

ASSESSMENT OF GENDER POLICY OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT BODIES

with special emphasis on
women's economic empowerment



Norwegian Ministry
of Foreign Affairs



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INTRODUCTION

In the process of achieving gender equality, local self-governing bodies play a particularly significant role. In the framework of their authorities, municipalities have elaborated a policy on equality and anti-discrimination, as they are more aware of existing challenges, needs or opportunities. Therefore, the Public Defender decided to assess the gender policy of local authorities, with a special emphasis on women's economic empowerment.

With the involvement and support of local NGOs and international organizations, appointment of a person in charge of gender equality (gender advisor) at self-government bodies, establishment of gender equality councils, and the process of developing relevant action plans have begun since 2017.¹ In addition, the Action Plans developed by the Government of Georgia, aiming at eliminating gender inequality and empowering women, also include activities to be fulfilled by the municipal authorities, which is a step towards localization of national action plans.

In the framework of the project "Joint Action for Women's Economic Empowerment in Georgia" and with the support of the UN Women, the Office of the Public Defender studied the situation of gender equality and the needs of women in the regions. The research also identified achievements and challenges at the local level. Also, as a result of this research, recommendations were developed to strengthen gender policies in local governments, to improve their targeting and to empower women economically.

Survey results show, that in spite of a number of activities carried out in recent years by the local self-government bodies to improve gender equality, reflection of different needs pertaining to the regions in the country's gender policy as well as development of action plans and programs that are systematized and based on needs assessment are still challenging. Furthermore, pursuing activities toward gender equality are less prioritized by local self-government.

The Public Defender, therefore, considers that the findings and recommendations of the present study will assist in clearly defining the gender policies of self-government bodies, which will positively impact the needs of the local population in the future and strengthen the sustainability of the institutional mechanism for gender equality further.

¹It shall be noted that Women's Information Centre provided significant assistance to local municipalities in the elaboration and adoption of gender equality action plans.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the framework of its constitutional mandate, the Public Defender of Georgia supervises the protection of human rights and freedoms within its jurisdiction on the territory of Georgia, identifies the violations of human rights and contributes to the restoration of violated rights and freedoms.²

The present study is based on international standards³, basic treaties and legislation of Georgia to assess gender policy of self-government bodies.⁴ In addition, at the stage of examining the gender policy of self-government bodies, the Gender Department of the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia requested information and reviewed the gender equality action plan of each municipality; the department also conducted the analysis of the gender equality programs.

The gender policy of self-government bodies was assessed in three stages. Initially, the survey framework was defined, key research issues were formulated and information⁵ was requested from municipalities throughout Georgia. In the second phase of the research, the received information was processed, and desk research was conducted, focusing on local and international experience of implementing gender equality policy and existing mechanisms. In parallel to the desk research, visits were conducted to selected municipalities and meetings were held both in focus group formats as well as individually. During the third phase of the study, the information that has been requested and also received as a result of the interviews was analyzed and examined to prepare the final report and subsequent recommendations.

In the framework of the gender policy survey, the Office of the Public Defender held 85 meetings with the participation of 800 individuals in 7 regions.⁶ The target regions for the study were: 7 Imereti⁸, Samegrelo⁹, Racha-Lechkhumi¹⁰, Guria¹¹, Shida Kartli¹², Samrtkhe-Javakheti¹³ and Kakheti¹⁴.

Following the request and processing of the information, specific municipalities were selected from these

²Constitution of Georgia, Article 35.

³Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, 2014, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1994.

⁴In particular, Code of Self-Government of Georgia, Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Law of Georgia on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination.

⁵The Office of the Public Defender requested information from all municipalities on Gender Equality Action Plans, implemented projects and relevant budgets; also on collection of statistics, gender council meetings, initiatives, cooperation with NGOs and agencies, trainings, activities undertaken for gender budgeting and economic empowerment of women.

⁶Guria, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Samtskhe Javakheti, Kakheti and Shida Kartli.

⁷Concrete municipalities were also selected according to the target regions of the UN Women project “Joint Action for Women’s Economic Empowerment in Georgia”.

⁸Sachkhere, Chiatura, Kutaisi, Gelati, Tskaltubo, Samtredia, Vani, Bagdati, Kharagauli, Tkibuli and Zestaponi.

⁹Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha, Chkhorotsku, Martvili, Senaki and Khobi.

¹⁰Ambrolauri, Oni (village Gari) and Tsageri.

¹¹Lanchkhuti, Chokhatauri and Ozurgeti (village Dvabzu).

¹²Gori (village Zardiaantkari), Kareli, Khashuri (village Chorchana) and Kaspi (village Karapila).

¹³Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, Adigeni, Borjomi (village Tadzrisi) and Ninotsminda.

¹⁴Signagi, Lagodekhi, Kvareli, Gurjaani, Akhmeta, Dedoplistkaro, Telavi and Sagarejo.

¹⁵Ratified by the Decree of the Parliament of Georgia of September 22, 1994 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/37372?-publication=0>

regions based on the following indicators:

- Municipalities that have adopted a decree on the establishment of the Gender Council;
- Municipalities that have a gender advisor/responsible person;
- Municipalities that have developed an action plan or implemented specific programs/projects to achieve gender equality.

As the research focuses primarily on the effectiveness and intersectionality of gender policies, the focus was made on approaches to reflect the needs of women with different experiences in policy documents and practices.

Members of the Municipal Gender Equality Councils, gender advisors at self-governing bodies, in some cases, self-governing city mayors and their deputies, NGOs and women living in and receiving local services, including various women with different needs were identified as target groups of the study, in particular, these are:

- Women entrepreneurs;
- Victims/survivors of domestic violence;
- Women with disabilities;
- Ethnic minority women;
- Women living in rural areas;
- IDP and conflict-affected women.

KEY RESEARCH ISSUES

The purpose of the gender policy assessment of self-government bodies was to reveal the visions of municipalities in the area of eradicating gender inequalities, and, to identify activities planned for economic empowerment of women. The research primarily focused on the following issues:

- Whether municipalities have a predefined policy to eliminate gender inequality and achieve women's economic empowerment
- Whether municipalities consider the specific needs of the region when planning gender policies
- Whether the action plans developed by gender councils are intersectional and whether they address the specific needs of women belonging to different vulnerable groups
- To what extent the planned and implemented activities affect gender equality and women's economic empowerment

Whether adequate human and financial resources are allocated at local governments to implement gender policies (to what extent local budgets reflect the needs of gender equality and how the population involved in the municipal budgeting process is).

Within the research, it was also important to assess the extent to which the activities planned and implemented by gender councils respond to the needs of women belonging to different vulnerable groups.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

While the study aims at revealing shortcomings pertaining to gender policies of local self-government bodies as well as problems about women's political and economic activities and participation, the results of the study are limited to the periods of information received and reflect the situation in the target regions in spring and summer 2019.

Furthermore, although the Office of the Public Defender requested information and held meetings with different groups in the target regions, the study does not analyze all projects implemented by the self-government bodies to achieve gender equality in full details.

1. THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN DEFINING GENDER POLICY

Local governments have a major role to play in achieving gender equality, as it is their decisions that affect the well-being of women living in municipalities. Accordingly, when assessing the gender policies of local governments, it is important to discuss international and local legislative framework and institutional mechanisms that point to the crucial role of local governments in achieving gender equality.

1.1. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

Local self-government bodies carry a particularly important role in eradicating gender inequality and empowering women; this role has been mentioned in a number of international documents. When analyzing gender policies of local authorities, it is important to review international documents that set different standards for local municipalities to implement gender policies and strengthen institutional mechanisms.

The Convention adopted on December 18, 1979, by the General Assembly on the **Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**¹⁵ reinforces the equality of women and men in both private and public spheres. The State Parties to the Convention condemn all forms of discrimination against women and undertake an obligation to develop, by all appropriate means, policies¹⁶ to eliminate discrimination against women. The contracting states also take all necessary measures to ensure the full development and progress of women in political, social and cultural fields.¹⁷

In addition to the provisions laid down in the Convention, the Committee also issued general recommendations that address contracting states and outline in more details activities of parties to the Convention to achieve gender equality.

