



## **Intercultural learning among young women from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Finland and Sweden**

### **Summary of the project**

In winter 2008 the Åland Islands Peace Institute, together with its partner organisations, the Women's Resource Center in Yerevan/Armenia, Yuva in Baku/Azerbaijan and Mälardalens Kvinnolobby in Västerås/Sweden started to plan a training and networking course in the framework of Action 3.1. of the European Union's Youth in Action Programme. After several months of thorough preparation "Living bridges" brought together 25 young women from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Finland and Sweden on the Åland Islands in August 2009.

The "Living bridges" training project was based upon three cornerstones: feminism, intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution. Young women from Sweden and Finland (mainland and Åland) and Azerbaijan and Armenia came together on the Åland Islands between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2009 to discuss these issues in the light of the Åland example. The international, joint training course was preceded by national preparatory trainings held in each country respectively. The purpose of the training was to deepen and develop contacts between women internally and between the regions, to encourage active citizenship and community involvement, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance as well as to build a base of social and professional ties between the Nordic countries and Southern Caucasus. The activity lasted for 8 days (without travel days) – 1 to 2 days for each national pre-training and 6 days for the international training. There were 5 to 8 participants from each country, plus experts and support staff, which makes a total of 35 participants. Throughout the project, non-formal learning was used as the main methodological approach. The aim of the discussions, work-shops, educational sessions and excursions was to achieve inclusion and interactive participation.

## Description of the activities

### Themes

The main themes of the project were gender theory and feminism, intercultural dialogue, conflict mediation and resolution and the role of youth, particularly women, in conflict resolution.

Feminism and conflict resolution are of central interest for all participating organisations: as for the Åland Islands Peace Institute, conflict resolution plays a central role in all of its activities and gender is used as a mainstreaming method and approach. For the two feminist NGOs active in Southern Caucasus, the themes of this project are the very essence of all their work. The young women who participated in the project live in an area with several unresolved conflicts (Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia all in the South Caucasus) or a region where a similar conflict was solved less than a century ago (between Finland and Sweden). All partner organisations work to break gender stereotypes and empower women. They promote active citizenship and an active role of women in conflict resolution.



### Preparatory stage

Pre-trainings were arranged at different times in all four countries and were held at the offices of the participating organisations. The local pre-trainings aimed at preparing the participants to work together and at providing them with more information on the history, culture and traditions of the countries represented. For the Caucasian representatives the pre-training programme was focused on discussions and interactive games on intercultural understanding, tolerance and other elements that help to facilitate a dialogue. They also completed exercises on context sensitivity in order to broaden their understanding of their home environment in socio-economical terms as well as to enable them to share it with other training participants. For the Nordic participants, the pre-training included discussions on gender roles in the Nordic countries and basic updates on the political situation in the Caucasus.



### **International training**

The international training course took place on the Åland Islands on 17-23 August 2009 (not including travel) and engaged 25 young women. The objective of this activity was to bring together young women from different countries (affected by past or present conflicts) and engage them in discussions on feminism, intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution. Subtopics included (but were not limited to) context sensitivity analysis, basic conflict dynamics and tolerance. As integral parts of the training, basic European principles such as democracy and human rights were discussed in terms of tolerance, intercultural understanding and respect. Gender equality and peaceful solution of conflicts were the principles studied in combined perspective, in terms of the role of the women in conflict resolution, reflecting the European principles.

### ***Feminism***

The participants were encouraged to reflect about the term feminism. With reference to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other legislation on regional, national and European level aimed at decreasing the discrimination of women, the advancements towards gender-equality in the EU, Scandinavia and the Caucasus were discussed and deficits detected. The discussion focused on persisting power structures, public and private divides that efficiently limit women in practicing active citizenship and methods to counter the oppression and exclusion of women. The so called girl group method was presented. While used in many EU countries it is not very well established in the Caucasus. All participants were keen on learning more about this method and brainstormed about the adaptation of this method to their home contexts.

### ***Intercultural dialogue***

Methods to counter xenophobia and intolerance continuously need to be re-discussed, re-assessed and updated to meet new challenges. This is part of what has been done during the training. This project strongly aimed at replacing “enemy images” with positive, personal experiences of encounters with young people from other countries. Young Armenians and Azeris have rarely the opportunity to meet and engage in deeper discussion. For the participants from Finland, the project brought closer young people from the mainland (the largely bilingual region of Turku/Åbo) and from Swedish-speaking Åland. There is still fairly little exchange between these regions and it shall give participants an opportunity to reflect about their own cultures and identities. For the participants from Sweden this was an opportunity both to get acquainted with Finland and the Swedish-

speakers of Finland as well as to participate in discussions about the conflicts and the status of women in the Caucasus.

Both, the pre-trainings and the international trainings aimed at raising awareness of one's own and the culture of the other participants. During the international training cultural perspectives on identity, collective and individual identities and intercultural dialogue were recurring themes.

Cultural nights were arranged by the groups' participants and featured, among others, snacks, music, dance, quizzes and outdoor activities typical to the respective regions.



### *Conflict management*

One theme of this project was conflict resolution which reflects the very origin of the whole European project. Intercultural dialogue can prevent conflict and facilitates finding solutions to ongoing conflicts. Looking at the Åland example as an example of a conflict resolved by peaceful means allowed for a shift of perspectives, way from conflict to peace. Mary Kaldor's distinction between old and new wars and Johan Galtung's notion of positive and negative peace were introduced and triggered valuable discussions around the terms peace and conflict.

While much interest was directed to the Åland example, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was experienced as a highly sensitive topic. A great desire for peace prevailed among the Caucasian participants despite their different views on history and the possible solutions to the conflict.



