauty of women, their role in society and family as mothers and mistresses of the house. At the same time, many people both in the South and North Caucasus recognize the peacekeeping role of women. Thus, among the ancestors of Karachai and Balkarians, the status of a woman and her authority were very high. And among these peoples in conflict situations a woman took off her headscarf and threw it in front of men. Such a gesture made by a woman meant a demand to end the enmity.

In the most parts of Dagestan, in the old days there was such a custom: if a mother adopts a child from the opposite warring party, it will put an end to the feud. The intervention of women often stopped the most cruel feud. For this, she had only to come forward, take off her headscarf and throw it in front of the fighting men. Respect for the woman in Dagestan is expressed in numerous rituals and traditions. So, for example, in the presence of a woman, men did not dare to plot a quarrel, or use foul language. With the appearance of an adult woman, both in the old days and nowadays, the others should stand up, thus showing respect to her.

Since ancient times, in Ossetia, the honor and dignity of women have been fully protected. The dignity of the man was displayed through this precautionary, respectful attitude towards the woman; a shame for him was the manifestation of rudeness, indecent behavior in her presence, assault. Older women among Ossetians were also in a special position and enjoyed universal respect. The most authoritative women took an active part in solving important public affairs, they occupied an equal position with the head of the family.

Ideas about such an ideal woman, the mistress of the house, were reflected in the Ingush epic literature. The image of such a heroine can be found in the legends about the wife of Baraha Kant, who always finds a way out of the most difficult situation. She does not allow a conflict to flare up and she highly elevates the honor and dignity of her husband and the whole country. In the stories the wife of Baraha Kant is depicted as a woman who yields to no men. Moreover, she surpasses them in intelligence, courage, and nobility.

The traditions of female mediation have survived to this day. This is confirmed by the statement of women participating in the international congress “White Scarf on the Caucasus Bridge”, dedicated to the armed conflict in Chechnya that broke out in the 1990s. The Congress was organized at the initiative of the Adygea Women's Union. The statement, in particular, states: “A decade of political, economic and social instability, inter-ethnic conflicts have turned out to be a great misfortune and irreplaceable losses for the peoples of the Caucasus. This brought to thousands of dead soldiers and civilians, broken lives of many people, as well as to ruined material, cultural and spiritual values.

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It is impossible to tolerate such things any more, we, women participating in the International Congress "White Scarf on the Caucasus Bridge", unanimously declare a strong protest to all this. We state:

1. Each of us and all of us together are categorically opposed to solving political problems by military and forceful means.
2. Each of us and all of us together demand from the legislative and executive authorities at all levels to take immediate measures to stop fratricide in the Caucasus and resolve all conflicts by civilized, peaceful means.
3. Each of us and all of us together are ready to resist any manifestations of ethnic hatred, attempts to sow distrust between our peoples, to sacrifice them to petty political ambitions and self-serving goals.
4. In the name of life, happiness and well-being, not only of the present, but also of the coming generations of peoples inhabiting the Caucasus, we now unite in the White Cavalry, an international social movement of women, symbolizing peacekeeping actions, mutual understanding, mutual respect and friendship.
5. The goals and objectives of the movement “The White Scarf of the Caucasus are as follows:
 - coordinating efforts to achieve peace, democracy, social, economic and spiritual progress;
 - providing assistance in settling and preventing interethnic and interstate conflicts and their resolution by peaceful means, compliance with the norms of international law, respect for universal human rights;
 - carrying out charitable activities in favor of victims of interethnic and interstate conflicts, as well as from natural disasters;

- participating in solving environmental problems, in joint activities in the field of culture, science, education, health care, protection of the family, motherhood and childhood;
- combining efforts to implement the provisions of the UN Convention on Women;
- ensuring the involvement of women in the Caucasus in the management of the creative affairs of society and the state.

6. Reviving the ancient Caucasian tradition, according to which the White Scarf, thrown by a woman between the warring parties, ends the feud and, filling this custom with content that meets today's realities, we are deeply convinced that the wisdom, warmth, patience and perseverance of women of the Caucasus will bring to our ancient earth the world that the nations long for.

7. We call on all women of the Caucasus to join the White Scarf in the international women's social movement and thus contribute to a positive solution of the acute problems of our time, for the sake of peace, good and happiness of our peoples.

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Since 1998, in partnership with the Dagestan public organization "Mother and Child Protection League" headed by Aishat Magomedova, the Union of Women of the Don began the implementation of the project "Dagestan - the center of peacekeeping". The Union of Women of the Don has many of such initiatives, which proves a significant potential of women's peacekeeping role, when no political situations prevent women from exercising this role.

It should be noted that in the South Caucasus, where during and after the collapse of the Soviet empire, violent ethno-political conflicts with the use of military forces erupted, the need for women's peacekeeping was not immediately recognized - the shock of military operations was too great after decades of relatively stable life. A series of armed conflicts in the North Caucasus in the late nineties led to the formation of a fairly strong and numerous women's organizations.

The Caucasus is one of the few regions where women's organizations were formed naturally, due to the fact that women were striving to establish peace in the region and to solve the acute humanitarian problems caused by armed conflicts, and also to prevent new armed conflicts. In other regions, the formation of the women's movement proceeded less naturally and, often, was regulated by local authorities. However, women's public organizations began to emerge and these organizations undertake a task to consolidate peace.

One of the most well-known initiatives in this direction was the League of Women of the Caucasus, created at the turn of the millennium, uniting outstanding representatives of the women's movement from Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, as well as a number of republics of the North Caucasus and Southern Russia. The League held several significant meetings, issued an advertising booklet about its activities, but political realities did not contribute to the development of this initiative into a powerful influential movement, and the League of Women of the Caucasus ceased to exist.

Conclusions

These and many other examples lead to the conclusion that even in traditional Caucasian societies, in which the role of women was rigidly predetermined, the peacekeeping potential of

women was still partially realized - perhaps, in the absence of other mechanisms, society was forced to resort to female influence in order to reduce male aggression and appeal to eternal values. The above-described ritual called "The White Scarf" was inherent in many Caucasian and Asian peoples and often helped stop the bloodshed not only in private quarrels, but also in higher-level conflicts.

Unfortunately, we have to admit that even today the conflict potential of the Caucasus region is still not exhausted, as evidenced by the presence of a number of unresolved and latent conflicts here. Perhaps it is the result of wars and clashes that the militarized culture and the cult of force are preserved. Ethnologist and sociologist G. Soldatova, speaking of contemporary processes in the Caucasus, notes that male dominance in Caucasian cultures is one of the possible causes of radicalization of relations in the region. Men often tend to use force to achieve their goals, while women, by their very nature, are usually on the side of peace.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that women are more sensitive to inequality and injustice, therefore, these are women who are capable to make longer-term and fair peace agreements. That is why it is quite logical to consider women as a world resource. In this regard, the statement of the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan can be cited: "In societies torn by war, women are often the driving force of society. They support the structure of society. They replace ruined social services and care for the sick and wounded. And, as a result, women are often the first advocates of peace. We must provide women with the opportunity to play a major role in peace negotiations, in peace processes, NS in peacekeeping missions."

However, despite the fact that women are really able to play an active role in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction, they still rarely have the opportunity to make real influence on decision-making. Enhancing the role of women and their inclusion in peace processes would contribute to the strengthening of both internal stability and global peace and security. It is also important to strengthen and develop the potential of women as mediators and social integrators in local communities, given the large role of women as carriers and translators of cultural traditions, norms and stereotypes.