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# Building Trust Through Care: A Feminist Take on Inclusion in Multi-Track Mediation

Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos

## ABSTRACT

Inclusion is seen as a ‘golden standard’ in conflict mediation, and multitrack peace processes as a tool to operationalize it. However, when non-official (Track Two and Three) actors do not have faith in the official (Track One) peace process, a critical tension emerges, undermining the underlying logic of multitrackness. This article examines this tension, applying a feminist lens to the peace processes in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh. It calls for a re-thinking of the hierarchical logic of a multitrack peace process, predominant in much of the literature and practice, and to (re-)centre practices of care, relationship and movement-building, and social reproduction.

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## Introduction

Soon after the Russian troops entered Ukraine on 24 February 2022, international peace community galvanized around calls for a peace negotiation. While not as public as the calls for a humanitarian response or for military support to Ukraine, the question: ‘how can the international community support a peace process?’, permeated the air in the early days post-invasion, and was the recurring theme of many conversations I had with international organizations at that time. Interestingly, however, Ukrainian women did not welcome these efforts with enthusiasm. Those I spoke to did not believe a peace negotiation with Russia was possible, or that it would bring a positive outcome. In other words, they did not trust the (potential) peace process and, therefore, did not see calling for one as a priority.

While the discussion of the peace processes in Ukraine is beyond the scope of this article – and is done by Tetiana Kyselova (forthcoming, 2023) in this volume – the dynamic described above sheds light on a broader trend across Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Namely, that those who work towards peace in their daily work – and self-identify as peacebuilders – might not always trust or support a formal peace process as a way of ending a war.

In this article, I argue that such is the case in Armenia and Azerbaijan, with regards to the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, as well as in Georgia, with regards to the negotiations around Abkhazia and South Ossetia (referred to as the Geneva International Discussions – GID).

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Applying a multitrack framework to my analysis, I posit that when non-official and grassroots (Track Two and Three) actors do not have faith in, nor support, the official (Track One) peace process, a critical tension emerges, threatening the underlying logic of a peace process. I track the trajectory of multitrack processes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, to better understand how ‘multitrackness’ operates in these contexts, and how the deficit in trust between the actors across and within different ‘tracks’ affects the peace process.

I apply a feminist lens to my analysis, examining the tensions, shortcomings and opportunities for the multitrack approach in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from the perspective informed by the appreciation of care and social reproduction work that goes into peacebuilding. As a result, I propose a ‘feminist reimagining’ of a multitrack peace process. I argue it does not contradict John Paul Lederach’s initial vision of ‘multitrackness’, but rather helps bring back some of its elements that have been missing in the mainstream discussions.

The article unfolds in three parts. First, I offer a theoretical framework for thinking about multitrack peace processes – adapting the ‘patchworked peacemaking’ framework proposed by Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger (forthcoming 2023) in the introduction to this volume. I suggest that – like patches – peace processes can take different shapes and serve different purposes. This is significant, because it undermines the linear and hierarchical logic that often underpins peacemaking efforts. Furthermore, I argue that using the aesthetic of ‘patchworking’ is also useful in bringing one’s attention to the dimensions of peacemaking that are rooted in, and dependent on, social reproductive work – an aspect rarely if ever acknowledged in multitrackness narratives.

Second, I introduce the two case studies, discussing the similarities between the two contexts, and briefly outlining the history of conflict, peace negotiations and multitrackness in both.

Third, I use the evidence from the two case studies to answer the central research question that has guided this article: ‘what happens to the multitrack-inclusion nexus when the peacebuilders don’t trust the peacemaking?’. I argue that such distrust undermines the underlying logic of a peace process, making it necessary to revisit the presumed purpose(s) of the process, and the very meaning of ‘peace’.

## Methodological note

Methodologically, the article builds on three types of sources. First, I rely on existing reports documenting various Track One, Two and Three initiatives in the countries I explore. Due to the language barrier, I was only able to access reports accessible in English, which are likely to present a Western-centric view of the negotiations and peace initiatives in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Conscious of this, I attempted to proactively seek out information and perspectives that might *not* be documented in the reports through interviews. Notably, I have used the data and information that emerged from research organized by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) in partnership with the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, which I designed and led 2021/2022. The research was conducted in partnership

with local partners, and the data for it collected through interviews with a wide range of activists, including at the grassroots level, done in local languages. Second, I have conducted twelve interviews with a purposive sample of peace activists from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. My interviewees were women who took part in Track Two and Three processes. I have intentionally focused on women activists to shed light on the gendered practices of peacebuilding. Within this target group, I aimed to ensure diversity in terms of age, geographical location, and scope of work. The interviews took place between November 2022 and April 2023, and were conducted in a semi-structured manner, using a small set of guiding questions to structure the conversations. To facilitate broad-base participation, one interview was conducted in Russian, and one was conducted via email, since the interviewee felt more comfortable providing responses in writing. Importantly, I was not able to interview peacebuilders from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh due to access issues. Adding these voices through future research will bring additional value to the reflections included below.

I also relied on my own knowledge and observations of the conflict and peace processes during years of work in the region in my capacity as the Director of Programs at GNWP. As such, I was attentive to my positionality and the way my identity and experience have shaped the research findings. I have worked closely with some of my interviewees before, which has created a rapport and trust between us. With the participants I did not know, the fact that I was aware of the regional dynamics made them more at ease, which was visible in the fact that they often used short-hands during our interviews. At the same time, I acknowledge that the familiarity with the region may have coloured my interpretation of the conversations with the interviewees. I do not believe that to be a limitation of itself. Following feminist epistemologies, I define objectivity not as ‘mere elimination of value’ – something that is not possible for any research – but rather a move towards ‘less partiality, less distortion’ – achieved by including diverse perspectives in research (Weldon 2006, 80). To minimize the distortion, I have validated my analysis with my interviewees to ensure it is aligned with their experience. The validation process was not always straightforward, and required some back-and-forth with my research participants, including around the terminology used to refer to the conflicts and the parties involved in them. This underscores the complexity and the highly politicized nature of the two conflicts. Ultimately, I do not claim to have presented an ‘objective’ account of conflict and peacebuilding in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, but I do hope that I was able to reflect a number of diverse and distinct perspectives – each bringing their own unique value.

