Mapping and Analysis of Peacebuilding Initiatives in Azerbaijan

2021
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Authors: Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, Sajida Abdulvahabova
Editors: Panthea Pourmalek, Shawna Crystal and Sophia Farion
Layout: Caroline Allman
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the project “Local communities build and sustain peace: Strengthening women and youth participation in building sustainable peace in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kenya, Moldova, South Sudan, Uganda and Ukraine,” the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), in partnership with local partner organizations, and with support from the Austrian Development Agency conducted peacebuilding initiatives and actors mappings in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda.

Mapping aims to provide a better understanding of the context and existing initiatives in each country and to allow for the forging of broader partnerships within each context. In Azerbaijan, the mapping builds on a previous mapping undertaken in the project “Local, National and Regional Strategies to Improve the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine,” supported by ADA between 2017 and 2019.

Based on qualitative research conducted between April and July 2020, this report reflects the changes that have occurred in the political and peacebuilding landscape in the country since the previous mapping carried out in 2018, and includes a greater focus on the following issues:

- Barriers and opportunities for women’s political participation and women’s participation in peace processes and decision-making;
- Barriers and opportunities for women’s economic empowerment;
- The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls, and implications for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions; and
- The impact of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh on women and girls, and the implementation of WPS resolutions, including the situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country.

The report begins with an overview of the gender-responsive laws and policies in Azerbaijan, followed by an overview of the peace and security situation, including the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report proceeds to examine key barriers to women’s meaningful participation and economic empowerment, with a dedicated section on the specific barriers faced by internally displaced women.
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The mapping employs gender-sensitive analysis to understand and explore the links between gender empowerment with peacebuilding.

The findings of the report draw on the testimonies of women and use their lived experiences as a foundation for understanding the peacebuilding landscape in Azerbaijan. The report prioritizes the views of women who have been directly affected by conflict, including women IDPs. The guiding questions for the report are:

1. What are women’s priorities for peace? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected those priorities?
2. Who are the actors who lead the implementation of the peacebuilding activities? How many of such initiatives are led by women? Who are supporting them?
3. How do the social dynamics between IDP and host communities affect peacebuilding in the country? Are these impacts different for women IDPs?
4. How are women represented in decision-making structures, including in local governance?
5. What were the challenges encountered by women during the implementation of peacebuilding activities in the country?
6. What challenges do women encounter in accessing basic services, such as education and health? What impact does this have on peacebuilding?
7. What strategies should be adopted towards addressing these challenges for effective peacebuilding in the country?

The research also addresses women’s awareness of their rights, as well as their views on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for the report was conducted through focus group discussions (FGDs). The FGDs were held in Baku and Buzovna and in two other regions, Pirshaghi and Ramana, where IDPs are located. Since discussions fell during the COVID-19 quarantine period, in-person meetings were held with only 2-3 people to respect social distancing. Approximately 18-20 people took part at in each region. 45 women were involved in online meetings and of the 58 persons who participated in the FGDs, 38 of them were IDPs. 80 per cent of the interviewed IDPs were women. The age of the surveyed varied from 22 to 60 years and above.

Online discussions were held by phone. Zoom conferences were not used as much during these meetings. People from different regions of Azerbaijan took part in online meetings.

Owing to the sensitive and confidential nature of these discussions, several participants' names and identifying characteristics are not indicated. This report was based on their interviews and opinions.
The Republic of Azerbaijan is a country located in the South Caucasus region, situated at the crossroads of Southwest Asia and Southeastern Europe.

Changes in the socio-political status of women in Azerbaijan began in the period preceding the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Women’s presence in the public sphere increased through greater participation in the workforce, including the oil fields and garment production, and participation in social activities such as women’s clubs, publications, and groups promoting women’s literacy, vocational training and legal rights. The growing oil industry and the Russian-European influence, especially in Baku, played a significant role in generating discussion on the social roles of women. Reformers, nationalists, social democrats and Muslims modernists considered the liberation of women as a prerequisite for the revival of Islam. In 1918, suffrage for all, including women, was established by law.

Thus, Azerbaijan was one of the first countries in Asia to grant women the right to vote. Various initiatives worked towards the modernization of Azerbaijani society, including schools for Muslim girls and more progressive and egalitarian interpretations of Islam, while social democratic and Marxists movements inspired working class women to make demands for maternity leave and healthcare for workers. The state played an important role in improving the social standing of women, following a Soviet model.


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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.

After gaining independence in Azerbaijan, a number of strategies on gender equality were adopted.

State Committee on Women’s Issues was established by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1998, with a view to implement the state policy on gender. In 2006, it was renamed the “State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs” (SCFWCA). The main objectives and purposes of the Committee are the protection of the rights of women and increasing women’s participation in social and political life. In Azerbaijan, the Institute of Ombudsman was established in 2001. The Office of the Ombudsman (Human Rights Commissioner) of the Republic of Azerbaijan was created to restore the human rights and freedoms enshrined in the Constitution and in the international treaties to which the Republic of Azerbaijan is a party, especially when governmental and municipal bodies and officials of the Republic of Azerbaijan violate these rights. The Institute of Ombudsman provides individualized assistance, free from formal procedural requirements and not limited by a rigid legal (legislative) framework.

Key political documents on gender equality in Azerbaijan include:


Article 25 prohibits any restriction of all rights on the grounds of gender. All Azerbaijani legislation is based on the Constitution and embodies the basic rights and freedoms, and equality between women and men.


This document envisages ensuring equality between women and men in all state bodies, providing employment for IDPs and refugee women in accordance with relevant state programs, and a gender-sensitive revision of legislation.


The National Plan of Action was developed on the basis of Beijing Strategies and taking into consideration national priorities. The Plan of Action includes the following issues as related to women: economics, education, health, violence, armed conflicts, mass media, environment, refugee and IDP women, and young women and girls.

**Law on Guarantees of Gender Equality (2006)**

The purpose of this law is to ensure equal opportunity for women and men in political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres of public life, and the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination.
Law on Combating Domestic Violence (2010)
The purpose of this law is to raise public awareness, support legislative initiatives and improve coordination among state institutions engaged in combating domestic violence.

Amendments to the Family Code (2011)
This amendment increased the age of consent to marriage to 18 for both women and men. The Criminal Code was amended accordingly in 2011, to prohibit early and forced marriages and to increase sanctions for such offenses.

The National Action Plan for the years 2009-2013 on combating trafficking in human beings in the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was approved by a Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
This plan contains nearly 70 policies for victims of human trafficking, including:
- Physical, psychological and social rehabilitation;
- Provision of safe living conditions meeting basic needs accompanied with psychological and financial support;
- Medical check-up and treatment, access to translation services, as well as consultation on their rights and responsibilities; and
- Protection of rights and interests in criminal cases.

