Mapping and Analysis of Peacebuilding Initiatives in Georgia

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of National and Local Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Security of Conflict-Affected Populations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Women's Organizations During the COVID-19 Pandemic</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews: Experts</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in disproportionate damage to many vulnerable groups, including internally displaced women. Issues such as barriers and challenges for women’s political participation and participation in peace processes, barriers to women’s economic empowerment, and the impact of the misuse of natural resources on women’s security and participation are still of great relevance.

With financial assistance from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the IDP Women Association (IDPWA) “Consent” and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) began this mapping 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 & Ukraine.” The goal of this mapping is to update and deepen knowledge and analysis of the peacebuilding landscape in Georgia. The mapping focuses on the areas bordering the South Ossetian/Tskhinvali region and Abkhazian territories, where the above-mentioned topics are especially relevant. The project builds on the results of previous Localization projects implemented through the cooperative effort of GNWP and IDPWA Consent and is dedicated to sustaining women’s meaningful participation in issues related to peace and human security. This report is important to understand how the peacebuilding landscape in Georgia has evolved since 2018, when a similar study was conducted by the IDPWA Consent with support from GNWP and ADA.
Georgia has experienced multiple armed conflicts on its territory, starting in the early 1990s and with the most recent war taking place in 2008. During these years, the profile and situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and conflict-affected populations in Georgia have changed significantly.

In Georgia, there are large numbers of IDPs from conflicts, including the Georgian-Ossetian conflict in 1992, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in 1993, the 1998 conflict in Gali district and the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetian/Tskhinvali region. According to data from the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, there are more than 290,000 IDPs, while the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center gives the number of 304,925 persons, and the National Statistics Office of Georgia’s “Women and Men in Georgia” 2020 report counts 286,000 internally displaced persons. At the same time, 116 villages in 10 municipalities have the status of “conflict-affected,” which captures an additional 45,000 persons affected by the conflict. In total, almost 9.5 per cent of the population of Georgia is directly affected by the conflict.

The conflicts have led to the occupation of almost 20 per cent of the country’s territory and massive internal displacement.

Currently, Georgia is facing unresolved conflicts in a situation of protracted displacement while being in a ”slow” situation in terms of aid. This is associated with the fatigue of donors, waning attention from the international community and a lack of understanding of the IDP-specific challenges. The traumatization and problems faced by IDPs remain present but are faced with a weak response. This is especially the case when the international community is expected to provide immediate assistance and response in the case of emergencies, while national governments carry the responsibility for the long-term support of IDPs.

In Georgia, over 53 per cent of the conflict-affected populations are women and girls. Women and girls continue to suffer from gender-specific challenges and impacts, including from poverty, lack of inclusion and participation, gender inequality, and domestic and gender-based violence (GBV). Women often carry a double or triple burden with compounding gendered expectations to be caregivers, contributors to the household income, and active community members. During periods of military activity, women are expected to take on the role of breadwinner, and in many cases, continue to do so after periods of heightened conflict have passed.

2 Country Profile – Georgia, Displacement Data, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021,
Many qualified internally displaced women cannot exercise their skills or find decent work, instead being employed at low-pay and low-skill jobs. An increasing number of women have left the country due to the lack of employment opportunities and targeting foreign markets with demand for women workers.

GBV rates are increasing in the general population of Georgia. There are no disaggregated statistics for GBV in IDP communities specifically, but according to participants, nearly half of internally displaced families have encountered GBV. A recent World Bank study (2017) did not find a direct link between unresolved conflicts and the increase in GBV and domestic violence. However, they concluded that the decrease in economic opportunities due to the situation of conflict directly increased the level of violence in conflict-affected families. Among the main reasons for this relationship cited by respondents were stress, illness, lack of employment of perpetrators (55 per cent) and an overall increase in violent activity (22 per cent). These factors are more present for those living in close proximity to the conflict division line, as reported by 35 per cent of respondents. This correlation is mainly due to the increased lack of physical security and impunity of perpetrators, unresolved conflict, kidnapping of people and “borderization.” Russia’s “borderization” policy comprises a series of actions to silently encroach on Georgian territory through the installation of illegal border fences and markers that further violate Georgia’s sovereignty and human rights.