The UN General Assembly Committee also recommends¹⁸ States to ensure participation of women in political and public lives. The Committee notes that despite the improvement of women's opportunities by democratic states, there are economic, social and cultural barriers that women continue to face. These barriers prevent women from participating in the decision-making processes. The Committee believes that the country cannot be described as democratic if women are excluded from such processes.¹⁹

The recommendation foresees measures that State Parties²⁰ shall define and implement in order to achieve gender balance among publicly elected individuals; it also recommends actions to make sure that women and men are equally involved in the formulation of government policies and that the barriers to equality

¹⁶Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 2

¹⁷Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 3

¹⁸General Recommendation of the Committee No. 23, adopted on the 16th Session of the Committee, 1997 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/recommendations.aspx>

¹⁹General Recommendation of the Committee No. 23 (Paras. 13-14), adopted on the 16th Session of the Committee, 1997; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/recommendations.aspx>

²⁰The State Parties to the Convention, including Georgia, undertake an obligation to submit to the UN Secretary General reports for the consideration of the Committee on the legislative, judicial, administrative or other measures taken to comply with the provisions of this Convention and to present progress made. Therefore, Georgia has submitted to the Committee sixth periodic report on the implementation of its recommendations specifically addressing Georgia.

are overcome.²¹

Committee calls upon Georgia to ensure the effective implementation of its laws on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and to achieve gender equality.²²

According to the Committee's concluding observations, Georgia needs to introduce temporary special measures in the form of a quota system in order to fully implement the Convention and achieve equality between women and men. This recommendation aims to promote women's integration in the sphere of education, economics and politics. In response to the recommendation,²³ 6th periodic report outlines that the draft law on the introduction of a quota system in the Parliament of Georgia was not supported, but the process is continuing.²⁴

The United Nations has adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to achieve peace and prosperity, outlining the 17 sustainable development goals mandatory for all countries. The Goal 5 of this document is to achieve gender equality in the country and to empower women and girls.²⁵

Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda addresses governments, including local authorities, and determines the role of state bodies in achieving gender equality and empowering women in the country. In particular, the document calls on the state to ensure the full and effective participation of women in decision-making at all levels of government. This statement implies both central and local authorities. Accordingly, local authorities shall also take care of increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions in self-government bodies.²⁶

Pursuant to this document, not only women's political participation is important, but also the development of rational policies and defining measures needed to achieve gender equality by the government on the legislative level. The parties also agree that the state shall carry out reforms to ensure that women have equal access to economic resources, such as land and other property, inheritance and other financial services.²⁷

Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda also focuses on the activities of local governments in the fight against violence against women and domestic violence. State Parties agree that local authorities have an important role to play in identifying women victims of violence in self-government units and in providing them with appropriate protection and assistance services. It is also stated that local authorities shall create public spaces that will assist women, victims of violence, to escape from a violent environment and start their lives all over again²⁸.

²¹General Recommendation of the Committee No. 23 (Para. 45), adopted on the 16th Session, 1997; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/cedaw/pages/recommendations.aspx>

²²Concluding observations on fourth and fifth periodic reports of Georgia (Para. 11); <https://bit.ly/2OxLILD>

²³Georgia's 6th periodic report on implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Para. 126.

²⁴The initiative on gender quotas was for the first time introduced in the Parliament of Georgia in 2003, the second time in 2008 and the third time in 2017 respectively in the form of a draft law, which was signed by 37 000 voters. In 2018, the Parliament of Georgia did not support changes in the Electoral Code on gender quotas at the first reading.

²⁵UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>

²⁶The Role of Local Governments in Promoting Gender Equality <https://bit.ly/37shJb9>

²⁷The Role of Local Governments in Promoting Gender Equality, Goal 5.a, p. 5 <https://bit.ly/2Xx6kIU>

²⁸The Role of Local Governments in Promoting Gender Equality, Goal 5.2 <https://bit.ly/2plb6Ri>

The role of local self-government bodies is crucial in the process of improving human rights situation of women, hence they shall take all necessary measures within their competences to improve economic, social and political rights of women living in the local self-government. That is why it is essential that self-government bodies comply with established international standards while fulfilling their functions.

Apart from the above-mentioned international standards, there are several important international instruments that Georgia has not become a party to, however, it is important to discuss them in the framework of the research on municipalities' gender policies. One of them is the **European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life**,²⁹ which determines fundamental rights for achieving gender equality. One of the principles of this document is to integrate gender perspective into all activities of local and regional authorities. Accordingly, local governments shall consider gender aspects, either in the form of gender mainstreaming or gender budgeting when planning policies, considering needs and developing tools. One of the key principles of the Charter is the development of need-based action plans and programs as crucial tools. According to this principle, local and regional authorities shall develop gender equality action plans and programs, taking into account the financial and human resources that are needed to implement them.³⁰ The role of local self-government bodies in achieving gender equality is also discussed in the **"Paris Local and Regional Governments' Agenda for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life"**³¹ developed by the Parties to the Global Conference of Local Elected Women. The signatory parties impose an important role to the local government in ensuring equality between women and men in local public policy agenda and in providing adequate services.³²

According to this document, in order to increase women's participation in decision-making and to guarantee equal representation, local authorities shall cooperate closely with NGOs working on the protection of women's rights and with the private sector,³³ establish and/or strengthen existing equality committees. Local authorities shall also provide care services for children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. These activities ensure alleviating heavy workload of women, preventing them to play a full role in society.³⁴

1.2. NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND POLICY DOCUMENTS

The Constitution of Georgia states³⁵, that the State shall provide equal rights and opportunities for men and women. The State shall take special measures to ensure the essential equality of men and women and to eliminate inequality. Defining the principle of equality at the constitutional level once again underlines the importance that the state attributes to achieving gender equality and to empower women. Therefore, the state shall take active steps to empower women and improve their human rights situation in accordance with this principle.

²⁹Georgia has not become a signatory to the mentioned Charter.

³⁰The European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, Principle 6; https://www.ccre.org/docs/charte_egalite_en.pdf

³¹Georgia has not become a signatory to the mentioned Charter.

³²Paris Local and Regional Governments' Global Agenda for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, Para. 2; <https://bit.ly/2QE4Gxm>

³³Paris Local and Regional Governments' Global Agenda for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, Para. 1; <https://bit.ly/2QE4Gxm>

³⁴Paris Local and Regional Governments' Global Agenda for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, Para. 2; <https://bit.ly/2QE4Gxm>

In addition, when assessing gender equality policy, it is important to discuss a constitutional principle such as the rule of law. According to this principle, “State authority is exercised based on the principle of the separation of powers”.³⁶ This implies that state authority is exercised at both central and local levels. Consequently, the role of self-government bodies in exercising state authorities is quite large. This principle highlights the importance of self-government bodies in achieving gender equality and empowering women at the local level.

The Organic Law of Georgia “Code of Local Self-Government” describes in more details the structure, authority, obligations and legal bases of local self-government. Based on this Code, local self-government bodies have the right to decide on issues of local importance. The local self-government bodies, i.e. the municipality, has representative and executive bodies, registered population, its own property and budget.³⁷ By law, the municipality is authorized to undertake measures to promote gender equality, prevent violence against women and/or domestic violence and protect and assist victims of violence against women and/or domestic violence.³⁸

Self-government bodies also develop, approve and implement programs, strategies, action plans and projects in accordance with the legislation of Georgia.³⁹ Local authorities themselves decide on the scope, direction and priorities of their activities. Therefore, their role and participation in promoting gender equality at the local level is considerable.

The purpose of the Law of Georgia on Gender Equality is to prevent discrimination in all spheres of public life, to create relevant conditions for the realization of equal rights, freedoms and opportunities for men and women and to facilitate prevention and elimination of discrimination.⁴⁰ Pursuant to the law, local governments oversee the protection of gender equality. In addition, according to the Georgian legislation, self-government bodies shall develop and implement measures to identify and eliminate discrimination.⁴¹

The self-government body is also authorized to approve the composition, status, functions and powers of the Municipal Gender Equality Council.⁴² The mayor of the self-government body shall, by order, designate the person responsible for gender equality to study gender equality issues in the municipality, to plan relevant activities and to coordinate their implementation.⁴³

Law of Georgia on Gender Equality stipulates that any form of discrimination in the development and approval of local government budget, programs, projects, and plans within the local self-government body shall be eliminated.⁴⁴ This statement obliges self-government bodies to be gender-sensitive in their work and to take into account the needs of all citizens living in the municipality equally.