Although Azerbaijan has ratified international policies concerning women's and human rights, there exists a large gap between the adoption of legal standards and their implementation.

This is in large part due to a lack of a concrete outline put forth and supported by the state to implement the policies they claim to pursue. These laws have not been implemented and are rarely monitored since no comprehensive information about them is released to the public. 5

The security sector is still considered a male profession and women continue to be under-represented, especially in leadership positions. Lack of understanding and insensitivity of police to the issues of sexual violence, as well as the difficulty of proving facts and evidence of this kind of violence prevent women from reporting to police. A fear of social stigma and rumors also contributes to the lack of reporting.

Women are regarded as primary caregivers at home, while at the same time, expected to contribute to the household income. Women are still discriminated against within the larger masculine political culture, with limited representation in elected office and relegation to less strategic positions within the state apparatus.

Whilst the Soviet legacy is one of an absence of illiteracy, high indicators of university education among women and men, equal wages for women and men, and women's participation in political life, women were rarely promoted into positions of decision-makers — in neither economic nor political spheres. Instead, women dominated professions such as teachers, physicians, food industries and as representatives of art and culture.

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IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIETY

On 27 February 2020, an Operational Headquarters (OH) under the Cabinet of Ministers was created to prevent and respond to dangers caused by the coronavirus pandemic, and to implement preventive and urgent measures. The first case of coronavirus infection in Azerbaijan was registered on 28 February 2020.

The OH created an informational portal www.koronavirusinfo.az, with the goal of informing and educating the population by providing information about the coronavirus, new rules and mitigation measures, and recommendations. At the same time, television channels launched campaigns to inform citizens about personal protection measures and relevant rules.

Under the Presidential Decree, the Cabinet of Ministers received a USD $1 billion allocation from the state budget to finance measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 and reduce its negative impacts. To help the health authorities answer more queries, the Public Health and Reforms Center of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Azerbaijan, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, introduced a bot called "Shefa." This bot aimed to help people make decisions about what to do if they had potential symptoms of COVID-19. Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies and the UN Development Programme launched the "Stay Home" digital platform (www.evdeqal.az) which provides advice on social distancing and staying at home, and offers e-learning resources, including information on setting up and running digital businesses from home.

During the pandemic, a number of large-scale measures were implemented to support employment and social welfare in Azerbaijan. These measures have saved jobs and wages of about 1.64 million employees in the public and private sectors. 2 million citizens, mainly from vulnerable groups, were provided with sustainability payments through social security (pensions, benefits).

The government launched a program offering a one-time payment to nearly 600,000 unemployed people, employing about 90 thousand public workers and creating small farms for 12,000 families within the framework of the self-employment program. Self-employment means that a person is employed independently or through state support, as defined in Article 1.1.15 of the Employment Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan. A special place is devoted to self-employment in the field of social policy in order to improve the social welfare of vulnerable families. According to Decree number 1941 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "On Additional Measures to Ensure the Self-Employment of the Population" dated 7 April 2016, a self-employment program was

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implemented. Within the framework of this program, low-income families are provided with the support of the state for the purpose of establishing or developing individual households by providing families directly with cattle, material and other property (not cash). The family is provided with production or service equipment in accordance with the business plan provided. This is a distinctive feature of the self-employment program from the experience of other countries. The program further envisages providing 340,000 members of 82,000 families with targeted state social assistance, 20,000 people with unemployment insurance, and about 100,000 families with food aid.9

The Cabinet of Ministers adopted an action plan which stipulates the allocation of USD $126 million USD to preserve the salaries of hired workers and $7 million to support individual entrepreneurs.

The Co-ordination Center for Azerbaijan Volunteers was established as an initiative of volunteer movements and organizations, to educate the population and provide social services to people in need.

The Coordination Center created a special digital communication platform to provide continuous support to people over 65 years who live alone, low-income families, single mothers and other vulnerable families during the quarantine. Through this platform, volunteers were in constant contact with these groups and provided them with various social services. Medicine and food supplies were distributed to ensure continuity of care for older persons, persons with disabilities and single parents, including those in rural and remote areas. Resources were mobilized from restaurants to provide hot lunches to medical staff treating people infected with COVID-19.

The families most affected by COVID-19 were mainly those with many children, which placed an additional burden on women. To address the most-pressing needs for vulnerable families, more than 100,000 food and hygiene kits were disseminated across the country, especially to women-headed households, IDPs, refugees and other vulnerable groups.

The SCFWCA and its eleven Child and Family Support Centers strengthened their activities in accordance with the instructions of the OH. Special brochures and posters were distributed among the population. As part of the “Call to Families” awareness-raising campaign, more than 3,300 families received information by phone, and special information booklets were distributed in settlements for IDPs and refugees, as well as in remote and rural communities.

9 Ibid

10 Ibid
Moreover, 90,000 public jobs are planned to be created by the end of the year.

Against the background of all these events, domestic violence remains a concern. In an effort to protect and inform individuals and families in the country, the regional staff of the Committee organized telephone calls to vulnerable population groups in 11 regions with a special focus on representatives of elderly generations. The main goal of this project was to provide the population with guidance on infection prevention, basic protective measures and control tools, and the recommendations of the Task Force under the Cabinet of Ministers.

During the calls, the wishes and needs of citizens are heard and the necessary support is provided. For example, citizens were educated on completing transfers and complete tasks via the Internet, isolated elderly people were connected to the relevant social services agencies, elderly citizens with diabetes were provided with medicines and medical supplies from the district hospital and pharmacy, and several families were provided with support to pay for utilities.

The government did not include civil society representatives in the OH and did not develop mechanisms to engage civil society organizations (CSOs) in the COVID-19 pandemic response planning. The State developed action plans to respond to the pandemic, but these plans have not called for proposals from CSOs.

A special project titled “Online Psychological Assistance” was launched in April 2020 by the SCFWCA. Two webinars on “Psychological problems in families during the pandemic and the ways to solve them” were held as part of this project. A total of 2,300 people have benefited from the above-mentioned project. In order to rapidly respond to the increased risks of psychological problems and domestic violence amid the “Stay Home” policy, special online training, webinars, campaigns and television programs were organized by the SCFWCA.

The Coronavirus Info Programme on Central National TV introduced a number of special programs to discuss and inform issues such as family and relationship problems and violence during the period of self-isolation.

