



Evaluation of the Gender Equality Policies at the Local Level

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Main Findings

- Among the 54 municipalities that provided IDFI with some information on the activities of their respective gender councils, only 18 had developed a 2021 gender equality action plan.
- Only 10 municipal gender councils submitted a report to city councils on their activities in 2020 and the state of gender equality in the territory of the municipality.
- The reports prepared by a majority of gender councils do not have the appropriate structure, and in terms of content, the envisaged activities do not match those outlined in the action plans.
- Among 64 municipalities, the gender equality promotion program/sub-program was written into the 2022 budget project in 13 of them.
- In a majority of cases, the budget for the implementation of the activities envisaged in the action plan was not approved separately. The activities planned by gender councils, both administrative costs and funds for specific structural units, are financed according to the issue, which are broken down in different articles of the budget.
- In 2020-2021, no gender council sessions were held in the cases of Borjomi, Dedoplistskaro, Zestafoni, Abashi, Kvareli, Sachkheri, Chiaturi, Khelvachauri, Khobi, Tianeti, and Martvili. In addition, during the same period, the session was held only once in the case of 6 municipalities.
- Within the scope of the authority of the gender councils, no participation in trainings, development of a new action plan, or preparation of reports on the implementation of the action plan took place in 12 municipalities of Georgia, which indicates that the Gender Councils exist only as a formality.
- A gender audit according to the directions of activities of the municipal bodies was carried out only in the Aspindza municipality.
- According to the information provided to IDFI by municipalities, gender needs research was conducted only in the Samtredia, Keda, Ozurgeti, and Akhaltsikhe municipalities. In the case of other municipalities, the lack of relevant qualifications of civil servants was identified as the main hindering factor in conducting gender needs research.

- The gender councils operating at the local level cannot ensure the development of action plans and programs based on needs studies, and are mainly limited to conducting one-time campaigns and providing general assistance.
- Due to limited budget and lack of qualification of civil servants, municipalities are deprived of the opportunity to conduct needs studies, based on which they would be able to further develop action plans and determine priority directions.
- Among the activities envisaged by action plans, in many cases, the long-term gender equality strategy of a municipality, as well as the development of a monitoring and evaluation system of the measures implemented to ensure gender equality, cannot be implemented, which is again related to the lack of qualifications of the relevant civil servants or council members.
- Most of the municipal action plans provided for a separate section on the official website and periodic updating of information on the gender council. In most cases, municipalities do not have a dedicated council section, and no action plans, action plan implementation reports, or council meeting minutes are being published.

Introduction

Ensuring equal rights and opportunities between women and men is of fundamental importance in the process of building democracy. Achieving gender equality and empowering women requires fundamental change at both the national and local levels.

In order to achieve gender equality, Georgia has taken notable steps both in terms of regulating the legal environment and through the introduction and implementation of relevant instruments in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. Additionally, in order to engage in global discourse, Georgia has joined important international mechanisms for the protection of women and children's rights. Among them, the ratification of the Convention on the Prevention and Suppression of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ("Istanbul Convention") of the Council of Europe in 2017 should be highlighted. Local governments have also expressed their willingness to participate in the global discourse on gender equality. For example, five Georgian municipalities¹ joined the "European Charter on Equality of Women and Men in Local Life"² in 2019, which establishes important principles in the context of achieving gender equality at the local level. Currently, more than 20 municipalities of Georgia have signed the charter. The gender council of Zugdidi municipality also approved the "roadmap" for localization of the national action plan in Zugdidi municipality within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1325³ "Women, Peace, and Security".

In 2017, as part of constitutional reform, a new entry appeared in the Constitution of Georgia to ensure the essential equality of men and women and to eliminate inequality,⁴ with the entry clearly emphasizing the state's obligation to introduce and implement special laws, policies, and programs to ensure equal opportunities for women.⁵ The Law of Georgia on Gender Equality defines the legal mechanisms for achieving equality between men and women in relevant spheres of public life.⁶ The law also establishes the basic guarantees for ensuring equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities defined by the Constitution of Georgia.