Psychological traumatization over prolonged periods results in anxiety and fear, lack of confidence and a variety of somatic diseases. A 2013 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey of “Social and Economic Vulnerability in Georgia” showed that the health status of IDPs is very poor, with disease profiles that are different from the local population. The study also found that IDPs have six times less access to food, salaries that are twice as small, and twice as high unemployment levels when compared to the local population. Internally displaced women often occupy traditional roles — caring for families, including children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. They deal with challenges such as taking on a breadwinner role while avoiding negative responses from men in the household, supporting traumatized children and ensuring their access to quality education, and supporting husbands who are often traumatized and unable to work and support families.

New challenges connected to the COVID-19 pandemic affect the general population, but also carry specific impacts for IDPs, as highlighted in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s report on the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia.

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The findings of this report are based on data collected through focus groups discussions (FGDs) conducted in conflict-affected areas (Gardabani, Gori and Zugdidi municipalities) and individual interviews with grassroots women and youth. FGDs were conducted by specially trained members of IDPWA Consent. In Gori and Zugdidi, research participants included internally displaced women and women from villages adjacent to the conflict division line (ABL). Gardabani was examined as a case where IDPs live in a community with ethnic minorities. This municipality is located in Eastern Georgia, where attention and assistance to IDPs are less than in regions with a high density of IDPs.

The researchers also interviewed representatives of think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Members of Parliament and researchers from the Public Defender’s Office, who presented an intermediate report on the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

The following document introduces a short overview of the research findings.

**METHODODOLOGY**

The findings of this report are based on data collected through focus groups discussions (FGDs) conducted in conflict-affected areas (Gardabani, Gori and Zugdidi municipalities) and individual interviews with grassroots women and youth. FGDs were conducted by specially trained members of IDPWA Consent. In Gori and Zugdidi, research participants included internally displaced women and women from villages adjacent to the conflict division line (ABL). Gardabani was examined as a case where IDPs live in a community with ethnic minorities. This municipality is located in Eastern Georgia, where attention and assistance to IDPs are less than in regions with a high density of IDPs.

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**INTERVIEWS**

In total, 141 individuals participated in FGDs and individual interviews.

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: ZUGDIDI**

Two FGDs of 10 and 15, respectively, were conducted in Zugdidi. The age of the respondents ranged between 18 and 63 years. The FGDs included participants of varying socio-economic backgrounds, persons belonging to IDP and host communities, persons with various employment statuses and persons belonging to socially vulnerable families. Chart 2 provides a summary of the social and employment statuses of the research participants. The participants of this FGD included 15 IDPs, 17 persons with higher education, 19 employed persons employed, six unemployed persons and seven socially vulnerable persons.

Participants expressed several positions regarding women’s participation in formal and informal negotiations. The dominant position within the first FGD was that no barriers to participation exist, while the second FGD members expressed that encouraging women to engage in formal negotiations at a local or international level requires the assistance of women mediators.

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7 ABL – former Administrative border line – in case of Georgia ABL divided South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region from the rest of controlled by central government Shida Kartli, and another ABL divides Abkhazia (concretely, Gali district) from Zugdidi municipality, which is con-trolled by central Government

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PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES IN GEORGIA
Interestingly, both Zugdidi FGDs suggested different obstacles to participation in peacebuilding activities.

According to the first FGD, stereotypes, lack of needed skills and a lack of access to education constitute the main obstacles to peacebuilding, whilst the second FGD pointed to misuse of women’s resources. However, the Russian occupation of Georgia was named as one of the obstacles by both FGDs.

Concerning women’s role in peace negotiations, respondents claimed that women do not possess enough education, self-confidence or financial resources to participate. Some participants expressed that NGOs should contribute to women’s material and financial reinforcement. Given that job loss was named as the primary obstacle to women’s economic empowerment, participants stated that the issue that needs to be addressed first is job creation. According to participants, there should be a platform to easily connect employees and employers. As for long-term plans, it was recommended to create grants for small business revival, low interest-rate loans and free professional training for women.

The majority of women in FGDs had heard about the National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS, and some knew about Local Action Plans (LAPs) (see Chart 3). However, women did not clearly understand what NAPs and LAPs mean in practical terms. Some women knew that the state had conducted special training on economic empowerment in Samegrelo, but none participated in this training.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: GORI

The FGD in Gori consisted of eight women, whose ages ranged between 30 and 61 years. Among the Gori respondents, seven had higher education and four were employed. When discussing possible means for women’s participation in peacebuilding activities, the dominant opinion in this FGD was that the state needs to promote women’s engagement. The leading position about the influence of women’s participation in peace processes was that women’s participation at the non-governmental level in informal negotiations has no impact. According to respondents, the factors that hinder participation in peacebuilding activities are the COVID-19 pandemic, gendered stereotypes, lack of necessary education, and the refusal to change the composition of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

