

# EVERYDAY LIVES AND MULTIFACETED OPPRESSION OF MUSLIM WOMEN OF GEORGIA



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# Everyday Lives and Multifaceted Oppression of Muslim Women of Georgia

Social Justice Center

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# Introduction

## An Intersectional Study of Women

This study seeks to comprehensively describe the difficulties and obstacles faced by women of ethnic and religious minorities in the region of Adjara as well as the Marneuli municipality in Georgia. It is based on research that was inspired by the idea that people's lives are not impacted by a single axis of power, rather, power should be analyzed as intersectional. In Georgia, the political and economic systems, ethno-religious nationalism and patriarchy are the dominant systems of power that impact the daily lives and conditions of the population. By describing the everyday experiences of Georgian Azerbaijani and Adjarian Muslim women, the study shows how these existing social systems affect people's lives and what kind of axes of power create daily obstacles for them.

The intersectional approach argues for a multifaceted analysis of power and its influence on people's lives and experiences (Collins and Bilge 2016, 2). The political and social systems underpinning events cannot be explained by a single element; they are always driven by different axes and foundations of power. These axes of power often intersect, cooperate or influence each other. Analyzing people's daily lives, concerns and problems through the lens of intersectionality, therefore, generates a more nuanced and complex perspective. Proponents of the intersectional approach maintain that social divisions such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, dis/ability, etc. collectively create systems of power that influence people's social positions and status (*ibid*, 4).

Intersectionality also underscores that there is no uniform understanding of "womanhood" in all groups and contexts; women face different challenges not only in different cultures and societies, but within the same society as well. The category of "woman", therefore, is actually quite diverse and heterogeneous, since various groups of women have different access to power, experience diverse types of oppression and are differently positioned towards men and each other (Mohanty 1984; Narayan 1998; Hooks 2015; Abu-Lughod 2016; Lorde 2021). As a result, it should be kept in mind that women hold diverse positions in everyday life and face different challenges due to the various forms of power acting upon them. The intersectional approach in itself, originated from the ideas of primarily African-American feminists who voiced the concern that the problems and oppression described by white women were not universal within American society because their views only represented the experiences of white, middle-class women.

White, Western feminists imagined their oppression to be universal and viewed the issues faced by other groups (like women of color in their own society and women living outside the West) through a Western, white lens, which prevented them from accurately describing women's lives (Mohanty 1984;

Narayan 1998). The movement started by white, middle-class women was blind to and could not voice the circumstances and problems that black women usually faced. For example, black women maintained that class and skin color were both important factors in their day-to-day lives, along with their gender (Hooks 2000; Lorde 2021). They argued that focusing solely on gender erases certain groups of women, such as poor women and women of non-dominant ethnic background, from the feminist agenda, and the broad masses of women are left out of the women's movements altogether (Crenshaw 1989). According to African-American feminists, for a multifaceted analysis of women's lives, it is necessary to identify and describe their different positioning within the diverse axes of power (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) shaping society (Collins and Bilge 2016; Lorde 2021).

This is why advocates of the intersectional analysis argue that it is misleading to declare one element of power as the dominant mechanism of oppression. Rather, it is important to analyze all the axes of power simultaneously and understand how people are embedded and configured within their 'matrix of domination' (Collins 1991). Additionally, the proponents of intersectionality situate the groups subjected to multiple forces of domination at the center of their research because this method reveals not only the essence of power, but also the intersections of its multiple axes (*ibid.*).

### The Three Major Axes of Power in Georgia

The majority of Georgia's population lives in poverty, thereby making material hardships born out of the economic system one of the major axes of power.<sup>12</sup> Even the so-called Georgian middle class is becoming increasingly impoverished due to over-indebtedness, ever-increasing housing prices and low wages. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an expectation that the volatile situation created during the *transition* would eventually stabilize, while people employed in the informal sector would gradually move to the formal sector as capitalism steadily replaced the older socialist system (Verdery 2003; Pedersen 2011; Knudsen and Frederiksen 2015;). However, the middle class is now becoming economically almost as precarious as those below the poverty line. Meanwhile, the lower classes often live without even the most basic benefits, that are supposed to be their social right, like healthcare, education and basic infrastructure<sup>3</sup>. In such an economic and political environment, the social groups living in the periphery like the Adjarians residing in the highland villages and the

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<sup>1</sup> On.ge [2021](#)  
Social Service Agency [2021](#)  
UNICEF [2018](#)

<sup>2</sup> GeoStat 2021 [\(a\)](#), [\(b\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF [2018](#)

Georgian Azerbaijanis inhabiting the non-Georgian-speaking villages are even more vulnerable, susceptible and deprived of even the bare minimum of the most fundamental public goods.

Georgian ethno-religious nationalism, which originated in the late 1980s and became the dominant ideology in the 1990s (Jones 2013), is the second major axis of power that significantly affects the lives of ethnic and religious minorities. During this period, civil wars erupted in Georgia and various ethnic minorities fled the Georgian territory. Ethnic confrontations that occurred in several towns in the 1990s have traumatic and tangible consequences for certain groups till this day. Due to the dominant position assumed by ethno-religious nationalism in Georgian society today, ethnic and religious minorities are often labeled as strangers, guests, and sometimes even enemies, despite the official recognition of the principle of equality within the legislative framework. Ethno-religious nationalism represents the ethnic and religious majority in Georgia as a group that deserves more privilege, while other groups become a “problem” that the Georgian state must “deal with.” Although the Constitution of Georgia does not differentiate between Georgian citizens on the basis of ethnicity, ethno-religious nationalist ideas are so dominant that they become an integral part of the everyday language of government officials, and they even appear in the teaching materials used in schools, including history textbooks<sup>4</sup>. These rhetorical and political practices exclude certain groups from realizing the full potential of their Georgian citizenship. The inequalities based on ethno-religious nationalism get intertwined with the hierarchies created by Georgia's economic and political system, and as a result, ethnic minority regions are even poorer and less developed than the rest of the country, and the access to education, employment and healthcare is even more difficult<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, gender is the third major axis of power in today's Georgia that can largely determine the direction of one's life, and for many women, it is often an important reason for getting fewer opportunities and facing many obstacles. Religious and ethnic minorities are not an exception, since women from such groups face even more barriers than men in terms of political participation, healthcare, education and employment.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the only aspect of the oppression of women from ethnic and religious minority groups that often gets highlighted is the culturally and religiously determined patriarchy within these communities; the patriarchy that generally prevails in Georgia as well as other facets of power that affect women's lives are often completely dismissed. It is therefore

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<sup>4</sup> TDI [2016](#)  
Radio Tavisupleba [2021](#)  
Formula [2021](#)  
GIDC [2017](#)

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF [2020](#), [2018](#)

<sup>6</sup> UN Women 2014 [\(a\)](#), [\(b\)](#)



necessary to talk about the patriarchy experienced by the women of these minority groups in a contextual manner, and discussions of their problems and oppression should take place without the use of Orientalist stereotypes. Moreover, while the concept of "freedom", or lack thereof, is often raised in the context of the oppression of Georgian Azerbaijani and Adjarian Muslim women in the country, other social, political and economic issues faced by these minority women usually remain forgotten. This is why it is important to explore the daily challenges of these women from an intersectional perspective. Such an analysis has the potential to create fairer conditions for the aforementioned groups by bringing about positive changes directed against the multidimensional domination in their everyday lives.

### Methodology of the Study

A total of 37 women were interviewed as a part of this study. Out of all the interviewees, 17 women were from the Marneuli municipality, while the remaining 20 were from Adjara, particularly the Khulo, Shuakhevi, and Keda municipalities, as well as Batumi. The vast majority of the women interviewed in Batumi had previously lived in mountainous Adjara. The questionnaire developed for the study was composed of several parts, and it was used to conduct both in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews. Out of all the interviewees, certain women are very active in their respective communities, have constant interactions with other women from different villages, and therefore, are well aware of the challenges that women generally face in these regions. The research paper is based primarily on 35 formal, structured interviews (one interview was conducted with three women simultaneously), while it also relies on both anthropological and legal knowledge acquired by the Social Justice Center about Highland Adjara and the Marneuli municipality. This knowledge was acquired through multiple research visits to various villages and interviews conducted with their residents. Moreover, it also encompasses the opinions that were voiced during the different workshops and focus groups conducted by the organization, along with the structured interviews and informal conversations with Georgian Azerbaijani and Adjarian activists, community leaders and ordinary citizens.

The majority of the respondents were selected based on the snowball sampling method, i.e. the respondents that were interviewed themselves recommended other interviewees. In addition, the study also focused on women who did not know each other and were also unknown to the research assistants prior to the interviews.

There were several factors that led to the choice of Adjara and Marneuli municipality as the eventual sites of the research. First, we wanted to select at least two minority groups as a part of the study to enable a comparative analysis. In order to gain more insight, it was important for the two groups to

have at least some kind of common characteristics. In this case, Islam immediately became the common denominator in both the groups. However, we also wanted to have a comparison between ethnic and religious minorities as a part of this study in order to see how religion and ethnicity impact each other and influence people's lives.

In Adjara, the study took place primarily in the mountainous part of the province, while also including people who had earlier lived in mountainous Adjara but were residing in Batumi at the time of the study. This choice was due to the fact that a larger number of Muslims live in highland Adjara than in the lowlands, and in any case, the entire province of Adjara would have been too large a geographical area for the scope of this study. On the other hand, the study was focused on the Marneuli Municipality because it is inhabited by approximately as many people as living in Keda, Shuakhevi and Khulo municipalities combined, and it is the largest municipality inhabited by the ethnic minorities in the province of Kvemo Kartli. In addition, the everyday lives of the people in Marneuli are also representative of the social contexts of other municipalities adjacent to Marneuli that are mostly inhabited by Georgian Azerbaijanis.

The age of the interviewees ranged from 19 to 80 years. Researchers selected women of different ages, education, experience and marital status. Some of the women are married, some are unmarried, several of them are divorced. Some women have children, some do not. Several of them are mothers of multiple children. Among interviewees there were secondary school graduates, university students, women with higher education, those with vocational education, those with incomplete secondary education and some women had a master's degree. In Marneuli municipality some interviews were conducted in Georgian and others were conducted in Azerbaijani language. Some of the women are housewives, some of them are considered to be self-employed because they have an agricultural household, some are employed, among them are precariously employed daily workers. Researchers were seeking a background diversity of respondents in order to recount the daily lives, challenges and concerns of women with different experiences. Of course, the respondents do not reflect experiences of all the women from Adjara or Marneuli, nor can they represent all women who have similar marital and employment status, education, or income. However, the research still reflects and highlights the structural problems that pose barriers to people in these regions. These experiences expose many structural barriers, gaps and obstacles that need to be further explored in the future; still, the study paints a general picture of what women's lives are like in Adjara and Marneuli municipality as of 2021.

The following research is mainly descriptive in nature, which was a deliberate choice from the authors to allow women to speak for themselves, to present their visions and concerns without our own

interpretation. Our goal is to represent, strengthen and put forward their voices in the mainstream discourse.

## **I. Healthcare, Reproductive Health, Services and Rights**

### **Marneuli Municipality**

#### **Social Problems and Healthcare**

Every single respondent from the Marneuli municipality recalled numerous incidents in recent years when either them or their loved ones could not afford to visit hospitals or doctors for a variety of reasons. With a few exceptions, the vast majority of the respondents named both the lack of funds and the high cost of health services as the primary reasons for their inability to do so. Consulting a doctor, getting medical checkups and getting diagnosed were expensive undertakings, especially when compared to Georgian wages, and therefore, the vast majority of women (with the exception of a few middle-income women and a few women who had health insurance) had trouble paying a visit to the doctor. Many interviewees pointed out that simply getting a diagnosis might cost as much as their family's monthly income or several times that amount.

More than half of the women who were surveyed mentioned that they constantly suffered from chronic pain or health-related issues. Women learnt to live with their pain because most of them were unable to consult a doctor despite suffering from health problems for a long period of time, often lasting for months or even several years. Many of them revealed that they had been constantly taking painkillers for years to cope with the pain. Most of the respondents also agreed that they were not the only ones with this problem. In their respective villages and the city of Marneuli, they knew a lot of cases where women were unable to consult a doctor due to their poverty; therefore, this seemed to be a common problem among the women of the region.

Even employed women who had their own income found it difficult to visit a doctor. The vast majority of the women surveyed stated that they had never been to a doctor for a preventive visit. They went to the doctor either when they were pregnant or had severe health problems. The only two respondents who went for regular checkups and preventive visits were not married and both had their own income. Married women who had their own income went to the doctor mainly to address their children's health-related issues, while they would visit the doctor themselves only when their health problems became too serious to ignore. One of the interviewees, a single mother, had not consulted a doctor since 2009, despite having acute health problems that have persisted for several years. She said that she only went to the doctor or a hospital when her child was sick, and even in those cases, she

borrowed money in order to take her child to the doctor's clinic. She had not been to the doctor herself for more than a decade! She said that she never had sufficient funds to get diagnosed or afford the treatment.

One of the respondents stated: *"The state generally does not invest resources in preventive care, it is so expensive that it remains inaccessible to the population ... State funding is [mainly] reserved for the most severe health problems."* She said that most of the surgeries that were funded by the state were reserved only for those occasions when a person was in an extreme health crisis and often these people die. Instead of such a scheme, she suggested, free government programs should also include preventive laboratory examinations and checkups, so that people could avoid extreme health problems.

Some of the respondents admitted that as a solution for their health problems, they had even consulted doctors with a dubious reputation only because they were much cheaper to visit. According to the respondents, sometimes such visits had turned out to be a complete waste of their money. Some of the women also recalled that such doctors with dubious reputation had actually exacerbated their health problems.

The women pointed out that apart from getting the diagnosis, they also found it difficult to deal with their health problems after they had been diagnosed. Most of the respondents blamed the high cost of medicines as an enormous barrier. One of the respondents stated: *"I can not afford [to buy medicine] because I have financial problems. Sometimes I am not able to buy my medicine on time, sometimes I can only buy half of it."* Another respondent also talked about being able to afford only half of their required medication or taking half a dose instead of the full dose of the medicine. Respondents also noted that the price of medicines had drastically increased in recent years. One of the respondents observed that some of the doctors had an agreement with the pharmaceutical companies, and therefore, mainly prescribed drugs from those particular companies, and as a result, the drugs that were already overpriced became even more expensive. Even in those cases when individuals were covered by the universal insurance, they could not remember even a single occasion when the insurance had covered the price of the medicine.

