WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN ARMENIA, GEORGIA, MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND PRESENT CHALLENGES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

BY MAIA BARKAIA

KVINFO

JUNE, 2026

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK

KVINFO
GENDER EQUALITY

Views presented in this publication do not necessarily align with the official stance of KVINFO or any other partners. The responsibility for the views articulated herein rests solely with the cited sources / interviewees.

FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that KVINFO shares this study on the women's rights movements of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in a historical perspective. The motivation for initiating this study was a curiosity to know more about the history in order to better understand the present gender justice gains and challenges.

The study was elaborated with support from the European Neighbourhood Programme of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

More knowledge of the struggle for gender justice and, in general, knowledge about these countries is definitely needed in Europe and elsewhere. Armenia has recently signaled interest in approaching the EU, but is not at this moment an applicant. Georgia's government has suspended accession negotiations until 2028. Moldova and Ukraine both have had status as a candidate to EU membership since 2022. Moldova initiated negotiations of membership in 2023, and Ukraine in 2024.

The common experience of first imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union, is an intriguing common denominator of these countries, and of the emergence and development of the women's rights movements, as different as they may be in other ways. This knowledge, we recognise, is important for the organising and strategising of the work to advance gender justice carried out today by the women's rights and gender justice movements in all four countries, whether in collaboration with KVINFO or others.

As this study makes clear, gender equality was not achieved in the Soviet republics. In fact, Soviet gender ideologies left local patriarchal structures unabated. Although not limited to the four countries in this study, these structures may contribute to the upsurge of the current anti-gender movement. In all cases, the anti-gender movement constitutes a core obstacle for women and human rights defenders, in and beyond the Russian interest sphere.

KVINFO is the proud partner of a range of women's rights and gender justice organisations in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratefulness for the mutual learning, trust, and collaboration experienced in these partnerships.

Lene Steffen
International Director, KVINFO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet countries have embarked on the path of democratisation amidst challenges such as inflation, unemployment and war (Hrycak, 2002). Although the Soviet period produced its own gendered restrictions and inequalities, in this new post-Soviet reality, women faced distinct hardships shaped by social, political and economic upheavals (Horn, 2006). This study explores how women's rights evolved since the 19th century, with a particular focus on the post-Soviet period and the current situation, across various political and social contexts in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. These countries share similar modern and contemporary historical trajectories in that all of them were colonies of Tsarist Russia, part of the Soviet Union and transitioned to independence in the post-Soviet period. In addition, with the exception of Moldova, they all experienced a brief period of independence between 1918 and 1921. Thus, these countries have grappled with three manifestations of Russian imperialism – Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia and post-Soviet Russia – representing distinct modern imperial projects rooted in contrasting economic systems and ideological reasonings.

This study presents the developments from early periods of feminism through the Soviet and post-Soviet periods to the current conditions of the women's rights movement, focusing on the transformation over time, the challenges and obstacles faced by women's rights groups and the pathways women navigate to overcome these challenges.

In this report the terms feminism, women's rights movement and women's rights activism are used to refer to the diverse forms of collective and individual efforts advancing women's rights and gender equality. While feminism denotes the broader ideological foundation, movement and activism capture its organisational and practical expressions. The term women's movement is employed as an overarching category that encompasses a range of initiatives, which may at times be explicitly feminist but are not necessarily always identified as such.

The term post-Soviet defines these countries primarily in relation to the Soviet Union, which glosses over their experience with Tsarist Russia. However, in this study, post-Soviet encompasses the relationship of these countries with the various metamorphoses of the Russian Empire. Women's rights in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been shaped and influenced by different historical periods, spanning from the second half of 19th century to the present. This study locates women's rights and gender equality within these historical contexts, with a particular emphasis on the post-Soviet period and the current context. Each country-specific chapter begins its exploration of women's rights activism from the second half of the 19th century up to the Soviet period. During this time, when these countries were under Tsarist Russian rule, anti-colonial intellectual and political movements emerged, including the earliest activities centred on women's rights and philanthropy (Gaprindashvili, 2017; Harutyunyan, 2016). Examining this period provides insights into how women began to establish their presence in the modern public sphere. This era includes the brief periods of independence that three of these republics experienced following the dissolution of the Russian Empire. This independence period represented unique experiments in statehood during which issues concerning women's political, social and economic rights emerged and held central importance. Notably, it was during these short-lived independent states that women gained the right to vote and run for office (Nakhutsrishvili, 2024). However, this period's advances in women's rights were strategically ignored by Soviet officials and historians, who instead framed comparisons between women's

rights in the Soviet Union and those under the Russian Empire. This narrative conveniently disregarded the significant strides in gender equality achieved during the independence period, focusing instead on highlighting the Soviet system as a radical departure from Tsarist oppression. This study examines this historical phase, with a chapter dedicated to focusing on Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The chapters on women's rights and gender equality during the Soviet Union highlight the common Soviet approach to women's rights issues, which was consistent across the four countries in this study. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union proclaimed women's emancipation and set a goal to abolish inequality. The Soviets initially focused on transferring household labour, primarily performed by women, into the public sphere and engaging women in the labour force, with state-managed women's rights campaigns. By the end of the 1920s, the Soviet government declared the Woman Question to be successfully resolved, leaving little room for further critical reflection on the matter. During the tumultuous 1930s, which were characterised by widespread deportations and repression, the lives of women were marked by additional challenges. Many of the progressive laws adopted in the early 1920s were abolished in the 1930s, and women's traditional roles as mothers were reinforced through various initiatives, including rewarding women for having multiple children. This narrative of achievement coincided with a conservative turn in the 1930s, and by the time of Perestroika in the late 1980s, women were encouraged to 'return to their purely womanly mission' at home (Gorbachev, 1987, cited in Kotliuk, 2023). The respective chapters for each country will elaborate further on the Soviet phase.

In the 1990s and early 2000s non-governmental organisations (NGOs) mostly supported by international organisations and foundations served as the main form of women's rights movement. Over time this landscape gradually diversified with the emergence of various independent groups and informal initiatives. In recent years women's and LGBTQI+ rights have faced coordinated attacks from anti-gender actors, with gender becoming a battleground for the Kremlin to mobilise anti-Western forces in these countries. In this study the post-Soviet period is analysed against the backdrop of key factors influencing gender equality, including the diffusion of internationally agreed-upon human rights and principles (Sabedashvili, 2011), the impact of transnational feminist networks and global feminist funding, aspirations for European Union (EU) membership in countries such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, along with subsequent Association Agreements with the EU – which sets democracy, human rights and the rule of law as foundational values for political alignment and economic integration, at least on paper.

The main part of the study was completed in 2024, while the final editing took place in 2025. Since then, the state of civic activism and particularly women's rights activism, in Georgia has significantly shrunk and deteriorated as a result of the government's repressive laws and crackdown on civil society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall research question is how have the women's rights movement, women's rights and feminism evolved since the 19th century, with a particular focus on the post-Soviet period and the current situation of gender justice across Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The following sub-questions will guide the inquiry and aid in addressing the overall research question:

How did the women's rights movement and/or feminist philanthropy develop in each country during the pre-Soviet period? What role did the emergence of the modern public sphere play in women's rights movements in these countries?

What were the conditions of women's rights during the Soviet Union? How did the official Soviet approach frame women's rights and how did it affect the situation of women's rights in the countries being examined?

What are the priorities, challenges, divisions and strategies of women's rights activism, feminism and civil society activism during the post-Soviet period?

What is the women's rights situation in areas such as politics, economics and health in the post-Soviet period for each country? What are the main challenges women, in all their diversity, face in these countries today, and how do they navigate and overcome them?

The research questions were developed in line with a feminist research ethic which emphasises attentiveness to power and boundaries (Ackerly & True, 2010). This means that they were framed with the goal of going beyond mainstream inquiry to make visible what is often overlooked or rendered invisible.

METHODOLOGY

Feminist research is understood as one of several social justice projects (DeVault & Gross, 2007) that aim not merely explain but transform the social order. Hence one of the key objectives of feminist knowledge production is to challenge and change oppressive structures (Cook & Fonow, 1990). This research study, with its twofold objective – first, to unravel the historical background of women's rights and feminist movements in countries marked by colonial rule and second, to map the current state of women's rights and overall gender equality – contributes to feminist knowledge production. The analytical insights and findings produced by this study can serve as tools for feminists and women's rights activists to alter oppressive and exploitative conditions while situating current struggles within their broader historical and regional context.

A feminist, intersectional and decolonial methodological framework is employed to encompass the diverse factors at play and respect diverse epistemologies. While gender serves as a useful analytic category (Scott, 1986), it is insufficient on its own to make the research feminist.
As Ackerly and True (2010) argue, 'it is the use of a feminist research ethic to guide it that makes gender analysis feminist rather than vice versa' (p. 63). A feminist approach not only problematises gender and foregrounds women's concerns but also dismantles women as unified subjects of feminism, recognising their diverse positions within history, culture and class (DeVault & Gross, 2007).

The principles of feminist ethics are drawn from the works of a variety of authors on feminist methodology (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Ackerly & True, 2010; Acker et al.,1983; DeVault & Gross, 2007). A key characteristic of feminist methodology is *critical reflection* at every stage of the research process. Consequently, the research is conceived as a self-reflective endeavour, with each aspect of research scrutinised in relation to feminist ideals (Cook & Fonow, 1990).
This research uses Ackerly and True's (2010) definition of a feminist research ethic, which entails a methodological commitment to reflecting on the power of epistemology and boundaries, as well as a commitment to transforming the social order to promote gender justice. To this end *deliberative moments* are planned at every stage to revisit and reconsider previous phases, ensuring alignment with feminist ethical standards that help to reflect on and address dynamics of power, knowledge and context throughout the research process (Ackerly & True, 2010). Regular progress meetings with KVINFO provided an opportunity to critically reflect on and evaluate the research process.

Although the research process was planned, it remained dynamic, adapting to challenges and new contextual developments, which required reflexivity and flexibility. For this reason, this study applied a non-linear, circular approach to the research process. While conventional stages – such as formulation of the research questions, conceptualisation, methodology, desk review, in-depth interviews and analysis – are followed, they are understood as mutually constitutive (DeVault & Gross, 2007). At each stage, deliberative moments are built in to revisit earlier phases and reflect on the ongoing process. The key elements of a feminist ethic, according to Ackerly and True (2010), are power, which implies recognising the power of privileged epistemologies, power that renders itself invisible and the power that marginalises oppressed groups. Attentiveness to power includes the need to reflect on asymmetries (Cook & Fonow, 1990), and boundaries, which entails transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries and rejecting a one-dimensional view of power. The feminist ethic acknowledges the intersectional dimensions of power by recognising the complexity and contradictions of women's lives. It also involves crossing boundaries between academic and activist spaces (DeVault & Gross, 2007). In this study, the intersectional dimension of feminist ethics is addressed by recognising that women in these countries are not a homogenous group, and by consistently trying to incorporate an intersectional framework, i.e. taking this heterogeneity into account, and by analysing the multiple axes of power that influence women's experiences.

Finally, a feminist approach requires transparency about the researcher's location, especially since this location has consequences for the research process. As a social-change oriented researcher, I critically examine factors shaping gender equality. I consider it insufficient to analyse gender inequality solely in terms of attitudes as structural factors such as economic inequality and differing access to opportunities must also be taken into account. Therefore, when respondents analyse particular aspects of gender inequality, I supplement their accounts with other sources and complement the study with additional methods to develop a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality. Thus, my positionality shapes the questions I ask, how I interpret respondents' answers and the methods I choose to capture multiple aspects of gender inequality. An aspect of a feminist ethics is to treat respondents as collaborative partners, not as objects of study, which blurs the boundary between the researcher and the researched (Ackerly & True, 2010). This dynamic was particularly natural in this study, as many respondents shared unique experiences and valuable knowledge, readily contributing to the research process. Notably, several respondents were also researchers specialising in their respective countries, which enhanced the collaborative nature of the work. In one instance, this collaboration took the form of a quid pro quo interview in

which a researcher focusing on the Georgian context offered insights into Ukraine in exchange for my perspectives on Georgia. Such exchanges exemplify the mutual enrichment possible through participatory and collegial approaches to research. This study engages expert interviewees and KVINFO staff members as collaborative partners fostering a multi-vocal feminist perspective. These elements of feminist ethics served as guiding principles at every stage of research planning, including data collection and analysis.

This research adopts a theory-seeking approach to theorising, rather than a theory-testing one. It aims to understand the phenomenon in question using conceptual tools developed in the course of reflecting on the research question throughout the research process. The study begins with an outline of a broad theoretical paradigm that encompasses intersectional feminist, post-colonial–decolonial and post-Soviet theories. The feminist approach emphasises women's agency and is guided by a feminist-informed research ethic (Hesse-Biber, 2011; Ackerly & True 2010). Intersectional and decolonial components encourage the exploration of traces that have been methodologically marginalised and excluded from mainstream history, while also addressing intersectional dimensions of power. Finally, this study seeks to reveal both conceptual over-inclusion and under-inclusion – that is, the ways in which the histories of women in Soviet Russia have been disproportionately emphasised, while the experiences and histories of women in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been marginalised or overlooked. By decentring history from Soviet Russia and shifting focus to these four countries, drawing on the notion of 'discursive colonisation' (Mohanty, 1984), this research contributes to reclaiming women's history in these countries from being subsumed and erased.

Although the women's rights movements in the countries under study evolved in different contexts, they share a *political field* (Ray, 1999) shaped by a common regional and historical background. However, each movement may have experienced this shared *political field* differently. The political fields vary across multiple dimensions but comparing them offers a transferable argument about the development of women's rights activism in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This research approaches women's rights activism in these countries as both distinct and a 'linked set of cases' (Roth, 2004), examining their historically specific similarities and differences. While the country contexts are unique, they are situated within a broader historical milieu that established connections between them. The study explores commonalities and differences between these countries and within these countries, as they are not homogenous and include women from various social groups and backgrounds whose experiences can be intersectional and unique. For instance, gender equality and women's rights unfolded differently not only in the selected four countries during the Soviet Union but also for various ethnic and religious groups within the same country.

The study employs two main methods: a desk review of relevant literature, serving as the primary method, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which provide additional guidance throughout the research process. For the desk review, I used non-probabilistic selection techniques, specifically theoretical selection (Ackerly & True, 2010), which involves identifying sources most likely to inform me about the research question. As a result, I selected literature that directly or indirectly addresses the research questions. However, the desk review has its limitations, as I have limited control over the credibility and scope of secondary sources. To minimise this, I prioritised credibility when selecting sources and focused on reliable secondary sources. While data availability varies slightly between countries, particularly in terms of the years covered, the

selection of sources was guided systematically by reliability and the focus on women's rights. The sources include scholarly literature on the historical periods in focus and reports, such as official yearly gender statistics, Country Gender Profiles and other documents relevant to understanding the post-Soviet situation of women's rights in the four selected countries. I primarily relied on sources produced by feminist and women's civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organisations, as they have been the main producers of knowledge in this area. Universities in these countries are primary focused on teaching and unfortunately have limited capacity for research, a situation further exacerbated by precarious employment conditions. The statistical data on gender representation include both men and women. For brevity, I only report the share of women, with the share of men being implied.

