



UN JOINT PROGRAMME  
FOR GENDER EQUALITY



# **HARMFUL PRACTICES OF EARLY/CHILD MARRIAGE IN KVEMO KARTLI: RESEARCH OF ATTITUDES**

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# INTRODUCTION

In Georgia, the issue of early and child marriage remains a significant challenge. Despite the widespread use of such practices, in the public perception, it is often stereotypically associated with the Kvemo Kartli region and ethnic minority communities in Georgia.

It should be mentioned, that throughout Georgia, as well as in the Azerbaijani community of Georgia, the harmful practice of early marriage has various reasons and root causes. However, the mainstream narrative often explains this practice in a non-dominant ethnic and religious community by the traditions, culture, «backwardness» and / or religious practices of these groups. In fact, the initial reasons of such practices may include issues such as systemic discrimination, the racialization of ethnic minority women, socio-economic challenges and poverty in the regions, weak state protection and care practices by government agencies, and lack of reflection of this topics in political agenda.

Despite the scarce data on children and early marriage, we are able to talk about trends and challenges in the Kvemo Kartli region based on the results of particular researches.<sup>1</sup> According to the 2018 UNICEF Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey, the highest rate of early marriages (15 years and under 18) is in the Kvemo Kartli region (25%). In addition, 33% of early marriages of girls are related to the poorest quintile of the welfare index.<sup>2</sup> In a special report on early marriage by the Public Defender of Georgia in 2015, we read that in the Kvemo Kartli municipal units, the school administration does not fully maintain statistics on the reasons for students dropping out of school. Also, according to the authors of the report, “in the villages selected as part of the study, almost none of the girls graduate from school because they get married.”<sup>3</sup> According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2020, an investigation was launched on 132 alleged crimes in Georgia, the motive of which was marriage to a child, and in 2019, an investigation was launched on 149 cases, of which 105 cases were probably motivated by marriage to a child.<sup>4</sup> In addition, during 2020, 131 cases of early marriage were studied in the territorial units of the State Care Agency, 23 of the cases were from the Kvemo Kartli region.

Considering the scale of the problem, in the process of finding solutions, the state is obliged to study in depth and properly understand the roots of the problem. The planning of preventive or responding measures should contribute to the effective solution of the problem and not to the deepening of stereotypes and prejudices towards ethnic groups. When talking about children and early marriage, two factors are critically important. First, how local state agencies see and explain child and early age marriage practices and their causes. Second, what are the attitudes, positions and explanations of the community members themselves (parents, young people).


It should be noted that while working on this issue, target groups such as school teachers and administration, ethnic minority girls and activist groups are often in the focus of international or local NGOs and the state. However, based on our observations, parents are often left beyond such focus. Lack of substantial

1 The research available at the link: <https://bit.ly/3ee2SWq> last seen: 22.12.2021

2 [https://www.unicef.org/georgia/sites/unicef.org.georgia/files/2019-11/child\\_marriage\\_ge.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/georgia/sites/unicef.org.georgia/files/2019-11/child_marriage_ge.pdf)

3 <http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/75/75677.pdf>

4 <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2021040110573948397.pdf>



understanding of the most decisive group's positions results in demonizing of parents and hindering to understand their positions and arguments. As a result, a vicious circle is formed where local activist groups, non-governmental organizations and government agencies focus on punishment of parents. And the parents themselves, consider the above-mentioned actors as the opposition to them.

The aim of the present study was to examine the views of parents who supported early marriage and the in-depth reasons behind their decisions. A proper understanding of the essential and in-depth reasons of the above group's behavior will help government agencies, the non-governmental sector and activist groups to analyze transformational work, plan and implement further steps. It is noteworthy that despite numerous studies on early marriage issues, this is the first study has been conducted with such narrow focus.

The research paper prepared on the basis of the work carried out and its findings on the positions and opinions of parents who support marriage at an early age, will provide important knowledge to the actors working on this issue, who in parallel with the punishing and presentational mechanisms will start work on transformation of parents consciousness, that will deeply alter existing reality.

