



# Impact of COVID 19 on Domestic Violence, Situation of Women Victims and Access to the Support Services

Monitoring Report

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Fund Sukhumi

May, 2020

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## 1. Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Violence globally and in Georgia

A worldwide emergency resulting from COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated domestic abuse and violence against women in almost every corner of the globe. Available information proves the catastrophic impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has already had and could have on women and girls. Historical experience suggests that a pandemic increases gender inequality. Studies of epidemic outbreaks show that the risks of domestic violence rise.<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations Population Fund, with every additional 3 months of isolation, another 15 million cases of gender-based violence are expected.<sup>2</sup> The existing problem of violence against women has further intensified during the crisis.<sup>3</sup> According to the Executive Director of UN Women in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the **shadow pandemic of violence against women** is growing and gaining momentum around the world.<sup>4</sup> Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence against women increased and access to the services decreased.<sup>5</sup>

This problem is recognized by almost all international institutions, and they express deep concern about the increased risk of domestic violence against women and limited access to services in isolation.<sup>6</sup> Despite recommendations, it can be dangerous for many women to stay at home.<sup>7</sup> The risk of violence against women is further increased due to the economic instability caused by the pandemic and isolation in a stressful environment.<sup>8</sup> As most women cook for their families, food shortages caused by the crisis exacerbate various forms of domestic violence.<sup>9</sup>

World Health Organization information also indicates that domestic violence has risen sharply due to the pandemic. The situation in EU member states is alarming, in particular, in April, the number of

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<sup>1</sup>As pandemic rages, women and girls face intensified risks - <https://georgia.unfpa.org/en/news/pandemic-rages-women-and-girls-face-intensified-risks-7>

<sup>2</sup>UNFPA– prognoses deplorable consequences of prolonging the COVID-19 pandemic on the condition of women’s health - <https://bit.ly/2zLpTzi>

<sup>3</sup>Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls in Eurasia - [https://www.equalitynow.org/covid\\_19\\_vawg\\_eurasia](https://www.equalitynow.org/covid_19_vawg_eurasia)

<sup>4</sup> Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic – Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

<sup>5</sup>COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, p. 2, 4 - <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

<sup>6</sup>„COVID-19 crisis: Secretary General concerned about increased risk of domestic violence“ - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/covid-19-crisis-secretary-general-concerned-about-increased-risk-of-domestic-violence>

<sup>7</sup>Amidst Coronavirus pandemic, UNDP rings the alarm on domestic violence -

<https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/stories/coronavirus-pandemic-albania-domestic-violence.html>

<sup>8</sup>A Gender Lens on COVID-19: Pandemics and Violence against Women and Children -

<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/gender-lens-covid-19-pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children>

<sup>9</sup>The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: Key Advocacy Points from Asia and the Pacific, p.1 - <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/news%20and%20events/stories/2020/giha%20wg%20advocacy%20brief%20gender%20impact%20covid19.pdf?la=ka&vs=0>

applications of women who have become victims of violence from their partners increased by 60% compared to the same period last year. The European Bureau of the World Health Organization calls on governments to increase the number of services offered, as well as to scale up shelters and other services.<sup>10</sup> UN Women recommends that the states give the highest priority to prevention of violence and provision of response services in pandemic-affected society, as well as the release of statistics on domestic violence.<sup>11</sup>

The Georgian government declares that it is committed to remain **principled position and tough policies against domestic violence in the condition of COVID-19 pandemic**. A communication strategy on violence against women and domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis has been developed. According to *Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, it continues an awareness-raising campaign to disseminate information about the services and assistance provided by the government to victims of violence. As part of the campaign, in cooperation with the relevant agencies, information on counseling and emergency hotlines, as well as shelters and crisis centers will be spread in quarantine hotels. This information will be posted in pharmacy chains and stores throughout the country.<sup>12</sup> Hotline for counselling (116 006) operates 24 hours a day. Crisis centers and shelters continue their work countrywide. *The State Fund for the Protection and Assistance of (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking* provides beneficiaries with free legal and psycho-social services partially remotely; it is also planned to introduce distance psychological counseling services.<sup>13</sup> The Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia confirms that the impact of the current situation is particularly detrimental to women and believes that during the pandemic gender mainstreaming should be implemented and the different needs of women should be taken into account when making decisions.<sup>14</sup> The Council recommends that the Government take measures to empower women economically and prevent and respond to violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>15</sup>

