

Public Defender of Georgia

IMPACT OF COVID 19 PANDEMIC  
ON CONFLICT AFFECTED  
WOMEN AND GIRLS

Special Report



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## CONTENT

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Purpose of research	4
1.2 Scope and Limitations of the Research	4
<b>2. Gender Aspects of the Pandemic</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Theoretical Framework of the Research</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. The Legal Status of Conflict Affected Women and Girls: Assessment of Pre-Pandemic Situation</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Assessment of Gender Impact of Pandemic: Risk Analyses</b>	<b>12</b>
5.1 Political Risks	12
5.2 Economic Risks	12
5.3 Healthcare Risks	13
5.4 Risks Related to Awareness and Accessibility	13
5.5 Risks Related to Gender-Based Violence	15
<b>6. Findings of the Research</b>	<b>16</b>
6.1 Meaningful Participation in Peace and Security Risks Management, Prevention and Reparation Processes	16
6.2 Economic Participation of Women	17
6.3 Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence	18
Due to the pandemic, NGOs that had similar services found it impossible to work on correcting violent behavior with perpetrators, which in the long run negatively impacted the situation of women and girls affected by the conflict	20
6.3.1 Pandemic-related Domestic Violence and other Forms of Violence against Women	20
6.4 Awareness and Access to Public Services	20
6.5 Access to Health Services, Including Sexual and Reproductive Health Services	21
<b>7. Conclusion and recommendations</b>	<b>24</b>

## INTRODUCTION

2020 has been an important date for highlighting significance and analyzing women, peace and security issues, as 20 years have passed since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325<sup>1</sup>, which puts women at the forefront of global security and peace policy.

Mentioned resolution, its accompanying resolutions<sup>2</sup> and the National Action Plans based on them, highlight the importance of women activism and advocating for women's issues, in diplomatic and development strategies of different countries (including Georgia since 2011)<sup>3</sup>, require for gender analyses of crises, caused by conflict and call the states to plan and implement the programs, taking into consideration the interests of conflict affected women, to make possible women's systemic engagement in peace processes and negotiations, to revalue and rename violent conflicts and lead peace policy from prospective of women.

In 2020, the issue of security came to the world's attention, however, the centrality of this issue on the agenda was due not so much to the analysis of the results of Resolution 1325, but to the global pandemic caused by the new coronavirus. In the absence of specific antiviral treatment and vaccine, coronavirus has seriously shaken the economic tissue of countries and has become a major security challenge worldwide<sup>4</sup>.

Both the conflicts and the coronavirus pandemic have a negative impact on gender equality and call into question the achievements that have been made in eliminating the effects of inequality over the past decades. Due to existing gender inequality, social and economic effects of COVID 19 have more negative impact on and create special threat to conflict affected women and girls, who belong to vulnerable groups. It is noteworthy that delays in basic health care and humanitarian programs can have fatal consequences in areas where health-related systems were already overloaded, or largely non-existent<sup>5</sup>.

The present document aims at investigation of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on conflict affected women and girls, study of international experience, evaluation of local safety policy in this regard, identification of the needs of women and girls living in collective centers, near the dividing line and in the occupied territories; and at development of the recommendations to help the state with planning policy in response to pandemic and in the process of its implementation.

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolution N1325 (2000). Available online: <https://bit.ly/39EuSkZ> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>2</sup> Since 2000, the UN Security Council has adopted a total of 10 thematic resolutions on women, peace and security.

<sup>3</sup> On December 27, 2011, the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was approved and a coordination group was established.

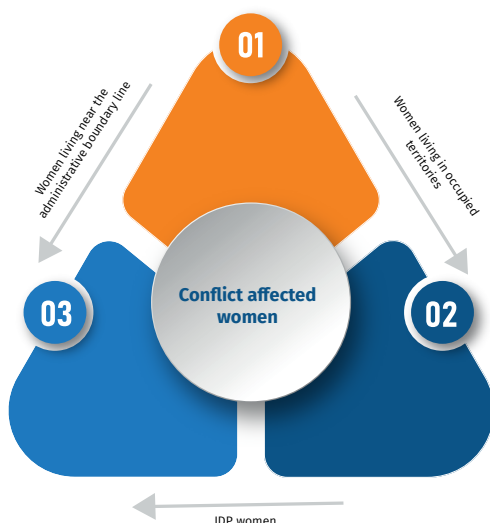
<sup>4</sup> Hoogensen Gjørsv, G. "Coronavirus, invisible threats and preparing for resilience", NATO Review, 2020

<sup>5</sup> Policy Document: The Impact of COVID 19 on Women, United Nations, April, 2020 Available online: <https://bit.ly/2JBuM2W> [last viewed May 15, 2021]



## Key findings

Findings of the research will be based on the interviews and focus groups<sup>6</sup>, carried out with conflict affected women and girls, interviews<sup>7</sup> and focus groups conducted with the representatives of international organizations, international missions and non-governmental organizations engaged in protection of women's rights and peacebuilding process, as well as on the in depth interviews<sup>8</sup> with the representatives of responsible public agencies. Within the frameworks of the research, in total were conducted 19 in depth interviews and 5 focus groups.<sup>9</sup>



Research has demonstrated that women and girls affected by conflict are a heterogeneous group. As a result of the analysis, it can be said that the impact of the coronavirus on their condition and, consequently, their needs, is different. These differences are significant, and in turn depend on various social and economic factors.

However, there is a conflict-related, war-related trauma that unites them all. Although women affected by the conflict are specifically targeted by the State Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the state's policy in the fight against coronavirus does not treat them as a separate vulnerable group. All of the women, engaged in the study

noted that during the security challenge such as the COVID 19 pandemic, the target of assistance from the state, international and non-governmental organizations were women and girls affected by the conflict who had an additional marker of vulnerability - such as disability or single motherhood.

The pain, trauma, and loss left to women by the conflict need state attention and recognition, as well as identification of needs and cross-cutting approaches, as security risks such as the possibility of renewed armed conflict or the global pandemic of COVID-19 are particularly acute for them.

Besides, the study demonstrated that despite of the differences, in all regions including in occupied territories, conflict affected women speak about stigma and psychological violence associated with coronavirus, including from family members and close relatives. Stigma forced women to hide or not reveal their infection status and not apply to testing and health facilities.

<sup>6</sup> Fiftyone (51) conflict affected women participated in the study through a focus group and in-depth interviews, of which two (2) were residents of the occupied territories, nine (9) internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in Jvari, Kaspi and Senaki collective centers; thirty (30) women and a girls living near the dividing line.

<sup>7</sup> Through a focus group and in-depth interviews, four (4) international organizations (UN Women, Heinrich Boell Foundation, Berghof Foundation, German Foundation for International Cooperation) participated in the study as well as (one) 1 international mission (EUMM in Georgia) and six (6) non-governmental organizations; representatives of the organization (Fund "Sukhumi", Association "Mercury", Association "Atinati", "Imedi" and "Rehabilitation and Development Center").

<sup>8</sup> Through a focus group and in-depth interviews, in the study participated five (5) government agencies (Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs, Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality and the Agency for State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking) and the representatives of six (6) municipalities (Oni, Tsalenjikha, Zugdidi, Gori, Kaspi and Kareli).

<sup>9</sup> Due to pandemic limitations, all interviews and focus groups were conducted using online platforms.

# 1. METHODOLOGY

## 1.1 Purpose of research

The aim of the study is to properly document and analyze the needs of women and girls affected by the conflict and of women rights activists working in the conflict context to facilitate the development of evidence-based recommendations and considering them both at the stage of the pandemic and addressing its consequences.

