

Andrea Hapke, cultural scientist, trainer for conflict transformation

The Responsibility of 'Mothers'. Gendered Discourses of Women's Peace Organisations in the North Caucasus/Russia

Introduction

This article discusses the significance of gender in violent conflicts and uses the discourses of women's peace organisations in the North Caucasus as an example. Since the Soviet Union dissolved, the region¹ has been marked by violent conflicts. The region has been profoundly unsettled by the Chechen War, which has been raging since the mid 1990s. Discourses on 'motherhood' and the 'responsibility of mothers' constitute an important basis for women's peace work in these militarised conflicts. They enable peace activists from various contexts to organise at local and supra-regional levels and to develop common political claims and activities despite profound political cleavages. Women form networks in which activists from disparate sides of the conflict collaborate. They develop alternatives to the prevailing militarised discourses and refuse to accept policies that create divisions among communities on the basis of ethnicised and religious ascriptions and which legitimise the use of force. They reveal that agreements among peace activists are possible. They engage in dialogue and collective campaigns against the politics of violence and separation. Throughout these activities the 'special responsibility of mothers' constitutes a central symbolic metaphor for organisations from various contexts.

'Motherhood' is not a new topic in connection with women's peace activism. Throughout the world several examples are known that in various ways refer to constructions of motherhood: the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina (Howe 2006, Guzman Bouvard 1994), organisations of mothers in Sri Lanka (de Alwis 2001), in Nicaragua (Cupples 2005), the Mothers for Peace in Germany², to name just a few. It becomes evident in all these movements that the social construction of the special responsibility of mothers for nonviolent conflict resolution and for peace renders possible women's mobilisation and campaigns.

This phenomenon will be discussed here by drawing on the examples of women's peace organisations in the North Caucasus³. Firstly, the peace activists' organisations and their general conditions will be presented in order to clarify the importance of discourses on 'motherhood' within the context of the Chechen War. It will become evident that the possibilities for political action are very limited. The actors operate within a context in which, on the one hand, non-governmental organisations are not recognised as authoritative political actors while, on the other hand, women are largely excluded from political discourse, in particular from the discourse on peace and war. Secondly, against this background, the article will highlight the connection between 'motherhood', notions of peace and the nonviolent

¹ The republics of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia-Alania, Karbadino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygea as well as the regions of Rostov, Krasnodar and Stavropol belong to the North Caucasus. All of these republics and regions belong to the Russian Federation. In administrative terms they are subjectmembers of the Russian Federation. The regions of Rostov, Krasnodar und Stavropol are areas with a majority Russian population. People of different non-Russian ethnicities live together in the republics. The region is marked by a great ethnic diversity. See for example, Proskurjakov 2006 on the situation in the North Caucasus.

² The organisation, which was founded in 1981, is, among other things, involved in Chechnya. (Gladysch/ Filter 2007)

³ The article is based on the findings of my PhD dissertation, which was funded by a Heinrich Böll Foundation scholarship.

termination of conflict. It will become apparent that the development of political action ties in with existing cultural patterns of femininity. Thirdly, the article will present the ways in which women's supra-regional networking builds upon a commonly shared notion of 'motherhood'. In a fourth step, the dilemmas and problems that lie in the dominant reference of 'motherhood' as the basis for women's peace work will be discussed. The examples presented will illustrate that the sole reference to 'motherhood' is not unproblematic with regard both to furthering the politicisation of claims and to the coherence of the alliances.

Women's peace organisations in the North Caucasus

Since the mid-1990s a remarkable development and networking process of women's peace organisations has taken place in the North Caucasus. This article will concentrate in particular on the Chechen organisations Echo of the War and Mothers of Chechnya for Peace, the Russian organisation Association of Don Women, as well as the network Women for Life Without War and Violence, which unites women's peace organisations from the whole of the Caucasus and Russia. The article is based on an analysis of the peace activists' texts and an analysis of interviews conducted with women from the aforementioned organisations⁴. The actors' discourses will be at the centre of the following discussion. The term 'discourse' is used differently in various social scientific analyses. In this article 'discourses' are considered to be the thematic approaches to the nexus of 'gender and peace' that appear in the texts of the examined peace organisations. These discourses are analysed for patterns that appear with a certain regularity and frequency, and in which constructions of gender are linked to 'peace' and 'peace work'. Discourses are relevant in this context because they are used to produce an attribution of meaning, and to render plausible and to legitimise actions⁵.

The women's peace organisations in this analysis operate in a region where violent conflicts and their respective effects on the population have marked its development. Their perspectives cannot be understood without a characterisation of the structural, social and political situation in which they operate. As early as the beginning of the 1990s the seven republics of the North Caucasus with a small Russian population belonged to the poorest regions of Russia⁶. The population's situation is marked by unemployment and a lack of prospects as well as the strong presence of violent actors. From 1994 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2008 two massive campaigns by the Russian army took place. They are known as the First and the Second Chechen War⁷. Thus, since 1994 there has been a "continuum of violence"

⁴ The material, which consists of programmes, project proposals and project reports, articles, speeches and the like, was mainly collected during several trips to the North Caucasus from 2004 to 2005 and during meetings with peace activists. I conducted several interviews with peace activists on their work, their goals, the history and the structures of the organisations in this setting. Moreover, I explored the significance of gender constructions. The interviews provide an important basis for the analysis, because the Chechen organisations have produced little written or published material. The period of investigation is from 1994 to 2005.