Despite my familiarity with the region and a degree of a sense of ‘solidarity’ (as a Polish person, coming from a former Soviet satellite country), I did also bring to the research my positionality as a Western woman (based in a Western institution) from a country that has not experienced conflict in the past few decades. Once again, being intentional about creating space for my interviewees to guide our discussion and validating the analysis with them was one way I have dealt with this aspect of my positionality. I also made efforts to avoid the research being extractive – I have offered my time to the interviewees to support them in their initiatives and work, and have shared my analysis with them, in hope it can support their work and advocacy.

## Disentangling the logic of a multitrack process

### *The inclusion project: Centering the local, multiplying peace spaces*

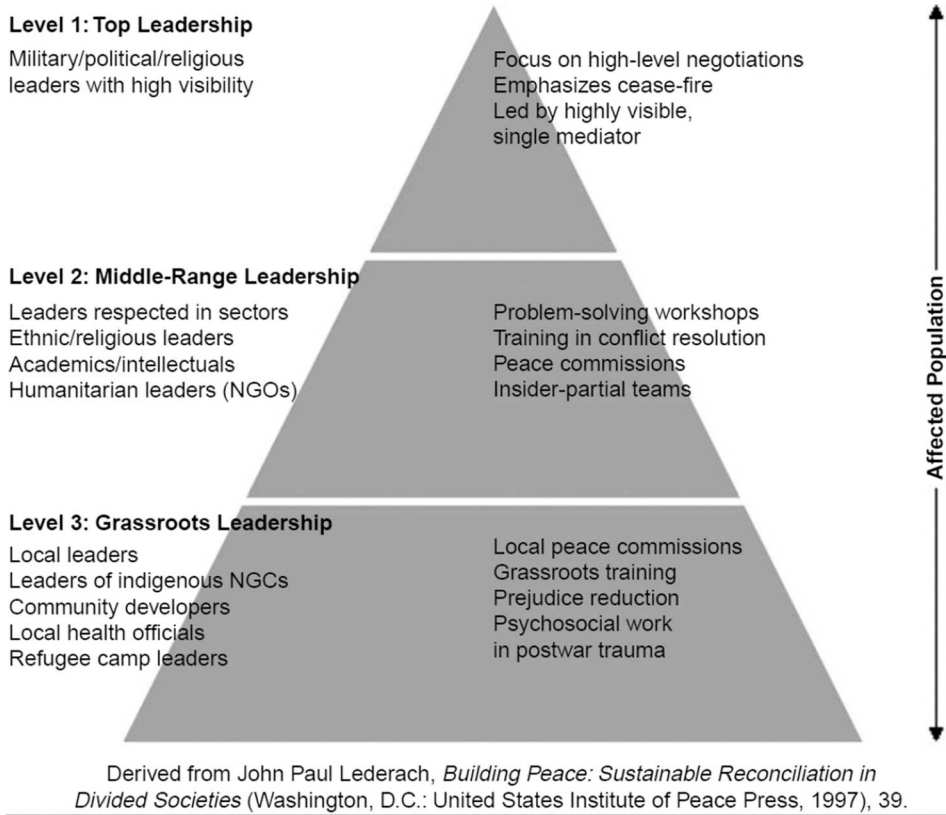
Over the past decades, inclusion has become a ‘golden standard’ in conflict mediation. The 2012 UN Guidance on Effective Mediation – the organization’s ‘cornerstone document on mediation’ (Hirblinger and Landau 2020, 6) – cites inclusion as one of its key principles. Inclusion was also a ‘central pillar’ of the UN review processes that took place in 2015 (Dudouet et al. 2018, 165), including the review of the UN peacebuilding architecture, which concluded that the UN ‘should also prioritize support to broadening inclusion so that peacebuilding processes are ‘nationally owned’’ (Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) 2015, 9). The drive towards broad-base inclusion as a standard in peace processes is what I refer to as the ‘inclusion project’.

In parallel to the policy discussions, scholarly debates around inclusion have also unfolded. One strand of inclusion literature has sought to make visible the purposes of inclusion and its contribution to peace processes (Hirblinger and Landau 2020; Hellmüller and Santschi 2014). Several scholars (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018; Hellmüller and Santschi 2014) have advanced arguments that inclusive peace processes might lead to better and more durable solutions to conflict. Opposing the utilitarian framing, feminist scholars have also advanced rights-based approaches to inclusion, framing it as a matter of ‘fairness’ (Aggestam 2019). Others have also pointed out the challenges of the ‘inclusion project’: notably, that ‘a tension can emerge between the exclusion needed to make peace and the inclusion needed to embed the peace in society after a violent conflict’ (Wanis-St. John 2008, 4).

One response to this tension has been to propose a ‘multitrack’ approach to peacemaking: one wherein official (Track One) peace negotiations are complemented by peace processes at other levels and among unofficial actors – referred to as Track Two (processes among established mid-level leaders) and Track Three (grassroots processes). The ‘tracks’ language was popularized in literature by John Paul Lederach, who introduced a multitrack model – in the form of a pyramid – in 1997 (Lederach 1997).

Lederach’s pyramid model (Figure 1) has been widely influential among scholars and practitioners alike. Indeed, the multitrack processes have been looked to as a hopeful path towards resolving some of the challenges around the inclusion project in the context of a peace negotiation. Scholars and practitioners have argued that strengthening the linkages between negotiators in Track One peace negotiations and those participating in Track Two and Three processes can be beneficial and lead to better agreements and stronger implementation (Christien 2020; Dayal and Christien 2020; Fal-Dutra Santos 2021). Many have also studied the exact mechanism through which these linkages are created and operationalized to increase their reach and effectiveness (Christien 2020; Cuhadar 2009; Cuhadar and Paffenholz 2020).

The attention to the processes happening outside of the official negotiating table was also at the heart of the so-called ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding literature. ‘Local turn’ scholars underscore the agency of local actors in peacebuilding (Björkdahl 2021; MacGinty and Richmond 2013). Ostensibly, the scholarship emerged as a reaction to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, with its lack of attention to structural roots and causes of violence. As such, it seeks to bring attention to local dynamics of violence, but also of peacebuilding.



