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Working Paper: Azeri Women's Voices: Narratives of IDPs and Refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh War and Implications for Humanitarian Social Policy

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Introduction. This project is part of a larger body of research, *Azerbaijan at the Crossroads: Women and a Nation in Transition*, which examines social historical issues and contemporary issues pertaining to gender and ideological changes that have occurred in Azerbaijan and that have altered women's "place"—women's roles and women's identity—in Azeri society from the Czarist period of the 1800s and early 1900s, through the Soviet period of 1920-1991, and into the period of independence and transition from 1991 to present.

My present research focuses on female Azeri internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia. There is no substantial literature that provides detailed accounts and insights into the experiences of Azeri women IDPs/refugees from the current conflict that began in 1988 and that has continued under cease-fire since 1994. Therefore, my current focus is especially timely and significant because it examines women's status in the context of national and global socioeconomic, political, and ideological elements that redefine and affect women's roles and identity in Azerbaijan. This society, which was largely closed to the outside world for seventy years while part of the Soviet

Union, and is now undergoing major social change. Yet, scholarly works in English about Azeri women—and especially about Azeri women IDPs/refugees—are limited. My research provides a new voice for Azeri women by analyzing gender issues *from the perspectives of the women of Azerbaijan*. And as I elaborate in my discussion of policy implications later in this working paper, my research—which emphasizes “listening to women” and gaining knowledge of the everyday experiences of Azeri women—provides more thorough insights into important gender-related policy issues and important humanitarian policy issues.

Research Question and Objectives. Rather than testing hypotheses, my field research is qualitative in nature and focuses on a broad research question: Specifically, what are the life experiences of Azeri women, especially those who are refugees or internally displaced persons from the Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia and how have these women adjusted to their status of "displacement"? How do these women view their place and identity in a context of social and geographic displacement and in a broader Azeri society that is undergoing major political and ideological transformation in the post-Soviet era? The goal of my research is to give Azeri women IDPs/refugees a “voice” and to capture—through their own thoughts and words—the essence of refugee life, the essence of the often difficult and troublesome life experiences that they have confronted and continue to confront on a daily basis and how they cope with their status of displacement by constructing “hope”.

More specifically, my goal is to capture the essence of refugee life at two levels: personal and societal. On the personal level, compiling narratives from IDP/refugee women provides a fuller understanding of the plight—the unique and the everyday experiences—of these women who were forcibly uprooted from their homes and their communities. On the societal level, these narratives provide insights into broader Azeri conceptions of women’s roles and identity in the

context of post-Soviet transition, as the stalemate between Armenia and Azerbaijan continues with no immediate hope for these women to return to their homes.

My current project focusing on Azeri women IDPs/refugees builds on my earlier research in Azerbaijan that examined the emergence of women's associations in the post-Soviet period and their efforts at empowerment of women. This earlier component provided an enhanced understanding of the everyday lives and experiences of women in this sociopolitical and cultural setting, contributed to the comparative historical analysis of Western and non-Western feminisms, and provided a unique opportunity to gain insights into the transition of women's roles and of women's associations in Azerbaijan. In my current project, I have compiled narratives from Azeri women IDPs/refugees who were forced to flee their homes during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Women constitute seventy-one percent of the nearly one million Azeris who became displaced, and large numbers still live at or below the poverty line in "temporary" housing, such as converted school dormitories, abandoned buildings, or recently government-constructed IDP/refugee settlements.

Research Methods. As a sociologist oriented toward both contemporary issues and social history, I use qualitative interdisciplinary humanistic methodologies to address my research question. My research utilizes a social constructionist theoretical framework that focuses on interpretive analysis with a strong comparative historical emphasis. Therefore, rather than using formal surveys or questionnaires, my research methodology, which was approved by the University of Kansas Human Subjects Committee, employed informal open-ended discussions/dialogues during which I digitally recorded these women's narratives. The narratives capture the essence of their past and present experiences and mechanisms for coping with such

extended periods of displacement, thereby providing these women with a new voice to describe and explain the realities of “displacement” from their own perspectives.

I conducted these open-ended dialogues, typically two to three hours in length, with individual IDP/refugee women and with small groups of three to five IDP/refugee women, ranging in age from their early twenties to their sixties and seventies. Given that IDP/refugee women are dispersed in various cities and regions and that there are no complete listings of all such women, probability sampling was not feasible. Instead, I selected IDP/refugee women through referrals and what is commonly referred to as a combination of snowball and quota sampling so as to include women of varying ages, marital status, occupation, region, and so forth. My dialogues with IDP/refugee women took place in locations convenient for the women, ranging from their homes to schools to space provided by NGOs.