³⁵Constitutional Law of Georgia №1324 of October 13, 2017; Constitution of Georgia, Article 11 (3);

³⁶Constitution of Georgia, Article 4.

³⁷Organic Law of Georgia Local Self-Government Code, Article 2.

³⁸Organic Law of Georgia Local Self-Government Code, Article 16 (4).

³⁹Organic Law of Georgia Local Self-Government Code, Article 19 (sub-paragraph “b”).

⁴⁰Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 2.

⁴¹Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (1).

⁴²Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (11).

⁴³Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (12).

⁴⁴Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (2).

The gender equality action plans of municipalities at the local level play special roles in fulfilling existing international and national obligations. 57 out of 64 municipalities of Georgia have developed gender equality action plans.⁴⁵ Majority of these municipalities (53%) have adopted gender equality action plans for 2018-2019.⁴⁶

It is noteworthy that in most cases (61%), gender equality councils do not have budget compliant with the action plan. In practice, however, there are examples where councils are financed from the local budget and such budgetary allocation varies from GEL 3,000 to GEL 31,000.

Action plans define in details the measures to be taken by the gender equality councils to ensure gender equality in the municipality during the reporting period and the agencies and partner organizations responsible for implementing these measures. Partner organizations include international and non-governmental organizations and central government. Public Defender welcomes the designation of an NGO as a partner agency, which indicates to the readiness of the municipality to cooperate with local and international organizations as well as with the central government and to implement measures necessary to achieve gender equality.

Study of gender equality action plans reveals that the action plans of municipalities, mainly carry formal character, are not tailored to a particular region or municipality, and cannot ensure meeting the special needs of the local population and, more specifically, the women and vulnerable groups.

1.3 INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

Improving women's rights in the country is ensured by the institutional mechanisms designed to achieve gender equality, which also facilitate concerted work between local and central authorities.

One of such important mechanisms is the **Council on Gender Equality of the Parliament of Georgia**, which is a Standing Body of the Parliament.⁴⁷ The Council is guided by the legislation of Georgia in the course of its activities. Its main purpose is to ensure systematic and coordinated work on gender equality issues.⁴⁸

The Permanent Council on Gender Equality of the Parliament of Georgia plays an important role in the process of relations with self-government bodies, as the municipal council establishes the municipal gender equality council to ensure concerted work with the Parliament's Standing Council.⁴⁹ In addition, the municipal gender equality councils report on their activities before the Standing Council on Gender Equality of the Parliament of Georgia.

Particular emphasis shall be made on the **gender equality councils** within the local self-government bodies, the establishment of which begun in 2017, though most of them (65%) were set up in 2018, followed by subsequent activities during the same period.⁵⁰ The functions, powers, composition and rules of operation

⁴⁵Information received as of May 2019. Following municipalities failed to prepare gender equality action plans: Lentekhi, Mestia, Poti, Abasha, Tianeti, Terjola and Khoni.

⁴⁶15 municipalities adopted Gender Equality Action Plans for 2019-2020; 4 municipalities have Action Plans for 2019, and 6 municipalities for 2018-2020 respectively. Only one municipality has an Action Plan for 2018 and 2017-2019.

⁴⁷Permanent Council of the Parliament of Georgia on Gender Equality, accessible on <https://bit.ly/2o27yrM>

⁴⁸Decree of the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia, Article 1 (1).

⁴⁹Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (11)

of the Council are determined by a decree adopted by the Chairperson of the City Council. According to the statute of the gender equality council, its members meet once every 3 months to discuss issues on the agenda of the council meeting.⁵¹

The creation of the municipal council on gender equality and the formation of the Council's Statute is the responsibility of the Chairperson of the municipal council. Each municipality approves its own statute; however, the functions and responsibilities of each municipality and the composition of the council do not differ from each other. The council also develops an action plan for achieving gender equality with the aim of determining the activities of the municipality in this area.

Important functions of the gender equality council include analysis of legal acts adopted by municipal bodies and officials, discussion of municipal development strategies, gender-sensitive budgets and draft budgets. It also includes reviewing applications on gender discrimination, responding to such applications within established competencies and developing appropriate recommendations.

Gender equality council reports to the municipal council once a year on the activities carried out and the state of gender equality within the municipality. The above statement makes the gender equality council accountable to the city council and therefore city council acts as an evaluator of the gender equality council's performance.

In order to facilitate the implementation of national and international obligations and recommendations by the municipality and to coordinate activities at the local level,⁵² all municipalities of Georgia have a **gender advisor** appointed by an order of the mayor of the municipality. The rights and responsibilities assigned to such advisors do not differ from one another in various municipalities. Nevertheless, in most cases, gender advisors perform their duties in parallel with other rights and responsibilities.

Regarding the functions of the gender advisors, he/she cooperates with the gender equality council of the municipality, prepares issues to be presented at the municipal gender equality council meeting and submits proposals and recommendations discussed at the meeting to relevant persons in the municipality. Her/his duty is to identify and eliminate any form of discrimination. However, it is noteworthy that, unlike the functions and duties set out in the law, those responsible for gender equality are primarily secretaries of the municipality's gender equality council and, in most cases,⁵³ perform merely a technical work.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Information requested on May 13, 2019.

⁵¹However, pursuant to the information requested in May 2019, there are municipalities that have not held any sessions (Poti, Abasha, Tlaneti, Sachkhere) or have held 1 or 2 sessions since 2018 (Ambrolauri, Lentekhi, Khobi, Adigeni, Borjomi, Kazbegi, Kvareli, Signagi, Dedoplistskaro, Gori, Chiatura).

⁵²Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Article 13 (12).

⁵³There are good practice examples (Martvili, Akhmeta), where gender advisors at city halls of municipalities carry out rights and obligations foreseen by the legislation: review incoming applications, meet the population and conduct informational meetings.

⁵⁴Such as drafting agenda and minutes of the meetings of the gender equality councils.

2. MAIN FINDINGS

The meetings highlighted problems, trends and findings that, on the one hand, are linked to the sustainability of the institutional mechanisms, and on the other hand, affect the daily lives of women living in municipalities.

2.1. GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN MUNICIPALITIES

Integration of gender equality in any type of activity is very important. Organizations and institutions that acknowledge the significance of gender mainstreaming policies are distinguished with a high rate of organizational development. In addition, the integration of gender equality issues considerably contributes to the establishment of equality principles.

The process of appointing gender advisors and forming gender councils at local government is a step towards gender mainstreaming. This process also included the development of action plans for each municipality. At this stage, gender equality councils are set up at the local level in all municipalities, and most of the gender advisors employed at the municipalities generally combine these functions and responsibilities.

The research revealed that the majority of the councils, for the most part, discuss issues of council formation, its functions and responsibilities and future planning activities. As for the activities carried out, the Council's resources are mainly directed at refining the Council's statute and action plans, celebrating the holidays,⁵⁵ ensuring involvement of population in thematic information campaigns, and developing assistance programs.

“Attitudes towards gender have changed positively compared to previous years, nevertheless they are still painful in our region. When the precedent was set to establish a non-commercial legal entity⁵⁶, it was a comic subject for some. At this point, gender-based discussions have shifted from the ironic to the neutral format, and more meetings are needed with the population to seriously address these issues.” [Meeting with the Tsageri Gender Council]

At the outset, during the meeting with the gender equality councils, it was very important to hear about their vision and experience about gender equality in the municipality and to assess their sensitivity and attitude toward existing challenges. The meetings revealed that council members often had difficulties understanding the meaning of the posed questions⁵⁷, indicating to their low awareness of gender issues in general; consequently, they needed to be provided with more contextual information, including definitions of terms, citing statistics and specific examples. As a result, during the focus group meetings with the gender equality councils, the council members were provided with awareness-raising on several important issues, which they later acknowledged and confirmed at the end of the meeting.

⁵⁵16-days campaign against violence against women, international women's day, mother's day.

⁵⁶To solve problems pertaining to gender equality, Tsageri City Hall established a non-commercial legal entity “Centre on Rights of Women and Gender Equality”, which is accountable before the City Hall and its budget comprises of 29 200 GEL.