Moreover, it is also obvious that transportation problems create big obstacles for the poor population in the countryside, it becomes difficult, if not at times impossible, for women to go to hospitals that are located even within the same municipality. In certain villages, municipal transport does not run, while private transport runs irregularly and may not return until later in the evening. Any family without a car and residing in a village, will face great obstacles in terms of movement, which complicates the visits to the hospital as well.

## Language Barrier

All of the respondents who could not speak either Georgian or Russian, and there were 11 such respondents in total, mentioned that one of the main obstacles faced by them within the healthcare system was the language barrier. While Russian-speaking women are able to visit doctors on their own and they do not face any communication issues, women who only speak Azerbaijani cannot go to the clinic on their own. Hence, they are obligated to take other individuals (family members, relatives or acquaintances) along with them who can act as translators in the communication process between them and health workers. Moreover, many clinics do not have any Azerbaijani staff who can translate or directly understand the problems of these patients. This creates additional barriers for people because of the following reasons - first, their hospital visits are constantly attended and mediated by other people, sometimes even by people outside their families, with whom these women have to share the details of their medical history and lifestyle in order to receive the correct diagnosis and treatment. Second, sometimes the person who acts as the translator would be a man, which creates an additional inconvenience for them. Women mentioned that during such circumstances they avoided asking certain questions that they wanted answered or they felt ashamed while speaking about their health problems. It should also be noted that some of the women are accompanied by their mother-in-law or another family member, regardless of whether the woman or the family member speak either Georgian or Russian. Some respondents emphasized that it was much more comfortable for them to visit a doctor with someone from their family. However, others expressed the concern that they could never be completely honest with the doctors and could not ask the necessary questions about their health.

On the other hand, women who speak Georgian and sometimes act as translators for their friends and relatives, mentioned that when nobody spoke either Georgian or Russian in the family, people were forced to take long-distance relatives or acquaintances to the doctor. Most Georgian speakers are often very busy and they live in another city for either work or education, and therefore, non-Georgian speaking women have to often postpone their visit due to the unavailability of Georgian-speaking individuals. Additionally, this creates further risks during the treatment, since Georgian speakers have to carefully translate the prescriptions for the patients without committing any mistakes. The risks increase manifold, especially when the language skills of the Georgian speaker are not very advanced, but the medical language is, on the other hand, quite technical and precise.

One of the observations voiced by one of the respondents was that due to language barriers, Azerbaijani women were sometimes not even aware of their own diagnosis. Georgian speakers accompanying them were often not as competent as professional translators and lacked any medical education, and therefore, patients were often unable to understand exactly what their diagnosis meant.

At the most, such women might have a very vague idea about what their health problems entailed. If women were wrongfully diagnosed, some of them did not know what type of error had been made: *“[Some women] do not know what their own diagnosis is and what it means. They cannot explain it to you ... They tell you that a mistake was made in a clinic but cannot explain at all what the mistake was,”* she said.

According to the same respondent, in recent years, some clinics in Tbilisi have finally started hiring ethnic minorities or people who speak those languages. This trend has slightly improved the situation, however, these problems are still acute in the region and most other clinics in Tbilisi usually do not have Azeri-speaking staff. Women in the Marneuli municipality considered the language barrier to be one of the biggest obstacles in the present healthcare system. Some interviewees thought that adding nurses or competent translators who spoke those languages to the clinics that were in areas populated mainly by the various non-Georgian-speaking minorities could go a long way in alleviating the problem.

Interviewees who were Georgian speakers noted that the attitude of the medical staff towards the Azeri-speaking population was completely different than their attitude towards those who spoke Georgian. Those who could not communicate in the Georgian language were generally treated with disrespect, and they had personally witnessed such incidents on multiple occasions. Moreover, one of the respondents said that despite her perfect knowledge of Georgian, she had been mistreated, and she attributed this to her ethnicity: *“As a Georgian-speaking individual, I have witnessed it with my own eyes ... Sometimes they mention different ethnic groups with disrespect ... I have been a witness and have expressed my protest. Their attitudes towards minorities have been quite different.”* Some respondents even suspected that in certain cases the indifference of the doctors towards some of the patients might have been due to the latter's ethnicity.

### Quality of Services and Qualification of Medical Staff in Hospitals

Some of the respondents had a deep sense of distrust towards the hospitals in the Marneuli municipality. Some completely avoided going to local clinics, while others said that they did not have the funds to go to Tbilisi, and hence, preferred local clinics. Tbilisi clinics were more expensive, and due to their own state of poverty, whenever these women were able to visit a doctor, they would visit local clinics and hospitals. However, some of the respondents distrusted the local health clinics because of their and their relatives' traumatic experiences. Several interviewees recalled that their relatives had been misdiagnosed or experienced bad medical treatment which had occasionally even ended with fatalities. The women generally questioned the qualifications of the medical staff and mistrusted the local clinics and their doctors. But they also stated that due to a lack of enough helping

hands, the existing staff in Marneuli hospitals often had too many responsibilities, and as a result, they had long working hours that further complicated the situation and prevented them from adequately paying attention to all the patients. One of the respondents believed that the doctors from an older generation in these local clinics were generally more trustworthy. However, some of the women also pointed out that due to their mistrust, they sometimes got their diagnosis done in other clinics elsewhere. In the few villages where there was a hospital, the staff might know the Azerbaijani language, and therefore, some of the patients preferred to visit these clinics. On the whole, however, in most of these villages, the qualification of the staff and the quality of medical service remained particularly dubious.

Additionally, several respondents reported being treated with indifference, i.e. the doctors did not even examine them or did not take their concerns seriously. A respondent recalled that on multiple occasions her problems were not taken seriously by the medical staff of the local clinics. For example, instead of a proper medical diagnosis, the doctors would just advise her "to stay warm," or would issue empty assurances like "it will eventually pass", etc.

In the health clinics, even before the pandemic, relatives often faced great difficulty obtaining information about the condition of their patients, and it would usually take them a long time to acquire any relevant information. In addition, one of the respondents, who spoke Georgian herself, recalled that in one of the Marneuli health clinics, the staff had insisted the family members to sign a document without explaining its content, and the staff eventually did so only after she had firmly requested them several times to explain the document. Therefore, she thought that this might be a common practice in several other regional clinics as well.

Due to the lower quality of healthcare services in this region, several people actually preferred visiting Tbilisi hospitals. However, even if the women did not have financial problems and could afford to go to the doctor in Tbilisi, they often had to postpone their visits by several months due to their work or household chores. On top of that, the situation was made worse by the fact that travelling to hospitals located in the capital usually took several hours, and many doctors did not work on the weekends which were the only time the women could spare for such long travels.

### Pregnancy and Reproductive Health

Some of the respondents in the Marneuli municipality observed that access to crucial information about contraceptives and practicing safe sex among women varied across geography, generation and in terms of their educational background. Educated women, younger generation and women who live in cities have access to more information regarding these issues. The interviewees also observed that

sometimes women did have information about contraception, but they were unable to afford them. Respondents believed that information about contraception was generally lacking in the region; knowledge about sexual activities and information about women's bodies were also inadequate. One respondent pointed out that irregular menstrual cycles and related problems that could potentially be rooted in other health problems were quite common in the region. However, women and girls often did not disclose such problems, and since they also did not have information that an irregular cycle might indicate another underlying health issue, they often refrained from going to the doctor. This often led to serious reproductive problems in the future, but due to a general lack of information, awareness and resources, they remained untreated or undiagnosed till it was too late.

Among the women surveyed, some admitted that they had been to only 2 or 3 checkups during their pregnancy, and they cited various reasons for such a low frequency. Some of them mentioned that it was related to financial difficulties, while one of them confessed that along with financial problems, she had also been ashamed to go for a gynaecological examination. However, in recent years, it seemed that the governmental program that had begun offering 8 free visits to pregnant women had somewhat reversed this tendency. Out of all the interviewees, women who had given birth in recent years had made full use of such state - sponsored free visits. Apparently, such initiatives have had a positive effect on pregnant women in the region and encouraged them to visit doctors.

With the exception of pregnancy or the most acute gynecological problems, most women had never been to a gynecologist for a checkup. The primary reasons were financial constraints as well as a sense of shame that they would be judged for going to a gynecologist. Only those interviewees had been to a preventive gynecological checkup at least once who had private insurance of their own or their own income; however, even several of the women with their own income admitted that they had never been on a preventive checkup.

According to most of the respondents, self-induced abortions were not uncommon in the region. Although certain women did mention that they had not heard of such abortions in recent years, more than half of the respondents admitted that they had heard of at least a few instances of self-induced abortions in the past 5 years, and some respondents even went as far as saying that this was a fairly common practice in the region. Respondents said that women mostly resorted to medical abortion without consulting doctors. Respondents thought that this was due to the fact that consultations and abortions in the clinics were expensive; additionally, women did not want to have their identities revealed. According to one of the respondents, even the techniques involving herbal recipes were used at times, although this happened in extremely rare cases, since the overwhelming majority of the self-induced abortions were performed using abortion pills. One interviewee admitted that she had also



heard about some doctors covertly carrying out illegal abortions, although she had not heard about such cases in the past 1-2 years. The vast majority of respondents believed that self-induced abortion was one of the most dangerous practices for women and one of the biggest challenges currently in the region, especially because many of them remembered several cases where self-induced abortions had ended badly for the women who had attempted them.

### Need for Universal Insurance

Only 1 of the respondents was privately insured through her workplace and she had been actively using it for her healthcare. Few of the respondents who had chronic health problems used the universal insurance, although this insurance still did not cover their medications. It is obvious that information about universal insurance is limited in the region. Often women (and men) either do not know that they qualify for universal insurance or they do not know how to make use of it and they end up paying for consultations that were supposed to be covered by the universal insurance. The women in the study who had information about universal insurance actively used it and it helped them alleviate their problems. These women were among the ones who were mainly suffering from chronic diseases (such as thyroid problems, diabetes, etc.). The universal insurance and similar other programs implemented by the municipality has slightly alleviated the financial problems faced by people with disabilities, although families that have members with disabilities still have to invest a lot of money in taking care of their loved one's health.

By observing the responses in the study, it is obvious that there is also a lack of information regarding state-funded programs. For instance, there seems to be a widespread ambiguity about the type of surgeries that are funded by the municipality or the state. One interviewee mentioned that she was refused funding in Marneuli City Hall and was told that they did not have such free programs. According to the same respondent, *"in the village people kept saying that there is [state] funding. But others tell us that there is no such program. This is much uncertainty."* Interviewees did not have much information either about the fact that free screening tests were available for certain groups in the region.

During the survey it was apparent that a large part of the population has either no information or is misinformed about the free governmental programs and other state funded resources. One could say that one of the main reasons for the existence of misinformation might be the language barrier. However, the problem of misinformation is also observed in the segment of the study that was conducted in Adjara, so we could not eventually attribute it to the language barrier alone. It was obvious that information was still inaccessible to a lot of people even when they visited the City Halls because their staff often failed to provide comprehensive information to the citizens.

It was also revealed that the process of receiving state funding was slow, and sometimes during emergency surgeries, the funding was not provided on time at all. The application procedure was time consuming as well with frequent long queues, and as a result, the beneficiaries often had to return to the City Hall several times to complete the procedure. Such inconveniences often compelled several individuals to opt for the faster, but more expensive, option of financing the surgery all by themselves.

## Adjara

### Social Problems and Healthcare

Much like their counterparts in Marneuli, many women in Adjara did not visit a doctor until they faced severe health problems. Socio-economic hardships and expensive prices in the healthcare sector had been named as some of the main obstacles that prevented visits to the hospitals. Respondents pointed out that merely consulting a doctor wasn't enough to get an accurate diagnosis, and they usually did not have enough funds for further medical tests like X - Rays and Ultrasounds. Moreover, these obstacles negatively impacted not only the poor women of the region but also the women from middle-income families. In Adjara, similar to Marneuli, many women live in pain and cannot visit the doctor for long periods of time, and this is especially the case in the villages of highland Adjara. Women from these areas consult a doctor only if their condition is very severe and the pain is unbearable. Due to financial problems, women sometimes have to pause their treatment or the process of diagnosis when they were only halfway through. Some women can only afford the consultation with a doctor but can not get medical tests and other examinations done afterwards. Others are unable to even buy the required medicines after getting diagnosed. Inevitably, such practices sometimes have rather unfortunate consequences. One of the interviewees said: *"In most cases, these women stay at home and continue to co-exist with that difficult illness; they continue to live a difficult life, and it sometimes ends in fatal consequences. Even diseases that concern the reproductive system, such as gynecological issues, uterine bleeding, [etc. remain untreated] and she herself does not pay attention to this issue, does not go to see a doctor and it ends with a very bad result. In this regard, life is [indeed] very hard for women, especially in rural areas."*

The vast majority of the respondents believe that this is a very serious problem in Adjara. One of them states: *"You might feel pain but you do not pay attention because it costs a lot to see a doctor. We do not have a context where you go there in advance even if you have money. It is true that you have to take care of yourself first, but when you see a family behind you, [which] does not have enough resources ... you do not allow yourself to go and do medical examination on yourself unless it troubles you."*

However, several women in Adjara also said that they usually paid great attention to their health even if they did not have any prior health problems, and they regularly took preventive measures and went

for scheduled check-ups frequently. But the number of such respondents among the women surveyed was actually quite low.

The respondents unanimously stated that the prices of medicines had increased drastically in recent years, and therefore, they often did not have access to medicines produced in Georgia or sold in Georgian pharmacies. Many women said that going to Turkey and buying medicines there was a much cheaper alternative and sometimes they actively used this option. One pensioner recalled that one of her friends who had received funds for the medication needed for her chronic illness had to then share the medicine with another friend who could not afford to buy it. Adjarian respondents indicated that the prices of medicines were one of the main obstacles in the field of healthcare in Georgia. In addition, a large section of the respondents also questioned the overall quality of Georgian medicines. According to one of the interviewees: *“When we went to Turkey, we bought medicines for half the price. These drugs were much cheaper than ours. Our medicines are expensive and of poor quality. Because of Covid, they doubled and quadrupled the prices of medicines.”*

### Lack of Information and Mistrust

Most of the respondents admitted that they had never been to a health clinic or a doctor for planned or preventive purposes. Some of them said that they suffered from severe health problems but for various reasons were unable to visit a doctor. This trend was further complicated by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the fear of contracting the virus, women decreased the frequency of their visits to the doctors even more. Of course, financial difficulties had always been one of the biggest obstacles faced by them, although this was not the only reason.

One of the respondents remarked that in cases where people did not have any financial problems, they still sometimes avoided visiting the doctor. On one hand, respondents explained this tendency by pointing out that access to resources and information on health, especially on reproductive health, was quite limited, and as a result, women were often unaware of the health risks they might face in the future. However, the survey also showed that many women mistrusted the healthcare sector as well.