Factors hindering women’s economic empowerment were believed to be a refusal to finance women-related projects, job losses, lack of information and limited access to public transportation. The main obstacle to political engagement was considered to be men’s dominance and mocking attitude toward women. One of the respondents also claimed that since women want to hide their private life from the public, they tend to avoid political involvement. The participants believed that the existence of women decision-makers would encourage more women to engage at a political level. In order for women to participate in peace negotiations, they must have appropriate skills and education and the political will of the state to include them.
According to Gori respondents, solutions to critical economic issues include grants for the revival of small businesses, low-interest loans and free professional courses for women. Both long-term and short-term plans require material and financial resources.

In the Gori FGD, women were informed about existing formats of negotiations, although they did not know the specifics and differences between Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the IPRM. Participants from Ergneti village of the Gori municipality tended to be more aware of the IPRM, as meetings in Ergneti still are conducted, while meetings in the city of Gali near Zugdidi are suspended. Regarding GID and IPRM meetings, women mentioned that although the participants are open to discussing problems in negotiations, they generally do not mention concrete issues to be addressed in the formal format or in informal talks outside the negotiation table.

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: GARDABANI**

Gardabani belongs to the Kvemo Kartli region, where the population is quite diverse in terms of ethnic origin and religious affiliation. 11,650 people reside in Gardabani, and the ethnic composition includes Georgians (54.2 per cent), Azerbaijanis (43.5 per cent), Armenians (7 per cent) and other minority groups. IDPs in Gardabani are from populations displaced from both the war over Abkhazia (1993) and South Ossetia (2008). After the war in 2008, IDPs were settled in houses already populated by Azerbaijani people, which required huge efforts toward their integration due to the lack of a common language, different religions and traditions, and the prevalence of trauma from displacement.

IDPWA has worked with the women and children from this IDP community since 2009. For years, it has provided language courses held on Sundays for children from both communities and supported initiatives and projects from which women fostered a peaceful co-existence. However, the problem of early marriage is still present in the Azerbaijani community despite tightened legislation. In the Gardabani IDP community, early marriages continue to be registered and justified by parents due to difficult socio-economic conditions or “to cover existing relations.”

On 25 September 2020, IDPWA “Consent” organized a meeting in one of its target locations — the Gardabani IDP Compact Center, where it managed an FGD in the frames of two different projects. These projects were the “Women and Girls against COVID-19” project conducted by UN Women and the “Women-Focused Networks - Women Rights are Human Rights” project which is oriented at the creation of women-focused networks in the South Caucasus and strengthening women living in rural areas, which is conducted by Crisis Simulation for Peace (CRISP). The FGD was supervised by Marina Pochkhua and UN Women Expert Maia Avaliani.

During the FGD, IDPs and conflict-affected women discussed several relevant issues.

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They emphasized topics that not only describe the overall problems of women living in the Compact Center, but also challenges that emerged during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include:

- The absence or unavailability of social assistance programs. Several women shared that they had initially received government assistance. However, for the last 12 years, they have remained out of the government’s focus and received minimal assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. When mentioning state compensations for families that lost their source of income due to the pandemic, it was established that some Compact Center residents could not receive the compensation due to their self-employed status, as they were not able to submit proof of payment for work from the bank. The women also shared that state social programs did not cover the unemployed portion of the population. As a result, women were left without any source of income until they reached the retirement age of 60.

- A lack of information prevents the Gardabani Compact Center residents from acquiring complete information about existing state assistance programs. According to the women, this has repeatedly been the reason why residents of Gardabani Compact Center were late in registering for the assistance that was intended for them.

- Offering local projects without assessment of the needs of the region resulted in project proposals that were not targeting the correct context and were thus meaningless to implement.

- Infrastructural issues are prevalent in the center. Many families live in 12-square-meter apartments. Since such apartments are already legalized, the state has no obligation toward their improvement.

- Education-related problems, particularly those related to connectivity and access to the internet. Despite the fact that fiber-optic internet is provided to Gardabani, families often cannot afford the initial cost of connection or the following payments. This hinders students from attending online classes. Another problem affecting online education is the inability of families to afford the technical equipment needed for children’s education, which also worsens the existing situation.

