



PUBLIC DEFENDER
(OMBUDSMAN) OF GEORGIA

Special Report

Early Age Marriages: Challenges and Solutions



Supported by the British Embassy, within the project
"Girls' rights protection and prevention of early age marriages"

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Foreword

The present report offers information about the study of individual cases of early age marriages by the Department of Gender Equality of the Public Defender's Office, monitoring of efforts of relevant agencies and analysis of information meetings.

One of the directions of the Public Defender's Office is prevention of early age marriages. The 2012 Parliamentary Report for the first time presented in-depth evaluation and statistical data about the issue. In 2015-2016, the Department of Gender Equality held a lot of meetings in the municipal centers of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Adjara regions with the aim to analyze the obtained information and identify existing problems and possible solutions.

The study of situation showed that the main challenges are the low level of public awareness, gaps in service delivery and ineffective response mechanism. These problems are particularly obvious in the mountainous areas and in the regions populated by ethnic minorities, where access to services is complicated by a number of reasons.

On 16 December 2015, the Parliament of Georgia discussed and adopted a bill, which had been prepared on the basis of the Public Defender's legislative proposal, in the third reading. According to the amendment, marriage registration rules for persons between 17 and 18 years of age has changed so that only the court will be authorized to issue a marriage license. In addition, a worthy condition for registration of marriage was clarified and the term of validity for the provision was defined as one year.

The report is supported by the British Embassy Project "Girls' rights protection and prevention of early age marriages". I hope that our efforts will help all those who have to deal with the problem and this will be another small, but necessary step in the prevention and elimination of early age marriages.

Ucha Nanuashvili
Public Defender of Georgia

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Introduction

Early age marriage is a registered or non-registered union between two persons, one of which has not reached the age of majority. Pursuant to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the internal legislative acts, a person is considered a juvenile before the age of 18.

According to the surveys, early age marriage is violation of the child's right to health, education, equality and the right to live in an atmosphere free from violence and exploitation. These rights are enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Around the world, more than 700 million women were married in the juvenile age. About 250 million out of them had not reached the age of 15¹. Girls who marry before the age of 18, in most cases drop out of school and stop getting education. They belong to a high-risk group of victims of domestic violence.

Unfortunately, early age marriage is a severe problem in Georgia. Both the forced marriage and the practice of engagement are common. The study of the cases shows that the main challenges are the low level of public awareness and inefficient delivery of services.

In 2014, Article 150¹ – Coercion of Marriage – was added to the Criminal Code of Georgia. However, according to the data provided by the Prosecutor's Office, no criminal prosecution was launched under this article in 2015.

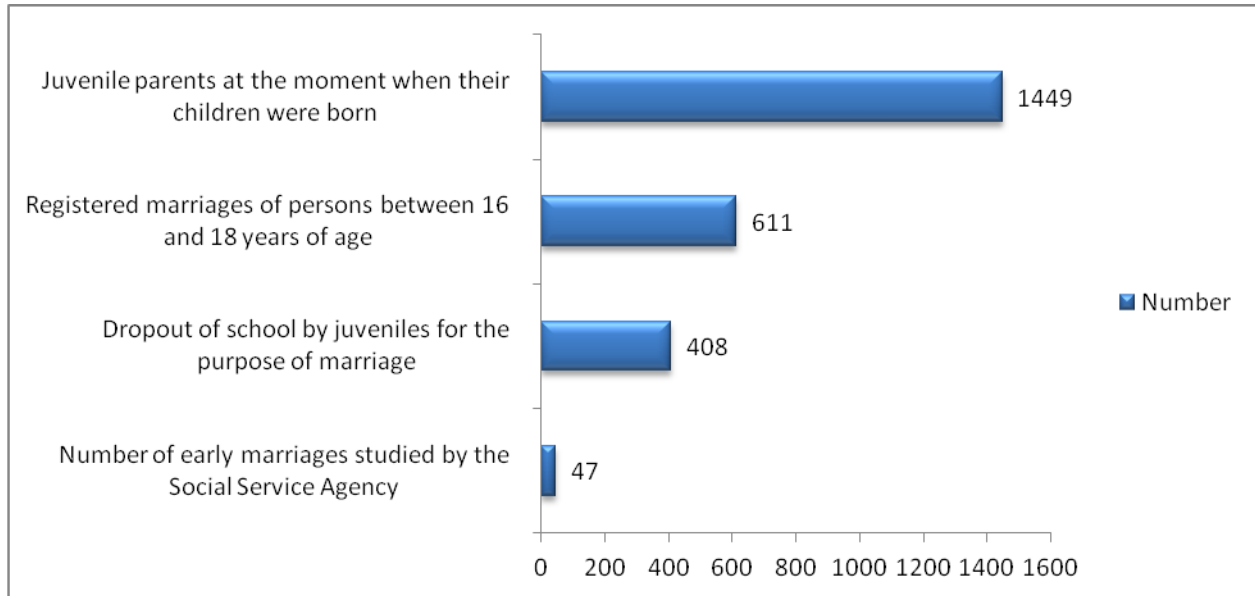
It should be noted that in 2015 the Ministry of Education and Science carried out a change, according to which, if a student drops out of school, the motive should be indicated; this partially made it possible to see the scales of early age marriages.

Register and management of early age marriage cases

Even though no exact number of early age marriages is available in Georgia, the Department of Gender Equality of the Public Defender's Office collected data of early age marriage cases from various agencies.