Accordingly, the present document is drafted as follows - the first part of the document includes the views and opinions of the representatives of state agencies. In the second part, the views and explanations of the community members regarding the current situation are presented. And the third part presents a summary and recommendations on what change theories should be based the work of government agencies, NGOs and international organizations, related to the issue.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESTRICTIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The present study was conducted on the principle of participatory action research of the qualitative research method. The authors of the study were members of the community themselves. For the purposes of the study, in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted in Kvemo Kartli municipalities. Respondents were divided according to their social status, place of residence, knowledge of the state language, age and gender. Focus groups of female and male parents were held separately so that established patriarchal norms did not hinder to women's more sincere conversations. Within the framework of the research, 4 in-depth interviews were conducted with a girl with early marriage experience and her relative. There were also two focus groups with young people (19 participants in total) and four focus groups with parents (17 participants).

In addition, in Dmanisi, Bolnisi, Tsalka, Marneuli, Gardabani and Tetritskaro municipalities and in the city of Rustavi, four meetings were held with representatives of local self-government, resource centers working in Kvemo Kartli, as well as law enforcement officials and social workers (28 meetings in total).

The document is a working report and the issues presented in it are aiming to catch primary trends and dynamics, it is important to continue working on similar studies with the same focus in the future as well.

# ATTITUDE AND WORKING PRACTICES OF THE LOCAL AND STATE AGENCIES

## The results of the interviews with municipal gender equity councils

Within the framework of the research, meetings were held with the representatives of the Gender Equality Council of all seven self-governing units of Kvemo Kartli. It should be noted that the vast majority of members of the Gender Equality Council are ethnic Georgians and often do not have enough information on local needs, concerns and challenges. The incompetence of board members is also frequent. According to most of them, early marriage is a typical event only for the Azerbaijani community of Georgia (in Tsalka - also for Muslim Georgians), although in some cases the respondents themselves or their family members had experience of early marriage. At the same time, prejudices and stereotypes about non-dominant ethnic groups are particularly strong among members of the Gender Equality Council.

It is noteworthy that the vast majority of members of the Gender Equality Council find it difficult to answer the question of how they work to obtain information about marriage at an early age. The members of the Gender Equality council mostly had their own vision of what they would do if they will get information on marriage at an early age, but none of them had similar experience. At the same time, the stereotypical views expressed in the core cases give us grounds to say that they do not properly see the need to work on this issue. It worth to mention, that the population itself is not properly informed about the existence and functioning of gender equality councils and, therefore, does not apply to them. Board members often state that they receive information on child and early age marriage in an informal situations, while ride by transport, or in other spaces, and none of cases of applying to the council were found in any of the self-governments. The work of the councils according to the municipalities is almost identical. In this respect, Marneuli Municipality is slightly different, however, the self-governments and the Gender Equality Councils do not have a unified strategy and / or vision of working on this issue.

In discussing child marriage and parental attitudes at an early age, council members almost everywhere say that early marriage is the result of “backwardness”, illiteracy, their culture, traditions, or customs of non-dominant ethnic and religious groups. It has been suggested several times that parents often resort to this practice because they want their children to be “handed over to the patron”. Opinions about socio-economic challenges, hopelessness, or insecurity were seldom expressed. It should also be noted that even members of the council, who were to work directly on such issues, often stated that even if they had information about early marriage, they would not turn to the relevant agencies because they did not want to “upset / destroy” families.

When talking about the in-depth reasons of early marriage, the vast majority of council members say this practice is related to the traditions of ethnic and religious minorities and their low level of awareness. Also, some of them say stronger punishment mechanisms are needed to make these people scared, to give up practice of marriage of their own children at an early age.