**Figure 1.** Lederach's Multitrack Pyramid model.

Source: Federer et al., 2019, p. 9.

At the heart of the 'local turn' lies the commitment to viewing peacebuilding as a complex and multi-dimensional process. Similarly to multitrack scholars, local turn scholars draw attention to the fact that peace unfolds on multiple levels simultaneously (MacGinty 2021; Pospisil 2021). They have also underscored 'the messy nature of peace processes and peace accord implementation' (MacGinty 2018, 96) and have argued for 'hybrid' and 'multiscalar' approaches to peacebuilding to capture this complexity (Wallis and Richmond 2017; Pospisil 2021).

Some have argued that Lederach might be viewed as a precursor of the 'local turn', since he has drawn attention to the importance of the informal processes unfolding at the Track Two and Track Three (Paffenholz 2014, 17). However, as demonstrated in the next section, the discussions of Lederach's model most often focused on the possibility (and usefulness) of the linkages between the different levels, reinforcing the hierarchy implicit in the pyramid imagery and obscuring the non-linear and 'messy' nature of a peace process.

### **The multitrack 'pyramid' and the underlying logic of a peace process**

Lederach presented the three tracks in a form of a pyramid – with Track One actors placed at the top, and Track Three at the bottom. This visual representation underscores 'a

hierarchy in traditional power relations and influence with a multi-track process' (Palmiano-Federer and Hirblinger, forthcoming 2025). It implies a logic wherein Track Two and Three processes are subordinate to the formal process, and a multitrack approach is a way of ensuring that they inform the Track One talks. Arguably, such logic was not the original intent of Lederach, who postulated a 'movement away from a concern with the resolution of issues and toward a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships' (Lederach 1997, 38). Nonetheless, over the years, it has become a dominant reading of the multitrack model.

One clear example of this lies in the discourse around the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, in which the utilitarian arguments attempting to justify women's place at the table have taken the centre stage. Despite feminist scholars' and activists' insistence that women's inclusion is a right – and not dependent on what women bring into a peace process (Aggestam 2019; NGOWG WPS 2019), women have long found their participation questioned, or conditioned upon them being able to represent an entire constituency (Fal-Dutra Santos 2021). Perhaps in response to this, much of the literature dedicated to women's participation in peace negotiations has advanced utilitarian arguments, pointing out women's contributions to the achievement, quality and durability of peace agreements (Abballe et al. 2020; Coomaraswamy 2015; Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018; Paffenholz et al. 2016; Phelan and True 2022).

This illustrates the underlying logic adopted in most discussions about peace processes and inclusion: that while a peace process might unfold at different levels and along different 'tracks', they ultimately have a single objective – to achieve and sustain a political settlement or an agreement between warring elites. While some scholars have also discussed the mechanism and importance of 'lateral' transfer – that is, transfer of knowledge and information between various actors operating in the Track Two and Track Three processes (Christien 2020; Cuhadar 2009) – the onus remains on how this transfer can ultimately lead to a better outcome of the Track One negotiations.

This logic is not without merit – reaching a peace agreement certainly is a worthy goal. However, in contexts where the Track One process is not present, is dysfunctional, or where those engaged in Track Two and Track Three initiatives do not want to be a part of it, the logic crumbles. If the ultimate goal of Track Two and Track Three processes is to inform an official negotiation, does the impossibility (or unwillingness) of doing so render them futile?

### ***Beyond an elite bargain – Patchworked peacemaking and the goal of a peace process***

In the introduction to this issue, Palmiano-Federer and Hirblinger (forthcoming, 2023) define 'patchworked peacemaking' as 'the result of complex and relational dynamics that are often driven by pragmatic and situated decision making, and dive right into the 'mess' of empirical realities.' They re-imagine multitrackness as a process of 'stitching together' of various initiatives, platforms and resources.

The patch imagery makes the limitations of the logic of a peace process concentrated around a single purpose – reaching an agreement between the two sides – even more apparent. Like patches, peace processes also can (and often do) serve multiple purposes, not all of them tied to the achievement of an agreement between the warring elites. This



is particularly the case – or particularly visible – when an elite bargain appears out of reach. However, rather than yielding peacemaking futile, such cases might call for a re-setting of priorities and reframing of the peace process logic. Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger (forthcoming, 2023) characterize the ‘patching up’ as a ‘messy process’ of bringing together ideas and notions about peace with the material realities of conflict-affected contexts.

The recognition of the messiness and non-linearity of a peace process was also a part of Lederach’s vision of peace. He noted, for example, that ‘[r]ather than seeing peace as a static “end state”’, it should be perceived as ‘a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationships’ (Lederach 2003, 14). However, as argued above, over time, the applications of Lederach’s model have highlighted if not linearity, then at least a concentration of peace efforts around the key goal of reaching a political settlement. In this sense, the multitrack pyramid model has perhaps become a victim of its own success. As Paffenholz (2014, 25) notes, ‘[t]hough practitioner organisations largely claim to operationalise Lederach’s theory in their discourse, [they apply] very narrow and inflexible interpretations (...) thereby greatly ignoring other central elements of Lederach’s original theory’.

As a ‘thinking tool’ designed to facilitate re-imagining of a peace process (Palmiano Federer and Hirblinger, forthcoming 2023), the ‘patchworked peacemaking’ framework provides an opportunity to re-think the multitrack model. In what follows, I propose such re-thinking through a feminist lens.

Feminist literature on peacebuilding has advanced many of the same arguments as the local turn theorists – highlighting the agency of local actors, the importance of their experiences and understandings of peace and peacebuilding (Prügl et al. 2021), and focusing on the relevance of the localized, everyday practices in advancing peace (Vaittinen et al. 2019). However, to date, there has been little cross-over between the two bodies of literature (McLeod and O’Reilly 2019).

In this article, I posit that re-imagining Lederach’s framework through a feminist lens can help bring to light two aspects of multitrackness that have been obscured – or completely absent – from most discussions to date. First, the messiness of the peacebuilding process; and second, the centrality of social reproduction in advancing and sustaining peace.

Messiness is central to feminist conceptions of peace. While ‘feminist peace’ eludes a definition, there is a broad consensus that it is characterized by ‘untidiness, complexity and co-existing contradictions’ (Sapiano and True 2022, 1). Feminist peace is one that is open to contestation, contextualization and constant evolution when faced with everyday realities of peacebuilding work.