Elimination of systemic gender discrimination at the country level is unthinkable without introducing the principles of equality in local self-government bodies and creating the corresponding legal framework. Municipal budgets, socio-economic development priorities, and municipal programs and plans should be developed in such a way as to exclude any form of

¹ Ozurgeti, Lagodekhi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, and Akhmeta

² "European Charter for Equality between Women and Men in Local Life" (2006). European Council of Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3DpNTV6>

³ UN Resolution on the Importance of Women's Participation and Gender Mainstreaming in Peace Negotiations, Humanitarian Response Planning, Peacekeeping Operations, Post-Conflict Peacekeeping and Governance

⁴ Constitution of Georgia, Article 11

⁵ Essential gender equality is guaranteed by the new constitution of Georgia (2018). United Nations Women's Organization. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3NkpPri>

⁶ Law of Georgia "On Gender Equality"

discrimination. In addition, it is important that all of the above is based on inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches.

It is also worth noting the important changes that have taken place in Georgia in recent years in this regard. Specifically, ensuring equal participation of women and men in the process of decentralization and self-government was declared as one of the main principles in the decentralization strategy. In addition, ensuring gender equality at all levels of governance is echoed by the 5th goal of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which assigns an important role to local governments in the process of empowering women and girls, which, in the nationalization process, was defined as follows in the tasks adapted to the Georgian context: reducing all forms of discrimination against all women and girls in all places; Ensuring equal opportunities for women's full and effective participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life; Ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and reproductive rights.

According to the "Local Self-Government Code" of the Organic Law of Georgia, a municipality is authorized to implement measures to promote gender equality, prevent violence against women and/or domestic violence, protect and assist victims of violence against women and/or domestic violence.⁷ As such, self-governing units can become important contributors to the process of ensuring gender equality in the country when initiating various programs/projects or developing priority documents.

In order to take into account the issues of gender inequality in the process of supporting decentralization, **an amendment was introduced to the Law on Gender Equality in 2016, according to which municipal councils were instructed to create municipal gender equality councils**, whose composition, status, functions, and powers are determined by the regulations of the municipal council and the statute of the municipal gender equality council as approved by the relevant municipal council. In addition, according to the law, in order to study the issues of gender equality in the municipality, to plan the activities to be implemented, and to coordinate relevant measures, the mayor of the municipality designates a civil servant in the relevant city hall who will be responsible for gender equality issues.

Activities of the Municipal Gender Equality Councils

The process of forming gender councils at the local level started in 2017. The main goal of creating a council was to ensure systematic work of municipalities on gender issues and coordinated work with the Gender Equality Council created by the Parliament of Georgia. The gender councils

⁷ Organic Law of Georgia Code of Local Self-Government" Article 16, Part 4.

formed at the local level act according to the corresponding regulations approved on the basis of the resolution of the municipal council.

In order to properly plan and implement gender policy at the level of municipalities, self-governing units develop relevant action plans, the general goals of which are to ensure equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for men and women in local self-government bodies, to promote gender mainstreaming, to empower women politically and economically, and to eliminate violence against women.

The action plan for the implementation of local gender policy developed by the gender councils is based on the Constitution of Georgia, the Law on Gender Equality, the Code of Local Self-Government, the action plans of the Law on Prevention of Violence Against Women/Family, Protection and Assistance to Victims of Violence, as well as international human rights conventions and local legislation. It should be noted that the process of developing action plans is ongoing, with active involvement of local and international organizations. In addition, international and non-governmental organizations are named as responsible for and as partner agencies in the implementation of some measures outlined in the action plan.

According to the report prepared by the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia, as of 2019, 57 out of 64 municipalities of Georgia had developed action plans for gender equality.⁸ The Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) became interested in the implementation of the mentioned action plans and the current situation in terms of gender equality in the municipalities. The Institute sent a letter requesting information to all municipalities in Georgia. A response was received from 54 of them. The analysis below is based on this information.