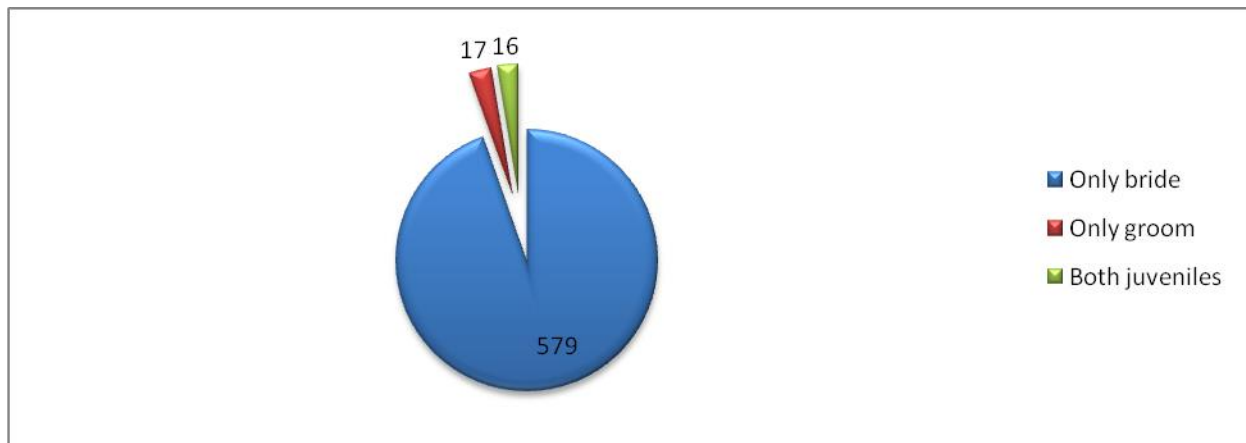
¹ Information is available at: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR..pdf

Table 1: Data on early age marriages (2015)



According to the information provided by the Ministry of Justice², marriages of 611 juveniles were registered in 2015 and 665 - in 2014. 95% out of them were girls. It is clear that when we are talking about early age marriages, it mainly concerns girls. However, there are early age marriage cases among boys too.

Table 2: Registered marriages of persons between 16 and 18 years of age (2015)



The figures of the Ministry of Justice are almost three times higher and reflect the parents who were juveniles at a time of registration of their children. The data of 2014 and 2015 are almost identical; however, they significantly exceed all other obtained data on early age marriages, and at the same time, are much more accurate, as registration of marriage does not often happen.

² Letters of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia: #7264 / 23.09.2015; #01/14677 / 25.01.16;

Table 3: Juvenile parents at the time of births of their children

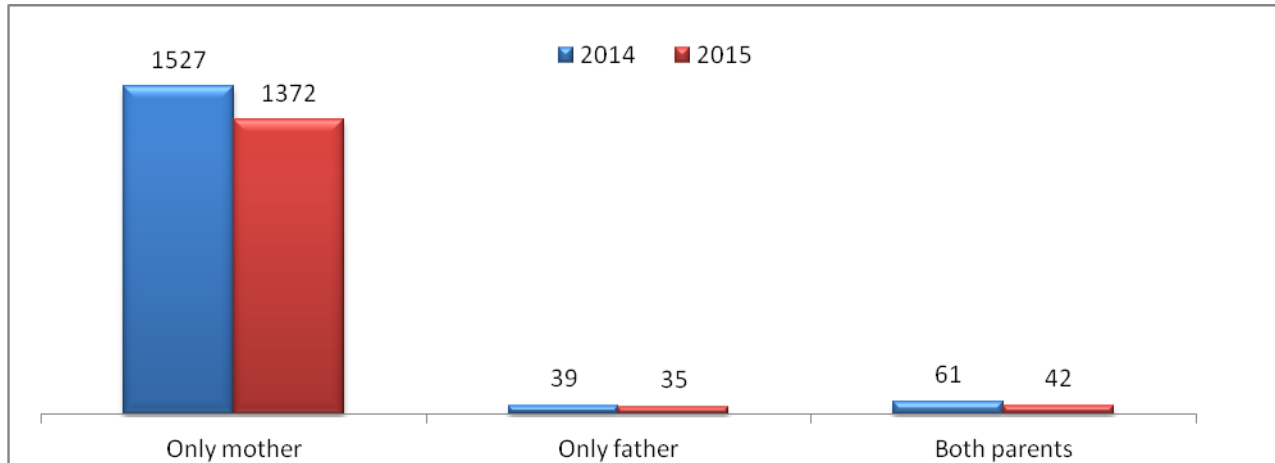
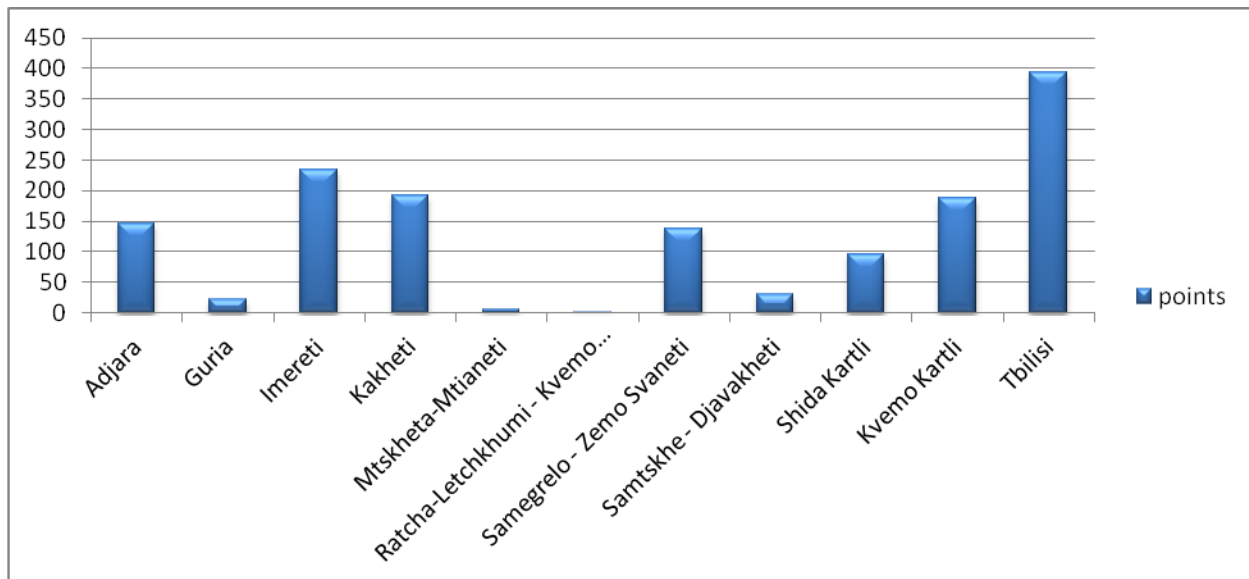


