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## Women Confronting Death: War Widows' Experiences in the South Caucasus

By Nona Shahnazarian<sup>1</sup> and Ulrike Ziemer<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Widowhood is an under-recognized, albeit significant, aspect of life all over the world. The scant literature on contemporary narratives of widowhood among women as a consequence of conflicts indicates that this aspect of lived experience is relatively underexplored. Although loss is integral to life in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the South Caucasus, it has been overlooked because of the unsettled politics in the region. Since the end of the full-scale war in 1994, the self-declared, internationally unrecognized republic has been locked in a protracted conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This longstanding conflict has had severe consequences for society in this region. Sporadic clashes along the border of Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>3</sup> are not a rare occurrence. Thus, for women married to soldiers, confronting death is not something rare in the everyday life of the region. The purpose of this article is to examine the everyday experiences, understanding and reworking of widowhood there. The article is intended to open up the hitherto neglected subject of widowhood as affected by violent fighting in this part of the world and to create awareness of the importance of the topic.

*Keywords:* widowhood, patriarchy, Nagorno-Karabakh

### Introduction

Becoming a widow is completely contingent and leads to major changes in a woman's life. In many parts of the world, widows become victims of their circumstances due to structural inequalities and patriarchal gender norms (Sahoo 2014, Sengupta 2016). While accurate information is limited, it has been estimated that there are approximately 285 million widows around the world (UN Women 2017). Yet, there remains a need for more detailed research concerning their everyday struggles, especially when it comes to publications on widows' agency and how societal gender norms impact upon their entitlements, statuses and vulnerability (cf. Ramnarain 2016). Female vulnerability and insecurity are heightened in conflict and post-conflict settings (Detraz 2011, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Thus, more recent literature on widowhood and

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<sup>3</sup> Following the constitutional referendum in February 2017, the unrecognised Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was renamed the Republic of Artsakh. However, for the remainder of this article the more widespread 'Nagorno-Karabakh' is used.

violent conflict has begun to examine the various ways in which widowed women deal with life after the death of their husbands in the aftermath of war (Brown 2016, Finke and Shackel 2015, Nwadinobi 2016, Pannilage 2017). When it comes to research on widowhood in post-socialist societies torn by conflict or in prolonged conflict conditions, however, there is still a significant gap in the literature. Hence, exploring the everyday struggles of widows in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus, the present article is intended to open up the still neglected subject of widowhood in post-socialist societies affected by violent fighting.

As the literature and knowledge about widowhood and conflict are still relatively sparse (Bokek-Cohen 2014; Quayoom 2014; Qutab 2012), important aspects of widows' lived experience remain largely unexplored. This in turn makes it particularly difficult to advocate and design programmes targeting the specific needs of widows (UN Women 2012). While current studies on widowhood in Western countries provide important accounts of wellbeing and the psychological effects of loss and bereavement (Balkwell 1981; Bonanno et al. 2004; Ory and Huijts 2015), the information available on the subject of widowhood in previously war-torn post-socialist regions is limited to some brief mentions of widows in parts of former Yugoslavia as important for the national discourse of the newly emerged nations (Jacobs 2016, Mostov 2000, Nikolic-Ristanovic 1998). It is therefore a pressing need to consider the lived experiences of widows in other post-socialist regions in order to address and understand the socio-political and economic context.

The current literature on widowhood can be divided on the basis of its two main regional perspectives. First, there is the literature focusing on widowhood in developed Western countries and, second, there is the 'outsider' perspective of widowhood in developing countries (Lenette 2013). Whilst the former largely discusses studies based on quantitative measures of bereavement and trauma and is limited to older groups (Martin-Matthews et al. 2013, Ory and Huijts 2015), in the latter it is much more likely that the women supplying the data have experienced widowhood earlier in life than they would in a Western society (Mand 2005, Sabri et al. 2016). Many of the widowhood narratives in developing countries are marked by stories of isolation and humiliation and focus largely on female widows (Owen 1996, Sabri et al. 2016).