According to the available data, **out of 54 municipalities, only 13 have developed an action plan for 2020-2021, three for 2021, and two for 2021-2023.** It should be noted that out of 7 municipalities⁹ that had not developed an action plan as of 2019, 4 have approved an action plan, while in the case of the municipalities of Tianeti, Khoni, and Mestia, the existence of such a document is still not confirmed in writing.

According to the above-mentioned resolutions approved by city councils, the municipal gender equality council submits a report on the activities performed during the year and the state of gender equality in the territory of the municipality to the relevant city council at least once a year. The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information requested 2020 reports on the implementation of the action plan. In the end, **out of 54 municipalities, the action plan implementation report was submitted to the city council in the case of only 10,** and 14 municipalities left the request unanswered. It should be noted that the gender councils in the municipalities of Zugdidi, Ozurgeti, Rustavi, Gori, and Ambrolauri have not submitted the appropriate report to their respective city councils. The case of the capital also needs to be

⁸ Assessment of gender policy of local self-government bodies (2020). Public Defender of Georgia. p. 13. Available at: <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2020061711084253805.pdf>

⁹ Lentekhi, Mestia, Poti, Abasha, Tianeti, Terjola, and Khoni

highlighted. The Tbilisi City Council did not provide the 2018-2020 action plan implementation report, and in addition, the City Council did not present a new action plan, as well as a list of activities aimed at developing employees' capabilities.

According to the information provided to IDFI, after the development of the action plan for 2018-2019, **no activity** (participation in trainings, development of a new action plan, preparation of action plan implementation reports) within the scope of the authority of the gender councils was carried out in Borjomi, Abasha, Dedoplistskaro, Dmanisi, Dusheti, Zestafoni, Tianeti, Khobi, Khelvachauri, Chiaturi, Kvareli, and Mtskheta, which **indicates that the gender council exists only as on a formal level.**

In addition, in 2020-2021, **a session of the gender council was never held** in the case of Borjomi, Dedoplistskaro, Zestafoni, Abasha, Kvareli, Sachkhere, Chiatura, Khelvachauri, Khobi, Tianeti, and Martvili. In the same period, a session was held only once in the case of 6 municipalities. Municipalities **name the spread of COVID-19 as the main factor hindering the activities of the councils.**

Additionally, according to the Public Defender's report, despite numerous activities aimed at improving gender equality by local self-government bodies in recent years, reflecting the different needs of regions in the country's gender policy and developing action plans and programs that are systematized and based needs research by local self-government units remains a problem.¹⁰ The same report also mentioned that the awareness of the members of the councils towards gender issues is quite low. The ombudsman's report reads that it is often the case that gender advisors do not know about their functions and duties, and at the council meetings, they mainly perform technical work in the form of organizing meetings and drawing up the minutes. The meetings show that in most cases, the training of all the members of the council is rarely done in the form of joint training, and the activities aimed at raising their awareness carry a fragmented character. IDFI was also interested in the implementation of the activities aimed at strengthening the capacity of council members. According to the information provided, in 2020-2021, out of 54 municipalities, awareness-raising trainings/meetings were held in 24 municipalities. Gender council members attended trainings and training courses mostly online. The trainings covered the following topics: women's awareness of labor rights, protection mechanisms, and regulation of labor relations, domestic violence, gender budgeting, localization of gender policy, gender in public service, etc. The number of participants of the trainings was between 1 and 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.p. 17.

In addition to the above, according to the 2017-2020 performance evaluation report of the Standing Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality, local gender equality councils see inconsistent development and in many cases depend on technical support from partners.¹¹

Based on the above, it can be said that the main goals of creating a gender council have not been achieved so far.