Deputy Chairman of SCFWCA, Sadagat Gahramanova, spoke about the measures taken in the country during the quarantine period. She noted, “66% of health care workers working in intensive care during the pandemic were women and measures were taken to protect them from the virus. Of the 600,000 people receiving social assistance from the state budget, 45% are women.” In addition, the Committee has taken a series of measures to educate people to fight against the virus, and to provide online psychological support. A National Action Plan with the objective to increase women’s employment was prepared based on the results. The issue of unpaid work at home, which has become a top issue due to its growing relevance during lockdown, is also included in the Action Plan.

11 www.scfwca.gov.az
GENDER EQUALITY IN DECISION-MAKING AND IN SOCIETY

Women’s low participation in political life can be explained by a number of factors. Financing an electoral campaign requires considerable amounts of money, and campaign financing for women candidates remains limited. Manifestations of sexism, misogyny, sexual harassment, language use enmity — these and other phenomena are faced by women trying to declare themselves in politics. Furthermore, gendered norms prevailing in traditional families and society limit women’s potential in political life.

One positive practice with regard to women’s participation in political life is the appointment of Gender Focal Points in government structures and in the Executive Power Institutions in all regions of Azerbaijan. Local authorities in Azerbaijan were established by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Executive power is exercised by the heads of local authorities in relevant places. Local executive power authorities set their activities based on principles of protection of rights and freedoms of citizens, the protection of their legitimate interests, development of the economy, social and cultural areas for the sake of improving the welfare of the people, ensuring the rule of law, transparency and consideration of public opinion. The Focal Points were appointed at the expert level, but act as a Deputy Minister/Chair of Advisor to the Minister/Chair in some ministries.

The government system can benefit from greater potential to successfully implement positive gender mainstreaming in society. The misunderstanding of the concept of gender equality and gender analysis may affect the design of goals and strategies, and lead to ineffective planning around gender-related issues or policies. The recently formed position of the Gender Focal Points in local executive powers within the government structure is a positive development from the gender-sensitization perspective. However, the recent implementation, and in some cases, lack of experience within the Focal Point Initiative remains a major gap. If this gap is successfully addressed, this initiative has the potential to strengthen the government policy of women’s participation in decision-making at a broad grass-roots level. The functions of the CG include: to act as a consultant on the mainstreaming of gender in all aspects of the work of the agency, using its own resources or external experts; attend important gender related events and disseminate
information on progress made on gender issues within the agency as needed; facilitate the development of cooperation between the women's sector of civil society and sectoral and regional structures.

There are about 2,750 CSOs in Azerbaijan, of which 90 (3.3 per cent) are women's CSOs. A survey of civil society in Azerbaijan shows that women CSOs work in the following areas: protection of women's rights and interests; promotion of women's business and professional activities; provision of social services and charity; peacebuilding; women's leadership; and elimination of violence against women. In 2014, after the adoption of amendments to the Law on Grants, CSOs faced difficulties in obtaining grants from foreign foundations. According to this law, foreign foundations conclude a grant agreement only when they have a representative office in Azerbaijan. This change has greatly influenced the activity of civil society.

Although the government promotes the equality of women and men, gender imbalance in power structures, a high degree of acceptance of the existence of psychological, physical and, to some degree, sexual violence, and an insufficient implementation of relevant laws, plans and international mechanisms remain a problem.

Compared to previous years and election cycles, women’s participation in all levels of political life is increasing. This increase is the result of the aforementioned efforts by CSOs, as well as campaigns carried out by CSOs to raise public awareness of women politicians. In elections, women have increased their participation, both as voters and candidates. Significant efforts have been made by women's organizations, in particular, to improve the turnout of women voters. Their civic and voter education campaigns aim to target women's specific needs, both in the formulation of their messaging, the communication mediums or media platforms, and even the organization of electoral workshops, which took into consideration specific constraints women may face.

Women's representation in parliament increased from 11 per cent in 2005, to 16 per cent in 2010, to 16.9 per cent in 2015 and, in the latest election, to 16 per cent in 2020. As of 10 March 2020, the speaker of the Azerbaijani Parliament is a woman, Sahiba Gafarova. At the municipal level, the figures improved from 4 per cent in 2004, to 26.5 per cent in 2009, and to 37.6 per cent in the latest 2019 election.

The vice president of the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan is a woman. 52 women diplomats (14.9 per cent of all diplomats) work in the diplomatic missions of the Republic of Azerbaijan abroad. The total number of diplomats working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan is 109 women (33 per cent) out of 331, and only 1.5 per cent hold the post of ambassador.

The chairman of the National Council of Youth Organization of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which includes 128 youth organizations, is a woman.

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Other relevant statistics on women’s participation in Azerbaijan includes:
- Portion of economically active population in 2015: 49 per cent \(^{15}\)
- Portion of women in public high schools (2016-2017): 48.7 per cent \(^{16}\)

Although the government promotes the belief in equality of women and men, the number of women occupying seats in the parliament at decision-making levels is low, as demonstrated in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>WOMEN %</th>
<th>MEN %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The First Vice President of Azerbaijan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Commissioner for Human Rights (including Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of women Minister (Minister of Culture and Tourism of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of deputy ministers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women head of the executive powers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women deputy head of the executive powers</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of women judges</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women rectors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The Women’s Empowerment Index, which is designed to measure progress in multidimensional aspects of women’s empowerment, is considered a factor in both women’s achievement and gender parity with men in 2016 year: 0.94. \(^{17}\)
- The number of women with a degree in sciences has increased significantly, when compared to men. This may be due to the fact that men’s preference for higher salary employment, and the low salary provided by research institutions. \(^{18}\)

\[^{15}\] State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. LABOUR MARKET, 2017
\[^{16}\] Ibid.
Approximately 5.2 million voters were registered to vote, including 340,689 IDPs.\textsuperscript{19}

In Azerbaijan, the 125 members of parliament are elected from single-mandate constituencies for a five-year term. A total of 80 outgoing members of parliament sought re-election. Of the candidates who contested the elections, 21 per cent were women. There are no legal requirements to promote women candidates in Azerbaijan. Before the election, women constituted 16.7 per cent of the parliament. Following the election, 18.2 per cent of the new parliament were women.

However, the participation of women in post-conflict rehabilitation, as stipulated by UNSC Resolution 1325, has still not been secured. Women, especially IDP women, are not included in local councils and have no access to decision-making about the most crucial issues influencing their lives. IDPs are not eligible to stand for office in municipal elections at their current place of residence. Article 212 of the Election Code of Azerbaijan states that a candidate may only be elected as a municipality member at their place of permanent residence. IDPs are still permanently registered at their place of origin, not their current residence.