According to the information from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter MIA), at the **beginning there was no increase in the rate of applications related to violence**. The number of calls to 112 related to domestic conflicts and violence was almost equal to the number recorded during the previous two months.<sup>16</sup> Experts<sup>17</sup> and Public Defender pointed out that **unchanged rate of reporting was due to**

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<sup>10</sup>WHO warns of surge of domestic violence as COVID-19 cases decrease in Europe - <https://unric.org/en/who-warns-of-surge-of-domestic-violence-as-covid-19-cases-decrease-in-europe/>

<sup>11</sup> Paying attention to women's needs and leadership will strengthen COVID-19 response

- <https://georgia.unwomen.org/ka/news/stories/2020/03/news-womens-needs-and-leadership-in-covid-19-response>

<sup>12</sup>The Georgian government continues to implement tough policies against violence against women and domestic violence - [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=geo&sec\\_id=198&info\\_id=75997](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=geo&sec_id=198&info_id=75997)

<sup>13</sup> Despite the COVID-19 crisis the Georgian State continues to implement tough policies against violence against women and domestic violence - [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=geo&sec\\_id=198&info\\_id=75857](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=geo&sec_id=198&info_id=75857)

<sup>14</sup>Recommendations developed by the Gender Equality Council for the Georgian Government - <http://www.parliament.ge/ge/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komisiebi-da-sabchoebi-8/genderuli-tanasworobis-sabcho/angarisebi-daskvnebi/covid-19>

<sup>15</sup>Recommendations developed by the Gender Equality Council for the Georgian Government - <https://bit.ly/2X4upkd>

<sup>16</sup>Ministry of Internal Affairs continues effective fight against domestic violence - <https://police.ge/ge/shinagan-saqmeta-saministro-agrdzelebs-odjakhshi-dzaladobis-tsinaaghmdag-efeqtian-brdzolas/13440>

<sup>17</sup>Organizations working on the issues of violence against women and domestic violence address the state entities - <https://bit.ly/2AGUYVn>

**victims' limited access to the means of communication**<sup>18</sup> and called for more active work to identify the true scale of violence. In order to evaluate the information on domestic violence in more detail, the Human Rights Protection and Investigation Quality Monitoring Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs has started work on a special methodology.<sup>19</sup>

Since in isolation a victim, being constantly monitored and controlled by the abuser, often cannot even talk on the phone, the mobile application for calling 112 was activated<sup>20</sup>, which allows the victim to secretly contact the police using the alarm button. The government disseminated the information about the service and other mechanisms against violence in various ways, including SMS messages. This campaign proved to be effective: according to the MIA information, there were 11 cases of calls using a secret alarm button between April 15 and 30, while in the previous 3 months only 8 such cases were registered.<sup>21</sup> Also, **the rate of reporting and investigations related to the facts of violence increased by 13% in the second half of April**; the number of calls to 112 has also increased.<sup>22</sup> These figures illustrate the significance of information campaigns and state support for victims, and also give an idea of the real scale of violence.

## 1. The Goal of the Monitoring and Methodology

The rapid increase of calls from women referred to Fund Sukhumi's psychologist requesting assistance in coping stress, psycho-emotional problems and family conflicts, have emerged the necessity to undertake a rapid response monitoring to explore better the impact of the COVID-19 on domestic violence and the conditions of victims in target regions. The research was conducted from 04.04.20 to 04.05.20 in 11 target municipalities of the Fund "Sukhumi" (Kutaisi, Tskaltubo, Terjola, Khoni, Senaki, Poti, Zugdidi (Koki, Khurcha, Shamgona, Kakhati), Tsalenjikha (Pakhulani, Tskoushi), Lanchkhuti, Ozurgeti, Kobuleti). In-depth distance/remote interviews with the women victims - beneficiaries of the Fund "Sukhumi", representatives of women support centers, service providers from NGO sector, and representatives of the women rights protection civil society organizations were conducted. 8 in-depth interviews and 2 online focus groups meeting were undertaken, involving 27 respondents in total. Telephone conversations with several quarantine centers were conducted as well. Due to the lack of time and the small number of respondents, the conclusions presented in this document do not claim to fully reflect all the problems. However, the analysis of the challenges emerging in the lives of our beneficiaries gives some idea about the overall picture of acute problems and needs. The document also provides recommendations for key actors.