It is crucial, that council members do not fully acknowledge of the importance and functions of the gender equity council. According to them, they can to a quite a bit in relation to early marriage and see their role only in holding informational meetings. Most of the members of the council do not have proper information about the referral procedures, they do not cooperate with other state agencies and the coordinated work between



the agencies is also problematic.<sup>5</sup> The knowledge of the members of council is superficial and the activities are mostly formal. Additionally, various activities are mostly attended by the same members of the Council. In some cases, the lack of services and the need for a psychologist, a lawyer at the local level, who would be directly focused on working with victims of violence, were also named as challenges. It is noteworthy that in some cases, the existence of an effective mechanism in self-government in this regard was mentioned, providing to self-government additional lever, as the council is mainly limited to advisory function.

### **Results of the interview with the representatives of the Kvemo Kartli regional divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia**

During the meetings held with the Kvemo Kartli regional divisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, several important issues were identified. First of all, it should be noted that the vast majority of MIA staff working on this issue at the local level are ethnic Georgian men. The attitude of most of them on the issue is often problematic and insensitive.

Most respondents, with the minor exceptions, stated that they received information about early marriage and child marriage from the Public Defender's Office, public health institutions, and other agencies. The direct appeal of the population to the police is very low. In their view, the practice of early marriage and child marriage is mostly characteristic of ethnic minorities and derives from their traditions and culture. According to the representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, appeal to the police unacceptable in the community of minorities therefore, the population rarely appeals to the police. During the meetings, it was revealed that the majority of respondents perceive the ethnic minority community as having different and, in some cases, problematic traditions and customs that cannot be changed and see little need to respond to similar cases. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the respondents name the lack of proper education as one of the reasons for early marriage and believe that it is necessary to strengthen efforts in this direction. This finding makes us to think, that delayed or possible inappropriate response by MIA staff to early marriage cases is related to their views and attitudes.

It is noteworthy that according to the respondents, the problem cannot be solved only by police control and punishment-oriented mechanisms. In their view, additional activities are needed to help raise the awareness of minorities. At the same time, the work with the younger generation was stressed as, in their view, it is impossible to change the attitudes of the adult population. Should be mentioned, that police emphasizes the lack of social workers, the language barrier and the need for a psychologist work.

Discriminatory attitudes towards the Azerbaijani population of Georgia were revealed among the police officers. During the meeting, the police officers uttered the following phrases: "Social poverty is not the reason for early marriage, the reason is that they have these traditions in their blood. This is a tradition," "It is still 17th century in Kharadjala".

According to police officers, the attitude of parents towards the issue of marriage at an early age is caused by the desire to receive economic benefits or to get rid of the economic burden. One of the Rustavi police officers, while talking on the role of parents in the issue of an early marriage, recalls a case when a family "married" a child in exchange for 30 cows. In his opinion, "30 cows is not bad amount." Dmanisi Municipality Police sees the role of parents in this situation in a similar way. They remembered a case when the girl's

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<sup>5</sup> As a result of the meetings held at the law enforcement agency, it is clear that the self-government is less likely to address issues similar to theirs. Also, as it turned out, the Council does not hold information meetings in cooperation with other agencies.

family applied to the police, but later withdrew the appeal because “the boy’s family paid a lot of money and gave them more gifts than they deserve, so they actually sold their daughter for that price.”

When talking about systemic problems, police officers almost never talk about socio-economic challenges, barriers facing minorities, and a sense of hopelessness. Practices of hierarchisation of non-dominant ethnic groups through regions police is notable. According to one of the policemen, “Marneuli has more developed population, because they paid more attention to education. Dmanisi is farther away and pays less attention to education.”

## **Results of interviews with representatives of educational resource centers**

The vast majority of meetings with representatives of educational resource centers were attended by ethnic Georgian staff, who stated that the practice of child and early age marriage was typical for the Azerbaijani community in Georgia and was coming from the traditions and religion of the community itself. According to one of the respondents, “they are following their traditions, they understand it that way.” According to the other respondent, “it is a bit difficult change one’s traditions, to change the origin.”

At the same time, the staff of the resource center said that in recent years, similar practices are no longer observed in schools, including Azerbaijani language schools. However, the reasons for missing and dropping out from the school are often such reasons as changing residence address, moving abroad, and etc. According to the staff of the resource centers, all the teachers should be familiar with referral document. However, the resource center cannot oversee this and director of the school is responsible for this.