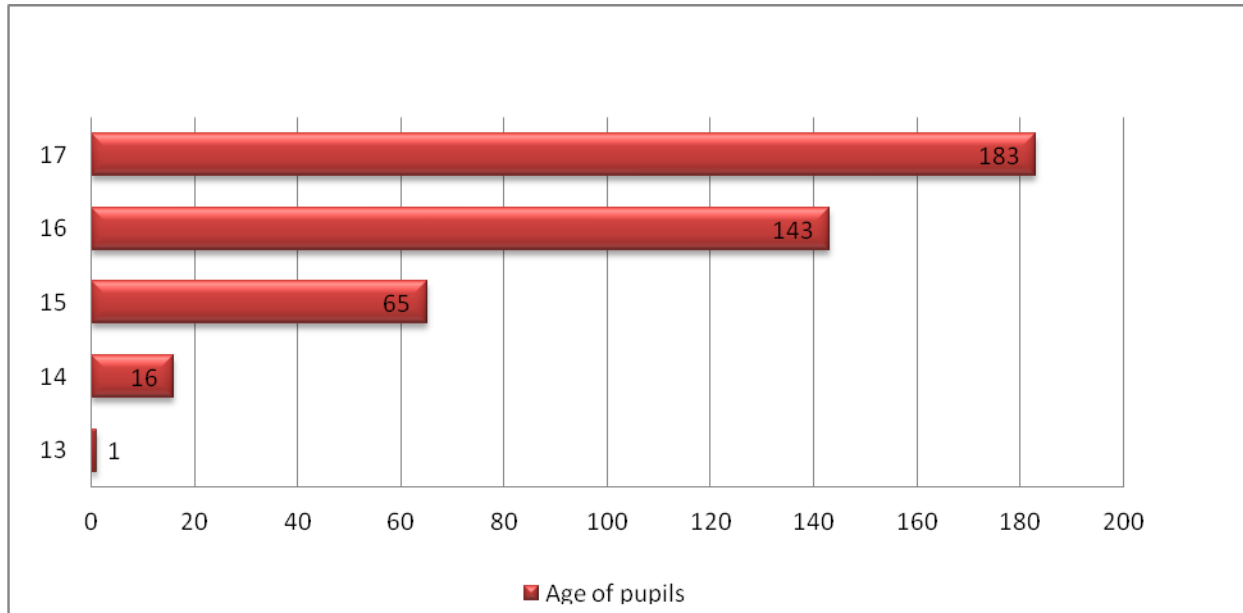
Table 4: Data of juvenile parents according to geographical location (2015)



It should be noted that young people often drop out schools because of early age marriages. Dropping out of school before completing the basic level of education is especially alarming. According to the Ministry of Education and Science³, 408 students between 13 and 17 years of age, and 168 students at the age of 18, dropped out of school in 2015.

³ Letters of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia # MES 7 15 00971410 / 25.09.15 – MES 8 16 00046633 /21.01.16

Table 5: Rate of school drop out due to early age marriages (2015)



It should be noted that most likely these numbers are not exact, since during the meetings, held in Kvemo Kartli region, teachers and principals did not have information that they should have registered the causes of school drop out by students and should have made relevant notifications. However, the majority of them noted that almost none of the girls graduate school in their villages exactly due to early marriage. This gives us grounds to believe that after the introduction of the register system, the data may be further increased.

The order of May 31 of 2010 on "Approval of Child Protection (referral) Procedures" (hereinafter: the referral procedures) in detail describes the responsibilities and obligations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, when violence occurs against children. However, the survey results of the Public Defender's Office make it clear that referral procedures with regard to early age marriage cases are almost never fulfilled.

As already mentioned, teachers have one of the most important roles in the prevention of early age marriages. They are responsible for notifying relevant agencies of the cases of early age marriages. Conversations showed that teachers believe that identification of the risk group of children and notification of appropriate agencies are beyond their competences and that they cannot interfere with the family affairs, outside of school. They also have no hope of confidentiality, which eventually causes their inaction. Such actions lead to the fact that the referral mechanism is ignored and teachers refuse to fulfill their legal duties.

The Department of Gender Equality of the Public Defender's Office studied the quantitative indicators of responses to the early age marriage facts by law enforcement agencies.