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<sup>18</sup>The Deputy of the Public Defender of Georgia – Due to the pandemic the communication with the victims of violence has become more difficult - <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/599776-saxalxo-damcvelis-moadgile-pandemiis-gamo-zaladobis-msxverpl-pirebtan-komunikacia-upro-metad-gartulda>

<sup>19</sup>Despite the COVID-19 crisis the Georgian State continues to implement tough policies against violence against women and domestic violence - [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=198&info\\_id=75857](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=198&info_id=75857)

<sup>20</sup>About the service - <http://112.gov.ge/index.php?m=150>

<sup>21</sup>Statement by the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs - <https://bit.ly/3dVYOrT>

<sup>22</sup>Statement by the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs - <https://bit.ly/2zIK40G>

## 3. Impact of the Current Situation on Domestic Violence and Women Victims

### 3.1. Current Conditions of Women Victims

During the monitoring, **all the respondents, without exception, confirmed that the situation caused by the pandemic has aggravated women's conditions.** As it was summarized by one of the participants, *"The entire burden is on women now. Now they have more grief and sorrow."* (Focus-group respondent, village adjacent to the dividing line, Orsantia).

It turned out that **not only did the already existing problems of women victims of domestic violence increase,** but also in the conditions of isolation, the prolonged stay of family members in the same space gave rise to violence or **provoked its emergence** even in families where there was no violence or it had not been detected before. Leaving the houses, active life and communication with other people often eased and helped in defusing the situation in families, but imposed restrictions have taken away this possibility -

*"The violence has been the case in the past too, but we worked, we managed to get out of the house and switch away from our problems. This situation has radically aggravated my life; I have to endure constant psychological stress and insult, even physical abuse has become my husband's habit. However, I cannot protect myself, I have nowhere to go...(crying)."* (Victim, Kutaisi);

*"The tense voices are coming out from the families which we considered ideal. Staying in lockdown has revealed problems in many families."* (focus-group meeting, respondent from Khoni).

In many cases violence has reached the breaking point and the women cannot tolerate it anymore: *"some women have tolerated abuse for years but it was balanced by the fact that they were not at home all the time. In this current situation everything worsened and many of them separated."* (focus-group meeting, respondent from Khoni).

**The situation of women who had been able to escape from the abusers and leave the violent environment in the past,** has been **considerably deteriorated due to COVID-19.** Lockdown and hard economic situation in the country have led to many job loss as a result of closed service sector, in which many of such women worked. Consequently, some **women were forced to return to their abuser partners** since they were not able to pay rent and feed their children –

*"A woman from my village managed to leave her abusive husband and started to work in Tbilisi as a hairdresser. Recently I learned that she had returned to her abuser. It turned out that the salon where she worked in Tbilisi was closed, and she could not pay the rent. This is very sad"* (Focus-group, villages adjacent to the division line).

**This situation has revealed abusers** who take advantage of restrictions and manipulate victims –

*"Many things are on the surface now. If before they [abusers] tried to restrain themselves, now staying locked at home, they show their true attitude."* (Moderator of the Fund "Sukhumi" support center).

**The abusers in isolation have gained additional domains of control over women**, for example control over the household –

*“I try to spare and save some products, my husband always argues with me because of that. But if they lack something, they blame us saying why we are not saving food.... But if you use everything economically, they don't like it either, saying – “you save everything like a broody hen”” (Focus-group, villages adjacent to the dividing line, respondent from Orsantia);*

*“As he has nothing to do, he started to control me in everything. “Why you put so much rice in the soup?” – as if he could teach me. When I started making bread dough, he stood over me and asked to show him how much flour I used. I couldn't say anything. Then I got terrible headaches, and I kept taking painkillers.” (women Victim, Zugdidi).*

**The overall tense situation created in families pours into violence against women** and they became the victims of violence from various sides: husbands, mothers and fathers-in-law, brothers, sons, etc.

