

# **Migrations and Gender Transformations in Post-Soviet Karabakh**

*From the Anthropologist's  
perspective*

# Introduction

## THE CAUCASUS REGION



# Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Caucasus Region



# Nagorno-Karabakh Territory Maps, New Flag



# Russian Federation and Krasnodar Region Maps



# About Research Methods

- **Qualitative methods** proved particularly relevant
- *Participant observation*: The study is based on eight-month stay in Karabakh (in the district of Martuni) in 2000-2001, and additional trips in August 2003 and September 2004.
- *In-depth* and *semi-structured* interviews: total number of interviews was 68, out of which 9 interviews were with the key informants whose life trajectories I continue to follow
- At the Martuni District Court I have consulted 112 civil lawsuits involving divorce which is the total number of divorces registered in Martuni during 1990-1999

# General Historical Context

- Contested Borderlands (1917-1920)
- 1988 declaration of democratic liberties and values conceived a number of ethnic conflicts on the territory of the USSR. The succession of events started with the dispute about the jurisdiction of Nagorny Karabakh. The conflict grew, and developed by early 90s into a real war.
- As a result of this war:
  - 160.000 Azerbaijani and Muslim Kurd refugees from Armenia
  - 350.000 ethnic Armenian refugees, who lived in Azerbaijan
- This event became a tangible breaking point in the people's consciousness. All the informants, without exception, marked this event in their speech. All their life is divided into the periods "before the event" (Soviet period) and "after the event" (Postsoviet period). These words require no commentary. Everybody knows in the detail the content of the weighty informative message, stored in these two words.

# The Escape of Labor Migration

- 'Normal' migration of Soviet time
- Survival-based migration of the postwar period
- Transitional crisis
- Poverty, deprivation and social exclusion
- Culture, class and gender factors
- Shifts in the gender composition after war
- Changes in the social and demographic structures
- Remittances from abroad



# Theoretical framework: Hanging on to “Weak Ties”

- Mark Granovetter’s concept of “the strength of weak ties” (1983): networks extending broader than the economic market are built and extended on the previously existent basis of mutual cultural and emotional commitments
- Remittances and other forms of extended kin assistance
- Personal Social Networks in finding economic opportunities
- The complexity of emotional interaction and the financial-economic exchanges process

# Motivation for Migrations after 1989

- Under the pressure of the following factors:
  - Politics
  - Economy
  - Social psychology
  - Culture
- Crisis of Traditional Patriarchy and Gender/Kinship Roles:  
Migrant's wives = virtual widows
- Women's new coping strategies and new discourses

# Multiple Marginalizations

- **Refugees from Azerbaijan / Women (including local women) / Women-Refugees**
- **Personalistic clan-like networks:** In employing the expression "clan" I follow the contemporary local usage. Many local informants, in fact, might even use the word "mafiya" — from the Italian Mafia — which adds a strong meaning of condemnation in describing the particularistic social ties that are perceived inherently corrupt. These are certainly NOT clans in the traditional anthropological sense of the term: such clans have never existed in Karabagh during the historical times. The new "clans" rather denote the bounded patronage networks based on kinship, friendship, neighborhood, political allegiance, shared commercial interests and life experience (such as serving in the same military unit during the recent war). The new clans have an explicitly and sometimes cynically instrumental nature. Therefore this phenomenon stands closer to nepotism or what some sociologists, following Max Weber, call the "neopatrimonial pattern of power".
- **Feminization of poverty** This applies, however, only to the lucrative occupations such as in the market entrepreneurship and the higher levels of state administration. More typically, women are employed in the state social services and education where the feminization has been traditionally higher in Soviet times. In Martuni during my fieldwork such employment was offered at: one kindergarten and two schools, one bank branch, the district library, and the local administration. The wages were minimal across the board. Nonetheless, obtaining even these jobs required competitive effort, in which the men (usually the fathers, husbands, brothers or other influential relatives) participated by offering to women their patronage and activating personal connections.