Despite some exceptions — like the one illustrated by the quote above — the participation of IDPs, in particular IDP women, in social life, political life and in decision-making processes remains very low. According to the interviews, IDP women often delegate their voting right to the head of family. As a result, IDP women remain “invisible,” with decisions made on their behalf and without their participation. The non-governmental sector is the only “niche” where women IDPs can influence decision-making processes and give voice to their problems.

“Who need to use documents and opportunities available to us to push for radical, positive actions that redress multiple long-standing gender inequalities. Even progressive males are against gender propaganda, believing it is contrary to their interests. The experience of the pandemic shows that the degree of the impact is different for women and men. The pandemic also had a very serious effect. Women and girls are on the frontlines of the COVID-19: unpaid care work is increasing, they are...

The work of local women’s organizations on peacebuilding issues has no formal mandate and is often not linked to the official peace process — which lacks specific mechanisms for women’s participation. The peace process also excludes other parts of the civilian population, such as IDPs. However, women’s civil society organizations are involved in the peace process through different initiatives, including dialogue activities, meetings and roundtables with the

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- Mammadova Sevda, chair of the Sumgayit Discussion Club

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- Afandiyeva Irada, expert/trainer by "Women Problems Research Union"

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 Losing employment and livelihoods, especially given our overrepresentation in informal work. These factors will increase early and forced marriages. For example, families living in poverty may view marriage as the best way to secure their daughters’ futures and reduce economic pressures on the family. The number of calls from victims who inform about non-responses from the police has increased since now the priority is responding to calls related to COVID-19.”


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This year we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which cemented the importance of women’s participation in decision-making, peace and security. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed and deepened all inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on people’s lives and has created numerous challenges for all of us. People’s normal lifestyles have been changed, social and gender inequality in society has increased. There is a danger of the emergence of new vulnerable categories unless additional support services are developed.”

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women mediators’ participation in peace processes before, during and after conflicts. To this effect, the Network intends to increase women’s involvement in multi-channel diplomacy processes, including high-level diplomacy, which will contribute to the universal recognition of the legitimacy and importance of the activities of women mediators.

Another example is the “Armenia-Azerbaijan Platform for Peace” a civil society initiative for the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict within the norms and principles determined by international law. However, there are still important gaps in the participation of women and other marginalized groups, such as youth, in the peace process.

“At a time where the pandemic is challenging human health as well as human dignity, values that we hold dearest as peacebuilders, strengthening peacebuilding, as well as creating conflict prevention strategies is more essential than ever. Regarding peace, civic space and democratic governance: it is crucial to strengthen the role of women in peacekeeping and conflict and violence prevention. Women’s organizations play an important role in advocating for peace, holding debate forums, carrying out awareness initiatives and criticizing the lack of women in formal political negotiations. Regarding the Women, Peace and Security agenda: women’s organizations face enormous difficulties in being considered interlocutors, despite the social leadership of these organizations. The quality in connection of trust between divided communities we have built is still there.”

- Dilara Efendiyeva, Head of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Civil Peace Platform

The ongoing negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan are marred with obstacles, difficulties and setbacks. The election held in the Unrecognized “Nagorno-Karabakh” on 31 March 2020, described by the Azerbaijan government as “illegal,” was one such setback and contributed to worsening tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The peace process is facilitated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group with Russia, France and the United States. Russia continues to be an active facilitator, convening both sides for negotiations — for example, in 2019. However, negotiations are often not public and civil society does not have access to them. As one interviewee pointed out,

“There are no spaces, where women from grassroots groups can build trust among themselves. There is a need for more meetings and dialogue between divided lines.”

- Abdullayeva Arzu, Chairwoman “Azerbaijan National Committee of Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly”, holder of Olaf Palme Peace Prize and EU and US Government Democracy and Civil Society Award

“The leadership role of young women and men is undeniable. Considering that youth make up the majority of the population, their participation in peace processes is a necessity. The median age in Azerbaijan is 30. In order not to be invisible, one must be active.”

- Ismayil Abdullayev, Head of Azerbaijan Youth Group for Peace Dialogue
facilitators do not consult with women civil society activists, which makes it difficult for them to influence the peace process. Azerbaijan has also not yet adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS for implementation and accountability to the WPS program. Taliya Ibrahimova, head of the legal department of SCFWCA shared that “the [NAP] document was handed to the President’s office and they have shown a big interest; we hope it will be accepted by the end of the 2020 year.”

The British Embassy in Azerbaijan held online meeting on 19 June 2020, devoted to the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. The following opinions were expressed about NAP on WPS:

“Development of the first National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Azerbaijan and its adoption and implementation as a political document in the near future will increase the participation of women and girls in Azerbaijan. In the settlement of armed conflicts and protect them from all forms of discrimination and violence. At the time, it serves to achieve de facto gender equality as a whole on a country scale.”

- Gulshan Pashayeva, Board Member, Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center)

It is hoped that the NAP on WPS will be adopted within the 2020 year.
LEGAL STATUS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN

Azerbaijan's national legal framework contains a number of legal provisions aimed at normalizing the status of IDPs as citizens with equal rights while at the same time affirming their special situation.

The most important law affecting IDPs is the 1999 Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on IDPs and Refugee Status. As stated in Article 1, the purpose of the law is to determine the measures "for the settlement, social protection of internally displaced persons and persons equated to them in the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as the responsibilities of state authorities." The provisions granted to IDPs through the law include: temporary accommodation; employment; social security; medical care; ensuring the right to education; transportation, and housing and communal discounts; and tax deductions (Article 3). According to Azerbaijan's legislation, IDPs have privileged access to the labor market in comparison to the local population, benefiting from State Programs designed to generate employment as well as government assistance in the search for employment. Furthermore, the government has established the Social Development Fund of IDPs, which is designed to help IDPs rehabilitate small-scale infrastructure such as roads, electricity and water supply systems, as well as public transport.

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An employment record book is provided, an official personal document recording the employment status of its owner over time; however, for the employment of IDPs, it is not mandatory.

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While reducing the number of staff and staff in management, businesses and organizations, these individuals have the right to retain employment.

According to the instruction on the distribution of monthly allowances from the state budget to IDPs, the monthly allowance for meals is a regular monetary aid to improve the welfare of IDPs. This subsidy is often referred to as "bread money."

President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on 10 June 2019 "On Amending the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 1206 of January 23, 2017 ‘On determining single monthly allowance for IDPs and the persons equated to them’." According to the order, the amount of the single monthly allowance for IDPs and the persons equated to them increased by 50 per cent on 1 April 2019, from 40 AZN to 60 AZN (USD $35.3). This amount includes utility bills and allowance for meals. The increase in the monthly allowance has strengthened social protection and improved the financial situation of 500,000 IDPs.