According to the staff of the resource centers, often, parents are those who assist the child and early age marriages therefore, it is necessary to work directly with them and change their consciousness. According to one of the respondents, it is necessary to “talk to parents and work with them, because the parent is the main link.” Respondents explain this attitude of parents with the lack of education and awareness. Socio-economic challenges and poverty, in their point of view, do not represent the significant issue.

It worth to mention, that a significant proportion of respondents talk about the critical role of the 1 + 4 program<sup>6</sup>, based on the program more young people get high education. But no one is talking about the possible positive role of these young people in the process of changing the practice of marriage at an early age.

The staff of the resource center cannot remember any activities planned by the Ministry of Education preventing early marriage in recent years. Moreover, in their opinion, some teachers even express dissatisfaction when activities are planned in this direction, with the participation of other agencies. According to one of the respondents, “there are numerous cases when teachers complain about the fact of planning event at school related to early marriage issue.”

As a summary it might be said, that representatives of the resource center believe that the school has special authority in the regions. Accordingly, it is necessary to take appropriate steps towards prevention of early marriage with the involvement of schools. However, they find difficult to indicate any actions, apart from conducting trainings and printing information booklets.

<sup>6</sup> 1+4 program foresees passing of the exam of general skills in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian, Osetian languages and in case of collecting certain amount of points the opportunity to get high education: <https://www.smr.gov.ge/ge/page/58/saganmanatleblo-programa>



### **Information obtained as a result of interviews with the social workers of the Kvemo Kartli Regional Center of Agency for State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking:**

The participants of the meetings with social workers in Kvemo Kartli were ethnic Georgians. Most of them stated that they have some problems while communication with local population, both on general and on the issues of an early age and child marriage. Furthermore, there have been cases when social workers have not been able to visit Azerbaijani villages independently. According to one of the social worker, her husband does not let her go to the Azerbaijani villages alone because he sees danger and is afraid. In the light of such obstacles, it is difficult to talk about the effectiveness of the social workers' activities.

Worth to mention, that the vast majority of social workers repeat the attitude of other agencies and state that the issue of early marriage in the Azerbaijani community of Georgia stems from the traditions, culture and religion of this group.<sup>7</sup> Some social workers also talk about socio-economic life, lack of perspective, and systemic challenges.

Some social workers believe that it is necessary not only to work in the direction of punishment, but also to raise the awareness among relevant bodies and agencies (school, self-government, mayor's representatives in administrative units, representatives of the medical field, etc.). In addition, a significant proportion of social workers talk about the need to create a special guidance document, considering local context that would help them work on the issue of marriage at an early age.

According to social workers, working proactively with parents and families on this issue and talking with them often leads to positive changes in attitudes. However, it is also said that often, girls want to get rid of the socio-economic challenges and poverty existing with their parents as soon as possible, so because of the lack of perspective, they choose to get married at an early age themselves.

Unlike other agencies, some social workers also talk about the challenges in the education system. According to the respondent, the low quality of education in non-Georgian schools, the low level of teacher qualifications and the basic infrastructural challenges reduce the interest in learning among students in such schools.

There is a strong feeling among the respondents that parents belonging to ethnic minorities do not like girls and they do not even consider them as children. According to one of the respondent, "it is the tradition and approach of ethnic minorities that they love a boys more than a girls, because a girl will soon leave home and a boy will stay." On the question, if they work with the parents on the issues of early marriage and what is their attitude respondents respond that the parents' reaction to the intervention of social workers is negative at the initial stage. Families often assess such a thing as an interfere into their family. They say: men become aggressive, while women say it is the tradition of their ancestors. They are not visiting the families alone for the first time, because of such attitude. At the same time, according to the respondents, directors of schools and teachers hide such cases, as they themselves are representatives of the same community.