⁵ In a broader sense I understand discourses to be knowledge that exists and is produced in communities. Discourses are the (provisional) results of current and historical processes of negotiation about knowledge that is at any one time valid. They are often considered culturally self-evident. They are, therefore, rarely questioned or understood as having been produced through social processes. Donati (2001), Nullmeier (2001), and Schwab-Trapp (2001) for example, deal with the significance of discourses for social and political action.

⁶ The North Caucasian republics are dependent on massive financial transfers from Moscow. The federal budget finances, for example, Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya to a level of 80% and more (Perović 2005: 43).

⁷ The second war has no fixed ending. Currently there are barely any relevant persons involved who argue in favour of an independent Chechnya. This can be attributed to the

(Cockburn 2004) in the Caucasian Republic. The situation of the population in Chechnya is marked by the collapse of civil and economic structures, a state of educational emergency and severe psychic after-effects of violent experiences, which include the loss of relatives, material goods and housing. In addition, the ecological situation is catastrophic. Military equipment, landmines that have not been deactivated and the contamination of soil threaten people's health.

The civilian population was heavily involved in conflictual events and strongly affected by violent actions. (e.g. Halbach 2004: 18) The social asymmetries between Chechnya and Russia as well as between the republics of the North Caucasus and other Russian inhabited areas were reinforced by the wars. Discourses of social exclusion and discrimination based on ethnicity and religion intensified and further aggravated the conflicts. Ethnic differentiations into 'Russians' and 'Chechens' and 'people of Caucasian nationality' became dominant (Zvereva 2003, Eichler 2006, Engel 2003, Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker 2005).

In these processes gender played an important role in the mobilisation of the inclination towards violence. The reinforcement of militarised masculinity revealed the close connection between ethnic constructions and constructions of gender in the context of crises and violent conflicts. As Eichler (2006: 486) stated, the Russian leadership used the Chechen War, "to associate itself with a notion of militarized, ordered, patriotic Russian masculinity in juxtaposition to a notion of destabilizing, aggressive, criminal Chechen masculinity." The construction of an opposition between a civilised, modern Russian masculinity on the one hand and a terrorist, fundamentalist and primitive Chechen masculinity on the other hand became particularly effective (ibid).

Ethno-nationalistic discourses emerged on the Chechen side, too⁸. They are expressed in male heroic epics which focus on the construction of the 'freedom-loving and resistant Chechen' (Tiškov 2001: 45, 147 et sqq.). In doing so, images from the 19th century literature were invoked⁹ (ibid). At the same time the commemoration of historic combatants, such as Sheik Mansur Ushurma and Imam Shamil, were revived. These leaders, who resisted the Russian expansion of the 19th century, were declared heroes and role models of the national liberation movement¹⁰ (Halbach 1995). Portrayed as their successors, Chechen men were mobilised for the current war and presented as 'fearless defenders of their country' (Tiškov 2001: 276). An interpretation of the ethnologist Tiškov's analysis of interviews suggests that, in the Chechen combatants' individual discourses, the 'defence of the home and the family' became a decisive argument in favour of arming oneself and fighting (ibid: 308). As the following comment by a Chechen combatant reveals, the 'defence of women and children' served to justify the use of military force:

„In my opinion the war really started when the people took up arms. It started to defend its homes and its relatives. Take me, for example. I didn't even intend to fight. But no! I was forced to do so! I knew about the mercenary soldiers. I knew

military superiority of the Russian army and to the successful policy of 'Chechenisation', i.e. the takeover of structures that are relevant to politics and the military by pro-Russian Chechen forces (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker 2005). It is possible to speak of an end of the war, however not of an end of violent actions.

⁸ For more about this see Choumiatski 1996

⁹ Lermontov, Pushkin, Tolstoy

¹⁰ Publications appeared on them, and conferences were held. In 1991 the Lenin Square in Grozny was named after Sheik Mansur. In the same year the Chechen Republic issued stamps of its own, which were supposed to demonstrate their independence from Russia. The stamps presented a set of three pictures Sheik Mansur, Imam Schamil and the new president of the Chechen Republic, Džochar Dudaev. (Halbach 1995: 196)

about their cruelties and their licentiousness. And when I imagined my daughter could fall into their hands, my hands demanded a weapon. Well, and then I simply had to fight.” (cited in: Tiškov 2001: 381).

Gender Studies findings that identify a structural inequality of women’s and men’s positions in wars (cp. Harders 2002) also apply to the Chechen War and to the situation in the North Caucasus. Under the conditions of an all-embracing militarisation of society and the dominance of militarised masculinity, women, and women’s peace organisations, in the political discourses on war and peace remain unnoticed. They barely have access to the official political decision-making level. Demands for gender equality and women’s participation in political structures are marginalised in Russian as well as in Chechen society¹¹. Moreover, the activists operate in a context in which non-governmental organisations are not recognised as political actors and considered relevant partners of the state. The situation in Russia is increasingly marked by processes of a return to authoritarianism and the centralisation of state structures.

