

weaving stories

2024

chambarak

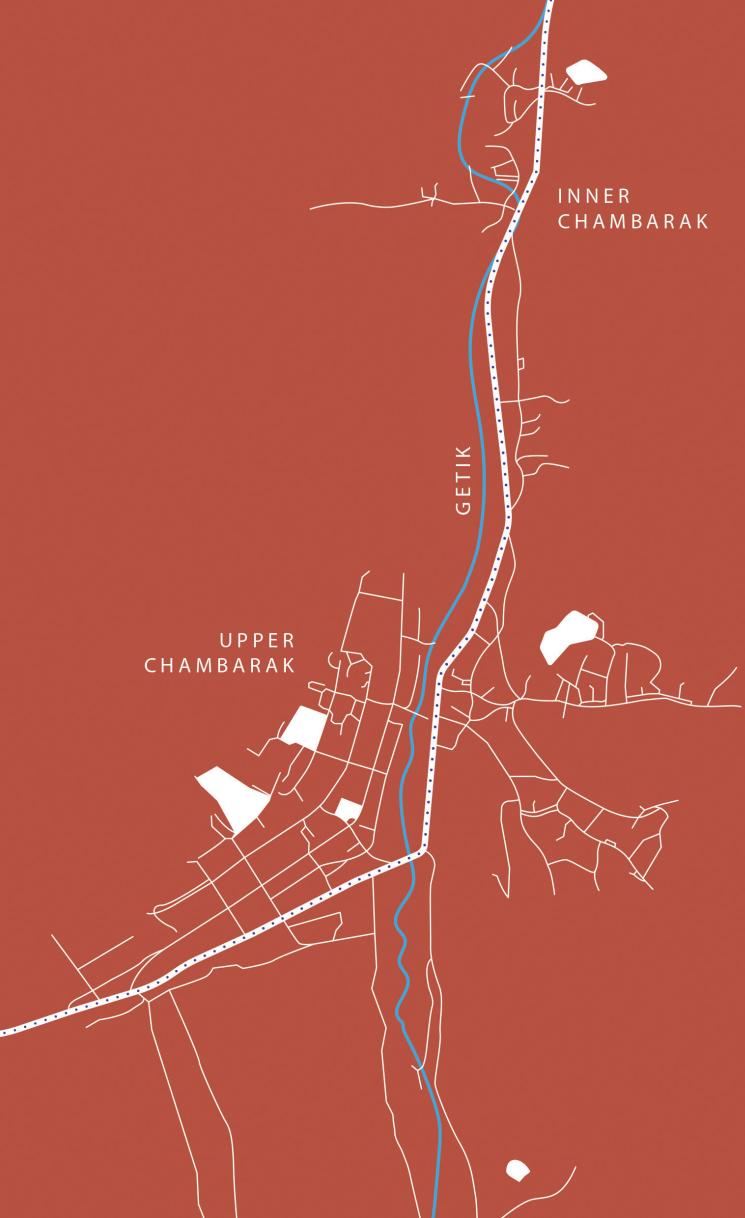
Adolescent girls living in Armenia's border communities face multifaceted challenges that impact their daily lives and perceptions of the future. Beside security threats and anxieties, they often have to grapple with discrimination based on age and gender as well. As a vulnerable group, their needs and aspirations are frequently overlooked at home, at school and within the broader community.

"Weaving Stories from Chambarak" zine, based on group oral history and dialogue methodologies, aims to share the stories and reflections of a group of teenage girls* from the Chambarak community of Armenia's Gegharkunik region. These narratives address issues that directly or indirectly affect their lives and communities, ranging from gender inequality to the complexities of war and peace.

Upon reflection, I'd like to note that while adolescents often echo the prevailing discourse of their environment, providing safe space and encouraging critical thinking enable many to question dominant narratives and analyze things from a broader perspective.

- Gayane Ghazaryan

**To ensure the safety and privacy of the interviewees, the names of the girls who've shared their stories aren't specified throughout the zine.*



This is our Chambarak. We live here. All is good — no water shortage, no mountain shortage. We have coffee every morning and then, in the evening breeze, we go for a walk, watch the cows and the little kids with muddy faces running around.