The desk review limited my ability to fully address the research question, as it relies on pre-existing data that in some contexts leaves certain aspects unexplored. To navigate this limitation, I supplemented the desk research with in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local feminist activists and scholars. I chose this interview method because it allows for flexibility in questioning, enables the interview to unfold like a conversation and fosters more collaborative encounters, as discussed in the previous paragraph on the researcher's location. In parallel with and after the desk review, I conducted semi-structured interviews to crosscheck certain findings, address gaps and seek suggestions from my respondents. Between November 2024 and January 2025, I conducted interviews with fourteen respondents: four focused on Armenia, four on Moldova, three on Ukraine, and three on Georgia. I assigned consecutive numbers and not names to the interviewed respondents to ensure anonymity. After conducting interviews, I revisited the desk review and revised it based on the suggestions and insights provided by my respondents. Given the multi-local nature of the research, I used online platforms to conduct most of the supplementary interviews. Of the fourteen interviews, four were conducted in person. This interview process was non-linear but involved a continuous back-and-forth process. For the expert interviews, I used both purposive sampling and the snowball method to select respondents. I interviewed a heterogenous group of women activists, from both mainstream and non-mainstream groups, and feminist scholars in each country, ensuring the application of feminist principles such as intersectionality and inclusivity.

The purposive sampling technique is theoretically informed, considering criteria such as understanding of formal or informal activism, feminist scholarship and intersectional concerns related to diverse communities. The expert interviews in each selected country helped navigate through the research process, enhancing multi-vocality. In accordance with purposive sampling, interviewees were selected based on their recognised experience and engagement with gender equality issues in the respective countries. While individual statements may reflect personal perspectives, they are used to illustrate broader patterns identified across multiple sources, including reports, studies and statistical data.

There is an asymmetry in the availability of scholarly literature in English on the history of women's rights movements. While there is a wealth of literature focused on politics, international relations and history, literature that foregrounds women's experiences, gendered histories – or herstories (Lerner, 1986) – is comparatively scarce. This reflects how research on the region has been conditioned by gendered values to which researchers have been blind. Moreover, within the literature on women's rights in the Soviet Union, there is a noticeable asymmetry and bias towards Russia-centred narratives (Goldman, 1993). The concept of post-colonial asymmetry (Chakraborty,

2000) suggests that the Empire – the centre – has the privilege of being represented as 'universal'. Consequently, even if an author focuses solely on Russian women activists, they can still claim to be discussing Soviet women's history. In contrast, when peripheral herstories are written about Armenian, Georgian or Uzbek women, they are often framed as 'particular' narratives from peripheral regions. As a result, while a rich and comprehensive history of the women's movement in (both Tsarist and Soviet) Russia exists, the histories of women from the Soviet republics, such as those in this study, must be brought to the forefront of analysis and discourse. By incorporating a feminist perspective, herstories are employed to emphasise the experiences and contributions of women often overlooked in traditional historical narratives.

In contrast, literature on the current state of gender equality in these countries is generally accessible, but again there is a lack of resources addressing the history of women's rights activism in the region, particularly in the case of Moldova. My respondents attributed this neglect to Moldova's ongoing brain drain, precarious conditions for researchers and the absence – both historically and currently – of gender studies programmes as an academic discipline to generate sufficient knowledge on this subject. Consequently, compared to the other chapters, the chapter on Moldova lacks a robust historical dimension.

In a single case study, the expectation would be for the researcher to be fluent in the local language, which I am in the Georgian language; however, when conducting multi-country research, I had to adopt a more creative approach to transcend language barriers (Ackerly &True, 2010). To address this challenge, I initially planned to hire translators for several key articles on the research topic. However, AI tools such as ChatGPT proved to be sufficiently effective in providing translations, allowing me to use these articles in all the native languages in the research.
As a Georgian researcher, I was particularly conscious of how my country of origin might influence my interpretation of the cases of Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. Although these countries share Soviet and post-Soviet experiences, each is distinct in its own context. The expert interviews from these countries incorporated into my desk review were helpful as an opportunity to crosscheck my interpretations and better understand the local complexities.

I integrated feminist ethics into the analytical techniques, to increase attentiveness to the dominant epistemological biases that may arise from privileging certain types of information or data in the analysis. Thus, description was supplemented with other analytical techniques, such as contextualisation in conjunction with content analysis of the selected literature. To draw comparisons and highlight differences, the study explores several common factors across each country, encompassing legal and institutional frameworks, women in decision making and politics, women's social and economic rights, women's health and violence, war and women. In addition to these common factors, the study also addresses context-specific issues that emerged during the desk-review.

This study does not treat women in these countries as a homogenous group, acknowledging the population's heterogeneity, including ethnic diversity by explicitly incorporating data on such differences wherever available. The selected countries exhibit significant ethnic and religious diversity, with the exception of Armenia, where ethnic Armenians comprise 98% of the population, and Yezidis and Russians primarily make up the rest (Census, 2022).

In Georgia, 86% of the population is ethnic Georgian, 7% ethnic Armenian and 6% Azerbaijani, while smaller groups include Kists, Assyrians, Russians, Ukrainians and Greeks (Census, 2014).

Additionally, the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are predominantly home to Ossetians and Abkhazians. In Moldova, 77.2 % of the population identifies as Moldovan and minorities make up larger proportions, with 7.9% Romanians, 4.9% Ukrainians, 4.2 % Gagauz, 3.2% Russians, 1.6% Bulgarians and 0.4% Roma (Census, 2024). In Ukraine, around 77–78% are Ukrainian (CoE, 2025), while Russians make up approximately 17% of the population and smaller groups include Belarusians, Moldovans and Crimean Tatars. In addition, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians and others account for even smaller proportions of the population.

This study was conducted and written between September 2024 and January 2025, which included an inception phase, data collection, analysis and drafting of the report – a challenging endeavour within such a timeframe. Furthermore, due to unfolding events in my home country, Georgia, finalising the study after January 2025 took longer than anticipate. Due to the timeframe the study does not cover the political events in 2025, which have substantially undermined Georgia's civil society. As a social-change oriented feminist researcher I am a founding member of the Movement for Social Democracy that emerged from ongoing protests against the authoritarian consolidation of power by the Georgian Dream (GD) government. I have been personally involved in these developments. The protests, which have been ongoing since 28 November 2024 are in response to rigged elections, an unprecedented number of political prisoners taken over the past months and a series of laws restricting fundamental rights and democracy. These factors affected the progress of this study, as well as the narrative.

THE SOVIET APPROACH TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This section examines the common Soviet framework regarding women's rights in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. I elaborate on the general trends of this historical period, while the following chapters include sections dedicated to specific developments in each of the four countries.

The Soviet approach to women's issues can be divided into three distinct periods: the 1920s, 1930s–1940s and the post-Stalin era (1950s–1980s). The 1920s represent a time of ideological radicalism characterised by an openness to critical perspectives on women's rights as the state sought to build socialism. This period is noted for its experimentation with sexuality and family dynamics, ultimately aiming to address the Woman Question (Sabedashvili, 2011). However, the 1930s ushered in an era of conservatism, where a renewed emphasis on family and motherhood emerged alongside calls for women's participation in the labour force to support the socialist state. Consequently, women's labour was mobilised for both production and reproduction, leading some scholars to describe this period as 'totalitarian androgyny' (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2005). The post-Stalin period was defined by the re-legalisation of abortion in 1955 and a shift in the approach to the 'Woman Question, with increased attention to women's dual roles as producers of shared wealth and reproducers of Soviet citizens.

Georgian scholar Tamar Sabedashvili (2011) challenges the rigid division of Soviet history into these three periods, arguing that the Soviet experience was multi-layered and elements from each of the aforementioned periods coexisted throughout Soviet history. While some fundamental structures persisted across the Soviet period, it may not be entirely accurate to conflate these distinct and complex periods, each with its unique characteristics. However, this periodisation

serves to illuminate the complexities of Soviet history, highlighting the nuances rather than oversimplifying the overall narrative.

The Soviet Union implemented a special approach to women's issues by establishing Zhenotdel, the women's section of the Communist Party, which operated actively from the 1920s until its liquidation in 1930. The organisation employed various strategies to connect with women, one of which was the publication of women's magazines (Barkaia, 2017). Women's accounts in these magazines from the 1920s reveal that they faced discrimination in multiple spheres of their lives. At home men often forbade them from working on collective farms, while at their workplaces women encountered discrimination, devaluation of their contributions and lower wages. They were likewise subjected to sexist remarks from their male comrades (Barkaia, 2017). Despite this 'proletarian antifeminism' (Goldman, 1993), the Soviet State recognised the necessity of women's labour force participation for building the socialist state and therefore introduced special measures to encourage their involvement, which drew more women into the workforce. Resistance to women's emancipation in some republics was manifested violently. The Central Executive Committee characterised such violence not as 'violence against women' but as 'counter-revolutionary offenses' (Stites, 1978).

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union sought to transfer household labour, primarily performed by women, into the public sphere. This raises questions about the motivations behind such a shift. Was it intended to challenge the existing gender division of labour, or was it primarily aimed at ensuring women's engagement in the workforce to maximise labour productivity? The answer may lie in the observation that this transformation did not significantly alter the fundamental gendered segregation of labour (Goldman, 1993; Sabedashvili, 2017). While aspects of household work, such as daycare centres, were indeed moved into the public sphere, they predominantly remained the responsibility of women and continued to be considered their exclusive domain (Barkaia, 2017). As a result, while the Soviet Union's mobilisation of women into the labour force was relatively successful, the jobs available to them were characterised by both horizontal and vertical gender segregation. Women were rarely promoted to managerial positions and men predominantly occupied skilled and supervisory positions (Creighton, 1996). However, women's labour force participation was still a positive step, as it ensured their economic activity and income, in turn providing them with some bargaining power.

By the end of the 1920s, the number of childcare centres in the Soviet Union had declined significantly due to insufficient funding. In the 1930s, the Soviet discourse shifted blame from systemic issues to individual women, assuming that the socialist state – and by implication, gender equality – had already been established. Consequently, any failures in women's advancement were attributed to their personal characteristics rather than structural barriers. During this period the image of the Soviet 'superwoman' – an ideal figure who simultaneously fulfilled the roles of wage labourer, mother and wife – emerged (Goldman, 1993; Sabedashvili, 2011). This tension between family and work demands faced by women in the Soviet Union can be explained by three key factors, as outlined by Wolfer Jancar (1978): the demands of paid employment, the Communist regime's failure to provide adequate services to alleviate women's domestic burdens and the regime's preoccupation with declining birth rates, as it needed a future labour force to sustain the building of the socialist state.

Beginning in the 1930s, with the transition to Stalinism and continuing through the post-Stalin era, there was a pronounced emphasis on motherhood and women's roles as caregivers. This period

saw the introduction of fines for divorce, alongside the exploitation of women both at home and in the workplace (Goldman, 1993). Divorced women, along with homeless children, emerged as high-risk social groups, with women in particular often turning to prostitution as a means of survival (Goldman, 1993). Notably, divorce rates in the western republics of the Soviet Union were three times higher than those in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (Sanjian, 1991).

While domestic violence began to be conceptualised as a human rights issue by women's rights activists and scholars in the West in the late 1960s (Dobash and Dobash, 1992, cited in Sabedashvili, 2017), it was not until the 1980s that it gained international recognition. Therefore, earlier conceptualisations of domestic violence in Soviet republics were likely limited. Sabedashvili (2011, 2017) examines how Soviet policy planners understood domestic violence across different periods of the Soviet Union and how shifts in gender approaches, along with the rethinking of the family concept, affected its connection to gender equality. Domestic violence was prevalent throughout the Soviet Union; however, in Soviet Georgia such incidents were classified under the umbrella of hooliganism, with nearly half of the crimes categorised as hooliganism being related to domestic violence (Johnson, 2009, cited in Sabedashvili, 2017). Thus, even in the late Soviet period (i.e. the 1980s) the state failed to recognise the connection between domestic violence and gender equality, nor did it acknowledge it as a significant social problem (Sabedashvili, 2011, 2017).

Progressive legislation, such as the decriminalisation of abortion, regarding women's rights that was enacted in the 1920s underwent significant changes in the 1930s. However, from the outset, abortion was not decriminalised as an assertion of women's rights (Goldman, 1993); instead, it was viewed as a social evil stemming from poverty. Policymakers of the Soviet state believed that once poverty was eradicated and material conditions improved, the need for abortion would diminish. Consequently, the Soviet Union recriminalized abortion in 1936. By the end of the 1930s, the Stalinist approach to women's issues equated the interests of the state with those of the family, further entrenching traditional gender roles and undermining women's autonomy (Barkaia, 2017).

As time progressed and the family became the central pillar of the Soviet state, the political will to achieve substantial gender equality waned. During Perestroika in the late 1980s Soviet women began to engage in a new kind of independent, collective action. In this period, Mikhail Gorbachov, after introducing perestroika or 'restructuring', revived the Women's Councils, which were under the authority of the Soviet Women's Committee. As a result, by April 1988 there were 236000 Women's Councils, with a total membership of 2.3 million (Hrycak, 2002). These councils established contacts with international women's activists, which resulted in the critical rethinking of domestic problems. Women activists began forming direct action groups to seek protection for mothers of large families, single mothers, disabled mothers and mothers of disabled children from state agencies. In 1989, various non-Russian, national women's associations began to form across the Soviet Union, particularly in the Western Ukraine, the Baltics and the Caucasus. Various ethnocultural women's association claimed to have no political goals and did not revolve around women's rights. A number of nationalist women's organisations have survived since the republics gained independence from the Soviet Union, for instance the Women's Association (Zhinocha Hromada) that was affiliated with the Ukrainian movement for independence (Rukh) and the Ukrainian Women's Union (Souiuz Ukrainok) established in 1989. The women's groups in the Soviet republics during the Perestroika tended to have a depoliticising focus (Hrycak, 2002).

The developments that took place in the Soviet republics had direct implications for the four countries in this study. Across these contexts, Soviet policies towards women followed a similar pattern, grounded in a common ideological framework that sought to present the Soviet project as an emancipator of women, depicting them as passive victims of a pre-Soviet patriarchal order (Kotliuk, 2023). This framing minimised or erased women's activism and their legacy from the pre-Soviet period, recasting emancipation as a gift bestowed by the state rather than the outcome of women's own struggles. Despite the official discourse on equality, women's voices remained largely absent from political and institutional decision making. These contradictions between proclaimed emancipation and entrenched gender hierarchies formed the shared legacy inherited by post-Soviet women's movements across all four countries, shaping the way in which contemporary struggles for women's rights and gender equality unfolded.

Each of the four countries examined in this study inherited a complex legacy: the remnants of a pre-Soviet women's movement, the Soviet model of state-managed emancipation and the post-Soviet transition towards market economies. While these shared historical experiences shaped similar structural and cultural challenges, the specific trajectories of feminist movements have differed across contexts. In all four cases, women's rights activism initially took the form of NGOs supported by international donors, before gradually diversifying into more autonomous and grassroots forms. Yet each country continues to struggle with persistent gender inequality, limited institutional support for gender justice and the rise of anti-gender movements, and these forces differ in strength and influence from one context to another. Moreover, the aftermath of wars and conflicts has deeply affected women's lives. The following four chapters explore these dynamics in detail, tracing how women's movements in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have navigated between inherited Soviet legacies, international agendas and local political realities.

CHAPTER 1. WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN ARMENIA

1.1. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ARMENIA DURING THE PRE-SOVIET PERIOD

Women's activism in Armenia is closely linked with the emergence of the modern public sphere and nationalism in the 19th century. Their engagement in public life primarily centred on education; establishing schools; training teachers and opening libraries; providing shelters for orphans, refugees and soldiers; and offering support to impoverished women (Harutyunyan, 2016). Overall, women's involvement in the public sphere was (still) gendered and characterised by educational initiatives and humanitarian work. The emergence of the modern public sphere in the 19th century was marked by the proliferation of periodicals, which became a platform for national consolidation. Until 1900, women's articles were typically published in sections of journals designated specifically for women, but after 1900, women's articles increasingly appeared on the front pages of journals (Khalapyan, 2019). Women pragmatically justified their demand for education by appealing to the 'logic that women were to ensure the upbringing of their nationals' (Harutyunyan, 2016), a tactic employed by women globally, as seen in the works of figures abroad like Mary Wollstonecraft.[1] However, women themselves did not view education merely as a

[1] For example, Mary Wollstonecraft's works include "The Vindication of the Rights of Women:With Stricutres on Political and Moral Subjects" (1792) and "Maria or, the Wrongs of Woman" (1798).

gendered responsibility, but as a pathway to enter public life and a prerequisite for their emancipation (Harutyunyan, 2016).