1. Collect evidences and, based on them, analyze the gender impact of the pandemic on conflict-affected population, peace processes, and women peacekeepers (including the impact of state policies to prevent the spread of the virus or crisis response);
2. Identify the challenges and problems faced by women and girls affected by the conflict in the course of pandemic;
3. Document the involvement of women in the crisis management process and demonstrate the ways in which women affected by the conflict have dealt with the challenges they face, analyze this knowledge and translate it into recommendations so that it can be taken into account in the policy-making process.

For the above mentioned purposes, the study will answer the questions regarding the effect of COVID 19 pandemic on conflict affected women and girls and women's rights activists, working in conflict and post conflict context; for example: how have women affected by the conflict managed to adapt to the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus; what challenges and barriers do women activists and peace activists face; how did they continue their activities? (including on the level of organizations), what kind of support do they need to continue/improve activates; at what extent women were engaged in development of COVID 19 response plan; are local women fully engaged in the development of crisis response, preventive measures, economic assistance packages or post-crisis reparations, and what are the main challenges and barriers for conflict affected women; how their legal and socio-economic status is impacted by the state anti-crisis policies and what will be their main recommendations in this respect.

## 1.2 Scope and Limitations of the Research

The present research aims at investigation of the impact of the gender aspects of the pandemic on women affected by the conflict, in particular on those living in the occupied territories and adjacent to the demarcation line, internally displaced persons and residents of collective centers.

As a result of the analyses of international experience and taking into consideration theoretical frameworks of the research, the following issues will be covered under the umbrella of gender equality and women, peace and security, with purpose of investigation of the effects of pandemic:

- Full involvement of women victims of conflict in peace and security risk management processes, including at the decision-making level;
- Economic participation of women affected by conflict, including increased unpaid labor;
- Violence against conflict affected women and domestic violence;
- Awareness of conflict affected women and girls and their access to public services;





Access to health services for women and girls affected by conflict, including sexual and reproductive health services.

Consequently, the study does not cover all aspects of gender equality and focuses on the challenges identified by international experience and desk research as the main challenges faced by conflict affected women in the course of pandemic. The anti-crisis policy pursued by the state since March 2020 to mitigate the social and economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic will be examined and assessed only in terms of the relevance of this policy and its impact on women and girls affected by the conflict.

Due to the limited term for implementation<sup>10</sup>, the study will not analyze in details the economic, social or health challenges facing conflict affected women and girls, the needs of the conflict-affected population emerged or exacerbated because of the pandemic, but will only collect information and identify key trends, which could indicate to the need for more detailed investigation by the responsible agencies, in policy-making process.

Besides, as one of the limitations of the research could be considered its qualitative nature, which is less representative compared to large-scale, quantitative research since it is impossible to generalize its results.

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<sup>10</sup> The second phase of the study was conducted in January and February 2021.

## 2. GENDER ASPECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

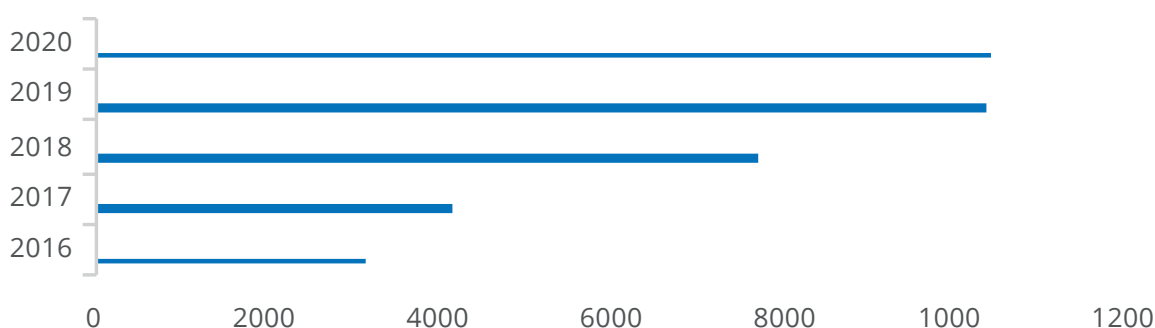
Pandemic, like other global health crises, is a gender-defined phenomenon. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the international community was focusing on the critical links between health crises and gender influences.

UN Security Council Resolution 2242<sup>11</sup> on Women, Peace and Security adopted in 2015, is the first to recognize health pandemics as a safety issue and calls on countries to ensure that the principles of prevention, protection and equal participation in the decision-making process for women are an essential part of every response plan<sup>12</sup>.

Today, women are at the forefront of the fight against the virus. They make up 70 percent of global health care workers and also, most of them are engaged in jobs in the care and services sector. The primary and irreplaceable nature of these works has shown us that coronavirus outcomes would inevitably be gender-specific. As soon as the pandemic started, all international organizations, including the UN, called on countries to take into account the gender impact of Coronavirus, and to prevent and manage crisis situations respectively<sup>13</sup>.

The impact of the pandemic on gender-based violence should be emphasized. A few months after the onset of the epidemic, it became clear that measures taken to prevent the spread of the disease, such as restricting movement, curfew, switching to online mode of operation, and so on, would contribute to the increase of incidence of gender-based violence<sup>14</sup>.

**Table N1: Domestic violence statistics (restraining orders) over a period of 5 years**



Although the preliminary data published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the statistics of domestic violence in the country increased by 6.92 percent compared to the same period last year<sup>15</sup> termination of

<sup>11</sup> UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security N4424 (S / RES / 2242), 2015, available online: <https://bit.ly/33DbReT> [last viewed May 15, 2021] <https://bit.ly/33DbReT>

<sup>12</sup> Policy Paper: The Impact of COVID 19 on Women, United Nations, April 2020

<sup>13</sup> COVID 19 and Women's Rights: Prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020 Available online: <https://bit.ly/2l7h8ny>, [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>14</sup> Europe prepares for 'perfect storm' of domestic violence amid Coronavirus restrictions, SWISSINFO, 2020 Available online: <https://bit.ly/36DQP1C> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>15</sup> MIA, "Registered Crime Statistics" (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 2020), available online: <https://bit.ly/3kw70ni> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]





the annual increase in the number of restraining orders issued<sup>16</sup> might be related to a reduced detection or referral rate in the face of a pandemic. The mentioned preliminary data shall be kind of a warning for the government, which is obliged to adapt the mechanism for prevention of gender based violence as well as respective protection and assistance tools to the restrictions provided due to pandemic.

The pandemic already caused the world economic crisis, which is supposed to be continued beyond that. In General, women were in less favorable economic conditions compared to men, even before pandemic. In particular, according to the UN Women study of 2020, before the crisis women earned in 24 percent less than men, dedicated less attention to paid work and more women were unemployed than men.<sup>17</sup> The restrictions caused by COVID 19, increase the burden of unpaid work for women and affects informal economy<sup>18</sup>, in which mostly women are employed<sup>19</sup>.

The negative impact of coronavirus on the health of women and girls, in addition to the risks posed by the virus, is related to the distribution of human, material resources and priorities in the health sector, which might make sexual and reproductive health services less accessible. The problem can be especially acute in Georgia, because, even before the pandemic, it was a challenge for the state to take progressive steps to achieve the sexual and reproductive health goals set out in the Sustainable Development Agenda..<sup>20</sup> Consequently, it is expected that due to the crisis in healthcare sector, depend by pandemic, as well as movement and economic barriers, the women's access to and awareness of specific, necessary sexual and reproductive services will become even more complicated.

Despite the distinct gender aspects of the pandemic that affect the quality of life of millions of people, worldwide planned and implemented policies on coronavirus pandemic prevention, management, and outcomes are largely gender-blind,<sup>21</sup> which is especially true for people in vulnerable groups, including women and girls affected by the conflict.