Non-governmental organisations that deal with human rights issues encounter state repression and innumerable bureaucratic obstacles. Organisations that deal with the Chechen War are particularly affected¹². Anti-war stances are very unpopular with the Russian public, and peace work is hardly recognized. Hence, women’s peace organisations operate in a social climate that is in no way conducive to the work of non-governmental organisations or to observing civil-societal functions, such as the monitoring of government bodies. This is also mirrored in the financial situation of the examined organisations. They mainly accomplish their work with the help of project funds and donations from abroad¹³.

The activities and discourses of peace activists, which strive towards a dialogue between antagonists, need to be evaluated against this background. The organisations in this article have been operating for more than ten years and have developed a broad spectrum of peace activities. These cover public relations, humanitarian aid, the promotion of women’s self-organisation, psychosocial work, education, working towards democracy, and the organisation of dialogues and networking. Whenever the state pursues a policy of ethnic differentiation, the peace activists oppose it by stressing commonalities. They develop political demands as well as a vision of civil society, a democratic social order and gender equality¹⁴. They strive, on various levels, to influence the public perception of the Chechen War and the situation in the North Caucasus. The organisations collect data and material that documents the conditions of the population in Chechnya. They pay particular attention to the conditions of women and children. The Association of Don Women, for example, conducts sociological research on the

¹¹ The number of women in the Duma, the Russian Parliament, is decreasing continuously. While there were 13.6% of women in the period of 1993-1995, in 2003 only 9.8% of the Members of Parliament were women. There are no women in the Russian government. (UNDP 2005: 43) In 2004 one in 34 Members of the Chechen Parliament was a woman. (UNDP 2005: 50)

¹² In January 2005 a law was enacted that massively impeded the work of NGOs by creating complex bureaucratic requirements. It made a case for banning them, if they were to contravene the ‘national interests’ of Russia.

¹³ The bulk of the work was, and continues to be, voluntary. The financial situation of most of the organisations is precarious. Posts are only guaranteed for a maximum of one year, and they are, moreover, often shared among several colleagues.

¹⁴ See for example, the action programmes of Women for Life without War and Violence (Meždunarodnaja konferencija „Ženščiny za žizn’ bez vojn i nasilija“ 1996, Sojuz „Ženščiny Dona“ 1998, Sojuz „Ženščiny Dona“ 2001a)

role, the situation and possible courses of action of women in the Chechen War (Association of Don Women 2002).

Despite difficult conditions, the women succeed in developing considerable and substantial activities in their regional and local alliances. What is the basis for such a successful mobilisation? When answering the question it is evident that discourses, understood as thematic framings that bestow meaning upon action, play a major role. The actors render plausible, and legitimise their actions with these discourses. They develop a common concept of self and formulate common goals. These communicative processes are, on the one hand, concerned with understanding and self-understanding among themselves. On the other hand, the peace activists strive to convince other women and men of the correctness of their goals and try, especially, to mobilise women for action. Their texts address the Russian and Chechen populations, government institutions, the international public, and potential sponsors.

Understood in this way, the discourses are gendered. One can find a multifaceted and, in part, contradictory thematic spectrum of statements on 'women' and 'femininity'. This spectrum is marked differently, depending on the respective ethnic communities. However, it also offers common traits. For example, activists from various Caucasian groups refer to traditional, civilian approaches to conflict resolution. Numerous stories tell of women who were able to end conflicts by throwing their headscarves between the parties in conflict. All groups share the notion of 'motherhood' as an ethical and moral stance. Thus, it is possible to speak of a 'discourse of motherhood' that underlies the peace-promoting activities. As I will suggest in the following examples, the discursive figure of the 'mother' offers the basis for women's public and organised (political) action.

Women's peace organisations in Chechnya and Russia – the politicisation of 'motherhood'

In Chechnya there were no women's organisations before the war. Since 1994 several organisations have developed. The role played by 'motherhood' with regard to the emergence and the work of women's peace organisations is presented in the following examples of two organisations.

The organisation, Mothers of Chechnya for Peace was founded in spring 1995. From the beginning of the war people, mainly women, gathered regularly in front of the OSCE building in Groznyj and demanded information about the whereabouts of their missing relatives. They spontaneously signed one of their appeals to government agencies with Mothers of Chechnya for Peace. When some of the women travelled to Moscow in order to speak with the chairperson of the government committee for prisoners of war and internees they were not admitted as private individuals. Therefore, they founded an organisation with the name "Mothers of Chechnya for Peace". These women were not necessarily the missing persons' biological mothers; they were related to them in diverse ways.