As for working with children, according to social workers, girls often say that their family has chosen a groom for them, although they have no complaints because they have been accustomed to this reality since childhood. And it is difficult for them to identify forced marriages.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that different opinions were expressed in some cases. Respondents said that early marriage was a large-scale problem, common among Georgians, and unrelated to ethnic minority communities and traditions.

# ATTITUDES OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

## Attitudes of individuals with early marriage experience

When talking about child marriage at an early age and when planning substantial changes or policies, it is critical to listen to people with such experiences. However, in international agreements, recommendations and legal norms, the needs, concerns and experiences of these people are often left beyond attention. Policies planned top-down from the positions of savior and professionals often lead to out-of-context, ineffective, and imperfect outcomes.

It is noteworthy that individuals with early age marriage experiences believe that such practices are still strong around them, although they have declined significantly in recent years. In addition, they believe that the main causes of early marriage are poverty, education challenges / prospects, patriarchy and false traditions. According to one of the respondents:

*"Often girls are raised in a very strict and closed environment and want to get rid of it. The wedding and the period after it is much romanticized. Strangely, you feel more valuable, because society looks at you differently, you are asked for your opinion. Also, the approach of teachers in dealing with young people, I think, is problematic. The teachers often cannot cause desire to get an education in adolescents and if you do not get, or cannot get education, then the second inevitable alternative is marriage." (In-depth interview with a person with early marriage experience, 20 years old).*

According to another respondent, the still existing cases of early marriage are the result of inconsistent state policies.

*"I knew that in the geographical area where I live, a large part of the police are relatives. So even when I called the police, I knew that this family link would solve everything the way they wished. I knew my voice and my opinion would never be heard. So what was the point of calling, who would protect me?! In the end I would be seen as the bad child. In this situation, unfortunately, no matter how strong the law is, my family ties are stronger so they can ignore this law." (In-depth interview with a person with early marriage experience, 22 years old).*

According to the respondents, the decisive vote on the issue of marriage at an early age mainly belongs to parents and heads of families. In addition, they say that in rare cases, it may be the decision of the child. However, all respondents agree that the opinions of both parents and children are the result of community customs, established roles and order. According to one of the respondents:

*"I married at the age of 15. To be honest, I was even glad at that time, and my parents probably really thought they were making the best decision for me. Then there was the heavy burden of family, children, my spouse was also very young. It is hard to get married at an early age. Now I have decided that there are other possibilities and I am not going to marry my child at an early age, I would like to educate her, I see that many things can happen differently. In my childhood, neither I nor my parents saw any other opportunities". (In-depth interview with a person with early marriage experience, 30 years old)"*

While talking about the role and importance of the school, one of the respondents remembers that when she stopped attending school, no one caused interest in her.

*"I do not remember any information meeting on this issue in our school. On the contrary, the school itself is covering such facts. I was in 9th grade, when I left school, no one was interested in the reason. But they knew that I was got married, but no action was taken by the school administration, but I had hoped for that. And, my school is supposed to be a school of city". (In-depth interview with a person with early marriage experience, 22 years old).*

All respondents with early marriage experience negatively assess such practice and want to oppose it. However, their capabilities and power are often limited.

*"From what I observe, my relatives are students, a period when they were at online learning, both themselves and their parents completely forgot that they were students. That time, my uncle wanted to marry his eldest daughter. Based on my experience, I was the biggest opponent to this and I am still doing everything for her education." (In-depth interview with a person with early marriage experience, 24 years old).*

### **Attitudes of young people**

Surveys show that the majority of respondents assess early marriage as a harmful practice and problem. In their view, girls are facing this problem most. It was difficult for them to remember boys married in an early age. According to young people, this practice is the result of the experiences and life of the older generation. According to the majority of young people, the place of women in society often stems from their economic conditions and the patriarchal set-up of the community. It is impossible to change this only by adopting strict laws and imprisonment.