A young woman who suffered from gynaecological problems and needed to consult a gynaecologist said: *“Partly I am wary of the economic situation and partly it is distrust. “I haven’t been [to the medical consultation], I would rather endure a little pain and go to a doctor I trust, even in another country, because I have heard a lot of stories where people had been getting wrong health treatments and their conditions worsened.”*

Another woman who had universal insurance said that if the health problem was serious, she did not trust the clinics to treat her well, even though the costs of the clinic were covered by the universal

insurance. She said that she would prefer visiting private medical clinics in case of a serious health problem, yet, they were quite expensive and she was still not sure of the quality of the medical service provided by the private clinics: *"They make big mistakes and I can not trust them because they do allow people to visit the doctor that they want to visit and I have the impression that sometimes their purpose is to sell drugs. When it comes to universal insurance, I used it once or twice, but I never benefited from universal insurance. I prefer to take out a small loan or borrow money and go to the doctor that I want to visit. But even if I pay a lot of money I know even in this case I will not get a quality service. I do not trust the universal insurance doctors ... I have even noticed that if one doctor has prescribed you the medicine for one thing, another doctor does not check whether the new prescription medicine reacts with other drugs that you use. The main purpose is to sell medicines."*

More than half of the respondents mistrusted both the doctors and the health clinics. They recalled their own experiences, or experiences of their family members, neighbors and close relatives when misdiagnosis or wrong medical treatment had caused serious health problems, including death. Some of the respondents also questioned the quality of private clinics. According to the interviewees, in Khulo dispensary, they only received the simplest of medical services. Often they had to double-check the diagnosis elsewhere and were always doubting whether their doctor was qualified. Some women thought that the whole healthcare system was quite problematic - the problems were further aggravated by the fact that one doctor might have to work at 2-3 places and that too in double-shifts.

Respondents also recalled cases of getting indifferent or insufficient attention from the doctors in the hospitals. Some interviewees said that despite having severe health problems, they were not attentively treated until they found acquaintances at the clinic. Respondents were remembering many incidents from their own and their relatives' experiences when doctors could not give them correct diagnosis and they had to go to Turkey in order to be diagnosed and get the proper medical treatment.

For the respondents, one of reasons for their mistrust of the system seemed to be the dubious qualifications of the doctors, as well as their constant fatigue while doing their jobs. In Adjara, similar to Marneuli, respondents also voiced suspicions that the doctors and the pharmaceutical companies were primarily interested in profit, and therefore, they often deliberately prescribed unnecessary laboratory tests to the patients. Some of the respondents said that they refrained from planned and preventive health examination partly due to these anxieties. They were afraid that if they went to the clinic for a checkup, they would be subjected to unnecessary medical tests: *"If they see someone like that, they will tell a lot of tales. They are more interested in earning money than treating you,"* said one of the respondents. According to another interviewee, when she saw cases of surgeries being performed incorrectly and people getting misdiagnosed, she thought to herself: *"I should not be held guilty for not*

*trusting this system. You can still trust doctors in Tbilisi and other big cities, but I think for 60% of doctors, making money is more important than taking care of their patients' health."*

According to the respondents, only simple health problems can be solved in Khulo. If they had more serious health problems, they usually went to Batumi or Turkey, which obviously cost a lot more money. Although compared to the healthcare infrastructure in these cities they had more faith in the Tbilisi hospitals, going to the capital was still associated with even more financial costs. Moreover, there is a great deal of distrust towards the Tbilisi hospitals as well, and most of the respondents actually trusted the Turkish healthcare system the most, although they always had to mobilize sufficient funds for their medical visits to the neighboring country.

### Universal Insurance

The respondents surveyed in Adjara knew more about the existence of universal insurance than the ones in the Marneuli municipality. However, many of the respondents still had either fragmented or incomplete information about the universal insurance. In Adjara, people working in the healthcare sector, as well as people with chronic diseases, were usually the ones best informed about how it works. But the ones who had actually used their universal insurance also pointed out that it did not cover much of their medical needs.

Many respondents observed that after the universal insurance reform, it no longer financed some of the most important surgeries. One of the interviewees said: *"Most of all, I wanted the hospital to be free because the hospital is expensive. If I felt pain or had health problems, I would be able to easily get to the hospital; but now I am told that I cannot qualify, that I have a high social score, that I do not qualify for medical help, I have received such answers many times."* Similar concerns were raised by several other women as well.

According to a woman working in the healthcare field, many people were misinformed about the universal insurance. People often misunderstand or have fragmented information about the insurance, and they cannot say in which category they were included and if they qualified for the insurance. It was also clear from the interviews that people do not distinguish between the universal insurance services, the free municipal services (e.g. free municipal medicine program for retirees), and the municipal funding reserved for surgeries. As a result, many individuals can only partially use (or in rare cases, are entirely unable to use) these resources. Consequently, their awareness of governmental funding and similar services is equally low. Despite all these problems, the universal insurance program, along with other health programs and services, is still an important resource for the Adjarian population due to their socio-economic difficulties.

## Reproductive Health

More than half of the women who took part in the survey had heard of multiple cases of self-induced or illegal abortions in Adjara. Similar to Marneuli, some women in Adjara took medication for abortion without consulting a doctor. Respondents recalled that some of their acquaintances had even died in this process. According to the interviewees, women resorted to this method for several reasons. The major reason was that women were unaware of the risks associated with self-induced abortion. The second reason was that women usually did not want others to know that they had opted for an abortion, thereby ruling out the possibility of seeking help from others for the process. The third reason was adverse financial circumstances. Women often found it difficult to pay for abortion at a local health clinic, and self-induced medical abortion acted as a much cheaper alternative.

When it came to having access to information about safe sex, most women thought that there was a general lack of knowledge in the region. Some interviewees felt the urgent need to spread more information on reproductive health, be it in the form of education in schools or informational meetings organized by municipalities. According to one of the respondents, most people got information about birth control only when they visited a doctor, and that too was an insufficient resource.

## II. Women's Employment, Labor and Housework

### Marneuli Municipality

#### Family Income and Employment of Women

Out of all the women surveyed in the Marneuli Municipality, 7 were homemakers and they were also engaged in agricultural activities. One of the women was a cleaner and she was a day laborer, while three of them were teachers, two were full-time employees at various companies and organizations, one was a student and not yet employed, and the final one of them had just graduated from the university and was not yet employed full-time, but she was involved in various paid and unpaid projects.

The vast majority of the homemakers and the unemployed women said that they wanted to get a job but could not do so due to external factors. They said that there were not nearly enough jobs, especially in the villages and regions, and finding a job was also difficult due to their housework. They did not have time for anything else, or they were unable to leave their children alone, and they also thought that they could not get employment due to their lack of education and inability to speak Georgian.

The women with secondary or incomplete secondary education believed that if they spoke Georgian and had higher education (had a profession), they would have been able to find employment more easily. However, the women who had studied accounting (in a vocational school or a university) said that the main obstacles had been their inability to speak the Georgian language and their lack of computer skills. Some women even said that their employment was hindered by their family members like their husband, or mother-in-law, or both.

According to all the respondents, it was much more difficult for women to find employment than men. They believed that there were more opportunities for men who had no prior knowledge and experience to find various jobs, while women rarely had the opportunity to do so. In addition, women faced the obstacle of not being able to leave their children because children were cared for mostly by women, and in many villages, there was no kindergarten or extended lessons at the school where women could leave their children for at least a few hours. One respondent stated: *“There are more jobs for men than women. A man can work everywhere, but a woman can not. It is said that men and women are equal, but that is just a talk. The reality is completely different. Men are preferred for most jobs more than women ... But despite all this, women work more than men in our village ... Women are busy taking care of their families, and they are involved in agricultural work all day.”*

In general, it should be noted that the respondents wanted employment for two main reasons - the first being that their families were not financially secure and they wanted to generate more income. Women said that this was one of their primary reasons for wanting jobs. The second reason that was mentioned by women was their desire to gain a certain amount of independence. According to some respondents, they would gain more autonomy and more control over their own lives if they had jobs of their own.

Among the families of the respondents, the monthly expenditure mainly ranged from 300 to 800 GEL. In some large families (8-9 people) and in families where women were employed, the expenditure went up to 1000 GEL or more. However, one single mother said that her income was only 110 GEL per month, that too from the social assistance, and this money was clearly not enough for even the most basic needs.

Two single mothers had the lowest income and expenditure among the respondents in the form of 110 and 300 GEL respectively. Neither of them received alimony because one of them said that her ex-husband had died, while the other said that her ex-husband was himself a pensioner with health problems and he could not afford to pay her the alimony. Both the women received social assistance amounting to 110 GEL per child.

From the survey, it was obvious that the single mothers had much lower income than the rest. The feminization of poverty is apparent in this case, which means that women are more on the edge of poverty and those families that are headed by a woman tend to be much poorer. Additionally, only two of the women surveyed in the Marneuli Municipality had private property of their own: one had a car, while the other had a house. Other women had no property of their own. This can be explained by the fact that it is rare in Georgia for parents to transfer their property to their daughters and divide the property equally between the girls and the boys. Since boys usually stay at home after starting a family, while girls generally have to leave their home, the property tends to belong to the men after the death of their parents.

Moreover, since the house does not belong to the man until his parents have passed away, this further complicates the imposition of alimony obligations on the man as a part of the divorce proceedings because often no property may be registered in his name.

Because women's education and Georgian language comprehension play a vital role for them to find paid employment, divorced housemakers are often left with no income at all and are forced to exist on social assistance and parental pensions. Single mothers did not have opportunities or had minimal opportunities to engage in economic activities. They survived on minimal social aid that did not offer a vision for long-term support, and instead, was a form of charity that kept people in poverty. Therefore, single mothers were forced to engage in precarious labor and work on a low income under challenging conditions..<sup>7</sup>

The monthly expenses of many families with 4 or more family members ranged from 300 to 600 GEL. Additionally, these families often sustained themselves through the family agriculture which allowed them to consume various goods without purchasing them. Nevertheless, women emphasized that their monthly funds were barely enough for basic necessities, and their income could not cover any additional costs, including medical expenses. Women who were not employed said that their families earned most of their income from agriculture, remittances from migrants, construction jobs (that mainly employed men) or other forms of daywork. The number of women engaged in agricultural activities was very high. Agriculture was mostly built on the hard labor of women.

Most of the respondents said that their families had different types of debt. The respondents named agricultural and daily household expenses as some of their most common reasons for borrowing money. They said that since life in the village was difficult, the future was unpredictable, and agriculture required constant attention, it was, therefore, difficult to determine whether the

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<sup>7</sup> Social Justice Center, [2019](#)



expenditure allocated to agriculture would generate sufficient yields and income. Other major reasons for their debt were the need to pay for medical treatment and the visit to a doctor, loan for a house or an apartment, and the tuition fees and living expenses for students in Tbilisi. In general, medical expenses were a hefty burden on the low-income families. One of the respondents said: *“I have a loan, I have not been able to repay it for 5 years. Our child was sick, we took out a loan, then we could not pay it back on time and the interest was gradually increased.”*

Only 2 individuals among the respondents had any kind of savings. Others said that it was impossible to retain any savings from their meagre family income. Debts and other financial obligations made it impossible for the families to break free from the vicious cycles of poverty and hardship.

The women who worked in schools or in various organizations said that one of their main motivations for working was to acquire financial benefits, and the desire to empower themselves and put their knowledge to good use. Those who were employed precariously and in daywork said that they worked because of their needs. They did not have any other options. One of the respondents, who was a cleaner and also operated as a day worker, noted that the pandemic had a terrible effect on her income. This was not because the demand for cleaners suddenly ended; rather, the disappearance of all the means of public transportation drastically worsened the already scarce employment opportunities of daywork. She could no longer be mobile and go to the places of her employment.

Teachers also voiced several problems that they faced. The certification and examination processes in Azerbaijani-language schools had resulted in many ambiguities, constant changes in plans, and adaptations that did not address the needs of the teachers in such schools. Many teachers had to remain contented with a meagre income. For example, one of the teachers said that her salary was only 400 GEL, even though she regularly taught for about 4 to 5 hours a day. Another teacher voiced the concern of those teachers who were not officially members of the staff. She said that such teachers who were employed in the schools through different programs only got a one-year contract and did not know whether they would have a job the following year. Since they taught in the schools under the confines of particular programs, they did not receive a salary for 3 months of the holidays every year. According to the respondent, she had been working as an assistant teacher at the same school for more than 5 years, and she still did not have a permanent contract. This problem concerned other assistant teachers as well since it was difficult to obtain the status of a permanent teacher, and if their program was canceled, they would be left without a job.

Teachers said they were often overwhelmed. Given the scarcity of resources, the education system put the onus on the teachers to compensate the negligence that existed in the system. As a result, the

teachers had many responsibilities apart from teaching, and this part of their work often remained hidden and was not reflected in their salary. This issue was especially exacerbated during the pandemic because the teachers had to put in far more effort to deliver good quality lessons.

## Adjara

### Family Income and Women's employment

In Adjara, most of the respondents were either employed or self-employed, although students and homemakers who were currently unemployed were also included in the survey.

The vast majority of the women lived in families of 4 or more people. Unlike the Marneuli Municipality, many respondents in Adjara did not want to disclose their monthly expenses. However, the ones who did disclose their expenses generally mentioned a monthly amount that ranged from 500 to 3000 GEL. The expenses dramatically increased if there were university students in the family. In Adjara, unlike in the Marneuli municipality, all of the women said they have had at least some work experience. Some of the respondents had worked for at least 6 months in unstable jobs such as sewing, in theaters, etc. This type of employment was often driven by the need for instant cash for reasons such as raising funds for students, buying children's clothes, funding tutors, and so on. Some women had to temporarily relocate from their villages to a different village or a town for several months to raise money for their necessities.

The other half of the respondents had stable jobs or have had them in the past. Among such interviewees, there were teachers of various subjects (including a teacher of religion), nurses, bank staff, and women who had their own business or were part of the family business. Almost all the women with stable jobs said that they had to work overtime that was not compensated. Overtime work included taking extra time for one's own work, helping others, and taking on additional workload even when the employee was not formally responsible for doing so. Moreover, it was evident from their responses that the respondents put a lot of emotional labor into their jobs. They often considered it their duty to help others despite their place of employment not accounting for it in any way or form.

One single mother who was interviewed had received alimony. However, it took her a lot of struggle along with the involvement of law enforcement and the court to do so. Despite the alimony, she had to work two jobs to pay for even the bare minimum expenses of her family. Another single mother did not receive alimony. She said that her former husband and she had never officially signed the marriage certificate and she did not receive any money from him, nor did she ask for alimony from her child's father.