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, the women participants also discussed the improvement of the situation of early marriages and better integration with the Azerbaijani part of the population.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS: GRASSROOTS

In addition to the FGDs, 103 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted. The interviewee’s ages ranged from 18 to 72 years. Among the individual interviewees in Zugdidi, 60 were IDPs, 21 were local residents, 50 were employed, 42 were
unemployed and 15 identified as socially vulnerable.\(^\text{(10)}\)

It was interesting to observe how respondents’ opinions on certain topics differed between villages and communities of the same municipality. In order to make these differences (as well as similarities) visible, an analysis of received answers from each village or community is presented below.

**Rukhi, Rike, Anaklia and Zugdidi**

Seven of 35 interviewees from Rukhi, Rike, Anaklia and the city of Zugdidi believed that the non-governmental sector contributes to their engagement in formal and informal peace negotiations. According to nine interviewees, a woman must possess education, drive and readiness in order to engage in negotiations, while five interviewees emphasized the need for the will of the state to include women. Six women claimed that society must encourage their involvement in the above processes. 28 interviewees viewed the impact of women’s participation in peace processes positively.

The most commonly reported factors preventing women’s participation in peacebuilding activities were stereotypes, lack of motivation, skills and/or opportunities and lack of education. However, according to four respondents, no such obstacles to women’s participation in peace processes exist. As for the obstacles to political involvement, respondents highlighted family challenges, lack of knowledge, lack of access to the internet, no desire to participate and poor access to funds. 34 respondents viewed the involvement of women in peacebuilding activities positively at different levels, including the national level, community level and grassroots level (including women-led advocacy and peace negotiations).

Factors identified as hindering economic empowerment included stereotypes, limited education, lack of support from family members and the preferential treatment of men. Only one respondent named unequal pay between men and women as a hindering factor. According to Zugdidi interviewees, dealing with the country’s economic crisis requires the financing or co-financing of projects oriented toward solving economic issues. To encourage the creation of new workplaces, professional trainings for women must be arranged. As for long-term incentives, there must be continuous encouragement of women’s economic engagement, change of banking regulations (e.g. low interest-rate loans) and better promotion of small businesses. According to the majority of respondents, the existence of human, material and financial resources is essential for the implementation of these recommendations.

According to the Public Defender’s mid-term report, local governments mostly depend on the activity of donors and nongovernmental organizations. Moreover, the responses regarding women’s political participation given by the respondents are supported by the fact that women are less likely to participate in meetings held by municipalities and local communities.

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\(^\text{(10)}\)According to the definition provided by the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, a socially vulnerable person receives assistance from the state to create basic living conditions. Socially vulnerable persons are registered in the unified data base of socially vulnerable families.
Koki and Orsantia

Among the 20 interviewees from Koki and Orsantia villages, two positions were held regarding women’s participation in formal and informal negotiations. Some participants noted that women are free to engage in such negotiations and must show interest and initiative. Most women interviewees believed that women’s participation in negotiations positively impacts the process. Only one of 20 respondents believed that women’s participation does not impact the process. According to the respondents, the main obstacle to women’s participation in peacebuilding activities is not having relevant education. Five women considered domestic situations as another obstacle, while two others named gender inequality.

According to 12 interviewees, the main factors hindering women’s economic empowerment are job loss and a lack of finances. Others considered a lack of education, and only one interviewee named a rejection of gender balance in workplaces by employers. Principal barriers to political involvement were believed to be a lack of relevant education and a lack of desire to participate in politics. Only one respondent named gendered stereotypes as a hindering factor. Eleven respondents claimed that women’s participation in peacebuilding on the political level is crucial and that more women must be appointed to decision-making positions. According to the interviewees, economic issues that need to be addressed are the provision of women with products and COVID-19 related hygiene means (short-term measures) and financing projects oriented toward the development of the agricultural sector (long-term). Financial resources are required to achieve both short-term and long-term goals.

Based on the mid-term report of the Public Defender’s Office based on the May to July 2019 research period, the representation of women in decision-making positions in the Ministry of Defense of Georgia has dropped by 23 per cent compared to previous years, whilst the representation of women in peace negotiations has decreased by 30 per cent.

Ingiri

Of 21 interviewees in Ingiri, 10 felt more meetings and negotiations are needed to engage women in formal and informal negotiations. Four women believed it necessary to single out and encourage women leaders in the community, while three respondents felt women must show action and initiative in order for them to participate. Other respondents refrained from answering this question. Sixteen women believed the participation of women in formal and informal negotiations positively affects the process, four claimed that it has a partial effect, and the others refrained from answering this question.