Pursuant to Article 140 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 16 is punishable. Despite the fact that the number of early age marriages between adults and persons under the age of 16 is quite high, the rate of responses to such cases is quite low. In addition, the problem is the low level of public awareness. In many cases people are not aware that this article does not provide for mitigation of punishment or cannot be justified by creating a family.

According to the information provided by the Chief Prosecutor's Office, the rate of responses has increased. For example, compared to 2014, the rate of criminal prosecution under Article 140 of the Criminal Code of Georgia increased by 74% in 2015; in 2014 criminal proceedings was launched under Article 140 against 33 persons, while in 2015 the figure was 129⁴.

Pursuant to Article 143 of the Criminal Code, illegal deprivation of human liberty is punishable, including unlawful deprivation of liberty of juveniles, which can be an abduction of a girl for the purpose of marriage. It should be noted that prosecution of persons for crimes envisaged by Article 143 has increased by 82%; the corresponding figure was 11 in 2014 and 60 in 2015. Out all these cases, in the first half of 2015, prosecution was launched only against three persons and all three criminal cases showed that illegal deprivation of liberty served the purpose of marriage⁵. As of another 6 months of 2015, a total of 57 cases were reported. However, this figure does not include only illegal deprivation of liberty of juveniles, as, according to the Prosecutor's Office⁶, the abovementioned could not be identified.

According to the information provided by the Social Service Agency⁷, they have not received any notification about early marriage cases from schools or from the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2014, while the study of the few facts, carried out by them, became possible only after the appeal of the Public Defender's Office. It is noteworthy that they were notified of one case from the hospital. In 2015, total number of early marriage cases studied by the Social Service Agency was 47. The data makes it possible to distribute them according to the regions⁸.

⁴ Letters of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia #13/60324 / 25.09.15 – #13/5363 / 23.01.16

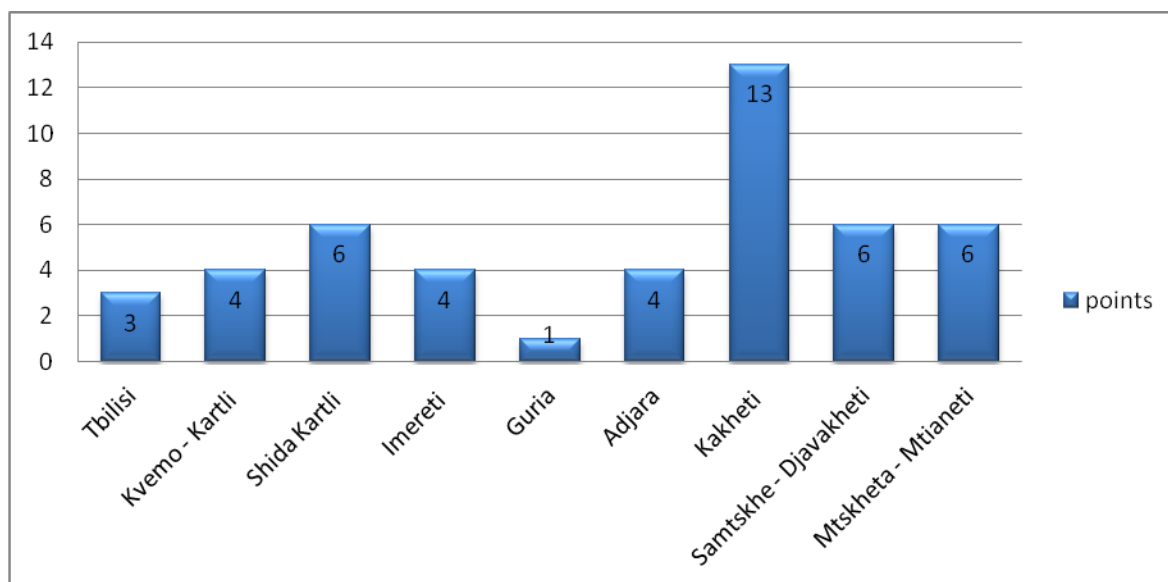
⁵ Letter of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia #13/60324 / 25.09.15

⁶ Letter of the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia #13/5363 / 23.01.16

⁷ Letter of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs #04/16119; 09/03/2015

⁸ Letters of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs #04/71601 / 22.09.15 – #04/3552 / 18.01.16

Table 6: Number of cases studied by the Social Service Agency (2015)



The survey of the activities of the Social Service Agency revealed various shortcomings, such as deficiencies in service delivery for non-Georgian speakers or inability to respond to cases when the parents or the children do not express any kind of protest or complaint about the incident. In such cases, social workers considered that no reaction was necessary, as the child's interests were protected, which in fact is contrary to the best interests of children that must be protected by the state, pursuant to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The existent situation made it clear that the Social Service Agency, like schools, find it difficult to carry out actions required by law in areas populated by ethnic minorities, as the language barrier hinders the process of working and also causes the lack of services. As a result, the vulnerable group, such as juvenile victims of violence, suffers from above mentioned problems.

Practice of early age marriages in the regions of Georgia

The Department of Gender Equality of the Public Defender's Office organized information and focus group meetings in various regions of Georgia in order to study the issue in depth⁹. The meetings were aimed at collecting information about early marriage, its causes and associated problems on the ground. Teachers, representatives of service provider agencies and school students were interviewed during the visits.

The survey results showed that population, including children, does not have adequate information on the illegal nature of the forced marriage. The principle - "a family affair", which people try not to

⁹ Meetings were held in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and high mountaneous villages of Adjara. A total of 30 meetings were held in 22 cities and villages, with participation of 750 people.

interfere with, is still effective. Teachers do not feel their responsibility either and do not act in compliance with the law when they are informed of early marriage cases. Moreover, the vast majority of teachers attending the meetings were not aware of their obligations. At the same time, there exist gender stereotypes, which encourage the practice of early marriage by putting girls in an unequal situation.