The social problems of refugees and internally displaced persons have become one of the priorities of state policy. Over the past decade, 1.55 billion AZN (USD 909.9 million) was spent from the State Oil Fund and other sources to improve the living conditions of refugees and IDPs. 57 modern towns and residential complexes with social and technical infrastructure were created in 30 cities and regions.

In the same 10-year period, the state budget financed 8,700 internally displaced students studying on a paid basis at state universities.

In accordance with the state program for temporary employment of IDPs, land is temporarily allocated from the state and municipal land fund and IDPs are provided with preferential loans, technical support and other forms of assistance. The rules and conditions for allocation of land plots, loans and assistance are defined by the relevant local executive power authorities.

However, IDPs are not yet systematically included in the planning of programs aimed at improving their situation, including in the construction of new settlements and their relocation. Dialogue and consultations with IDPs is rare and does not ensure that all the needs and concerns of IDPs are heard. When asked "on the issues of improving failures in the construction process, as well as on the issue of supporting dignified living conditions, relocation to new homes, does anyone ask your opinions?" IDP respondents replied that nobody asks for their opinion, nobody keeps them abreast of developments and they are not engaged in the process.

Moreover, there are some gender-specific challenges related to the rules for granting the IDP status in the Republic of Azerbaijan:

The status of the "IDP" and the certificate of approval is not granted to:

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25 Ibid.
As discussed above, IDPs — in particular women IDPs — are also largely excluded from local governance and decision-making processes. A woman from Barda mentioned that there are some “communications between local self-government and IDP men, but that it would be better to have more close cooperation with women also.” The lack of active political participation on the part of many IDPs can be explained by the limited opportunities for IDPs to develop leadership skills. Women IDPs in particular are constrained by gender-specific obligations such as domestic chores, and more pressing concerns such as the search for employment. Moreover, there is social pressure against women’s participation in politics, as some men do not want women to take up public roles.

Women who had access to participation and leadership development opportunities — in particular those who participated in programs organized by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — were more active and more aware of their rights. As one woman from Agdam put it “we know our own rights and try to participate in community life. But people’s awareness of gender equality is very low. For them our diligence is doubtful.”

As one IDP interviewee, a student from the Baku State university recalled, “in our group, one IDP girl was in a good relationship with a non-IDP guy. But the matter did not reach a wedding. She did not marry him because she would have to pay for studies.” Another woman IDP interviewee added: “Sometimes a marriage will not be registered. So that, the woman receives an allowance.”

These testimonies demonstrate that despite a relatively strong legal framework, there are serious gaps in the law regarding the situation of IDPs — especially women IDPs in Azerbaijan.
Women are significantly underrepresented in decision-making positions, and while they may make up a substantial proportion of the administration staff, they are typically outside of strategic positions. As a result, women, in particular IDP women, see themselves as disconnected from the peace process and from decision-making.

“There is nothing that depends on us, we can’t do anything. States are solving war. We are waiting for the results. Of course we want a peaceful decision.”

- IDP woman from Agdam

Interviewed women IDPs also said that they would feel more comfortable dealing with local authorities if there were more women represented within those structures.

In general, IDPs in Azerbaijan are well accepted by local communities and report that they feel safe with no specific threats to physical security. Exceptions relate to IDP settlements located close to the frontline, in towns such as Terter, where IDPs report the presence of landmines in the near proximity to settlements as well as sporadic shooting. New government settlements in Agdam and Fuzuli have been built close to the frontline. IDPs living in those settlements feel more insecure, as they are closer to the fighting.

Unfortunately, these issues have not yet been addressed or resolved. For over 30 years, more than half a million women in Azerbaijan have had a “stamp” on refugees and IDPs. IDP youth, although better integrated, still face problems as they feel stigmatized. In society, IDP status is often seen as a negative label accompanied with a social stigma.

“So many times, I thought — will not go and register as IDP, I don’t need IDP status.”
- IDP girl, student, Baku State University

“There is no doubt that the Azerbaijani government has done a great deal of work to solve the problems of refugees and IDPs, to address their social concerns. It does not change the reality of our lives, which will probably continue until we have the right to return home.”

- IDP woman from Ramana

The ultimate desire of most IDPs who live in public buildings is resettlement into better conditions. For those who were resettled, the expectation to return to the lands they fled from becomes the prevailing concern and an overarching future vision.

The love of the homeland and the wish for peace arose as central themes in interviews and discussions.

“There is no doubt that the government has done a great deal of work to solve our problems. But I am an IDP. I want to return to my home, to my homeland.”

- Elderly IDP woman from Barda

“We hope to return. I often dream of my native home, the house of my youth.”

- A woman IDP from Agdam

“We faced the war and know what it is like. I don’t want war.”

- IDP woman from Horadiz
Several interviewees also highlighted the past trauma they faced, and which affected their life as IDPs.

"We faced the war and know what it is like. Women are often the worst affected by conflict. They often become targets of violence, their husbands and children may be killed."
- IDP woman from Fizuli

"When I think about the tragedy at Khojaly, I remember crying, weeping,

Although the older interviewees discussed the trauma of what they witnessed during the war, it was the younger generation displaced as children, who felt that they spent their entire adult lives in limbo. Based on the interviews and focus group discussions, it is clear that the majority of IDPs are not in favor of armed violence.

SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The problem of domestic violence was prominent in Azerbaijan already before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019 alone, 184 women suffered at the hands of their family members, and 54 of them died. 26

These statistics likely underestimate the true numbers of women experiencing domestic violence. Shelters for women and children exist only in the three major cities in Azerbaijan — Baku, Ganja, and Sumgait, all of which were established by NGOs. Although the Baku shelter for women and children is only designed to accommodate 30 people, it housed 23 women and 22 children during the first pandemic lockdown. 27

Azerbaijan introduced a special quarantine because of COVID-19. Individuals could only go outside for two hours with permission from the police. It was only with the help of the police that victims of domestic violence could be brought to the shelters.

The pandemic crisis, the numerous restrictions imposed during the state of emergency, the constant fear of being infected, and the deteriorating economic situation in families had a negative impact on the daily lives of women.

There was a threefold increase in domestic violence in Azerbaijan in just the first weeks of the lockdown introduced as part of the fight against COVID-19. 28

Although official statistics on the increase of domestic violence in Azerbaijan in this isolation period are not yet available, an increase in the number of people who have contacted shelters indicates a worsening situation.
Interviews revealed numerous reasons for the increase in domestic violence cases, including: weak response to family conflicts from the social service; inadequate government attention to gender-based violence (GBV) issues; weak implementations of relevant laws; and distrust of the police’s ability to support victims.