# The invasion of women into the market domain

- **Extremely competitive field**

*My work became too difficult because of so much competition. The minivans now run directly to Sadahlo [a Georgian and therefore politically neutral town on the border between Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia which serves a major wholesale market of imported goods — N.S.] Anybody who wishes, even women, can catch a ride and return with merchandise. This newly-made "businesswoman" S. is truly a pest! She brings down the prices. Instead of pretending to run a business, she should better stay at home, take care of her children and kitchen. As if the men were not having such difficulties in earning a living and sustaining the families, these women are now sneaking into business!*

R. Aslanyan's interview, a 43 years old who owns several shops and is considered a fairly prominent businessman

- **Women's Discourse of Victimization**

a voice from the other side of the gender divide in business: *Every week I travel with a group of traders to the wholesale market in Sadahlo. And what else there remains? The husband does not send us money, the relatives cannot help, my parents are old, and I have no brother. The children must be fed, dressed, have the school supplies.* (A. Martirosyan, 36 years, mother of two children, unemployed teacher of Russian literature and language.)

# The Ambivalences and Paradoxes of the Patriarchal Society

- Networking out of patriarchy
- Women as a “transgressor” of traditional norms (exploiting the system of extended kinship)
- The psychological discomfort and / or emotional liberation  
the wives of migrants commonly used the metaphorical expressions such as: *Vanished without a trace, our home is without a head, a master; he made our heads bend in sorrow; he spoiled all my life*  
*A woman must not have to deal with these things. Her prestige suffers, too* (literally, the "honor drops" )
- The sexual “sponsorship” contract
- Community control: rumors, gossip and family’s symbolic capital

# The Outcomes of Virtual Widowship

- Reunification (the “ideal” resolution)
- Distanced Bigamy (dual household as a compromise decision)
- Divorce (final failure of the family project)

# Scenarios: authentic voices

- *The "caring" people let the husband in Moscow know that his wife got a lover. They called on him to return and put his house in order. The husband suddenly appeared at the moment when she was about to leave with her lover for Stepanakert [the capital of Karabagh — N.S.], as if he caught them in the act. The husband made a huge scandal on the spot, publicly. He yelled at her in very rude words, all while the people were watching, and demanded divorce. But she was unmoved, stood her ground! She demanded to leave her alone and go back to his Moscow, let her have a life. The husband already regretted his words. But too late! She wouldn't back down. Why, she asked, did you try to trample me into dirt? Why all this scandal in front of idle passers by? Where is your manly courage and honor? And so, he went back to Moscow, gathered money, and returned to Yerevan [the capital of Armenia — N.S.] where his daughter studied at a university. He dressed her up, lavished her in gifts. He brought expensive sweets to the professors during her diploma finals. He walked his daughter by hand, like a good father. The poor devil then sent money home asking to accept him back.*
- *Our neighbor K. the other day came to visit from Riga [the capital of Latvia — N.S.] He brought his wife a gorgeous gown, a thick golden necklace, lots of gifts for the children, and money atop of that. (Regarding N. Grigoryan, 41-years old, a mathematics teacher at school.)*
- *My husband was here recently, he wanted to come back for good and settle down with our family. But I told him to go away, I no longer want him around. Where were you, I said, when I was sitting here with the grandchildren under the bombardment? When we were freezing without the firewood? When there was nobody to help me dig the bomb shelter? And so left, to live with that woman he was living with... No, I have no regrets. <...> He became a different man.*

# Conclusions

- **Reasons for the new wave of labor migration:**
  - Pervasive unemployment and the lack of market-based opportunities in a depressed region
  - Nepotism
  - The expectation of the resumption of war with Azerbaijan
  - The generalized socio-psychological frustration of Karabakh's population in the aftermath of ethnic conflict



# Findings

- The impact of migrations on gender relations in the region is destructive
- Malfunctioning of patriarchal order – a variety of women’s life-strategies which carry a transformative potential
- Women’s invasion to the public domain
- The contradiction between the dominant (virulent) discourse regarding gender relations and the actual social practices / alternative discourses
- Society’s “objective” eye. Community as a *panopticum*: repressive functions of social control