Implementation and Challenges of Gender Equality Action Plans

As mentioned before, in the process of developing gender equality action plans, the civil sector provided significant assistance to the municipalities. For example, the National Association of Local Self-Governments of Georgia (NALAG) municipal action plan support manual was developed. Most of the activities envisaged by the action plan developed by the municipalities, however, are of a general nature and include activities aimed at access to health services, equal participation of women and men in political life, raising awareness and strengthening the capabilities of municipality employees, which cannot directly respond to issues such as improving gender policy, gender budgeting, socio-economic development of women affected by the conflict, and other important challenges. At the same time, the local context and problems cannot be properly taken into account. For example, according to the information requested by the Public Defender from self-governing bodies, the majority of municipalities (70%) have not implemented appropriate measures for the economic empowerment of women. All while the rest of the activities of the municipality are limited to training the women living in the administrative unit in project writing skills and agricultural issues, providing informational meetings on the part of the self-governing unit, and providing one-time assistance to vulnerable women.¹²

The same report mentions that the members of the gender council cannot name the specific needs that characterize their region, and their assessment of the current situation in the municipality is of a general nature.¹³ The same is confirmed by the research conducted by the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia, according to which the measures taken by the state are insufficient for ensuring the needs and interests of women and girls living in rural areas. In addition, the mentioned measures do not address the economic empowerment of

¹¹ Anna Tsurtsunia-Zurabishvili. Evaluation of the 2017-2020 activities of the Standing Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality and Recommendations for Future Activities (2021). p. 15.

¹² Assessment of gender policy of local self-government bodies (2020). Public Defender of Georgia. p. 20. Available at: <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2020061711084253805.pdf>

¹³ Ibid.p. 17.

women and girls living in rural areas, because they are not supported by appropriate, effective mechanisms, including the obligation to implement gender budgeting in local municipalities.¹⁴

It should be noted that the 2020-2021 action plan of decentralization of Georgia provided for conducting research on gender needs at the local level and ensuring the availability of research results. **The components of the action plan that were based on needs studies were not able to be implemented for the most part.** In the reports available to IDFI, the lack of relevant qualifications of civil servants is mentioned as the main obstacle to conducting gender needs research. According to the information provided to IDFI by the municipalities, this kind of study was conducted only in the municipalities of Samtredia, Kedi, Ozurgeti, and Akhaltsikhe. It should be noted that Akhaltsikhe municipality has implemented the methodology for processing gender statistics and conducted a survey of the needs of the population in villages in order to fulfill the activities described in the 2020 action plan, and the municipality produces statistics of village assemblies and project proposals through the lens of gender. In addition, Akhaltsikhe municipality has developed a medium-term gender equality strategy for 2021-2023, which defines the municipality's gender policy for 2021-2023 and priority directions for achieving the goal of gender equality.

The report prepared by the majority of gender councils does not have an appropriate structure, and in terms of contents, the activities envisaged by the action plan are missing. The reports do not contain statistical data on the approval or denial of the implementation of activities. For the most part, the documents present the chronology of information campaigns carried out (for example, the distribution of information booklets made with the funds of the municipality's city hall), or the list of one-time assistance provided within the framework of social programs (e.g.: given gifts and grocery baskets).

In many cases, implementation of a gender audit according to the directions of activity of the municipal bodies is specified among the activities envisaged by an action plan. According to the reports provided to IDFI, the latter was only implemented in the Aspindza municipality. The other municipalities attribute the failure to perform the mentioned activity to the non-use of internal audit resources of the city hall and the lack of personnel with the necessary qualifications.

Among the activities envisaged by the action plan, in many cases, the ones that are often unable to be implemented are the development of the long-term gender equality strategy of the municipality, as well as the development of the monitoring and evaluation system of the measures implemented to ensure gender equality, which, according to the provided reports, is again related to the lack of qualifications of the relevant civil servants or council members and requires the support of experts. The municipalities were also unable to take into account the needs of employed women, from the activities outlined in the action plan, the introduction of childcare services for working mothers at night could not be implemented, the gender analysis of the legal acts of the municipal bodies and officials could not be prepared, etc. Proactive

¹⁴ Gender Equality in Georgia: Barriers and Recommendations. Updated edition, part II. (2022). Standing Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality. p. 9. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3tS2fKM>

publication of information by local self-governing units is a problematic issue. The majority of the action plans of the municipalities provided for a separate section for the council on the official website and periodic updating of the information. In most cases, municipalities do not have a dedicated council section, and no the action plans, action plan implementation reports, or council meeting minutes are published.