A typical leitmotif developed in the discourses of the Mothers of Chechnya for Peace that is linked to the construction of motherhood: that of common 'suffering' and 'compassion'. Individually experienced agony was considered to be the connective element that rendered possible understanding and organising with other women. The "suffering of thousands of mothers" (Arapieva 2006: 14)¹⁵ became the starting point for the mobilisation of women for peace and for the demand to respect human rights. They derived the responsibility for the

¹⁵ The same formulation can be found by Gašaeva (Duduev 2003: 12).

termination of the war from the common experience of suffering war and violence. In doing so the construction of 'responsibility' is closely linked to 'motherhood'. Consequently, a mother is understood to be a being that is *per se* connected with another being, the child. Based on this relationship she can appreciate the hardships and worries of others and develop a sense of responsibility for them. Activist and president of Mothers of Chechnya for Peace, Madina Magomadova wrote: "My suffering, my tears flowed together with the streams of other sisters, mothers, wives." (Magomadova in: Arapieva 2006: 14).

The politicisation of women resulted from the concrete examination of the results of the armed conflict. While they were looking for their relatives, they dealt with existing social structures and developed political demands. Magomadova worked on different government committees¹⁶. She and her fellow campaigners addressed the problem of those who had disappeared during the war using public appearances, resolutions, and interviews. They criticised the government for its inaction and demanded that it take responsibility for investigating the violations of human rights. Magomadova travelled through European countries and publicised the situation in Chechnya on an international scale.

Activists of the organisation Echo of the War went through this process of politicisation, too. At the beginning of the war Taita Junusova, one of its co-founders, lived in a village in the north of Chechnya. Along with many others in Chechnya, she lost her job at the beginning of the 1990s¹⁷. In the first months of the war she desperately sought possible options for action in order to resist the disintegration of social structures. However, she had no idea about "what my place and my role could be" (interview with Taita Junusova, 29.9.2005). The young men from her village went to the capital to register for the armed conflict. Junusova thought about joining them; supporting them as a cook or nurse. In March 1995 she heard that women from Russia were on the way to Chechnya to protest against the war. The Russian women called their march of peace the "march of motherly compassion"¹⁸. They explained on a banner that they were demonstrating "in the name of life". They demonstrated for an end to the war and wanted to bring back to Russia their sons and husbands who were deployed as soldiers in Chechnya. This message sparked Taita Junusova's activism and opened up new options for action. She stepped forward to demonstrate Chechen women's solidarity with the Russian women. Together with other women she organised a convoy of eight buses. They welcomed the Russian women emphatically and joined the march for peace. (interview with Taita Junusova, 29.9.2005)

Taita Junusova is convinced that women and mothers need to unite for peace. The "march of motherly compassion" became the catalyst for her political involvement. It enabled her to break out of the typical role assigned to women in violent conflicts: that of behaving passively.

¹⁶ She worked as an expert on the search for missing people on the Committee for Negotiations between Russia and Chechnya, which was founded in 1995, and she worked as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee in Search of Missing People in the Chechen Republic from 1996 to 1999.

¹⁷ This is attributable to the collapse of the economic infrastructure. Many people lived from casual employment, trading, and seasonal work in other regions. A study by Bersanova (1999) reveals that women were particularly affected by unemployment. Women were the first who stayed at home in insecure and increasingly violent situations.

¹⁸ The mothers of Russian soldiers initiated the peace march in March 1995. Representatives of the soldiers' mothers' organisations, which had existed since the end of the 1980s as well as other individuals took part in it. See Hinterhuber 1999, Glasser 2005 on the "Soldiers' Mothers' committees". A report by Sonia Mikich, which was broadcast on April 11th, 1995 in the NDR-"Weltspiegel", gives an impression of the peace march.

At the beginning of the war there was a clear-cut and massive obligation on men to fight¹⁹; for women, however, active channels were not available. They had to sit at home while the men in the family had to protect them and the children. Political activities were barely possible for women as the construct of the 'peaceful woman' excludes political involvement and intervention into political and conflictual events. Taita Junusova, however, took advantage of the opportunity to take action presented by the Russian women. Symbols of motherhood primarily legitimised this type of political action.

The sense of responsibility that is linked to 'motherhood' can be found in other activist discourses of the Echo of the War, too. To this day the organisation is involved particularly with children in the Chechen conflict zone. Initially, it organised humanitarian aid. Later, it set up education and children's rights programmes. As activist Zajnap Gašaeva put it, they followed "the call of [their] hearts, the sense of responsibility for the children and for the future" (Sojuz „Ženščiny Dona“ 2001a: 32). However, the work of Echo of the War covered a much broader spectrum than social interventions for children. The activists documented war crimes and travelled to European countries with their material to inform people about the situation in Chechnya and to denounce human rights violations. Further, their political demands aimed at the legal prosecution of war criminals who had rendered children orphans (e.g. El'dieva 2006: 21).

