

**T**he issue of women in armed conflict has gained recognition over the past few years as more and more reports on how women are brutalised in wars make their way to the information networks of women and the mainstream media. At this year's meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) this problem was considered an area of critical concern, under the heading of violence against women.

Three years ago, *Women in Action*, issue No. 2, 1995, ran an article entitled "Dr. Elmira Souleimanova: a Woman of Peace." Elmira, as she prefers to be called, is an activist, scientist, professor and director of the Women and Development Centre in Azerbaijan. At the CSW meeting in March, I had the good fortune of running into her again. A tireless activist, she continues advocating in behalf of women in situations of armed conflict in her native country.

Azerbaijan, a country of seven million people, bordering Europe and Asia, has been under attack by the neighboring country of Armenia. Azerbaijan had been part of the Soviet Union since 1920. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan was coveted for its rich national resources, particularly, Elmira said, by Armenia which has almost none of its own. This conflict has been going on for several years and at present both countries are undergoing a peace process.

The peace process is the good news. The bad news is that the psychological impact of war continues. The whipped-up aggression of men during war, unemployment, the economic crisis, the return of refugees from camps and women's lack of independence, have all combined to increase the incidence of violence against women.

The Women's Development

Centre with support from United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is working on a research project that will document what Elmira has been observing in her country. The rate of traditional domestic violence has increased, and other types of violence as well.

There is a need to look at the situation of women and expand the definition of violence against women, says Elmira. For example, she points out, many elderly women now choose to live alone, away from family, preferring hardship to the violence at home. The aggression comes not only from husbands but also the sons. There are 160,000 households headed by women with no other support.

There are more women in prison, women who have committed crimes for survival. They should not be seen as criminals, Elmira says, but as victims of domestic violence. If their husbands supported them, they would not be in jail, she adds. What's more, their children often end up on the street adding to the cycle of violence. Thus, both women and children are victims.

The increase in physically disabled women and their neglect is also a consequence of war.

Elmira would also like to document the effects of sexual violence among women who have survived the military kidnappings. But these women she says, are so ostracised by their families and communities that they try to lose themselves within the country and it is difficult to find them. They will not identify themselves nor admit to their ordeals. This, she says, is a tragedy as the women are left alone to cope with their "burden of shame."

Elmira also sees an increase of violence among the young. The cycle of violence, she is afraid, will continue if not addressed immediately. As a professor at the university, she brings up the issue

## Elmira Reports **Violence Against Azerbaijani Women**

by Luz Maria Martinez

of violence. At one such discussion, she asked the male students to raise their hands if they had ever beaten their girl friends. Several hands went up, she says. Also some women are accepting the violence as a way of life and are resigned to the idea that they cannot change it.

Elmira sees the work ahead in a comprehensive way. Youth and children need to be targeted through various forums, education, role-modeling. The legal system needs to be targeted. WDC is also working with lawyers on the family code, along the concept of "the personal is public and the public is personal." It is not enough to protect women at government levels but women should be free of harm in their own homes, she says. The medical profession also needs to be worked with, as they are the ones who see some of the violence in their clinics. And the media needs to be educated as they need to move away from the old traditional way of reporting women's news and begin to print stories that address women's issues.

My conversation with Elmira was short. But one can see what an effective lobbyist she is as she is able to provide an overview of the situation in a matter of minutes and leave one wanting to always know more. ☺

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