Most women and girls living in conflict and post-conflict areas have limited mobility, access to their own housing and basic services. Women affected by conflict are also at increased risk of contracting the virus, being subjected to domestic violence, and being left without basic health care services. Conflict affected women, representing IDPs, rural population or other vulnerable groups also suffer from a lack of access to reliable information and technology<sup>22</sup>.

Any change that will reduce the effort for rights and economic empowerment of women, might have sharply negative, long-term impact on gender equality, including women economic empowerment and right to education. Therefore, it is necessary to plan and implement a crisis response and reparation policy based on the analysis of the gender factor, gender-segregated statistics.

<sup>16</sup> MIA, "Statistics of Domestic Violence" (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 2021), available online: <https://bit.ly/37MgHsD> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]

<sup>17</sup> Rapid Gender Assessment of the Situation Caused by COVID-19 in Georgia, UN Women 2020, available online: <https://bit.ly/37wVzf9> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>18</sup> Why Coronavirus Recession Affects Women, Fast Company, 2020, Available Online: <https://bit.ly/2L5hjxk> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>19</sup> There is no difference Corona kills us or hunger Traders blocked the road in Rustavi, 2020, available online: [https://droa.ge/?page\\_id=956](https://droa.ge/?page_id=956) [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>20</sup> National Survey on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Issues, Public Defender of Georgia, 2019. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2JJZZkt> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>21</sup> COVID 19 Global Gender Response Measures, 2020. A joint online platform of the United Nations Development Program and the UN Women: <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>

<sup>22</sup> COVID-19 and Conflict: Ensuring meaningful participation of Women in Ceasefire Peace Talks. UN Women, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2Vt6ZEW> [Last viewed May 15, 2021].

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

It is still impossible to assess the full extent of the gender impact of the coronavirus. However, it is already recognized as one of the biggest security threats the world has experienced in recent times. Its social and economic impacts are enormous and, as the challenge, require complex, unified action on the part of the world community.

In order to be able to study the impact of the coronavirus on the legal status of women and girls affected by the conflict in the Georgian context, it is important to evaluate the institutional framework for women, peace and security, safety risks and their gender impacts for the perspectives of human rights and feminist theory.

The mentioned framework is based on ten resolutions of the UN Security Council and represents unique tool for the analyses of conflicts and safety risks as well as respective response. The institutional framework for women, peace and security takes into consideration that the conflict consequences and security challenges affect differently women and girls and recognizes special role of women in peacekeeping process. Besides, it takes into consideration that security and safety are stronger with equal engagement of women in the process for safety risks management, prevention and reparation<sup>23</sup>.

At an international level, safety is defined as protection of borders and integrity by the state<sup>24</sup>. It also addresses health, social, economic and environmental issues that threaten the lives and health of citizens. Most of the human rights and security issues raised by the coronavirus pandemic on the global agenda require future review and rethinking of existing security mechanisms and tools.

In particular, the analysis of the effects and consequences of coronavirus is likely to call into question individualistic, country-specific security policies, require a rethinking of the security concept, and give greater importance to the existence of instruments such as UN Resolution 1325 and subsequent documents. Whereas this mechanism, on the one hand, allows for agreement on common principles and, on the other hand, depends on the empowerment and involvement of women at the local level in terms of bringing their individual needs to the forefront in the face of security risks.

Feminist approaches to security issues view the individual as a starting point for social structure and attempt to analyze the unequal nature of the impact of physical and structural violence on the safety of individuals or groups of people, taking into account societal and cultural norms and gender stereotypes. Besides, strives for the concept of emancipatory security, tries to present social hierarchies and analyzes the structure of these hierarchies in the context of international order<sup>25</sup>.

Feminist theory addresses international threats to security, such as global pandemics or environmental issues, sexual and gender-based violence (including feticide), as well as poverty and inequality; since, without eliminating gender inequality, it will be impossible to resolve conflicts and plan and implement responses to security challenges.

<sup>23</sup> Georgia's 2018-2020 National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security, 2018

<sup>24</sup> Tickner, Ann, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*, New York, 2001. p38

<sup>25</sup> Same p. 62



## 4. THE LEGAL STATUS OF CONFLICT AFFECTED WOMEN AND GIRLS: ASSESSMENT OF PRE-PANDEMIC SITUATION

In Georgia, while discussing effect of coronavirus on conflict affected women and girls, it is essential to take into consideration that the country has two conflict regions. According to 2019 data, Georgia has 286 216 registered IDPs<sup>26</sup> and cannot implement effective control over occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Besides, not single social, economic and political challenges existed in the country, even before pandemic.

The active participation of women in decision-making on pandemic management is encouraged in Georgia;<sup>27</sup> however, the policy pursued by the state for preventing coronavirus, mitigating its effects or dealing with its consequences, until now, has never been specifically targeted to the women and girls affected by the conflict.

Involvement of conflict-affected women in formal, high-level negotiations<sup>28</sup> always was a challenge. Despite of problem advocacy, analysis and development of respective recommendations for decades, the stereotypical norms that exist in this area still prevent women from being members of peace negotiating delegations or otherwise being fully involved in peacebuilding processes; although the participation of women in such processes is essential to achieve gender-sensitive and sustainable outcomes<sup>29</sup>. Also, the participation of women in the security sector is critically low<sup>30</sup>.

Besides quantitative data, according to the report on the meeting on UN Women experts,<sup>31</sup> women's meaningful participation in peacekeeping processes shall include the following components:

1. Women shall be engaged in peace processes long enough to be able to consult, analyze and contribute to the peace format recommendations and consensus process;
2. Women should have prior knowledge of the issues being discussed at the negotiation table in order to be able to represent women's interests effectively;
3. Women and women's organizations should have opportunities to share information and experiences;

<sup>26</sup> Among which, women make up 53 percent. "Woman and Man", Geostat, 2020. Available online <https://bit.ly/3qkBMBo> [last viewed on February 15, 2021]

<sup>27</sup> Two (2) of the country's Vice Prime Ministers, Minister of Health and Head of Government Administration were women during the pandemic.

<sup>28</sup> After the August 2008 war, the format of the Geneva International Talks was established between Georgia and Russia. The decision to establish these discussions was made in accordance with the ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008. In February 2009, in the fourth round of the Geneva talks, an agreement was reached on the establishment of an Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) for both occupied Abkhazia and occupied Tskhinvali. The main purpose of this format is to discuss daily incidents on the ground and ensure prompt response.

<sup>29</sup> Women are still not represented in military attaché positions in diplomatic missions. Also, the representation of women in peace negotiations did not increase during the reporting period, ranging between 33 percent -20 percent in 2018-2020.

<sup>30</sup> In 2018-2020, the percentage of women in leadership positions in the Ministry of Internal Affairs was 6-7 percent, while in the civil office of the Ministry of Defense it increased from 23 percent to 33 percent. The percentage of women employed in leadership positions in military units is unknown.

<sup>31</sup> Meaningful participation of women in peace processes and implementation of the peace agreements, the report of the meeting of UN Women experts 2018, available online <https://bit.ly/3g7ojst> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

4. Women organizations should have sufficient resources for engagement so that, as soon as opportunities arise, they can engage in negotiations without practical or financial problems.<sup>32</sup>.

it should be highlighted that the contribution of women and girls living in conflict-affected and occupied territories, as well as women's organizations and groups, in informal peace processes and relationship-building activities is immeasurably crucial. Due to their nature, these activities, are not always documented, accounted and valued properly. Often, similar meetings initiated by women's organizations and groups are held without publicity, in neutral areas. Consequently, women leading informal peace processes with Abkhaz and Ossetian women face barriers to engaging in formal, patriarchal peace processes, and their activities are not "translated" into the format of the Geneva peace talks<sup>33</sup>.