It's a border community. All day long, we're anxiously watching the news to see what will happen. But when we see those kids running around with their sweet, muddy faces, we forget about all our worries and enjoy the peaceful nature. I can't picture my life without Chambarak. The land is different here.

young girls & the community

By 'community,' we mean the society, the local people who do everything possible for its improvement and development. The voices of young people are not fully heard or valued in our community. The grown-ups — teachers and parents, too — do not give much care to the issues that concern us.

In the community, young people have the capacity to solve the issues that bother us, but because our voices are not heard, we are unable to change the things we don't like. One example is the issue of opening a youth center, which concerns many young people living in the community.



Sometimes they put so much pressure on us, we regret having been born a girl.

In our community, whether you like it or not, people often meddle in each other's lives, especially when it comes to girls and women. Boys are always given higher status. They can come home late, misbehave, love and be loved. As for the girls, well... don't even get me started. According to the local mindset, a girl should only sit at home until the age of thirty and set a coffee table for the guests. And yes, the table around which everyone discusses other people's lives. Of course, there are exceptions, but there are so many negative people that it's hard to see the positive ones!

There comes a moment in life when you realize you only live once and you must live it to the fullest. But then suddenly you remember where you live. You realize you must conform to others' expectations instead of your own. God forbid they catch a girl with a guy. They'll make a big deal out of it. She'll probably end up like Joan of Arc. As for the teachers, oh WOW! It's one thing for them to supervise you during class, but what about after school? "Where are you going? Why?" What's the point of all these questions? What does it have to do with them? Ah, I don't know, it's tough dealing with these people, but there's something about them that keeps me attached. I can't help it.





- Mom, why is everything so difficult for us?

Illustrations by Ina Grigoryan



- Ew, lose weight!

- You're not feminine at all.
- You look like a guy. Take care of yourself.



- Do you need attention?
- You're a woman. Behave a bit modestly!











Photos by Anush Mkhitaryan, Milena Grigoryan, Zaruh Sargsyan, Karine Tizyan

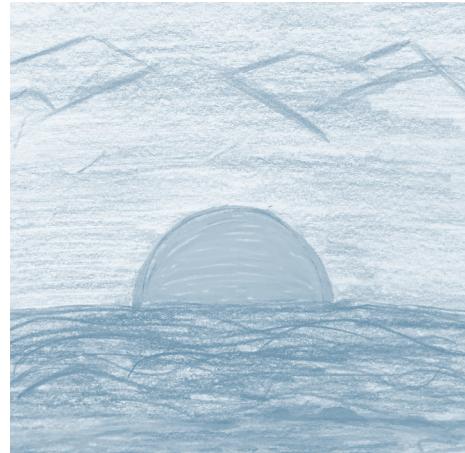
war
peace
violence



ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN

I think there are no 'bad nations' – there are bad people. And those bad people exist in every nation. It's not right to say that all the Turks [and Azerbaijanis] are bad. There are good people among them too. If I were to meet my peers [from those nations], first of all I would like to know what they think about us.

People have varied perspectives, and I believe that my peers in Azerbaijan also want peace. If my father is on the frontline, theirs might be as well, and it's the governments that are responsible for this situation. I'm not sure, maybe most of them [Azerbaijanis] have a negative attitude towards our people, but there are also people who want peace.



We have an ethnic Azerbaijani living in our neighborhood who married a Molokan, and now they live here. He is such a good person. He's really the most caring and kind-hearted one, and I love him best of all. But then I remember about the crimes committed by the Turks, the Genocide of 1915, the war, and a sense of revenge awakens. War is not a good thing. When war breaks out, innocent people are 100% not guilty of it. It's not their fault that the authorities cannot get along with each other.

On September 27th, 2020, I was only ten years old. I was emotional and fearful. On the same day, my father went to the frontline. I still remember my mother's watery eyes. Although it was difficult, we had to go to my grandmother's village [for safety], but my mother decided to stay. I had never seen Chambarak so empty in my life. Dead silence. The noise of the kids was gone and I just missed those days.

Although I was little, I recall my uncle's last request, which I refused. He simply wanted me to sing for him, not thinking that it would turn out to be the last time we saw each other. I had spoken with him only three hours before he was killed. Later I received the news. It was painful. Life seemed to stop. To this day I remember him and I am grateful. This war really left a big mark on my life — appreciate what you have.