Barriers to participating in peacebuilding activities, according to 11 respondents, include distrust and negative attitudes toward women.
The second obstacle is believed to be women’s inactivity due to lack of motivation, skills and/or opportunities. Only two out of 21 respondents named a lack of information and an unstable environment in the country as relevant factors.

As for political participation, the dominant hindering factors noted include a lack of relevant education and domestic challenges. Seven respondents considered a lack of interest in politics as a hindering factor. Unlike Koki and Orsantia respondents, who claimed that women must be actively engaged in peacebuilding activities at the national level, Ingiri respondents believed that women must be active on the community level. According to Ingiri interviewees, the main obstacles to economic empowerment are an unstable economic environment and unemployment. Only one of 21 women named a lack of information as a barrier. For this group, priority economic goals that must be achieved are conducting free professional training for women and providing humanitarian support. The provision of employment for women is a long-term goal that requires human and financial resources.

Ganmukhuri

Ganmukhuri interviewees discussed several different ideas regarding women’s participation in formal and informal negotiations, including engaging in a diplomatic format (at a formal level) and conducting trainings with the help of nongovernmental organizations. According to the respondents, women’s role in the above-mentioned formats positively and significantly impacts peace processes. Notably, nine out of 17 women refrained from answering this question. The main barriers to engaging in peacebuilding activities are viewed to be domestic issues and a lack of relevant education and information. Three women named negative attitudes toward women and gender-based stereotypes as additional barriers.

The obstacles to political participation are believed to be a lack of education, finances and domestic responsibilities. As for women’s role in peacebuilding activities, the majority of the respondents did not see women present at the national level. Several different opinions were expressed regarding their participation in international advocacy. On this level, some of the respondents did not see women at all, whilst others considered their role as visible and important.

Various factors hindering economic empowerment were named by the Ganmurkhi respondents, including neglecting women’s role in economic activities, the inactivity of women due to lack of motivation, lack of skills, familial responsibilities, discrimination and lack of education. Once again, several respondents refrained from providing answers. Economic issues that must be addressed were similar to those expressed by interviewees in Koki and Orsantia, including the provision of humanitarian support and organizing financial literacy and professional training for women.
IDP Community of “Vector”

According to the majority of the interviewees in the IDP community “Vector” in the Zugdidi municipality, women’s engagement in formal and informal negotiations requires action. Two respondents claimed women’s participation is possible in a diplomatic format, while only one woman believed that nongovernmental organizations could encourage their participation. All interviewees believed women’s participation has a positive impact on peace processes. The main obstacles to women’s participation in peacebuilding activities were believed to be domestic and care responsibilities and stereotypes. Four interviewees believed that no such barriers exist.

Five respondents were not interested in political participation, while the other five believed they did not possess relevant education. When speaking on women’s participation in promoting peace at a political level and in international advocacy, the majority of the respondents considered women’s role as important. Respondents viewed women’s engagement at the community level as limited and saw their increased involvement as required in peace negotiations.

According to five respondents, barriers to economic empowerment do not exist. However, several respondents believed that barriers like domestic responsibilities and stereotypes exist. The issues that were primarily addressed on women’s economic welfare were similar to those expressed in Koki, Orsantia and Ganmukhuri, including training on project proposal writing for women, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and agriculture-oriented projects. Financial and technical resources are needed to accomplish short-term and long-term economic goals.

ROLE OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTION PLANS ON WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY

Georgia was the first post-Soviet country to approve and implement a WPS NAP in 2011. After this, two more NAPs were approved and implemented from 2016 to 2017 and 2018 to 2020. However, the NAPs were targeted at the national level and were thus generic, not taking into account the specific needs and contexts of each conflict-affected municipality.

For instance, municipalities like Zugdidi and Gori, located alongside the ABLs, are home to a large number of IDPs. Tskhaltubo municipality has the highest percentage of IDPs but is not close to the ABL. In the Kaspi municipality, most of the conflict-affected population lives in villages adjacent to the ABL. While similar in their make-up of IDPs, each location’s context and specific needs are quite different.
To contextualize NAPs to the local needs and priorities, it is imperative to localize the NAP actions and activities to the local contexts. In 2017, the first workshops on NAP localization were conducted in Georgia by IDPWA with the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and supported by the Austrian Development Agency.