*"As I said, at that time the girl was mostly forced to marry, especially when the groom's family was rich. Literally the parents did not want to miss this chance because they knew there was no other perspective. In fact, this social factor is still actual, especially in the case of poor families, the parents and the girl herself would like to get out of this "dark days". (Focus group young person, 18 years old).*

Almost all participants of the focus group assess negatively activities of the police in preventing early marriage in the region, in their opinion, especially local police knows the age of the married couple very well, but does not respond. In one of the youth focus groups, concern was expressed in relation to the police response on the facts of kidnapping. In their opinion, often, the police officers do not work operatively, and when a girl is sexually abused, the police officers wait for the parties to reconcile. In the process, the girl's voice is completely suppressed. The young people participating in the focus stated that they did not trust the police.

*"I do not trust the police in this matter. Especially male police officers. We have very few female police officers. Men can never understand how great a tragedy it is for a woman to be kidnapped, married at an early age and domestic violence. They always take the side of the kidnapper, the abuser." (Focus group young person, 20 years old)*

On the question if they knew who they could apply in case if they themselves, or someone else, had been married, coerced, or kidnapped at an early age, one of the young persons named the ombudsman's office and the names of civil activists. It is noteworthy that in terms of avoiding such cases, the role of the police, was assessed as not serious.

*"I do not see the role and power of the police in this regard at all, I do not take it seriously and I do not trust their work. Where is the police, where is the system?! It is not! We have a policeman in our village, there occurred many cases of early marriage and I know very well that he knew these facts, but did not react to the incidents not make relations difficult with the residents of the village and moreover, he went to a 14 year old girl's wedding, ate and drank well and passed ". (Young person participating in the interview, 18 years old).*

Respondents also find the role of the school problematic in this regard. In the youth focus group and among the women with early marriage experiences, there was expressed opinion that the school administration, for a variety of reasons, is closing eyes on the facts of child marriage. One of the reasons is the close relations in villages, and the second important reason is the fear of "spoiling the name of the school". According to the one participant of the focus group, when her sister was on a tenth grade she was married and the wedding took place, so the school not only closed eyes on the fact, but school director even complained that the family had not invited her to the wedding.

*"One of my teachers at my school was looking for a girl to marry to a relative. This person is educated, is a teacher, I do not understand why she could have such an attitude" (Focus group young person, 18 years old).*

Accordingly, the opinion was expressed, that the harmful practice of early marriage is not caused by the illiteracy of the Azerbaijani community, as often even school teachers and directors agree with this practice. They even attend parties celebrating child marriages. According to young people, other factors, such as feelings of hopelessness, poverty, and social norms and order established over the years, form this practice. It has also been assumed that the reasons for early marriage may also be in religion and culture. However, in both focus groups of young people, there was equally strong opinion that this practice had nothing to do with their religion. According to one of the focus group participants:

*"I was born in a faithful family, I am also a faithful and I am wearing tie. However I was never told that I should not study or get married at an early age. On the contrary, my religion preaches knowledge and learning. I think that this attitude towards religion, on the contrary, plays a bad role in resolving this issue". (Focus group young girl, 21 years old)*

Most of the young people participating in the surveyed pointed to the challenges existing in non-Georgian language schools and the gaps in the education system (low level of teacher qualifications, Georgian language learning challenges, and infrastructural needs) that their parents have to fill with their financial resources. In their opinion, this creates an unequal and unfair environment and makes their perspective and opportunities entirely dependent on the socio-economic status of the parent and / or family. However young people also say that changing of the harmful practice of early marriage is impossible without the involvement of educated young people. They say it is difficult to change mind of families without positive examples. Even an increase of number of young people with higher education may make families think that there is another perspective and solution for their children besides getting married at an early age. Some participants recalled the example of residents from their own village, where young people older than they continued their education, learned Georgian and could support their families, even financially. This also affected the lives of some of the focus

group participants, and their parents gave them the opportunity to continue their studies. Young people also appreciate the 1 + 4 program<sup>8</sup> and say that this program has decided the future of many of them.