A feminist lens can also give new meaning to the ‘patching’ metaphor. In most of today’s patriarchal societies, patching is viewed as a quintessentially feminine task – it is part of the social reproductive labour performed by women to sustain their families and communities. The patching imagery thus highlights the oft-ignored aspect of peacemaking and peacebuilding – namely, social reproduction. Social reproductive work includes a host of practices that have also often been referred to as ‘care work’ – caring for individuals, families, and communities. Care and social reproductive work can be paid or unpaid, but in both cases is disproportionately carried out by women, often undervalued and invisibilised (Razavi 2007; United Nations Research Institute for Social



Development 2010), and sustained through the existence and reproduction of gendered narratives and norms around roles within a household.

There is abundant research and literature demonstrating that social reproductive work is critical to sustaining communities and economic systems (Bhattacharya 2017; Escobar 2013; Fraser 2009), and to sustaining peace (Almagro 2022; Hall 2016; Hamilton, Mundkur, and Shepherd 2021; Lawson and Flomo 2020). Increasingly, feminist peace scholars have also brought attention to the importance of care in building and sustaining peace – by creating trust (Vaittinen et al. 2019), transforming elite bargaining processes to bring to light issues related to social reproduction such as the need for rural nurseries as part of a land access deal (Phelan and True 2022, 171), and sustaining political and movement work that ‘nourishes and sustains the agenda’ (Hamilton, Mundkur, and Shepherd 2021).

Thus, social reproductive work – including the work to build, maintain and nurture relationships and communities – is essential to building peace, across all tracks. However, despite Lederach’s assertion that relationships lie at the centre of peacemaking, the consideration of the role of social reproduction in sustaining them is notably absent from his work, as well as most of the discussions around it. Indeed, when speaking about relationship-building and reconciliation, he often evokes language of utility and ‘strategic peacebuilding’, rather than that of care. Based on an analysis of the conflict and political dynamics in the context of Armenia and Georgia, I argue that this obscures the work necessary to sustain and nurture relationships among those not directly involved in the conflict, and the need for continuous efforts to build and maintain movements as an integral part of peacebuilding. Applying a social reproduction lens allows to bring these aspects of peacebuilding to light.

Taking social reproductive work seriously also helps ‘dethrone’ the peace agreement as the ultimate goal of a peace process, undermining the hierarchical, linear nature of the peace process implied by the pyramid image and bringing back the ‘messiness’. This, indeed, is in line with Lederach’s original intent – since he called for the peacebuilding community to ‘recognize agreements for what they are: social and political antacids, temporary acid reducers that creates an exit for symptomatic problems and an opportunity to create a way to work on repeated patterns and cycles of destructive relationships’ (Lederach 2005, 65). Lederach identifies reconciliation (relationship building *across enemy lines*) as an alternative to this short-term approach. Once again, looking at the peace process through a feminist lens allows to broaden this conceptualization. While not undermining the value of reconciliation and trust-building across communities, it highlights the importance of trauma-healing, relationship (re-)building within movements, and – critically – leveraging other policy spaces and documents to advance critical issues in parallel to the peace agreement.

My contribution, then, is two-fold. First, by explicitly and intentionally applying a feminist lens to the analysis of a multitrack process, I provide a richer and broader picture of what a ‘multitrack’ effort might entail – in line, I hope, with Lederach’s original intentions. Second, by taking a closer look at contexts where the multitrack approach has been promoted in practice, but which are often marginalized in scholarly discussions of peacebuilding, I hope to bring new empirical insights to advance thinking around the ‘inclusion project’.

In the following sections, I examine the peace negotiation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh, and the GID on the conflict in Georgia, attempting to

answer the question: in contexts, where there is a deficit of trust between actors operating along different peacebuilding tracks, what are the characteristics of a multitrack approach, and how is it linked to the ‘inclusion project’? In other words: when the peacebuilders don’t trust the peacemaking, what does ‘multitrackness’ mean, and in what ways can it lead to greater inclusion?

## Overview of the peace processes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

The article focuses on the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the international processes related to the conflict in Georgia. The two case studies are compelling, not only due to shared (Soviet) history and geographical proximity, but also because their peace processes share important similarities, as well as some striking differences, which provide for an insightful discussion. Critically, both contexts are characterized by a wary – if not simply cynical – attitude many actors have towards the official negotiations (Gamaghelyan 2020, 132).

That said, the purpose of the article is not to compare the two settings, and the peace processes unfolding therein, but rather to present snapshots of multitrackness in contexts where the peacebuilders do not trust the peacemaking. Importantly, as noted above, these snapshots are grounded in the perspectives and testimonies of women peacebuilders – providing a window into an often overlooked perspective on what ‘peacebuilding’ and ‘inclusion’ means in these contexts.

While my objective is to critically engage with the ‘inclusion project’ and, specifically, the possibility of advancing it through a ‘multitrack’ approach, I in no way mean to suggest that inclusion is not an important goal. To the contrary, most of my interviewees emphasized the importance of improving the linkages between Track One, Two and Three processes. At the same time, the interviews painted a clear picture of the wide range of challenges to inclusion. In reflecting on these challenges, I apply a feminist lens and propose that – in line with the patchwork logic – it might be possible to envision solutions that do not abandon the multitrack model, but rather expand it by broadening the definition of ‘patches’, ‘patchers’ and the very ‘hole’ that needs to be patched.

## The nature of conflict in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

Both contexts I consider share the **long-lasting, low-intensity nature of conflict** with periodic flare-ups.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan erupted over the demand by the ethnic Armenians living in what was then the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to transfer the territory from Azerbaijani control to Armenia during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The demand later escalated into a claim for independence. Armenia supported the bid, which led to an armed confrontation with Azerbaijan (Kucera 2020). The first Nagorno-Karabakh war ended with a ceasefire signed in 1994. However, violence along the contact line continued to spike periodically – most notably in April 2016, and in September 2020, when it once again escalated into a full-scale war. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh war lasted six weeks and caused over 6000 casualties and over 75,000 displacements (Agence France-Presse 2020). It ended with a Russia-brokered ceasefire deal signed on 10 November 2020 (Deutsche Welle 2020). Most recently, in September

2023, Azerbaijan conducted a ‘lightning military operation’ in Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians and prompted the self-declared republic’s *de facto* president to decree a dissolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh state institutions, effective on 1 January 2024 (Edwards 2023; Kvinna till Kvinna 2023). This latest development is certain to change the dynamic of peacebuilding in Armenia – both due to the huge influx of displaced people and the possible perception of another ‘defeat’ at the hands of Azerbaijan. However, since the interviews and analysis for this article were conducted prior to these latest developments, they are not fully accounted for in the below discussion.