In addition, the population sees causes of early age marriages in the wrong way. The participants of the meeting named free nature of children, technological advancement, religious factors and interest in the opposite sex among the causes of early marriage; however, they did not consider the fact that early age marriages were related to the lack of information, gender inequality and existent stereotypes.

The meeting participants talked about the excessive freedom of girls, which often leads to dangerous results. In their view, excessive freedom is the factor that leads to early age marriages.

- *I think that the Internet and freedom brought all this. I am a teacher and I lose one girl each year. Too much freedom is given to 14-16-year-old girls. I think everything was different 20 years ago. Maybe lack of perspective was also a reason for this. (Sagarejo)*
- *I think the youth understands the idea of freedom in the wrong way and they express it without thinking enough. They express freedom in impudence. (Khulo)*

However, the public cannot realize that the children have interest towards the opposite sex particularly in the transitional age, which is normal, and it should not end with marriage. In fact, young people, and especially girls, know that they will become subjects of gossiping and consideration by neighbors, relatives and teachers, if they show interest towards the opposite sex. Dates and other friendly meetings with the teenagers of the opposite sex will stain girls' reputation and they will no longer be able to get married, which is associated with the destruction of their future.

Accordingly, young people prefer to "legalize" their relationship by engagement or marriage and thus protect themselves from staining their reputation. So, one of the causes of early age marriage is the gender inequality, as girls are required not to take any single step that would overshadow their honesty. However, the same is not required for boys. On the contrary, some noted that meetings with girls are good for the boys' reputation and this is even considered as a kind of experience for them. Parents believe that they will protect their girls from dangers if they make them marry or engage, and as they often call it, if they "find patrons for them".

There are cases when couples first meet each other at the wedding, while the engagement ceremony is held without them. Such forms are mainly spread in the Azeri regions. The main motivation in similar cases is improvement of financial conditions of the families. Teachers believe that forced marriage is a financial deal for parents.

As the information meetings revealed, kidnappings no longer take place in Kakheti and Adjara regions; however, it is still a general practice in Samtskhe-Javakheti, in particular, in Akhalkalaki. As for the causes of early age marriage, the majority of the meeting participants named the lack of perspective for the future.

In Marneuli the most common form of early marriage is the engagement practice. This is a kind of tradition, which is basically decided by parents and which makes the relationship between a girl and a boy legal and acceptable both for the family and the public.

It should be noted that not only girls, but also boys, drop out of school in Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions due to early age marriages and cases of labor exploitation are reported. The situation is different in Adjara, where it is categorically unacceptable children to be used as workforce at the expense of dropping out of school.

- *Not only girls but many boys also drop out of school. They do not go to school after the 9th grade, especially in Adigeni district. They go to the mountains to work and parents also believe that they do not need education. (Akhalsikhe)*
- *It is the same with regard to boys. They have to work at home and this is a social factor. (Lagodekhi)*
- *There are many cases in Marneuli, when children drop out of school even before the 9th grade, though then they return for getting certificates and continue to study.*
- *There are at least two cases in rural schools, when children get engaged and I think this is a form of early marriage too. In the 8th grade they already know who will be their husbands. Girls do not attend classes, but they are still registered as school students, since school principals cover for them. In many cases fiancés do not want their girls to go to school. If you walk around the villages, you will see that girls do not go to high classes. In one of the villages a teacher asked a girl about why she got married, which caused quite serious dissatisfaction in the community. (Marneuli)*

The meeting participants in Marneuli noted that girls' education has become a bit more important in the recent years, though the problem is poverty.

- *In many cases, girls do not attend high classes because parents do not have money to buy books and other necessary things for school. So, they have to make a choice between their children when deciding to give a relevant education to one of them. (Marneuli)*

Deficiencies were also noted in the education system. Teachers and other persons attending the meeting expressed dissatisfaction with the modern education system and described it as out-of-date:

- *Teachers mainly use old methods of teaching in schools, while modern kids are so advanced, that they are no longer interested in that model. They want to get newer and more interesting information; they need education on sexual health. (Marneuli)*

At the meeting in Bolnisi the issue of forced marriage was discussed. It should be noted that marriages are often forced by parents or other family members, while girls do not have the right to refuse marriage or engagement, if there is no any special reason for it. The meeting participants discussed the issue of high rate of early age marriages in their region. They brought examples of forced marriages. For example, in the Bolnisi village of Nakhiduri, when a 15-year-old girl was forced to get married, she was physically abused by her husband, after which she tried to commit suicide.

At the meetings held in Kvemo Kartli region, we talked about the harmful practice of abduction of girls. As the discussion showed, majority of kidnapped girls are forced to marry the kidnapper. They are forced to do so by the society and by their families in order to save their reputation. According to locals, nobody will marry a kidnapped girl; she is doomed to constant gossiping, and if a girl fails to marry at all, she will be "destroyed". In some cases, girls are forced not to disclose the facts of kidnapping, because their families might appear in danger, as they may try to take revenge on the kidnappers.

Consequences of early marriage

It should be noted that early age marriage cases should be considered as violence. This approach is shared and proved by a number of researches, which were held in various countries with the same problems. Early age marriage is a form of violence, when juveniles themselves may not be aware of the risks and threats they may face by taking this step, while their parents (guardians/caregivers) and state agencies responsible for protecting children from sexual abuse are required to make every effort to avoid such consequences.