The study of widowhood in terms of armed conflict started with historical studies focusing on World War One war widows (Kuhlman 2012) or memories from widows after the Vietnam War (Fitzpatrick 2011). In recent years, due to the ongoing involvement of military personnel from Western countries in long-term wars, detailed qualitative analysis of experiences of widowhood has gained momentum and may continue to increase (Fitzpatrick 2011). Although still very much under-researched, of particular interest to scholars has been the study of young and middle-aged widowhood (Lenette 2013). Basnet et al. (2017: 10), for example, found increased levels of anxiety amongst young war-widows in Nepal. Women who were young at the time of widowhood came across as much more nervous over their future and day-to-day life, whereas middle-aged women had significantly lower chances of anxiety.

In the context of armed conflict, widowhood is often combined with displacement and violence. Loss and bereavement are integral to displacement, yet only a few publications so far have examined how exactly the loss of a spouse affects widowhood in exile (Chou 2007, Lenette 2013). Violence against women is also integral to conflict and accordingly widows have not been spared from acts of violence (Koos 2017). In situations of armed conflict, the sense of frustration, anxiety and powerlessness may be manifested in a number of ways, but research has shown that women and children are disproportionately affected (Sjoberg 2014). Noteworthy here is that a conflict is often compounded by a polarization of gender roles (Qayoom 2014). Therefore, the way in which patriarchal power relations and the newly acquired identity as widow are negotiated on

an individual level needs urgent analysis. How do widowed women in Nagorno-Karabakh deal with their unwanted status as widows? How do some of them manage to overcome the limitations of their status?

The article proceeds as follows. After a description of the context and methodology, the results are presented thematically in three subsections. The first section discusses war widows facing societal marginalization and isolation. This is a topic that has been substantially discussed in many parts of the world, in the context of developed countries (cf. Ory and Huijts 2015, Panagiotopoulos et al. 2013) as well as developing ones (cf. Chitrani and Anwar 2013, Kotzé and Rajuili-Masilo 2012, Ng et al. 2016). Yet in the post-socialist context this is still an aspect of women's lives that is almost wholly absent from the literature. The second section considers remarriage as a strategy that widows use to reintegrate into society by achieving once more the status of married women. However, for widows in Nagorno-Karabakh this strategy is not as straightforward as it might seem. While one choice is that of remarrying as a result of finding a new love, the other choice is levirate marriage. Levirate marriage is an ancient tradition and has received some attention in the previous literature on widows (cf. Nyanzi 2011, Sapir 1916, Sev'er and Bagli 2006). The final section examines widows' sexuality and social control. Previous literature exploring the topic of widows as sexually active persons has almost unanimously concluded that this is not an accepted phenomenon in developing countries (cf. Nyanzi 2011).

### **Study Context and Methodology**

The article is based upon data from a larger ongoing ethnographic study exploring gender issues and political transformation in the protracted conflict zone of Nagorno-Karabakh (cf. Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2012, Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2014). Ulrike Ziemer has made three fieldwork trips to Nagorno-Karabakh, one to Martuni in July 2009,<sup>4</sup> one to Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh in August 2015, and one to Shushi in August 2016.<sup>5</sup> Nona Shahnazarian is originally from Martuni but emigrated to Russia in the 1990s when the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh started. Recently she has returned to live in Yerevan. As part of her doctoral degree, she started her research in 2000 and has returned to Nagorno-Karabakh every year since then.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, we draw on biographical interviews, with a total of seven local widows and five widows who were formerly from Azerbaijan and had to resettle in Martuni and Shushi as a result of the conflict. In addition, we draw on interviews in Nagorno-Karabakh with journalists and leaders of women's civil society organisations. Research participants were selected by means of purposive sampling (Marshall 1996). Nona Shahnazarian provided the local knowledge to contact widowed interviewees. The participation of these widows was voluntary and depended upon the willingness and availability of individuals to take part in the study. As in most cases, widowhood is for them a painful experience; our sample included only middle-aged and elderly women, because they had had enough time to overcome their distressing loss and were more open and reflective about their experience. The interviews and discussions were mainly held in Armenian or Russian and recorded. The interviewees were free to choose the location of their

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<sup>4</sup> This fieldwork trip was funded by the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) and was conducted as part of a CEELBAS Postdoctoral Research Fellowship on Migration and Diasporic Citizenship (2009-2011).