In general, the peacebuilding process is a political process, and the low participation of women echoes the challenges of equal political participation of women in the country. Consequently, negotiation formats such as the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) and the Geneva International Talks are staffed by men from the main agency<sup>34</sup>.

Due to the pandemic, the steps taken by the state to increase the human security of IDPs and conflict affected women and girls are of particular importance; in particular, development of normative documents for gender sensitive early warning system, which has not been implemented so far, including in the context of preventing and dealing with COVID-19-related security risks.

However, access to public services for women affected by the conflict is generally a challenge. According to the 2019 report of the Public Defender of Georgia, access to health services was a special problem, since in outpatient facilities the access is often limited to medical equipment, medicines and, in many cases, even to doctor's consultation<sup>35</sup>. There is no service that provides psychological support to IDPs and conflict-affected women and girls and, if necessary, ensures necessary medication, which has negative impact on the health of IDPs and conflict-affected women and girls.

Illegal arrests are one of the most serious problems when moving along the occupation line. According to official data, in 2020, 64 people (including 6 women and 1 minor) were detained in direction of occupied Tskhinvali region and 13 - occupied Abkhazia (including 1 woman and 2 minors).

Awareness of sexual and reproductive health services and regulatory norms is also a problem, in particular, there was a widespread misconception in conflict-affected regions that abortion was illegal in Georgia at any term; which does not correspond to reality and indicates the critically low awareness of the population regarding public services and regulatory legislation, which is of particular importance in the process of pandemic prevention and management.

<sup>32</sup> Standards, Barriers, and Elimination of Gaps: Increasing the Effective Participation and Contribution of Women in Peace Processes in Georgia, UN Women, 2020. p. 14-15 available online: <https://bit.ly/39FgGbG> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

<sup>33</sup> Same

<sup>34</sup> An analysis of the meetings held within the framework of the Geneva International Negotiations and Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism allows us to say that the formal representation of women in these meetings is critically low. Information about the meetings is available online: <https://bit.ly/3de9kMz> [last viewed March 15, 2021].

<sup>35</sup> Interim Report on the Implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018-2020): Findings and Recommendations, Office of the Public Defender, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2l6OQtI> [last viewed May 15, 2021].





While, the pandemic increases the risk of violence against women and domestic violence<sup>36</sup>, it is especially alarming that even before the pandemic, the level of awareness of conflict affected women and girls regarding public services related to violence against women and domestic violence was low; the lack of the concept of rehabilitation of victims of sexual violence during the conflict, is also a problem.

Difficult economic situation for women affected by the conflict was a challenge even before the pandemic. Compared to other regions (excluding the capital), the number of recipients of social packages is much higher in conflict-affected regions<sup>37</sup>, and the state's measures to empower women economically are still scarce and insufficient to ensure equal economic inclusion of women affected by the conflict<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> COVID-19 and Violence Against Women and Girls: Shadow Pandemic. UN Women, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3g4TEw7> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

<sup>37</sup> Social Security, Geostat, 2019. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2JNR8Oo> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>38</sup> Interim Report on the Implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018-2020): Findings and Recommendations, Office of the Public Defender, 2020. P. 17

## 5. ASSESSMENT OF GENDER IMPACT OF PANDEMIC: RISK ANALYSES

### 5.1 Political Risks

The social and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus also affects the domestic and foreign policy processes of the countries. Despite the fact that the Secretary of the UN Security Council, António Guterres, has repeatedly called on countries to cease fire since the outbreak of the pandemic, the escalation of conflicts in the South Caucasus is still a problem<sup>39</sup>. However, it is problematic for governments to adhere to their constitutional obligations, such as holding elections, because they run counter to health recommendations.

The global situation in terms of intensifying terrorist attacks is also complicated. In Libya, for example, a hospital where the patients with coronavirus were treated, was bombed in April, and in May the maternity hospital was attacked in Afghanistan. Similar risks are visible in Georgia. The increase in the number of infected people and the sharp worsening of the social situation were followed by several attacks on banks and microfinance institutions, hospitals, which even more aggravated the crisis developed in the country after the elections.

Consequently, it is important for political actors to manage the situation in a way that makes possible to protect the country's integration and security within the constitutional framework.

### 5.2 Economic Risks

The economic impact of COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting women and men. As noted in the UN Policy Study Document, the pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in social and economic systems. In particular, according to a UN Women survey, a third of women and men employed before the pandemic say they have lost their jobs. It is true that, as a result of the same study, fewer women than men report that their income from productive activity has decreased, although 39 percent of them still report a decrease in this type of income.<sup>40</sup>; however, the spread of the coronavirus has disproportionately burdened women with unpaid care work, reducing women's economic activity and creating temporary poverty for women and girls, posing a threat to women's education, employment and career advancement in the long run.

Studies have demonstrated that the faster countries plan gender-sensitive economic policies in response to the coronavirus crisis, even in pandemic conditions, the higher positive outcomes will be not only for gender equality but also for the country's economic development. In contrast, if countries do nothing, there are risks that both gender equality and equal economic inclusion, as well as the incomes of employed and self-employed women, will deteriorate. However, it is noteworthy that the social costs of gender equality are 6 times lower than the benefits that the country will see as a result of equal economic growth<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, UN Security Council, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2VyN2N4> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>40</sup> Rapid Gender Assessment of the Situation Caused by COVID-19 in Georgia, UN Women, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/39FrSyn> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>41</sup> COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Resisting Negative Economic Impacts, McKinsey & Company, 2020. Available online: <https://mck.co/37AAn1u> [last viewed May 15, 2021]





According to current statistics, the mortality rate caused by coronavirus is higher among men, globally<sup>42</sup>. This, after the crisis, might increase the number of single women / mothers and older women left alone, which, in its turn, will have significant socio-economic consequences. Consideration of other possible scenarios is needed to mitigate the long-term consequences of the crisis and respond to its effects on the vulnerable population.

### 5.3 Healthcare Risks

COVID 19 pandemic will deepen the barriers facing conflict affected women and girls in the regard to access to healthcare services, especially the ones related to primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive health and respective products. Access to healthcare facilities, dispensaries, and medical personnel has been a problem even before the pandemic near the administrative dividing line and in IDP collective centers, due to lack of funding, equipment, and experienced human resources.

Increased demand for health services during a pandemic will exacerbate the crisis, among other reasons due to restriction of movement to prevent pandemic, safety risks, and gender-based violence (for example: domestic violence) or inequality barriers that affect women and girls. However, we must bear in mind that, globally, 50 percent of maternal mortality comes from conflict zones<sup>43</sup>. The COVID 19 pandemic as a health challenge also means that the medical and material resources necessary for women, might be diverted from basic medical services to fighting the pandemic.

The crisis caused by the spread of the Ebola virus has shown that the under-prioritization of services against gender-based violence and the reduction of funding for basic services and mechanisms in this area had sharply negative effect on the mental and physical health of victims of violence and survivors; and in Sierra Leone, the closure of gynecological care facilities has increased maternal mortality<sup>44</sup>. The spread of the coronavirus may also increase rates of sexual exploitation and violence. For example, in Sierra Leone, during the Ebola epidemic, cases of sexual violence and exploitation by health workers responsible for vaccinating women and girls got increased, while the Public Defender of Georgia found sexual harassment of a quarantined woman by a doctor<sup>45</sup>. Which means that the state should take additional preventive measures to reduce sexual harassment, violence and exploitation in the process of provision of health services.

