



SECURITY BAROMETER

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Middle East crisis: Implications for Peace in the South Caucasus from Women's Perspectives

Introduction

The war against Iran and the broader Middle East crisis, which began on 28 February 2026, is reshaping regional dynamics with direct implications for the South Caucasus. As a key junction between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe, the region is increasingly affected by disruptions to energy, transport, and security corridors. Instability in Iran, combined with wider regional tensions, is altering trade routes, increasing pressure on strategic transit pathways, and heightening risks of economic disruption and security volatility. The Middle East crisis further amplifies these pressures by disrupting global energy markets, trade flows, and strategic alignments. As a result, the South Caucasus is emerging as a corridor of growing strategic importance, while simultaneously facing heightened exposure to external shocks, including implications for border management, regional stability, and crisis response capacities. These dynamics position the region at the intersection of emerging risks and strategic pressures.

Iran is a multi-ethnic society, with Persians forming the majority (approximately 60%) and significant minority groups including Azerbaijanis (around 25%), Kurds (around 10%), Lurs, Baloch, Arabs, Turkmen, as well as smaller Armenian and Assyrian communities. Many of these populations maintain cross-border cultural and linguistic ties, particularly in border areas, shaping regional dynamics, including patterns of mobility, community-level interactions, and trans-boundary sensitivities during periods of instability.

In terms of religious composition, Iran is predominantly Shia Muslim (approximately 85–90%), with Sunni Muslim communities (5–10%) largely among Kurdish, Baloch, and Turkmen populations, alongside recognized religious minorities including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. These groups maintain historical and cultural linkages across the region, influencing social cohesion, cross-border interactions, and perceptions that may shape regional responses in times of crisis.

Earlier in 2026, Iran remained a high-risk, low-visibility environment due to internal protests, with severe internet restrictions and repression limiting reliable information. This created an atmosphere prone to misinformation and polarized narratives. Women played a central role, with issues like the hijab symbolizing broader debates on state control and personal freedoms. The security situation was multi-dimensional, involving economic, political, gender, and geopolitical factors, with no clear low-risk pathway forward. Ensuring the protection of women's agency and minimizing harm in external engagement remained key priorities. Global solidarity efforts faced diminishing returns, with social media visibility normalizing violence, sanctions disproportionately impacting civilians, weakening multilateral systems limiting effective responses, and international attention failing to translate into sustained political action.

II. Gendered Dimensions of the Ongoing Middle East Crisis

The war against Iran and the broader Middle East crisis are transforming the South Caucasus into a high-stakes geopolitical corridor, where fragile peace is increasingly securitized. From a women's perspective, the impact goes beyond conflict spillover to include rising insecurity in daily life, shrinking civic and political space and exclusion from critical decision-making processes. The region therefore faces a dual erosion: both of peace and of women's agency. As the South Caucasus becomes a key alternative transport and energy corridor bypassing Iran, infrastructure and transit routes take on heightened strategic significance, further shaping security dynamics and affecting women's mobility, protection, and participation.



Gender Dimension: The growing role of the region as a transit corridor, combined with insufficient investment in protection systems, is exacerbating risks for women. Increased cross-border movement heightens exposure to trafficking networks, exploitation in transit zones, and mobility-related insecurity. These risks are further intensified by limited gender-responsive border management and weak protection frameworks.

Militarization and Fragile Peace Dynamics

The failure of recent US–Iran diplomatic efforts (12 April) to de-escalate tensions underscores the fragility of broader regional security architectures and the limited traction of current peace diplomacy frameworks. This setback reinforces perceptions of entrenched geopolitical rivalry and contributes to an increasingly volatile regional environment extending beyond the Middle East.

Within this context, Armenia and Azerbaijan remain among the 15 highest-ranking countries globally in terms of military expenditure as a share of GDP, reflecting sustained security anxieties and continued prioritization of defence postures over confidence-building measures. In contrast, Georgia maintains more moderate defence spending (41st place in the same ranking), focusing on alliance cooperation, professionalization, and interoperability.

The ongoing crisis in the Middle East further heightens risks of spillover into the South Caucasus, including increased military deployments along borders, the potential linkage of Middle East tensions with unresolved regional disputes, and the risk that parts of the region could be indirectly drawn into wider proxy dynamics. As a result, fragile peace processes are increasingly under strain, with security imperatives continuing to outweigh diplomatic engagement and sustained dialogue frameworks.



Gender Impact: Increasing securitization is contributing to the further marginalization of women in peace processes, alongside a reallocation of resources away from social cohesion, prevention, and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) priorities toward defence and hard security. At the same time, the rise of militarized masculinities is narrowing civic space and limiting opportunities for women peacebuilders to participate meaningfully in decision-making, mediation, and confidence-building efforts.

Please add at the end of this para - Women's efforts to integrate the WPS norms and standards into "hard security" frameworks have so far not been successful, although such efforts continue.

Displacement and Humanitarian Pressures

Further escalation scenarios include the risk of large-scale displacement from Iran into neighboring regions. While cross-border movements remain limited so far, the scale of internal displacement signals significant spillover risks. The South Caucasus, particularly Armenia, has limited absorption capacity, already strained by recent displacement crises, including the influx of over 100,000 refugees from Karabakh in 2024, and faces structural constraints in accommodating a large new wave of arrival.

Ongoing attacks to Iran using heavy weapons are already having a negative impact on the environment, posing serious risks to health and well-being. The destruction of infrastructure and contamination of resources can exacerbate humanitarian pressures, further complicating the response efforts. Heightening geopolitical tensions shift policy focus in neighboring countries from inclusive development to securitized infrastructure governance.