Many respondents said that their families were engaged in agriculture and substituted their lack of income with their own produce. The families that were entirely or predominantly dependent on agriculture said that it required a lot of hard work. Some of them said that despite working a lot, they only ever had just enough products to use in their household or they received very little income from their agricultural products: *"When April comes, I am in the field all the time, I produce herbs ... You bring it to the market and you see that our produce is devalued, the produce of a farmer is undervalued somehow."*

Almost none of the households to which the respondents belonged had even minimal savings. One elderly woman summed up her life in the following way: *"I have never had [savings]. I've gotten old and I have no savings and I do not think I will ever have them, my assets are my children."*

The family of almost every respondent owed money, and the amounts and types of their debts varied quite a bit. For example, women often mentioned that they had bought their phones via deferred payments to give their children access to education during the pandemic. Their reasons for taking debt also included mortgages for houses from banks, loans for family hotels, renovations or small businesses, loans for household and daily expenses, as well as various health-related needs.

The respondents owed money to banks, credit companies, pawnshops and other individuals, as well as regular shops and pharmacies. Respondents felt that most of the people around them lived in debt. They also mentioned that private lenders often took advantage of overdue days and charged a high interest rate for such days. The abundance of small loan companies and pawnshops was especially noticeable in Batumi and Khulo. According to the respondents, many people in Batumi regularly placed bets in different casinos, and their gambling addiction had also aggravated the situation.

Several respondents who were employed said that their labor was not adequately compensated, and even those who said that their labor was adequately compensated argued that the wages in their regions were generally low. When they said their wages were not low, they were usually comparing them with other people's wages. However, they confirmed that their salaries and even their total family income only covered basic necessities. A few of the respondents who thought that their family income could cover more than their basic necessities also said that the additional costs could be covered only once or twice a year, and they could not provide the finances for their additional needs all the time. One respondent said: *"In a family, children, me or an elderly person may need something. But you can not spend it when you do not have it [money]. For example, till the end of this month we need 1000 GEL to handle all the costs, but when you do not have it you have to be satisfied with 100 GEL. You have to buy whatever is necessary and crucial and you put aside everything else. Kids may also need something that ... well, now, for example, it is essential to have clothing, you can not go out naked, of course, and I try to dress them*

*according to my capacities. You may want more and you struggle, but we buy the essentials. We can not buy whatever we want. However much the income is, the expenses will be according to that. You can not spend what you do not have."*

Women with secondary or incomplete secondary education unanimously said that it was more challenging for them to find a job compared to men. Men who had the same level of education could work in construction or be day laborers, but similar opportunities were almost non-existent for the women. One of the respondents said: *"Of course, I want a job according to my capability, that will allow me to work and have my salary and be independent, I want to buy something without asking anyone, even my husband, to have the opportunity to answer my needs. We live in a village. I really want to work and have my salary, but I cannot do that because of external factors. For example, there are no jobs. There is not a factory nor a company that could employ women. If there is something available, I am sure many women will be willing and able to work ... Take, for example, me, I am not educated but I want to be independent and have money so that my children lack nothing ... My husband works here and there; there will be construction or something like that. Of course, women cannot do that and that is why I do not work."* Moreover, women also found it challenging to leave their household chores and children behind and look for jobs instead, and this further prevented them from working.

Women with higher education said that they worked at places where promotions did not exist for objective reasons because every employee had just one employer or a single supervisor. The only woman who worked in a bank also turned out to be the only person to raise the issue of how women faced more obstacles in their professional advancement than men: *"Men have more advantages here than women ... Even the supervisors think that it is better to be a man. They had questions about my employment, whether a girl would be able to pull through."*

### Religious Discrimination at Places of Employment

In Adjara, respondents recalled religious discrimination cases at places of employment experienced by themselves or their relatives. Women say that the problem of discrimination is less common in Khulo and surrounding villages, with more cases of discrimination affecting areas where the Muslim majority does not live. For example, one interviewee recalls a case in which her sister was refused a job at school because of her religious belonging: *"My sister graduated from university with honors. She is a very good teacher and has innovative approaches. One of the lecturers offered her a job at a school, and the head of the school is a Christian. When she submitted the documents, the answer was that their school definitely needed a Christian teacher. Her religion prevented her from being employed because she was a "Tatar". The lecturer told*

*her that only Christian students study in their school and that a Muslim teacher could not enter the elementary level classes because the teacher had to teach the students the love towards Christianity."*

Another woman who wears a hijab says: *"I had a case. There are more places where I can work easily now, but when I had my first child I wanted to work ... I called, they told me to come in ... When I arrived, they saw that I had a headscarf, they thought maybe I could not do it. They did not call me again ... I personally have had many friends [in such a situation]."*

## Housework

### Experiences from Adjara and Marneuli Municipality

In both Marneuli Municipality and Adjara, similar trends were observed in terms of housework. In particular, women who were homemakers and did not split the domestic labor with other family members had to perform both household chores as well as engage in agricultural activities for about 8 to 14 hours per day. The respondents said that as soon as they woke up, they started doing household chores, rarely took breaks, if ever, and they could only rest while sleeping. Most of these women were the only ones in their families doing all the household chores. On the other hand, women who had mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, daughters-in-law, or in rare cases, daughters at home, said that they did housework for about 5 to 9 hours per day. For these women, the redistribution of labor among multiple individuals did reduce their workload. However, for others, especially those who had large families or whose families were involved in agricultural activities, domestic work still took about 8 to 9 hours a day. Employed women who were not married were the least busy with housework. The same could be said about the university students, although they all did some types of housework. These women said that they spent more time performing household chores during the weekends or they spent 1 or 2 hours a day during the weekdays.

We should also speak about single mothers and women employed in precarious labor. Both of these groups often had to work full time at their jobs, in some cases 10 to 12 hours per day, and at home, they often did most of the housework as well. Employed and married women said that they still had to do the housework themselves. Some of them had to do housework alone and they did everything around the house all by themselves. Based on the experience of the respondents, it was also apparent that in the case of absence of other women in families, or in some families where the mother had to work, the burden usually fell on older girls, and they had to do a lot of housework. Some respondents argued that this badly affected their school attendance and their free time, while for other respondents, the workload was not heavy.

Most of the interviewees said that they only rested when they went to sleep at night, or even if they did get some rest during their waking hours, it was never more than 1 to 2 hours per day. One of the Adjarian women said: *"I do not think there is such a thing in the village to decide and deliberately devote time to rest. Sometimes we will drink coffee and sit down for a bit; but it is impossible to set aside an hour for [resting]."* Another respondent said: *"In my opinion, labor never ends for a woman. If you dedicate the whole day to housework, you still can not finish all of it; it still takes a long time to have everything in order. If you do not choose to sit down and allow yourself to rest, you might never finish the work around the house because your work might just go on indefinitely."* Some women said that they only rested while playing with their children. The respondents who rested for about 1 to 2 hours a day said that they mostly relaxed while drinking tea or coffee, watching TV, or having the neighbors over as guests. Women who worked and were not married said that they rarely had the time to rest. Students, however, managed to relax more often. They said that they could relax for about 4 to 5 hours per day by having fun with their friends, or reading, or watching a movie.

Women spent most of their time caring for children, teaching them, cleaning the house, farming, cooking and washing. Some of the women said that they also had to emotionally support their family members, children and spouse, and thereby engage in emotional labor. One of the respondents summed up this type of labor in the following way: *"[Children] are little and then they will grow up, you can call them little, but the fact is you have a relationship with five different individuals and everyone needs a different approach. It takes so much work, so much energy, you have to understand their psychology. One child requires a different approach, another one – a completely different approach."* Despite their hard work, many women said that this work was of great value to them.

In both Adjara and Marneuli, most women said that their workload and its difficulty were either equal to that of men, or were higher. One respondent in the Marneuli Municipality said: *"I think women's work is more difficult than men's. A woman does all the work at home."* According to a woman from Adjara: *"My grandmother used to say, housework is invisible ... You work so much, you work all the time, but somehow it is not visible."* Another respondent believed: *"I get less tired at my job than while I do housework. It is invisible but also very time-consuming. The work done by women in villages is so much more than the work done by a man; although the work that men usually do requires more strength and is physically demanding, the work that women do is more tiring and it takes more time."* Yet another woman described the invisibility and difficulty of women's labor: *"[Women's labor] is so much more difficult but it is hidden, that's the thing. A woman's labor is invisible because what she does is not considered to be valuable by men. For example, a man cuts up one, two, three pieces of firewood and it can be seen. When you go and do this and that, even if you cook food, it gets eaten and it is gone. The work is invisible but it takes more time, at least that is what I think."* Most of the

women had similar feelings about housework. They said that even if they did something all day long and the work was quite hard, it often remained unseen.

In both Marneuli municipality and Adjara, some of the respondents thought that it was unfair their domestic labor remained unpaid. According to one of the respondents who lived in one of the Marneuli villages, the state should recognize the importance of women's domestic labor and pay housewives at least a minimum wage: *“I think the state should provide social assistance to housewives, even if it is 100 GEL. Since we do not have a job, how can we survive? We want to work, but we cannot do it because we take care of our family members, we take care of our children, we take care of our families.”* Every respondent thought that most of the economic activities in society in general could not be carried out without being supported by women's labor at home.

Half of the women who were surveyed said that they were the ones who decided how to spend money in their family. Others said that their husbands, mothers, or other family members made all the financial decisions. Women mostly said that they made their own financial decisions when it came to their children's expenses and when they needed to buy household items. Certain women would themselves make decisions regarding what produce to purchase, while others deliberated with their husbands and other family members.

Mostly unmarried, employed women were the ones who said that they had their own money that they could spend on themselves. Some of them got to spend the entire amount solely on themselves as per their own discretion. On the other hand, due to the economic situation, the money generated by married, employed women was mainly spent on the needs of the whole family and their children. As mentioned before, the income of such women often covered only their basic necessities, or sometimes not even that.

### **III. Violence Against Women**

#### **Physical, Economic and Psychological Violence**

One half of the respondents surveyed in both the Marneuli municipality and Adjara either refrained from talking about physical violence or said they had not heard of such cases in the recent past. The rest of the respondents openly stated that they had information about cases of physical violence. Certain women thought that there were less cases of such violence today, while others believed that the number of cases had not decreased, and in rare cases, women thought that the number of cases had in fact increased. Women named their relatives, neighbors, friends and fellow villagers who had been abused in the past and were still being abused today. Women mostly remembered cases of

husbands abusing their wives. Respondents were more likely to associate the violent tendencies of husbands with alcoholism and financial hardship. Respondents who thought that physical violence had decreased cited the education of girls as the main reason for the change. They said that women's education and knowledge of their own rights had reduced cases of violence. However, other respondents disagreed.

Respondents spoke more freely about economic and psychological violence. One respondent admitted that one of the reasons for her divorce from her husband was his psychological abuse against her. According to the respondents, in their social circles, economic and psychological abuse was much more common than physical violence. However, respondents did not link the education of the victims of psychological violence to their victimhood as much as in the cases of physical violence. Several respondents pointed out that women were abused psychologically not only by their husbands, but sometimes by their mother-in-laws as well.

Many women in Marneuli highlighted the frequency of economic violence. One respondent said: *"Economic violence is when the abuser restricts the victim's access to education, access to healthcare when the abuser forbids the victim to leave the house or does not give money to them ... There are many cases."* Apart from the cases where money was withheld from women who needed financial support for healthcare, education, and basic necessities, respondents also mentioned other forms of economic violence, such as when a woman was denied the income from her own labor. *"Economic violence is prevalent in villages, women work in agriculture and play a big role in earning an income. But they are still economically dependent on men,"* said one woman in the Marneuli municipality.

Only two respondents recalled cases where women divorced their husbands because of violence. Several women said that their acquaintances or relatives tried to leave their families due to various forms of violence but then had to return for various reasons. Some respondents thought that violence was linked to awareness, and if the people and victims themselves gathered more information about it and the stigma was broken, the victims would be able to raise their voice against the violence more easily and, if necessary, divorce the perpetrators. Additionally, sometimes divorced women found it difficult to return home to their parents.

Women who shared stories of violence experienced by their relatives and acquaintances as well as the stories about women who left the violent environment of their families also described the barriers women had to face in the process of doing so. While some families refused to take back their daughters after the separation, many families were actually willing to take a divorced woman back. However, there were various obstacles to be considered: the parents might live in a completely different village



or town, and if a woman had children, she had to relocate them to another place, which could often be stressful for the children. Even when some families were willing to support the children of their divorced daughters, they usually did not have the financial means to do so. Consequently, many women could not leave an abusive family because their parents' family was unable to support them and their children. Receiving alimony seemed to be a significant barrier for many women. It was especially difficult for those who did not know the Georgian language and had no experience of being at the court or dealing with other Georgian institutions. Moreover, alimony was often not enough for the women and their kids. As one interview showed, in addition to alimony, single mothers might even need to work two additional jobs to cover their basic expenses.

One respondent recalled that her friend had left the abusive family and returned to the parents' family; however, the woman had to eventually go back to her husband's family due to the flawed conduct of state institutions. According to the respondent, the problems started when the abuser and the victim were not even separated from each other despite calling the police, and they were forced to continue to live under the same roof. The respondent recalled that after her friend had reported the violence to the police, the abusive husband's family members took the help of their acquaintances to receive confidential information from the police about the case. The woman left her husband's family and returned to her parents, although her husband's family members and relatives repeatedly visited her to attempt a reconciliation. The husband was eventually found guilty and was required to do community service. However, according to the respondent, after the man paid some money, someone else did the community service on his behalf. The respondent's friend did not find the state supporting her in any way and was forced to eventually return to her husband's family.

Since the parents of such women often could not offer refuge to them and their children, and in some cases, a woman might be at risk from the abusive family, women were in dire need of shelters that could allow them to decisively leave an abusive environment. Respondents said that such shelters did not exist in many regions, or they existed so far away that a woman was completely cut off from her social environment. In addition, there were often no available places at these shelters, and women could only stay in them for a few months. Many abused women might not even have secondary education and any prior work experience. As a result, a long-term support system was required that could allow them to leave independently and also gave them the requisite resources and skills to start their lives afresh. The absence of alternative housing was one of the main obstacles that prevented women from leaving a violent environment. There was no concept of social housing in Georgia where victims of violence and their children could live without rent for an indefinite period of time.

Women who had some experience of dealing with victims of violence said that public services for abused women were minimal. There were no long-term or even short-term psychological support programs for the victims of violence in various regions. Psychological support was quite important because many victims had depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, or suicidal thoughts. On the state level, victim employment programs did not exist, and victims' financial independence was completely neglected. In addition, there was a shortage of social workers in the municipalities. Instead of a large number of social workers being active in different communities, being involved in identifying or preventing cases of violence, being mediators between victims and abusers and supporting victims in various regions, there were very few social workers in each municipality.