### 5.4 Risks Related to Awareness and Accessibility

Limited access to electronic devices, the Internet, or lack of skills to use them may make it difficult for women and girls in conflict and post-conflict regions to access reliable and necessary information, electronic platforms (e.g., 112 application) and education services.

<sup>42</sup> Coronavirus kills more men than women, Washington Post, 2020. Available online: <https://wapo.st/33ARKOA> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

<sup>43</sup> The Face Hidden by Conflict: Maternal Mortality, World Economic Forum, 2018. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2N6WC93> [last viewed on February 15, 2021]

<sup>44</sup> COVID-19 response policy and its relationship to women, peace and security. Social Development Direct, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/37tUbUp> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>45</sup> The Public Defender of Georgia has established the fact of sexual harassment of a woman in quarantine by a doctor, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3mDKARh> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

Due to the collapse of health services because of the coronavirus pandemic, women often have to take care for the health of family members and relatives infected with the virus, which is doubly difficult in the absence of access to a reliable source of health information. This increases the vulnerability of women and reduces the effectiveness of the assistance, provided by them. Besides, lack of access to reliable information causes creation of myths and legends about the virus, often might be related to the forms of virus and its transmission, treatment methods and might not be in compliance with scientifically proved information, distributed by the official health care agencies.

Often, basic healthcare services for women (including public services, information, medication, counselling) function electronically during the pandemic; while lack of access to electronic devices and internet as well as of skills to use them, might limit the women's access to medical services and medications. Lack of freedom of use of electronic devices and the Internet is also associated with the risks of detecting and reporting domestic violence and violence against women.

There is less access to clean water and sanitation in conflict regions. However, often women and girls are responsible for water collection and family hygiene. In the context where women are already anticipating an increased threat of violence, their failure or non-fulfillment of mentioned responsibility might increase the risks of violence against them and call into question the prevention of the spread of the virus.

A special challenge was movement at the so-called checkpoints, which significantly reduced the access of the conflict-affected population to public services during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Formal regimen for movement at so called check points, established by the governments of both sides, as well as different barriers such as unpredictable locking of so called checkpoints problems with de facto documentation required for travel, mandatory quarantine, and so on, restrict freedom of movement of women and girls living in occupied regions and create unjustified obstacles to their access to subsistence services<sup>46</sup>.

By the end of November 2020 (i.e. after the March 14 closure), the de facto government of Abkhazia, after an 8-month closure, opened so-called Enguri checkpoint only to retirees, though with some restrictions. In particular, three times a week, the retirees can only cross to the end of the Enguri Bridge, where a pension bank car is waiting for them<sup>47</sup>. As for the occupied Tskhinvali, under the pretext of the COVID-19 epidemic, the de facto administration closed all five checkpoints connecting with the rest of Georgia, leaving the population of the occupied region facing a severe humanitarian crisis.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> A 63-year-old woman died in the quarantine area of Analia, 2021. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3f3hfyj> [last viewed on March 15, 2021]

<sup>47</sup> After 8 months of closure, the Enguri Bridge was reopened for retirees, information is available at: <https://bit.ly/3m7LcgV> [last viewed on March 15, 2021]

<sup>48</sup> Tskhinvali continues to Issue Permits for Crossing Odzisi and Karzman Checkpoints, 2021. Available online: <https://bit.ly/396vqjL> [last viewed on March 15, 2021]



## 5.5 Risks Related to Gender-Based Violence

Coronavirus response measures, as well as the state-imposed restrictions for pandemic prevention, increase the risk of already high gender-based violence in conflict and post-conflict areas<sup>49</sup>.

Healthcare crises typically lead to an increase in cases of violence. In particular, Cholera response in Syria and Yemen has led to an increase in cases of gender-based violence, including forced and early marriages<sup>50</sup>. Unfortunately, it is already possible to talk about similar trends in Covid-19. UN and Council of Europe Secretaries General speak of increased risk of violence due to Coronavirus pandemic and quarantine measures.<sup>51 52</sup>

Coronavirus-induced impacts, along with conflict-related stress and trauma, increase the risk of intimate partner violence while the access to protection and assistance mechanisms is reduced due to the movement restriction, threat of virus transmission, or other barriers.

Incorrect registration of coronavirus cases and low referral of women at the testing stage remains a global challenge in conflict-affected regions,<sup>53</sup> which is related to the barriers to access to testing.

Armed conflict also increases the risk of sexual and physical violence against women. Given that the state often takes strict measures to control the population under the pretext of coronavirus prevention, this may lead to increased risk of sexual assault by persons serving in armed or peacekeeping missions<sup>54</sup>. International practice shows that women and girls affected by the conflict, in regions where the country has little control over the peacekeeping and security forces, fear the quarantine measures introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19.<sup>55</sup>

Analyzing the current situation, it is clear that in Georgia, as in other conflict-affected countries, it is important to understand the specific impact that COVID 19 on women and girls living in conflict or post-conflict areas. As it is clear that gender impact of COVID 19 will be more reflected on women and girls affected by the conflict, it is important to involve them in both short-term, rapid response mechanisms and long-term reparation planning.

<sup>49</sup> COVID-19 and Violence Against Women and Girls: A Shadow Pandemic. UN Women, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3g4TEw7> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

<sup>50</sup> COVID-19' response policy and its relationship to women, peace and security. Social Development Direct, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/37tUbUp> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>51</sup> Message of the Secretary-General on Coronavirus and Gender-Based Violence, 2020. Available online: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/251640> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>52</sup> COVID-19 Crisis: The Secretary General of the Council of Europe is concerned about the increased risks of violence, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2Jp8Wjq> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>53</sup> COVID-19 testing and the number of cases may be higher in conflict-affected regions.

<sup>54</sup> COVID-19 response policy and its relationship to women, peace and security. Social Development Direct, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/37tUbUp> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>55</sup> Same

## 6. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

### 6.1 Meaningful Participation in Peace and Security Risks Management, Prevention and Reparation Processes

*This chapter largely deals only with the occupied Abkhazia region. Unfortunately, in conditions of active borderization, in occupied Tskhinvali, the peace process is almost non-existent and so far, the state has not taken any steps in this regard.*

The new Coronavirus has significant impact on the work of government agencies and on the agenda of international organizations and foundations, working in Georgia to resolve conflicts and restore trust, participating in peace processes, and in development of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. The pandemic has complicated the implementation of peace restoration processes by the state and international organizations. It became impossible to hold bilateral meetings outside Georgia. Due to security risks, only the ongoing peace process was continued in online format, while new processes were not initiated.

From the beginning of the pandemic to the end of the second wave, the peace process went through several transitional periods. Despite the stagnation caused by the first wave of COVID-19, this period did not last long and the actors were able to adapt quickly to the new reality.<sup>56</sup> State and international organizations note that opportunities have been created in the wake of the barriers<sup>57</sup>. In particular, after the start of the pandemic, Georgian and Abkhazian healthcare professionals worked together to manage the epidemic situation. The online format enabled organizations to expand discussions and involve more people. However, given that peace and confidence-building processes largely depend on the relationship of people in the physical space, online dating has failed to replace the physical process. Due to the impossibility to insure security risks, some organizations refused to continue the process during the pandemic.