As these examples illustrate, the references to constructions of femininity and 'motherhood' were essential for mobilising Chechen women and for triggering the work of women's peace organisations. The activists' use of these motifs of motherhood build on deeply entrenched discourses. They ensure that their actions will be accepted. In addition to justifying their individual actions, they also legitimise their concerns to the outside world. By referring to 'motherhood', they take up a widely shared discourse that is part of the cultural standards in many countries. While mothers' actions are mostly located in the private sphere in hegemonic discourses, the women in these organisations have used 'motherhood' to appear before the public. Based on individual experiences, a process of politicisation has taken place. The women have created structures, founded organisations, and developed political demands. In contrast to the dichotomous patterns of political / apolitical and active / passive, these discourses of motherhood constitute the starting point for women's actions. Unlike hegemonic discourses, women are not pushed into passive roles. Instead, they are at the centre of the discourses as peace activists.

The discursive figure of 'motherhood' also decisively established the peace work of women's organisations in Russia. In contrast to Chechnya, women's organisations existed in the north Caucasian regions that had a majority Russian population, as early as the mid-1990s. The Association of Don Women in the Rostov area is one such that determined peace activism as a fundamental field of work and task for itself. The organisation developed from a women's support group founded at the beginning of the 1990s and which operated under the name of "Mother and Child". The potential that was linked to the discourse of 'motherhood' was picked up in the context of 'peace and war' in the mid-1990s and developed in manifold ways. During a meeting of women's organisations in Moscow in summer 1995, collaborators of the organisation were confronted with the effects of the violent conflict on civilians in

¹⁹ It was difficult to escape from the obligation to fight. and to choose other options for action. Nevertheless, several men lived according to many different patterns as ethnologist Tiškov's (2001) material reveals. On the issue of narrowing down of subject positions for men in the run-up to the war and at the beginning of the war see e.g. Bašić 2004, Blagojević 2004, Seifert 2003.

Ingushetia and North Ossetia²⁰. They perceived the relationship between the groups from both north Caucasian republics as distanced. The groups sat far apart and didn't listen to each other's descriptions of their respective experiences. This observation led the Association of Don Women to the decision to perform peace work and to develop this as an area of work. The president of the organisation, Valentina Čerevatenko, put the key questions to the then session as follows:

“How can we deal with the problem of peace and war? What is our place in the regulation of these processes? Doesn't it scare us that women are sitting at our table who blame each other and who cannot find a way to solve this question, *and who do not see that all of them are mothers?*” (interview with Valentina Čerevatenko, 8.10.2005, emphasis A.H.)

The speaker employs the discourse of motherhood as an emotional argument in order to establish an immediate need for action. At the same time it is assumed that the potential for peace and reconciliation resides in the 'motherhood' of the antagonistic parties in a conflict. The fact that her speech is about women and mothers plays a decisive role in the appeal. With the argument 'We all are mothers' the notion of closeness and a connection to the women in the wartorn regions are produced and social responsibility is demanded.

Against this background the Association of Don Women developed considerable and versatile peace work in the areas of public relations, education, psychological care and networking. The links between 'motherhood', 'peaceful femininity' and discourses on peace are decisive for all these areas of work. As the following extract from the homepage of the Association of Don Women reveals, here, too, women as active peace activists are at the centre:

“In order to bring peace into being we consider it necessary to use to the full extent the peace-making abilities of women and motherly diplomacy. When women unite they can accomplish the transfer of the parties in conflict from a culture of war (if it is at all possible to speak of 'culture') to a culture of peace. However, for that purpose a huge amount of every-day work and the belief in its success are required.”²¹

Supra-regional collaboration – women's networks for peace

It is noticeable that the link between the term 'motherhood' and peace activism is a basic motif in women's programmatic and political activities in the North Caucasus. This enables women to formulate a common interest in peace across different contexts and political positions in the violent conflicts. While attending a supra-regional conference, one activist formulated the compelling obligation for women to act upon the war as follows:

“May a woman who carried children in her womb for forty weeks, who bore them in agony and who nourished them at her breasts, may she be indifferent in the light of other people's tragedy and that of members of other nationalities, other religions, other colours of skin or shapes of eyes?... I call on all women to protest against all wars in the name of mothers and children.” (Magomedova 2001: 119)²²

²⁰ In 1992, conflicts in one of the border regions between the two republics, which belong to the Russian Federation, resulted in several hundred deaths and the expulsion of the Ingushetian population from the district.

²¹ The quotation is from the former website of the Association of Don Women (www.donwomen.de). The internet presence of the organisation was completely remodelled in 2006.

²² Ajšat Magomedova is a peace activist from Dagestan/ Russia, the president of the organisation League for the Protection of Mother and Child.

Based on the common responsibility of women and mothers, and based on the initiative of the Association of Don Women, more than 50 women's organisations from the whole of the Caucasus region²³ networked from 1996 to 2002. They united under the name of "Women for a Life Without War and Violence", formed a common steering committee and organised several supra-regional conferences²⁴. Shared actions and projects were carried out within the scope of the network. The actors saw a need for action on many levels. Among them were the creation and propagation of a 'culture of peace' and a solid basis of interpersonal relationships, particularly gender relations. By setting the creation of a 'culture of peace'²⁵ as a priority, education and public information about the causes of war as well as about methods of nonviolent conflict management were understood to be pivotal. The network campaigned for the development of democratic structures and civil society and for the empowerment of women. It demanded the political exercise of influence by women's peace organisations on legislation, in particular with regard to the military, and women's participation in conflict resolution at the decision-making level. They also focused on social tasks which had arisen out of the violent conflicts, such as, coming to terms with trauma, the reintegration of former combatants and their families, and working with children and adolescents.