Respondents also said that because a couple was not allowed to divorce for a year after the birth of a child, it also prevented certain women from leaving because they could not legally divorce their husbands and receive alimony. This law was originally designed to protect women, but it also posed an obstacle to those women who had been in cases of violence.

According to the respondents, women were often not believed when they discussed psychological, economic or physical violence. This tendency applied to both public opinion and various state structures such as the police. According to one of the respondents, women were more trusted when they were supported by an organization (including non-governmental organizations) or a group. When the abuser's family was influential in the community, it made the victim's life all the more difficult. In such cases, it was important to have an organization or a team of people by her side who could provide the victim with psychological, financial and legal support. One of the examples showed that when the Municipality Woman's Room stood up for a victim, a large part of the community sided with her despite the influence of the abuser's family. According to a woman working at the City Hall, this also prompted other women to turn to the police for their own cases of domestic violence. After the incident, the number of cases of physical violence that were officially registered had increased in the municipality. On one hand, this growth was generally related to the pandemic - domestic violence cases had indeed increased during the pandemic. On the other hand, women who had previously refrained from calling the police were now feeling encouraged to change their minds and report such incidents.

Respondents said that the problem also existed at the level of state structures. For example, gender councils should employ sensitive and knowledgeable people about gender issues. However, this was not yet the case, and on some occasions, there might be people on the gender council who did not have gender sensitivity. In addition, law enforcement agencies needed to have people who had in-depth knowledge of the issue and compassion for the victims of violence.

Adjarian respondents also said that often women were not allowed to live with their children after divorce, and the children had to stay with the father. Women were forbidden to take their children home or sometimes see them altogether in various ways because they had decided to separate from their spouses.

Respondents also raised the issue of early marriage. Some of the respondents had gotten married between the age of 15 and 17. Adjarian women thought that although early marriage was considered the norm in Adjara ten or twenty years ago, these views had now changed, and girls rarely got married prematurely anymore. It is also important to note that in Georgia in general, early marriage was quite common in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some respondents complained that they could not get an education due to the pressures of starting a family, although women also admitted that this was considered the norm a few decades ago.

In the Marneuli municipality, both young and middle-aged women said that they faced the problem of early and forced marriage. Several respondents said that they were either forced into marriage or married very young. According to one of the respondents, she was against her marriage because it had deprived her of education, and now her only hope in life was her little child. Teachers also recalled cases where they tried to help their students but to no avail. In some cases, the student herself asked for help, while in other cases, the student wanted to marry herself and the teacher tried to intervene. Teachers said that often they themselves did not have enough information about what to do if they found out about the marriage of a minor girl. Sometimes the girls were scared and denied that they themselves had asked for help from the teachers. Teachers were often given conflicting information by different state institutions that only ended up confusing them. In addition, respondents acknowledged that early marriages were often caused by social hardship, and families married off their girls when they could no longer afford to sustain their livelihoods. Given these factors, it is important to conduct thorough research to determine the causes of early and forced marriage. It is clear that early marriage is also caused by social and economic factors. Since motivated teachers neither have proper information about the mechanisms that would help girls nor access to adequate resources, they alone cannot help their students. Social workers are not involved in this process either. It is important for the state to evolve a multifaceted mechanism to address this issue that will not be focused solely on punitive measures.

## IV. Political Participation

### Marneuli Municipality

#### Settlement Assemblies

Settlement councils that act as one of the main mechanisms of local democratic governance in Georgia in order to ensure the involvement of the population in political processes remain largely inaccessible and closed off to women. Only two out of the 17 women interviewed in the Marneuli municipality actively attend village meetings, and are always able to express their thoughts on such occasions. The remaining 15 of the interviewees said that they had never been to a meeting of the village council.

Interestingly, in the Marneuli Municipality the majority of the women that were interviewed were actually aware of the existence of such mechanisms of local governance, but they themselves had never been able to take part in them. There were several reasons for this: some women said that they did not know when the meetings were being held. One of the activists in this region said that she had wanted to participate in these meetings for a long time, yet the relevant information about the meetings never reached her. Several other women have had similar experiences. However, there were also a few women who just did not want to participate in such village meetings.

It was quite apparent that women rarely attend the settlement assemblies in the region. Their opinions were also divided on the issue of rural men making decisions on their behalf; while some women said that the decisions of men did manage to address the needs of women, others largely disagreed. In villages where basic infrastructure is lacking and there are no roads, running water, gas, etc., women believed that any decision that would positively impact their lives was of utmost importance, especially the ones that addressed the fundamental infrastructural problems of the region. However, in the villages where issues of water, road and gas problems have been more or less resolved, but there are still no kindergartens, women said that men often did not voice this pressing issue that directly concerned a lot of women. Instead, men might decide the funds to be directed towards building a ritual house or a cafe. Women, therefore, believed that it was important for them to have spaces for expressing their concerns, so that the City Hall representatives could be made aware of these issues.

One of the main obstacles, according to the respondents, is the pervasive notion that there is no space for women in politics in general. Therefore, women are wary of participating in any political activities other than elections. Some women thought that these ideas were perpetuated by the community, however, others pointed out that the municipality does not provide space for women to actively participate in politics. With the exception of just one respondent, every single interviewee was willing

to participate in political processes if that meant they could bring about positive changes in their communities.

Several respondents felt that the decisions made at the settlement assemblies were not entirely democratic, that these meetings were held only as an illusory mechanism, and it did not matter whether people participated in them or not. They thought that even before the councils were held, the crucial decisions had already been made by the state officials, and therefore, the councils were not able to properly fulfill their roles. One woman said, *"I think decisions are mostly based on what the state prefers to do, rather than what the village population decides."*

Another respondent, a local activist who was well acquainted with the context and problems in the region, noted that in Azerbaijani-speaking villages women and men alike were far removed from the process of making political decisions. Even if it seemed at first glance that the men received more information about the settlement assemblies and they occasionally participated in such political processes, the truth was that the men were not truly involved in making political decisions, nor did they have any real political power. The activist believed that neither the Marneuli municipality with its municipal council members nor members of the parliament or other governing bodies actually understood the importance of the participation of ordinary people in the political decision-making process. She said that the state's governing bodies and their members could not comprehend that the national and regional budgets belonged to the state and the people of Georgia, and that they did not come from the pockets of any particular party. The respondent found it difficult to imagine how ordinary residents could be involved in the political process if this basic fact was not even understood by the state officials.

Active women in the community also expressed similar thoughts. One of them said that the population was often not informed on simple matters, such as what rightfully belonged to them by virtue of their citizenship. She said: *"If there had been water issues in the village for years and suddenly the village gets running water once or twice a week, people think that the problem does not exist anymore and a great progress has been made ... there are so many problems in the village, we are satisfied when even one of them gets remotely resolved."*

When basic problems such as water issues or road issues were resolved, the population perceived it as a gift from the government, rather than their right. However, as another respondent noted, government representatives also helped to strengthen this misconception. Various respondents mentioned how the ruling party often attributed to themselves not only the projects that were created with state funds, but also the projects that were constructed entirely with donations from international organizations. According to the same respondent: *"We, as a general population, are also at fault here, because we are not very interested [in politics] and for years we have been accustomed to the stance of the municipality that we should*

*not be involved in the process of making decisions. Nowadays it is not a normal occurrence when someone speaks up, it irritates the state officials ... When you are dissatisfied with something, they label you as a supporter of the oppositional party. A person who expresses dissatisfaction with anything, suddenly gets a name of a supporter of the opposition. Many people are holding back because of it ... There is also nihilism: people say, well, I can not change anything anyway.*" According to the same respondent, even active men in the Marneuli municipality could not exert much influence unless they worked for the political parties. Consequently, it was difficult not only for women but also for men to be actively involved in politics and achieve any tangible outcomes based on their involvement. Respondents even said that certain people around them thought that if they expressed their dissatisfaction or their needs, they would be deprived of their pension or social assistance by the state.

According to another respondent, in the ethnic Azerbaijani villages, the tendency to keep a tactful distance from politics and to remain passive during the settlement assemblies should be seen more as a problem of the lack of municipal accountability rather than the irresponsibility of the population: *"The municipal officials do not have faith in the institutions which are designed to ensure the participation of the general population. Village councils are extremely arbitrary: the main goal is to assemble these councils, gather the number of people that are required, and most of the people who participate in them are men. [This mechanism] does not work, because it is not [the municipality officials'] sincere desire to actually incorporate attendees into the discussion and resolve issues for the benefit of the participants."*

### Unreachable State, Unheard Voices

In Marneuli municipality, most of the respondents stated that the municipality government or any of the other state bodies remained unreachable for them and they did not have any mechanisms that would make their voices heard by the institutions. Women who did not speak Georgian said that the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language on their part was the primary reason for not being able to voice their concerns and issues. According to them, if they spoke the Georgian language, they would have been able to successfully present their needs and concerns before different governmental institutions. One of these women said: *"If you want to voice your concerns, you need to speak the Georgian language and I believe, that this is one of the biggest barriers for me."* For another respondent, who also did not speak Georgian, it felt like an impossible mission to apply for social assistance: *"I want to apply for the social assistance, but I know that the process is very difficult and I know that it is very hard to get social assistance from the state. It makes me lose my motivation."*

The second reason highlighted by women was that they did not have information regarding how to voice their concerns and problems before the municipality or other state institutions. They did not

have information on the various means that would give them direct or indirect access to various governmental bodies or the municipality. Women also said that their lack of education and living in the countryside were barriers that prevented them from having a voice that could reach authorities.

Women also mentioned that the burden of excessive housework in their households also posed a barrier. They had difficulty finding free time for being active in the community and participating in additional activities. Especially women in rural areas had so much agricultural and domestic work that they had no time left for even self-care.

Some respondents said that it was simply pointless to voice their concerns to the municipality or other institutions of the state. *"Well, I will reach them personally, but will [they] react in any way?"* Asked one interviewee. Another respondent remarked: *"People feel that no one cares about our opinions anyway."* Yet another woman said, *"I know that if we address them, nothing will change and nobody will pay any attention to us. Why would I address them? ... Even if we reach out to the state and make our voice heard, who will pay any attention? Nobody ... None [of our needs] are considered. We live in poverty and the government does not help us to deal with these financial difficulties."* A woman living in another village said, *"People think that their opinions change or impact absolutely nothing. If you show to a person that their opinion matters, they will dare to speak again. But many people believe that they cannot change much."* Another respondent also voiced similar concerns: *"In villages people live in horrible conditions, the employment is extremely scarce. If our concerns were actually considered, these conditions would not have existed."* And a young student said that the program 1+4 was the only thing that reflected the concerns of the local population and nowadays a greater number of young people had an opportunity to learn Georgian well and enroll in higher education.

Consequently, as the responses showed, knowledge of the Georgian language and education could not guarantee that women's voices and concerns would be heard by government officials. Women also thought that even if their voices reached certain institutions of the state, they doubted whether anything could be changed for the better.

According to several respondents, ordinary people in general do not know what kind of free or governmental services exist in Georgia. In addition, people often approach the wrong state or municipal institutions, and they find it difficult to pick the right department that would address or resolve their problems. However, more often than not, no one explains to them that in certain cases their application has been rejected not because such free services or municipal and state funding do not exist, but because of the wrong referral. Often public officials do not consider it their responsibility to explain to the citizens why their requests have been refused, and whether there are ways to resolve the problem and which specific department can help them. The matters are further complicated by the

language barrier between non-Georgian-speaking citizens and Georgian-speaking municipal employees. A woman who had frequent contacts with citizens and came into close contact with the municipal services said: *"The system is able to ignore certain things if it prefers to do so, therefore, we are subjected to the good will of the public officials, humans ... It [the system] does not work, because they [officials] might feel lazy to do things properly, because [the help] is considered to be a waste of time; they only love citizens before and during elections."*

Four women from two different villages mentioned that in their villages the population had addressed the City Hall via collectively written letters that were concerned with water, road and gas issues, and in the end, the problems had been resolved. However, other respondents said that these processes usually dragged over a very long period of time and it might take years until basic needs of the population were met.

Most women said they had never addressed the City Hall in any way in order to resolve their personal needs. Others, however, did have some experience with the City hall. Two interviewees mentioned that they had written a letter addressed to the municipality because they needed assistance regarding their health or their relatives' health. Women active in the community had written letters addressing the municipality mainly because they had needed assistance for various projects to be implemented in their villages. Women said that sometimes their requests were fulfilled, more often – they were not. One of the women, who was quite active in her community, said that she suspected her ideas regarding implementing various projects in her village (getting garbage bins, fixing inner-village roads, placing outdoor lighting, building a bus stop, etc.), often got rejected because of her critical views towards the local municipality officials. However, she recalled that once, in 2011, her request was carried out in the village. According to the experience of another respondent, the problem was solved much faster if a person found acquaintances to help them at the City Hall. She recalled that one of her unresolved problems that had been stretched out for months was suddenly solved soon after she ran into an acquaintance at the City Hall who helped her facilitate the process much faster. People who did not have acquaintances there might have to wait for a response for months and the problem might still remain unresolved.

## Adjara

### Settlement Assemblies

In Adjara, some women have not heard of the settlement assemblies being held in the region over the past few years. Not surprisingly, due to the pandemic, in-person assemblies did not take place in 2021, but some women maintained that even before the pandemic information regarding the settlement



assemblies being held had not reached them. Other women said that these meetings were held but women did not attend them because it was mostly men who got together and made decisions on such occasions. According to the interviewees: *"At such gatherings women mostly can not speak much. In the villages, including my village, the decisions are always made by men ... They did not listen much to women, or ask, 'well what you think?'"* No one really asks for women's opinions." In the villages where the most fundamental infrastructure did not exist, such as running water or roads, whenever these issues got solved at the settlement assemblies, it was beneficial for the whole village. However, as some women pointed out, in other cases men might not raise the issues that bothered women the most. For instance, one such important concern of the women had been the issue of the absence of kindergartens in certain villages. According to one respondent: *"They do not think it is important to take women's opinions into account. They may not directly oppress women's opinions, but when [women] are in the minority [at assemblies], men make decisions, let's take the unresolved problem of kindergartens or other problems in rural areas. Many women do not even have information that these assemblies have been held in villages in the past few years."*

One of the interviewees said that when it came to the jobs that were mainly done by women, the important decisions were still made by men. One such case was the water-related issues. Although water was mainly used by women during their everyday activities, it was still men who got to decide which family would receive their share of the water, and at what time. In addition, as mentioned by several of the respondents, issues that concern women the most do not get enough attention in the region. Women unanimously agreed that there was a widespread belief in the region that politics was a sphere meant exclusively for men, and this idea was further reinforced by the fact that women were generally not called for the settlement assemblies, and the state did not encourage women to participate in such political processes.