As a result of early age marriages, children/juveniles face a danger, such as domestic violence. They are much more vulnerable and have little information about the protection mechanisms. At the same time, violence is regarded as an unsolvable situation, and therefore, they find it difficult to escape from it, especially if we take into account the social aspects and requirements existing Georgia, which originate from the principles of gender inequality, such as, for example, informal requirements imposed on girls/women with regard to honesty, chastity, maintenance of a family and patience.

In addition, sometimes early age marriages affect health. It is known that the risk of complications and death in childbirth for girls under the age of 16 is 5 times higher. In addition, their reproductive functions are damaged and cancer risks are increased. As for the possibility of family planning, girls do not have this opportunity; they cannot make decisions about when to become mothers or how many children to have. This is due to the restriction of access to contraceptives, as well as the lack of information about such opportunities, and most importantly, the attitude and the requirements of the society, which force married girls to become mothers, as otherwise, they will become victims of fierce criticism. All this leads to abortions, which are often conducted in unsafe conditions.

According to the respondents, early marriage, apart from health and other risks, is associated with the problem of poor prospects of development. In addition, the meeting participants underlined the greater likelihood of domestic violence and other problems caused by the lack of knowledge of rights.

After the marriage, the girls often agree to low-paying jobs and leave their children with other family members. As for attending classes after marriage, the meeting participants said that if the husband's family considers education to be a priority, they will take care for the girl's future development.

- *If a girl marries and education is part of her future plan, her academic performance continues, and if education is not her plan, performance deteriorates. (Akhalsikhe)*
- *It is rare when a married girl has a high academic performance. (Sagarejo)*
- *It depends on family values; if education is important for them, they will let the girl finish school, though there are families who are not interested in education at all. (Batumi)*
- *Parents' contribution to girls' early marriage is largest. Children often do not have incentive and support from their parents, and they get married because their parents do not let them go to school. Girls should get education which would be enough for properly bringing up children. (Marneuli)*

In Tsalka, principal of one of the schools talked about the marriage of a 13-year-old girl. She gave birth to a son when she was 14, and despite the fact that she somehow managed to attend classes, other children's parents demanded from the principal to suspend the girl's student's status, because they did not want a married girl, who had a baby, to sit side by side with their children. Later, the principal restored the student's status for the girl.

One of the participants of the Akhalkalaki meeting noted that in her graduate class her two classmate girls married at an early age. One of them has a child already. In Ninotsminda people believe that girls will not continue their education after marriage, because they do not feel comfortable and even teachers think that pregnant girls should not go to school as "it is not nice." The Khulo municipality can be brought as an exception, where the whole class, including teachers, care for a pregnant girl in their class.

- *If a girl gets into a rich family after marriage, she is no longer allowed to go to school; if the family lets her do it, the school administration will not allow her to go to classes. (Akhalkalaki)*
- *The principal does not allow a pregnant child to attend classes, is it normal? There should be special schools for such children. (Lagodekhi)*
- *It is not normal when a pregnant girl sits in the classroom. Is it morally justified? (Lagodekhi)*
- *If she wants to get education, she should not get pregnant. (Telavi)*
- *It is not recommended a pregnant child to sit in the classroom. (Shuakhvei)*

In addition to a variety of factors and realities in the region, the participants do realize the risks of early marriage and make the following assessments:

- *When you are between 18 and 25 years of age and, at the same time, you get married at an early age, you spent your most important time in caring for a family, you remain jobless and cannot get appropriate education; therefore, you cannot give education to your children as well; in addition, early marriage often ends in divorce, at the time of which most of the divorced persons are not fully developed. (Ninotsminda)*
- *In such cases they quit school and have problems in getting education. Accordingly, they do not have enough knowledge to bring up children, in addition to which there is a great risk that their children will do the same. (Sagarejo)*
- *At this age they are not mature, and this actually leads to the split of the family. (Telavi)*
- *Early marriage causes not only mental, but also physical problems. They are not mature and they are under high pressure. Girls are also at high risk when infertility problems arise. (Marneuli)*
- *Last year, a 14-year-old girl could not survive childbirth. She had been forcedly married by her parents and the case ended in such a fatal result. (Marneuli)*

Gender roles and stereotypes

Majority of respondents say that according to the established gender roles in Georgia, higher education is a priority for a boy, as he is considered to be the one who must financially satisfy a family, while in case of a woman it is not so, because her main future prospect is associated with marriage.

- *There might not be direct pressure, but very often the following happens: for example, when asked respondents in the villages, and especially in Javakheti and Adigeni, about which child they would give education in case of limited financial resources, the parents replied by saying: boys, because girls will get married. Such attitude does not leave girls any other chance except for getting married. This is indirect coercion, when girls do not have a choice. (Akhaltzikhe)*

They think differently in Adjara, where parents do everything in order to give their children proper education, though even there advantage is given to boys as they are "family breadwinners."

- *We have more funding, because it is a high mountainous region and I have not heard if any family had to make a choice between a girl and a boy in terms of giving them education. (Khulo)*

- *Boys are partially privileged. Functions must be separated in the family and it is necessary to take into account that a man is the head of the family, while a woman's role is to bring up children. (Khulo)*

Consequently, the pre-formed, patriarchal views about gender roles are obvious, according to which, women's main function is to bring up children and to do housework, while men must supply families with finances. It was also noted that no matter of the woman's role in the society, she still has to cook at home or wash the dishes.