LOCALIZATION

IDPWA has been working in the Zugdidi region since 1998 and cooperating with local authorities and non-governmental organizations throughout its years of activities. Since 2017, IDPWA has conducted work on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and WPS. In 2017, IDPWA arranged a civil forum in Zugdidi with GNWP and UN Women, along with other governmental and non-governmental institutions that already were, or should have been, engaged in the process of empowering internally displaced and conflict-affected women. In Gori, the same workshop was conducted by IDPWA and GNWP, which started the localization process in Shida Kartli. In 2018, IDPWA, together with the Fund “Sukhumi” and Women’s Information Center, commenced the localization process of UNSCR 1325 in 10 conflict-prone villages with the support of UN Women.

Georgia’s third NAP on WPS included “localization” in its planned activities and paid greater attention to the role of municipalities. However, current research shows that not all women are familiar with the NAP and LAPs. Often, they do not understand how the implementation of the existing NAP and LAPs can solve their problems in tangible ways at the community level.

Since 2018, several local organizations (Women’s Movement Imedi, Merkuri, Ksenoni) were also actively involved in the promotion of LAPs. Here, it is necessary to stress the role of local government. Despite the fact that all municipalities were obliged to prepare LAPs on gender equality and include provisions on UNSCR 1325, very few municipalities used this opportunity to increase the participation of women and girls. Zugdidi municipality was leading this initiative. Their gender-sensitive and disaggregated data allowed for previously impossible analyses that elucidated the need for new programs for the elderly and women survivors of GBV.
Due to the closure of the checkpoint, women who were living in Gali and registered as IDPs were unable to get their pensions in Zugdidi to purchase necessary medicine. After long negotiations, in the fall of 2020, these pensioners were allowed to visit Zugdidi on a three-day, monthly organized trips overseen by the UNHCR, Russian border guards and Georgian authorities. A similar agreement was reached for students so they could return to universities after the holidays. There were also other challenges, as many former residents of Gali relied on subsistence farming from their lands beyond Russian/Abkhaz control. These individuals were not allowed to travel to Gali in the summer for their harvest, which is necessary to survive the winter.

Additional difficulties were created by COVID-19 regulations. Residents of Gali coming to the controlled territory of Georgia needed to quarantine for at least five days. Many individuals crossed the ABL for only one or two-day trips; these trips were short due to security considerations and individuals could not wait extra days for their required test results. This burden limited their ability to move freely and such barriers to formal crossings have led to dangerous informal methods of crossing the border.

The ability to go from Gali (controlled by Russian/Abkhaz forces) to Zugdidi (controlled by the central Georgian government) and back is dependent on several factors.

First, the checkpoint must be open and people allowed to cross. During the 2020-2021 period, the checkpoint on the Enguri bridge was often closed due to COVID-19, elections in Georgia and in self-proclaimed Abkhazia, and forest fires in the winter of 2020 to 2021, among other limiting events.
In Samegrelo, the division line follows the Enguri River, which serves as a natural obstacle to crossing the ABL. Many people do not have documents issued by de facto authorities, including women and the elderly, yet still need to cross the river to go from Gali to Zugdidi and back. Crossing the river is dangerous, as the hydropower station activities can increase the water flow. During one interview, a woman shared video evidence of people crossing this dangerous river. NGOs appealed to the State Minister for the Reconciliation Apparatus, the Parliamentary Temporary Commission on Restoration of Territorial Integrity and De-occupation, and other agents repeatedly to alleviate COVID-19 restrictions and allow for safer border crossing.

Unfortunately, this issue was not resolved for a number of months. It took several cases of people drowning during attempted river crossings for authorities to revoke the quarantine requirements. One of the Inguri river cases from the spring of 2021 resulted in the death of a young couple who left their children temporarily with elderly relatives, leaving the children as orphans. This tragic case forced the central government to change the regulations and accept proposals from NGOs, who had long been advocating for this method of conflict transformation.

Despite the changes in regulations, some limitations remained. To cross the checkpoint, it was necessary to have passes issued by “de facto” Abkhaz authorities, which the majority of IDPs who originated from Gali do not have. Thus, people continued to use informal ways to go from Gali to Zugdidi and back.\footnote{Only those IDPs who are originally from the Gali district (bordering controlled territory) could be accepted from crossing de facto division line, but only when they possessed documents issued by de facto authorities. Other IDPs are not allow to enter Abkhazia territory, controlled by Russia and de facto authorities}

In 2020, Russia expanded its borderization policy from Shida Kartli to Samegrelo, continuing to destabilize human security in the region. Before the expanded policy, children would cross the division line to study in Georgian schools in Pakhulani (Tsalnejikha district) and Ganmukhuri (Zugdidi district). This travel was allowed due to agreements between the conflicting parties. However, in 2020, the same students were unable to continue studying in Georgian schools, which limited their opportunities to study in their native language since Gali district schools operate solely in the Russian language.