In Adjara, much like Marneuli, people were quite concerned that they were not able to participate in the village assemblies. However, they were also concerned that the political process in general was not entirely inclusive or democratic: *"Nobody is actively involved. The state decides my needs for me; it keeps telling me: 'Well, I offer this service and if you want to participate you can do so.' I ask, 'But where was I when you created this program?' I am being told that some kind of a research has been done and everyone's needs are being taken into account. But I really doubt it ... The state institutions are telling you that they are close by, but they are not close by, they are above you and you can never reach them directly."* Some women felt that not only women but men too were not sufficiently involved in politics.

## Resistance Against the Hydroelectric Dam

In Adjara, numerous respondents remembered the resistance against hydroelectric dams. In the villages that were affected by the Shuakhevi Hydropower project, women recalled the various types of resistance practices, but in the end, none of them had worked. One woman recalled: *“In our village some people did have issues with the dams, both men and women participated in the protest, but unfortunately, we ended with whatever the government wanted; people did not get what they asked for. It's probably people's fault too, because we have to unite around one issue. If more people unite, they will have better ideas, but we have never won against the government ... Women were quite active in these processes around the dams. Unfortunately, the government crossed both, men and women, it did not comply with the requests that the protesters made. The village also did not stand united and so there was not much resistance left. The dams have affected our crops and climate – we experience water scarcity, the quality of fruits is horrible now, and agricultural crops do not grow like they used to. We should have had one goal; we should not have concentrated on buying houses with the money and should not have prioritized our private interests.”*

Another respondent also recalled the events around the project: *“In villages social issues and the everyday problems that the residents face are more of a priority, than, for example, Power Plants and other issues ... The village residents did not discuss the problem together, there was a protest once and it was very easily suppressed because the government paid off the compensation ... If the people had enough means, they would say, ‘We do not need your money.’ For example, for me environment is more important than this kind of money. But these people can not prioritize environment when they have so many money-related issues ... There were houses that would get destroyed during the dam construction; some people took money, closed their houses and left the village ... However, their neighbors, who expressed that they wanted to remain in their houses and were not planning to move, did not get any compensation and now do not have water either. It is very hard to protest against the injustices of the cold-hearted government that does not care about humans, and its main goal is to build a dam.”*

## Current Politics in Adjara

Respondents recalled that their neighborhoods or villages had collectively written letters that were addressed to the City Hall. In some cases, their requests were fulfilled, although the process had often been quite lengthy. However, some women said that sometimes the letters were in vain.

The vast majority of women thought that they could reach out to the municipality if they wished to do so, be it by writing letters, meeting with the mayor, etc. It was obvious that the municipal authorities in Adjara were not as inaccessible to people as their counterparts in the Marneuli municipality. Yet, some women did recall that their requests were in vain. The interviewees said that their requests that had not been met were mostly related to different types of social assistance and

different housing issues, such as fixing deteriorated houses, seeking shelter, house-ownership issues, etc. An interviewee who was a single mother said: *“There are ways to voice your grievances, but you need someone to guide you in the process, someone who will help you ... There are many single mothers who do not have shelter. You might go to the City Hall, but you can not reach the upper levels, you can not voice your problems to people in the upper echelons. I think there should be someone [at the City Hall] who will help you, stand by you and if you are unable to reach the upper levels, they will raise your grievances there ... I think the municipality can allocate such a person who will help at least single mothers in some way. ”*

Although a few women thought that the municipality did consider the needs of their families and the grievances of the whole community, most women actually thought that the state and municipal policies completely overlooked their needs. A young woman assessed the municipality and state policy in the following way: *“In general, I do not think that the governing body of the municipality is tailored to the needs of the population. I think they have one draft of the local budget and they slightly update it every year, nobody researches what the needs and new priorities are that year ... From the first glance, it looks like all municipal projects are socially oriented, but in reality, none of these social issues are resolved. One-time assistance can not eliminate serious social and financial problems. I do not think there are any long-term plans ... In general, all municipalities are the face of our government. The state does not have a strategy, it does not tackle the main challenges of the country, such as the issues of the occupied territories, social and economic challenges ... We have a serious failure in the field of education, healthcare, we have serious human rights violations, we have problems in the judicial system.”*

## **V. Politics and Prospects of Education for Women**

### **Marneuli Municipality**

#### **Access to Education: Higher Education**

Among the women surveyed in Marneuli, 2 had pursued their higher education in Azerbaijan, while 5 had received a bachelor's degree in Georgia. Among the women who received a bachelor's degree in Georgia, 2 also had a master's degree. 1 interviewee was a student and 3 women had not finished secondary schools, although all of them had been educated till at least the ninth grade. 5 people had secondary education and 2 had studied in vocational colleges in Azerbaijan, although only one of them had eventually graduated from it.

The women who did not finish secondary schools were over thirty years old, and cited poor grades or marriage as their reasons for dropping out. Only one person among them said that she was a refugee

and had to move to Georgia at a young age when she was still attending school, and this had hindered her education.

Every single woman who had received secondary education mentioned that they had wanted to go for higher education but did not have the resources to do so. With the exception of one person, when these women graduated from schools, the '1 + 4 program' did not exist, which provides an opportunity for Armenian-speaking and Azeri-speaking citizens of Georgia to pass one exam in their mother tongue instead of four exams in Georgian. The women said that when they graduated from school, the majority of the Azerbaijani-speaking population went to Azerbaijan for higher education, but their own families could not afford it. In addition, several of them mentioned that when they were in school, the quality of education in them was very low, and therefore, they could never acquire sufficient knowledge to go to the universities. Several women also noted that they could not continue their studies due to bad grades or marriage, and in some cases, even forced marriage. Everyone who had not graduated from secondary schools or had only received secondary education thought that they would have had 'a better life' if they had gone for higher education. For them, 'better life' meant a higher income, a higher economic status, more independence, and the ability to be more integrated into the political processes. The women also thought that they would have been able to help their children more with homework, but they couldn't do so because of their own lack of education.

According to one respondent, education brings about the following changes in the life of an individual: *"[they] become an active citizen, defend the rights of themselves and others, can play a role in governing the state, can have access to information, etc. I do not want my child's life to be like mine. I can honestly say that an uneducated person has a difficult life. If you want to go ahead in life, you need to get an education at least till the undergraduate level."* Respondents with access to higher education believed that expanding their worldviews through university education was also an important aspect of acquiring knowledge: *"In school and in a university a person learns about the world and about themselves; this enhances their worldview, etc. This is why it is necessary to get higher education."*

Interviewees believed that their chances of employment had dropped dramatically due to their lack of higher education. All of the respondents wanted their children or grandchildren to go to universities because they believed that a bachelor's degree was a necessary requirement for employment today, and they also thought that their children would learn Georgian in universities much better than anywhere else. Most of the women said that when they went to school, the quality of education was very low. Georgian language class was especially unsatisfactory, and therefore, it was impossible for them to learn Georgian.

Women who had graduated from universities in Azerbaijan also faced unemployment issues. They thought that there were too few jobs in Georgia, and their unemployment also resulted from the fact that they did not speak the Georgian language well. Women who went to vocational schools also faced unemployment problems. They thought that if they had a bachelor's degree, or spoke the Georgian language well, or had computer skills, they would have had more opportunities for employment. However, women with higher education said that there was a serious employment problem in the country in general, especially in the peripheral regions and villages. Consequently, going for higher education and having a knowledge of the Georgian language were not sufficient conditions for people's employment. The women who had secondary or incomplete secondary education thought that education and learning the Georgian language would help them overcome poverty. However, women who had higher education and spoke Georgian well thought that unemployment was a systemic issue, and that's why it was difficult for people to find employment even after graduating from a university and learning the Georgian language.<sup>8</sup>

All of the respondents believed that education was necessary for both women and men, and therefore, it should be accessible for both the genders. Several respondents pointed out that education might play a more important role for women. One woman said: *"A woman needs education more than a man. If a woman is educated, she is also independent, she has willpower, she will not face financial problems; if she is educated, she will have a profession, she will decide on her own how to act and what role she should play in society."* Another respondent, whose daughter was a student, said: *"I want my daughter to be a strong and free woman. Education is very important to achieve that."* Women viewed education as one of the means that could help them prevent their oppression, and even strengthen or protect their rights.

Women who had received higher education said that their familial and parental support had been one of the most important factors for their admission to college. They said that both moral and financial support played a big role in their enrollment. These interviewees believed that the persistence of children while pursuing education and parental support for it were the most important grounds for admission in college. The financial support included the allocation of money to tutors who prepared students for the national exams as well as providing money for their accommodation and education in Tbilisi.

### Access to Education: Secondary Schools

Women who did not speak Georgian said that the low quality of education in schools and the equally inferior quality of the Georgian lessons were the main reason behind their inability to pick up the

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<sup>8</sup> Social Justice Center [2021](#)

language. Moreover, according to the older generation, Georgian language was not a priority in the Soviet Union, and as a result, Georgian lessons were either held quite rarely or not at all, and even the Georgian teachers did not have the appropriate qualifications.

Women who had graduated from the secondary schools 1 to 7 years ago or those who had maintained a close contact with the schools because their children were currently enrolled in them were more critical of the secondary schools in general. Others believed that the quality of schools today was better than it was 10 or more years ago, although many respondents thought that the quality of education in Azerbaijani-language schools was significantly lower than in Georgian-language schools. Respondents unanimously agreed that the incorporation of new, qualified Georgian language teachers and ethnically Georgian language assistants into the schools of the region had brought about enormous positive changes. Nevertheless, as per the opinions of the respondents, this was not enough. First of all, the number of these teachers was insufficient, and as a result, the existing teachers were only able to teach in a limited number of classes, thereby leaving a large number of classes completely cut off from accessing this opportunity. In addition, the time restriction of lessons was named as one of the biggest problems in the schools. During the pandemic, the time allocated to each lesson was reduced to 30 minutes, and this led to many problems in all the subjects, especially if there were at least 15-35 students in the same class. It was impossible for the teacher to cover all the required materials and ensure the involvement of all the students in the learning process within such a small amount of time. Online learning was also named as one of the most serious challenges due to a general lack of the necessary electronic equipment in many families, along with internet problems and related expenses. Additionally, online learning had made it much harder to get feedback from children who also faced difficulties trying to concentrate during online classes.<sup>9</sup>

The interviewees said that the highland villages experienced acute infrastructural problems. For instance, the school buildings were often badly damaged, many schools did not have heating, while some schools suffered from faulty infrastructure. Furthermore, particularly in the Azerbaijani-language schools, one of the main problems was the fact that the current textbooks were based on inadequate translations.<sup>10</sup> There were a lot of mistakes in these textbooks, and this created difficulties for students, especially in the subject of mathematics. In addition, the Georgian language books only offered basic grammar to students and in-depth grammar was entirely missing. The Georgian lessons were also focused only on teaching the Georgian language and were not integrated with classes in

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<sup>9</sup> Social Justice Center [2020](#).

<sup>10</sup> Social Justice Center [2020](#), EMC [2020](#).

Georgian literature, and Georgian literature in general was completely missing from the non-Georgian-language schools. Several respondents recalled that they learned about many famous works of Georgian literature only after they became college students in Georgian universities, and they had not read many famous works of Georgian literature till date because these texts were not taught in Azerbaijani-language schools. There was also no mention of the Azerbaijanis of Georgia in the history textbooks and it seemed that this community had been rendered entirely invisible. According to one respondent: *“When I was in school I thought that I belonged to another country. There was nothing in any textbook that talked about my community, there was nothing in the Georgian history about us either. We found out who we were much later in life ... However, at the university when a comment was made about me being from Azerbaijan, I no longer thought that I was a refugee from there.”*

During interviews, it was also pointed out that the teachers in the schools often did not conduct lessons in the subjects in which they had received training, and many of them, in a bid to increase their low salaries, had to teach subjects that they had not studied themselves. The qualifications of the teachers in general were also questioned, since many of them had not updated their qualifications for years, if not decades. It was also highlighted that many teachers had graduated from the vocational colleges in Marneuli a long time ago in their youth, and therefore, were entirely unsuited to the needs of the education system in the present day. It was actually rare for schools to hire new teachers who could rejuvenate the staff with new knowledge and experiences. Some respondents also mentioned the problem of widespread nepotism, since some of the teachers were employed at schools where their relatives were part of the managerial staff, and such practices inevitably left the truly motivated and well-educated teachers outside the education system. A large part of the staff in the Azerbaijani-language schools was also of retirement age, and this created its own set of problems. Older teachers were generally unable to constantly update their knowledge, since it took a lot of time and energy to seek out new information and get trained in newer pedagogical approaches.

The teachers surveyed in this study further mentioned that the computer rooms in several schools usually remained locked and unused. Most of the computers themselves were 10-12 years old and outdated, and the schools also suffered from internet problems. Even their laboratories did not have the necessary inventory for experiments, and during physics and chemistry lessons, experiments were often not conducted at all. Some respondents thought that there was a big gap between what the Azerbaijani language schools offered and the requirements of different universities; at times the gap was so large that many students were thought to be not prepared at all for the university. The teachers also raised other concerns about the education system. They said that the system constantly kept

evolving and changing without the actual aim of these changes being understood by the authorities from the very beginning. According to the teachers, first the changes were made and only afterwards what the changes had been made for began to be considered. The changes were also so rapid that the teachers were unable to adapt to this state of constant reforms. The respondents pointed out that despite the scarcity of resources and the fact that even the most fragmentary information often reached the Azerbaijani language schools only with great difficulty, the teachers in these schools were still under pressure from the authorities to deliver the best results.

According to one of the respondents, who was particularly familiar with a lot of schools in the region due to the nature of her job, Georgian and Azerbaijani children led quite separate lives in the schools. She said that the schools did not encourage unity between these two groups, and there was a glaring difference in their respective levels of knowledge, education and skills. In mathematics, physics and other subjects, for instance, Azerbaijani students lagged far behind their Georgian counterparts. These differences were clearly felt even among the children who were in the same class. The respondent believed that it was necessary to find commonalities among children, but the education system did not have such an approach towards them. Consequently, students did not have a sense of unity among them and they did not evolve together. According to the same respondent, one of the main problems in the Azerbaijani-language schools was the fact that the education system did not follow unified protocols - the system had one set of requirements for Georgian schools, and entirely different requirements for the Russian, Azerbaijani and Armenian schools.