<sup>5</sup> These fieldwork trips were funded by the University of Winchester internal REF fund (2014-2015 and 2015-2016).

<sup>6</sup> Since 2000, the second author has conducted more than 80 interviews with women living in Nagorno-Karabakh. Most of her fieldwork trips were self-financed.

interviews. Very often the research participants chose their place and kitchen as the interview location.

### **The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh**

To date, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region<sup>7</sup> is a central obstacle to the political development of Armenia and Azerbaijan and a key impediment to the development of the South Caucasus region as a whole and its integration into the wider world. The conflict can be traced further back than the collapse of the Soviet Union and has long stood out as one of the world's more daunting diplomatic challenges (Cornell 2017).<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Gorbachev's slogans about democratization and promises of correcting mistakes made by previous Soviet leaders, Karabakh Armenians turned to Moscow with a petition for the re-establishment of Nagorno-Karabakh under the jurisdiction of Armenia. In 1988, Armenian deputies in the local Soviet Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unite the region with Soviet Armenia. Following this vote, tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Nagorno-Karabakh escalated into inter-ethnic violence between the two (Civil Society Monitoring Report 2014). The ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh strongly pursued the principle of self-determination, separated from Azerbaijan and subsequently declared themselves 'independent.' Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan, despite losing the war as well as seven of its provinces surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, rejects the principle of self-determination, accepting only the opposing principle of territorial integrity (Cornell 2017).

In May 1994, after large-scale ethnic cleansing, a Russian mediated ceasefire came into effect, but no peace agreement was reached. Since then, the conflict has not moved any closer to a political solution. Overall, there has been a pronounced lack of political will from the main parties to the conflict and little effort to encourage peace talks, resulting more or less in diplomatic deadlock. In the meantime, the economic and political imbalance between the two countries has also grown. Armenia, the victor in the war, has suffered a decline in its population<sup>9</sup> and struggles economically, while the development of Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources has meant that its economy is now over six times larger than Armenia's, and for several years its official defence budget exceeded Armenia's entire state budget (ibid.).

In recent years, the unsettled nature of the conflict has been regularly reiterated, with a steady escalation of tension almost every month.<sup>10</sup> The most serious escalation of fighting in over two decades occurred in April 2016 with some serious combat and civilian fatalities on both sides (Sanamyan 2016). Since then, sporadic clashes on the Line of Contact (LoC) have continued and the tensions have not relaxed; in fact the risk of a further escalation in the conflict is, if anything, higher than before (Sanamyan 2017). In short, in the current circumstances, both societies continue to prepare for war and the best-case scenario is the continuation of low intensity conflict along the LoC (Poghosyan 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> The Nagorno-Karabakh region comprises an area of 4,400 square kilometres. The population of Nagorno-Karabakh was estimated at 145,200 in 2016 (<http://stat-nkr.am/en>, p.14, accessed 17/11/2017). The capital of Nagorno-Karabakh has a population of 55,000 ([www.karabakh.travel/en](http://www.karabakh.travel/en), accessed 20/07/2016).

<sup>8</sup> The main causes and developments of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh have been examined in great detail. Thomas de Waal's (2013) book provides perhaps the most detailed analysis.

<sup>9</sup> According to World Bank data, Armenia's population has decreased from approximately 3.5 million in 1990, to roughly 2.9 million people in 2016, whereas Azerbaijan's population has increased from approximately 7.1 million in 1990, to 9.7 million people in 2016.

<sup>10</sup> For data on fatalities, see for example, Broers (2016: 8).