- *A woman may sit in the Parliament, or live in Tbilisi or in Khulo. Believe me, when she comes home, she will still have to perform her duties and responsibilities, which is to fetch water or do the laundry. The fact is that the salt, which is put at an equal distance from a man and a woman, would be passed to a man by a woman, and even in an elementary situation a man always stands above a woman. (Khulo)*

Although men are often considered to be the main financial providers and women to be housewives, they also talk about the recent trend when the function of a breadwinner has been assumed by women. According to the participants, today, across the country the main breadwinners have become women and the problem is the feminization of the migration.

The Marneuli meeting participants noted that gender does not matter for the family when it comes to education. Since higher education is associated with significant financial resources, the parents have to make a choice - which child to let go to study; however, they make the choice according to children's performance and skills:

- *It does no longer matter for us whether the child is a girl or a boy. We let a child with better performance go to get education (Marneuli)*

In addition, much noise was caused by the fathers' so-called "paternity leave", because some think that the term "paternity leave" is outrageous and it should be replaced by a more neutral term, such as for example: "leave for a child."

- *If the mother is no longer alive, then I would take a paternity leave, but I would never do this if she is alive. The main function of a woman is to be a mom and raise children. (Shuakhvei)*

People in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara think that marriage of a girl at the age of 25 is already delayed, while 20 years is a good age.

The role of persons responsible for the prevention on early age marriages

The role and responsibilities of parents were emphasized in Telavi. It was said that parents should provide information to children about all the details about the interests of early age. According to the

participants, parents have the responsibility to bring up children. However, opposite opinions were also expressed, according to which, teachers have no less role in the development of children:

- *Bear in mind that every child has a parent. There is a real problem in school, when all teachers skip the lesson about the anatomy of women and men in the biology. Take into account the parents' level of education; how can they pass education to their children? I believe that the primary duty of the school should be giving right education and information to children. It would be better if there were a standard adjusted to each child. (Telavi)*

It should be noted that almost all the participants agreed that there is a kind of distance and negative approach between children and parents. In their view, open communication between parents and children is rare. In addition, parents do not have time for relationship and thus they lose the function of bringing up children. Teachers say children want to know about HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, menstrual cycle and related things; but in fact, many parents cannot talk about such issues because they feel awkward, or do not consider it necessary to share such information. Consequently, children find it difficult to find a common language with parents.

Teachers note that when this type of information is not exchanged between parents and children, they have to talk about these issues with children, but they are not specialized in these issues. According to the participants, such meetings are very good with children, but they are even more necessary for parents, because they are the ones how carry out violence against children.

- *Let's take today's meeting. When I found out that the Public Defender's representatives would arrive here, I told the high classmates to attend the meeting. However, when I came here, I found out that parents did not allow children to come to the meeting. Therefore, I had to come only with one child. Children are forbidden to talk about these issues at home. (Marneuli)*

On the other hand, information about sexual life provided at school also creates problems, because parents often do not want their children to receive this type of education. Also, it was noted that service of a professional psychologist in school is regarded as luxury, whereas it is much needed even in kindergartens.

- *We had such a project - "Esthetic life for the youth", which involved a reproduction specialist, a gynecologist and a psychologist.*
- *In the 9th, 10th and 11th grades we wanted to show a special video and we asked permission from the teacher and the school principal. They did not refuse; however, they asked us to get permission from parents. As it turned out, most of them were against it and in the end; we could gather only 10 children. (Akhaltzikhe)*

- *Our organization prepared a project "Providing information on reproductive health to children" and conducted separate lessons for girls and boys. One of the principals showed great resistance. I, for example, cannot talk to my children about these issues, but it is very important teachers to talk to them at school. (Lagodekhi)*
- *This year we talked about reproductive health with older girls. They engaged in the process very well; they showed great interest; we had invited a specialist. (Telavi)*
- *Children learn information about such issues in a distorted form. When a reproductive doctor talks to children, they show different attitudes and think that they can benefit from it. Consequently, they are more open; as for parents, they have neither information nor education on similar issues. (Batumi)*

The situation is different in Telavi, where the project - "Teaching of legal culture" has been carried out in the 2nd, 5th, 7th, 8th and 9th grades for the third year now.

- *Today, kids have too much information. The issue of early marriage is also included in this program and is carried out in the 9th grade; it is a very large course - 20 hours. You have to hear the children's questions, discussion, activity, etc. (Telavi)*

Finally, the role of the teachers in the struggle against early age marriage was discussed. As outlined, teachers are not well aware of their obligations and responsibilities and they think that if parents make their children get married, it is a family affair. The participants also talked about the lack of safety guarantees, as in many cases teachers are not sure that their anonymity will be protected if they refer to the Social Service Agency or police.

- *If a teacher notifies the relevant agencies, the next day they will stone us. (Akhalsikhe)*
- *At present, teachers are deprived of their function. If they reprimand or shout at a child, parents may come with a gun next day. (Sagarejo)*
- *I remember a girl came to school 2 years ago; she was crying and asking teachers to help. The whole school went to the girl's home, but her parents sent us back, saying it was none of our business. (Marneuli)*

It seems that teachers are justifying themselves by having too much responsibilities. They do not have any information about the responsibilities and obligations with regard to notifying police or a social worker of the child's early age marriage.

As for the work of the Social Service Agency in the regions, there are occasions when neither the teachers nor the population is aware of existence of the social service or their responsibilities. It was noted in Lagodekhi that a social worker mainly works with the vulnerable children, while in terms of early marriage, they have never been resorted to. In addition, it was said in Telavi that there had not been any case when school referred to a social worker, meaning that the referral mechanism does not

work. As for Adjara, the situation is relatively better in terms of social service effectiveness in Khelvachauri and Batumi.