⁵⁷Question posed at the focus group meeting on the situation and problems in the region was understood as a question on balancing employed individuals at the municipality.

Another problem is that council members cannot address specific needs of the region and their assessment of the situation in the municipality is superficial. The meetings also revealed a number of cases where council members failed to recognize the importance of the main focus of the research on women's economic empowerment, which again points to the lack of knowledge and sensitivity of municipal employees about discrimination and oppression of women.

It is noteworthy that at some municipalities male members of the councils tend to leave the meetings early, or mainly attended them as listeners, indicating once again to their low level of awareness of gender inequality challenges in the country.

Often, gender advisors are unaware of their functions and responsibilities and typically perform technical work at council meetings, such as organizing the meetings and drafting minutes. The meetings show that in most cases, all members of the council are rarely trained together and that their awareness-raising activities carry fragmented character. Even when a member of the council attends gender training, the practice of sharing information with peers is not established.

NGOs are primarily concerned with raising the awareness of council members. The topics of trainings for the council members are mainly on gender issues, violence against women and domestic violence, gender statistics, gender budgeting, early marriages, political participation of women, women affected by conflict, rarely sexual harassment and LGBT+ issues. In addition, various study visits were conducted abroad for council members to share best practices.⁵⁹

As for raising awareness of the local population, the main actors here are local⁶⁰ and international⁶¹ organizations. The key topics of the meetings are violence against women, domestic violence and introduction of general principles of gender equality. In addition, local organizations conduct needs assessment within various projects and provide relevant information to municipalities. In many cases, regional organizations working on women's issues are also members of the gender equality councils and are actively involved in their work. Despite their dynamic work, public participation in such meetings is still low and television and the press are still considered to be the main sources of information. Informational meetings are fragmented without being able to inform the public on gender equality topics.

Gender budget analysis is crucial when establishing an institutional mechanism in municipalities. From meetings with gender equality councils, it is clear that council members lack information on the specifics, needs and methodology of gender budgeting. Most councils allocate funds for gender-related initiatives and services mainly into the programmatic budget, which is reflected in thematically similar articles. In many cases, asking members of the board about gender budgeting meant asking a number of clarifying questions and in parallel, will to provide them with more in-depth and comprehensive information on gender budgeting. In addition, even in municipalities where council members have been trained in gender budgeting, it is

⁵⁸Mainly local non-governmental organizations, such as Women's Information Centre, Tankhmoba, Fund Taso and Fund Sokhumi as well as international organizations NDI, GIZ, UN Women work on raising awareness of councils.

⁵⁹Members of Akhmeta Council payed a visit to Berlin to raise awareness on activities of municipalities. In addition, Khashuri Council members were in Sweden.

⁶⁰Mentioned local organizations by the population: "Women's Fund in Georgia", Fund "Sokhumi", Fund "Taso", "Women's Information Centre", Association "Hera", "Atinati", "Association of Democratic Women", "Tanaziari", "Dea" Partnership for Human Rights (PHR)", Association "Tankhmoba", „Gvirila“, „Andamati“, „Let's Do It Together“, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, „Bemoni“, „Fao“, „Imedi“, „Elkana“, „Women Farmers Association“.

⁶¹International donor organizations mentioned by the population: NDI, IRI, World Vision, Red Cross, GIZ, UN Women.

difficult for them to identify specific needs of women, which means creating additional programs, projects and initiatives to improve women's rights.

Unfortunately, there is no exchange of information on the successful practices of different municipalities and therefore there is no platform at this stage that would make it easier for different self-government bodies to address specific issues, except for some cases when a Memorandum of Understanding⁶² is signed between municipalities. Particular attention shall be paid to the problem of communication between the municipalities and central government,⁶³ which is systemic in nature. Various recommendations, trends, needs assessments, findings and problematic issues are still not shared between the councils themselves and the central government.

Council members believe that this kind of communication is particularly important to them, the focus was made on regional forums as a successful practice and an opportunity to inform decision-makers about the problems in the region.

2.2. INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

In the framework of the research, it was important to examine the extent to which women participate in public hearings and meetings of various kinds, including village assemblies, where problems in the municipality are voiced and ways to resolve them are discussed. In addition to attending public hearings, it was also interesting for the research to observe what issues women were lobbying for at these meetings.

According to gender equality councils, women are not only attending public hearings and village assemblies but are more involved in raising concerns and voicing initiatives and actively emphasize infrastructural, health and social issues.

Meetings with local and rural women themselves revealed that village assemblies are almost no longer held. In addition, access to information about public hearings is also problematic. The reason for the low turnout at public meetings is stated to be the mistrust toward the municipality, as they feel that their problems are only mentioned during the elections of the local municipality. They also think that needs assessments are only a facade, which ultimately leads to their indifferent attitudes.

In addition to participation, the study also spoke about the extent to which women's issues are addressed in policy documents and targeted programs and level of identifying the problem and solving it by municipalities. In this regard, women's negative experiences with municipalities are mainly highlighted, where the emphasis is made on bureaucratic procedures and lack of interest, even when the local government is aware of the problem.

This was also confirmed at a meeting of gender equality councils, where only some municipalities recalled cases of successful resolution of problems raised by women.⁶⁴ However, it is to be welcomed that the coun-

⁶²For example, Batumi, Ozurgeti, Kutaisi and Senaki concluded Memorandum and carry out joint projects.

⁶³As to the cooperation with thematic ministries, mainly Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry for Regional Development were mentioned.

⁶⁴Mentioned examples directly addressed infrastructural and health issues.

cils are aware of the necessity of more participation of women in public processes and support from the state and express their readiness in this regard.

“A woman needs a lot of effort to get out and get involved in political or social life. Therefore, a woman should be encouraged to get a job, even with the establishment of a summer kindergarten.” [Meeting with the Ozurgeti Gender Council].

Women’s equal participation and involvement in decision-making processes is particularly problematic in areas populated by ethnic minorities⁶⁵, where the language barrier is an additional challenge. Other reasons for women’s inactivity at public meetings were also caused by the feminization of migration and the family business, which is also accompanied by responsibility for domestic affairs.

An additional barrier is that men are mainly employed in the leadership and decision-making positions at the municipalities, which may in some way affect the issue of women’s rights in the country. It was also noted at the meeting with the population in Samegrelo that when financing rural programs, where the population itself decides on specific rural budget allocations, mainly those topics are given preference that cannot affect the situation of women.

At the regional level, local and international organizations play a major role in facilitating the interaction between the local population, civil society and self-government. It is also worth noting that in regions where NGOs are links between the population and the gender equality councils, awareness and access to existing services is much higher.

2.3. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

It was crucial for the study to identify specific activities and initiatives by municipalities aimed at enhancing the economic empowerment of women, including vulnerable groups locally, together with access to vocational education.

Action plans of gender equality councils contain a statement on the municipality’s commitment to women’s economic empowerment. According to the envisaged activities, municipality aims to “provide accessible educational, economic and other programs and financial participation to economically empower women living in rural areas, vulnerable women and socially vulnerable groups.”⁶⁶ Therefore, according to the plan, the municipality shall ensure economic empowerment of women and, more specifically, vulnerable groups of women and facilitate their integration into society. Nevertheless, according to information requested by the Public Defender from self-government bodies, the majority of municipalities (70%) have not taken appropriate measures to empower women economically.⁶⁷ The activities of the rest of the municipality are limited to offering women living in administrative units training on project writing skills and agriculture, organizing informational meetings and providing one-time assistance to vulnerable women. “Women’s Rooms” are

⁶⁵In the framework of the study, problems were revealed in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti. For example, women attending the Iormughanlo community meeting, Sagarejo, stated that they have not attended discussions of draft village programmes at all, therefore their priorities have not been reflected during elaborating budgetary priorities.

⁶⁶Despite the fragmented nature of action plans, vulnerable groups in the concrete municipality are enlisted in the action plans: for example, IDP women, persons with disabilities, women victims of domestic violence and ethnic minority women.

⁶⁷Information requested dates May, 2019.

also named as a space for various types of information meetings for the local population.⁶⁸

The meetings showed that the programs in the municipality regarding the economic empowerment of women are scarce. The vision and general awareness of the members of the gender equality councils to develop activities to promote women's economic empowerment is low. They believe that economic empowerment of women is more of a business prerogative and their contribution to these issues should be minimal.