### **Model Mothers and Dutiful Wives – Armenian Gender Ideology**

Gender roles, traditional gender roles in particular, receive heightened attention during wars and in post-conflict societies (Cockburn 1998, Elshtain 1987, Lorentzen and Turpin 1998). They serve as symbolic boundaries of the nation in the nationalist discourse of countries which have been shaken by violent conflicts. Mothers, wives and daughters signify the nation and national belonging (Turpin 1998). They are perceived as the property of the nation (Mostov 2000). Regarding the Armenian nation and its gender traditions, concepts such as motherhood play a significant role in the construction of Armenian femininity. Motherhood is a notion which is processed through a distinct history of genocide, survival (early independence years and in the diaspora), war (in Nagorno-Karabakh), and the struggle to preserve Armenianness after the forceful eviction from a historical homeland to a strange host country (Beukian 2014: 262-263). Women are considered the nurturers of the nation; they have the childbearing responsibility to keep the nation growing. Particularly, in view of the security threats, the discourse of ‘othering’ Azerbaijan (and the Turks) in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia necessitates an equally strong discourse of ‘us’ that underscores Armenianness as exclusive. Thus, Armenian women typically believe that the concept of motherhood is constructed to be an exceptional Armenian trait that distinguishes Armenian women from those of other nations.

Alongside ‘motherhood’, family and home (guardians of the hearth [*ojakh*]) also play an imperative role in the Armenian sense of national belonging. As in other patriarchal societies, women in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are supposed to concentrate on family related duties and, most importantly, on children’s upbringing. In Nagorno-Karabakh, mothers are required to care for and protect their patriotic sons. Daughters are brought up to look out for a good marriage opportunity, to secure a respected future life and status within the community (Ziemer 2011: 135). As many studies on Armenians in the world have demonstrated, marriage and the family in Armenian culture is central, due to Armenia having little history of independent statehood and its long struggle to survive (Boulgourdjian-Toufeksian 2000, Komsuoğlu and Örs 2009). In addition, marriage carries a huge emotional weight in Armenian society because it is the culminating moment in a woman’s life. Hence marriage is a fundamental aspect of Armenian society; the family that emerges through marriage processes is a microcosm of society. When a woman gets older she is given high social status, for instance, when she becomes a mother-in-law and has accomplished maternity and childrearing. This stage as an ‘older woman’ is perceived as a reward for a life devoted to serving the interests of the family (Shahnazarian 2011, Ziemer 2011).

### **Societal Marginalization and Isolation of Widows**

Just as in other societies affected by war (Katz and Ben-Dor 1987), war widows in Nagorno-Karabakh today represent powerful symbols of patriotism, since in most cases their husbands sacrificed their lives in the 1990s war, or in more recent years were killed in combat service along the border of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities recognize this symbolism in the form of monthly state pensions. These war widows receive a small monthly pension of 30,000AMD (approximately 62USD) and an additional 70,000AMD (approximately 144USD) for each child younger than 18 years of age.<sup>11</sup> If a child decides to study at university

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<sup>11</sup> In comparison, according to the Republic’s National Statistical Service, the average salary in Nagorno-Karabakh was estimated at 46,409 AMD (approximately 96USD) in 2016 (<http://stat-nkr.am/en>, p.53, accessed 17/11/2017).

this child support is paid until the age of 23 years. In addition, in honour of their husband's sacrifice, war widows three times a year receive 16,000AMD (approximately 33USD) on the Nagorno-Karabakh Independence Day, New Year's Eve and Victory Day. They also receive 400USD for their fallen husband's grave stone (Interview, Artur Arystumyan, August 2015).<sup>12</sup>