In the beginning of each dialogue, I provided a brief background about myself and my research. In many respects, this was the most critical point in the dialogue for it is here that I had to quickly begin establishing an atmosphere of trust with the women. As was the case with my prior research in Azerbaijan, the fact that I am a women, that I am fluent in Azeri, and that I have an in-depth understanding of Azeri culture were crucial elements in the process of establishing rapport: that is, in establishing a bond of trust and openness. In turn, my prior Fulbright affiliations with Baku State University provided additional credibility to my research activities. Following this introductory phase, my fieldwork dialogues then focused on broad questions to set the context, thereby encouraging IDP/refugee women to talk about their life experiences.

Preliminary Research Findings. In focusing on issues pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh War, it is essential to emphasize that my intent is not to examine the origins of the war or to evaluate or assess the merits of claims made by the governments of either Azerbaijan or

Armenia. Instead, my goal is to provide a more detailed understanding of the *impact* of the war and of forced displacement on the citizenry of the region. Furthermore, given my methodology, my intent is not to generalize my findings to all IDPs/refugees, but rather to explore the processes and dynamics of displacement on the everyday lives of Azeris—and particularly on Azeri women—who were forced from their homes and communities.

As a further note of clarification, the term—“refugees”—refers to Azeris who were living in Armenia and were forced to leave Armenia and to move to Azerbaijan. The term—“internally displaced persons”—refers to Azeris who were forced to leave their homes and communities in the region of Nagorno-Karabagh, which constitutes twenty percent of the land in Azerbaijan, and to seek shelter elsewhere within the country. Although I use the combined term—“IDPs/refugees”—in this working paper, the majority of women are IDPs, and my primary focus in this working paper is on IDPs, rather than on refugees.

In Azerbaijan, the term, *qachqinlar*, refers to two groups of refugees who were forced to leave Armenia and to move to Azerbaijan: (1) those Azeris who were *born in Armenia* and were residing in Armenia and (2) those Azeris who were *born in Azerbaijan* but were residing in Armenia. In turn, the term, *majburi kochkunlar*, refers to those Azeris who were forcibly displaced from their homes in Nagorno-Karabagh and forced to relocate in other areas of Azerbaijan as IDPs. Furthermore, whereas both terms are used in formal documents, reports, and media accounts in Azerbaijan, the distinction between refugees and IDPs frequently is blurred in everyday discourse, and the term, *qachqinlar*, is often used as a catchall term to refer both to refugees and to IDPs.

In focusing on the day-to-day experiences of IDP/refugee women, I organize my preliminary research findings into three phases: (1) the initial experience of becoming displaced,

(2) the process of finding a sanctuary, a place of safety, and (3) problems that IDP/refugee women confront and the process of coping with the prolonged period of “temporary” displacement while maintaining the “hope” of returning to their homes and communities in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this working paper, which is a work in progress, I provide a very brief overview, and therefore my commentary and analysis included herein should be viewed as tentative and as subject to revision at later dates.

I. Fleeing for Safety. Although the current Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dates back to 1988 when political efforts were initiated within the framework of the Soviet Union to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh into the state of Armenia, the majority of displacement occurred in the early 1990s when the Armenian military offensive moved through villages and towns forcing Azeris to flee. Often, people had little advance warning of impending Armenian attacks. Frequently the time was so short that they had no choice but to flee with minimal possessions, and sometimes only with the clothes they were wearing. One woman from the Khojali district, the site of what Azeris refer to as the “Khojali genocide,” recalled:

“When the shooting began, about 100 women and children gathered at my nephew’s house. It had a thick cover. Then we went to the forest trying to run away. The Armenian soldiers were capturing people one-by-one, wherever they saw, and then they murdered them. The soldiers were everywhere. It was cold, freezing cold, and there was thick snow around us. We were surrounded by the soldiers, like a ring. People were hungry. They had taken nothing to eat with them [when they fled]. But no one thought about it. We were just looking for a way to get out of the forest.”

Another woman, from the Shusha district, 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 [the town of] Turshsue and then to [the area of] 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 [the area of] Agdam and eventually to [the city of] Baku.”

And still another woman, from the Kalbajar district, described the panic of displacement as attempts were made to evacuate residents in April 1993.

“We left Kalbajar during a terrible and very horrible situation. Helicopters were sent from Baku. 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.”