Meetings showed that public service, educational institutions, agriculture, tourism business, retail and wholesale trade, livestock, poultry, farming, sewing, service, seasonal work and retirement pension were the main sources of income for women.

In addition, employment is a major challenge in the regions, with people receiving social assistance as their main source of income. Most of the city council members and some of the local population have a negative opinion about the state's social policy. In their view, it is better for the state to develop a long-term strategy for socio-economic development of the population, as mere monetary assistance cannot ensure their proper empowerment. In this regard, it is reaffirmed that poverty and unemployment are serious problems facing the population of the region.

Furthermore, there is a high level of feminization of migration in the regions, which implies a large number of female migrants. There has been a tendency for women to temporarily move to work, but most of them do not return. Remittances are the main sources of income for such families, with Italy, Israel, Turkey, Russia and Greece being the main migration destination countries.

Women's economic empowerment has a direct link with women's vocational education. The major problem in the regions is the lack of vocational training programs and institutions. In addition, the lack of municipal transport is a serious challenge⁶⁹, which makes it twice as difficult for rural women to access such educational establishments.

Besides, there is a stereotypical view in society that the knowledge gained at a vocational institution is not considered prestigious. On the other hand, the quality of the certificates issued by the vocational institutions is problematic too, being not enough for employment. The lack of existing programs and the multitude of "men's professions", that are predominantly male-dominated and women still being reluctant to receive education in STEM professions have been repeatedly named.⁷⁰ The agricultural professions and the lack of staff in this area are particularly deficient in the regions. Consequently, it is important that employment needs are identified at the municipal level, with professions emerging at vocational institutions that will, on the one hand, facilitate the use of on-site human resources, and on the other hand, make demand-supply more systematic.

One of the major barriers to access vocational education for women remains the burden of family care. This problem is closely related to family affairs performed by women, which minimizes the time spent on their

⁶⁸The Women's Room is a new municipal service, which is provided in 4 regions of Georgia- Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Ajara and Kakheti. It is a library and resource space for rural women and children who visit the municipal building, facilitated by local government, local women and civil society. The Women's Room aims to improve the access of rural women to local government and decision making processes in tandem with the work being done to mainstream national gender policy requirements into local government.

⁶⁹Non-governmental organization "Tankmoba" in Tskhaltubo provides funding for transportation of specific beneficiaries.

⁷⁰STEM professions imply science, technology, engineering and math.

own development as well as the opportunity for professional growth to the maximum extent.

“The burden of family work is mainly on women and they are obliged to do the family business. Education depends on the woman, the woman is responsible for health, cleanliness, the comfort of family members; woman is even responsible for the happiness of her husband.” [Focus Group Meeting in Kharagauli]

Meetings confirm that the family business is still perceived as a woman’s responsibility, though some changes have been made in the younger generation and the modification in the education system has more and more facilitated the participation of men in the family affairs. Nevertheless, men continue to have a problem with using childcare leave, and this issue is still linked to stereotypical beliefs and prejudices in society that preclude men’s role in child care. Maternity leave is also a problem for women employed in the private sector, unlike public service, where regulation is more or less in order.

State programs are crucial for the economic empowerment of women. Within the framework of the research, two programs supporting entrepreneurship were named:⁷¹ “Enterprise Georgia” and “Plant the Future”. High public awareness of these programs shall be welcomed, but many challenges have been identified during the meeting with the local population, which hinder women’s economic empowerment. For example, “Enterprise Georgia” is a state-run program that aims to develop both entrepreneurship and support entrepreneurs through financial or informational means. It was noted that the trainings offered to program beneficiaries are formal in nature and do not actually provide the knowledge needed to fully implement the project. In addition, the barrier for women living in rural areas is that the trainings are mainly held in district centers, which prevents them from participating in such meetings.

Rural women believe that when designing state programs, specifics and needs of a particular region shall be considered and priorities for funding shall be determined accordingly. Lack of skills in project planning, financial risk assessment and project implementation is also a challenge for women entrepreneurs.

The lack of substantiated refusal to a project application was also a significant problem for women entrepreneurs, which would make it easier to correct the deficiencies and prepare accordingly in the future. Access to the program is a twofold barrier for ethnic minority women, due to lack of language skills and predetermined “masculine and feminine” business types. For example, in Akhalkalaki, women talked about lack of information and pointed to the fact that it was much easier for men to participate in the programs. In Sagarejo, an example was recalled, when only men attended a meeting in the Community Centers to discuss the development of a business plan.

“Very few women risk starting a business where communication with people is needed. To do this, you need to have a network, and, in addition, a woman needs permission from a man. For example, a woman cannot sit in a stranger’s car and go shopping.” [Focus Group Meeting in Akhalkalaki with local women]

There are many reasons for hindrances facing economic empowerment of women in Georgia, but one of the most important factors of socio-economic inequality is the rate of ownership of real estate. Again, gender

⁷¹Grants received within the programme mainly covered following spheres: beekeeping, greenhouses, hotel business, livestock, poultry, ritual services, atelier, aesthetics center, fitness club and more.

inequality in agricultural land ownership is a challenge, with men being twice as often documented as owners than women. Women also cannot enjoy the right to sell or transfer their assets because of their limited influence on decision-making.⁷²

The opportunity to own land has been named as one of the barriers to participate in the program, Plant the Future initiated by the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture of Georgia that aims at the efficient use of agricultural land and the improvement of the socio-economic status of the rural population. Under this program, an individual or a co-operative owning or co-owning a certain amount of land may be funded. The meetings show that because of low awareness, women are reluctant to set up cooperatives. To apply for the program, the major obstacle for women is to own a land and the additional financial costs associated with it, which is compounded by the requirement from the bank to certify land ownership and other bureaucratic procedures. It is also noteworthy that the program declared financing of berry crops as a priority in 2018, which for many women turned out to be unprofitable due to problems pertaining to access to water.

“It is in the regions and it will be for a long time. The man was considered to be the head of the family, and no woman would say, register the property on my name. The woman was patient and has been doing so ever since.” [Focus Group Meeting in Tskaltubo with local women]

In addition, the meetings revealed a low level of public awareness of land registration procedures, which may also be related to the lack of legal advice. The lack of information meetings in this regard was particularly problematic in the Iormughanlo community in Sagarejo, where knowledge of the Georgian language is an additional barrier.

Unfortunately, inheritance distribution practices have not changed, with the advantage given to men and women being less likely to be registered as owners of land or real estate. Distribution of property also depends on the capacity of the family, however, when the family is faced with a choice, the boy, as “successor”, plays a decisive role in the distribution of the property. There are also cases where women themselves refuse to own a property and transfer it to their brothers.

Consequently, the discriminatory practices of inheritance, lack of real estate or land ownership make women more vulnerable and further complicate their economic empowerment. In addition, meetings show that the problems of rural and urban women are different. Accordingly, public policy should be designed in a manner that meets multisectional approaches and needs-tailored services.

2.4. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Activities of municipalities on women’s reproductive health are nominal, and projects, programs or initiatives that raise awareness of women’s reproductive health are rarely spelled out in gender equality action plans.

The activities of local municipalities in terms of women’s reproductive health are mainly related to mobilizing the population and disseminating information. In addition, the municipality co-finances certain surveys

⁷²Information can be retrieved from the following website: http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/georgian/EDGE%20Report%20GEO%20Final.pdf

and treatments.

The study found that women’s awareness of the culture to use health care services in the country is challenging, even when there is no financial barrier.⁷³

“Five years might pass without a woman living in the village paying a visit to a doctor. There is no problem with the resources, they just do not go to a doctor. There are also qualification problems. 8 doctors serve the municipality and the villages are divided into days.” [Meeting with women living in Akhaltsikhe]

One of the successful practices is the “Winners Women’s Club” in Guria, which has a memorandum with the local municipality and where meetings with women with cancer are organized. The local population more or less has trust in the hospitals and clinics in the region and therefore utilize the on-site services. However, due to the lack of an on-site specialist or relevant research equipment, most of the population has to travel to the nearest city.