### Method

Throughout the project, non-formal learning was used as the main methodological approach. The project methodologies were based on such techniques as interactivity, participation, holding educational workshops, sessions and excursions. All project coordinators have previous experience of non-formal trainings. To name but a few, Ms. Mammadova, representative of Yuva, is a professional trainer in non-formal education and a member of the Pool of the Trainers of the Council of Europe and SALTO (<http://trainers.salto-youth.net/PervanaMammadova/>). The sessions were held in either the whole group or in three to six small groups. All results were shared with the whole group. The participants participated in group work and discussions involving all participants. They prepared oral presentations and got trained in discussing and evaluating the arguments of others. In this way their critical thinking and articulation of own views were enhanced. The participants were the main actors and the timetable was adjusted according to their need during the course of the week. A short evaluation session was arranged every day before or after the daily programme where the participants had an opportunity to reflect on their impressions and share their feelings and thoughts about the training with other group members. Different evaluation methods were used in order to involve every participant in the evaluation process. The majority of them were inspired by the Intercultural Learning T-Kit. A longer evaluation session was organised on the last day of the exchange where each participant had to provide feed-back on the programme and organisation of the training. Besides, all participants were asked to fill in an evaluation form and present their opinion about the different elements of the programme (lectures, study visits, cultural evenings etc.) on the scale from 1 to 5.

### Multiplying effect

On the educational level, this training course was expected to widen and deepen the participants' understanding of feminist conflict resolution and how this can be applied in civil society youth work. At the end of the training course the participants expressed their motivation to go back to their realities and turn their newly acquired experiences and skills into different kinds of actions. Many

participants declared their wish to find out yet more about the other countries. Some want to pursue further studies on conflict resolution at the university level. The results of the training will be disseminated within the participating organisations. The participants from Armenia and Azerbaijan hope to be able to work together in the future despite the great divide between their countries. The local communities of all organisations benefit from the formal and informal presentation of the training and the acquired knowledge of the local organisations.

On the personal level this project aspired to challenge old perceptions of feminism, peace-building and not the least "the other", e.g. "Armenians", "Azeris" and "Caucasians", "Finns", "Ålanders" or "Swedes". It is hoped that this will have a lasting impact on the participants so that they can act out of genuine conviction in relation to the young people they will encounter in their social and professional networks. As previously mentioned, this is a controversial and ambitious aspiration from a Caucasian perspective.

Every organisation is responsible to arrange follow-up activities for their representatives and provide them with support in order to ensure that the participants make use of the knowledge and skills they have gained during the training. Living bridges has initiated further cooperation between and within the two regions and the respective organisations at the NGO level and institutionally. During the activity, as well as before and after, there were opportunities to discuss new ways of working together within the EU Youth in Action Program. Sustainable cooperation is currently under preparation.

### Visibility

Already before the international training course journalists from Azerbaijan had contacted us with the request to report on this event. Because all participants should feel safe during the course we decided that the Peace Institute's current volunteer from Azerbaijan, herself a trained journalist, would send a press release and interviews to the Azeri and Armenian media upon the permit of all participants. The Azeri media and the Armenian media have received press releases and have subsequently written about the seminar. These articles can be found here:

<http://www.today.az/news/politics/54706.html>

<http://www.anspress.com/index.php?nid=128342>

<http://www.anspress.com/nid128352.html>

<http://day.az/news/politics/168700.html>

<http://vestikavkaza.ru/news/obshestvo/molod/6956.html>

<http://www.vesti.az/news.php?id=13633>

<http://news.am/ru/news/2638.html>

[http://news.bakililar.az/news\\_molodej\\_azerbayjana\\_i\\_24329.html](http://news.bakililar.az/news_molodej_azerbayjana_i_24329.html)

The Ålandic media has also covered the training. The articles can be downloaded here:

[http://www.nyan.ax/nyheter/?news\\_id=45535](http://www.nyan.ax/nyheter/?news_id=45535)

<http://www.tidningen.aland.net/article.con?iPage=1&id=18321>

Both articles explicitly mention the Youth in Action Programme.

A further instrument for visibility is the webpage of the Åland Islands Peace Institute. The project has been announced there and this report is available there for the interested public ([www.peace.ax](http://www.peace.ax)).

### Achievements

The course has achieved the objectives jointly set by all partner organisations. The project provided the participants with experience of intercultural encounters and interactions. They learned about gender theory and gender perspective. For the Caucasian representatives this training was particularly challenging since meetings like this are perceived as highly controversial in their countries. Engagement in a training on conflict resolution requires a lot of courage and open-

mindedness from the individual participant and has a potential of critical/important personal development. Contacts between and within the Caucasus region and the Nordic countries have been deepened. The project provided the participants with a non-formal learning experience of intercultural encounters and interactions. They learned about gender theory and gender perspectives, intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution in a non-formal setting. At the same time the objectives of the Youth in Action Programme were achieved. European citizenship means active citizenship and this was a topic discussed during the course, with focus on the question what role women can play in resolving the conflicts prevalent in their societies. The participants were young women, some of them already active in youth work, others not yet. By engaging in these discussion all participants acted as active citizens. This learning experience can be expected to have lasting and multiplying effect in all partner organisations and among young Europeans in all partner countries.

Cultural diversity was experienced every day. The programme reserved room for the presentation of the different countries and their cultures present and intercultural communication was the topic during one of the sessions.

The knowledge gained about the other's cultural backgrounds and the gender patterns before the international training, taken together with the intensive discussions during the first day (cultural perspectives on identity and socio-economical contexts) and the casual cultural nights has resulted in a positive intercultural learning experience.