One of the defining characteristics of the history of women's rights activism in Armenia is that it extends beyond the current territorial boundaries of the country. Therefore, this study draws on the framework used by Armenian feminists to narrate the history of Armenian women's activism both within the country and across the diaspora. The Armenian diaspora was an integral part of the national public and contributed significantly to the emergence of a modern public sphere. Until the 1860s and 1870s, there were only a few schools for girls, including one in Yerevan (established in 1850), another in Smyrna (1840) and the Nuneh School in Tiflis (now Tbilisi). Armenian scholars identify three distinct spaces of women's activism: the diaspora, 'Western Armenia', in Ottoman Turkey and 'Eastern Armenia', which includes Tsarist Georgia (Khalapyan, 2019; Harutyunyan, 2016). All three transcend the current geographic boundaries of Armenia. Harutyunyan (2016) observes that advocating for women's rights was more difficult among the Western Armenians in Ottoman Turkey due to stronger opposition from conservative forces amongst Armenians there. Nonetheless, Armenian women writers such as Srbuhi Dussap addressed women's issues, including the right to paid labour. She condemned women's subordination to men, and advocated for equality of the sexes (Khalapyan, 2019; Harutyunyan, 2016). Dussap (2020) is the author of *Mayda,* the first novel written by an Armenian woman and published in 1883.

Armenian women's activism emerged as part of the larger movement for national consolidation and the enlightenment project of spreading literacy, which was essential for fostering national self-awareness. Since women's activism was closely tied to the broader national awareness and enlightenment project, which was dominated by men, some men raised the Woman Question and advocated for women's rights. Women received encouragement for writing, not only from secular intellectuals but also from some religious figures (Khalapyan, 2019). However, the women's movement was not merely 'brought to life not by women, but rather, men' (Harutyunyan, 2016). However women were not passive recipients 'pushed into the public sphere' by men. It is important to distinguish between men's support for the Woman Question and to recognise women's agency in the movement. While some men supported women, they had to endure harsh criticism from numerous male counterparts. Moreover, one of the reasons for the scarcity of women writers, according to Yenovk Armen, was the fear of public reaction to their decision to write (Khalapyan, 2019). Thus, for women, it was not enough to possess desire and talent for writing; they also had to exhibit immense courage and resilience to venture into a field dominated by men.

Among the men who supported women's entrance into the public sphere were thinkers such as Mikael Nalbandian, who stated 'Gone are the times when men looked down upon women as slaves... In this humanistic age, the enlightened world regards women as human beings' (Nalbandian, 1945, cited in Harutyunyan, 2016). Arashkanian also viewed women's rights as vital for the progress of humankind, framing it as an issue of human rights.

With the emergence of women as public figures and educators in the 1870s and 1890s, the grievances women faced began to appear in stories, periodicals and scholarly works. One of the earliest examples of such work is Raffi's study 'The Armenian Woman' (1990), which was published in parts in the periodical *Mshak* in 1879. The author examined women from all social classes, both urban and rural, and identified the social and economic factors responsible for their grievances. Armenian women's activism was influenced by European women's movements and

the progressive thought of the first wave of feminism. Armenian periodicals published articles on European women's struggles, as well as translations of works on women's rights. For example, *Mshak* featured articles on the Woman Question, reports on women's conditions in various provinces, information on women's movements in the West, translations, book reviews and more.

In both Western and Eastern Armenian societies of the 19th century, women's activism unfolded through newly founded women's organisations that initially focused on educational and cultural issues, later expanding to address other aspects of women's rights, including economic rights and charity. In Western Armenian society, in Ottoman Turkey, women established dozens of organisations during the 1860s–1880s, such as 'Armenian Patriotic Women's Society', 'School-Loving Ladies' Society' and the 'Patriotic Women's Society' in Uskudar, Constantinople, which was founded by teenage girls. In 1880 this society opened middle schools for girls in various provinces. After World War I, Armenian women founded numerous workshops to support women economically, providing orphaned girls with opportunities to earn a living. For instance, in the 'Girls' Workshop of Pera', hundreds of orphans learned crafts that allowed them to support themselves (Harutyunyan, 2016).

Among Eastern Armenians, notable examples of women's organisations include the 'Froebel Society' and 'Armenian Women's Charitable Society of Tiflis', the latter being the largest organisation among Eastern Armenians. The society opened girls' schools and established a crafts school in 1888. However, the Charitable Society was closed after the 1899 state regulation banning public organisations, although some craft schools continued operating as workshops. The Meghu Society, founded in 1906 in Tiflis, was unique in that it focused on women's economic empowerment, particularly addressing the issue of unemployment. Thus, the Society not only tackled the immediate consequences of poverty but also sought to eradicate it by integrating women into the labour force. Armenian women's public activism was not limited to women's organisations; they were also active members of mixed-gender societies such as the 'Armenian Charitable Society', the 'Publishing Society' and the 'Ethnographic Society'. Eastern Armenian women's organisations were influenced and inspired by their Western Armenian counterparts, with both groups learning from each other's experiences.

During the First Armenian Republic period (1918–1920), women were granted the right to vote and to be elected. Notably, women made up 8% of the members of Parliament in the independent Armenian Republic. Although Alexandra Kollontai is widely recognised as the first female ambassador in the world, serving as an ambassador to the Soviet Union, the title of the first female ambassador actually belongs to Diana Abgar, who served as the Ambassador of the independent Armenian Republic to Japan. This is yet another example of Soviet history subsuming and erasing the pre-Soviet legacies of peripheral independent republics.

1.2. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

Soviet Armenia, like other post-Soviet republics, shared the same Soviet framework of gender politics, which included the right to vote and be elected, free and obligatory education and the right to work. However, this framework did not address the gender division of household labour, which led to women's double burden. Additionally, the darker aspects of the Soviet Empire, such as repression, also marked this period. The academic literature on political repressions in the Soviet Union primarily focuses on men as the targets of purges, with few works examining women as

subjects of repression (Papikyan, 2020). Purges in the Soviet Union refer to mass arrests, imprisonment and execution of political prisoners, kulaks, religious leaders, dissidents and others perceived as enemies of the state. While there are some shared patterns of repression mechanisms, such as purges across the entire USSR, there are certain characteristics specific to the Armenian context.

During World War II, the pressure on women increased compared to previous years. The number of women subjected to purges in Soviet Armenia was greater than in the 1930s (Papikyan, 2020). In the 1930s, women were less desirable targets of purges due to gender stereotypes that portrayed them as physically weak and less useful for forced labour in the camps. However, this changed after 1941 when the GULAG administration issued an order to regional heads of the NKVD[2] to send women to industries where their labour was needed, such as sewing, textiles and footwear manufacturing (Applebaum, 2003). Thus, alongside the political objectives of terror, economic factors played a role in women's repression. One of the common political accusations against women was the spread of anti-Soviet agitation and false news. During the war, official information networks were unsettled, and oral news became a significant means of spreading information (Papikyan, 2020).

The ethno-centric approach promoted by the Soviet Empire, which created hierarchies among ethnic groups, produced a specific type of national identity in which women were viewed as the preservers of Armenian culture and identity, thereby limiting their roles. Soviets idealised the heterosexual family and viewed homosexuality as 'a product of the degradation of capitalist society'. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in the 1920s, it was still viewed as a mental illness. In 1933, homosexuality was criminalised again. Throughout the Soviet period, individuals suspected of homosexual behaviour were subjected to forced hospitalisation and experimentation. Moreover, the criminalisation of homosexuality exacerbated hatred towards individuals whose sexuality did not confirm to the gender norms of the time and fostered intolerance (Shahnazaryan et al., 2016).

Armenian women's rights activism transcended geographic borders in pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. During the Soviet period, Armenian women actively participated in the French Resistance during and after WWII and founded the Union of Armenian Women in Paris, led by a novelist and poet known by the pseudonym LAS. Initially operating underground, LAS was arrested and died in a concentration camp; however, her comrades continued the fight. In 1944, they openly organised their first central committee and, in 1947, they established a journal titled *Armenian Woman* (Hai Guine), which was published for two years. The organisation maintained strong ties with Soviet Armenia through correspondence, and the journal functioned as a propaganda tool for the Soviet Union after WWII. Ekmekcioglu (2023) argues that the journal should not be viewed merely as a propaganda tool but as a socialist feminist journal that was 'trans-historical and trans-national in its content'.

[2] The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), which preceded the KGB.

1.3. WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN POST-SOVIET ARMENIA

The post-Soviet women's rights movement in Armenia emerged through NGOs, supported by international organisations and foundations. The landscape of women's rights in the 1990s and 2000s was predominantly shaped by formal NGOs; a pattern also observed in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. However, in the 2010s, diverse feminist groups, initiatives and voices began to slowly emerge. Following the Nagorno–Karabakh war in 2020 and 2023 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which had a profound and shocking impact on the entire population – including feminist activism – the presence of diverse and critical voices became less pronounced. Olya Azatyan, a representative of United Nations (UN) Women Armenia, identifies several waves of women's activism in the country. The 1990s generation of women activists primarily engaged in humanitarian work. In the 2000s, coinciding with Armenia's membership in the Council of Europe, a new generation of activists began to focus on rights-based approaches. From the late 2000s through the 2010s, there was an increasing diversity of women's NGOs, encompassing a range of perspectives from liberal to more radical views, characterised by internal debates and disputes. However, after the Karabakh war, the agenda of civil society as a whole underwent significant revision, with security issues coming to the forefront and feminist activism adapting to the changing priorities.[3] At the same time, in the 2000s, non-formal women's initiatives began to address women's rights issues in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. One such informal group established a resource centre in the building of Yerevan State University. However, the university soon imposed restrictions on their activities, forbidding discussions on topics such as sexuality, sexual health and sexual harassment. As a result, the group was forced to relocate and register as an NGO, naming it the Women's Resource Center (Shahnazaryan, 2011).

Women's rights CSOs, Jilozian (2017) argues, lack the necessary channels to impact government policymaking, whereas anti-gender groups have been successful in influencing legislation and policies regarding gender. Feminist CSOs have had to assume roles and responsibilities that would typically be provided by the state. Additionally, some consider the absence of a strong grassroots movement to be a reason that opponents attack gender equality initiatives as being directed by foreign interests (Fabian, 2021; Jilozian, 2017). An interviewed independent feminist activist views the 'donor-driven agenda' as a limitation of women's rights activism in Armenia, as it fails to fully comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of the issues women face. Most organisations, she argues, focus on specific, narrow issues such as assisting victims of domestic violence and establishing shelters. The primary tactics employed are advocacy, service provision and awareness-raising.

Not all NGOs working on women's rights in Armenia can be classified as feminist, nor do they necessarily embrace notions of gender equality.[4] Independent activists are more critical of mainstream NGOs, suggesting that, despite their significant funding, these organisations do not serve as 'political game-changers'.[5] Despite these critiques, Armenia is home to a diverse range of women's activists and feminist streams. The Nagorno–Karabakh war has significantly impacted Armenian society, including women's rights activism. In the 2010s, Armenia was characterised by vibrant women's rights groups – both formal and informal – representing various ideological perspectives. However, feminist voices became less diverse after the war. One feminist

[3] Interview. Armenia. 27 November 2024.
[4] Interview. Armenia. 24 December 2024.
[5] Interview. Armenia. 24 December 2024.

respondent explained this shift as a result of being 'in a collective state of trauma', which affected people's sense of agency and ability to act. Even before the war, a new dynamic had begun to shape women's rights activism. Following the 2018 Armenian Revolution, even those who were vocal critics of the government became less critical, with fears of the war contributing to a decline in dissenting voices.

1.3.1. ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS IN ARMENIA

The anti-gender movement influences public opinion on gender equality and hinders the adoption of progressive laws and the ratification of international conventions. For example, as a result of campaigns by anti-gender groups, the term 'gender' was removed from legal documents, as seen in the case of the Act on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which was previously known as the Gender Equality Law.

The 2013 anti-gender campaign in Armenia coincided with the country's turn away from the EU. Instead of signing a partnership agreement with the EU, Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Experts argue that gender issues were raised strategically to foster fear and galvanise the conservative public against the EU (Hasratyan et al., 2014). The anti-gender campaign included conferences organised by Russia-backed groups focusing on Eurasian integration and targeting women's rights NGOs. As a result, the EU became increasingly projected as a cultural coloniser seeking to corrupt Armenian traditions (Baker, 2017).

The LGBTQI+ community is marginalised in Armenia, facing discrimination from anti-gender groups and intolerance from the broader public. Targeting LGBTQI+ rights is also part of the anti-West agenda and narrative. A majority of Armenians (72.1%) hold negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ individuals. Furthermore, 18.6% of survey respondents consider homosexuality to be a 'disease', while 12.7% believe that homosexuality is a result of negative influences from Western countries (PINK & CRRC-Armenia, 2016). Against this backdrop of public attitudes, the state fails to provide sufficient legislative protection for LGBTQI+ individuals, who continue to experience intimidation, threats, harassment and violations of their rights (Jilozian, 2017).

1.3.2. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Armenia has adopted and signed key international treaties and human rights norms regarding gender. The constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind, but there is no standalone law specifically targeting gender discrimination. The adoption of the Act on Guaranteeing Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men in 2013 was a significant step forward. However, as noted previously, this law was initially conceived as the Gender Equality Law, but following conservative outcries, the term 'gender' was removed from all related documents. Jilozian (2017) views the law as an example of *de jure* equality, describing it as a 'largely unimplemented law'. Barriers to the full enforcement of the law include scarce budget allocations and the limited capacity of the mechanisms intended to ensure its enforcement.

There are also insufficient legal measures to address early marriage, as individuals between the ages of 16 and 17 are allowed to marry with the permission of their parents or legal guardians. The Armenian constitution defines marriage as a union between a woman and a man, but it does not explicitly prohibit marriage between individuals of the same sex. As a result, in 2019, an

opposition party attempted to propose a bill outlawing same-sex marriage that was rejected by Parliament.

Armenia has laws addressing human trafficking (adopted in 2014) and domestic violence (adopted in 2017). The act on domestic violence focuses on violence prevention, protecting victims of violence within the family and 'restoration of peace in the family'. It includes preventive and protective mechanisms, as well as social assistance if required. The draft law was criticised, and Nikoghosyan (2017) argues that the law that is meant to be a preventive and protective tool was turned into a mechanism for 'family reconciliation between abusers and survivors'.[6] The law has been amended in subsequent years, with amendments addressing the limited definition of domestic violence in the law, the need to increase protection mechanisms for the survivor and challenging the protection of the accused in the name of 'family reconciliation'. A new term was introduced, and instead of husband, the law now broadly addresses a 'partner' as a perpetrator. However, some provisions, such as 'supporting the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society, strengthening traditional values and restoring peace in the family',[7] that are related to traditional values and family harmony remain problematic (UN Women, 2021).

Armenia has not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. The ratification has been blocked by the anti-gender movement, led by ultra-nationalist groups, as in Ukraine and Moldova, and supported by the Armenian Apostolic Church, which has spread disinformation about the Convention (EU4Gender, 2024).