This financial support from the government can also produce resentment in a widow's immediate neighbourhood as a conversation with a war veteran showed when he exclaimed: '*I wish I'd die as well, then my kids at least wouldn't be hungry.*'<sup>13</sup> In addition, this relatively generous support from the state generates considerable societal expectations that a widow will honour appropriately the great achievement of her fallen husband. Thus, according to patriarchal norms, widowhood demands further sacrifice. Joy and laughter should not be part of a widow's life; instead, with no husband, it is memory and grief that define it. Suddenly widows face a diminished status as they have 'lost their master' (*tar chonim*) or are 'left without their owner' (*andar mynal*) or pitifully are considered 'headless women' (*kylyoxy kytyrvatz kynegy*) (Shahnazarian 2004). In short, all these linguistic phrases allude to the patriarchal norm of a complete family where the father is the head of the family and the breadwinner. Maria<sup>14</sup> remembers:

When my father was seriously injured and his life hung on a thin line, my grandmother loudly prayed to God and asked him 'even if crippled, even if without hands or feet, let him stay alive, don't let my daughter remain without her master (*andar-ynderyu*).

A widow's isolation and marginalization can also come from the fact that widows keep their husband's memory alive and thus to some extent it continues to control their life. Susanna describes how she keeps the memory of her husband alive: '*The portrait of my husband hangs on the wall in my house ... I'll never remove his portrait, never...*' Some widows have talked about waiting for signs from their husband when they face difficult tasks. Furthermore, some widows assume that their husband is embodied in their children, especially if he died at the birth of their child (which happened often during the war in the 1990s). As Anush maintains: '*my husband died but he is alive in his child*'. This is specifically the case when the child is a boy and gets given the role of a male adult, the perished father. Thus, every so often a son at an early stage of his life is treated as the head of the family because he is perceived to be the incarnation of his father. In other words, some widows create their own reality to make sense of their life according to patriarchal norms which stipulate a woman's subordinate role in the shadow of her husband.

In addition to the societal demand on widows to live a withdrawn and quiet life in honour of their perished husband,<sup>15</sup> widows are also marked by superstition, connected to their social

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<sup>12</sup> Director of the Union for Relatives of Fallen Soldiers [*Soyuz rodstvennikov pogibshchikh voynov*], Stepanakert, August 2015).

<sup>13</sup> This interview quote also relates to the difficult socio-economic conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Unemployment rates vary across the region but can be as high as 30 percent in some parts according to the National Statistical Service (<http://stat-nkr.am/en>, p.26, accessed 17/11/2017). In the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, unemployment was estimated at 22.3 per cent in 2016 (<http://www.haynews.am/hy/karabakh-1326286593>, accessed 23/11/2017). According to the Republic's National Statistical Service, 23.3 per cent of the population in Nagorno-Karabakh live in poverty and 6.2 per cent of the population in extreme poverty (<http://stat-nkr.am/en>, p.26, accessed 17/11/2017).

<sup>14</sup> In this article, interviewed widows are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure complete confidentiality.

<sup>15</sup> In Nagorno-Karabakh, their solitary being is simply expressed in their everyday dress which is meant to be black for at least six months after the death of their husband.

stigmatization. This phenomenon has been especially discussed in publications focusing on widows in developing countries (Courtney 2014, Soussou 2002). Nune, a widow with three children, has experienced this marginalization as a result of stigma and superstition. Nune is not a war widow, thus received less state support and found herself at the bottom of the hierarchy of widows. Before her husband's death, she provided some additional family income by baking from home (wedding cakes, birthday cakes, etc.). Together with her husband's income, her small additional earnings secured a good income for the family. However, when she became a widow, the number of orders decreased substantially, especially for weddings and birthday cakes, because people felt superstitious about placing orders with a widow.

Another facet of the isolated and marginalized status as a widow is that, according to Karabakh Armenian traditions, it is not customary to invite widows to birthday parties or other celebrations such as weddings or the ancient community tradition of *midzhi*.<sup>16</sup> If they are invited out of politeness, they know that they should not attend because of their social stigma and their grieving status. Birthdays and weddings are about celebrating the next stage in life; widows are about grief and remembering the past with their husbands. This stigma about their status does not seem to leave them; Seda, who has been a widow for many years, told us with regret how she had been excluded from the *midzhi* for her young niece in 2006, just because her husband died in 1993.