*"I probably would not ever studied without the example of the other girls studying and working in our village. My parents decided that I could study and have my own income based on their example." (Focus group young girl, 19 years old)*

## Attitudes of the parents

Focus groups of parents do not assess the practice of marriage at an early age as completely negative and consider it as a custom left over from their ancestors. In their opinion, starting a family is a heavy burden at any age and the earlier a person enters this space, sooner he/she begins to realize responsibilities. All of them know that marriage at an early age is not allowed and even prohibited in Georgia. However, they also see that often, no one is punished for it. In addition, some focus group participants have a negative attitude of punitive mechanisms.

*"I do not think that the police and the state love my child more than I do and want my child to be happier, more than me. Therefore, no one can forbid me how I should behave in my family and with my children. When we are in trouble, who comes and who helps us? They are looking only for imprisonment". (Focus group parent, 48 years old)*

According to the respondents in the group of female parents, the practice of early marriage is a problem that is mainly faced by girls. The fact is attributed to the general oppression and invisibility of women in society, which is perceived today as the strength of the family institution. However, even in these circumstances, during meetings, especially female parents often expressed radical views against early marriage.

*"I have to die, in order to marry my daughter at an early age. I myself was a child bride. I was married at the age of 14, I had not any perception of life, family, nor did I know what to was ahead. Even now I suffer from health problems caused by early start of intimate life. That's why I am actively talking to all three of my children about these issues, despite their young age. I know from experience how important it is for a mother to take firm position." (Focus group parent, 33 years old)*

According to the respondents, their decisions to marry their children at an early age are always based on caring for their children and protecting their best interests.

*"I marry my daughter at the age of 16. What else could she do? We could not learn Georgian to her then. I could not afford her study in Baku. Nobody would take her to higher education institution, as she did not know Georgian. The best solution for her was to start a family. I think today she is happy, he is already the head of her own family. She has children, and I am also happy to have such great grandchildren". (Focus group parent, 59 years old)*

Often, parents also talk about safety and child care issues. According to focus group of parents, often even basic issues such as the lack of transport and outdoor lighting in villages are the result of the state's inadequate care for human safety.

<sup>8</sup> The program of the Ministry of Education, according to which young people from ethnic minorities take the national language test only in the national exams, and during the next year they study the Georgian language. After successfully passing the Georgian language exam, they are enrolled in a 4-year bachelor's program.

*"Okey, you tell me to give her education. I sent my daughter to study. How she should go and how should she come back? There is no transport in the village. Every day I have to take her back and forwards, I have no other business what do you think? If my daughter comes home from school in the evening and walks all the way, there is not even outdoor lighting to walk through the village, and not to be afraid of dogs. And at this moment someone put her in the car and took away. Then what should I do? Should I kill that one? I prefer my child to be with me and you do whatever you want". (Focus group parent, 42 years old)*

Participants say, despite the fact that today the situation has been changed the problems still exist. One of the parents says that due to financial issues, he is not able to educate all three children. Consequently, the choice should be made for only one child, the others should be employed and married and take care of themselves.

*"How can I educate everyone? Where do I get the money for this? I am also human being. You know what it the cost of one child's education a child in Tbilisi, rent, travel costs, food, beverage, etc." (Focus group parent, 41)*

One of the participants recalls the case when her neighbor from the village educated to the daughter, but today this girl has neither started a family nor is employed.

*"He is my neighbor in the village. His daughter has a lot of fiancés. That time he decided to educate his daughter. The kid went to university, graduated. But what do you want, today this girl is 24 years old and sitting at home, cannot start a family and does not work anywhere. What can this man do now? I do not want my children to go this way. We are guests in this country. So we need to know our place. It's better for my daughter to start a family earlier, than going back-forwards as if she is learning something and then be left that way". (Focus group parent, 43 years old)*

During the focus groups, both women and men talked about the norms, customs and the need to follow them in the society. According to one of the respondents, young people today want a different life, which is against their culture, way of life and religion. However, there were differing opinions on this issue.