In terms of protecting the LGBTQI+ community, Armenian legislation currently provides only 8% protection for LGBTQI+ rights, sharing the same ranking as Russia (ILGA Europe, 2023). The score is calculated based on 49 European countries' legal and policy practices for LGBTQI+ people, ranked from 0%–100%. The laws and policies that are ranked are divided into seven thematic categories covering equality and non-discrimination, family, hate crime and hate speech, legal gender recognition; intersex bodily integrity; civil society space; and asylum. Although there are some provisions in the law against hate speech to protect minorities, a loophole in the legislation still leaves LGBTQI+ individuals vulnerable and unprotected (IWPR, 2015).

1.3.3. WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING AND POLITICS: SUCCESSFUL GENDER QUOTA POLICIES

The political representation of women in post-Soviet Armenia has shown gradual progress, aligning with the broader literature on women and war that links militarism with male dominance in politics, while the aftermath of conflict often leads to an increase in women's representation (Mohgadam & Goolgasian, 2024). In 1999, women constituted only 3.1% of the Parliament; by 2016, this number had increased to 9.9%. In 2017, the figure rose further to 18.1% and, in 2021, women made up 33.6% of MPs. As of 2023, women's representation in the parliament reached 36.4%, demonstrating significant progress in recent years that has exceeded established quotas. Gender quotas have been established in Armenia for the least represented gender, among electoral candidates, local administrations and the judiciary. However, women still face significant

[6] See: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/paradox-of-armenia-s-domestic-violence-law/
[7] Article 2. Principles for prevention and protection of victims of violence within the family. Act on Prevention of Violence within the Family, Protection of victims of violence within the family and restoration of peace in the family.

underrepresentation in higher decision-making positions. In 1999, Armenia introduced a 5% electoral quota, 20% in 2011, 25% in 2016 and 30% in 2020. By the end of 2024 there were eleven male and four female ministers – the Minister of Health, the Interior Minister, Justice Minister and the Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport (EU4Gender, 2024). In addition, the Public Defender and Prosecutor General are also women.

While some experts interviewed regard the increased political representation of women as a significant achievement, arguing that it 'at least creates some kinds of experience' and allows women to see others in political roles, others highlight the limitations of such representation.[8] They contend that gender representation alone is insufficient to fulfil feminist objectives, emphasising that it must be accompanied by feminist political consciousness. As one respondent pointed out, 'Women are there, but women's questions aren't there'. [9]

An environmental activist further raised concerns that women in political positions may still uphold existing systems of power that do not align with feminist principles, questioning the potential contradictions of the female Minister of Interior: 'When I, as an activist, go out on the streets fighting for environmental causes and against exploitation, will she, like other men, deploy police officers to defend the rights of businesses?'[10]

The political parties, being the main gatekeepers to entry into politics, lack gender sensitivity and do not develop gender policies (Martirosyan, 2021). In the civil service, while women make up the majority (54%) of civil servants, only 17% occupy the highest level civil service posts due to vertical segregation of labour (UN Women, 2022). Women's participation in decision making at the local administrative level is quite low, especially in rural communities. For example, although women comprise 50% of the staff in Yerevan municipality, no women are represented as deputies of Yerevan's city mayor. Overall, only 6% of the deputy heads of communities are women (EU4Gender, 2024).

A study on public attitudes reveals that societal views on women's role in executive positions are divided. People are more likely to envision women as deputy ministers (68%) or ministers (64%), whereas less than half of Armenians (46%) can see a woman as prime minister (OxYgen, 2020). Women are more likely to favour gender equality in politics than men. Over half of male respondents (53%) think that men make better political leaders, while 44% of women agree with this statement. Conversely, 47% of women believe that there is no difference between men and women as political leaders (Onyshchenko et al., 2022). The gender discrepancy in political leadership is asymmetrical to the gender distribution of voting participants; the majority of voters are women (54.97%) compared to 45.04% of men (OxYgen, 2022). Among female voters, those aged 50–65 are the most active participants in elections, and employed women are also more active participants in the electoral process (OxYgen, 2022).

1.3.4. WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS: LOW RATES OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN THE FORMAL LABOUR MARKET

The economic sphere, like political representation, is significantly gendered in Armenia. Fifty-two percent of women are economically inactive compared to 29% of men, meaning they are neither

[8] Interview. Armenia. 27 November 2024.
[9] Interview. Armenia. 27 November 2024.
[10] Interview. Armenia. 24 December 2024.

employed nor actively seeking employment (ARMSTAT, 2023). This issue is particularly alarming among women in the 25–49 age group. In 2022, 40% of women in this age range were outside the labour force, compared to just 10.9% of men in the same age group (ARMSTAT, 2023). In 2022, the overall gender gap in labour force participation between men and women was 32.3%, with the gap especially pronounced among 25–34-year-olds, at 41% (ARMSTAT, 2023). The high gender discrepancy in employment during women's reproductive years points to structural factors such as parental leave, compensation, availability of preschool education, gender-sensitive labour markets and the gender division of labour. Women are disproportionately engaged in unpaid household activities, resulting in economic inactivity and, when employed, increased time poverty. Women spend 58.5 hours per week on unpaid household work, while men spend just 28.4 hours (UN Women, 2022). Although the time spent on household work varies depending on women's employment status, this is not the case for men. Whether employed or not, men spend almost the same amount of time on household tasks, which is consistently less than women do. The labour code also reinforces the unequal division of care work. While women are entitled to 140 days of paid maternity leave and up to three years of unpaid leave, men are entitled to only five days of paternity leave (EU4Gender, 2024). Subjective factors such as marital status, education, geographic location and family structure also influence women's labour force participation. For instance, 70% of married men are employed, compared to just 43% of married women (ARMSTAT, 2023). Similar patterns of low labour force participation in the formal economy among women can be observed in other countries as well, which are the subject of this study.

The gender gap in young individuals who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is more pronounced in rural areas, with 45% of women being NEET, compared to only 19% of men. The gender gap is also evident in informal employment, where 63% of informal workers are men, compared to 37% women (ARMSTAT, 2023). There is both horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labour market, favouring men. Vertical segregation refers to the disparity in positions held by men and women. For example, 83% of employers are men, while only 17% are women (EU4Gender, 2024). Similarly, women are underrepresented as business owners.

The gender wage gap remains a critical issue. Employed women's monthly salary is about 39.2% of men's salary. In 2002, women's wages constituted approximately 45% of men's wages, resulting in a 55% gender pay gap (Ishkanian, 2002). By 2018, the gap had decreased to 35.3%, but by 2023, it had increased again, with women's earnings amounting to only 60.8% of men's earnings, meaning the gender pay gap stands at 39.2% (ARMSTAT, 2023).

Migration in Armenia, as in other post-Soviet countries, is driven by poverty, unemployment and a sense of hopelessness in the post-Soviet period (Ishkanian, 2002). However, unlike other post-Soviet countries, migration in Armenia has been shaped by the diasporic nature of Armenian life, which facilitated and normalised general emigration and particularly labour migration. In the 1990s, over 500000 Armenians left the country following the crisis after independence. The main destinations for emigration since the 1990s have been Russia, the United States, France, Canada, Germany and Ukraine. Until 1997, men were more likely to emigrate as wage labourers, but by the end of the 1990s, women began to emigrate as well, joining the global labour force as domestic and care workers (Ishkanian, 2002).

1.3.5. WOMEN'S HEALTH: ACCESS, DISCRIMINATION AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The state of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) remains a significant challenge in Armenia. While women have the right to abortion, the mandatory three-day waiting period before requesting an abortion can hinder access, particularly for women in vulnerable circumstances, adding additional psychological pressure. Abortion, rather than contraceptive use, remains the most common method of family planning in Armenia. In fact, nearly half of women (47%) in Armenia report having terminated a pregnancy at some point in their lives (Osipov & Sargizova, 2016; EU4Gender, 2024). Abortion rates are notably higher among women in rural areas, being twice as high as for women in urban areas. Contraceptive use also differs between urban and rural areas, with people in rural areas more likely to rely on traditional methods. There are also gender differences in opinions on abortion, with 18% of men believing that abortion is not a woman's choice, compared to only 9% of women sharing this view (Onyshchenko et al. – UNFPA & UN Women, 2022). However, overall, the majority of men and women support women having more freedom of choice regarding abortion.

The most common age for women to become pregnant is between 18 and 21 years, with adolescent pregnancies (18–19 years old) particularly common in Armenia (EU4Gender, 2024). Adolescent pregnancy carries serious health, social and economic consequences. Contributing structural factors include the inaccessibility of contraceptives, a lack of agency or resources to obtain them and a lack of awareness. Almost 19% of women report being physically or sexually abused during pregnancy (EU4Gender, 2024).

Women from marginalised backgrounds, such as those living with HIV, disabilities or as part of the LGBTQI+ community, often face discriminatory attitudes from healthcare providers.
This discrimination reduces the willingness of women from vulnerable backgrounds to seek healthcare, preventing them from realising their right to healthcare. Furthermore, women from marginalised groups often lack access to essential gynaecological care due to structural barriers that the state fails to address. For instance, the state does not ensure equal provision of health services in rural areas or guarantee adequate and ongoing SRHR training for healthcare workers.

1.3.6. VIOLENCE, WAR AND WOMEN

Violence against women, both offline and online, remains a critical issue in Armenia. Over 700 cases of domestic violence are reported each year, and women's organisations receive approximately 3000 hotline calls (EU4Gender, 2024). There has been an acceptance of violence against women, reflecting deeply rooted patriarchal norms and societal attitudes, with over one-third of survey respondents stating that women should tolerate violence (Osipov & Sargizova, 2016, cited in Jilozian, 2017). A majority of women (67%) do not take steps to protect themselves from domestic violence (ARMSTAT, p. 61). According to a 2010 survey by the National Statistics Service of Armenia, 43% of women who had been physically or sexually abused by their partner stayed silent about their experiences, and 77% of those who had been abused continued living with their abuser (ARMSTAT, 2010). However, public attitudes have shifted in recent years. A 2023 study revealed that most women would seek help from women's organisations if they faced violence (Socioscope, 2023). After the Velvet Revolution, the government made significant progress in combatting domestic violence, establishing the Domestic Violence Council in 2018. In 2019, decrees were signed to open more shelters, crisis centres, develop protocols and ensure

financial support for survivors (EU4Gender, 2024). However, there are no national laws or regulations to protect individuals from online gender-based violence (GBV).

Gender has been a fundamental yet often overlooked dimension of post-conflict society. The 44-day Nagorno–Karabakh War, followed by the mass displacement of Armenians, has significantly impacted the situation of women and girls. The war unfolded in three episodes: the conflict in 2020, an attack in 2022 and mass displacement in 2023. A needs assessment conducted among forcibly displaced women revealed that most displaced women live with relatives or friends in large households, and many women with disabilities assess their conditions as inconvenient. Seventy-two per cent of displaced women are unemployed, with 60% actively seeking jobs (Agate, 2023).

Due to the regional wars since the 1990s, peacebuilding has been a key focus for women's organisations in Armenia; however, women have largely been excluded from high-level diplomatic negotiations (Tatikyan, 2022). Notably, in 2020, the National Security Strategy of Armenia acknowledged the low level of women's engagement, citing it as a failure to 'fully utilize the human capital towards national security and development' (NSSRA, 2020, cited in Tatikyan, 2022). The perspectives of women's rights activists on peace and security have faced criticism from the conservative opposition, who view democracy, human rights and pacifism as hindrances to national security and the 'immunity of the nation' (Tatikyan, 2022). After the 2020 war, women's views on peace and security also shifted as many became disillusioned with established peacebuilding activities. Opinions became divided in which some women activists considered making concessions Armenia's only option, while others argued that it was insufficient to trust the peace process.

The war also changed how Armenians perceived the country's primary grievances. As one activist interviewee put it, 'The war broke the hearts of people and changed the whole feminist landscape. Priorities have shifted, as there is now a huge need for survival – just physical survival – and for processing grief'.[11] Before the war, unemployment and poverty, followed by territorial conflicts, were considered the main issues facing Armenia (OxYgen, 2022). After the war, security concerns and war-related issues overshadowed unemployment. There is a notable gender difference in priorities, with women more likely to consider unemployment the main problem (33%) compared to 25% of men. Issues like 'unresolved territorial conflicts' and 'lack of peace' also reveal gendered differences. Territorial conflicts are seen as a problem by 14% of men compared to 8% of women, and the lack of peace is considered the most important issue by 10% of men versus 6% of women (OxYgen, 2022). Women are more likely to view social issues as most pertinent. However, these two dimensions – security and economic insecurity – should not be separated, and it seems that women understand the importance of both. While the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict shifted Armenia's foreign policy towards security concerns, it had specific gendered impacts, with economic insecurity as one of the key consequences of the war.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of women's rights movements in Armenia demonstrates how Armenian women have persistently asserted their presence in the public sphere. While the 19th-century movement was

[11] Interview. Armenia. 24 December 2024.

intertwined with the emergence of the modern public sphere and nationalism, the post-Soviet period saw the institutionalisation of women's activism through NGOs, often shaped by donor agendas. The emergence of critical and diverse feminist voices, particularly in the 2010s, marked an important phase in broadening the scope of activism and reclaiming agency. However, the women's rights movement has faced increasing challenges from anti-gender politics, echoing similar developments in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, where the language of tradition and sovereignty is weaponised to resist or erode advances in women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Armenia's legal and institutional commitments to gender equality, though formally aligned with international frameworks, reveal significant implementation gaps. The introduction of gender quotas has led to gradual and impressive increases in women's political participation, but this has not consistently translated into feminist policymaking, as women in political positions may still uphold systems of power that do not align with feminist principles. Structural inequalities, historical legacies and recent socio-political upheavals continue to shape women's lived experiences. Limited participation in the formal labour market, coupled with disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities and discriminatory labour policies, underscores persistent barriers to economic rights. In the sphere of health, rural–urban disparities, patriarchal norms and inadequate public provision, particularly affect marginalised women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. Violence against women, both offline and online, remains widespread, despite recent institutional reforms. Finally, gender has been a fundamental yet often overlooked dimension of post-conflict society in the aftermath of the Nagorno–Karabakh war, marked by mass displacement, growing economic insecurity, the rise of militarised masculinity and women's exclusion from peacebuilding processes. Respondents note a decline in dissenting voices as a consequence of the war, which also reshaped public perceptions of the country's primary grievances.

CHAPTER 2. WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN GEORGIA

2.1. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN GEORGIA UNDER TSARIST RUSSIA AND DURING THE PERIOD OF INDEPENDENCE (1918–1921)

The pre-Soviet period encompasses both Tsarist rule, which lasted until 1917, and the brief period of Georgian independence. Although the 1917 Revolution brought about a significant political rupture, followed by Georgia's short-lived independence from 1918 to 1921, women's activism during the pre-Soviet era remained relatively continuous in many respects. The emergence of women in the public sphere in 19th-century Georgia must be understood within the context of Russian colonialism and the Georgian anti-colonial response. Under Tsarist rule, the Georgian language was relegated to a subordinate status, and there were attempts at cultural assimilation. For example, 19th-century Georgian lawyer and politician Nino Kipiani, one of the women activists, recalls that Georgian students were punished for speaking their native language in school; furthermore, Russian public servants referred to Georgian as a 'dog's language' (Gaprindashvili, 2016). Print media became a key form of resistance against Russian assimilation policies, creating a space for Georgian writers to defend their language and culture. Despite facing opposition from some male writers, women such as Barbare Jorjadze published their works and contributed to this cultural resistance.

The right to education was one of the paramount issues that women in Georgia advocated for. Georgian writer Ekaterine Gabashvili significantly advanced this struggle. Prior to her efforts, the 'Society for the Advancement of Literacy among Georgians' was established in 1879 to confront Tsarist Russia's assimilationist policies. While the initial board members were predominantly men, women actively participated in literacy initiatives. For example, as early as 1874, two Georgian women founded schools for girls in the regions of Akhaltsikhe and Khovle (Gaprindashvili, 2016).