In Georgia, the conflict also dates to the 1990s and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Following Georgia’s independence, the Georgian armed forces fought with separatist groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, both of which have claimed independence. Despite numerous attempts at reaching a resolution, the conflict continued to simmer throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and escalated in August 2008, when Russia deployed its troops to South Ossetia. This triggered a response from Georgia and led to a 5-day war between the two countries. While the two parties signed a ceasefire on 12 August 2008, the war shifted political and military dynamics around the two regions. Russia officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics and has stationed its troops in their territory, ostensibly for peacekeeping purposes. As a result, Georgia has lost control over much of the two regions, which jointly account for 20 per cent of its territory (Gressel 2015).

### *Shared history and geopolitical realities*

Another important similarity between the two contexts is the **strong presence of Russia**. In Georgia, Russia officially became a side to conflict, when it invaded Georgian territory in 2008. Since the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, Georgia has sought a closer integration with the West, in particular the EU and the NATO. Russia, on its part, has maintained military presence in the breakaway territories, and has periodically conducted military exercises, which Georgian government has deplored as signs of ‘militarization’ of the two regions (Agenda.ge 2019).

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, the role of Russia has been less straightforward – and has shifted following the latest 2020 war. Following the 2020 war, Russia deployed over 2000 peacekeepers to the border between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire deal it brokered. In this sense, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war led to an increased Russian involvement in the peace process, in particular as the Minsk Group – established to mediate the peace process following the First Nagorno-Karabakh war – has effectively ceased to function. This has complicated the dynamics of the peace process. Several of my interviewees have noted that civil society has advocated *against* Russia’s role as the broker or guarantor of peace, viewing it as unacceptable in view of the country’s links to both sides of the conflict, and the fact that it has provided both Armenia and Azerbaijan with weapons (Interview 7, Armenian woman peacebuilder, November 2022). As a result, peacebuilders find the official process, as it unfolds today, ‘unacceptable’ and unlikely to succeed, and do not see being a part of it as an option (Interview 7, Armenian woman peacebuilder, November 2022).

### *Track two and track three initiatives and the ‘moment of hope’*

Both contexts are also characterized by a large number of Track Two and Three processes.

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, several Track Two meetings and ‘problem solving’ workshops have been organized, in particular by the United States. These included the Dartmouth Conference held between 2001 and 2007, which consisted of twelve meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani experts and civil society representatives (Pashayeva 2012, 116). Arzu Abdullayeva, who participated in the dialogue, recalled that it resulted in a document with recommendations that were transferred to the Minsk Group to support the official peace process (Interview 2, Azerbaijani woman peacebuilder, November 2022). Overall, my interviewees expressed a sense that the 2000s were the time of hope for peace, highlighting, however, that ‘it was only one, very short time’ (Interview 2, Azerbaijani woman peacebuilder, November 2022).

Additionally, grassroots peace initiatives have also thrived in Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1990s and 2000s. In 1992, a National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly Network was established by Armenian and Azerbaijani women. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Network strived to ‘break down enemy images and initiate peace dialogues’ (Pashayeva 2012, 111). It facilitated study visits to other conflict-affected regions, organized exchanges between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Armenia and Azerbaijan, ran youth camps, and facilitated exchange of prisoners. In 1994, the Transcaucasus Women’s Dialogue was established with support from the United States. Moreover, the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) supported the establishment of the Regional Women’s Mediators Network, designed to support the continued dialogue and exchange between women from across South Caucasus (Interview 1, November 2022). Beyond the efforts aimed at women’s inclusion, other people-to-people diplomacy initiatives also thrived. Switzerland funded the Caucasus Media Support Project, which allowed the journalists from either side of the conflict to visit the other side, in order to foster more positive coverage. Exchanges and study visits between both countries’ intellectuals were supported by Russia, and religious leaders met with the negotiators on both sides (Pashayeva 2012, 113–114).

In Georgia, multiple informal peace initiatives also emerged. A notable initiative was the so-called Schlaining Process, facilitated by the UK-based international peacebuilding organization Conciliation Resources and the German-based Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management. It consisted of more than twenty meetings and workshops held between 1998 and 2004, which brought together representatives of the Georgian and Abkhazian civil society, as well as those involved in the official peace process (Cohen 2012, 68).

In addition, grassroots initiatives that dedicated themselves to addressing the impact of the ongoing conflict, while promoting ‘multi-ethnic dialogue towards peace and stability’ (Cárdenas 2019, 365) have also blossomed. These included the ‘Organization of Women of Georgia for Peace and Life’ (today called Fund Sukhumi), focusing on integrating Abkhaz IDP women in the humanitarian and conflict resolution efforts, as well as the IDP Women’s Association ‘Consent’, founded to protect the rights of IDP women, but soon broadening the scope of its work to promote the agency and meaningful participation of women – including IDP women – in public life and the peace process. Echoing the sentiments expressed by Armenian and Azerbaijani peacebuilders, the

founder and head of ‘Consent’, Julia Kharashvili, recalled that in 1990s and early 2000s ‘there were prospects for confidence-building, many groups created to promote dialogue, economic measures. Civil society was participating – but it was a very short period’ (Interview 4, Georgian women peacebuilder, February 2023).

### *A breakdown of trust and shrinking civil society space*

If both contexts were characterized by a ‘moment of hope’ for the civil society and Track Two and Three processes in 1990s and early 2000s, they have also both witnessed a **shrinking civil society space and a breakdown of trust** in recent years.

In Azerbaijan, the government introduced a range of laws that were perceived as severely restricting the space for civil society work and advocacy (Human Rights Watch 2013).