“In many cases, we see the direct consequences of violence because of the long absence of information about it. This, in turn, affects the number of victims of domestic violence. According to the data collected, the perpetrators of violence against women are mostly their spouses, which is 68.4 per cent. 12.1 per cent of women are abused by their ex-husbands and 11.9 per cent by men who they live with informally.”

- Taliya Ibrahimova, Head of the legal department of SCFWCI

The analysis of the data collected by the Domestic Violence Database established by the SCFWCI shows that women are exposed to a wide range of violence.

Of 223 appeals made in 2018, 101 people were victims of physical violence, 71 were victims of economic violence, 11 were victims of sexual violence, 39 were victims of psychological violence and 15 were victims of human trafficking.29

In 2019, following the investigation of 242 received appeals, it was found that 116 people suffered from physical violence, 76 from economic, 11 from sexual, 39 from psychological violence, 30 were victims of human trafficking (of which 15 were foreigners).30

In 2019, the investigation of 27 criminal cases on human trafficking and forced labor was completed, 27 defendants (5 men, 22 women) were prosecuted, and 42 traffickers were convicted. Of the 89 identified victims of human trafficking (85 women, 5 men, 1 child), 78 were placed in the shelter of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Each was provided with medical, psychological and legal assistance in cooperation with the Assistance Center of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and NGOs.31

Although reports started coming in from other countries about an increase in domestic violence from the very first days of the lockdown, there has been little debate or campaign during this period in Azerbaijan. The roads were closed, it was difficult to bring people in need from the districts, and you needed to get permission. The Interior Ministry swiftly helped us with it. Since the beginning of the lockdown, 14 women have contacted the Baku shelter for women and children, and most of them came here in May. Incidents and cases of violence may have occurred, but isolation has somewhat limited the possibility of information circulating. There are no hotlines or helplines in the country for victims of domestic violence. The government

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29 Ibid
30 Ibid
Normally, people are able to see less of each other and to devote more time to themselves and set boundaries. However, they practically do not have that kind of an opportunity during the lockdown. Due to the state of emergency which prohibits leaving home, the whole family has to stay home. It affects psychological state, therefore the tensions, cases of conflicts and violence have increased. Long-standing discontent about something and grievances that were not expressed in time may also lead to physical violence during isolation. Women who regularly suffer from domestic violence acquire the helplessness syndrome. Therefore, it is important that people around them who are aware of the violence persuade the victim that the first thing to do is to contact the police."

- Mehriban Zeynalova, Head of NGO Temiz Dunya

"Aggressors usually try to isolate their victims to make it easier for themselves to carry out violence. For example, they restrict their victims' contact with friends and family members, and do not allow them to work. In this way, they deprive them of support. In this sense, the lockdown was the perfect cover-up for aggressors. After all, in this case no one sees the marks from beatings, and most likely no one will know that violence occurred. This makes the aggressor more confident that he will go unpunished and makes the victim more helpless."

- Gulnara Mehdiyeva, Coordinator in the feminist movement in Azerbaijan

"Limited or no access to the Internet and telephone in villages, on the one hand, and unawareness of women about available services of assistance and support on the other cause the women victims of violence to keep silent. It should be noted that the situation is made more alarming by the fact that more cases of domestic violence are characterized with more secrecy and silence. The victims feel ashamed. In the current situation victims avoid talking about their problems, because they consider it a shame. People are likely, at least temporarily, to lose interest in non-COVID-19-related stories."

- Mammadova Parvana, Co-chair of Yuva Humanitarian Center/Azerbaijan Feminist Group

In light of this, authorities should designate domestic violence shelters as essential services and increase resources for them, and to civil society groups that support women victims of violence. Awareness of issues of GBV in IDP communities as well as among the general population is low. Traditional views on GBV or domestic violence result in an unwillingness to discuss such issues publicly with trained psychological or medical personnel. Very few cases are reported to authorities and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.
In light of this, authorities should designate domestic violence shelters as essential services and increase resources for them, and to civil society groups that support women victims of violence. Awareness of issues of GBV in IDP communities as well as among the general population is low. Traditional views on GBV or domestic violence result in an unwillingness to discuss such issues publicly with trained psychological or medical personnel. Very few cases are reported to authorities and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice.

“Violence in my village has greatly diminished. The number of cases of violence has been minimized, mainly related to the tightening of the law. Trainings conducted by NGOs played a big role in this.”

- Naila Mustafayeva, woman from Fizuli

“Domestic violence is one of the most serious problems in our community. The women's rights are violated every day. Women are not aware of their rights. The level of awareness is low.”

- Woman interviewee from Horadiz

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

In focus group discussions, ‘female entrepreneurship’ was not a familiar concept for interviewees, although several women in the community are engaged in petty trade and one woman is a hairdresser. Women identified the following obstacles to business development: high taxes, bureaucracy, and corruption through inspections by various agencies, such as the fire brigade or police. Nobody tries to implement legislation through formal channels and many prefer to give bribes instead. For example, women who do not have property rights protected may tolerate more abuses at home. Similarly, women without property rights are not able to take loans or secure financing due to a lack of collateral. One woman from Agdam said that she tried to set up her own business and employ local women but could not obtain a bank loan.

“Many women have the confidence to do something but they often do not know how to act on it. Right now, they are involved in housekeeping only. Most women our community lack the education and basic training required for business. When women wish to do something by themselves, they face numerous problems, such as the lack of capital, resources, business ideas, knowledge about the marketing process, and cooperation from their family members and society.”

- Woman from Horadiz

However, several interviewees highlighted that there were still key gaps to be addressed.

“If domestic violence happens, only relatives and elders get involved and they try to make peace between the spouses. In extreme cases a wife can file for a divorce.”

- Figure Rustamova, Pirshagi
The restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 crisis have had a severe impact on citizens’ economic security.

Closing kindergartens due to quarantine is particularly problematic for essential workers who have care responsibilities. Evidence shows that women hold 78 per cent of all hospital jobs, make up 70 per cent of employees in pharmacies, and 51 per cent of employees in grocery stores.

Doctors, nurses and shop sellers, and other workers facing a high level of exposure to the virus feel responsible for their families and worry about bringing the virus home. They are under psychological pressure from the members of the family and, in parallel, they fear losing their jobs.