*“The children are involved in the distance learning process and this annoys my husband and his mother. All complaints are always addressed to me, they always argue with me and rebuke me” (Victim, Kutaisi).*

**Additional risks of violence have appeared**, when some family members returned to villages from the cities (where they worked), and people were isolated in one space –

*“If before wife and husband, or mother-in-law have lived together, now someone is coming from the cities, and families live together... I had case of violence against 18-year-old girl, by the boyfriend of her mother.” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

**Lacking support system from friends and relatives** aggravates women's stressful mood. In this respect restrictions on transportation and movement played a significant role. Even if there is not a barrier for movement and it is short distance to walk, victims are strictly forbidden to leave their homes and meet with relatives, because *“on their way they can meet someone who is infected.” (Moderator of the Fund “Sukhumi” support center).* **Telephone communication is also restricted for many victims.** In a small space under the constant supervision of the abuser they often fail to find a place to talk in private. *“My husband doesn't like it when I talk on the phone, and I also try not to talk in order to avoid conflicts” (Victim, Kakhati).*

**The trend of economic violence against women has emerged.** In many cases, family members prohibit women from working for fear of being infected with the virus. There was a case involving a woman medical doctor who had been in contact with COVID-19 positive patient and her husband put forward an ultimatum - *“either your profession or your family!”* After refusing to leave work she was asked to leave the house. Of course, such a disrespectful attitude to the profession of a woman could not arise suddenly –

*“Prior to this case the husband had an image of a normal person. This case just exposed many hidden and well-disguised problems.” (Moderator of the Fund “Sukhumi” support center).*

One of the beneficiaries of the Fund "Sukhumi" worked as a shop manager and her husband constantly fight with her and threatened saying "don't bring the virus, or...". After she refused to give up her job, her husband took the child with him to the village -

*"The woman is now left alone with her fears and crushed due to the absence of her family members and missing her child" (Psychologist of the Fund "Sukhumi").*

**Fear of contagion and demand from woman to leave job are sometimes used as an excuse to evict woman from her parental or relatives' home.** That not news, that the families rarely support women victims and do not offer housing in the parental' homes. There was a case with a women victim whose brother and sister-in-law demanded from her to leave the job or their house, as she was seen as a threat for spreading the infection in their family and finally she was forced to leave the house and move with her child to a rented apartment. The victim, who had had a hard time overcoming the consequences of her husband's violence, found herself alone again –

*"It took the woman years to get out of this situation, and when she thought she was already firmly on her feet, she found herself alone again severely hurt by her brother and sister-in-law. Of course, with her wages in the supermarket, it is hard for her to pay the rent and support the child." (Psychologist of the Fund "Sukhumi").*

### 3.2. Low Reporting Rate: Reasons, Challenges, Expectations

At the first stage, despite the expectations, the number of applications from victims to relevant state agencies was considerably small. Lack of applications and reluctance of women to reveal the facts of violence and seek external assistance, was caused by the sense of social insecurity and lack of confidence in the support system. Revealing the facts of the violence was quite difficult even before, but **existing situation further intensified this sense of fear and lack of confidence in women. Distrust in support mechanism, the ambiguity of the perspective,** made it difficult for women to resist violence. However, if earlier a woman hoped to find a job in the service sector, today in the wake of the crisis, the perspectives and hope to find the job were significantly reduced -

*"The problem existed even before the crisis, the victims were always afraid to live independently and, believe me, now this feeling has intensified" (Assistant of the Fund "Sukhumi" support centers); "Even under normal conditions, it was difficult for them to make a decision, and even more so now." (Representative of NGO "AVNG").*

**Shortage of information** still remains a challenge. It turned out that TV clips play a significant role as the TV remains as the most accessible source of information in regions –

*"It is good that so much information is spreading, some will call, others will hope that they will be able to call when they need" (Focus-group, village adjacent to the division line, Koki).*

It was revealed that several other factors hamper the detection of the true scale of violence. First of all, **victims are constantly monitored and controlled** by their abusers They have difficulty communicating and disclosing the truth about their conditions not only with the relevant agencies but also with people close to them.



*"My niece told me that she is well. As I learned later the family members forbid her to talk on the phone, telling her – "You must not take your family business out!" When someone calls her, all of them listen to her" (Focus-group, village adjacent to the division line, Pakhulani).*

*"There were several cases when victims called me from their neighbors' homes as they were not able to call in the presence of the abuser" (Representative of NGO "AVNG").*

Another **problem is the limited access to the internet or insufficient skills in using internet and specific devices** -*"There are still places where the internet is not available, or it is too expensive for locals" (moderator of Sukhumi Women's Support Center).*

Another problem that hinders women is **less expectation of support from the state and society in the current situation, fear of being rebuked**. The women believe that this issue is not topical and **is of little concern to the society**.