In the 1880s, many women who were active in various social spheres joined the Society for the Advancement of Literacy. This organisation encouraged the translation of foreign literature into Georgian, introduced modern thinkers to the Georgian public and facilitated the establishment of schools. However, girls' education was not equally prioritised compared to that of boys. In response, Georgian writer Ekaterine Gabashvili took steps to establish a women's professional school. The alumnae of this school later founded additional schools for girls across various regions of Georgia (Gaprindashvili, 2017). Despite women's contributions to the Society's efforts to disseminate literacy, no women are represented on the monument dedicated to the Society for the Advancement of Literacy in Tbilisi.

Women played vital roles in establishing regional branches of the Society, training teachers, preparing textbooks and opening reading rooms. Beginning in 1900, the Society opened regional branches, five of which were administered by women. One notable branch was established in Yerevan, Armenia, under the supervision of Tamar Tsitsishvili-Vachnadze. This illustrates parallel developments in women's rights activism in Georgia and Armenia. For example, Armenian women established schools for Armenian girls in Tbilisi during the pre-Soviet period. Moreover, it is important to consider the exchanges, solidarities and collaborations among various groups in the Caucasus. The 'Society of Women in the Caucasus', established in 1913, exemplifies such intersections.

In the 19th century, women's writing began to appear in print media, publishing both fiction and non-fiction works and engaging in discussions about education and enlightenment. According to the interviewed expert, feminist writer Tamta Melahsvili's writing served as a form of women's activism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[12] Women in pre-Soviet Georgia explored feminist themes such as personal freedom, love, male dominance and practices that deprived women of their rights. For example, in 1893, Georgian writer Barbare Eristavi-Jorjadze published an essay considered by contemporary feminists to be a feminist manifesto, titled 'Remarks to draw the attention of young men', in which she sharply criticised male dominance and restrictions on women's access to education (Jorjadze, 1893). Similarly, Ekaterine Gabashvili, a writer and educator, challenged the patriarchal foundations of Georgian society in her stories. Thus, the climate surrounding women's rights and the issues women faced at the margins of the 19th and 20th centuries is reflected in women's fiction writing, which addresses topics such as women's social rights, education, early marriages, abortion, trafficking, sex work and sexually transmitted diseases. Tskipurishvili (2021) argues that although these works are fictional the authors wrote with the intent of fostering social change and shifting the attitudes and behaviours of patriarchal society.

Women's rights activism in Georgia (as well as in Armenia and Ukraine) did not develop in isolation but was part of the global women's movement. By the end of the 19th century, John Stuart Mill was

[12] Interview. Georgia. 12 December 2024.

inspired by his female colleague, Harriet Taylor Mill, with whom he co-authored works on domestic violence, women's political rights and other issues concerning women's emancipation. Georgian women's rights activists engaged with these ideas, reading both Mill's works in Georgian and some in English. For instance, Harriet Taylor Mill's 'Enfranchisement of women' was translated into Georgian and inspired women like Ekaterine Gabashvili to mobilise others. She established women's circles in various cities throughout Georgia, aiming to empower women to publish their writings and engage in translation. As Gaprindashvili (2017) notes, Ekaterine Gabashvili encouraged her friend to publish an excerpt she had translated from Elizabeth Fries Lummis Ellet's 'The women of the American Revolution'.

The emergence of women in the public sphere and their efforts to advocate for their rights in 19th-century Georgia encountered significant backlash. Both women's rights advocacy and the subsequent backlash in Georgia often mirrored the arguments voiced in the West. Some Georgian male writers criticised women for daring to aspire to 'become doctors [or] professors', instead suggesting they should 'become mothers', lamenting what they viewed as women's 'destruction' (Kezeli, 1882). Men employed arguments about women's inherent inferiority, attempting to support their claims with 'scientific' knowledge that drew connections between women's brains and their ability to bear children. This discourse echoed the discussions Mary Wollstonecraft faced in the West regarding the causal misjudgements linking intelligence and gender. Georgian women were not passive recipients of criticism; they demonstrated their agency by responding assertively to such critiques. Kato Mikeladze, a prominent Georgian women's rights activist and politician, responded as follows: *'*Science shows that the causes of economic and political inequality do not result from inequality in ability or intelligence. It is the other way around. Because of existing economic and political inequalities, there are inequalities in abilities*'* (Gaprindashvili, 2017). There are also instances in which women collectively wrote letters to debunk arguments posed by men.

Georgian women's rights activists were influenced by the global women's movement in three significant ways. First, they engaged with and translated Western literature that promoted women's rights. Second, some activists studied abroad, gaining exposure to European women's movements. Mikeladze was one such activist, who studied in Moscow, Brussels and Paris. Upon her return to Georgia, Mikeladze established the first feminist newspaper, *The Voice of Georgian* W*omen*, which addressed pertinent issues related to women's rights. Finally, the influence of Enlightenment philosophers and authors, many of whose works were translated into Georgian, is evident in Georgian women's writing and activism.

In the early 20th century, Georgian women were actively writing and voicing their concerns regarding women's political rights. Their strategies differed from those of their contemporaries in Europe and Russia. While Alexandra Kollontai in Russia focused on mobilising women factory workers rather than advocating for women's suffrage – believing that revolution was the key to addressing the marginalised populations' grievances (Kollontai, 1920), despite lacking a sovereign state to fight for suffrage, Georgian women engaged in political processes. They established the 'Georgian Women's Union for Equal Rights' and sent representatives to the Third Conference of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1906 in Copenhagen (Beraia, 2017a).

After the Russian Revolution, with Georgia gaining independence in 1918, women began actively discussing political representation. Mikeladze (1917) was at the forefront of this struggle, arguing, *'*We are fighting against those wretched conditions in which we grow up and live, which threaten us

[as women] with exclusion from humanity*'* (p.137). Mikeladze's *The Voice of a Georgian Woman*, was published from 1917 to 1918 and aimed to raise political awareness among women and support their participation in public life. The newspaper reflects the ideological diversity of pre-Soviet feminist activism in Georgia, encompassing both liberal and socialist feminist perspectives (Melashvili, 2014). In 1918, when Georgia gained independence, Georgian women were granted the right to vote and to be elected. In the first parliament, which comprised of 130 members, five were women. Tragically, two of them were killed by Bolsheviks, and two others were deported. The fifth woman was imprisoned several times before eventually being released (Gaprindashvili, 2017). The main allegations against some of them included creating anti-Soviet propaganda or having links to the Mensheviks. For the Georgian experiment of the First Republic, it was crucial to build democracy from the grassroots level, leading to the establishment of 'village societies'. In 1918, a Muslim woman from the Azerbaijani-speaking population ran as an independent candidate, competing against candidates from established political parties. She won and is regarded as one of the first democratically elected Muslim women (Dunbar, 2018). If we envision feminism, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman described, as 'a dream of a different future' (Delap, 2020), this aspiration was also shared by Georgian feminists from the 1880s to the 1920s, albeit along distinct paths. Each feminist trajectory, or 'mosaic', has its own unique pattern (Delap, 2020) and contributes to the broader narrative of feminism's global history.

2.2. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

The Soviet discourse on women's rights undermined the herstories of women's activism during the pre-Soviet period, effectively depriving women of their agency (Gaprindashvili, 2017). This discourse constructed pervasive binaries such as modern–backward and civilised–uncivilised, positioning the Soviet narrative on the progressive side of history as a combination of modern and civilised. Soviet authorities set out to liberate peripheral populations from the grip of premodern darkness and to create the New Soviet Wo/Man (Barkaia, 2017). The label backward was particularly consistently used to describe minority Muslim women in Georgia, with publications referring to them as the 'backward child of the East' (Barkaia, 2017). By insisting on difference, Soviet ideologues employed stark contrasts between the pre-Soviet past and the Soviet Union. Consequently, the progressive elements of women's activism in the pre-Soviet period were overlooked, as acknowledging them would undermine the absolute dichotomy between Soviet and pre-Soviet periods.

The lives of women in rural Soviet Georgia were marked by additional challenges, particularly during the tumultuous 1930s. As forced collectivisation reached its peak, there were 13754 documented cases of peasant protests, 3712 of which were led by women (Bekishvili, 2017). This decade was characterised by widespread deportations and repression, and by the 1940s, the population of men had significantly decreased due to military service, deportation or repression. The experiences of women in rural Georgia must be understood against this backdrop. They faced a dual burden, managing responsibilities towards their families while also contributing their labour to collective farms, which were essential to the state. Collected oral histories reveal the hardships of women in rural Georgia, who often bore multiple children and managed household responsibilities alone, as well as troubling instances of sexual violence perpetrated by the heads of

collective farms (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*) (Bekishvili, 2017).[13] The latter exploited women's vulnerability during the war, particularly as they were often left alone and in need of basic provisions. Interestingly, the elderly women who accounted these oral histories spent most of their lives within the Soviet context, narrating their experiences from that perspective, and they tended to view events such as deportation, war, collectivisation and repression as inevitable.
They expressed little belief in the possibility of resistance, perceiving these occurrences as decisions made by authorities beyond their control (Bekishvili, 2017). This allowed respondents to cope with the darker aspects of their life histories. This perspective creates a distinction between the Soviet system and individual agency, responsibility and accountability. While the respondents hold the Soviet system liable for its wrongdoings, they often absolve individual perpetrators and society of responsibility.

In the 1930s, the Georgian Writers Union was established, yet among its 78 members, only eight were women. Some pre-Soviet feminist writers, such as Ekaterine Gabashvili, who had previously addressed significant issues concerning women's rights, found themselves relegated to writing children's books during the Soviet period. Another notable pre-Soviet women's rights activist, politician and writer, Mikeladze, was excluded from the Writers Union and spent her final years in poverty (Gaprindashvili, 2017).

2.3. WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA

The gender transformation in post-Soviet Georgia must be understood within the context of the political landscape and civil society emerging during this period. As in other countries examined in this study, women's rights activism in Georgia emerged in the 1990s primarily through NGO engagement. As feminist philosopher Tamar Tskhadadze notes, during this period, NGOs were one of the few sources of employment amidst the widespread unemployment of that time.[14]
The first generation of post-Soviet women's rights activists primarily focused on legislative changes, placing less emphasis on mobilising popular support (Melashvili, 2014). They were less inclined to identify themselves as feminists.[15] These pioneers played a significant role in drafting and adopting important legislation, such as the Domestic Violence Law (Sabedashvili, 2011). Since the 2000s, women's activism has been increasingly motivated by feminist values and principles, although it has still largely remained within the NGO framework. However, by the 2010s, feminist activism expanded beyond the NGO sector, taking on various forms, including both formal organisations and informal, non-registered groups. Among the informal groups were the Independent Group of Feminists and Partisan Girls. Vadatchkoria (2018) identifies four types of organisations and groups addressing women's issues in Georgia based on interviews with feminist activists: a) Formal NGOs engaged in contentious politics, formal NGOs not involved in contentious politics, non-formal groups, such as the women's movement and non-formal radical groups that are not mainstream in feminist activism. Each of these groups has its own niche and pathway to contributing to gender equality in Georgia. The significance and impact of different forms of activism vary depending on the political context. While ensuring legal mechanisms for

[13] Kolkhoz refers to the collective farm in the Soviet Union, where farmers jointly worked and shared resources but were required to meet state production quotas. Sovkhoz refers to the state-owned farm where workers were salaried employees.
[14] Interview. Georgia. 6 January 2025.
[15] Interview. Georgia. 12 December 2024.

gender equality has been crucial, the current political situation in Georgia – where previous legal gains are under threat – demonstrates the equal importance of other forms of feminist activism.

The introduction of gender equality issues into academia and the establishment of a Gender Studies programme at Tbilisi State University in 2006 played a crucial role in the development of feminist principles and the emergence of a new generation of women's activists. This programme, one of the first of its kind in the post-Soviet world, significantly contributed to the development of local knowledge on women's rights and encouraged scholarship on these issues. Additionally, international exposure through study programmes and the globalised flow of information, including on feminism, fostered the emergence of a new type of public discourse.

Alongside the evolution of women's activism throughout the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, the issues addressed also shifted. In the 1990s, activism was more focused on humanitarian concerns and primarily addressing gender stereotypes and perceptions. In the 2000s, violence against women became the central issue, driven by internal factors, such as societal receptiveness to discussions on gender inequality, and external influences, such as legal reforms and targeted funding. From the second half of the 2010s, the scope of issues expanded to include economic justice.

A key strategy among post-Soviet feminists in Georgia has been to reconnect with their feminist predecessors from the pre-Soviet period (Vadatchkoria, 2018). According to respondents, this approach has been less commonly employed strategy in Armenia and Moldova. As more women became involved in feminist activism and local scholars emerged within academia, they initiated a search for local agency. They highlighted the discrepancies between the actual needs of women in Georgia and the agendas of international donors, which often guided the working themes of local organisations but sometimes overlooked the most pressing issues facing women (Melashvili, 2014; Japaridze, 2012). Similarly, NGO-based activists began to reconsider international funding politics as they faced resource scarcity, revealing the disproportionate distribution of funding and lamenting the constant precarious conditions under which they have operated due to ongoing instability (Rusetskaia & Khomeriki, 2024).

Earlier attempts to mobilise Georgian women into a cohesive movement had been top-down, facilitated by various international donors through coalitions (Melashvili, 2014). In contrast, the 2010s marked the emergence of a grassroots movement. A pivotal moment for the women's movement in post-Soviet Georgia occurred in 2014, sparked by responses to femicide. This led to the formation of the 'Georgian Women's Movement', which introduced a new dimension to women's activism in the country and became the largest feminist group to date (Melashvili, 2014). The Movement placed a strong emphasis on legal reforms related to gender quotas and violence against women, aligning more closely with liberal feminist ideology.

The women's movement of the 2010s was notably diverse in terms of form, ideology and strategies. This era saw the emergence of independent, informal feminist initiatives characterised by non-hierarchical organisational structures. A significant aspect of activism during this period was a generational shift in which the new generation of activists openly identified as feminists, contrasting with the older generation, who often preferred the label of women's rights activists (Beraia, 2017b). This led to spirited discussions among feminists from different ideological streams. However, by the end of the 2010s, particularly in 2020, ideological differences ceased to dominate the feminist discourse.

The second generation of feminist activists frequently engages in both women's and LGBTQI+ rights advocacy. A defining moment for the LGBTQI+ movement in Georgia occurred on 17 May 2013, when activists gathered to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia on Freedom Square, resulting in unprecedented violence against them (Rekhviashvili, 2017). Since that day, the LGBTQI+ movement in Georgia has developed along two main perspectives. The first group prioritises visibility as the primary instrument of their struggle, with organising Pride events as a key objective. The second group comprises organisations and individuals who emphasise intersectional and multifaceted strategies, including research, community activism and service provision. In 2018, the latter group chose not to participate in Pride events. However, in 2024, an election year where LGBTQI+ rights issues became central to the ruling party's agenda, fostering hatred towards the community, LGBTQI+ organisations decided not to hold the Pride event. This decision was made to avoid contributing to the ruling party's anti-gender pre-election campaign.