Another important issue in the study was the accessibility of women to maternity hospitals, which was a problem in some cities.⁷⁴ It is a common practice for residents in relatively small towns to access health-related services in the nearest major metropolitan area.⁷⁵

Of particular concern is the issue of transportation of family doctors to villages, which is also linked to timely and effective access to medical services. In rural areas, family doctors usually have primary care medications; complications due to lack of medication are frequent. There are cases when family doctors purchase medicines themselves because there is no medication provided by the ministry or municipality. The general lack of infrastructure, amenities, including hygiene, cleanliness, access to water and lack of medicines, remain problematic.

In some villages, access to internal roads and therefore access to emergency medical services have been cited as challenging, as a result of which oftentimes the patient had to be transported to the main road by hand.⁷⁶ In addition, old emergency cars and those without relevant equipment endanger patient safety when moving.

⁷³For example, to find out about women’s reproductive needs and problems in Chkhorotsku, the organization Atinati made a special questionnaire, but the women did not respond because of lack of interest. Members of the council also confirm the problem of public awareness.

⁷⁴The problem has been identified in Baghdati, Vani, Oni, Tsalenjikha, Chkhorotsku, Adigeni, Aspindza, Tskaltubo and Kharagauli.

⁷⁵Women living in Tskaltubo and Baghdati go to Kutaisi for antenatal consultations. The same applies to Sighnaghi, Kvareli and Tsalenjikha, where population has to go to the nearest town for any health-related issue. In addition, a case was recalled in Kvareli, where a patient passed away, because the emergency was unable to transport the patient to Telavi on time. A case was revealed in Tsalenjikha, where a pregnant woman gave birth on the way to Zugdidi. Giving births in mini-buses were mentioned in Aspindza too.

⁷⁶Problems pertaining to calling emergency were revealed in Dedoplistskaro, Kvareli, Ambrolauri and Tsageri. Streets numbers in Oni create problems, as a result of which emergency faces difficulties in identifying concrete family, hindering delivery of an on-time service and posing risks to health conditions of the patient.

2.5. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Local authorities have a major role to play in eliminating and preventing violence against women. The activities and initiatives outlined in the municipalities' gender equality action plans mainly address campaigns to raise public awareness and increase the sensitivity of board members toward gender-based violence.

As part of the research, understanding the attitudes and approaches of gender equality council members toward the ways to address violence against women and domestic violence was important. Council members often realize that their work needs to be more active in raising awareness of the population and that victim support services need to be improved, both financially and content-wise. It was also mentioned that there was minimal provision of victim support services in the municipality, which was explained as having no problem by council members. However, the rate of detection and reporting has increased as a result of the establishment of victim support services, which led to an increase in budget.⁷⁷

Measures undertaken by the gender equality councils toward prevention and eradication of gender-based violence are mainly linked to participation in campaigns and various activities against violence against women. In addition, printed material with information on protection and assistance services available in the country are also disseminated. The sensitivity of Sakrebulo representatives on violence and sexual harassment of women was particularly low in Racha. Lack of knowledge and low sensitivity to the phenomenon of domestic violence have been revealed.

“It is a family matter, for him she is a wife - whether he hits her or not, other people shall not interfere. If we hear such a case in the family, we will not expose it. Whether this woman is killed or not, depends primarily on her. How can she not understand, that she needs help”. [Focus group meeting with the Oni gender equality council].

As far as prevention and detection are concerned, the work of gender equality boards in this area is fragmented and unsystematic, which is directly reflected on the level of public awareness. As it is clear from the meetings, informational consultations held by the councils with different target groups do not ensure utilization of various mechanisms to identify violence against women and to protect victims. Numerous examples have been discussed where local population, police, social workers and municipal officials were aware of abusers living in the community, but specific interventions and transmitting victims for assistance to the appropriate organization or agency have not been carried out. In addition, there is a problem in the awareness of City Hall officials about the principles of gender equality and protection and assistance measures in the country, which are the main sources of disseminating information to women living in rural areas.

It is also important to note that gender equality councils rarely cooperate with local police units, even though they have certain programs to assist victims. The low awareness of gender equality councils and advisors also result in the very low referral of victims to be involved in various services or assistance programs. Consequently, gender-based initiatives at the prevention level are minimal. The cooperation of municipalities with the social agency is also challenging, including the implementation of referral instruments with the relevant agencies and, therefore, inter-agency cooperation.

Meetings with local municipalities show that the number of identifying violence in the region has increased,

⁷⁷Reporting has been doubled at Zugdidi municipality after establishing victim support services.

but the lack of a supporting circle and the victim's decision to cooperate with the law enforcement bodies remain as a problematic trend.

“Social background has a great impact on the facts of violence. Domestic violence is still considered a family affair. Civil liability is also low. The fact that everyone knows everyone in a small district is added to this, where people prefer to settle things on their own, rather than to call the police.” [Focus group meeting in Ambrolauri]

Unfortunately, the local population views municipalities as the least likely mechanisms for victim assistance and protection. Therefore, it is important to increase their sensitivity and level of awareness of domestic violence and violence against women so that victims going to the municipality receive the services that are designed for their well-being without stereotyping and judgment.

Population not being fully aware of the protection and assistance measures available in the country is also a problem. Most of the focus group participants did not have information about victim shelters, their services and hotlines. In this regard, they are most aware of the Emergency Service – 112.⁷⁸

Study showed that both the population and the members of the gender equality council have little knowledge of the definition, forms, and legislation about sexual harassment. Although part of the gender equality council and the department of the Municipality have undergone the digital course of the Public Defender on the prevention of sexual harassment, there is a less likelihood that the representatives of the municipality will be able to provide the victim with information on the existing legislation or support mechanisms.

When talking about this issue, sarcastic and comic attitude was felt both from the side of the population and the representatives of the municipal authorities. Neither public officials nor local population perceive the facts of harassment as a problem.

2.6. INFRASTRUCTURE

Despite the implementation of several local or international projects, meetings have shown that infrastructure issues remain challenging for the rural population. Local inhabitants mainly focus on **rehabilitating** kindergartens and schools, repairing internal rural roads, arranging meeting spots for rural population, quality of water and its supply, sewerage and irrigation channels, registering and taking care of street dogs⁷⁹, electricity and gasification.

In addition, the lack of municipal transport and the arbitrary nature of the work of private companies operating on the ground, which often results in chaos and disorder, have been cited as an additional problem in all regions.

Women more often refer to the usefulness of drinking water and the water supply schedule. The issue of water supply is particularly acute for women entrepreneurs who own family hotels, restaurants, or agricultural land. Rural women have also repeatedly indicated to the arrangements of meeting spots in villages,

⁷⁸It is worth mentioning, that church and local priest were named as examples of victims support and reinforcement.

⁷⁹Problem of street dogs, which relates to safety and health was revealed in the framework of the study in Signagi, Akhmeta, Chkhorostku, Akhaltsikhe and Ozurgeti.

where the local population can jointly resolve and discuss problems in the municipality. Otherwise, such place for gathering is the private residence of a random inhabitant.

Moreover, establishing areas for youth, where they could have access to informal education was also highlighted as one of the challenges. Rural women state that there is often a need for a dance or music school, gym, or swimming pool, but allocating and equipping relevant buildings by the municipality is linked to time and finances, which further prolongs the meeting of the local needs.

2.7. VULNERABLE GROUPS

When defining the gender policies of municipalities, it is particularly important that their programs and action plans address the needs of women belonging to a vulnerable group. Gender equality council action plans are mainly concerned with collecting sex-segregated data on vulnerable groups, facilitating their integration and social activation based on needs assessments, and providing educational, financial and other programs for economic empowerment.

Situation of rights of women with disabilities

The research findings show that women with disabilities lack the opportunity to participate in policy and decision-making processes at the local level. Apart from the lack of state programs and initiatives, the problem is the low motivation of women with disabilities to actively engage in public life, which is related to the complexities of access to the environment and the stigma existing in society.

The programs in the municipalities are mainly focused on the medical model and provide one-time financial assistance, transportation, and rarely home care services. The fact that the most of the existing support programs are designed for age groups under 18 is another issue. In addition, in some cases, the municipality is interested in improving the legal status of persons with disabilities, however, City Hall and City Council representatives lack knowledge of specific issues and as a result, their activities carry formal character. The problem is also the fact that the decision-makers are mainly men, who have difficulties in understanding not only the problems of persons with disabilities but also the needs of women.