II. Finding Sanctuary. Some evacuees fled from their homes to neighboring towns or areas, to any place where they had relatives, friends, or acquaintances who could provide them with temporary shelter. In other instances, evacuees eventually found shelter in old railway boxcars, mudhuts, abandoned buildings, government facilities, and other makeshift housing. Often, displaced Azeris moved as a community and re-settled elsewhere as a community or as a group of families from the same community. One woman commented:

“We came to Barda. We had relatives there. We lived at their house for some time. But it is hard to live together. So, we came to Baku.”

Another woman noted:

“Most of our relatives live in other regions. But the Directory of the Executive Power and the Committee for Refugees were kind people. They gave us rooms in the school for technical training. And we’ve been living in the school ever since. I am thankful to them. They are very kind. We are still living in that building. It is very crowded, but we live somehow. What can you do? It is life. You encounter lots of troubles and difficulties. You must go on somehow.”

Quite frequently, living accommodations still are 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 share one or two rooms. The following woman's account is typical of many other women's experiences.

"The situation is very bad. We live on the second floor here. There are children in the building, and they have no where 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?"

And another woman commented:

"It [the war] has had a very bad influence on my children. My son hasn't celebrated his birthday for 11 years. His birthday is on the April 2, on the day of the invasion of Kalbajar."

Finding sanctuary and adjusting to their new status of IDP/refugee has been a very difficult process. 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 that coincided with the period during which Azerbaijan had just gained political independence from the Soviet Union and was just beginning economic transition from the Soviet system. The people of Azerbaijan, as a whole, were experiencing economic hardship and scarce resources. And in this context, women IDPs/refugees indicated that they sometimes were subjected to disparaging remarks and treatment by some individuals who believed that the IDPs/refugees were receiving special treatment from the government and from aid agencies to the detriment of other Azeris or that the IDPs/refugees were inferior to other Azeris. One woman's account illustrates the point:

“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.”

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:

“They [non-IDP Azeris] now understand. They know that we did not leave our homelands of our own will—they know that we are not here because we want to be here. I locked my doors and left. I was *forced* to give up my home in Fizuli. Now they respect us. And they understand that Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to all of Azerbaijan.”

III. The State of Prolonged Temporariness and the Social Construction of Hope.

Azeri women IDPs/refugees are the most vulnerable of all Azeri women. In this context of crowded living conditions, giving birth to children in uncertain settings, inadequate medical care and nutrition, and unemployment, women’s roles are precarious as Azeri women IDPs/refugees have had minimal control over their social and physical environment during these extended years of continuing uncertainty and “temporary” displacement that, in effect, have become a state of permanence. Azeri IDP/refugee women continue to experience a prolonged state of “temporary” displacement that now is approaching two decades in length. Throughout this period, their lives have been filled with uncertainty. When will the dispute with Armenia be resolved? When will they be allowed to return to their homelands in Nagorno-Karabakh?

This strong desire to return is constantly reflected in comments on different levels, from micro to macro. Referring to the personal micro level, women frequently make comments such as:

“Even though we live here [in Sumgayit] physically, we live in Kalbajar [in Nagorno-Karabakh] in our thoughts. In our minds, we always see Kalbajar. We always talk about our land, about places, about the days we spent there.”

And referring to the macro national level, they make comments such as:

“These lands [Nagorno-Karabakh] are not just our lands. These lands belong to all Azeris and to Azerbaijan.”

On the personal level, Azeri IDP/refugee women have had little control over their situation even though they are the center of their families. Material issues such as unemployment, inadequate income, and substandard housing are central problems that they continue to encounter on a day-to-day basis. And psychological issues related to the death of their husbands, sons, and other relatives and friends in the war, being uprooted from their homelands, and experiencing disconnection with their past also continue to impact Azeri IDP/refugee women. In the on-going hope that they will be able to return in the foreseeable future, they often are still reluctant to establish deep roots in their new found homes. Even relatively mundane decisions can be problematic. For example, one woman commented:

“Even though we have now lived here [in our present location] for many years, we are still ‘standing’ rather ‘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 [Nagorno-Karabakh].”

Another woman commented:

“I have a leak in my roof, and I have had it patched several times to keep the water from coming in and shorting the telephone line that had stopped working. But I really don’t want to do anything major to my roof because any day now we may be leaving and returning to our home in Kalbajar [Nagorno-Karabakh].”

Still another woman noted:

“People tell us that we should try to get another, more modern apartment like so many non-IDPs are now doing. But why? Our ‘home’ is still in Fizuli [Nagorno-Karabakh]. That’s where I was born. That’s where my relatives are buried. That’s where I want to be.”