The reports presented by the municipalities mentioned in many cases that the implementation of the activities envisaged by the action plan was also prevented by the restrictions caused by COVID-19. It should be noted here that most of the activities included the advancement of gender issues at the institutional level, the implementation of awareness raising and capacity building campaigns, as well as the consideration of gender perspectives in budgetary processes. The restrictions imposed due to COVID-19, however, significantly impeded a number of processes. Adaptation to the restrictions in order to complete the planned activities took place only in individual cases. For example, in the report submitted by the gender council of Batumi municipality to the city council, we read that the activities provided for in the 2020 plan were replaced in the new action plan by issues, the content of which was determined according to the needs created by the epidemiological situation. For instance, supporting those undocumented single mothers who were not included in municipal or government programs, as well as providing clothing and stationery for the children of the beneficiaries of shelters for victims of violence.

The analysis of the documents also revealed that only in the case of individual municipalities was emphasis placed on the reflection of gender aspects in the budget. For example, the 2019 action plan implementation report of **Ozurgeti municipality** mentioned that, in the process of budget planning, Ozurgeti municipality invited a gender specialist, within whose competence the gender aspects of the budget were determined and a survey of the needs of municipal programs was conducted with consideration of gender aspects. Part of the recommendations issued by the Gender Equality Council of Batumi Municipality was reflected in the budget of the corresponding year. Part of the recommendations issued by the gender equality council of **Batumi municipality** was reflected in the budget of the corresponding year. Additionally, sub-programs of assistance for victims/presumed victims of violence against women and domestic violence have been developed. Specifically, appropriate funds were allocated in the 2022 budget for the financing of temporary housing for victims of violence, and for the beneficiaries of shelters for victims of trafficking and domestic violence, a travel subsidy was implemented for travel by municipal transport. In the case of **Chokhatauri municipality**, at the initiative of the gender equality council, an important social program/project was included in the municipality's budget for both 2019 and 2020. For instance, in order to ensure gender equality and promote the elimination of domestic violence, categories of financial assistance to victims of domestic violence, as well as assistance after surgical intervention to women diagnosed with breast cancer, appeared in the budget. The gender council of **Poti municipality** developed a gender equality promotion program for 2020, the budget of which was set at 5,000 GEL, which was aimed at raising women's awareness, strengthening female entrepreneurs, and increasing women's involvement and participation in public life with equal rights and opportunities.

Gender Budgeting

The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information was also interested in the extent to which municipalities take into consideration gender issues at different stages of the budget cycle.

By general definition, gender budgeting means taking gender equality issues into account in the budgeting process and, as a result, ensuring the allocation of budgetary funds in a way that will contribute to the improvement of gender equality in all areas and sectors.

According to the definition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), gender budgeting is an effort to achieve gender equality through the use of various analytical approaches in the budgetary process. Among the tools, the OECD considers a gender policy impact assessment system, a summary/report of the impact of budgetary measures in achieving gender equality, as well as the consideration and evaluation of a gender perspective in public spending.¹⁵ Gender budgeting in all cycles of the budget process ensures the increase of gender responsibility, effectiveness, and accountability of state expenditures. In addition, gender budgeting facilitates the availability of data broken down in terms of gender, as well as access to information about programs and the budget in general.¹⁶

According to the amendment made in 2015 in the Order N385 of the Minister of Finance of Georgia dated July 8, 2011, "On Approving the Methodology of Compiling the Program Budget": "Taking into account the specifics, depending on the need, in relation to gender-sensitive programs/sub-programs/activities, it is preferable to specify the indicator of evaluation of the program/sub-program/activity in the gender aspect as one of the indicators". The amendment introduced in 2015 applies to the state and municipal budgets of both the state and the autonomous republics.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the obligation to consider gender aspects does not exist at all stages of the budget process. For example, the Budget Code of Georgia, as well as the Law of Georgia "On Gender Equality" do not include a provision on gender budgeting.¹⁸ Municipalities of Georgia are facing significant challenges in terms of integrating gender aspects into the budget. There is, in fact, no strategic approach to the budget process aimed at women's empowerment. Since 2019, after program budgeting was introduced, the municipal budgets have included articles tailored specifically to women, although the extent to which the needs and priorities of women living in the municipality are taken into account is questionable.¹⁹