- *The Social Service Agency was notified of the last case by school. Notifications were also sent to the Public Defender's Office. I want to note that apart from downsides, the Internet has upsides as well, and we can get a lot of information from the media. (Batumi)*

The Social Service officials say social workers often quit jobs and it has a variety of causes: working in many directions, low wages, lack of qualifications, etc. The lack of human resources was also underlined. The problem is also the fact that acts of violence have taken place against social workers, as they often have direct contact with the offenders.

Teachers are not aware that restriction on the child's right to education is violence. Teachers are not sure if it is possible to check the reason for the children's absence at school and at the same time, to remain anonymous.

- *Until families depend only on principals and teachers, this issue will never be settled. The parent's role is very important in this case. (Lagodekhi)*

The problem is the fact that children do not have information about their basic rights and believe that parents' opinion is crucial; they find it difficult to imagine a situation when they will address school, police or Social Service Agency "against" their parents.

- *We want to help, but we cannot do it, because parents organize marriages themselves; if the girl goes to the police, she will embarrass her family, because she will testify against them. (Ninotsminda)*
- *If the child knew whom to appeal, she would not go to the police. (Sagarejo)*
- *Each district of Telavi has its own inspector; it is not easy to resort to them, but it is either not difficult. I have asked my classmates who is our inspector, but they did not know it. (Telavi)*

Information about rights is very limited in the region. Although the subject "Civic Education" is taught in some schools, it is clear that the practical situation is quite critical. The participants are well aware of the causes and forms of violence against women, though, they find it difficult to find a solution and to respond to violence, especially when it happens in a family.

- *This issue is not often discussed in our society. I think it's still a taboo. Such things may be happening around each of us, but we continue to live usually. With that said, it is important to provide schools with information about child's rights and to promote establishment of friendly services in educational institutions. (Sagarejo)*
- *I have been actively going to the meetings for two years and I arrived at one conclusion: your representatives should come to all schools and hold meetings about all these issues together with teachers. The majority of the society thinks that if they commit an offence, they will not*

be punished by law. The syndrome of impunity! Perhaps this problem will be solved gradually, after 5 years. (Marneuli)

- *Training alone will not resolve the case. Someone must be punished in order to prevent repetition of the same action by another person. It is very important that these meetings be attended by police officers and social workers. (Marneuli)*

The information, provided by a Lagodekhi Municipal Council member, according to which, no more kidnappings are taking place in the Kabala community after representatives of the Public Defender's Department of Gender Equality held an information meeting on early age marriages there, is welcome.

- *We contacted you last year, when there were almost two cases of abduction of girls every day. After your intervention, when you arrived here and held a meeting with high school students and talked to the police, they became more active. Earlier police used to say that it was a tradition and a family affair. They were offering the families to reconcile, while nobody was interested in the opinion of the girl or the boy. As a result of your intervention, one person was arrested. It was a great lesson for others. After that there had not been violent kidnapping. Thank you for that. (Lagodekhi)*

The attendants of the Marneuli meeting also stressed the role of the Government, which can have a large impact on elimination of early age marriages. However, the state device is ineffective.

- *The problem is not only among the population, but also in the state. I have worked in the court for 2 years and I remember at least 15 cases of abduction. 100% of the cases ended in plea bargaining. The state does not respond to such cases and the level of submission of citizens' applications is also very low. I personally witnessed a fact, when a girl got married at an early age and the school principal was Tamada (head of the wedding party). (Marneuli)*

Local population mistrusts the state bodies. As the Gardabani meeting attendants explained, trust in the law enforcement or state bodies is so low that they never apply to them, since they have poor expectations in advance. They consider that an appeal can only bring harm. It is therefore important the authorities to show more efforts, to raise public awareness and to show more initiatives proactively to prevent early marriage.

Conclusion

As a result of information meetings held in the regions, it became clear that the level of information on the early age marriage problem, its solution and obligations is very low. Of particular concern is the fact that the service providers and specialists working with children do not understand the nature of the problem and do not have information about their duties.

It is a worrying trend that teachers are against pregnant girls' attendance at classes and think that this is unacceptable. Consequently, they oppose the fundamental right of the child - to get education and to be developed as a full-fledged person. We may presume that teachers see the nature of the problem, but they have not thought of the possible solution.

In addition, girls do not have information about sexual and reproductive health and rights. They do not know how to act in case of pregnancy, what is allowed for them, what is the availability of abortion, privacy issues, etc. They are not aware of contraceptive.

Therefore, it is important specialists to hold seminars about sexual and reproductive health and rights, because children have questions that need to be discussed with specialists.

Recommendations

Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

- To ensure raising awareness of teachers on their liabilities concerning the early age marriage issues;
- To promote implementation of coordination between the Social Service Agency and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, that is provided for by the referral document on the protection of the child; to supervise implementation of notification obligations by responsible agencies;
- To ensure organization of open lessons/seminars in schools with the participation of reproductive and sexual health specialists as well as rights specialists;
- In teaching civic education an important part should be devoted to the early marriage or other, gender inequality issues;

Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

- Native-speaking psychologists should be provided for ethnic groups in order to adequately respond to violence against children;

- A strategy should be developed for ethnic minorities in order to fulfill responsibilities of the Georgian and international legal acts, including ensuring service delivery in cases of early marriage.

Ministry of Internal Affairs

- To promote implementation of coordination between the Social Service Agency and the Ministry of Education and Science, that is provided for by the referral document on the protection of the child, including implementation of the notification obligation;
- To develop response guidelines for early marriage and to strengthen the role of a district inspector, in order to raise awareness of local community (especially ethnic minorities) and offer consultations on early marriage issues.