„Talking about women with disabilities is pointless. These women are not considered as resources at all, especially in the public service. Women with disabilities do not have the opportunity to gain education, work experience and then get employment because of their situation.“ [Focus Group Meeting with Women with Disabilities in Zugdidi]

Another problem is that programs and services for people over 18 years are lacking at the municipalities. Zugdidi has scarce information on the activities implemented by the municipality in this regard. Stereotypical attitude of the municipal staff itself was indicated as a problem too.

„Public officials’ attitude and approach is so cold and unethical, that unless one is a fighter and armed with knowledge, there is no longer a desire to come and request for services“. [Focus Group Meeting with Women with Disabilities in Zugdidi]

In terms of cooperation and general relations with the municipality, it was noted that there are fewer initiatives for the empowerment of women with disabilities and these initiatives are mainly of a charitable nature

– “one can see mainly flowers, sweets and photos”.⁸⁰ Although persons with disabilities are more actively involved in the work of disability councils, their participation in the gender council is low. Besides their attendance at the councils is problematic, as the council buildings are largely without adaptation.

As to the access to the physical environment by the persons with disabilities, most public institutions, including council and city hall buildings, are not adapted. In addition, access to hospitals, schools and yards is also problematic. Most buildings have an outdoor ramp, which allows persons with disabilities to enter the building, but limits movement inside. In the framework of the study, access to the physical environment was a major issue not only in the target regions where the focus group meetings were held but also in other municipalities. Attendance at council meetings is an issue for members of the council on persons with disabilities. Also, even in situations where the physical environment is more or less in order, the quality and inclination of the ramps is problematic. Persons with disabilities have the feeling that even in the case where a ramp is in place, it is only formal in nature and is not actually intended for free movement of persons with disabilities.⁸¹ Moreover, the meetings show that by accessibility mainly ramps and elevated buildings are implied, whereas people who are blind, have hearing impairments and other types of disabilities are not considered at all when determining their needs and defining policies.

Problem of municipal transport also addresses persons with disabilities. Apart from the fact that the physical environment is not adapted, a person with a disability living in Telavi was unable to get to the exam because a taxi driver refused transportation to a wheelchair user. Moving is a problem not only within the city but also in the countryside, as road transport and trains are not adapted. Therefore, limited access to the physical environment, stereotypical attitudes, visible or invisible barriers make the wheelchair user to stay at home and refuse public goods.

“Like my son and I, there are a lot of people in home custody. There is no municipal transport for persons with disabilities. Because of these barriers, the child once very active is now locked in own mind and no longer wishes to communicate with the outside world.” [Meeting with parents of persons with disabilities in Telavi]

Awareness-raising meetings for persons with disabilities are mainly organized by NGOs. The main challenge, as already mentioned, is attending meetings and providing adapted environment. Access to information for persons with psycho-social needs is another challenge.

In addition to the fact that public has a stereotypical attitude toward persons with disabilities, research has shown that it is necessary to work with family members and parents of persons with disabilities, as many of them are against receiving disability status and accessing appropriate services by relevant individuals. In particular, it was noted that persons with no status are mostly girls because they think that if they are granted with the status, their disability will be known to the public, which may hinder their marriage plans. This practice speaks to the stereotypical attitude that considers the role of women only in the reproductive context and does not allow them to become socially active. The lack of status for persons with disabilities is linked to the limitation of support provided by state programs. It is particularly difficult to obtain status and to go through appropriate procedures for persons who do not have family members and cannot move

⁸⁰Focus group meeting with women with disabilities living in Ozurgeti.

⁸¹The lack of public toilets for persons with disabilities and the problem of attending meetings of the council on persons with disabilities were repeatedly mentioned at the meetings.

without assistance.

*“There are many beneficiaries who either did not attend school or did not go beyond the family. Basically, everything depends on the parent. If the parent is not active, they are in fact doomed”.
[Focus group meeting with parents of persons with disabilities in Telavi]*

Access to education, both formal and informal, for persons with disabilities, and their professional development is crucial. Meetings show that programs and initiatives for the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities are rare, as their main source of income is mostly social assistance. Persons with disabilities are scarcely employed in public or private sectors due to qualification and reasonable adaptation of working environment and relevant conditions.

“A survey was conducted in 2017 on a number of people employed; there was no word on employed women with disabilities. Women with disabilities are not considered as a resource and talking about their economic empowerment is pointless.” [Focus Group Meeting with Women with Disabilities in Zugdidi]

Public awareness is a constant process; therefore, continuous information campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and creating a tolerant environment are particularly necessary. Access to the physical environment at public institutions remains the most important challenge, which disregards the employment of persons with disabilities at the municipal level.

IDP and conflict-affected women

The results of the study show that, despite projects implemented by NGOs, international organizations, or the state, awareness and access to health, social and legal services for displaced and conflict-affected populations remain challenging. In addition, there is a low participation of IDPs, and conflict-affected women in policy formulation and implementation, limiting the consideration of their needs by local government action plans and policy documents.

The survey found that existing services are mainly tailored to general needs and that there are minimal programs or initiatives that would explicitly address specific needs of displaced and conflict-affected women. Since 2018, localization process of the 2018-2020 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution on “Women, Peace and Security” is ongoing at 10 municipalities⁸²; the process aims at facilitating local self-government bodies in strengthening their role locally and reinforcing conflict-affected women and girls through developing of different strategies.

NGOs are mainly working to raise awareness of IDPs and conflict-affected populations. It is through them that problematic issues are advocated within municipalities. It is noteworthy that the UN Security Council Resolution N1325 on “Women, Peace and Security” was reflected in the action plans of the self-government bodies, where IDPs live⁸³. Nevertheless, the problem is the lack or scarcity of budget for the activities set by the Action Plan. Consequently, municipalities are less active in organizing meetings, which is also evidenced

⁸²Selected municipalities during the localization process: Dusheti, Gori, Kareli, Kaspi, Khashuri, Sachkhere, Stepantsminda, Tsanejikha, Tskaltubo, Zugdidi.

⁸³Zugdidi, Gori, Kareli, Khashuri, Tskaltubo, Tsalenjikha, Sachkhere.

by the low awareness of IDPs about gender equality councils and gender advisors. Meetings show that infrastructural⁸⁴ issues, including access to water, repairing roads, improving housing conditions and transportation are still acute issues for IDPs and conflict-affected women. The issue of well-equipped roads and transportation is also linked to the access to health services by IDPs and conflict-affected women, as it is not possible to call an ambulance in winter due to a badly arranged road. Their socio-economic situation is particularly alarming. IDPs often referred to the fact that the municipality had information about the issues raised by them, but the problems have not been resolved for years, increasing their distrust towards local authorities.

The main source of income for women affected by conflict is limited to social assistance and pensions. They also have information on vocational training courses, though the location of the schools is often associated with transportation problems and additional costs. As to the state-sponsored entrepreneurship programs, some IDP women use this opportunity, but there is a major problem with funding the project for women living along the demarcation line, as the refusal on funding is justified based on unstable environment and occupation.⁸⁵ Accordingly, it is important that the state takes these risks into account when announcing grants for entrepreneurship programs, and during selection of project applications, consider the specific needs of women affected by conflict.

The meetings also revealed that the provision of psycho-social services to IDPs and conflict-affected population is very low.

Single and multiple-child parents

Another important aspect of women's economic activity and the realization of their labor rights is the human rights situation of single and multiple-child parents. Although the grounds for determining and terminating single-parent status have changed, assistance programs are based on the goodwill of a municipality and cannot provide adequate material guarantees nationwide. Also, the conditions of providing social protection as a result of granting a status of a multiple-children family do not cover the needs of large families, therefore it is important to improve the services available in the country for bettering large families' socio-economic rights.

The meetings demonstrate that the challenge at the municipal level is the lack of special protection and assistance measures, or oftentimes their non-existence. In addition, most municipalities do not have comprehensive statistical information on single and multiple-child parents. Furthermore, single parents/multiple-child parents working in the City Council and City Hall are not identified and supported.

One-time financial assistance for single and multiple-child parents ranges from GEL 50-300. It is an established practice to assist this group during the festivities with products, household items and various types of gifts. Providing rent or a household is rare,⁸⁶ which is also associated with bureaucratic procedures and prolonged deadlines.