In many cases, the loss of a source of income is connected with the loss of the jobs of the labor migrants from Azerbaijan. They are engaged in the informal sector of the economy and often work without formal employment contracts. The pandemic had a significant negative impact on migrant workers, especially women, resulting in a higher level of unemployment, loss of livelihood and income, and difficulties returning to the home country. Many migrants are still unable to return to their country of origin.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF IDP WOMEN

Many IDP women are highly educated and, prior to displacement, held respected positions as physicians, teachers, cooperative leaders and managers in their home communities. Some of these qualified IDPs were able to acquire employment in their newfound communities. However, more often, IDP women could only find lower-level employment or became unemployed.

Women’s employment and livelihood have also been affected by the pandemic. In the liberated areas, Armenian forces destroyed many cultural centers, such as museums, galleries and libraries, which were employing mostly women, depriving them of their source of income.

IDPs attribute their unemployment to several factors. To begin, there are few jobs and income-generation opportunities in rural areas. Some IDPs have therefore left the settlements to search for jobs elsewhere. IDPs seem to find jobs more easily in urban centers, but face difficulties accessing formal employment without residence registration.
Others fear they would lose their right to housing in rural areas if they moved, and therefore preferred to stay unemployed at their current residence. In addition, many IDPs need to upgrade their skills. Qualifications that IDPs obtained before their displacement are recognized, but the skills and work habits of many long-term unemployed people have eroded. This fact complicates their reintegration into the labor market.

Some specific barriers that IDPs and other women face is the lack of childcare provided by the government, since male relatives do not allow them to work outside the home when childcare responsibilities remain in the household. Limited participation of IDPs in economic life results in their isolation, loss of professional qualifications, and worsening of their families’ economic and psychological status.

Divorce or abandonment often plunges an IDP woman into poverty, as the mother usually assumes sole responsibility for the children. If the marriage was not officially registered, women cannot claim alimony for themselves or their children after divorce.

Women that get married young often remain under-educated and lack income-generating skills. The entrepreneurship courses and training provided by the government often do not reflect the fact that women carry additional challenges related to domestic responsibilities.

Women, single mothers and youth in particular felt the lack of employment and self-reliance contributed to their marginalization and isolation from economic and social life. For IDP women, financial insecurity is yet another potentially destabilizing factor in their lives.

Azerbaijan’s inheritance law does not prevent IDPs from inheriting property as it treats them as citizens. However, in the newly constructed settlements, IDPs are given houses only for “temporary use” and therefore cannot acquire the property through inheritance.

Finally, finding a job or income-generating activity is not easy in rural areas. The situation of rural women is even more complicated because they have fewer opportunities for self-realization; the lack of kindergartens, the lack of jobs in rural areas, and the fact that jobs are sometimes far from the displaced settlements are causing additional problems.
**ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE**

Pandemics are not only a biological event and public health crisis. It is essential to understand and fight them from an economic, societal and cultural perspective.

The constant psychological stress caused by the pandemic has had a serious negative impact on the health of the population. About 34 per cent of the surveyed group agreed with the statement “COVID-19 has significantly worsened my health.”

The median age of patients was 59 years, with higher morbidity and mortality among the elderly and among those with other conditions.13

The number of infected women is also increasing, as most of the medical and social assistance sector jobs are covered by women.

The provision of reproductive health services, including maternal healthcare, are central to health rights of women and girls. However, reproductive health is viewed as lower priority and is often neglected. The government has made efforts to improve reproductive healthcare for women, including through the adoption of the National Strategy on Reproductive and Sexual Health, and the State program for the protection of mother and child health. However, there is still limited access to adequate general and reproductive healthcare for women, especially for those living in rural and remote areas, and IDP women.

Therefore, special attention was given to the issues of reproductive health during the pandemic. Communication materials for pregnant women and health workers on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic were developed by the UN Population Fund in partnership with the Azerbaijan Association for Supporting Development of Gynecology and Perinatology and the Scientific Research Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology. These materials were later distributed among prenatal centers and antenatal clinics.

“Lately we often hear that pandemic will have a serious impact on the demographic situation. In this case opinions are different, some specialists consider that birth will increase after the pandemic, as it happened in the past, for example baby booms after wars. However, in modern society the number of wished births is stable and people plan the number of births and intervals between births. So, most likely we will observe decrease in birth numbers, and possibly an increase in abortions. Given the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic many women will lose regular access to modern contraceptives. Two factors play a role in the rejection of pregnancy: economical loss in people’s income and emotional tension in many families during the quarantine period.”

- Gunay Safarova, Gynaecologist

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IDPs have access to public health facilities and medical services free of charge. Most local and IDP women interviewed shared that they never visit the gynecologist, and they are less aware of contraception methods when compared to local women. Some admitted that they do not see the doctor about “women’s diseases” even if they know they need to because it is prohibitively expensive. Over two-thirds of women interviewees said they and their acquaintances go to state hospitals for medical care when they are pregnant, while 20 per cent of pregnant IDP women will turn to a midwife or to no one at all, and a quarter of IDP women will deliver their children at home assisted by a midwife or an obstetrician.

This is both due to poverty, and a lack of medical equipment, medicine and qualified staff at clinics or health points in or near rural IDP settlements. These barriers are especially present for single mothers.

IDPs continue to suffer health issues relating to their displacement and experiences during the war. Various diseases were reported by interviewees, including blood pressure issues, loss of vision, endocrinological problems and diabetes. People interviewed in Pirshagi noted that their health conditions have worsened since the war.

**ACCESS TO EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The Ministry of Education closely cooperates with higher education institutions. One of the priorities of the Ministry of Education is to provide students with content in the field of higher education. The Education Minister Jeyhun Bayramov noted during a briefing of the Operative Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers, "during the quarantine period, 21 higher education institutions offered classes online: "95,000 students use this opportunity. At present, we are working to improve this process further." Bayramov stated that during the pandemic, 50 per cent of students in the country studied with support from public funds, stating "the decision to pay a tuition fee of poor students in connection with the coronavirus was commendable."

However, according to interviewees, a lack of computers and smartphones is a major obstacle to the full involvement of children in the learning process. In families with several children, one computer and smartphone is not enough to support education for all students.

“**The COVID-19 pandemic is a test for us, which revealed a range of social, economic and political vulnerabilities within our society. Serious obstacles for the involvement of students in the online education process that have been listed include: weak Internet signal at their living areas; high costs of internet services; insufficient space or number of rooms where the students could study separately from other family members; and low technical skills.**"

- Niyal Barkhalova, Assistant professor
  Baku State University
The gender inequality caused by the COVID-19 crisis is reflected in the unequal distribution of housework. Over half of all interviewees believed that "women's workload has significantly increased as they have to work online from home, do housework and take care of children at the same time". The need to help children in the distance learning process, combined with their own work responsibilities, triggered psycho-emotional stress, which had a negative impact on their health and psychological condition. Most women working from home are still responsible for household chores and care for family members.