Involvement of non-governmental organizations in confidence-building and peace-building processes is limited. Moreover, several organizations operating in conflict-affected regions are at risk of suspending their work on women, peace and security issues due to a lack of adequate funding to cover operation costs. According to them, during the pandemic the grants of the donor organizations covered only the costs for providing the service and were not aimed at saving the organization itself.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which had an impact on the conflicts in Georgia, was also a significant political challenge in the region. NGOs operating in occupied Abkhazia involved in the confidence-building process see the example of Karabakh as a threat that the return of IDPs could be a pretext for resuming the conflict. Unfortunately, there was almost no talk in Georgian society about the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the resumption of the protracted conflict in the South Caucasus.

<sup>56</sup> UN Women has taken care for the involvement of IDPs and conflict-affected women in peace processes by increasing access to the Internet, which has facilitated their involvement and, at the same time, improved access to services in general.

<sup>57</sup> The state held two multilateral meetings in 2020 and up to 10 bilateral meetings involving women affected by the conflict, focusing on, among other things, the effects of the coronavirus and its response policy.





The pandemic also had impact on the resurgence of conflicts in the region. Women, especially Armenian and Azerbaijani, spoke openly about the dangers of armed conflict on various platforms, within the frameworks of the early warning mechanism. However, their opinion was not properly considered. As a result, it can be said that the pandemic overshadowed the political risks in the region. Existing threats are perceived as “accompanying” security risks, which de-prioritize the women, peace and security agenda.

Coordinated work of several ministries responsible for the needs of women affected by the conflict has been mentioned by NGOs as one of the main challenges in rebuilding trust and building peace. As a result, the full involvement of IDP women in peace processes has been removed from the political agenda,<sup>58</sup> as a result meaningful participation of IDP women in peace processes has been removed from the political agenda.

It should be mentioned that IDP women and those living in occupied territories (mostly in occupied Gali district) have feeling that they are engaged in bilateral dialogue, since they have social circle on both sides of dividing line, with whom they have constant contact and have a sense of belonging to the group. Unfortunately, women living in villages near the dividing line in the Georgian-controlled territory, do not have the feeling that they are part of the peace process and bilateral dialogue.

## 6.2 Economic Participation of Women

The pandemic and the accompanying restrictions have negative impact on the economic situation of conflict affected women in Georgia. People lost their jobs, and those who maintained employment during the pandemic found themselves under the greatest social stigma and psychological pressure. These women have become an additional threat category and subject of domestic violence due to the fulfillment of their professional responsibilities.<sup>59</sup>

Despite of this trend, the needs of women living in occupied territories and in villages near so called dividing line are quite different.

According to studies conducted on the IDP population living in Georgia, which have gender dimension, it can be said that IDP women are better able to adapt to new circumstances, develop new ways to save families.<sup>60</sup> However, their economic situation deteriorated as a result of the coronavirus.<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting, that basically IDP women, living in Tbilisi and around it, mentioned sharp decrease of the family income, which was related to the loss of job by one or more members. While in western Georgia, the economic situation of IDP women living in collective centers has not deteriorated significantly, as it was extremely difficult even before the pandemic. Nevertheless, large proportion of IDP women living in collective centers talk about negative effects of the pandemic and, at the same time, point out that they are socially vulnerable and state subsidies were their only source of income both before and during the pandemic.

<sup>58</sup> In particular, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons 2019-2020 does not provide for the involvement of IDP women in peace processes. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3bBgmdh> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]

<sup>59</sup> The gender dimension of the COVID 19 -Pandemic and its impact on human security. Results of the Rapid Survey of the Fund Sukhumi in the Target Regions, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3koYhTy> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]

<sup>60</sup> Nargiza Arjevanidze, “Feminist Perspectives on War and Internally Displaced Persons”, Heinrich Boell Foundation Tbilisi Office, 2020. pp.17-65

<sup>61</sup> COVID-19 and the Affected Raspberry Orchard Business of IDP Woman, Netgazeti, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3dJsNGu> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]

The pandemic had a negative impact on the economic situation of women living in occupied Abkhazia, as the area of economic activity was limited, construction, trade and tourism were halted.<sup>62</sup> The pandemic had particularly negative impact on the people living in the occupied Gali district who:

- (a) were involved in informal economic activities in the territory controlled by Georgia or were somehow connected with the crossing of so-called administrative border, since their activities were completely stopped and they failed to get involved in the anti-crisis plan developed by the Georgian government.
- (b) depended on Georgian pensions and IDP benefits and, as a result, were left without a source of livelihood.

The alarming situation, in the occupied Akhagori district, at the so-called border became even more tensed since the end of August 2019 after the occupation regime demanded from the Georgian authorities to take over the police checkpoint opened near the village of Chorchana in Khashuri Municipality. Later, on September 4, 2019, the de facto government completely locked the so-called checkpoints. Accordingly, the local population of occupied Akhagori became completely isolated after September 4, 2019. The closure of the so-called checkpoint, which was used by up to 400 people daily, has created a dire humanitarian situation for women and girls living in Akhagori.

The economic situation of women in the villages adjacent to the dividing line has deteriorated. As a result of the research, it can be said that they were mainly involved in agriculture, small business and services. On the one hand, these areas were most affected by the pandemic and many women lost their jobs, and on the other hand, women were unable to move from villages near the dividing line to work due to restrictions on municipal transport and increased transportation costs. Women living in villages near the demarcation line also noted the negative impact of increased unpaid labor on economic activity.

The legal status of the elderly living in the villages adjacent to the dividing line (on both sides of the dividing line) has been particularly complicated. Because of the limitations caused by the coronavirus, they were often left without a source of livelihood and necessary care. The temporary government commission for responding to the needs of the affected population in the villages adjacent to the demarcation line, provided food and hygiene kits to vulnerable groups. However, the fires in the occupied Gali district at the end of 2020 also had a negative impact on the economic situation of the population.<sup>63</sup>

### 6.3 Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence

Identifying, reporting, and escaping violence against women and domestic violence was a challenge even before the pandemic, in conflict-affected regions and villages near the demarcation line.<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, this was due to the low level of public awareness of the existing protection and assistance mechanisms, and on the other hand, the difficult socio-economic situation of women affected by the conflict.

<sup>62</sup> Coronavirus: Impacts on Trade and Tourism in Abkhazia. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3dL5uvW> [last viewed on March 15, 2021]

<sup>63</sup> Expectations or Hopes of the Fire-Affected Population in the Gali District: Needs and Response Strategies”, Sukhumi Foundation, 2021. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3cezJKG> [last viewed on March 15, 2021]

<sup>64</sup> Study on Violence against Women in the Zugdidi and Gali Conflict Affected Population, Georgian Relief Committee / GEOCOR, 2018





Measures taken by the state to respond to the increased risks of violence against women and domestic violence during the pandemic were not specifically tailored to the needs of women and girls affected by the conflict. As a result, as expected, the pandemic, on the one hand, exacerbated the domestic violence situation and, on the other hand, made it difficult to escape violence. Restrictions on pandemics have led to the isolation of the perpetrator and the victim in one space.

Analysis of focus groups and in-depth interviews with the representatives of responsible government agencies, women affected by the conflict, and NGOs working on the issue in the occupied Abkhazia and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti regions, suggests that during the first wave of the pandemic, referrals to services decreased as in government agencies<sup>65</sup>, so in service-providing NGOs, which was translated into increased referrals as soon as the restrictions were lifted.<sup>66</sup> However, even the increased referral does not fully reflect the scale of the violence. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not separately record the messages of the conflict-affected population, including from the villages adjacent to the demarcation line, which complicates the analysis of the challenges in this direction.

As for the people affected by the conflict in the occupied Tskhinvali region, they note an increase in domestic violence in the region due to the difficult psychological and socio-economic situation in the region; however, this was not reflected in the increased appeal, as the current militia is not sensitive to the problem of violence against women, and international and local non-governmental organizations do not work on the ground, while their work relatively alleviates the situation in occupied Abkhazia.