⁸⁴Roads in the village of Chorchana are not in order and therefore transport is problematic, especially in winter when children have to walk in the snow.

⁸⁵A woman living in Zardiaantkari was refused project funding.

⁸⁶The Sighnaghi municipality had initiated the purchase of abandoned buildings to later transfer to single parent, multiple-child parent or women victims of domestic violence, but due to bureaucratic procedures the process is suspended.

The problem has also been identified in the following context: in municipalities where there is budget available to support single or multiple-child parents, the level of awareness of the population, both among single parents and within the gender councils, about the procedures to gain the status is low. Rules on determining multiple-child parent status is different- in some municipalities, a parent with 3 or more children is considered eligible for the program, whereas in some municipalities having more than 4 or 5 children is required. It is often the case when a single parent with multiple children is at the same time socially vulnerable and receives social assistance, which once again confirms the severity of their socio-economic conditions.

“For large families, there is GEL 100 per child, which often is a good income for socially vulnerable families. These families should be supported by the state and strengthened. We had a case where we offered employment to parents of a large family and everybody refused because in this case the social assistance would be terminated.” [Focus Group Meeting with Gori Gender Council]

The focus group meetings also revealed practices where the municipality has the budget to support single or multiple-child parents, but due to lack of applications, these funds are not utilized. Consequently, it is important to activate the municipalities and to keep the population informed on granting the status and following assistance services, including through the provision of legal consultancy.

Finally, in municipalities where there are one-time financial assistance programs, the focus is made on single and multiple-child mothers and there is no case, where the municipality had information on single or multiple-child father. Therefore, given the unequal distribution of the burden of care on single mothers, it is important to have social benefits foreseen by the state budget.

3. CONCLUSION

As a result of the analysis of the information obtained from the meetings by the Public Defender, it can be concluded that gender inequality is mainly a result of limiting and neglecting women's rights and is directly reflected on their human rights situation. Therefore, the major purpose of the study was to identify these barriers and to research policies aimed at empowering women in local self-government.

The meetings show that more efforts are needed from the part of local governments to implement the principles of gender equality in the country. Particularly problematic is to raise the sensitivity of the members of the gender equality council and to equip them with knowledge on basic issues related to gender. It is important that in some cases, the council members acknowledge the problem of lack of knowledge as one of the obstacles to their work. In addition, the low representation of women in decision-making positions is another issue, which is also linked to the low sensitivity of men holding offices to gender topics. Council members also have scarce information on legislative changes and institutional mechanisms to achieve gender equality in the country.

Knowledge of gender budgeting issues and its practical application remain problematic for municipalities. Most of the council members are unable to identify the specific needs of women and have no knowledge of the impact that a gender-sensitive budgeting can make on the well-being of the local population, especially women. All programs and initiatives imply the establishment of concrete finances in budgets, which in many cases has been identified as a major problem. Consequently, it is important that action plans have subsequent budgets, which later will be positively reflected on gender equality.

Knowledge of gender equality councils on initiatives and programs aimed at women's economic empowerment is particularly low. Council members are not equipped with relevant knowledge and currently, they do not specifically prioritize the establishment of support programs for women entrepreneurs, which is also related to finances. An important challenge was accessing information by women entrepreneurs on strengthening their skills, project writing courses, developing business ideas and etc. Apart from this, women have some fears and because of poor financial resources, they cannot risk starting entrepreneurship. In this regard, there are many barriers in Georgia, including inheritance distribution, ownership of land and other types of property, lack of specially tailored projects and initiatives, and a lack of gender assessment of entrepreneurship support programs. The shortage of vocational educational institutions also remains challenging, especially for women who did not have access to higher education before and now wish to study to pursue a career and further development.

Meetings demonstrate that there is a high migration of women in the regions due to the lack of jobs and difficult socio-economic background. This problem is also particularly acute in youth living in rural areas since, after school, the municipality is unable to offer them any prospects for either their professional development or employment. Local population and those working in municipalities consider that it is better when the state provides long-term grants for the creation of jobs, instead of giving families money as social assistance over the years. On the other hand, there is a tendency that at this stage the population prioritizes satisfying the basic needs and enjoying social benefits. Because of this, they are not interested in programs having long-term results.

Prevention of domestic violence and providing support services to victims/survivors of violence are still problematic. The trend towards increased awareness of protection and assistance services in the country shall be welcomed, nevertheless, there is a need to make councils more active in introduction and facilitation of operating friendly services on municipal levels, which on the one hand, will economically empower victims/survivors and on the other hand, support them in starting independent life.

Particularly important is the tendency that the population lacks the feeling that their human rights situation will improve even if the needs assessment is carried out. Correspondingly, communication between municipalities and local communities needs to be improved, gender equality councils need to become more active on existing services and assistance programs, as their activities planned at this stage do not ensure empowerment of women in the political, social or economic contexts. Also, programs developed by municipalities often fail to address the needs faced by women living in rural areas and, therefore, existing policies are incapable of affecting the improvement of women's rights. Particularly notable is the lack of intersectional approaches in policy documents developed by gender equality councils, which adversely affects the legal status of vulnerable groups and cannot ensure their equal participation.

It was specifically outlined within the study that in previous years, more awareness-raising meetings and various types of information campaigns were held with the population since 2018 similar initiatives have been reduced. At some meetings in the regions, there were problems in discussing basic principles of equality, domestic violence or sexual harassment; in a number of cases the participants expressed aggression because they perceived gender equality as the "enemy of the Georgian family". Consequently, it is important that awareness-raising activities of the population are planned and implemented systematically, both by the municipalities themselves and with the support of local and international organizations and in close cooperation with them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Administration of the Government of Georgia

- To promote the establishment of a joint platform to coordinate gender equality issues among municipalities, for sharing good practices and for further communication
- To actively inform local governments on commitments and activities outlined in state strategies and action plans on gender equality

Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia

- To strengthen cooperation with self-government bodies and establish close coordination with gender equality councils in the municipalities and with gender advisors
- To produce and analyze gender-segregated data of municipal employees and facilitate the development of a unified standard methodology

Local Self-Government Bodies

- To ensure that members of the Gender Equality Council are aware of gender policies, safeguards and assistance mechanisms in place in the country and to promote raising their sensitivity toward domestic violence, sexual harassment, gender budgeting and women's economic empowerment and other issues
- To comprehensively study-specific needs of women living in the municipality and ensure that they are reflected in action plans, strategies and policy documents
- To strengthen cooperation between the gender equality councils and local and thematic organizations
- To ensure practical implementation of gender budgeting and carry out targeted programs aimed at improving human rights situation of women
- To take all possible measures for ensuring women's participation and engagement at all stages of planning, implementing and evaluating priority projects for the local community, with particular attention on the consideration of needs of vulnerable groups
- To plan and implement awareness-raising campaigns to reduce the burden of family care and to eradicate gender stereotypes
- To enhance coordination with referral services (police, social service agency and education resource centre) to prevent and eliminate cases of violence
- To develop support services for victims of domestic violence through financial assistance or other socio-economic empowerment
- To identify and collect segregated data on single and multiple-child parents living in the municipality
- To ensure that the infrastructure in the municipality (especially internal roads) is in order and that the adapted environment is accessible
- To pay special attention to the provision of ambulances, kindergartens and schools, in accordance with sanitary and hygienic standards
- To provide access to municipal transport in villages where schools and kindergartens are not functioning

- To take appropriate measures to facilitate the integration of persons with disabilities into society and their socio-economic development, in particular with regard to access to the physical environment

Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development

- To promote the professional development and economic empowerment of women entrepreneurs living in municipalities through trainings and teaching project management skills
- To take into account the specifics and needs of a particular region when identifying priorities in entrepreneurship support programs and funding
- To ensure awareness of the population on the establishment of cooperatives and their advantages
- To pay particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups when designing women's economic empowerment programs

Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport

- To ensure access of women living in municipalities to vocational education, especially for empowering women in rural areas

Legal Aid Service

- To raise awareness of the local population on land registration procedures and provide legal advice as needed
- To ensure awareness and access to legal services for displaced and conflict-affected women
- To provide legal consultancy on gaining single-parent status and support services

Ministry of Finances

- To create a separate article in the budget for local self-government bodies, which will ensure the implementation of activities of the action plans envisaged by the Gender Equality councils.