2.3.1. ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS: SHIFTS IN POLITICAL RHETORIC

In post-Soviet Georgia, various anti-egalitarian actors have been present, including the Church, far-right political parties and non-party actors, such as certain media channels. However, since 2021, a notable shift has occurred in the landscape of the anti-egalitarian agenda (Tskhadadze & Barkaia, 2023). After Irakli Garibashvili was reappointed as prime minister in 2021, the GD party, which had previously adhered to a more liberal framework, began shifting towards conservatism. However, populist elements were present in GD's rhetoric from the outset, coexisting alongside its liberal stance. Therefore, Georgia's recent embrace of conservative populist patterns is not entirely novel (Tskhadadze & Barkaia, 2023). While GD previously outsourced much of its far-right rhetoric, particularly anti-genderism, to far-right groups and satellite parties, since 2021, the ruling party has begun to mainstream anti-genderism and some elements of populism and, by 2024, GD has fully embraced anti-egalitarian rhetoric. In its attempt to maintain its grip on power, GD aims to create an emotionally charged collective identity among the population, as it can no longer afford to share potential electoral support with satellite parties. Anti-genderism has served as a tool to justify Georgia's shifting geopolitical orientation. It is not coincidental that much of the gender-related disinformation has targeted the West and predominantly taken the form of homophobic narratives (MDF, 2024).

LGBTQI+ rights in Georgia have become a central battleground for far-right populists' anti-gender campaigns. During the early years of the GD government, the inclusion of LGBTQI+ rights in the national human rights action plan and the Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination represented a progressive step towards ensuring equality as it provided activists with a legal framework for advocacy. However, the reappointment of Garibashvili as prime minister, and particularly 2023–2024 anti-egalitarian legislative initiatives, marked a significant policy shift. The government no longer acts as an impartial arbiter but instead openly aligns itself against the LGBTQI+ community. By 2023, LGBTQI+ issues were entirely removed from the human rights action plan, signalling a clear reversal of earlier commitments. The GD has taken a significant and unprecedented step in recent Georgian politics by leading a homophobic pre-election campaign. This marks a departure from the earlier approach, where hate language and anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric, similar to anti-gender discourse, were largely outsourced to far-right groups or satellite parties. On 17 September 2024, the Georgian parliament adopted an anti-LGBTQI+ legislative package, which consists of the bill 'On Protection of Family Values and Minors', which directly

targets the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQI+ community. In 2025, the GD adopted a bill that removed the term ‘gender’ from the legislation and abolished Gender Equality Councils at parliament and municipality levels. The long-term harm and ramifications of this shift on the women’s movement need to be carefully analysed and understood.

2.3.2. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Until 2022, Georgia was gradually making progressive steps towards achieving gender equality. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country committed to upholding human rights and gender equality, becoming a party to key international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, ratified in 1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (adopted in 1995), the Istanbul Convention (ratified in 2017) and the Generation Equality Forum (launched in 2021). The Istanbul Convention is a comprehensive international treaty aimed at combating violence against women and domestic violence. Following its ratification, Georgia was expected to accelerate its efforts to strengthen its legislative framework to align with the provisions of the Convention. In 2017, Georgia was one of the first countries among those examined in this study to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Although the ratification process faced opposition from marginal far-right groups, the resistance was not strong enough to prevent its adoption.

At the national level significant steps were taken to establish a legal framework promoting gender equality since the independence. In 2004, the government formed the Gender Equality Advisory Council under the Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia. In 2006, two critical laws were adopted: the Act on Fighting against Human Trafficking and the Act on Elimination of Domestic Violence, Protection, and Assistance to Domestic Violence Victims. Further advancements came in 2010 when the Act on Gender Equality was enacted, ensuring more comprehensive legal protections.

Throughout the 2010s, Georgia continued to improve its legal framework on gender issues. The Labour Code was amended to provide stronger rights regarding maternity leave and protection against workplace discrimination. Additionally, the Act on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (2014) reinforced Georgia’s commitment to gender equality, further embedding these values into national legislation. The law prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. It is a nuanced piece of legislation, establishing definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, as well as ‘multiple discrimination’. Most importantly, the law imposes an obligation on every legal entity, both private and public (UN Women, 2023). However, overall progress is now at risk due to recent shifts towards authoritarianism and conservative populism that threatens to undermine the advances made in the past three decades. For instance, in September 2024, the GD adopted a law targeting the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQI+ community. Under the guise of family protection and prohibition of propaganda in the educational system and public spaces, the law imposes legal restrictions that limit the dissemination of information related to LGBTQI+ issues at public gatherings or in the workplace. The alignment of Georgia’s anti-gender legislation with global anti-gender movements began as early as 2017, when, mirroring Hungary’s constitutional amendment defining marriage exclusively as ‘the union of a man and a woman’, Georgia adopted a similar provision in its constitution.

Due to the authoritarian turn and the rise of anti-gender politics, these setbacks have now escalated into a heightened threat to Georgia’s relatively well-established national gender equality

framework. The framework includes the Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women, and Domestic Violence, which serves as a key institutional mechanism to ensure national coordination of gender equality policymaking and implementation. Additionally, the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia has maintained a dedicated Gender Equality Department since 2013. Another institutional mechanism was the permanent Gender Equality Council of the Parliament, tasked with overseeing and safeguarding gender equality in the country. However, in 2025 the one-party GD parliament approved a bill that abolished provisions mandating the establishment of Gender Equality Councils within the parliament and municipal representative bodies. The bill also removed the term 'gender' from Georgian legislation, renaming the Law on Gender Equality to the Act on Equality between Women and Men. The bill's explanatory note states, 'Alongside biological sex, the artificial term 'gender' was deliberately introduced into Georgian legislation through active lobbying of foreign influences and their representatives'.[16]

2.3.3. WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING AND POLITICS: PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND THE IMPACT OF GENDER QUOTAS

Women's representation in decision making has been gradually increasing in post-Soviet Georgia, reaching a peak with the implementation of 25% quotas for the least represented gender in 2020. However, in 2024, the Parliament of Georgia abolished mandatory gender quotas. This marked a reversal of the positive trend that followed the introduction of quotas in 2020. 2024 polls show that the majority of Georgians continue to support the implementation of mandatory quotas. Women's presence in the parliament and executive bodies remains lower compared to other examined countries and the global average. Women comprised nearly 7% of the Georgian Parliament in 1995, and men 93%; a figure that remained steady until 1999. In the following years, women's representation hovered around 10%, men's at around 90, but after the number of seats was reduced from 235 to 150 in 2008, women's representation dropped to 6%, increasing men's to 94 (Chkhaidze, 2017). In 2012, the percentage of women in Parliament nearly doubled, reflecting a positive trend. Although it was driven by political changes that brought the new coalition government into power rather than intentional gender measures.

Gender quotas were introduced in Georgia in 2020 for parliamentary and local elections. The 25% quota for proportional party lists required that for every four candidates, at least one had to be of the opposite sex. Gender quotas have played a significant role in enhancing women's political participation in Georgia, leading to an increase in both the number of female candidates and the proportion of women elected to Parliament. By 2023, women accounted for 19% of Members of Parliament, up from 14% in 2019 (UN Woman, 2024). The introduction of quotas also led to an increase in the number of women elected to local self-government bodies, from 13.8% in 2017 to 24% in 2021 (UN Women, 2024). At the local council level, a 50% gender quota mechanism was initially introduced in 2020 but was later replaced in 2021 with a new rule: one candidate of the opposite sex for every three candidates. Interestingly, 63% of Georgia's population believes that greater involvement of women in politics would benefit the country (UN Women & CRRC Georgia, 2025).

Female politicians in Georgia are three times more likely to experience gender disinformation compared to their male counterparts. This disinformation includes tactics such as blackmail,

[16] See: https://jam-news.net/georgian-parliament-backs-removal-of-term-gender-from-legislation-in-first-reading/

threats to release intimate content, posts inciting violence against women, cyberstalking and the spread of sexual content intended to discredit them. Gender disinformation differs from general disinformation by violating women's personal boundaries and encouraging sexual and physical violence (CRRC, 2021). Gender disinformation not only discourages women from public political

engagement but also instrumentalises gender narratives and women for political purposes (Pataraia, 2024).

2.3.4. WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS: EXCLUSION FROM THE LABOUR FORCE

In post-Soviet Georgia, poverty remains a critical problem and is especially pronounced among the rural population, people with disabilities and girls. An illustration of this is that every fourth girl lives in a poor household (UN Women, 2024). Women living in rural areas mainly work to survive rather than accumulate any kind of revenue as they face barriers in accessing financial or other types of resources. Women still do manual labour and do not have access to technology and heavy machinery. The work that women in rural areas carry out is extremely burdensome, resulting in the deterioration of their health while earning exceptionally low profits. This poses additional challenges to women from ethnic minorities, who are either beyond the labour force or, if employed, in low-skilled manual labour (Shalvashvili, 2021).

In Georgia, women are less likely than men to be employed, but they are also less likely to identify as 'unemployed'. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that women often struggle to maintain the status of unemployed individuals – defined as those who do not have a job but have sought work in the past four weeks – due to childcare responsibilities that drive them out of the labour market as economically inactive. As a result, women are more frequently classified as economically inactive 'housewives' unless they are actively employed. Overall, 56.9% of women, compared to 34.9% of men are economically inactive (GEOSTAT, 2024). The disparity in economic inactivity between men and women is particularly pronounced in the 25–34 age group, with 46.4% of women compared to 15.5% of men being economically inactive. Beyond the formal labour force, women are actively engaged in the informal economy, which deprives them of social benefits such as maternity leave and the prospect of a contributory pension.

The unequal distribution of household labour between men and women in Georgia significantly hinders women's economic activity. Women spend five times as many hours on unpaid household and care work than men (UN Women, 2022). The discrepancy in time spent on unpaid housework is most pronounced in the 25–44 age group. Women who are caregivers are 58.4% less likely to be in the labour force (TUS, 2022). In terms of childcare, mothers and fathers in Georgia spend considerably unequal amounts of time, with mothers dedicating 20.4 hours per week, while fathers contribute only 3.9 hours (TUS, 2022). This data aligns with public attitudes towards the distribution of domestic and care labour in Georgia. For instance, 58% of men and 42% of women believe that women are primarily responsible for household chores in their families (Onyshchenko et al., 2022). In addition to the unequal division of labour, structural constraints, such as the shortage of preschool education, limited parental leave and an overall lack of care infrastructure, contribute to women's time poverty in Georgia. Preschool education is more likely to be a challenge in rural areas and among ethnic minority households (UNICEF and GEOSTAT, 2018). For example, while 83% of 3–4-year-olds in Georgian-speaking households attend kindergarten, only 60% of children in this age group in Armenian-speaking households and 29.4% in Azerbaijani-speaking households

do so (UNICEF and GEOSTAT, 2018). The lack of access to kindergartens is cited as a barrier by 44% of parents whose children did not attend preschool (UNICEF and GEOSTAT, 2018).

Maternity, paternity and parental benefits remain a challenge for Georgian women. The state provides paid maternity leave for 183 days, with an additional 730 days of unpaid leave. The compensation amounted to GEL 1000 (approx. 318 EUR) over six months, which was increased to GEL 2000 (approx. 636 EUR) in 2023. However, this compensation is limited to formal employment, meaning women in informal employment do not benefit from this scheme (UN Women, 2024).

Labour migration from Georgia has become an increasing phenomenon. In 2023, migration from Georgia rose by 95.6% compared to 2022, with 245064 people leaving the country. While socio-economic factors were the primary drivers of emigration in earlier decades, recent years have seen new trends, including emigration for political reasons and due to the overall political situation in the country. Additionally, the deteriorating state of LGBTQI+ rights has led to a significant wave of queer emigration. The gender distribution of official emigrants is 42% women and 58% men (GEOSTAT, 2023). However, the Organisation for Economic co-operation and Development (OECD) (2022) offers an alternative figure, stating that women comprise the majority (62%) of Georgian emigrants in OECD countries. Over the years, migration has become increasingly feminised as demand for care work has risen in host countries of migration.

2.3.5. WOMEN'S HEALTH: MATERNAL MORTALITY, FAMILY PLANNING AND ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE HEALTHCARE

Women's health in Georgia faces numerous challenges, particularly in the areas of maternal health, family planning, access to safe abortion services and comprehensive sexuality education (UN Women, 2024). Maternal mortality in Georgia remains among the highest in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region, surpassing the regional average (20 per 100000 live births). Despite the reduction in the maternal mortality ratio from 40 per 100000 live births in 2010 to 25 in 2017, it remains high, placing Georgia among the few countries in the region with such a high lifetime risk (UN Women, 2024). A key contributor to maternal mortality is the low quality of antenatal, natal and postnatal care, compounded by factors such as a weak transport system, morbidity, socio-economic status, maternal age and education.

The protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights is an essential component of the dignity and autonomy of women, girls and trans people, but remains a significant challenge in Georgia. Family planning and contraceptive use remain low in frequency despite increased awareness. For example, 32.6% of women aged 15–44 report an unmet need for modern contraceptive methods (UNICEF & GEOSTAT, 2018). In other Eastern European countries this share is about half that of Georgia's (UN Women, 2024). 79.2% of women aged 15–49 report being able to make informed decisions about reproductive healthcare; however, this rate is lower among Azerbaijani- (69.0%) and Armenian- (57.4%) speaking women. The number of abortions in Georgia has been decreasing over the past decade (GEOSTAT, 2024).

Healthcare in Georgia is not inclusive of the needs of women from ethnic minorities, who face numerous barriers to accessing healthcare, such as language barriers, lack of regular municipal transport and the unavailability of necessary healthcare facilities in their communities (Shalvashvili, 2021). Additionally, healthcare services are not accommodating to the LGBTQI+ community, with

no specific health guidelines for transgender individuals and a lack of specialised programmes designed to address their unique needs (UN Women, 2024). Women with disabilities also face significant challenges in accessing medical care during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as general medical services. They encounter difficulties in physically accessing medical facilities and face discriminatory attitudes from healthcare providers. Doctors' stereotypical attitudes, particularly the perception that women with disabilities do not have a sexuality, create barriers to receiving gynaecological care. As a result, women with disabilities are among the most discriminated groups regarding access to sexual and reproductive rights (PDO, 2022). Overall, healthcare programmes in Georgia fail to adequately address broader gender-related issues and diverse groups' specific needs.

2.3.6. VIOLENCE, WAR AND WOMEN

GBV remains a critical issue in Georgia. According to recent data, 50.1% of women aged 15–69 in Georgia have experienced violence in their lifetime (GEOSTAT & UN Women, 2023). Furthermore, 18.2% of women have experienced violence within the past 12 months (GEOSTAT & UN Women, 2023). Among ever-partnered women, 26.5% have experienced intimate partner violence, including physical, sexual, psychological and/or economic violence at some point in their lives. Specifically, 7.7% of ever-partnered women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, while 24.6% have faced physical, sexual and/or psychological intimate partner violence (GEOSTAT & UN Women, 2023).

In terms of other forms of violence, 23.7% of women have experienced psychological violence, which includes both emotional abuse and controlling behaviours. Additionally, 8.4% of ever-partnered women have experienced economic violence. Despite the severity of the issue, violence against women remains underreported in Georgia. Of the women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence, 38.2% did not disclose their experiences to anyone. Only 22.8% of women who experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence sought help from formal organisations or agencies. Moreover, 11.8% sought help from the police, 8.0% approached a religious leader, and 5.1% turned to a healthcare worker for assistance (GEOSTAT & UN Women, 2023).

Women and girls with disabilities face additional barriers to accessing justice, as well as physical barriers when trying to reach police stations, courts or legal aid services. These obstacles prevent them from participating equally in investigative activities. The process of investigating crimes of sexual violence against women and girls with disabilities is particularly problematic. Discriminatory practices exist, as women with disabilities who are victims of sexual violence are always subjected to psychiatric examinations, unlike other crime victims (PDO, 2022).