Even in the case of a referral, there are still challenges:

- (a) The economic empowerment of victims of violence, which was a problem even before the pandemic<sup>67</sup>, however, the pandemic has exacerbated the situation in this regard;
- (b) Escaping violence against women and domestic violence in occupied Abkhazia; due to closure of the only checkpoint, women living in occupied Gali district cannot use the protection and support services available in Zugdidi, while in Abkhazia there are no shelters for the victims of violence (just crisis centers and NGOs helplines are available), which complicates escaping domestic violence.
- (c) Psychological rehabilitation of victims of violence; NGOs point to the demand for intersectional and needs-based long term psychological services tailored to the needs of women and girls affected by the conflict, as the coronavirus has had a particularly negative impact on the mental health of this group.

<sup>65</sup> In 2020, the number of referrals to the domestic violence victims' counseling hotline increased to 116006 (1775 calls in 2020, compared to 1468 calls in 2019). Letter of the LEPL State Care and Victims Assistance Agency of March 31, 2021 № 07/2580; 2019 statistics available online <https://bit.ly/3fyLnSz> [last viewed March 31, 2021].

<sup>66</sup> The statistics of domestic violence published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (compared to 2019) has increased by 6.92 percent and as a result of in-depth interviews, it can be said that the number of non-governmental organizations providing protection and assistance to victims of violence has increased in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Abkhazia and Zemo Svaneti.

<sup>67</sup> Monitoring Report on Domestic Violence and Trafficking Victims Service Institutions, Public Defender of Georgia, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/2Mt5y8C> [last viewed on February 21, 2021]

Due to the pandemic, NGOs that had similar services found it impossible to work on correcting violent behavior with perpetrators, which in the long run negatively impacted the situation of women and girls affected by the conflict.

### **6.3.1 Pandemic-related Domestic Violence and other Forms of Violence against Women**

The increased risks of violence against women and domestic violence during the pandemic were also reflected in the emergence of specific forms of psychological violence, which is directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and related constraints. In particular:

The women affected by the conflict spoke of psychological violence by family members, which manifested itself in limited access to a doctor and testing services because, in the event of probable confirmation, on the one hand the family would become the victim of coronavirus related stigma and on the other hand the other members of family, engaged in informal economy, depending on daily work would lose income, due to mandatory requirements. Due to that, male family members, as decision makers, prohibited women and girls from accessing health care and testing, even if any family member had a proven communication with the infected person and / or had obvious coronavirus symptoms.

However, focus groups and in-depth interviews revealed that if an employed woman became the primary source of the virus for other family members, she was subjected to psychological pressure on the basis of gender. Family members reminded her that a woman's place is at home, and that working and being in public is incompatible with her role ("If you had not gone out and worked, you would not have brought COVID into the house").

## **6.4 Awareness and Access to Public Services**

Conflict affected population is not properly informed regarding coronavirus, means for its prevention and coping measures, which contributes to the spread of myths about the virus, ways of its spread and methods of self-treatment.

Awareness of IDP women and women living in the occupied territories is a particular challenge. The information is relatively available to young people since they have access to the internet. While, middle-aged people do not have information about the virus, its spread or the means for dealing with it. As for the restrictions related to the pandemic, people mainly from one another get the information about them. In Gali, mainly the school and the medical center provide information about the restrictions to the people, and when the school and the medical center are closed, a certain information vacuum is created.

Internet access is a problem both in the occupied territories and in the villages adjacent to the demarcation line, which is due to poor internet quality and financial inaccessibility. This also complicates access to education.

Access to food and medications was a problem in the villages adjacent to the dividing line and in the occupied regions. The situation is especially problematic in the occupied Akhgori, where the current humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic<sup>68</sup> and in Gali, where basic foodstuffs, clothing

<sup>68</sup> In occupied Akhgori, despite the humanitarian crisis, the de facto government even removed medicines with Georgian inscriptions from the pharmacy network.



and medicines were provided from the Georgian-controlled area, however, after the so-called checkpoints were closed, a shortage of basic products became a problem as well as higher price for existing ones, due to increased transportation costs. This the mostly affected elderly, vulnerable and poor people.

Access to clean, drinking water is also a problem in most parts of the IDP settlement and in most villages in the occupied Gali district. Since mainly women are responsible for cleaning and provision of family with food and drinking water, they have to carry water from springs. This is also associated with an increased risk of transmitting the virus, as women have to stand in line for water, where appropriate recommendations are often not followed (distance, masks and so on).

Mobility was mentioned as the biggest barrier for accessibility.<sup>69</sup> The mentioned has especially negative impact on women and girls living in occupied territories and near dividing line, due to closure of so called check points and restriction of municipal transport, since in these villages proper infrastructure mostly is not available and people have to travel to district centers to get essential services. As a result of mentioned restriction, students who studied in the territory controlled by Georgia, remained beyond the education process, while the students who were taken to the territory controlled by Georgia to continue education, as a result of mutual engagement in 2020, faced the problem of continuing their education and housing, due to limited mobility and economic hardship.<sup>70</sup>

## 6.5 Access to Health Services, Including Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

Limited access to health services is a major problem for conflict affected women affected, during the pandemic. Analyzing the interviews conducted in the study, it could be said that, due to the almost non-existent physical infrastructure and heavy mental heritage, women affected by the conflict find it more difficult to deal with events such as pandemics. Women who were ill of the new coronavirus, or have lost loved ones because of that, say these events have renewed the fears and insecurities they already had as a result of the conflict.

Access to health services, basic medications and contraception was mostly a problem for women affected by the conflict, due to the lack of on-site services on the one hand and the lack of financial resources to receive services in regional centers on the other.


As soon as the pandemic started, the Georgian state applied to the World Health Organization and other international organizations to help the people living in the occupied territories. The official position was that Georgia would not close the border or obstruct traffic<sup>71</sup>. By 2020, a total of 892 patients had been transferred from both occupied regions. Out of them, 256 COVID infected patients were from occupied Abkhazia and 24 - from the occupied Tskhinvali region.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> One aspect of mobility restriction is the closure of crossing points. Only Engurhesi (power plant) employees could cross the Enguri Bridge during the pandemic. Crossing other points was impossible due to their difficult access. The crossing point on the Enguri Bridge was closed as soon as the first COVID infected patient was detected in Georgia and opened first on October 16 only for retirees and then on February 11 (with a 5-day quarantine). As for the closure of the Perevi crossing, it was not dependent on a pandemic and was linked to political reasons. As a result, it is unlikely to open even if pandemic-related restrictions are eased.

<sup>70</sup> Gali students can no longer pay the rent for an apartment in Tbilisi, Netgazeti, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3aT559d> [last viewed on February 21, 2021].

<sup>71</sup> Ana Dumbadze, "The President of Georgia thanks the WHO for helping the Abkhaz people" Georgia Today, 2020

<sup>72</sup> Letter # 78-1-2-202101291750 dated January 29, 2021 of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia on Reconciliation and Civic Equality.



Although Georgia, including with the help of international organizations, was able to provide assistance to the Abkhaz people during the pandemic, there was no such opportunity in occupied Tskhinvali. With severe humanitarian conditions and artificial isolation, the population living in the occupied regions was in particular danger, during the pandemic. From the very first days of the spread of the coronavirus, Georgian authorities have expressed their full readiness to help the people living in the occupied territories.

Despite the readiness of the Georgian authorities, the position of the de facto authorities on receiving this assistance was different. The de facto government of occupied Abkhazia immediately expressed its interest in receiving assistance from Georgia through international organizations. While the occupied Tskhinvali regime categorically refuses to receive assistance from the Georgian-controlled territory.