¹⁵ OECD Gender Budgeting Framework - Highlights. OECD. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3iKv1qx>

¹⁶ Shorena Kakhidze. Supporting guidance document for municipalities on issues related to gender budgeting (2020). p. 9. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LpCnfy>

¹⁷ Gender Equality in Georgia: Barriers and Recommendations. Updated edition, part I. (2022). Standing Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality. p. 87. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3JSZ0bM>

¹⁸ Ibid.p. 88.

¹⁹ Gender analysis of the municipal budget and assessment of women's economic situation. p. 11 Available at: <https://bit.ly/3J4HMaI>

In many cases, gender equality councils of municipalities name the lack of a budget or its low volume as the main obstacle to the implementation of planned activities. At the budget planning stage, which in terms of gender is directed only to healthcare programs and sub-programs, their effectiveness, as well as the indication of measurable indicators of their performance, is not evaluated. In addition, municipalities do not have the opportunity to carry out gender analysis of the budget.

According to the research carried out by the Office of the Public Defender in 2019, in most cases (61%), gender equality councils do not have a budget that would correspond to their action plans. In practice, however, there are examples when the councils are financed from the local budget, and the amount allocated to them ranges from 3,000 GEL to 31,000 GEL.²⁰

According to the replies provided to IDFI by the municipalities, the budgets for the implementation of the activities envisaged by the action plans had not been approved separately. The activities planned by the gender council, are financed according to the topic, which is broken down in different articles of the budget, both from administrative expenses and from the budgets of specific structural units.

The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information studied the programs/sub-programs in the 2022 budget approved by the municipalities that are aimed at ensuring gender equality. Out of 64 municipalities, a gender equality promotion program/sub-program is listed in the budget project of 13 municipalities,²¹ and the allocated amount ranges from 3,000 GEL to 230,000 GEL.

For example, the amount allocated within the framework of the 2022 budget project for gender equality, strengthening of families, and children program (priority of health care and social security) of **Zugdidi municipality** is 230,000 GEL. The program envisages the financial support of the activities to be carried out with regard to the issues of domestic violence and gender equality, as well as the "Women's Room". The program also includes the provision of one-time financial assistance for the purpose of social protection of children.

In the budget project of **Poti municipality**, the gender equality promotion program envisages raising women's awareness, strengthening female entrepreneurs, increasing women's involvement and participation in public life with equal rights and opportunities, jumpstarting initiatives aimed at women's economic empowerment, as well as promoting women's active involvement and empowerment in public and economic life. It should be noted that in the draft budget of **Marneuli and Lagodekhi municipalities**, specific funds have been allocated for the implementation of activities planned within the framework of the functioning of the gender

²⁰ Assessment of gender policy of local self-government bodies (2020). Public Defender of Georgia. p. 13. Available at: <https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2020061711084253805.pdf>

²¹ Ozurgeti, Baghdati, Lagodekhi, Khulo, Tskaltubo, Tsalenjikha, Chokhatauri, Keda, Lanchkhuti, Zugdidi, Tkibuli, Poti, and Vani.

equality council. In the case of other municipalities, gender equality promotion programs are focused on awareness-raising campaigns (for example, informing gender-sensitive groups, school students, and teachers) on issues of violence against women and/or domestic violence, technical support for the "Women's Room", etc.

Regardless of the steps taken by individual municipalities, it is necessary to define rules for the use of gender aspects at all levels of budget formation, and to clearly write goals based on needs research of women and men in the budget program. In the evidence-based decision-making process, the use of gender statistics and gender indicators, which are the main means of measuring the achievement of the goals of projects, programs, and policies, is also of fundamental importance.²² In addition, municipalities can study and share best international practices of gender budgeting and, in this regard, raise the awareness of civil servants. Targeted advocacy by both local and international non-governmental organizations is a significant contributor to the mentioned process.