### **Life Choices – Respect and Status or Second Love?**

For most of the war widows we interviewed, returning to their former social group and integrating again is hardly possible, although they are not subject to a sharp decline in their economic position, as widows in other countries experience (Cavallow and Warner 2014, Owen 1996, Soussou 2002) thanks to the relatively generous state pension. In Karabakh society, three factors determine the next life stage of widows – motherhood, patrilocality and strict social control. Many of the widows interviewed became largely dependent on their husband's family after his death. This dependence is especially strong when they have already lived with the husband's family during his lifetime. According to Armenian tradition, it is expected that the wife of the youngest (or only son) lives with his family. Given this dependency on their husband's family, widows are faced with a choice between a more predictable (approved) and a less predictable (risky) future. If they choose the latter and get married a second time, they would lose the help and support of their parents-in-law, as well as other relatives of their perished husband. The choice of the former, i.e. remaining a widow for the rest of their life and forgetting about their own personal desires, would ensure them a safe and accepted status in society but under strict social control. This option is more likely to be chosen by widows with children, because they prefer to ensure a respected societal position for their children.

Getting married again? I couldn't risk the well-being of my children ... it's very difficult with children to get married again anyway, and also generally it's difficult to find a good husband. Often even young girls have difficulty finding a

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<sup>16</sup> The *midzhi* support network is used in Nagorny Karabakh villages to help families to complete big tasks, for example, building a house or organising a very big wedding with more than 200 guests. Today, *midzhi* in Karabakh society is mostly held to prepare for the dowry of young girls and thus has become a type of young women's gathering before the wedding takes place, but one to which widows are never invited. Young women take part in this event and also married women, if wealthy, to help add to the stock of married women's wisdom (Shahnazarian 2004).



husband. Those who didn't get killed in the war were often either disabled war veterans or in the best case scenario shell-shocked ... many of them didn't have work. Well, what kind of life would that be? ... Yes, of course, it would be easier for my kids ... then people can't look down on them or talk about us. Well, not long ago someone proposed to me, but I said no straightaway ... Well I'm actually not a *songsuz*,<sup>17</sup> why do I need a husband? My daughter is married, my son is grown up. He came back from the army recently. That's a comfortable life, isn't it?

As becomes obvious from this interview excerpt, Marietta refers to the deep-rooted Armenian gender ideology that a respected family has a husband, the head of the household. She implies that people would look down on her because she lives without a husband and thus has not got a complete family as the societal discourse demands. Yet she concludes by highlighting that she has done her duty as a wife, she has brought up two children who now can take care of her. Hence, she questions the importance of finding another husband, implying the Armenian gender ideology that almost the only purpose of marriage is to create a family.

Narine also explains how she decided to live with her parents-in-law in order to avoid the risk of an unpredictable insecure future:

It was me who decided after the death of my husband to live with my mother-in-law for another twenty years until she died. And yes, there were five men who wanted to marry me ... My husband was killed by a mine ... I decided to live with his parents in his house ... Where else could I go? If I was to get married again, I'd lose the support of his parents. But how would life be with a new husband, who knows? ...

### **Levirate – A Strategy for Re-Integration?**

In connection with the issue of marginalization of widows, it is interesting to examine the phenomenon of levirate amongst Karabakh Armenians. Levirate is a very old marriage institution which has been discussed in other publications as a solution to widows' isolation and impoverishment (cf. Nyanzi et al. 2009, Sev'er and Bagli 2006). It is an ancient form of marriage, in which when a married man dies his widow marries one of his brothers (Sapir 1916). This tradition is often explained as an expression of patrilinearity, which suggests that a married woman is perceived as the property of the husband, eternally linked to him even after his death. Levirate in Nagorno-Karabakh presents a legitimate and accepted solution to the lonely status of widows and had been practised as early as the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Second World War, long before the war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the 1990s (Shahnazarian 2004). Nonetheless, in the Soviet era this tradition lost importance and was almost forgotten, but when the war started in 1991 and the number of widows in Nagorno-Karabakh sharply increased, this tradition experienced a revival. However, this does not mean that the revival was accepted without any criticism from the individuals affected by it.