Indeed, even after over 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.”

Azeri IDP/refugee women’s identity is intertwined with their homeland, whether it be Shusha, Kalbajar, Fizuli, Khojali, or other towns and areas of Nagorno-Karabakh. This identity—and the hope of returning—is central to their coping with the experiences of displacement. Further, it is maintained through various mechanisms. Perhaps most central is the fact that IDPs frequently live with or near other members of their family and near other families from their home community. And children from the same IDP community often attend the same public school. Furthermore, some schools have become a reflection of the community as they take on the name of the IDP community. For example, “Shusha school” and “Kalbajar school.” As one woman noted: “How can I forget? I live next door to four other families from Kalbajar. Every time I step out my door and see them, I am reminded of home.”

Their identity also is maintained and reinforced through reminiscing and through storytelling about the past—about their homes and communities in Nagorno-Karabakh—with their children, other family members, and friends at home and at weddings, celebrations, and other social gatherings.

Azeri IDP/refugee women express their pain and suffering, their sorrow about the loss of their homes and their lands, and anger toward the Armenian soldiers who murdered their relatives and friends, but they also express determination and resilience and the hope of returning to their lands. These emotions and sentiments are expressed verbally and also in written form, particularly in poetry. Azeri culture includes a long and rich history of poetry, literature, and music. This strong tradition is reflected in the numerous monuments, parks, streets, and public buildings named after such individuals as Nizami, Fizuli, Natavan, Behbudov, Bul-Bul, and Vurgen. Indeed, the

Nagorno-Karabakh region—and the area of Shusha in particular—are 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. The writing, reading, and reciting of poetry plays a significant role in the identity of many Azeris and of many Azeri IDP/refugee women in particular. Such poetry—written by both IDP/refugee women and men—frequently recalls the beauty of their homelands, their pain and anger toward Armenia, and their longing to return. The following comments are illustrative:

“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.”

Ultimately, a central issue for Azeri IDP/refugee women is “hope”—the hope of resolving the conflict with Armenia, either peacefully or militarily, and of returning to their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh. As one younger woman 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*.”

And the words of one elderly woman succinctly express the thoughts and emotions of so many:

“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.”

Policy Relevance. Situated between Russia and Georgia to the north and Iran to the south, Azerbaijan is of major geo-political importance to the United States. It has been allied with the U.S. in “the war on terror,” including the war in Iraq, and it is central to the production and transportation of oil and natural gas from the Caspian Region to the West. Yet, Azerbaijan also is

engaged in a delicate political balance as Azerbaijan maintains positive relations not only with the U.S. but also both with Russia and with Iran. The increased importance of Azerbaijan to U.S. National interests is further highlighted by Russia's recent military incursion into neighboring Georgia, which included the potential for seizing control of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline transporting crude oil from the Caspian Sea to Western markets, and by Russia's continuing efforts to gain increased access to Azeri natural gas exports and increased control over natural gas supplies to the West.

Yet, U. S. national interests in Azerbaijan are not restricted to issues pertaining to political alliances, access to oil and gas resources, and economic cooperation but rather are also intertwined with continuing U.S. efforts to promote democratic governance and civil society. Directly related to the latter are issues of civil society and of humanitarian concerns. Indeed, my research on Azeri IDPs/refugees has important policy implications—pertaining directly to humanitarian and human rights issues—for the United States in its relations with Azerbaijan, as well as for Azeri and international NGOs, humanitarian groups, scholars, and practitioners. My research is of significance because it gives Azeri women IDPs/refugees a “voice” and captures, through the women's own thoughts and words, the essence of IDP/refugee life. These are women who confront difficult and troublesome life experiences, conditions that have been compounded by deleterious effects of economic transition that Azerbaijan has experienced during the past decades. These women's narratives provide important insights, with policy implications, into major humanitarian and human rights issues pertaining to IDPs/refugees.

Such policy-relevant research contributes to our broader understanding of gender, culture, and humanitarian elements within Azerbaijan and provides U.S. analysts and practitioners with new insights and a deeper understanding of important political, economic, and cultural issues. My

research also benefits NGOs and other humanitarian agencies that directly seek to assess the needs and to assist Azeri IDPs/refugees. On a broader scale, such policy-relevant research links directly to geopolitical and humanitarian issues of conflict resolution and peace-building efforts and the need for Azerbaijan and for Armenia to come to a resolution that will bring enduring peace to the citizens of both countries.

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