Women from KIIIs in Shida Kartli commented on the sudden appearance of posters with the phrase “Entrance prohibited – territory of South Ossetia” on their land plots. They felt very frustrated, and their existing psychological burden severely increased. Women and young girls discussed threats related to lack of transportation in evening hours, lack of children’s institutions such as kindergartens and poorly equipped ambulances. In some ambulances, no equipment or medicines are available (for example, in Chorchana). In some villages, ambulances are distant and not available to
the elderly (Zardiantkari in the Gori district, and Karapila and Saribari in the Kaspi district).

An especially difficult situation has been ongoing in Akhalgori district, which was occupied in 2008 and previously controlled by the central government. The district is not only fully isolated from Georgia-controlled territory but also from South Ossetian/Tskhinvali region. A road was built to attempt to connect them, but it passes through dangerous mountain regions, making it inaccessible for sick individuals and the elderly. There have been several cases of death while attempting to traverse the road. The checkpoint to cross into Georgian-controlled territory was closed in the fall of 2019 and continued to be inaccessible throughout the pandemic. In many cases, residents could not reach Tskhinvali for medical facilities, which resulted in multiple deaths because they could not receive medical assistance in time. A special case of denied medical care was of civic activist and blogger Tamar Mearakishvili, who was called to court five times and prohibited from leaving Akhalgori by the de facto prosecutor’s office.

This case attracted the attention of many NGOs and international organizations. Due to very difficult socio-economic conditions, many Georgian families decided to leave Akhalgori and move to the government-controlled territory, which led to the stark depopulation of Akhalgori.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic and related curfews brought new challenges for women and the general population. The prohibition of movement left several villages without access to food and everyday products as they did not have grocery stores (for example, Ergneti village could not get bread for three days, as there were no cars allowed and no shops in the village). Furthermore, villages were not equipped with ATMs. As a result, women and the elderly could not pay for communal facilities, get pensions or participate in financial activities more broadly.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women activists demonstrated a readiness to help communities and increase their resilience. Women’s organizations were, as always, on the frontline of crisis response. In many communities, IDP women and women from conflict-affected villages created resilience groups, which helped vulnerable community members overcome difficult periods. Women organized groups to help the elderly and persons with disabilities, assist children with education issues, and help distribute food, humanitarian items, bed linens, seeds, and other necessities.
In Zugdidi, the women’s organization Tanaziari started working as soon as the pandemic began, providing medical consultations and assistance. Later, they opened a 24-hour pediatric center, which was a pivotal resource for women who cared for children.

The organization Women’s Peace Movement ‘Imedi’ assisted women in eight conflict-affected villages by preparing face masks and distributing small agricultural supplies (with support from the Turkish Development Agency, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Red Cross). The distribution of masks to vulnerable families in conflict-affected villages and IDP centers free of charge not only supported their physical security, but also positively influenced their psychological status as people felt more protected.

The women’s organization, Cultural and Humanitarian Center “Sokhumi” based in Kutaisi, conducted several studies about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of women and highlighted emerging challenges related to the loss of jobs in the informal sector, problems faced by medical personnel and the increase of GBV. The studies were shared with the government for advocacy purposes.

The women-led NGO Sapari and women’s organization Hera XXI conducted advocacy campaigns to create better security conditions for women victims of domestic violence and to protect the reproductive rights of women and young girls.

In parallel, these organizations were conducting international advocacy related to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Georgia.

With support from the European Union (EU) Instrument Rapid Reaction Mechanism, IDPWA, Women Entrepreneur Fund and Women’s Information Center (WIC), a joint project was implemented to increase the resilience and self-reliance of women. WIC assisted many women with psychological consultations and information dissemination about assistance to victims of domestic violence. IDPWA helped women self-organize in more than 50 communities to raise awareness about resilience, organize trainings and seminars, and organize projects supporting employment and livelihoods.

IDPWA and WIC, in partnership with GNWP and with the financial support of ADA, conducted educational seminars for journalists and young women peace activists on peacebuilding and UNSCR 1325. WIC conducted a media competition that raised awareness among journalists about peacebuilding, WPS and women’s participation.