*"I think early marriage is our custom, not our religion. But some people call it religion. I have read the Quran. The woman is respected there. Islam is a religion of fairness. It's our people's fault because we have no education and we do not know the laws". (Focus group parent, 49 years old)*

The focus group of women expressed the opinion that it is important to know and be aware to whom their daughter is going to marry. And when they see that they is a "suitable candidate" for their child, then they are ready to marry her, because they do not know who their child will meet in the future. At the same time, patriarchal and discriminatory views were strong in the focus groups of both women and men. Similar attitudes were especially expressed by people who also focused on their own socio-economic poverty.

*"A woman should be handed over to the "head", as soon as possible, I grew up her and marry her, than she can do what she want. She could not stay in such poverty with me forever. I was not lucky and maybe my child will be luckier". (Focus group parent, 42 years old)*



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found that government agencies and community members have fundamentally different views and explanations on the issue of early marriage. The meetings revealed that the mainstream narratives, which are often reproduced and promoted by local agencies, are not shared by community members. It should be noted that stereotypes and prejudices about ethnic minorities within agencies often prevent them from conducting in-depth and comprehensive work on the issue.

The main findings and issues identified during the study can be summarized as follows:

1. **The attitudes and theories of change of most state agencies on the issue of marriage at an early age are essentially excluded from the context and are often based on their prejudices.** The vast majority of people employed in government agencies are ethnic Georgians. During the meetings, it was revealed that most of them viewed themselves distances from non-dominant ethnic groups and linked early marriage to the religion, culture of minorities, their backwardness, and lack of education. While community members associate this practice with socio-economic challenges, hopelessness, customs, and patriarchy.
  - **Recommendation:** The state should start working on raising the awareness of public officials about the existence, culture and identity of non-dominant ethnic and religious groups and increasing their sensitivity.
  - **Recommendation:** The state should start thinking about promoting employment of ethnic minorities in state agencies, which, on the one hand, would increase the number of young people with higher education within the community, and on the other hand, would strengthen the knowledge and sensitivity of the agencies.
2. **The work of the state on early age and child marriage issues is not consistent, systematic and unified.** Meetings with both government agencies and community members show that state work is often fragmented, delayed, and inconsistent. It is noteworthy that most of the agencies state that they receive information either from the representatives of the Public Defender's Office or other agencies. There are frequent cases when different agencies talk about different statistics of early marriage in their municipality. Social workers do not have a unified work guide. Information about the referral document in schools and its use is often problematic.
  - **Recommendation:** Establish a unified system of registration of early marriage cases, based on which all agencies will have unified statistics on such cases.
  - **Recommendation:** Create a guide document for social workers working on early marriage issues, taking into account the local context.
  - **Recommendation:** Establish a community-based early marriage prevention course for community teachers, school directors and police officers (including raising awareness of a referral document).
  - **Recommendation:** Strengthen monitoring of police work to assist victims of early marriage.
  - **Recommendation:** The state should develop a parental awareness campaign on early marriage for community members.

3. **One of the most important in-depth causes of early marriage is socio-economic challenges, a sense of hopelessness, and patriarchy.** Focus groups and meetings reveal that both young people and their parents talk about feelings of hopelessness, poverty, and patriarchy as the main reasons for the marriage at an early age.
  - **Recommendation:** The state should allocate a special grant to fund the education of girls belonging to ethnic minorities living in rural areas.
4. **Impact of basic infrastructural challenges on both girls' access to (higher) education and the prevention of early marriage.** Parents said that in the absence of public transport and outdoor lighting, as well as the indifference of police officers, they would not let their children go anywhere because they did not want to endanger them.
  - **Recommendation:** In the process of implementing infrastructure projects, state and local governments should also consider these projects in the context of preventing early marriage and girls' access to education.
  - **Recommendation:** Strengthen communication between the local police and the population.
5. **Young people whose positive and successful examples have a significant impact on the process of changing harmful practices of an early marriage in the community.** Focus groups of young people and parents reveal that the cases of successful young people have a positive impact on the attitude of community members towards early marriage.
  - **Recommendation:** Government agencies should support the employment of young people (in schools, local governments, village trustees, etc.) so that they can become formal and informal community leaders.