*"They will probably rebuke me and say that this is no time to talk about violence when so many people die because of the pandemic and the whole world is fighting an invisible enemy. I often hear on the news that statistics on domestic violence have increased, but I'm sure the statistics are even more alarming than can be seen on the surface" (Victim, Kutaisi).*

The majority of victims believe that the society will rebuke them for revealing and talking openly about their problems in this period – *"No one has time for me now..."* This is how they comment to the psychologist of the Fund Sukhumi and they prefer to talk about their problems anonymously. Such an attitude from the victims has its own reasons

*"In my opinion, the support to the victims has diminished, today the society is more focused on their families and they care very little about sharing the problems of others" (Psychologist of the Fund Sukhumi); "The neighbors play a minor role, although they see the situation in families like mine, it doesn't bother them much. Society does not realize its responsibility in this regard." (Victim, Kutaisi).* Although, some of the respondents believe that - *"Those people who had empathy before still have it." (Moderator of the Fund "Sukhumi" support center).*

Another obstacle to the disclosure of cases of violence is **lack of trust in the police and skepticism toward government, that it would provide victims with all necessary support and assistance**. Women do not believe that their problem will be solved by calling the police, and on the contrary, some believe that by imprisoning the abuser, their situation may worsen.

*"I could not advise anyone to call the police, even if it's my own child. Why would you need family problems solved by the police. Get up and leave if you can't stand, something will appear. What would the police do, they will arrest your husband and then you would need to send parcels to the prison. What does it look like? This is not a family" (Focus group, village near the dividing line, Khurcha)*

*"You cannot get a job, no one will give you an apartment and how else can they help you. They can only detain your alcoholic, jealous husband, and you are left alone" (Focus-group, village adjacent to the division line);*

The civil society organization has been initially warning about possible increase of cases of violence and aggravation of the conditions of victims. According to existing data, **the number of appeals to non-governmental organizations has increased significantly and it is expected to see bigger increase in the future –**

*“The number of applications has grown. Mostly, women call and ask for help, and they want me to help them find ways to resolve the conflict with their husbands” (Psychologist, the Fund “Sukhumi”).*

*“There is zero likelihood that violence has decreased during this period and there are no victims, quite the contrary” (Psychologists, “Merkuri”).*

*“The number of applications for this period has considerably exceeded data for other periods.” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

*“A new category of victims is emerging in the country which can be called the post-coronavirus category. This is fueled by the hard emotional background which was created in many families and many couples found it difficult to cope with it.” (Psychologists, an NGO run shelter).*

#### **4. Needs of the Victims – Response, Services and Access to them**

**The needs of the victims are basically the same as before** - employment, economic support, housing, providing access to psychological assistance in the regions, adequately reflecting the needs of victims in local budgets, conducting effective information campaigns condemning domestic violence in the regions, improving Internet access in the villages. **The introduction of effective State support programs for victims ensuring their adjustment to independent living still remain topical and urgent.**

The support programs announced by the state do not reflect **the specific needs of victim/potential victim women, single mothers** in the current situation. It is important that the interests of this group are adequately represented in state packages of social and economic assistance -

*“ I often hear from our women that such category as women victims or single mothers has always overlooked and has not been included in the State assistance scheme. There is no separate aid package for them” (Moderator of Fund “Sukhumi”)*

The real picture of the scale of violence and the number of women victims in the period of pandemic has not been yet identified. In this regard, **it is essential to strengthen the role of the Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence** and its coordination with the civil society organizations that have relevant competencies. **The need to cooperate with regional NGOs and share their knowledge and data** is especially important, because they work in regions and villages where public services and support are not available, and they have information on domestic violence and victims/potential victims. Adequate use of their competencies, information and experience will help the government achieve better results and improve support for affected women.