During the pandemic, IDPWA continued to conduct its “leader’s academy” program, which prepares women to participate actively in decision-making and peacebuilding. This program has increased the number of activists in all conflict-affected regions of Georgia.
With support from Bread for the World and GNWP, IDPWA supported women’s initiatives in Georgia and the neighboring countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan. These initiatives successfully built networks among women activists and organized training for women in cybersecurity. Additionally, it provided women with free internet and technological devices.

**INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS: EXPERTS**

In this project, IDPWA gained additional information regarding women’s participation in peacebuilding activities by conducting individual interviews with leading experts and public servants, such as Nino Kalandarishvili (Director of Institute of Conflict and Nationalism Studies), Ekiko Bendeliani (Coordinator of the Peacebuilding of Youth Project), Ekaterine Gamakharia (expert from the Cultural and Humanitarian Foundation “Sokhumi”), Guguli Maghradze (Professor of Psychology and Member of Parliament from ruling party), Lia Gigauri (Deputy State Minister of Reconciliation and Civil Equality) and Sopho Russetski (Leading Specialist of Gender Department in the Public Defender Office). IDPWA also used the meetings with representatives of the Geneva International Discussions (GID), to discuss the consequences of the 2008 conflict in Georgia.

When discussing women’s engagement in peacebuilding activities in formal and informal formats, several opinions were emphasized. First, participants emphasized that women can become peacebuilders through involvement with NGOs, not just through formal methods. Second, participants stressed that women should hold leading positions within official political structures. Respondents mentioned several types of women’s involvement in peacebuilding processes based on their practical experiences. Some examples given included: face-to-face meetings between conflicting parties mediated by international organizations with the participation of women representatives; participation in relevant fora of internally displaced women or those living in the villages adjacent to the conflict division line; and the presence of several women in the GID. The respondents also suggested women are more present during informal meetings compared to formal meetings, where instead of sitting around the decision-making table, they are sat around the room behind the negotiator. According to all respondents, women’s participation in formal and informal negotiations would bring positive results.
All public servants mentioned the importance of grassroots women’s participation in consultative meetings. One high-level official stated that during one of the meetings, 70 per cent of women’s proposals were verbalized during the GID and IPRM. However, no concrete women’s initiatives implemented during previous years were named. It was also stated that women’s participation in the GID is extremely important. In discussing why Georgia’s commitment to have 50 per cent of women represented at negotiation tables is not implemented, public servants mentioned that participants are selected due to their position and experience in the responsible government agencies, and there are no women currently in these positions.

According to expert interviews, factors hindering women from political participation are:

- Lack of support (from families, society and government)
- Inadequate education
- Limited financial independence
- Priority of satisfying basic needs
- Non-recognition of women from the professional point of view, mostly by men in decision-making positions and those who believe women belong in the household
- Presence of men in leading positions in political parties
- Unstable political, economic and human security environments

All expert respondents voiced the importance of women’s involvement in peacebuilding processes at all levels.
RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Georgia:

- Increase the number of consultations with women peacebuilders and civic activists.
- Implement commitments concerning the percentage of women participants in GID and IPRM. To reach this goal, it may be necessary to revise the principles of the selection of participants for the GID and IPRM and promote women to positions that allow them to participate in such negotiations.
- Increase the number of civil servants trained in negotiations and mediation skills, and organize joint training for civil servants and women community leaders.

To conflict-affected municipalities:

- Train staff on topics related to conflict transformation, civic participation and women’s participation.
- Familiarize mayors and other municipal leaders with the WPS Agenda.
- Include issues related to WPS in municipal development plans and plans of the Gender Equality Council.
- Include women’s proposals in government budgets.
- Provide budgetary support for WPS LAPs and ensure monitoring and evaluation processes are included in the implementation of these plans.
- Support NGO women’s groups created in communities and give them advisory roles and opportunities for participation at the municipal level.

To international and local NGOs:

- Support the education of women on the WPS agenda.
- Support women’s economic empowerment through the provision of training and financing projects that target self-reliance and small businesses.
- Organize open spaces where women can hold direct dialogues with decision-makers.
- Support the localization of the WPS NAP in conflict-affected municipalities.
- Increase the number of projects that directly involve conflict-affected and internally displaced women.

To women activists:

- Increase participation in efforts to localize the WPS agenda.
- Actively engage in work with municipalities with the goal of increasing women’s meaningful participation.