The teachers pointed out that although the school should be a center for both formal and informal education, it was often necessary to open additional community centers as a substitute for the lack of resources in most of the schools. Sometimes this involved hosting certain classes in these community centers instead of the schools, such as the Georgian language lessons, the English lessons and partial informal education.

A small section of the respondents that was quite familiar with the school system also spoke about its politicization. The schools as well as their teachers were the resources that the governing party constantly relied on during elections and other political processes.

Some of the respondents further mentioned that at times the problems in the schools did not arise solely due to the lack of sufficient funds. Certain schools, for example, did not even know how to use the existing funds available to them because they did not have the proper experience and knowledge to do so. These unutilized funds were generally returned to the budget at the end of the year, although these schools lacked several resources in the first place.



Most of the respondents, including the ones who thought that it was possible to receive good quality education in schools, believed that it was necessary, or at least highly important, for students to have tutors in order to be admitted to the university. For a few of the respondents, this was especially necessary if a student wanted to receive a grant upon admission. One respondent said: *"It is necessary for a child to have a tutor if they want to be admitted to college. Nowadays the duration of one lesson is 30 minutes, I think this is very little time. A teacher cannot even allocate one minute per child if students require the explanation of materials individually."* Similar thoughts were expressed by another respondent: *"It is necessary to have a tutor if a child wants to go to the university. Compared to the past, lessons are not conducted very well. Nowadays one lesson lasts for 30 minutes, what can a child learn in that amount of time? We are barely getting by and we do not have additional finances to cover the costs of an additional tutor. But despite all this, we are struggling through so that my son can go to college. I have three boys. The elder and the middle one could not study in the university, I want at least the youngest child to study there. That's my biggest goal right now."*

Several respondents said that when they were in secondary schools they had to do household chores or assist their families in agricultural activities. Most of these respondents said that they did not have to miss school because of it, but one of them said that she missed school quite often because she was the elder daughter and had to take care of many household chores: *"I had to miss school many times. During the spring season we start working on our plots of land that were far away from our house. My parents went to work, and I had to take care of the plot and miss the school because of it. I was cleaning the house, preparing food, caring for my sisters and my brother. I am the eldest child in the family and it fell on me to carry the biggest burden of housework. Of course, all of this has had a negative impact on my education. I could not understand the lessons and I was getting bad marks. It made me lose my motivation to learn at school."* Another respondent recalled that although she rarely had to miss school, she had to do a lot of housework and agricultural work after the classes would get over, and this made it quite difficult for her to study. Other respondents did not have a similar experience themselves, but they recalled many cases where students had to leave the school due to getting married early, or their involvement in agriculture, or to travel abroad (mainly to seek employment abroad or because their parents were employed abroad). Based on preliminary observations, all three of these issues are linked to socio-economic problems, although more in-depth research is required to confirm this. One of the respondents said: *"Students do not go to school because their parents work in different places, such as Turkey, and the children are forced to go with them. The problem is that the state does not respond to these problems adequately."*

### Experiencing Discrimination

Women who did not speak Georgian and were in an Azeri-speaking environment could not recall any forms of ethnic discrimination in educational settings. Many of them had studied in their own

communities and this factor could perhaps explain the lack of discriminatory experience. Some women who had studied in areas where Georgians were in the majority remembered experiences that could not be described as direct discrimination, but they did expose the sense of alienation that exists between ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis. One of the respondents recalled that both the lecturers and her college classmates had inaccurate information about the Azerbaijani community. For example, seemingly positive comments were often made at the expense of representing the whole community as backward, uncivilized and barbarian. She recalled: *"Their emphasis was on my appearance. They said, 'You are ethnic Azeri? really? And so white?' Or they would say, 'Wow, you speak Georgian fluently, your people [ethnic Azeris] do not speak Georgian at all, this is why I am saying that your Georgian is great.' They would mention, 'speaking Tatar', they would say, 'you have child marriages,' 'you have women's circumcision, right?' I was told such comments."* Women who were in active contact with ethnic Georgians said that their community was often referred to as Tatars and as a community that was backward, thereby insulting them and the other Azerbaijanis of Georgia.

## Adjara

### Challenges in Education System: Higher Education

Half of the women who were surveyed as a part of this study in Adjara were either students or had a bachelor's degree, while the other half of the respondents had secondary and incomplete secondary education. Respondents with secondary or incomplete secondary education named external factors such as marriage, financial problems and the widespread belief that men needed to be more educated than women as their reasons for dropping out of school and not pursuing higher education. Respondents said that due to financial problems and limited resources, many families often picked their boys over their girls when they had to determine who would get higher education. In addition, respondents said that there was a widespread belief two to three decades ago that women did not need to be educated. Some of the respondents said that they had a great desire to study, but because of these factors they could not pursue their studies in universities, or they could not finish the courses in the secondary schools.

One of the interviewees said: *"My education was not even on the agenda; unfortunately, it never was, I want a girl ... Here is what happened, I left school, I got married. That was not even on the agenda, we did not have a phone, we did not have the electricity to watch something on TV, or be a part of the civilization and I could not even think about it. Nobody around me was studying, everyone was getting married and I thought that this was how it is ought to be."* Another respondent recalled: *"When there was work to be done at home, we could not go [to school] ... because we were girls and it was no big deal if we did not go ... Nobody bought me textbooks. Not*

*because we did not have enough money. No, it was only because the girls did not need to study and I had to take care of it on my own. No one would yell at me for not studying either. There have been many instances when I did not have a textbook, and I wrote my homework and learned the materials without it ... Because my parents did not think it was important for me to have the textbooks ... It was not just me, the parents of many of my friends thought so too."*

Respondents unanimously agreed that this perception had radically changed in the last 10 to 20 years, and lately, more and more women had been receiving higher education. This belief was strengthened by the fact that the interviewees were trying their best to get their grandchildren or great-grandchildren enrolled in universities. Many of them had already invested a considerable amount of resources to enable their children to pursue higher education, regardless of their gender. This tendency was also confirmed by the fact that the interviewees believed that women and men should have equal access to education. However, much like in Marneuli, a few women mentioned that education might be even more necessary for women because they generally lived in an unfair environment and they faced more obstacles than men. According to some of the interviewees, women should possess the resources to protect themselves from the gender gap in employment, domestic violence, and other instances of the violation of their rights. One respondent said: *"Women need education more than men because men can get by, they are more easily employed, they do not need a diploma for their income. A woman definitely needs a diploma ... Women need education in order to be able to defend themselves."* Another respondent said: *"In my opinion, the only way a man is stronger than a woman is physical strength. Let's discuss it, how else is he stronger? Their brains are not better ... Girls were always studying better than boys; I was always a witness of that ... Why should a man get more education than a woman? Women do so much more, why should men be highly valued? This is unacceptable for me and I think everyone should be equal."*

However, some respondents said that getting a bachelor's degree today was simply a necessity in order to get at least some form of employment. According to one respondent, *"[studying at the university] means fighting for a diploma, studying for a diploma. If you have a diploma today, you have the door open to any field where it is required to have a higher education and a diploma. Hence you have no chances without a diploma and knowledge. A person may have knowledge, more knowledge than someone who graduated from college, but they might not have a diploma for a normal future."* In Adjara and Marneuli, people believed that higher education was the necessary precondition for a better future, higher income and the opportunity of having a stable job. One respondent summed up these ideas in the following way: *"A person who has a higher education also has more economic, moral, spiritual development; I don't know, they can... where there is education there is more development, you are able to change the economic condition naturally and physically."*

Based on their own experiences, women also named financial hardship as one of the main obstacles that hindered their prospects of getting higher education. Some respondents said that they could not continue their studies in universities because they did not get enough scores to qualify for the government grant. Since they were not able to commute to universities from mountainous Adjara, Adjarian students often needed tuition funds, living expenses and money for both food and transportation, and several families were unable to afford these costs. Respondents recalled many cases from the families of their relatives and acquaintances when students had to drop out of college because their families could no longer afford to pay all these expenses. In the view of the respondents, this was such a big challenge that there should be state programs to help students in need. While there were a few study grants, the women believed that this was not enough. Students, especially the ones from rural areas and low-income families, needed a steady financial support. The women thought that due to the lack of such a support, many children were severely disadvantaged, despite having a lot of motivation and desire to learn.

The interviewees said that many college students known to them had to work while studying because they did not have enough money to live in the cities. One of the respondents also recalled her own experience and said that before the pandemic began, she used to work for 6 days a week, while also pursuing her studies. She felt compelled to work after her university classes because otherwise she would not have been able to live in the city. These experiences deprived many students of the opportunity to devote sufficient amount of time to their education.

Most of the women who had managed to study in universities said that the moral and financial support of their families helped them to do so. Some of them said that it was difficult to pass the national exams without additional help from tutors because many schools did not provide the necessary level of education for children to be actually admitted to the universities with funding. Although there had been cases when several students managed to be admitted without any help from tutors, this was generally very rare. One woman recalled: *“Because I did not have the necessary knowledge and good enough background education at school, sometimes I had to pull all-nighters. I had to walk 8 kms every single day in my final year of school; I had tutoring lessons in Didachara for 6 days a week. We got out of these lessons hungry, tired, and then we had to start doing homework once we got home. It took me a lot of hard work to be admitted to the university.”* Many families did not have the money for tutors. According to the respondents, it was generally more feasible to get by without tutors in Khulo, since many teachers in the region were certified. However, several village schools might not have a teacher for a specific subject for a few years, and these classes were often filled in by someone who lacked expertise in the requisite discipline. Therefore, in villages, there was an even greater need for tutors.

One of the respondents recalled that the Religious school in Khulo played a crucial role in the education of her children. In the Muslim religious schools of highland Adjara, children could get religious education and they were also tutored in various other subjects. This resource was very useful for families who did not have the financial means to hire tutors for their children. The respondent admitted that her own son was accepted into the university precisely because this opportunity existed in Khulo.

Two of the interviewees had received their bachelor's degree in Turkey. They had received a fully funded scholarship from the Turkish Embassy that had covered their entire tuition fees and other accommodation and living expenses. The respondents readily acknowledged that without this opportunity they would not have been able to receive higher education because their families did not have sufficient funds. One of them said that her family strongly opposed her desire to continue her studies in Turkey, although having a scholarship and the support of other students allowed her to complete her studies without any help from her family whatsoever. According to the same woman, she was eager to continue her graduate studies in another field and not the program that was offered by the embassy. However, she eventually did not regret her decision to study in that undergraduate program, and she admitted that she would not have been able to receive higher education otherwise.

### Challenges in the Education System: Secondary Schools

Respondents who have had a close contact with the education system pointed out that it was inconsistent, changed frequently and teachers were unable to keep up with the changes. Additionally, many issues and reforms were often ambiguous, and this led to further uncertainty.

In the villages, the problems were most apparent in the English language classes and science classes. Village residents recalled that even 2 to 3 years ago they did not have the appropriate equipment to conduct experiments in the chemistry or physics classes, and in the biology classes, they did not have the resources that would provide visible examples of the study materials. The respondents said that there had been a slight improvement in some of the schools in recent years as a direct result of the teacher certification programs. However, the improvement had not been felt equally in all of the schools of the region. Respondents named the low quality of foreign language classes as well as the low quality of chemistry, physics and biology classes as one of the main challenges in the schools.

Village residents said that based on their experiences they clearly felt the stark differences between the center and the periphery; by 'center' and 'periphery', they meant not only Batumi and its outer lying regions, but also the differences between their local municipal center and the more remote, far - flung

villages. Schools of the region also had problems regarding the libraries because in many schools there were either very few books, or the libraries did not exist at all.

Young people also raised the issue of problematic history textbooks wherein Islam was often used as a synonym of the enemy, which then inevitably led to Islamophobia. They could not recall any examples from their textbooks where Islam had been mentioned in a positive context. Instead, Islam was constantly vilified and associated with the conquest of Georgia. They said that the history textbooks often did not distinguish between the political history of Islam and Muslims, and Islam as a religion.

Respondents said that the textbooks and the study materials often did not correspond with the requirements of the national exams, which inevitably created a need for tutors. There was a big difference in the quality of the secondary schools and the universities, and hence, many students found it difficult to study at the universities because their schools had not prepared them well. Respondents also said that many small schools, including several in the rural areas, did not employ a psychologist, and this made it difficult to identify the problems and additional needs that some students might experience.

In addition, the pandemic seemed to be a major challenge because a large number of students did not have access to appropriate electronic equipment or the Internet. Since there might be multiple school-going children in a single family, parents and their children often had to share the electronic equipment with each other. Electricity problems were also named as a major challenge in many villages. Both students and their parents said that they often had blackouts that disrupted the classes of schoolchildren and the university students. Another problem was the slow speed of the Internet in different villages that did not allow schoolchildren and university students to adequately participate in the classes without interruptions.

A large subsection of the respondents said that they were actively involved in their family's agricultural activities while also attending the secondary school. According to the interviewees, almost all children in highland Adjara were involved in agriculture because living in a village and getting by without working in agriculture was simply unimaginable. Additionally, the harsh climatic conditions in the highlands of Adjara and the mountainous landscape made agricultural work even more difficult, and as a result, families always needed more helping hands. Moreover, many families had their plots of land far away from their homes, and they often had to take their cattle to pastures located even higher up the mountains. The majority of respondents said that their involvement in these activities did not prevent them from going to school or studying, or even if it did, it happened quite rarely. However, a

few women recalled that their duties at home prevented them from going to school and studying. Some of them even remembered occasions when they were not allowed to go to school because of their chores and duties at home.

One respondent said: *"I only went to secondary school and could not even graduate because my mother died while giving birth. She left four daughters, one of them was very little, only an hour old. I was older, 6 years old ... Well, my grandmother raised the four of us and we were orphans and I could not afford to go to school all the time ... I went there partially till grade 3 ... After that I helped my grandmother and I could not go to school. So I do not have a school certificate, [because] I left school very soon. Given that I do not have sufficient education, I could not go to the university or anywhere, I did not have the opportunity to study at the time. My grandma would leave [the children] to me, I had to take care of them so that they did not hurt themselves, or I had to wash the dishes, I would do things at home, whatever I could. I wanted to help my grandmother and take some burden off of her."*

Another respondent recalled being involved in the agricultural activities of her own family but she would also help out her neighbors and relatives: *"When there was a sowing season I used to go to the highland mountains. Often due to fatigue, I could not prepare my homework, I did not have time to study and I was hoping to study during the breaks between periods. Sometimes my hands were so tired that I could not write my homework down and I had to type it on the computer."*

Other respondents recalled that they had classmates who had to help their families in agriculture, and who were often absent from the school for the whole week or even the whole month. They also remembered that due to their families living in poverty, their schoolmates and classmates had to work seasonally in Turkey, often throughout the whole summer. In Turkey, they mostly picked hazelnuts or tea leaves in the farms, and as a result, they sometimes missed school for an even longer period of time. The respondents recalled that their classmates and friends needed to work even in times of minimal needs in order to support themselves financially, and therefore, many of them eventually dropped out of school, received poor education, or were unable to attend the university.