In one of our informal conversations with a group of young men in Martuni in 2009, we heard of a case showing that even for men it is not easy to practice levirate. We were told that one young man whose brother had died and whose mother wanted him to marry his brother's wife ran

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<sup>17</sup> A woman without children or infertile.

away from home to avoid this, because he was in love with another woman. However, before he ran away he promised his brother's wife that he would take financial care of her and his nephew. In other words, this young man, aware of his responsibilities as provider for his dead brother's family, was trying to find a middle way.

Gohar, who married a second time via the levirate practice, told us how difficult this was for both parties:

My mother-in-law, when she received the letter (from the army) that her son had vanished, forced her younger son, my husband (but we weren't married then), to marry me because I had a son from his brother, basically his nephew. Initially, he rejected this suggestion in every possible way, saying 'how can I share a bed with my brother's wife, how can I look at her when he might re-appear.' In response, my mother-in-law suggested to me that I could choose any part of her house to live in with her second son ... and this is how we grew together.

In this way, because Karabakh society is a society where women's social status and welfare depend on their relationship to men, the practice of levirate fulfils the function of protecting its widowed women. By means of this practice, widows and their children in a patriarchal society can without conflict secure their social status as a complete family headed by a husband.

However, while the above interview excerpts demonstrate a degree of resistance from the men involved and to a lesser extent resistance from the widows themselves, the next interview excerpt with Mariam shows that even widows do not always approve of this practice. Sometimes it is other family members who enforce it, for instance, mothers-in-laws, who as older women have acquired a very high and almost unquestioned status in society. Mariam tells us how she resisted this practice:

In 1992, we got bombarded. My husband was killed and our house burnt down. My husband's cousin planned to get married to me, but I didn't want to. Simply because he is a rude person and an alcoholic and he is an *azaph*.<sup>18</sup> I can't imagine being his subordinate and serving him. Why do I need such a man? ...

Here it becomes obvious that for some widowed women, widowhood offers a certain freedom to choose what will happen next and the possibility of re-building their own life. In this interview excerpt, Mariam prefers the status of a grieving widow. She used some money from a government fund and with the support of her children rebuilt her home. Thus, she chose the predictable future of a single widowed woman rather than getting entangled with a man who, according to her, was not trustworthy enough.

### **Widows' Sexual Desires and Social Control**

Social control is perhaps the biggest influencing factor for a widow's further decisions in the next stage of her life. Neighbours and their controlling behaviour can affect widows as much as their children. In August 2015, the Director of the Women's Resource Center in Shushi, Gayane Hambarzumyan, explained that perhaps '*the smaller the territory, the more important neighbours are*', and this is how they can assert so much social control. As important as it is for neighbours to

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<sup>18</sup> Translates as bachelor.

watch out for each other in the insecure circumstances of Nagorno-Karabakh, their vigilance also has the effect of controlling other women's lives to a degree that severely limits women's freedom. Thus, social control structures a widow's life strategies and choices – they do not want to be ostracized by their neighbourhood for one wrong move. Following the unspoken discourse of traditional widowhood, to live with the memory of a deceased husband means prestige and honour for one's family and children. However, some widows openly criticize these social control mechanisms and what they entail for them:

I'm not against thinking of my own individual life. Everyone's organism has desires. And really one can potentially do anything within boundaries (*sahmanaphak*). Here in Karabakh, adhering to traditions (*orenkhav*) would be like burying oneself alive. It shouldn't be like this. I'm a little older, but there are also younger widows, how can they completely forget about their own desires? ... these desires are given by nature and don't depend on the person. Really, widows have only got two choices in this situation: either they don't care about society, and go from one man to another and follow their heart, in this way risking their children's future; or they remain alone and live as society expects ... and their children will suffer less.