"I am exhausted, I have a feeling that I will never get out of this state. This is all nerves, I am tense and nervous and that is where this exhaustion comes from."

- Fejrin Eminova, mother of three children, from Baku

"I work as a teacher and now I give online lessons. I am in the hardest situation. I have lessons every day and at the same time, I have to do the housework. I have little children. Due to quarantine, they do not go to kindergarten and they don't wait for me to finish my online classes and prepare and serve the dinner and this repeats every day."

- Sabina Aliyeva, teacher from Baku

"The school lessons are killing me. I have twins - first graders. I have to sit next to them so they’re not distracted. Our little daughter at this time bothers us and demands to go on her hands. When I take her, the twins are distracted. The husband does not help me, because he is a doctor and goes to work. I am under permanent psychological stress."

- Mother of first graders from Baku

"Mothers of school students are going crazy. One kid, the second one, the third one, then their lessons and their homework. I am a teacher but I hardly remember any fathers involved in this process. It's only mothers who try and work hard. They are not familiar with technologies and have no computers, but they still manage to do something. Now all the fathers are at home, but all these stuff fell upon the mothers' shoulders."

- Khuraman Salimova from Baku

Schools and day-care centers have closed. Increased childcare needs during school closures exert a disproportionate impact on working mothers. Childcare poses an additional challenge to working parents during the crisis. This is evidenced by the replies to the question: "What is the main problem in your life caused by the COVID-19 outbreak?" 80 per cent of women surveyed responded with "stress".
Women and girls are also less likely to be connected to the internet compared to men and boys. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing digital aspects of daily work and the lack of access to new technologies and digital services are disproportionately affecting women and girls. The digital gender divide affects women’s ability to receive vital support and services.

As a matter of state policy, IDPs have equal access to higher education and vocational training programs as other citizens and are eligible to attend state universities free of charge if they pass an entrance examination. Non-governmental higher and secondary vocational education institutions provide certain discounts for the education of IDP students.

“I have 4 children. We do not have a computer. We have only one mobile telephone.”

- An IDP women from Pirshagi

At 97.1 per cent, the literacy level of IDPs does not differ considerably from other population groups. IDPs view education as very important for their children as it is seen as a means to escape poverty. According to the interviewees (including some schoolteachers), 99 per cent of girls complete school. In villages where schooling is only available up to the ninth grade (15 years old), the inability to complete secondary education is an issue. However, there are families in other areas that do not allow girls to continue their education after the ninth grade.

During the pandemic, limited access to technology further restricted IDPs’ access to education.

CONCLUSION, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the Government of Azerbaijan promotes the equality of women and men, in practice, there are still many barriers and obstacles that women — in particular women IDPs and women living in conflict-affected regions — experience. Women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making and leadership positions.

Women IDPs, in particular, are excluded from decision-making, including consultations and discussions about the policies that affect them. Women’s views are not voiced in high-level official positions, and Azerbaijan does not have institutionalized mechanisms for indirect female participation in the peace process.
The war severely impacted Azerbaijan's population, reducing access to economic opportunities, worsening their health and psychological wellbeing, and increasing the feeling of insecurity. Moreover, the analysis in this report has shown that the status of IDP women is complicated both by their uncertain legal situation — including the gaps in the legal framework around women’s right to IDP status — and their lack of access to information, resources and leadership opportunities. As a result, IDP women are not included in local councils and have no access to decision-making about the most crucial issues influencing their lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on Azerbaijani people’s lives and has created numerous challenges for all women and girls. A pandemic heightened all existing inequalities.

People’s normal lifestyle has been changed by social and economic obstacles, such as the loss of employment and livelihood, which has disproportionately affected women who are overrepresented in the informal economy. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the digital aspects of everyday work. In this context, the lack of access to new technologies and digital services affects women and girls, as well as the IDP population disproportionately.

The main challenges to the effective implementation of the WPS agenda in Azerbaijan can be summarized as follows:

1. Social norms, gender division of labor and perceptions of women and their roles often discourage or prevent women from participating in public life.
2. There are no official mechanisms for women’s meaningful inclusion in the peace process, and no spaces for dialogue and trust-building for women at the grassroots.
3. IDP women face a double discrimination — both within the law (in particular with relation to the right to IDP status) and in society. They are also often unaware of their rights and opportunities available to them.
4. Evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that women’s economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and differently from men’s.
5. The gender digital divide further aggravates the exclusion of women, especially IDP women and women living in rural areas, since many activities and information were moved online.
6. There is a lack of coordination between the state efforts and the efforts of CSOs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Recommendations to the Government**

1. Integrate UNSCR 1325 and 1820 into the analysis for the country strategy paper and adopt a NAP on WPS.
2. Encourage quality, gender and conflict-sensitive language in the media and analysis.
3. Ensure that IDP-related laws and policies are based on gender-sensitive analysis, and effectively address the concerns of women IDPs. Ensure that IDPs — including women IDPs — are meaningfully consulted in developing and implementing these laws and policies.

4. Strengthen the implementation of the adopted legislative acts and develop adequate monitoring mechanisms.

5. Facilitate dialogue between CSOs and state authorities to allow the effective involvement of CSOs with the goal of a gender-sensitive response to COVID-19.

6. Create mechanisms that uphold women and girls’ unrestricted access to information and communications technologies.

**Recommendations to UN Agencies and International Organizations**

1. Include women experts in all meetings on peace and security.

2. Facilitate opportunities for dialogue across conflict lines, with meaningful participation of women on both sides.

3. Invest in the development of the skills and capacity of the media in gender and conflict sensitive reporting.

4. Support existing and new coalitions and networks which can assist IDPs, in particular IDP women, including through the provision of leadership trainings.

5. Support CSO initiatives to monitor the implementation of the governmental COVID-19 pandemic response.

**Recommendations to Donor Organizations**

1. Consult women experts, including women IDPs, when developing programming on peace and security for local civil society actors.

2. Provide financial support to organizations that have experience working with IDPs and maintain good relations with administrative structures that can support their work.

3. Invest in initiatives focused on early detection and prevention of new crises and conflicts.

4. Allocate funds to CSOs for research and analysis, to obtain accurate and gender-sensitive information on peacebuilding initiatives.

5. Allocate funds to education campaigns on reproductive health for women.