The issue of peace and security holds existential importance for the Georgian population, which has faced frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, over 300000 internally displaced persons and the aftermath of the 2008 war with Russia. Since 2011, Georgia has actively engaged in the development and implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) for the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which along with a few landmark Resolutions comprise the WPS agenda. These plans have become a significant framework for shaping ideas and policies concerning women's involvement in conflict resolution and the pursuit of lasting peace. The NAP on WPS in Georgia for 2022–2024 outlines several crucial commitments, including efforts to improve housing conditions and livelihoods for conflict-affected women and youth, as well as the prevention of GBV and the promotion of women's active participation in peace

and security-related decision-making processes. The NAP also prioritises women's empowerment, focusing on ensuring access to essential services for conflict-affected women and girls. Furthermore, the NAP emphasises the need to raise awareness about violence prevention and human security issues for conflict-affected women and girls (UN Women, 2024).

In Georgia's security sector, women continue to be underrepresented, with limited opportunities for career advancement and leadership roles. However, in 2021, women comprised 51% of employees at the Ministry of Defence of Georgia, a figure that has remained unchanged for the past three years. There is a significant gap in women's participation in conflict resolution efforts and peace dialogues, which results in the exclusion of their experiences and contributions from peace processes. Women are underrepresented in Geneva International Discussions and in people-to-people diplomacy initiatives. According to a 2022 Public Defender of Georgia report, women's representation in Geneva International Discussions was 20%. Furthermore, in people-to-people diplomacy initiatives, only 16% were led by women's CSOs or other entities focused on women's issues in 2021 and 2022 (UN Women, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Women's emergence in the public sphere in 19th-century Georgia was closely tied to cultural resistance against Russian colonialism, with literature and print media serving as key tools for defending national identity and challenging patriarchal norms. Early female writers used fiction to address issues such as education, early marriage and reproductive rights, despite opposition from male contemporaries. As in other post-Soviet countries examined in this study, women's rights activism in Georgia initially emerged through NGO engagement in the 1990s. By the 2010s, feminist activism expanded beyond the NGO sector, taking on diverse ideological forms and organisational models, including both formal institutions and informal grassroots groups. While important legal gains were made, especially through gender equality frameworks and institutional reforms, recent authoritarian shifts, including the rollback of quotas and gender-sensitive legislation, have exposed the fragility of these achievements and underscored the need for diverse and resilient feminist mobilisation.

Today, gender equality in Georgia faces intersecting challenges of shrinking civic space, intensified anti-gender rhetoric, socio-economic exclusion and persistent violence against women, particularly women with disabilities and from minority communities. The state's retreat from gender commitments is especially dangerous in a context where structural inequalities in labour, healthcare and political participation remain unresolved. As demonstrated in this report, the progress of previous decades cannot be taken for granted, and sustained activism – both institutional and informal – is essential to defend and advance the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people in Georgia.

CHAPTER 3. WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN MOLDOVA

3.1. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN MOLDOVA DURING THE PRE-SOVIET PERIOD

Moldova has experienced both Tsarist and Soviet rule. It was annexed by Tsarist Russia, and after the Russian Revolution, the Moldovan Democratic Republic declared independence in February 1918. Shortly afterward, in April 1918, the president signed the conditional Union of Bessarabia with Romania, which was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1944; meaning much later than the other countries in this study. After the annexation, Soviets undertook an ambitious Russification campaign in Moldova, which included resettlement, introduction of the Russian language and Cyrillic alphabet and cultural re-education (Horn, 2006).

The first women's movement in Bessarabia emerged in the mid-19th century, centred around education and enlightenment. The emergence of the women's movement must be understood in the context of broader socio-political transformations. In Bessarabia, as in other countries examined in this study, the women's movement centred around education, philanthropy and literacy promotion, marking women's entry into the modern public sphere. The first school for girls in Bessarabia was established in 1864.[17] Among the 19th century philanthropists were writer Roxandra Edling (1786–1844), Natalia Dadiani (b. In 1865), Nadejda Tudor and Elena Alistar. The latter two founded the 'Women's League of Bessarabia', which aimed to advance women's rights.[18] These early initiatives laid the foundation for local women's movement and reflected the broader shift towards women's civic engagement.

3.2. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

During the Soviet period, Moldovan women were encouraged to participate in the workforce, including roles traditionally dominated by men such as heavy industry and agriculture. This policy was intended to integrate women into all sectors of the economy (Bogatu, 2024). However, the implementation of these policies often led to gender-blind approaches. While women were granted equal rights on paper, in practice, they frequently faced the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities. State policies did not adequately address the unequal distribution of domestic labour, which remained predominantly the woman's responsibility.[19] This approach often resulted in a superficial form of equality, emphasising women's presence in the workforce without fostering deeper societal changes. While the Soviet period in Moldova introduced policies that theoretically promoted gender equality, the practical outcomes were mixed. Women were integrated into various sectors of the economy, but persistent traditional gender roles and the lack of supportive policies for domestic responsibilities limited the effectiveness of these measures.

[17] https://womenplatform.net/region/feminism-in-the-republic-of-moldova-a-short-history-of-the-women-who-demanded-equality/
[18] Ibid.
[19] https://www.mexicohistorico.com/paginas/exploring-feminist-perspectives-in-moldovan-society-35c19062.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3.3. WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN POST-SOVIET MOLDOVA

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Moldovan economy went through a devastating crisis, and among the consequences were massive labour emigration and human trafficking. During the 1990s, Moldova became one of the poorest country in Europe (DFID, 2008, cited in Wylie, 2010). The burden of poverty, poor healthcare and lack of social services has been particularly heavy on women. The CEDAW committee pointed out 'the disproportionately heavy burden of the effects of transition borne by the women of Moldova' (Horn, 2010). It is against the backdrop of the socio-political insecurity and international encouragement that women's organisations emerged in post-Soviet Moldova in the 1990s predominantly focused on issues such as domestic violence, trafficking, breast cancer and political participation. In Moldova, trafficking in women has become the main point of entry into 'women's issues' (Horn, 2010). Since then, GBV has been the predominant topic for women's rights organisations in Moldova. Despite advancements, especially in legal rights, challenges persist, including entrenched patriarchal attitudes that hold bias against women and women's rights. For instance, 27% of men (in 2024), compared to 46.5% of men (in 2015) and 29% of women (in 2024) compared to 37% of women (in 2015) believed that granting women rights implied that men lose out on their rights as a result (Women's Law Center, 2015, 2024).

Among the earliest organisations in Moldova are the Gender Centre (registered in 2000), which focuses on domestic violence prevention, and Gender-Doc, established in 1998, which advocates for the rights of the LGBTQI+ community in Moldova. However, explicitly feminist groups were only founded in the second half of the 2010s.[20] Women's rights organisations also vary in their tactics. In Moldova, up until now, these organisations have been predominantly concerned with advocacy for legislative changes, litigation and providing services such as legal aid and shelters. As for informal groups, according to one interviewed expert, their voices remain marginal, and they are predominantly focused on protests, marches and holding the government accountable for gender inequality. Another expert, who works in an NGO addressing mainstream gender issues, noted that informal groups' street activism 'adds up' their voices, as it complements efforts made by NGOs.[21]

Overall, civil society in Moldova is highly dependent on international funds, as government funding schemes are scarce and, as interviewed experts note, 'usually nepotistic'. [22] They add that as a result of this dependence, the agenda of NGOs working in Moldova is often determined by international organisations, which primarily fund initiatives against GBV and trafficking. One expert points out, 'most organisations work on gender violence because this is where the international money is'.[23] Similar to Ghodsee (2004), who argues that 'women's issues' have been constructed and limited to Western frameworks, interviewed experts also criticise this overdetermination, believing it limits the agendas of women's organisations. Due to the precarious positions of their organisations, they must constantly seek grants and fit into the 'vocabulary and framework of liberal feminism'.[24]

[20] See https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Moldova/Between-institutions-and-movements-the-challenges-of-Moldovan-feminism-177614?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[21] Interview. Moldova. 13 December 2024.
[22] Interview. Moldova. 13 December 2024.
[23] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025.
[24] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025.

In the 2000s, international gender assessments identified two contradictory positions for women in Moldovan society: 'as potential political and economic actors or as potential victims of trafficking' (Horn, 2006, 2010). While both positions 'reflect some point of reality' in women's lives, some argue that such framing limits the types of programmes ultimately funded and supported by international donors. One interviewed expert notes, 'The overprevalence of violence statistics overshadows any number of other problems', making it difficult to discuss gender broadly in Moldova (Horn, 2010). In her words, 'This is important, but it's not the only thing that's happening',[25] noting issues such as poverty, education, workplace discrimination, unequal pay and the division of household chores. One alternative approach to addressing women's problems would be to broaden the scope and view women's rights issues against the backdrop of economic inequality, rather than focusing only on women's victimhood.

In the 2000s, approximately 2500 NGOs were registered in Moldova, over 50 of which focused on women's issues (Horn, 2010); however, the number of NGOs does not reflect the actual number of truly effective NGOs, as only 15–20% of those registered were active. Some consider dependence on international ties and funding to be an impediment to the growth of a self-sustaining civil society (Horn, 2010). A significant number of NGOs emerge and fade depending on funding cycles and project money (Horn, 2010), resulting in a constantly shifting landscape of NGO activism in Moldova. However, some main players have managed to sustain themselves over the years, navigating the foreign funding system.

In Chisinau, the LGBTQI+ community holds an annual Pride parade, typically accompanied by strong police protection, due to opposition mainly from socially conservative Orthodox Christian protesters. This opposition highlights entrenched social attitudes against the LGBTQI+ community. Homophobia was actively instrumentalised by those opposing the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, portraying it as a 'Trojan Horse' [26] that would be used to import gender ideology (Grzebalska et al., 2017).[27] This reflects the increase in negative attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community, as 49% of women in 2015 compared to 64% of women in 2024 are against laws protecting LGBTQI+ rights (Women's Law Center, 2024). However, overall, women in Moldova tend to have more progressive views on gender equality than men, particularly in areas such as violence and reproductive health (Women's Law Center, 2024).

In terms of protecting the LGBTQI+ community, Moldovan legislation currently provides 39% protection for LGBTQI+ rights, which is relatively high compared to other countries in the former Soviet Union (ILGA Europe, 2023). The score is calculated based on the legal and policy practices for LGBTQI+ people in 49 European countries, ranked on a scale from 0–100 %.

3.3.1. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Republic of Moldova is party to the key international legal frameworks addressing gender equality and women's rights; however, challenges persist in implementing these laws effectively. Since gaining independence in 1991, Moldova has joined several treaties and international

[25] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025
[26] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025.
[27] Gender ideology is a term often used by conservative and far-right groups to describe gender equality initiatives and LGBTQI+ rights that is typically used pejoratively to oppose these movements, suggesting they undermine traditional family structures and societal norms. Scholars like Andrea Pető have critiqued this term, arguing that it functions as a political tool to challenge progressive gender policies.

conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2010), the EU–Moldova Partnership Agreement (2014) and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2021).

At the national level, the principle of equality is enshrined in the Constitution, which guarantees that all citizens are equal before the law. Gender equality and anti-discrimination efforts are supported by legislation such as the Act on Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2006) and the Act on Ensuring Equality (2012).[28] To further these efforts, the Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality was established. The Council has legal status and is set up to ensure protection against discrimination. While the Act on Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Women and Men,[29] adopted in 2006, serves as a guiding framework for promoting gender equality, its effective implementation remains a significant challenge. The Government Committee on Equality of Women and Men was set up to ensure implementation of the provisions of this law.

In 2016, a provision mandating a 40% quota for each gender in cabinets and political parties' electoral lists was introduced under the Act on Ensuring Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, as well as in the Electoral Code and in the Act on Political Parties. However, the legislation lacks enforcement mechanisms, as no sanctions are imposed for failing the meet the minimum quota.

Laws preventing and addressing domestic violence[30] provide institutional mechanisms and protection measures for victims of domestic violence. The 2024 revision of the Act on Preventing and Combating Family Violence further aims to tackle GBV facilitated through information technology, among other measures. These laws outline state obligations to offer services, including the introduction of urgent restriction orders, legal emergency aid and the creation of a website to raise awareness about available services (Act N 196, approved in July 2016). Additionally, a law was passed on crime victims' rehabilitation, which includes financial support provision. However, these provisions are often not applied in cases of GBV (UN Women, 2021).

Moldova has a law on preventing and combating human trafficking[31] that establishes an institutional framework for prevention and combatting trafficking, as well as a national referral system to assist victims. Although human trafficking is punishable under the Criminal Code, UN Women (2021) highlights several gaps in this area, including limited access to free medical assistance for victims and a lack of protection for trafficking victims during the investigation stage.

The Republic of Moldova adopted several national strategies to promote gender equality and combat violence against women and domestic violence. These include the Strategy for ensuring gender equality in the Republic of Moldova (2017–2021/2016–2020), the Strategy on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2018–2023), and the National Programme on preventing and combating VAW/DV (2023–2027) (Council of Europe, 2025).

[28] Law No. 121 p.29
[29] Law No. 5 p.29
[30] For instance, Law 45-XVI on Preventing and Combating Violence within the Family.
[31] For instance Law 241on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

Detailed Action Plans accompanied these strategies; however, the assessment of the previous strategy (2017–2021) indicates that the impact has been uneven (UN Women, 2021).

To promote gender equality, the Moldovan government established the Gender Equality Coordination Council. Additionally, a Moldovan think tank developed the National Gender Equality Index (GEI) to monitor the progress of the country's National Gender Equality Strategies, using the index is part of EU accession. The GEI covers 31 indicators covering six key areas: labour market, politics, education, access to resources, perceptions and stereotypes and health (Council of Europe, 2025).

3.3.2. WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING AND POLITICS

Women's political representation in post-Soviet Moldova has gradually increased. In 1998, women held only 8.9% of the parliamentary seats, and this figure increased to 39.6% in 2021 and 40.6% in 2024. One of the key factors contributing to this increase is the 2016 40% gender quota. Women's representation has also improved at the local level. Notably, following the 2019 local elections, six women with disabilities and six Roma women were elected as local councillors for the first time (UN Women, 2021). In 2015, Roma women were elected to town councils for the first time since Moldova gained independence in 1991.[32] The quota's introduction, along with civic activism, significantly contributed to this progress.

Currently, Moldova's political landscape includes women in prominent positions, such as the presidency and the deputy chairperson of Parliament. However, women made up only 17.7% of ministers and cabinet members as of 2024.[33] The current president of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, recognises that unequal social roles hinder women's engagement in politics but based on her own example, advocates for meritocracy. As one respondent pointed out 'Our society weighed the candidates on merit and qualification, assessed their characters, not genders, and made their choice'.[34] Previously, political leaders such as Eugenia Ostapciuc, speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova from 2001 to 2005, distanced herself from the idea of feminism. Overall, more women (72.6%) than men (53.7%) in Moldova support the establishment of a gender quota system. Those who oppose it argue that 'we don't need incapable women in leadership positions' (Women's Law Center, 2015).

3.3.3. WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Women's social and economic inequalities are among the most pronounced and inadequately addressed issues in Moldova. Although the poverty rate in Moldova has been steadily declining, from 75.30% in 2004 to 19.9% in 2014, and to 14.40% in 2021,[35] the gender differences among people below the poverty line is notable among female-headed households, where the poverty rate stands at 29.3% (UN Women, 2021). At the same time, approximately 20% of the population receives social assistance benefits; a figure that has been increasing. (UN Women, 2021).

[32] See: https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/08/first-romani-women-elected-to-local-councils-in-moldova
[33] See: https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/moldova
[34] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025.
[35] https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/mda/moldova/poverty-rate#:~:text=Moldova%20poverty%20rate%20for%202021,a%200.2%25%20decline%20from%202016

A substantial proportion of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, totalling 127786 by 2025,[36] rely on 'other sources' of income rather than employment or pensions, underscoring these households' vulnerability. Households in this category, with at least one person with a disability, are especially dependent on pensions from Ukraine, with 44.7% of such households relying on them, compared to 19% of households without members with disabilities (UN Women, 2024).