According to civil society organizations’ general assessment, at the beginning **the country was not ready for responding to the challenges created by the pandemic. At a later stage the work became more active.** The government launched an awareness-raising campaign, which included dissemination of the booklets and flyers

about the hotline, sending SMS messages, etc. It was also announced that information would be posted in pharmacy chains, stores and quarantine zones. However, such information was not available in places (pharmacies, shops, quarantine zones) visited as part of our monitoring. *“Almost a week has passed but I have not noticed any such information banners” (Psychologist Georgian Center for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT)).*

At the initial stage of the lockdown **it was very hard for the state to react quickly and to adapt the services to the new reality.** Providing shelters to the victims has become difficult; when the victims asked to provide them with shelters, they were turned down due to “quarantine issues”. However, at later stage this problem was resolved –

*“Later the issue was resolved. The quarantine zone was arranged on the next floor and the victims, after passing the required time in the quarantine, were moved downstairs” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

Some of the services to victims are provided remotely. Under these conditions, the **lack of unlimited access to the Internet is a challenge for a significant number of the victims.** There still are locations where the internet is not available at all -

*“Most beneficiaries do not have sufficient Internet access to participate in the meetings. In such cases, we try to communicate with them by telephone. This is a maximum that can be done remotely in this situation” (Assistant of the Fund “Sukhumi” support centers).*

**A special mobile application developed by the state for 112 had a positive feedback,** but NGOs believe that **it would be unreasonable to rely on this tool only,** as many women do not have access to smartphones and the internet, or they lack skills needed to use the application, especially older victims –

*“It is an exaggeration to talk about the mobile application and its effectiveness. We have families who live in a situation where the internet cannot be used, they cannot download the application and use it accordingly” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

**The involvement and proper response of social workers is also problematic,** this problem existed even before and in this situation it is more acute –

*“It is very difficult for social workers to work on these cases, especially now, when they simply put them aside; especially as we still do not have social workers who specifically deal with issues of domestic violence” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

However, they can play a very useful role. Social workers have data on vulnerable groups, risk groups for violence and **can identify cases of domestic violence** and victims proactively as well as play a positive role in **preventing violence.** Their intervention, unlike the police, requires less justification, so more involvement of social workers would be very important –

*“They can really monitor the situation, visit or make a phone call. This will be one of the tools to make the problem of violence visible and to make the victim feel protected” (Psychologist Of GCRT).*

**As for the reaction from the police, it may be considered one of the fastest response mechanism, although at the beginning they showed less enthusiasm.** Gradually, the police response is becoming more adequate due to the civil society organizations active advocacy –

*“they didn’t want to waste time on this, it was the underlying emotion. They said phrases like “no time for that now”. However, overall they are performing their duties well” (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

The study participants emphasized the **importance of protecting anonymity by the police**, which, unfortunately, in a number of cases is violated and it is often disclosed who called, who reported the fact of violence –

*“This endangers the applicants who experience psychological stress and constant difficulties during this hard period” (Psychologist of GCRT).*

According to the respondents **the recourse of district police officers are not sufficiently used.** They usually know the problem families and can help prevent violence by talking to the abuser. More activities are needed in this direction as well.

With regard to the local government response, it turned out that **some municipalities provided food assistance to victims registered in their municipalities**, which was very important for those women. However, their resources are not put to full use. In all municipalities the Mayor’s office representatives in local administrative units are well informed about the problem of domestic violence and the victims. They can be a valuable source of information gathering and communication with these families, which, unfortunately, does not happen -

*“Some find in this only a matter of ridicule. They do not have the slightest idea about the obligations of local self-government with regard to this issue” Moderator of the Fund “Sukhumi” support center).*

**Civil society organizations proved to be more flexible** in responding to the emerging challenges. First of all, **they described the increase in violence more accurately**, and secondly, instead of waiting, **they tried to support the victims proactively.** In addition, in order to better adapt to the existing situation, they maximally adjusted their services to the needs of the beneficiaries. However, the challenges still remain –

*“We make maximum use of telecommunications, and if available, the Internet. The main problem is that individual counseling is hardly possible because the victim is confined in a closed space” (Assistant of the Fund “Sukhumi” support centers).*

NGOs have identified **risk groups**, and they are trying to communicate with them and find out about their conditions.