It is noteworthy that the treatment of coronavirus-infected patients relocated from the occupied territories has not been a challenge, even in times of crisis. Nevertheless, the villages adjacent to the so-called administrative dividing line were directly affected by the health crisis, in particular, women living there did not have access to a properly equipped outpatient clinic, doctor consultations and laboratory services. In confirmed cases of coronavirus, ambulance crews did not come to patients (due to the risk of the disease transmission) and transportation of the patients in difficult condition was a problem, due to mobility restrictions and limited beds in hospitals.

The mentioned is partially caused by the fact that the state does not have any special approach to provision of services to the population of the villages adjustment to dividing line. People in this territory receive the services like others in other parts of Georgia, which is obvious negligence of the needs of conflict affected people.

As for other health services, on the territory of occupied Tskhinvali and Abkhazia vaccination of children was uninterrupted even in the course of pandemic. In occupied Abkhazia, access to reproductive health services was a major problem. In particular, the patients at risk of difficult pregnancy and complicated delivery had problems in movement to the territory controlled by Georgian authorities, as a result of which in case of complicated delivery the infants having special needs were taken to the territory controlled by Georgia, while mothers were left in occupied Abkhazia. The mentioned had extremely negative impact on physical and mental health of both mother and child.

Receiving service of induced abortion was also a problem in occupied Abkhazia. Before the pandemic, mentioned service could be received in the territory controlled by the Government of Georgia; and after the closure of the only so called check point, women have to terminate pregnancy using homemade means, which has negative impact on their health (“only in case of bleeding the abortion is done”). Medical abortion is also unavailable and the only possibility to get the medication that provokes abortion, is to have necessary personal relationships.





## 7. CONCLUSION<sup>73</sup>

In response to the coronavirus crisis, the countries globally have developed 2,517 response policies since the outbreak of the pandemic between 1 December 2020, of which 992 were assessed as gender sensitive, with the largest proportion (70 percent) relating to increased risks of gender-based violence.<sup>74</sup>

As for the policy planned by Georgia in response to the coronavirus, from the beginning of the pandemic until December 1, 2020, the country has developed a total of 26 policy documents, of which only 7 (26 percent) were assessed as gender sensitive. Out of these 7 policy documents, 4 address the risks of violence against women and 3 address the economic safety of women. Unfortunately, none of the policy documents are aimed at reducing the increased care burden. However, none of the gender-sensitive policy documents specifically address the needs of women and girls affected by the conflict.

International experience demonstrates that it is important for the countries to start planning and implementing crisis response policies regardless of how long the pandemic lasts. It is essential that conflict-affected women are actively involved in the policy-making process and that gender-specific needs and perspectives are taken into account in all decisions made.

At the same time, crises and crisis management are part of the women's peace and security agenda, and it is important that the state does not de-prioritize it. Moreover, it is important that the state and international donor organizations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

However, the role of civil society and international organizations in dealing with the pandemic is crucial. In particular, it is important to prioritize the assistance and support of women human rights activists and local women's organizations in conflict-affected regions<sup>75</sup>. Besides, the findings of research demonstrate that it is essential to ensure that international organizations provide women, peace and security organizations, as well as women affected by conflict with adequate resources for engagement; to make possible their immediate participation in negotiations as soon as the opportunity offers itself, and facilitate their activity within the framework of women, peace and security in occupied territories, in cooperation with the government.

<sup>73</sup> Part of the recommendations are based on documents developed by the UN Women on Women, Peace and Security. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3lBuztL> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>74</sup> COVID 19 Global Gender Response Measures, 2020. A joint online platform of the United Nations Development Program and the United Nations Women: <https://data.undp.org/gendetracker/>

<sup>75</sup> The Women, Peace and Humanitarian Foundation study found that 30 percent of CSOs are at risk of shutting down because of the effects of the coronavirus. Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Context of Coronavirus in West and Central Africa, United Nations Women, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/36z0l9t> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

## RECOMMENDATIONS


### To the Government of Georgia, the Interagency Commission on Gender Equality, Women and Domestic Violence:

- Actively advocate to ensure that responsible agencies perceive women affected by conflict as a vulnerable group with special but multifaceted and different needs and to develop cross-cutting policies tailored to those needs.
- Assess the needs of women affected by conflict through large-scale and representative research in the context of specific policy planning (especially economic, social and security policy) and diversify approaches to ensure multifaceted involvement and accessibility.
- Evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the rate of violence detection and identification, including (but not limited to) the effects of coronavirus-induced constraints and barriers, and plan response measures to maintain positive trend in the field of violence detection and identification in the country.<sup>76</sup>
- Adjust the activities of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security to the context of the Coronavirus and continue the implementation of the Action Plans, in particular, start working with women involved in the conflict and responsible agencies on a new National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, which, among other things, will address the new challenges posed by the Coronavirus pandemic and make full use of the opportunities created;
- Plan and implement a gender-based violence prevention campaign specifically for women living in compact settlements, occupied territories and villages near the so-called demarcation line.<sup>77</sup>
- Provide women with access to basic reproductive health services and products in compact settlements, occupied territories and villages near the so-called demarcation line.
- Strengthen work with local governments in the context of women, peace and security, including, but not limited to, localization of the National Peace and Security Action Plan. It is especially important to strengthen the work with the municipalities that are not adjacent to the dividing line but have IDPs.
- When planning policies to respond to the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus, take into account the increased unpaid labor burden of women as a result of the pandemic and take specific actions to alleviate it, such as increasing access to kindergarten services, facilitating the distribution of care, and so on.

<sup>76</sup> The number of reports on violence against women and domestic violence has increased in about 70 countries, in different geographical regions. Analysis of these messages shows that gender-based violence has increased in both conflict and post-conflict areas. . For example, in Palestine, the Women's Legal Aid Center has seen 75 percent increase in reports since the pandemic began, mostly from urban-type settlements but also from rural women and temporary migrant settlements. It is important to examine the rate of detection and identification of violence due to the effects of coronavirus-induced constraints and barriers, and to plan response measures. Majumdar, S., Wood, G., The Impact of COVID-19 on Violence Against Women and Girls, The Experience of Civil Society and Women's Organizations, UN Women, 2020. available online: <https://bit.ly/36AGS53> [last viewed May 15, 2021]

<sup>77</sup> Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Context of Coronavirus in West and Central Africa, United Nations Women, 2020. available online: <https://bit.ly/36z0l9t> [last viewed May 15, 2021].



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- When planning the policy to respond to the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus, take into account the limited access to reproductive health services, including all contraceptives of women affected by the pandemic, and take specific measures in response.<sup>78</sup>

**To the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality:**

- Ensure full involvement of conflict victims, especially IDP women, in these processes. In particular, it is important to:
  - Ensure that conflict-affected women are involved in peace processes long enough to be able to advise, analyze and contribute to the peace format recommendations and consensus process;
  - Ensure that women affected by the conflict are informed in advance of the issues being discussed at the negotiations table so that participating women can effectively represent the interests of their group;
  - Constantly inform conflict affected women and women's rights organizations about the progress of the peace process and hold meetings to share information and experiences;

<sup>78</sup> The study of UN Population Fund estimates that globally, more than 47 million women from low- and middle-income countries will not have access to modern contraceptives due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the number of unattended pregnancies and births will increase to 7 million if the restrictions last for more than 6 months and the health care system continues to operate in the face of a severe crisis. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Combating Gender-Based Violence, Genital Mutilation, and Early Marriage, UNFPA, 2020. Available online: <https://bit.ly/3IE58aM> [last viewed May 15, 2021].