It was November 2022. Artsakh was besieged. After a while, my father decided to move to Karabakh for his military service. My father remained under siege for a year. One day I came home to my grandmother's eyes filled with tears and I realized war had started again, and we didn't hear from my father for about three days. [...] It was very difficult for me because the fear of losing had awakened. My father had taken part in the Artsakh war, going through many things, but he had never shared anything about it with us.

The next day we talked about Artsakh at school. I just couldn't hold back my tears because I was always told that the men would not be allowed back. I had never shown how I felt. My father was exceptionally precious to me and the endless longing was simply unbearable. Thank God he came back. I didn't wish for anything else.



- Sweetheart, please sing my favorite song, "The Mountains of Jabrayil"



- No, uncle. My voice is gone. But I promise — once dad comes back, I'll sing.

- Hello, uncle.
How are you doing?



- Hello, sweetheart.
We're good. How are you? How is grandma?



- My dear, your uncle was the commander of the
4th squad. He's a hero to all of us.

**Feelings are for everyone – for
both the girls and the boys.**

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I've noticed that after this 44-Day war, there were acquaintances who were stressed and would easily get mad about everything. It seemed like they didn't want to listen to anyone. They lost their ability to listen. Before the war, they were calm, active, full of life, but after the war, they seemed isolated and they didn't want to be asked any questions regarding the war.

In fact, no one has the right to commit violence toward someone else.

Before that [the war], my dad would spend a lot of time with us, we socialized a lot. For example, he would come play with us, but after the war...I don't know. When he had already returned, it was not even possible to talk to him. He was isolated at first, but now there's slight improvement.

The pain that they accumulate in themselves increases their aggression. The victim of physical violence should try to control their own emotions and support him [the aggressor].

But we must realize that it* is very wrong. After the war, my father had that nervous condition. He tried to keep himself busy so that he wouldn't get angry with us, wouldn't do something wrong. We would go shopping, buy some interesting things, make some small houses and stuff like that, and he would always find something to do for himself so that he wouldn't be free and wouldn't think too much. At that time, both my brothers and I were always around dad, and my mom would always tell us not to leave him alone. This way we had fun time while making sure he wouldn't get irritated.

*Violence committed by veterans against family members.

When my father came back from the war, he was able to regulate his emotions, but for example, my uncle and many other acquaintances cried and found relief like that. My father had many troops who were killed, and normally, the attention he was supposed to give his children would often go towards his soldiers. [After the war] he found his peace by visiting their graves, by seeing them. Now, the love and care he once directed towards his soldiers is now given to me, to his children.

Seeing a therapist will help [rehabilitate war veterans], but in our society, while some might seek help, I believe 90% will refuse. For instance, if a boy cries, he will be labeled a coward. Feelings are for everyone — both for the boys and the girls. For example, during the war, all the women of Chambarak were crying, screaming, while the men held back their emotions. This repression built up inside them, and they had no outlet for their suffering. At that time, in my opinion, their situation was more difficult, because they could not get rid of that pain.



I've been reflecting a lot on my future lately. My parents want me to move to Dilijan for high school, but I'm feeling unsure. I'm confident in my ability to succeed there and manage on my own, but... oh that 'but'. Deep in my heart, I don't want to leave. I'd rather stay in Chambarak, in our familiar neighborhood. I want to wake up every day, stand on our balcony, and watch the lively scene of our community. While I do think about leaving Armenia in the future, I'm not sure why or where I would go.

I was watching the news with my grandfather recently, and they reported that some villages were given to the Turks [Azeris]. Grandpa said, 'We are next.' This filled me with fear. The next day, when I talked about it with my friends, they shared the same concerns. I'm very scared about what might happen. I deeply appreciate what my parents have done for me. To conclude, I'd like to share a quote from my grandmother Anahit: 'Good luck to us, and may the Turks never achieve their dream.'

Everyone around me says that there is no future in Armenia, but I don't listen to anyone and claim the opposite. My feelings grew even stronger after I visited Germany. While I was there, I felt incomplete because I was constantly thinking about my homeland and my family. Every day, I would call my mom and ask her to show me Chambarak and the garden in front of our house. That trip made me appreciate Chambarak even more and made me realize that I don't want anything to change here. Then the Artsakh war started. I was supposed to go there a month before the war began, but it didn't work out. Now, even though it's no longer my country, I feel a strong need to visit and connect with it, as it is the land of my ancestors."

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