In Armenia, my interviewees noted that the 2020 war has reduced the possibilities for civil society engagement in peacebuilding and peacemaking. Even though the government has signalled the willingness to engage with the civil society, organizations leading peace initiatives have been disillusioned and do not feel that their perspectives will be taken seriously.

Finally, in Georgia, the dynamic of civil society inclusion has evolved at least twice. First, following 2008, the changed format of peace negotiations, with the increased role of Russia and the fact that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not recognized as ‘sides’ to conflict, made the negotiation less credible for the civil society. While there were efforts by international actors to facilitate exchanges between civil society and the negotiators in the Track One process, these have become less of ‘working sessions’ and more of ‘briefings’, with civil society being able to learn about the progress in the official negotiations, but not to influence it (Interview 5, Georgian woman peacebuilder, March 2023). Then, in 2022, the country faced a debacle around the proposed ‘foreign agent’ law, which would require individuals or organizations receiving at least 20 per cent of their funding from abroad to register as ‘foreign agents’ and create additional reporting and inspection requirements for them, with a threat of up to five years of prison for violations (Amnesty International 2023). The project of the law was abandoned after a mass outcry from the civil society and a swathe of protests (Kirby 2023). However, activists interviewed for this article have noted that it has contributed to a deterioration of trust between the actors participating in Track One, Two and Three processes. As one interviewee put it, even though it took years of advocacy to establish communication channels with the government, ‘now that civil society does not trust the parliament, we cannot engage with [the women’s machinery] the way we would like to’ (Interview 10, Georgian woman peacebuilder, April 2023).

### *Peacebuilding in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: A lonely path*

Lastly, as emphasized by most of my interviewees, **peacebuilding has become a ‘lonely path’ in both contexts** (Interview 1, representative of global peacebuilding network, November 2022). Interviewees from Georgia and Armenia in particular have shared that there has been an increased level of disillusionment, and limited openness to dialogue on the part of the broader society. In Armenia, my interviewees noted that following

the Second Nagorno Karabakh war, the public opinion has ‘turned against the dialogue, promoted by women’, with some people saying, ‘We tried the women’s way; but the dialogue did not prevent the war’ (Interviews 7 and 8, Armenian woman peacebuilders, November 2022). In Georgia, Sukhumi Women’s Fund conducted a survey, which showed that ‘people are frustrated. If you ask people on the street, they don’t see a lot of progress on peacebuilding’.

This perception of dialogue as the ‘women’s way’ is significant. While it repeats a common trope of ‘women as natural peacemakers’, it also brings attention to the social reproduction aspect of peacebuilding. Notably, it underscores that peacebuilding is something women – and other peacebuilders – undertake often not only without resources, but against the disillusionment and rejection by the wider society. This increases the emotional toll of peacebuilding work – bringing attention to the need for trauma-healing and dialogue *within* the peacebuilding movement. Interestingly, GNWP (2023, 43) found that the sentiments of disillusionment in peacebuilding ‘are rooted in patriarchal notions of masculinity and gender’ and have often been linked to the anti-gender movements within the countries.

The five distinguishing features of the two contexts: (1) the slow-burning (but intensely impactful) nature of conflict, (2) the shared Soviet history and reality of Russian involvement, (3) the proliferation of Track Two and Track Three initiatives; (4) the shrinking civic space; and (5) the breakdown of trust between the peacebuilders and the wider society, make them an interesting case study. The convergence of challenges to inclusion with a strong drive towards it on the part of the civil society brings to light some of the alternative strategies for inclusive peacebuilding, many of them rooted in social reproduction. Notably, the distrust towards the official peace process was highlighted in particular by the peacebuilders working in Armenia and Georgia, and less so by those working in Azerbaijan. Therefore, the following section focuses on the two former countries in particular.

### When the peacebuilders don’t trust the peacemaking ...

The interviews I conducted paint a complex and nuanced picture of the peacebuilders’ approach to the multitrack peace process.

On the one hand, the peacebuilders were very aware of the shortcomings of the Track One processes. As noted above, civil society organizations in both contexts have had a complicated and often uneasy relationship with their governments, which has deteriorated following the escalation in armed conflict – in 2008 in Georgia and 2020 in Armenia.

Armenian peacebuilders have pointed out that the emergence of militarized narratives, which dismiss women’s peacebuilding work rooted in care and social reproduction, prioritizing instead hard security discourses of ‘winners’, ‘losers’, and resolving conflict by force, made it more difficult to engage with the official actors involved in Track One negotiations. Reflecting on this, one of my interviewees noted that the ‘trust between the civil society and the government has been broken’ (Interview 12, Armenian woman peacebuilder, June 2023). Importantly, this deterioration of trust went hand-in-hand with a loss of confidence in the official negotiation and its ability to bring a solution to conflict.

In Georgia, several interviewees have noted that the peace process has been stalled due to its politicization. The focus of the talks has been on the political status of the

two breakaway regions. However, whenever the issue is raised, the (unofficial) representatives of the two regions, as well as the representative of Russia, leave the room, making a constructive discussion around everyday needs and concrete proposals for resolving them impossible. Similar to their Armenian counterparts, Georgian peacebuilders thus had little confidence that the official peace process, in its current format, could lead to the resolution of conflict.

On the other hand, the interviewees' disillusionment with the peace process did not necessarily mean that they did not want to be included in it. To the contrary, peacebuilders from both contexts complained about insufficient or inadequate inclusion models.

However, the kind of inclusion advocated for by the women peacebuilders would require not only strengthening of the connections between the different tracks, also a *re-thinking of the very structure of the Track One process and the multitrack model built around it*. This is perhaps best exemplified by the Georgian peacebuilders' suggestion regarding the GID. The interviewees felt that the focus on the highly politicized issues was counter-productive and wished to apply an approach more firmly rooted in the practices of care, building and sustaining relationships and addressing their communities' basic needs. One interviewee stressed that those discussions around basic needs and human rights of local populations 'still continue, but they are "under covers"', and have minor influence on the official processes due to their politicization' (Interview 11, Georgian woman peacebuilder, April 2023). While this illustrates the shortcoming of the multitrack model applied in Georgia, it also points to the strength and 'stability' of the dialogue at the grassroots level.