The conferences of Women for a Life Without War and Violence were of great significance for the formation of women's peace networks at regional level. Representatives of organisations were able to exchange their knowledge and their experience in peace initiatives within this context. The results of the discussions are manifested in their collectively agreed action programmes. The goal of the network was programmatically expressed through its name: "A Life Without War and Violence". This goal was inextricably linked to the strengthening and consolidation of a supra-regional women's movement. The strengthening of the women's movement was considered a decisive way of achieving a peaceful society²⁶.

The link between 'femininity'/'motherhood' and peace was theoretically substantiated in the 1996 action programme. Within this discourse a male and a female principle are understood to structure social relations. The principles are considered fundamentally different and viewed as complementary. As a result, 'masculinity' is constructed as bellicose, militant, aggressive and destructive of life. Femininity, however, is understood to be peaceful, life-creating, protective and nonviolent. (Meždunarodnaja konferencija "Ženščiny za žizn' bez vojn i nasilija" 1996: 32-36)

Discourses on gender, and discourses that particularly referred to 'motherhood', became radically important in the collaboration of actors who came from the entire Caucasus region and from Russia, who were positioned on different sides in the discourses of the warring

²³ Women's organisations from the South Caucasian countries Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were represented in this network, too.

²⁴ The conferences took place in 1996, 1998 and 2001. Approximately 300 representatives of non-governmental organisations, the media, and scientists as well as representatives of the local administration attended them. Material on these conferences appeared online in Russian at www.donwomen.de.

²⁵ The term has been used in international contexts since the end of the 1980s. In 2001 the UNESCO and the UNO proclaimed the decade of the "Culture of Peace".

²⁶ In particular, the action programme passed in 1996 is clearly influenced by the platform of the World Women's Conference in Beijing (1995). Women for a Life Without War and Violence took up the notions on the role of women's organisations in peace processes and adapted them to their context.

parties²⁷. Commonalities among women were emphasised, and appeals to solidarity were made. At the peak of anti-Chechen propaganda in Russia the Association of Don Women argued in favour of dialogue and reconciliation between Chechen and Russian women. A Russian psychologist formulated the following appeal: “I turn to you, Russian and Chechen women. If every one of us says, ‘Who, if not myself?’ and approaches the other, the evil must retreat, because nothing is stronger in this world than the love of a woman – mother...Only the one that makes the gift of life can preserve life.” (Sojuz „Ženščiny Dona“ 2001b: 13)

Based on these contents and this legitimacy, the activists informed the public about the political situation in Chechnya, a region plagued by conflict, and about women in the region. In their publications, Chechen and Russian women reported on common projects: on their experiences during the war and on its effects on the civilian population. These presentations were contrary to the hegemonic discourses in both Russia and Chechnya. They blatantly contravened official discourses, according to which there was no war at all, since the acts of war were officially presented as strategies against ‘terrorism’. In such a situation the notion of the need for peace and nonviolent conflict resolution signified a regime-critical potential. Women’s organisations contradicted the official version by raising the issue of, and by denouncing, bombing raids, kidnapping, torture, and the disastrous social situation in Chechnya²⁸. Moreover, they offered alternative suggestions for solving conflicts and alternative social visions in the face of seemingly permanent relationships of violence. With their notions of nonviolence, cross-cultural dialogue and everyday work on relationships, they made a stand against the official understandings of conflict resolution that rely on military force and political actions. In doing so, women’s political involvement and political participation were important preconditions for corresponding changes.

The activities of the Chechen organisation Echo of the War, too, were from the outset characterised by collaboration with Russian women. The activists supported women from Russia who were looking for their missing sons in Chechnya. They organised round table discussions and strove towards a dialogue between Chechen and Russian women and between women from Chechnya and Dagestan²⁹. In 1997 a supra-regional Russian-Chechen organisation was founded which also bore the name “Echo of the War”. This was meant to be a signal for the collaboration of women on both sides. The Chechen co-president of the organisation, Zajnap Gašaeva, reasoned, “Thousands of Chechen and Russian women are unified due to distress: their sons, brothers, husbands died or are missing. This requires our collaboration, the strengthening of our options” (Duduev 2003: 12). The suffering of women and mothers was the connecting element and the central motif for collaboration on the Chechen side, too.

Challenges to collaboration

²⁷ The relevance of gender constructions to the production of an inclination to violence in the Chechen War was presented on p.4 et seq. of this article. Similar patterns can be seen in warlike conflicts in the south Caucasus.

