

## **Working Session 9**

Veresk" Charity Foundation for Disabled and Amputees, Abkhazia

### **Gender Equality in Abkhazia**

Thank you for giving an opportunity to speak at such honorable meeting.

I would like to bring to your attention this very important issue of women's participation in the political life in my country from the point of view of civil society activist and a member of the Association of Women of Abkhazia.

Women in Abkhazia play very active role in the civil society, though they are not widely presented in governmental structures. The traditional roles of women as mothers and housewives, as well as supporters rather than leaders put obstacles to women's participation in the political life. Their access to mainstream politics, information and resources is rather restricted, partly due to their socio-economic burdens and responsibilities for supporting their families and communities, but also due to assumptions about their inefficiency in politics, the personality-based and privileged nature of the political environment.

As it often occurs in other conflict contexts, Abkhazian women faced a variety of insecurities during the violent Abkhaz-Georgian war in 1992-93 and were primary actors in responding to the conflict, providing family income during the war and especially after when Abkhazia suffered nasty economical sanctions imposed by the entire world on behalf of Georgia, women actively tried to build social life and even set up small enterprises. Nobody then in the government of Tbilisi even took to mind the protection of civilian population and the rights of women and children.

Women also fought as combatants, worked in military hospitals as nurses and doctors, were correspondents on the front and helped refugees to survive. definitely, there were women among those awarded honors and medals. Despite their important roles during and after the war, women find themselves not represented in leadership and decision-making roles in the current political sphere.

Abkhazia has declared itself to be a 'sovereign, democratic state, which recognizes and guarantees the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights and other universally recognized international legal acts'.

Being partially recognized Abkhazia is unable to establish foreign relations as a state and the laws passed by the Abkhaz authorities are yet not recognized by international law and Abkhazia cannot become a party to international agreements. Also Abkhazia received relatively little development or post-conflict rehabilitation assistance, though, after Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence, it provided considerable economic and financial support. Non-recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state should not be an obstruction in promoting gender equality and the development of a rightful, inclusive, tolerant society, and certainly should not be used to limit opportunities for any section of the population.

Local NGOs effectively lobbied for a law 'On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the Republic of Abkhazia', which came into force in 2009. It is still too early to anticipate full implementation of such a law, especially the one which requires a fundamental change in attitudes, behaviors and political culture. Gender equality within Abkhazia's political framework needs to be addressed through the population and its expectations of women's roles

in public life. NGOs also contributed to the preparation and lobbying for the Law on Access to Information, adopted in 2008, and have been particularly active in lobbying for transparent, free and fair elections and their monitoring, participating in the public organization “League for Honest Elections” with the aim of promoting a more comprising political culture.

Abkhaz women founded civil society organizations to tackle a variety of needs and problems, including the provision of humanitarian assistance, creating livelihoods and advocating for democratic and political reforms. Association of Women of Abkhazia was established by a group of Abkhaz women in Sukhum in March 1999 with a mission to protect the rights of women and strengthen women’s social and political position within society as well as to improve women’s status and eventually increase the access and representation of women in leadership positions in the broader political field. To this purpose, AWA carries out research programs, raise public awareness and trainings.

However, so far the development of appearance for strong, educated and independent women has occurred in parallel to a decreasing female presence in the Abkhaz decision-making structures. Furthermore, their prevalence in this field has led to compartmentalizing women in this sector, creating hypothesis that “the place” for women’s public voice is in civil society rather than in political leadership.

Women are occupying some prominent positions and are present across the judiciary and parliament. However, Abkhaz experts noted that they are few and that women in power do not always represent women’s interests.

In the early 1990s the Soviet tradition continued and women were still able to enter parliament, but over time this has decreased. Women themselves are not particularly influential or active in political parties and do not look for high level positions. There is just one woman among the current parliamentarians. She has been elected as deputy speaker. This is a downturn from the parliament of 1996–2002 when 5 and 3 in 2007 out of 35 deputies were women. In the Sukhum town Assembly, 6 out of 25 members were female but nowadays no female has been elected. No women have ever been nominated for president in the three presidential elections, although in 2004 and 2011 women stood as candidates for vice-president.

Within government, one of the deputies of a prime - minister is a woman, two out of twelve ministries are headed by women (Labor & Social Development and Justice). Just one woman heading up one of the six state committees, and only two out of nine departments under the Cabinet of Ministers are headed by women (Department for Statistics and the Department for Building & Architecture). Of eight state funds, two are headed by women (fund for the development of Abkhaz language, and the medical insurance fund). The official information agency, Apsnypress, is also headed by a woman. It is important to bear in mind that statistics do not significantly reflect the realities and complications of women’s political participation. Women do not naturally represent women’s interests and even where women were present, they were usually not in leadership positions and they do not have such a significant influence.

Sorry to say, Abkhazia is a bit far from reaching a lot of women in public structures and, moreover, the sense of their political participation cannot be measured by statistics. There are significant factors which block women’s number in public office, as traditional roles, stereotypes and women’s status attributing the lack of women decision-makers and political leaders to stereotypes about women’s responsibility as mothers and housewives. The society is accustomed to giving decision-making responsibilities to men and there is a slight tendency for women to be taken less seriously as actors in public life.

The partially recognized status of Abkhazia means it is problematic for the international community to engage officially on issues relating to women's political participation in governance of the country. However, this should not discourage the international community from supporting the aim of gender equality in Abkhazia.