What peacebuilders want, then, in a context in which they do not trust the peacemaking, is not a separation of the Tracks, or burying of the multitrack model and the inclusion project. Rather, it is a *redefining and broadening* of what 'inclusion' means. The patchworked peacebuilding tool provides a useful framework to suggest what such a re-imagining of multitrackness might look like, when done from a feminist perspective.

### ***Changing the patching technique: From vertical to horizontal inclusion***

A first step towards the feminist reimagining of a multitrack peace process is to broaden focus to include **horizontal rather than only vertical inclusion** as the 'patching method' for the patchwork peacemaking.

The importance of 'horizontal' peacebuilding work was recognized by Lederach when he conceived of the multitrack model. Indeed, the 'multitrack' approach was designed to bring attention to the grassroots efforts that aimed to build trust among communities. However, Lederach's theory is based on the assumption that '[t]he lines of group identity in contemporary conflicts are more often drawn vertically than horizontally within the pyramid' (Lederach 1997, 56). Lederach goes on to assert that 'in most armed conflicts today, identity forms around ethnicity, religion, or regional geography rather than class, creating group divisions that cut down through the pyramid rather than pitting one level against another' (Lederach 1997). In other words, the 'horizontal' for Lederach referred to building relationships between actors operating within the same track, but belonging to different ethnic or national groups – that is, different sides of conflict.



This obscures the need for fostering dialogue between diverse social groups and actors working at each level and on the same side, who often operate in silos.

Applying the feminist lens of care allows to more clearly see the rifts that emerge *among* peacebuilders, especially as they deal with the emotional burden of peacebuilding and their own trauma. Armenian peacebuilders I interviewed admitted that following the 2020 war and the trauma it inflicted on the Armenian society, cracks have emerged within the peacebuilding movement. As one of my interviewees pointed out, in Armenia, there is a need for ‘internal peacebuilding’: (re)building of trust and bridges among the peacebuilders themselves (Interview 8, Armenian woman peacebuilder, November 2022).

Horizontal inclusion requires building, maintaining and strengthening peace movements that bring together diverse actors – including those who do not easily fit within the traditional peacebuilding category. This might be the case, for example, of youth organizations. Natia Kostava, a young Georgian woman peacebuilder who also serves as a Program Officer for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia at GNWP highlighted that the discussions around the peace process tend to include the ‘usual suspects’ – activists who have long been involved in the peace work – and thus risk excluding youth activists and young people, who are among the most affected by the conflict (Interview 6, young Georgian woman peacebuilder, February 2023). Another interviewee noted that some of the meetings that bring together civil society peacebuilding experts and grassroots women create a dynamic where the latter are not comfortable to speak or find it challenging to follow a discussion riddled with technical language (Interview 4, Georgian woman peacebuilder, February 2023).

Paying attention to the ‘horizontal’ highlights the value of movement-building, networking and joint strategizing, which is grossly undervalued and under-resourced in both contexts. Movement-building and creating durable relationships is often at the heart of women-led peace initiatives, as it capitalizes on the social reproductive labour they often already perform within their families and communities, and the trust they enjoy because of it (Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) 2023). However, one of my interviewees noted that donors not only do not encourage networking and movement-building, but that their practices – including limited opportunities and repeatedly funding the same organizations – contribute to rifts and competition among civil society actors (Interview 12, Armenian woman peacebuilder, June 2023). This, in turn, serves to perpetuate the marginalization of the care paradigm within peacebuilding.

### *Bringing in new patchers*

A second step towards the feminist reimagining of a peace process is a reflection on **who the ‘patchers’ are**. When official negotiations are stalled or dysfunctional, the extent to which external mediators can effectively act as ‘patchers’ is limited, as the dynamics both *between* the official and unofficial actors and *within* the peacebuilding movement itself are complex and riddled with context-specific nuances. Thus, while external actors can provide important support to peacebuilding movements, they are not best placed to lead or mediate horizontal inclusion efforts. Furthermore, the presence of external ‘experts’ can encourage the defaulting to highly technical language, which effectively excludes grassroots actors.

This creates the need to recognise and support other ‘patchers’ – such as the members of the marginalized or excluded groups themselves. However, while the potential of grassroots, local and rural women and youth as mediators within their communities is often recognized rhetorically, they are rarely provided with resources to be able to effectively perform the role of patchers. When resources are available, they are often geared towards dialogues between the two sides of the conflict (or the ‘conflicting’ communities). Support to localized mediation *within* each of the conflict sides – which could include more spaces for collective trauma healing and enhancing local actors’ skills in trauma-informed facilitation – is scarce.

Thus, taking social reproduction and ‘horizontal patching’ in a peace process seriously requires rethinking some of the funding paradigms around peacebuilding. Furthermore, it also requires greater attention to the shrinking civic space and its consequences for peacebuilding and peacemaking. As discussed above, shrinking space for civil society is one of the defining characteristics of both cases studied in this article, and underpins the peacebuilders’ distrust towards peacemaking. The importance of protecting civil society space has been increasingly recognized in policy discussions around peacebuilding, including, for example, within the WPS agenda (United Nations Security Council 2019). Moreover, important empirical accounts of how peacebuilders navigate shrinking civic space have recently emerged (Tadevosyan 2022; Naamani and Simpson 2021; Annan et al. 2021). However, further research is needed to more fully understand the interplay between shrinking civic space and the possibilities for peacebuilding and peacemaking – including through the multitrack approach.

### **Redefining the ‘hole’**

The third step towards a feminist reimagining of a multitrack peace process is to **redefine the ‘hole’** – the scope of what needs to be mended.

As described above, Georgian interviewees have underscored the difference between the ambition of the official negotiators – to resolve the political issue of the status of the breakaway republics – and what is viewed as a priority by those engaging in the informal processes – the issues of access to healthcare, water, and basic services, all of which have been complicated by the practice of borderization. In other words, they pointed out that what is discussed in the GID is not what matters to the people on the ground. Similar sentiment was also expressed by Armenian peacebuilders, who described that many civil society actors have preferred to work on everyday security issues in their communities than engage with the official peace process (Interviews 7 and 12, Armenian women peacebuilders, November 2022 and June 2023).