### Discriminatory Practices

The respondents recalled quite a few cases of discriminatory treatment in the universities and schools that were either based on their own experiences, or the experiences of their children, family members and relatives. Cases of such discriminatory treatment were more common towards those who would wear a headscarf or other attributes that revealed their Muslim identity.

According to one woman, she enrolled her children in a private school to protect them from discrimination, but they encountered problems over there as well because Muslim children were generally often bullied and ridiculed: *"Here [in Adjara] many [Muslim] people have problems, many children*

*are abused and they face obstacles. I know a lot of cases ... I know girls who were going to cover their heads [with headscarfs], but they could not cover their heads because of school or had to leave their studies ... Before the pandemic, one of the students in my childrens' class said that they were Muslim. The teacher responded that the student was Georgian, not a Muslim. She maintained that the student was wrong and should not have said that. My child also supported the classmate and said, 'I am a Muslim myself,' the whole exchange continued with a lot of arguing."*

Another woman recalled that her son's religious identity became a source of conflict between his teacher and him: *"[In Batumi] Paata<sup>11</sup> lost an opportunity to receive a computer because of this ... He had a conflict with a teacher because of his religion. Apparently, the teacher said, that she came so early to school because Khoja's braying noises woke her up in the morning, and Paata argued with her. He had a conflict with this teacher because of this. Paata told her that because she was a teacher she had no right to mention his religion badly. At the end, somehow the word got out and reached the principal and this teacher finally deducted Paata's grades at the end. "*

Several other respondents said that the Muslim youth often hid their faith to avoid ridicule or insult. One young woman said, *"I will tell you a story of my friend. When she was enrolled in a university in Tbilisi, she was the only Muslim in her cohort who admitted that ... they were a Muslim. For a long time, she was ridiculed because of this, but she did not feel embarrassed ... There were other Muslims in that cohort, but they did not admit it because they could not go through the similar things, the ridicule ... My friend did not feel ashamed ... She was and still is a successful student ... but there was pressure from some lecturers, how could such a beautiful girl, an educated girl possibly be a Muslim! Why? What makes them [lecturers] special? How are they [lecturers] convinced that they are the center of the world?"* Another respondent recalled that a teacher in a technical subject at her university had once loudly expressed his opinion that all Georgians should be Christians and had linked Islam to only conquest and coercion: *"I think he did not expect that I would be a Muslim. He would say, you have such a European look that I was certain you would be a Christian. Why are you a Muslim? Maybe you will be baptized."*

Some respondents said that no such comments came from their lecturers or teachers. However, the lecturers did not address the cases of discrimination that often occurred between the students. For example, they did not address several of the negative and derisive comments about the Batumi mosque, such as "there are many mosques already", that were made by some of the students against their Muslim counterparts. In Georgia, therefore, the existence of the principle of equality at the constitutional level does not necessarily ensure the creation of equal conditions for religious minorities

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<sup>11</sup> The name has been changed



in practice. One respondent summed up the cases of everyday discrimination as follows: *“I know a lot of stories from Adjarian muslims where they had to prove themselves and prove that we are a part of the Georgian nation, we have a right to live as independent individuals, we are not ‘Tatars’, we are Georgian. A strong-willed individual might not be fazed by all this but a lot of people are disturbed by the attitudes of being associated with so-called ‘Invader Tatars’ who seemingly dictated our religion.”*

## **VI. Dominant Gaze towards Muslims**

The respondents also highlighted the attitudes towards their own community that they encountered in daily life. Some of the respondents in the Marneuli Municipality said that they did not know what the views of the dominant ethnic group were towards the Azerbaijani community. However, a few women who had frequent cross-ethnic contact with the ethnically Georgian community spoke openly about the obstacles and views they faced.

Women remembered the beginning of the 2020 pandemic vividly when Marneuli and Bolnisi were in a lockdown and declared a red zone. This was the time when racist and chauvinist comments and posts appeared on social networks against the Azerbaijani-speaking population. Some of the respondents recalled that they had not felt such hatred towards their community before. However, in the spring of 2020, they faced a large wave of hatred wherein the notion that Azerbaijanis were backward and uneducated was especially prevalent. In their view, this was also encouraged by the state because it remained silent towards such hate speech. The Azerbaijani community had not seen any response from the state officials, and not a single state representative had defended the rights of Georgian Azerbaijanis. As a result, respondents felt that many people in their community had lost trust towards the Georgian state, and they thought that they would have to face the barrage of hatred alone. Some of the respondents thought that the involvement of the Azerbaijani state when there were any conflicts or tensions between Georgians and Azerbaijanis also created distrust in the Georgian Azerbaijani community, since a large part of this group attributes itself entirely to the Georgian state. Women were especially hurt by the attitude that many people considered the Azerbaijani community to be underdeveloped. One respondent, who came from a mixed Georgian-Azerbaijani family, said that if negative attitudes towards Azerbaijanis were evident in the Georgian community, she did not remember the negative attitude towards Georgians in the Azerbaijani community. In the Azerbaijani community, people had a sense of sadness rather than resentment, aggression, or a desire for domination.

Almost all respondents in Adjara voiced the concern that even leading politicians in Georgia's public discourse equated Georgians with Orthodox Christianity, which immediately excluded Adjarian

Muslims from the notion of Georgianness. Adjarian respondents said that they often felt like second-class citizens. They were often referred to as "Tatars," which was painful and alienating to Adjarians. Respondents also recalled the dominant group saying the phrase "If you do not like it here, go elsewhere," which, in their opinion, reflected the secondary status of Adjarians. The women said that it was still not recognized that Georgia belonged to both Muslim as well as Orthodox Georgians, and that Muslim Adjarians had no other homeland.

According to some of the respondents, existing conflicts between Muslims and Christians, such as the one over the construction of a mosque in Buknari, were often overshadowed by artificial attempts of reconciliation and peacebuilding. However, the interviewees did not see any fundamental changes in the state policy and the public discourse. Some respondents said that Muslims were often equated with terrorism, violence, underdevelopment and harmful thoughts. One of the respondents said: *"[They think] this person is from Adjara, they are Muslim, therefore, they are cruel, they are prone to ruthlessness ... Very bad perceptions prevail. If you are a Muslim, they do not consider that this is the correct way of living. When you step out, when you are in a city or the capital or at a meeting, and you are a Muslim, no one expects you to fulfill your responsibilities with dignity ... If you say that you are Adjarian, they remember early marriage, and you are considered to be oppressed by Islam, and it is believed that you do not know how to behave in society ... I am from Adjara, I am a Muslim, but I do not think that Islam oppresses me, I do not think anyone is pressuring me."* According to an older woman, these attitudes had gradually begun to change. For example, if Khulo was initially considered an untamed place in their youth, in Batumi and Kobuleti people now had more information about mountainous Adjara and they no longer differentiated between Upper and Lower Adjara. However, every Adjarian respondent thought that there were many negative perceptions towards Adjarians. According to the interviewees, they constantly had to prove that they were Georgians and that they too loved Georgia.

## Conclusion

In summary, women face multiple challenges in several areas of Adjara and Marneuli municipalities. The existing political-economic system, patriarchy and ethno-religious nationalism are the major axes of power that create an unfair, and in some cases, an oppressive environment for these women.

In terms of healthcare, most women in highland Adjara and Marneuli Municipality name socio-economic problems as one of their main obstacles. Women say that they have to live with severe health problems and pain because they do not have the funds for physical examinations and treatment. The cost of medical assessments and consultations is increasing so drastically that even middle-income women find it difficult to conduct full examinations of their health. Almost every single respondent

named the cost of medicines as one of the health sector's biggest problems. Azerbaijani women face tremendous barriers to accessing healthcare services due to their lack of knowledge of the Georgian language.

Most women in Kvemo Kartli are homemakers or are self-employed. Homemakers have a strong desire for employment primarily due to the fact that families often do not have enough income. According to certain women, the fact that they only have secondary or incomplete secondary education and do not speak the Georgian language prove to be an insurmountable barrier. However, those who have higher education and speak Georgian say that it is difficult to find a job in general, especially in the Marneuli municipality. Employment of the Azerbaijani-speaking population in the formal sector is very low. Many employed respondents from both the regions are teachers, although they often have to work overtime and have low salaries. Some women employed in Adjara and Marneuli work in unstable jobs without insurance and maternity leave. They usually do not even know how long they will be employed or when they will work and get paid.

Women perform most of the labor regardless of whether they are employed. Therefore, women are constantly experiencing a paucity of time - they often do not have time for rest or fun, and a large portion of family responsibilities are borne by them. Women's work at home is quite challenging, and as the respondents say, sometimes housework is even harder than paid work.

In Adjara and Marneuli municipality, women also raise the issue of no long-term support programs for violence victims that can make it easier for women to escape from a violent environment. Another problem is the lack of compassionate staff in law enforcement institutions who will not cause trauma to the women. Most divorced respondents do not receive alimony, and in Adjara, there are cases when divorced women do not have a chance to live with their children.

In terms of political participation, the vast majority of women feel that women are excluded from politics. This is attributed to the prevailing perceptions in their villages, towns and cities that politics is a sphere for men rather than women. Additionally, there are limited mechanisms to ensure women's involvement in politics. The majority of women surveyed in Marneuli municipality believe that they have no means of making their voices heard by the municipality or various state institutions. They think that the main reasons are their lack of knowledge of the Georgian language, lack of sufficient education, and lack of information about the mechanisms in Georgia that can enable them to share their concerns. In Marneuli municipality, except for election voting, a large number of women fail to exercise even the most basic rights of political involvement. It is an insurmountable obstacle for some women to access the municipality or social agency for social assistance, health issues, or to resolve the

village's problems. Women in Adjara, on the other hand, say that making their voices and concerns heard by the municipality is not such a challenging issue, although they think that many of their concerns, especially the ones that are related to their housing, are not met or are incredibly delayed. Several respondents mentioned gender quotas as one of the ways to ensure women's participation in political activities.

Some women in Adjara and Marneuli Municipality think that women in particular and common citizens in general have minimal influence on the political process, and that democratic mechanisms in Georgia are both illusory and exclusionary. They believe that the government does not thoroughly investigate and address the fundamental concerns of the majority of the Georgian population, neither at the state nor at the municipal level. There needs to be long-term visions to address these concerns, since existing services are fragmented, porous and cannot bring about a large scale transformation or alleviation of the problems.

In terms of education, it is evident that Azerbaijani-language schools are far behind Georgian-speaking schools; they have infrastructural problems, flawed teaching materials and lack of modern equipment like computers. The level of qualification of teachers is also worse than in Georgian language schools. Often, these schools cannot adequately teach the Georgian language or other subjects. Moreover, the books given to students in Azerbaijani language schools have quite a lot of issues.

In the remote villages of Adjara and Marneuli, the problem of school infrastructure and teacher qualifications are even more acute. Qualified teachers may not be present in particular subjects, and various classes are often taught by a teacher who does not have sufficient qualifications to teach them in the first place. In both the regions, school-children are often involved in family farming. While this does not prevent some students from getting an education, housework and involvement in agricultural activities are a massive obstacle for some women's education, especially for older daughters who have the most significant responsibilities among children. Financial difficulties and early marriage are also cited as the main reasons for girls dropping out of high school. In both the regions, admission and studying at universities without additional tutors are almost unheard of. Family support and financial ability play a big role in whether girls get higher education, and there are no social support programs for students from the regions to cover their housing, food and daily expenses. Scholarships from Azerbaijani companies and fully-funded scholarships in Turkey are the only means of getting a higher education for some girls.

As this research has shown, the problem of cultural domination also deserves our attention. The values, beliefs and visions of the dominant society are perceived as the norm that offers a superior

worldview, and the lives and conditions of different cultural groups are measured from this vantage point. This approach perceives the values and lifestyles of different minorities as underdeveloped and backward, and hence, it orientalizes them. This form of domination is exercised not only by conservative groups that view religious and ethnic minorities through the prism of ethno-religious nationalism, but also by liberal groups that speak from the perspective of liberation. But, in addition to orientalizing different groups, this approach also diminishes the problems and oppression of women to a single, and rather simplistic, understanding of power. As a result, these visions undermine the process of women's liberation because they attack women's second fundamental identity (cultural, religious identity).

A single-layer analysis of women's lives will not be a good tool to describe their challenges, daily life and oppression. Women from the upper and lower classes, and those from the periphery and the center, often face quite different challenges. Different factors affect their lives that are just as important as their gender. Depending on which ethnic group women belong to, they have a different quality of life, social status and experiences. Women belonging to the dominant ethnic group do not experience barriers and discrimination as the non-dominant ethnic groups, especially the non-Georgian-speaking ethnic groups. The language barrier and extremely limited access to education and employment pose additional obstacles for Azerbaijani women in Georgia. This study also found out that Georgian Muslims and Georgian Azerbaijanis are subjected to derogatory and discriminatory treatment because of their religion or ethnicity within the education system, employment and everyday relations. In some cases, this can take the form of hate speech, and sometimes religious or ethnic factors can lead to discrimination at the places of employment.

It is important to remember that women's lives are greatly influenced by their socio-economic conditions, or in other words, their class. Class is one of the main determinants of life opportunities, especially in peripheries with even fewer social services and a plethora of fundamental infrastructural problems. For these reasons, rural women, who are generally poorer than urban women, also experience time poverty as they face the burden of collapsed infrastructure and limited social services. These deficiencies are often filled at the expense of women's labor and time. Poor women also have to work even harder in the face of scarcity of resources in the family. Class, gender, ethnicity and religion create unique combinations that affect people's lives differently. For example, some groups may be under a constant state of multifaceted oppression, while others may have more power and ability to maneuver in certain situations. It does not mean that oppressed groups do not have any agency, but rather that certain groups face more obstacles than mainstream Georgian society. We must recognize and consider all of these axes of power while developing coping strategies. Moreover,

it is up to these women to determine their own emancipation strategies, and dominant groups must not set the agenda for the women from minority groups.

This research has sought to outline a nuanced view of the challenges faced by women in highland Adjara and Marneuli municipality. For future studies, it is important to survey a larger group of women and include groups that may face additional issues: for example, women with disabilities, victims of physical violence, and more. By putting religious and ethnic minorities at the center of this research, the operation of existing power systems and their influence have been clearly demonstrated. Highlighting the myriad problems and challenges faced by minority women, therefore, can lead to a better understanding of such systems of power, and perhaps, create possibilities for dismantling them.

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