Gendered Risks: Displacement is significantly increasing vulnerabilities for women and girls, including heightened risks of gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and trafficking, as well as barriers to accessing essential services and legal documentation. Female-headed households are particularly exposed, facing compounded economic and protection challenges.

Women-led organizations in Armenia identify key risks and constraints, including language barriers and limited coordination between NGOs and government agencies at municipal and community levels. Several NGOs that provided emergency relief to refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh have accumulated experience in delivering essential services, including protection support, distribution of non-food and food items, and shelter assistance. The Armenian Red Cross is also strengthening its preparedness for potential emergency responses through staff training and capacity-building efforts.

Erosion of Multilateralism and WPS Agendas

The broader crisis in the Middle East reflects the continued weakening of global governance and multilateral frameworks, resulting in reduced effectiveness of international norms supporting the Women, Peace and Security agenda, growing difficulty in translating solidarity into tangible protection and policy change, and a declining trust in global institutions.

Across Europe, March 2026 saw large-scale public demonstrations expressing solidarity with Gaza, Palestine, and Iran, reflecting a growing societal concern over escalating violence and humanitarian crises in the Middle East. These mobilizations brought together diverse civil society actors and attracted significant public participation in major European cities, underscoring the depth of public engagement. However, this visible solidarity has not been consistently translated into coherent policy shifts or unified governmental positions, revealing a persistent gap between public sentiment and institutional foreign policy responses on the Middle East.



Gender Impact: In the context of shifting geopolitical priorities, women's rights risk being deprioritized, instrumentalized, or sidelined in political and security negotiations. At the same time, women are highly visible in solidarity movements across Europe as participants and organizers, particularly within feminist, youth, and human rights networks, reflecting strong gendered civic engagement around peace and justice issues. However, the disconnect between public mobilization and policy action disproportionately affects women and girls in crisis contexts, as delayed or limited political responses translate into prolonged humanitarian needs, protection gaps, and reduced access to essential services. This gap also constrains progress on Women, Peace and Security commitments, including the prevention of gender-based violence, protection of civilians, and meaningful participation of women in peace and humanitarian decision-making. Meanwhile, women-led civil society organizations continue to play a critical role in filling operational and advocacy gaps by providing frontline humanitarian support, psychosocial assistance, and community-based protection in conflict-affected settings.

Shrinking Civic Space and Security Risks for Women

Regional governments face pressure to balance security concerns with civil liberties, particularly regarding civic activism, diaspora mobilization, cross-border political sensitivities, etc.



Gender Impact: Growing securitization is exposing women activists and human rights defenders to increased surveillance, intimidation, and reputational risks, particularly through perceived association with “foreign agendas.” At the same time, civic space is contracting, significantly limiting safe and enabling environments for feminist and peace activism.

Economic Shock and Everyday Insecurity

The war has triggered global energy and economic disruptions, including rising oil prices, inflation, and supply chain breakdowns. In the South Caucasus this contributes to increased cost of living, pressure on food systems and basic services and uneven economic gains (e.g., energy windfalls in Azerbaijan vs. vulnerability elsewhere). Delays in regional trade corridors slow down price stabilization and supply chain efficiency, increasing cost of essential goods.

Dependence on fragile supply chains, including the risk of disruptions in key routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, significantly affects the availability and cost of fertilizers and agricultural inputs worldwide, with direct implications for yields and planting cycles. This is particularly relevant for the South Caucasus, where agriculture is heavily dependent on imported inputs and therefore highly vulnerable to external shocks, including timing disruptions that could affect harvest cycles and productivity, especially in rain-fed and mountainous areas, underscoring the need for strengthened regional cooperation and diversification of supply chains.



Gender Impact: Economic disruptions are disproportionately impacting women, particularly those concentrated in informal and low-paid sectors, making them more vulnerable to income loss. These pressures are compounded by rising unpaid care responsibilities and declining access to livelihoods and social protection systems.

Uncertainty and delays in regional connectivity and infrastructure projects/initiatives - evidence from comparable contexts shows that infrastructure corridors near insecure borders often see increased informal economies that disproportionately expose women to exploitation. Cross-regional connectivity projects like TRIPP¹ could potentially deliver cross-border employment, mobility, and trade benefits for women, but only if stability and inclusive governance are ensured.



Gender Impact: Escalation of the conflict contributes to increased militarization of border areas, where women face heightened risks of trafficking and harassment along informal trade corridors. Women-owned SMEs, already underrepresented in cross-border trade, face additional barriers to market access and finance when regional connectivity is disrupted. Large-scale connectivity initiatives, such as TRIPP, are typically negotiated at state and security levels with limited participation of women economists, planners, and civil society actors, increasing the risk that infrastructure design does not adequately reflect women’s needs, including safe mobility, access to services along transport corridors, and inclusive local development benefits. Rural women in border regions are particularly affected by reduced agricultural trade opportunities and constrained access to cross-border markets. As a result, the potential “peace dividend” of regional connectivity initiatives may not translate into meaningful economic empowerment for women or strengthened gender-responsive regional cooperation.

¹ TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity) was introduced as part of US-mediated peace and connectivity discussions in 2025, within the broader Armenia–Azerbaijan peacebuilding process. It envisions a transport link through southern Armenia connecting Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave, while remaining under Armenian sovereignty. Iran expressed concerns about TRIPP, viewing it as a sensitive geopolitical development near its borders. It opposes any “corridor” interpretation that could alter regional borders or increase external, particularly US, influence, while emphasizing that connectivity should respect sovereignty and regional balance.