For example, the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) advises municipalities on the implementation of gender-oriented budget policies. Within the framework of cooperation with GIZ, the development of gender budgeting was planned in 5 municipalities of Georgia - Keda, Rustavi, Gurjaani, Ozurgeti, and Ninotsminda.

Additional Mechanisms

According to a study by the United Nations Women's Organization, women's involvement in the decision-making process at the level of municipalities is low,²³ but can be significantly improved by encouraging the use of citizen involvement mechanisms and by disseminating information. Emphasis can be placed on the use of participatory budgeting, which is an important tool for participation by local population in the decision-making process. Raising awareness and capacity building of a wide segment of the population around the mentioned mechanism will encourage social mobilization, which will pave the way for gender opportunities. In this regard, the example of Pankisi valley is noteworthy, as the women living in the valley formed the "Council of Eldest Women", as a result of which the active participation of women in determining the priorities of the local community and planning projects has increased significantly.

In order to increase access to municipal services at the local level, across 32 municipalities, a "Women's Room" is in operation - an information-consulting service and an open space for holding meetings and trainings, the purpose of which is to increase public awareness and

²² Shorena Kakhidze. Supporting guidance document for municipalities on issues related to gender budgeting (2020). p. 45. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LpCnfy>

²³ Gender Assessment of Agriculture and Local Development Systems (2016). Analysis and Consulting Team (ACT). p. 18. Available at: <https://bit.ly/37Zjwch>

involvement in various social programs. The foundation of this initiative was laid with the support of international organizations. It should be noted that in order to ensure cooperation and coordination between the "Women's Rooms" and to promote the implementation of the gender equality policy of the local self-government, a "Union of the Women's Rooms" was also created,²⁴ in which, at the moment, 16 municipalities of Georgia are participating.

The main function of the "Women's Room" is to assist women who are interested in specific issues in the municipality and to provide them with advice on various municipal services. Interested persons can use the library and internet in the Women's Room. In addition, the Women's Room allows representatives of various non-governmental and private sectors to use the existing space for meetings, which in turn creates additional benefits for the visitors of Women's Rooms in terms of sharing information and different ideas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the activities of the municipal gender councils reveals that, despite the activities carried out in recent years, the main goals determined during the creation of the councils have not been achieved up to this point. Gender councils operating at the local level are not able to ensure the determination of the needs of local women. Consequently, the development of action plans and programs is not based on relevant evidence and research. In order to ensure gender equality, municipalities are mainly limited to implementing measures aimed at raising awareness, as well as providing one-time campaigns and assistance. In addition, due to the lacking budget and the absence of relevant qualifications among civil servants, the municipal gender councils cannot fulfill the obligations imposed by the gender equality action plan.

It is important to note that in many cases, municipal councils cannot provide evidence-based budget advocacy within their powers, which is subsequently reflected in the absence of programs/sub-programs aimed at gender equality in the budget draft.

Based on the analysis, the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information developed the following recommendations for the effective work of gender councils at the local level:

- Increase the exchange/sharing of information on gender issues between the central and local governments systematically in order to strengthen cooperation.

²⁴ https://www.womensroomsunion.ge/cat/about_union

- Municipalities should prioritize the collection of basic gender data and develop the capacity of those responsible for the collection and management of this data.
- Implementation of gender analysis of the budget should be a priority for the municipality. Based on the analysis, consideration of gender budgeting components in the next year's budget should be done.
- Gender aspects should be taken into account at all stages of the budget cycle; when determining needs, women should be involved to a high degree.
- Develop action plans and programs based on local needs research, promote women's issues in priority/policy documents of municipalities.
- Ensure the availability of information in terms of gender, which means displaying the gender equality council section on the official website of the municipality and periodically updating the information available there.