As Hasmik describes in this interview excerpt, there are only a few options for widows: there is the option of accepting their widowed status according to societal norms or the option of ignoring societal norms and once more becoming sexually active. The latter option, however, would entail great risk of further marginalization, since sexual relationships outside marriage are not as accepted, as Hasmik explains further:

... three years ago I went to see a doctor because I thought I was ill with a women's problem.<sup>19</sup> But the doctor said: 'you aren't ill, you just need to get married again.' My daughter, however, didn't allow me to listen to what the doctor said because she didn't want me to get married again. She admitted that she didn't want me to get ill, but in this town (Martuni), she said, you couldn't find even five men who would keep it a secret if they had been with you.

As Hasmik's daughter's comment demonstrates, having a secret sexual relationship would mean sacrificing a widow's reputation, for it is not an accepted practice outside marriage. Accordingly, with a damaged reputation a widow could then experience losing the support and help from her neighbours which is essential in uncertain circumstances such as in Nagorno-Karabakh, as Gayane Hambardzumyan explained at the beginning of this section. Nonetheless, the idea of a second marriage seems to be unbearable for some widows, even if it was done to resolve their insecure status by conforming to societal expectations, as Shushan tells us:

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<sup>19</sup> Most of Nagorno-Karabakh's infrastructure was destroyed during the war in the 1990s, including hospitals and health clinics. Women were most affected by this, since they were not able to access adequate healthcare. Even today, most towns and villages lack adequate health facilities and women have to travel a long way to get medical care. Therefore, in Shushi, for example, women organize among themselves that one of them visits the gynecologist in the capital Stepanakert (by bus 30 min from Shushi), gets a prescription for contraceptive pills and shares the prescription with her friends. This can potentially harm women's health, as they mostly take medication without any prior consultation (Civil Society Monitoring Report 2014).

This isn't possible (second marriage), this is a desecration of the husband's memory and I'll never get married again. I don't want to experience again what I experienced when I got married for the first time. It was all perfect with him (her husband), even very perfect.

## **Conclusions**

The widows' experiences explored in this article have highlighted the various ways in which war widows in Nagorno-Karabakh are marginalized and how they navigate the challenges linked to their status as widows. Even though as war widows they have a respected societal status and receive substantial governmental support, it places societal expectations on them which may marginalize them in everyday life. We have documented how research participants have dealt with their unwanted status. Our discussion has shown that although in public most war widows conform to societal expectations, they are critical of Karabakh society's demanding exigent expectations of them. The most significant finding of our research is that marginalization for widows in Nagorno-Karabakh is not so much related to a worsening of their economic position as it often is in other parts of the world, but that it is the patriarchal discourse in society that marginalizes them. Due to the heightened militarization of society in the region, most widows would rather comply than openly challenge the patriarchal discourse, as *'women are simply not ready yet to challenge'* (Anahit Danielyan, independent journalist, August 2015). Hence, although one may be tempted to read these narratives as stories of powerless female victims of male patriarchy in need of support, we are instead inclined to read these stories as narratives of resourcefulness. They show the search for a middle way that satisfies both their families and society and does not entirely marginalize them. As we have demonstrated, for example, refusing the options of second marriage or levirate turns widows into agents in charge of their future. This agency could perhaps be interpreted as a sign of social change, although one which may be very slow, especially since these widows' narratives also show, as other studies do, that the protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has led to a polarization of gender roles.

Evidently, conditions for war widows in Nagorno-Karabakh can be vastly different, even in such a small region. Still, the challenges that face our research participants demonstrate that detailed explorations of widowhood deserve more attention. Although we have discussed the experiences of middle-aged and older war widows, their experiences can provide useful examples of the difficulties that widows under the age of 30 encounter. Thus, the topic of widowhood and how to deal with marginalization needs a much deeper understanding and further exploration in order to identify ways and strategies that can empower widows in general, and younger widows in particular.

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