*“If they cannot speak directly, we try to learn about the mood and psycho-emotional state of women in different ways” (Psychologist of GCRT).*

Based on foreign experience, the NGOs created an additional and safe way of sending a notification –

*“The idea is based on a **keyword**. If they cannot call or write to us as all their phones are controlled, they can send us a keyword. In this way we identified 4 cases in 22 days (Representative of NGO “AVNG”).*

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that **COVID-19 has had a very negative impact on women victims of domestic violence and their access to services and it has further exacerbated their conditions in many ways.** In addition, it turned **many women into victims of domestic violence.** The state needs to have an approach that on the one hand, allows victims to feel that despite the current situation their problems are not secondary or insignificant and on the other, shows abusers that in spite of everything, they will not avoid punishment. The abuser should know that he is closely monitored. This might play a restraining role for him. “In the existing situation supporting the victim is crucial. The main thing is to convey a clear message: **“Do not be afraid, I'm with you!” and give them hope that they will be protected from the abuser**” (*Moderator of the Fund “Sukhumi” support center*). Given the challenges emerging due to the extraordinary situation, we consider it necessary to propose the **following recommendations:**

### For the Georgian Government:

- The Government should take proactive steps to identify problem families, provide the necessary information and offer relevant services;
- The Government should scale up cooperation with the local government to identify women victims and provide coordinated and needs-based assistance;
- In the process of developing packages of social and economic assistance, the government should identify and consider the interests of victims/potential victims, single mothers, as they became one of the most vulnerable groups due to the crisis;
- The government should intensify cooperation with the relevant civil society organization, especially those working and locating in the regions, including cooperation within thematic groups at the Inter-Agency Commission, in order to better identify and respond to emerging issues related to domestic violence;
- More active awareness-raising effort is required, which includes the use of TV media and other means of communication accessible for the population, especially in the regions (providing information about existing support programs through posters and flyers in shops and other public places);
- Increased access to the Internet should be provided to the population of villages; the current situation has clearly indicated this need;
- Psychological services should be available, especially in the regions; Considering the shortage of specialists, broadcasting talks with a qualified psychologist (similar to a TV school for school pupils) about domestic violence and the consequences of the pandemic can be an option, as this is the easiest way to convey a message to village population;
- The Government's response should be targeted at abusers and preventive psychological work with them should be intensified;

- It is necessary to educate social workers on domestic violence issues and increase their role in supporting victims, especially in terms of monitoring families at risk and preventive work;
- It is necessary to continue work towards raising gender-sensitivity of the police staff, to inform them adequately about increased risks of violence due to the pandemic; also it is necessary to guarantee the anonymity of the applicant when a case of violence is reported;
- It is important to work more actively with the population in order to encourage community to speak up and reveal the violence;
- Even after the lifting of restrictive measures, the government should continue to actively support victims, as the consequences of violence can be more dramatic in the long term;

#### **For Local Self-Government:**

- Given the drastic increase of domestic violence facts and the deterioration of the victims' conditions, it is necessary to expand support services and better reflect women's needs in local budgets;
- It is necessary to participate more actively in the dissemination of information about services and in delivering this information to the public;
- It is necessary to participate in active work to identify victims, which can be done better by municipalities rather than central authorities, given their proximity to the population. The resources of the representatives of the Mayors in administrative units can be used in this direction, and they should be clearly instructed on the initial and timely intervention;

#### **For Civil Society Organizations:**

- Due to the expected increase in the rate of reporting, including during the post-isolation period, it is recommended that civil society organizations mobilize additional resources and retrain relevant specialists;
- It is recommended that a proactive regime for responding domestic violence and providing assistance to victims is maintained and continued;
- Increased cooperation with central and local authorities in the post-isolation period is needed to better support the victims.



## Cultural-Humanitaria Fund "Sukhumi"

**The Monitoring report was prepared by:**

Fund "Sukhumi"'s representative office in Tbilisi

**Lela Khatridze**

**Ekaterine Gamakharia**

**The data was collected by:**

The monitoring team of Kutaisi office:

**Ema Kamkia, Khatuna Gogua,**

**Tea Goletiani, Guranda Gvantseladze**

**Translator – Nino Nijaradze**

**Address:**

**#6 Mgaloblishvili str. Kutaisi, Georgia**

**Office space #2, #29b, A. Mitskevich str. Tbilisi, Georgia**

**emails: [womansukhumi@gmail.com](mailto:womansukhumi@gmail.com);**

**[fundsukhumi@bilisi@gmail.com](mailto:fundsukhumi@bilisi@gmail.com)**

**web page: [www.fsokhumi.ge](http://www.fsokhumi.ge)**

**facebook account: [www.facebook.com/fsokhumi/](https://www.facebook.com/fsokhumi/)**