²⁸ For example, interviews with Gašaeva and Basaeva (Heßling 2005, ZEIT-Fragen 2001, Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker 2004)

²⁹ The atmosphere between the population of the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan was very tense after Chechen combatants had been involved in fights in villages in the mountains of Dagestan in 1999 and after Chechen combatants had in various ways violated the territory of the neighbouring republic. This also had effects on the relationship between Chechen and Dagestanian peace activists. The efforts towards a dialogue are documented in a brochure (Omarova/ Maldaev/ Magomedova/ Magomedov 2003).

Feminist peace and conflict studies or gender studies, each assess women's peace work that is based on 'motherhood' differently³⁰. Some contributions to feminist peace and conflict studies in the 1980s and 1990s entailed a normative political approach. The question of the way 'femininity' could be used in peace-political respect was pivotal. Representatives of this perspective, such as Sara Ruddick, considered it a chance to develop visions of peace and women's emancipation by tying in with ascriptive roles of women and women's experiences³¹. Ruddick developed her 'politics of care', which was based upon 'positive feminine values' as a model for a peaceful life together (Ruddick 1990). Representatives of poststructuralist or deconstructionist approaches problematised approaches that referred to 'peaceful femininity' and 'motherhood' as the bearers of a special potential for social development. They referred to the fact that the orientation towards 'motherhood' and 'women's peaceability' acts on, repeats, and reinforces the dichotomous social ascriptions of roles (Kaplan 1994: 123- 133, Wasmuth 1996: 10). From their point of view it is questionable whether social change can be achieved through such a concept. They question the emancipatory effects on women, since a hierarchical relation of power is contained in the binary constructions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Representatives of this concept refer to analyses that reveal that the rationale of the use of violence is based on constructions of 'bellicose masculinity' and 'peaceful femininity'. Since these historically and discursively deeply rooted constructions are reciprocal, the reference to 'peaceful femininity' will always reproduce the construction of the bellicose man, too (cp. Seifert 1999: 61).

While linking with the poststructuralist approach, this article retraces the construction processes of gender in the discourses of peace activists in the North Caucasus and their impact on peace work. The relevance of gender to political action, and the collaboration of women in violent conflicts is made explicit. The potential of the reference to 'motherhood' has been presented so far. Some problems and dilemmas that are linked to this construct are discussed next.

In light of the politically tense situation in the region, the collaboration of women's peace organisations did not remain unaffected by the intensifying political and military struggles. When political pressure became too great, the women's alliances also came under pressure. For example, in 1999 some of the Russian women withdrew from the Chechen-Russian organisation Echo of the War. Under the pressure of political events the consensus that had been built upon the common 'suffering of the mothers' and that had been stable until then started to crumble. It is hard to say which events in the organisation led to the breach. Nor can the way the activists dealt with the conflict be reconstructed. In an interview for a newspaper Chechen Zajnap Gašaeva attributed the breach to the escalation of the violent conflict and to the officially propagated concepts of the enemy³². (Duduev 2003: 12)³³

There were similar conflicts within the network Women for a Life Without War and Violence. During a meeting of the steering committee in February 2000 a member of the Krasnodar Committee of Soldiers' Mothers criticised the network for focusing on the lot of Chechen children. She complained, "We should not only think of [...] Chechen children. We have to think of our children, too. They need help" (Protokoll 2000). The speaker called upon the assembly to talk about groups in Russia that were in need as well as discussing those in

³⁰ Seifert 1999, Harders 2002, Hinterhuber 2003, Hagemann 2005 offer insights into the debates.

³¹ See also Mitscherlich 1987, York 1998, Skjelsbaek 2001.

³² Terrorist attacks in Russian cities and massive anti-Chechen propaganda caused a good portion of Russian society to support or tolerate the Chechen War. (Siegert 2003: 153)

³³ Nevertheless, the Chechens continued their peace work, and they found other Russian partners in the aftermath.

Chechnya. The chair of the session, Valentina Čerevatenko, repudiated the comparison of the situations of Chechen and Russian children. She emphasised that they had to work with both target groups and that the goal was to organise encounters between Russian and Chechen children, “so that they will not shoot at each other tomorrow” (ibid.). This example suggests that the ‘responsibility for children’ did not appear only as a unifying force but also as a disruptive element in the discourses once a distinction between ‘one’s own’ and ‘alien’ children was made. This example reveals the importance of developing common goals that have a different foundation than the assumption that mothers and women *per se* have the same interests.

It has been shown that the construction of the ‘responsibility of mothers’ that is posited as universal unites women from various contexts. An opportunity for common discourses of peace and of peace activities resides therein. However, if the construction of commonality is so important for collaboration, the question arises as to how differences and misunderstandings are dealt with. The peace activists’ discourses assume that women necessarily understand one another and find agreement through their biological and social roles and experiences. Hierarchies among the women, different positions within the conflict and issues around social position are barely discussed in the regional networks³⁴.