While this finding might appear unsurprising, it does point to an important reality of inclusion and ‘multitrackness’: namely, that better ‘connecting’ the tracks might require re-defining the modalities and scope of each of them. Georgian peacebuilders would not be satisfied with the human security issues being ‘relegated’ to Track Two processes. On the contrary, they suggested creation of additional *official* spaces – not necessarily linked to the formal GID process, but with the capacity and resources to influence political decisions and, most importantly, action on the ground – where more pragmatic discussions could take place. While this could resemble the working groups created under the Schlaining process in early 2000, the focus here should not be on ‘informing’ the

official discussion, but rather on effecting political change and mobilizing concrete action in their own right.

This challenges the dominant peace process logic, which places the official process (and the peace agreement as its outcome) at the centre. Recognizing and addressing the roots of conflict and violence was a key rationale for the multitrack model proposed by Lederach (1997, 166–167), since ‘if these early problems are not addressed, marginalization and poverty will deepen, creating fertile ground for promoters of violence and revolution’. Viewing the ‘early problems’ underlying conflict through a feminist lens of social reproduction brings additional clarity as to *how* they might be addressed. Importantly, in line with the feminist assertion that ‘personal is political’ it helps ‘politicize’ the peacebuilding work happening at the grassroots level.

In addition to bringing to light the (often unpaid) labour of care and social reproduction that goes into peacebuilding, taking social reproduction work seriously also calls for examining the ways in which the State should contribute to it. In other words, it requires breaking with the (often unspoken but nearly always present) assumption that the work of healing and of addressing the everyday security is the remit of the civil society, and confined to Tracks Two and Three. Indeed, most official peace negotiations would benefit from taking the questions of social reproduction more seriously. This would mean – for example – identifying, recognizing and addressing security needs that emerge around social reproduction work such as childcare, schooling, or collecting firewood.

However, Track One negotiations are not the only avenue through which official actors can recognize and address issues of social reproduction. There is a plethora of political processes and spaces through which the peacebuilders pursue their everyday peace priorities. This can include localized peace processes and agreements – the practice and benefits of which have been increasingly documented (Bell et al. 2021; Kaldor, Theros, and Turkmani 2021). Furthermore, at the national level, a promising policy space are the discussions around National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security. In Georgia, the NAP proved to be an effective channel to advance some of the priorities of the IDP populations – including IDP women’s right to political participation. It also allowed for the recognition of the importance of women’s access to work – including, for example, the provision of transportation for rural women to be able to access economic opportunities – as an element of peacebuilding. Localization of the NAPs – and formulation of Local Action Plans – can also be a powerful avenue to advance localized peacebuilding, which focuses on addressing everyday security needs, but in an institutionalized manner. In Ukraine, task forces and working groups on WPS that emerged at the local level as a result of Localization served as a useful avenue for women-led and feminist organizations to strengthen their relationship with local authorities. The same mechanisms can be replicated and reinforced in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Thus, applying a social reproduction lens to a peace process calls for reforming the way the Tracks function, but also for recognizing that a peace process (even a multitrack one) is not the only channel through which questions of peace and security are addressed – and paying more attention to the modalities of inclusion in other official spaces, including through protecting civil society space. Needless to say, this should not be interpreted as an excuse not to include women or civil society in Track One processes. Rather, I hope it

can become a useful departure point for conversations about what complex, multi-pronged, ‘patchwork’ inclusion model might work best in a given context.

## Conclusion

The multitrack approach to peacemaking grew out from a desire to bring greater attention to processes that happen outside of the official negotiations table. While it was not part of its original design, over time, the dominant understandings of a ‘multitrack peace process’ have converged towards a logic that dictates that those participating in the processes should share a singular goal: the achievement of a negotiated settlement through the official Track One talks. Track Two and Track Three processes are given value, and supported, insofar as they help advance this goal. While often unspoken, this hierarchical logic is intrinsic to most of the conceptualizations of ‘multitrackness’ – and reinforced by its most common visual representation, as a pyramid.

However, in contexts where the peacebuilders don’t trust the peacemaking – such as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – this logic is undermined, if not overturned entirely. This begs the question: other than a political settlement, what can be additional purposes of a peace process?

The above discussion of the peace processes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia offers a number of possible answers to this question – from the possibility of a peace process that aims to heal the wounds and divisions *within* a peace movement and the broader society, to peace processes focused on addressing local needs and ensuring human security.

Applying a social reproduction lens, the article suggests paying closer attention to the types of everyday work that might not fit into the narrow definition of a ‘peace process’ or ‘peacebuilding’ (framed as reconciliation among those on the opposing sides of conflict) – and are thus often unrecognized and unpaid. It postulates that we need to think beyond the peace agreement, and even beyond simply reconciling the warring sides, as the ultimate objective of a peace process. This does not mean that a peace agreement is never useful, or that it cannot provide a valuable framework for reaching some of the peacebuilders’ goals. Indeed, peace agreements remain the main way in which conflicts are ended. However, a more comprehensive look at the plethora of spaces and processes – unfolding at the local and national level, in private and public spheres – is useful to better understand the context of the peacemaking.

Understood through the prism of the ‘patching’ imagery, the very notion of peace needs to be redefined and broadened to include tasks and processes that, on the one hand, have been overlooked and marginalized as ‘apolitical’ – the everyday practices of care and healing, as well as advocacy and efforts to address exclusion and violence along its continuum, not only insofar as it is linked to the conflict between the warring elites. Moving forward, reflections about ‘patchwork peacemaking’ could examine whether and how this model could be used to embrace and elevate peace initiatives that are rooted in care and to visibilise the social reproductive labour that goes into peacebuilding.

In the above discussion, I merely touch upon those different alternative possibilities that patchwork peacemaking framework offers. However, I do hope that the discussion – which is grounded in the realities and perspectives of Armenian, Azerbaijani and

Georgian peacebuilders – can prompt further discussion on the place of care in peacemaking, and on the relevance of diverse policy forums and discussion to peacemaking processes. I also hope these initial reflections can guide a more holistic and grounded approach to peacemaking and the ‘multitrack-inclusion nexus’ in the region – bringing more focus and resources to everyday peacemaking, horizontal inclusion, recovery processes, and opening up a wide array of political spaces to those working towards peace on the ground.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

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