At this point the question of the activists’ understanding of ‘power’ arises. Complex relations of power are masked by leaving unquestioned the conditions under which the symbolic link between war, gender and peace is produced. The ‘mother’s heart’ stands for women’s ‘peaceability’ and ‘responsibility’ in the discourses, and it constitutes a widespread metaphor. Slogans, such as, “You all are mothers!”, “Our children are crying for help!”, and “Women, listen to your hearts!” (e.g. Sojuz „Ženščiny Dona“ 2001b: 12) appeal to women’s responsibility. By locating examples, such as the ‘mother’s heart’, in women, they occupy an innocent position and thereby place themselves outside of social structures. The activists take on a high degree of responsibility, that is to say, the entire responsibility for peace. However, they do not take on their share of responsibility for the war. Women’s participation in a ‘system of strife’ is not discussed. The responsibility for war and violence is delegated to men and male structures³⁵.

Furthermore, ‘masculinity’ is barely discussed. While the role of women is broadly debated, the role of men is dealt with only briefly in the publications of the organisations cited in this article. Discourses on men and ‘masculinity’ often serve only as contrasts to the constructions of femininity³⁶. The construction of women’s and mothers’ responsibility for peace is contrasted with dominant constructions of belligerent, military masculinity. Men’s peacemaking options for action are *de facto* masked.³⁷ An alternative of the dominant notions of ‘masculinity’ has not been provided for, conceptually or programmatically. In this way the activists undermine, on a discursive level, their wish to create sustainable peace. A debate on ‘masculinity’ and the development of alternative roles for men could offer new perspectives³⁸.

³⁴ Moreover, other concepts of identity and women’s experiences that do not equate ‘femininity’ with motherhood are blanked out by rendering ‘motherhood’ central to the construction of ‘femininity’.

³⁵ It is striking that women’s and mothers’ roles and actions are consistently assessed positively. A critical debate on the topos of motherhood is lacking entirely.

³⁶ This aspect appears particularly clearly in the action programme of Women for a Life Without War and Violence (Meždunarodnaja konferencija „Ženščiny za žizn’ bez vojn i nasilija“ 1996).

³⁷ This, despite the fact that some men work in, and support the organisations.

³⁸ This is evident, for example, in processes that were activated by the project Omnibus Line 1325. It is the goal of the German-Russian project that is funded by ZIVIK to implement

Concluding remarks

In this article the significance of the category 'gender' for the peace activists' actions in the North Caucasus was explored. Several examples illustrated ways in which constructions of a binary gender system can legitimise women's concern for peace and can become the foundation of their actions. The situations in which peace activists operate are marked by violent conflicts and the delegitimisation of hitherto seemingly universal values and patterns of orientation. In this context the activists increasingly resort to deeply rooted historical and discursive patterns that offer continuity across different political systems. The equation of 'women/ motherhood/ femininity' with 'peace' renders possible the mobilisation of women against war and violence. The particular responsibility for life ascribed to women is derived from their life-giving function. A deeply rooted interest in the maintenance of peace is allocated to them. This discourse, which draws on mothers as biological beings, is linked to a discourse that emphasises mothers' social experiences. This has an impact not only on individual women, who access politics via a traditional concept of gender roles. Rather, the reference to socially acknowledged constructions of femininity bestows legitimacy upon their actions. Women from the entire Caucasus region find it possible to identify with these discourses; women who are placed in different positions in the conflicts. The reference to a common 'responsibility of mothers' renders possible networking and collaboration.

The peace activists refer to constructions of femininity that initially preferred to locate women in the sphere of the house and the family rather than in the political sphere. However, it became obvious that women's organisations politicised 'motherhood', transforming and expanding its role. 'Femininity' is discursively valorised and linked with active positions. This is an effective strategy of self-empowerment for women. They become visible as political actors, they create political structures and this opens up a space for the development of alternative discourses, including those that are critical of dominance. In a context in which women's actions are largely understood as social and not political actions, they struggle for access to the political sphere and to the general public³⁹. Their peace work is accompanied by gender-political involvement, which is aimed at strengthening women as political activists. The reference to 'discourses of motherhood' occurs in a context in which barely any other constructions of femininity are available, which have high symbolic contents and which could legitimise women's public actions.

Dilemmas also emerged from the references to constructions of 'motherhood' in conjunction with war and peace. The article revealed the fragility of a consensus reached on the basis of seemingly universal constructions of femininity and 'motherhood'. It was also observed that 'masculinity' plays a subordinate role in the discourses, often serving as a foil for emphasising women's potential for peace. A debate on 'masculinity' could offer new perspectives for peace work. It is necessary to discuss differences among women and their different positions in the contexts of conflict. However, despite the difficulties and problems presented here, the fact that the reference to existing constructions of gender and 'motherhood' renders possible

gender perspectives in peace work and to strengthen women's roles in peace processes. The participants of the courses report on their experiences in a newsletter (www.omnibus1325.de). There is, for example, a report on the foundation of a Fathers' Counsel in a kindergarten, and a Russian member of staff of the Association of Don Women reflects upon his male socialisation.

³⁹ It cannot be ignored that it is above all women, i.e. Chechen and Russian human rights activists and peace activists, that shape the image of the Chechen conflict in the western public and who appear before the public with political demands.

peace policies and regional alliances of women from different camps of the conflict needs to be appreciated. The actors take up cultural patterns and hegemonic gender discourses, draw upon them, and displace them via political action, albeit in small steps.

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