An intersectional perspective on gender inequality in Moldova is required, since it is shaped by factors such as economic background, age, residence, ethnic and social status (UN Women, 2021). The labour market is characterised by low wages and high rates of informal employment and labour migration. Women's labour force participation reflects some gender disparities similar to those observed in other countries examined in this study, though to a lesser extent. As of 2020, 63.9% women were outside the labour force, compared to 54.9% of men. Women in rural areas, in particular, face severe barriers to employment opportunities.

Women are significantly underrepresented in higher-earning sectors and leadership positions, while the jobs in which they are employed are severely underpaid. Women are predominantly employed in the service sector, accounting for 58% of the workforce compared to 42% for men. In agriculture, women make up 39% of workers, and in industry, 46%. Women are concentrated in fields such as education (where they represent 82.2%), health and social assistance (80.2%), hotels and restaurants (71.8%), finance and insurance (72.1%) and cultural activities (59.9%) (UN Women, 2021).

Women's economic activity is significantly hindered by unpaid care work within households. Women spend more time on unpaid domestic chores than men, and they face challenges accessing childcare and support services for the elderly. The lack of adequate elderly care programmes disproportionately affects women's employment, especially as the ageing population grows, reinforcing the perception of women as primary caregivers (UN Women, 2021).

Women with children have fewer economic opportunities than men, and these opportunities diminish further as the number of children increases. Women tend to enter the labour force later and take longer career breaks (Council of Europe, 2025), reflecting the gendered division of care work and a labour system that is often unfriendly to women. The lack of accessible childcare services has been frequently highlighted by entrepreneurs as a significant obstacle to women's involvement in business (UN Women, 2021). Women with children have a labour force participation rate of 39.4%, compared to 62.5% for men with children. In contrast, women without children have a higher participation rate of 62.9%, almost equal to men without children (UN Women, 2021). These statistics demonstrate that, within the current structural and labour policies, having children negatively impacts women's economic activity.

Structural barriers, such as limited access to affordable preschool education and the absence of gender-sensitive labour policies, exacerbate these challenges.

Gender-biased attitudes also play a significant role in sustaining the unequal division of labour although they have evolved over time. In 2015, 90.5% of men and 81% of women either agreed or partially agreed with the statement that 'for a woman, the most important thing is to take care of the household and cook for her family', whereas in 2024, 86% of men and 71% of women either totally

[36] See: Ukraine Refugee Situation in the Republic Moldova Operational Data Portal: https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10784

or partially agreed with it, indicating a gradual shift in perceptions (Women's Law Center, 2024). Considering these statistics, it is not surprising that household duties remain the area where gender equality acceptance is lowest, with 64% of women and 55% of men recognising the necessity of equitable distribution of household labour (Women's Law Center, 2024). It should also be noted that an analysis of household activities performed by men has highlighted trends of increased involvement from one generation to the next. Fathers of men born in the 1960s were less involved in household activities compared to fathers of those born in the 2000s (Women's Law Center, 2024). Similarly, gender-biased views found almost at equal levels among men and women regarding women's labour force participation have shown a slight improvement over time. In 2015, 60.8% of men and 60.2% of women believed that when women are employed, they take over jobs meant for men, compared to 53% of men and 59% of women in 2024 (Women's Law Center, 2024).

Overall, household decision making in Moldova has become increasingly participatory over the past decade. In 2015, 85.6% of men believed they should have the final say in family decision making, and this figure declined to 64% in 2024. Among women, 49.7% accepted this situation in 2015, compared to 43% in 2024 (Women's Law Center, 2015, 2024). Attitudes towards joint decision making about investments among both partners have shifted significantly, with the proportion of newly formed couples engaged in joint decision making increasing from 52.3% to 68%. More broadly, slight increases have emerged in the number of families where both partners decide on investment expenses (from 52–59%), current consumption expenses (from 41–56%) and matters related to schooling or other activities involving children (from 44–55%) (Women's Law Center, 2015, 2024).

There are significant obstacles to the effective protection of minorities in Moldova, largely due to marginalisation and weak mechanisms for implementing relevant legal provisions (ECMI, 2014). Minorities such as the Gagauz and Bulgarians face discrimination in areas such as education, language and political representation, as well as a lack of platforms for expressing their concerns. However, the Roma community experiences the most severe forms of marginalisation. Roma women face discrimination in the labour market at all stages, including pre-recruitment, working conditions, wages and skills development. Roma women are often excluded from the labour market due to several factors, such as lack of access to education, employment in low-paid and low-skilled jobs and exclusion from the formal labour market. This exclusion leaves them without the social security benefits tied to formal employment. Additionally, family restrictions prevent many Roma women from accessing the labour force. Only half of Roma women (51%) and Roma men (53%) believe that it is acceptable for women to have paid jobs outside the home (UN Women, 2024).

3.3.4. MIGRATION: GENDERED PATTERNS, PUSH–PULL FACTORS

Since gaining independence, Moldova has experienced several migratory periods. Until the war in Ukraine, Moldova had primarily been a country of origin for migration, rather than a destination country. By 2019, approximately 1150000 Moldovans were residing abroad, constituting about 28.7% of the total population (UN DESA, 2019). The predominant form of emigration from Moldova is temporary labour migration. The main destinations for Moldovan emigrants are Russia, Romania

and Western Europe, particularly Italy, [37] which is the second preferred destination for both circular and permanent migration (Weirich, 2021). The direction of emigration is somewhat gendered: more men from rural areas tend to migrate to Russia, while women with higher educational attainment from urban areas typically migrate to Southern European countries, mainly for domestic and care work. However, there is a trend towards the masculinisation of the migration force, with men constituting 67.5% and women 32.5% of the migrant population in 2018. As a result of the massive migration of men, interviewed experts point out that, although legally married, there is a significant phenomenon of unofficial 'single motherhood', as the women left behind, functioning as single mothers,[38] take on household and childcare responsibilities while their husbands are abroad.

According to an interviewed expert, both internal migration to Chisinau from rural areas and external migration from Moldova are driven by a combination of push and pull factors. The primary push factor for migration from Moldova is economic. A 2009 study found that 92.6% of Moldovans believed migration would improve their financial situation (ETF, 2009). In addition to economic reasons, interviewed experts cited factors such as inaccessible healthcare and social services as contributing to migration.[39] One of the pull factors for migration to Europe is the demand for care work for the elderly in host countries. Two of the interviewed experts spoke about both care drain and brain drain from Moldova.[40] As a consequence of the care drain, Moldova has a care deficit for young Moldovans and ageing parents of migrants. The specificity of irregular migration is also gendered, with men primarily migrating for illegal labour, while women are more vulnerable to human trafficking, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs (Horn, 2010).

3.3.5. WOMEN'S HEALTH: CHALLENGES IN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Women face healthcare challenges that are influenced by gender, as well as class and residential area. Inequalities in accessing primary and specialised healthcare services are noticeable between urban and rural populations in Moldova. These disparities are especially pronounced among low-income households, the elderly, women and households with people with disabilities (UN Women, 2021). The high cost of healthcare is a significant barrier for vulnerable groups. For instance, 80% of Roma women reported that they do not visit a doctor due to the high cost of health services (ILO, 2018).

Moldova has made progress in the fight against HIV and AIDS by expanding access to HIV testing through youth clinics, self-testing and NGOs (UN Women, 2021). However, the rising HIV rate, from 17.4 per 100000 people in 2010 to 28.3 per 100000 in 2021, indicates that prevention efforts remain insufficient, particularly among young women aged 15–24. This age group is 4.8 times more likely to be infected than their male peers (UN Women, 2021). This gendered aspect is compounded by stigma and discrimination faced by women living with HIV/AIDS (UN Women, 2021).

Although child and maternal health indicators have improved significantly and maternal mortality dropped from 44.5 to 15.3 per 100000 live births between 2010 and 2018, adolescent fertility remains high at 22 births per 1000 girls; more than double the European average, which is 9 births per 1000 girls (UN Women, 2021). The average age at first marriage differs by gender, with

[37] See: https://moldova.iom.int/migration-profile-republic-moldova
[38] Interview. Moldova. 9 January 2025
[39] Interview. Moldova, 9 January 2025
[40] Interview. Moldova, 9 January 2025

women marrying at an average age of 26 years and men at 28.9 years. While Moldova's legal framework recognises sexual and reproductive rights, disadvantaged women continue to face limited access to early detection programmes and critical cancer treatments, revealing a gap between legal provisions and practical healthcare equity (UN Women, 2021).

3.3.6. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS: CONFRONTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN MOLDOVA

GBV, which has been the predominant focus of women's rights organisations in Moldova, is often linked to human trafficking, another critical issue that has attracted significant attention from international organisations. One of the interviewed experts viewed trafficking as a consequence of domestic violence, highlighting the interconnectedness of these two forms of GBV.[41] In Moldova, violence against women remains widespread and deeply rooted, with 25% of partnered women reporting physical, sexual or psychological intimate partner violence in the 12 months prior to a 2018 survey (UN Women, 2021), and 73% having experienced such violence since the age of 15 (UN Women, 2024). These high rates not only reflect the prevalence but also the normalisation of GBV within intimate relationships. A total of 40% of women reported being survivors of violence (UN Women, 2021).

Violence against women is an intersectional issue, influenced by factors such as age, residential area, ethnicity and economic status. The incidence of violence is higher among women whose partners are aged 50 years and older. For example, 35% of women with partners aged 50–59 report experiencing physical violence, compared to 15% of those with partners under the age of 30 (UN Women, 2021). While the increase in restraining orders from 80 in 2011 to 635 in 2020 signals some institutional progress, it also underscores the growing recognition of a systemic problem that continues to disproportionately affect women across demographic lines (UN Women, 2021). The interviewed expert complained that despite Moldova having an electronic system in place, more than half of restraining orders are violated, highlighting significant challenges in enforcing legal protections for victims of violence.[42]

Over time, public attitudes have increasingly shifted in favour of condemning violence against women. In 2015, 27.7% of men and 17.5% of women agreed that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together. By 2024, these figures had decreased to 21% of men and 13% of women. Similarly, in 2015, 41.1% of men compared to 23% in 2024 agreed that there are moments when a woman needs to be beaten. In 2015, 19.1% of women agreed with the statement, compared to 12% in 2024 (Women's Law Center, 2015, 2024). These shifts indicate growing recognition of gender equality and the unacceptability of violence within familial contexts.

During the transition period, Moldova faced high unemployment rates, poverty and massive migration, which, coupled with social factors such as violence against women and children and discrimination, created conditions conducive to trafficking. Initially, in the 2000s, Moldova adopted a repressive model to combat trafficking, focusing on illegal migration, border control and organised crime. In contrast, the empowerment model centres anti-trafficking strategies around human rights (Horn, 2010). Although most of the trafficking victims in the 1990s and 2000s were irregular migrants, even those travelling through regular channels, such as to Russia, were not exempt from exploitation (Mikhailov et al., 2005, cited in Wylie & McRedmond, 2010).

[41] Interview. Moldova. 13 December 2024.
[42] Ibid.

In response to increased reports of trafficking, international organisations directed significant resources to combat it. Efforts included prevention through public awareness campaigns, legal consultations, crisis prevention services, psychological rehabilitation and job skills training programmes (Horn, 2010). The most vulnerable groups – women, children, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ individuals and people from rural areas – have been identified as the most susceptible to trafficking and violence (Wylie & McRedmond, 2010).

While the current scale of trafficking remains difficult to establish due to underreporting and fear of stigmatisation, the number of victims assisted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Chisinau from 2000 to 2013 reached 3194 individuals.[43] In 2018, the rate of trafficking victims per 100000 people was 16 men and 11 women (UN Women, 2021).

Women remain underrepresented in WPS Agenda implementation as well as Moldova's security and defence sectors. They are also notably absent in official dialogue formats, which hinders progress towards gender equality in the country's governance and security frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the women's movement in Moldova must be understood in the context of broader socio-political transformations. In the early 20th century in territory of present-day Moldova, as in other countries examined in this study, the women's movement centred around education, philanthropy and the promotion of literacy, marking women's entry into the modern public sphere. Since the 1990s, women's organisations in post-Soviet Moldova have focused primarily on GBV, trafficking and women's political representation. Civil society remains heavily reliant on international funding, with formal groups prioritising advocacy, litigation and service provision, while informal groups remain marginal and protest-driven. Despite Moldova's commitment to gender equality frameworks, implementation is uneven due to institutional gaps and lack of accountability. Women's political representation has improved, rising from 8.9% in 1998 to 40.6% in 2024, largely due to the 40% quota introduced in 2016.

Women in Moldova face deeply entrenched and intersectional economic and social inequalities. Significant gender disparities remain in labour force participation, wages, unpaid care work and access to economic opportunities, particularly for women in rural areas and Roma women. While attitudes towards gender equality and shared decision making are slowly improving, structural barriers continue to hinder women's full economic and social inclusion. Women in Moldova face healthcare challenges shaped by gender, class and place of residence. Access to services is particularly limited for women in rural areas, those from low-income households, the elderly and people with disabilities. Despite progress in areas such as HIV testing and maternal health, high healthcare costs and limited access to reproductive and cancer care continue to disproportionately affect vulnerable women, including Roma women, who report high rates of unmet medical needs.

GBV and human trafficking remain deeply entrenched in Moldova, shaped by structural inequalities and exacerbated by economic vulnerability, migration and weak enforcement of protections. Although institutional responses and public attitudes have gradually improved, reflected in increased restraining orders and declining societal acceptance of violence, systemic challenges persist, particularly in enforcement and victim support. Trafficking prevention has evolved from a

[43] See: https://moldova.iom.int/migration-profile-republic-moldova

punitive approach to a rights-based model, yet women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ individuals are especially at risk, and their representation in security and policy decision making remains limited.

CHAPTER 4. WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND GENDER EQUALITY IN UKRAINE

4.1. WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN UKRAINE DURING THE PRE-SOVIET PERIOD

Although geographically situated to the west of Russia, Ukraine has often been imagined as an orientalised version of Little Russia in Russian imperialist discourse (Kotliuk, 2023). In this historical narrative, the Russian legacy in Ukraine is depicted positively, while negative aspects are attributed to other foreign influences, including Polish, Catholic, Tatar and Jewish (Snyder, 2010). Thus, Ukraine is conceptualised as a liminal space between the Russian Empire and these external influences. This framework strips Ukraine of its agency, framing it not as a true adversary – an identity reserved for the West – but as a satellite state susceptible to Western influence and in need of liberation. This liberation paradigm also disregards the agency of Ukrainian women and their struggle against both Russian imperialism and the patriarchal order. Ukrainian feminists find inspiration in the pre-Soviet women's movement in Ukraine. History, especially women's history, remains a contested terrain shaped by competing political regimes. Ukrainian feminists thus turn to the past to shed light on the legacy of Ukrainian women, using it as a source of empowerment and reference (Kis, 2012).

Kis (2012) identifies four dominant narratives in Ukrainian women's history. First, there is the Berehynia narrative, which refers to an ancient Ukrainian pagan goddess and emphasises a matriarchal Ukrainian past and a distinctly feminine' Ukrainian identity. Second, the great woman narrative glorifies notable Ukrainian women, celebrating their individual achievements.
Third, national feminism explores women's contributions to the Ukrainian national cause, framing feminist agency beyond explicitly feminist movements. Finally, the woman's devotion narrative centres on the experiences of ordinary women, emphasising their everyday contributions and resilience.

The Ukrainian women's movement is rooted in the ideals of anti-imperialism and national independence. Women activists in the early 20th century were deeply involved in the national liberation movement while simultaneously advocating for women's emancipation in both political and cultural spheres (Kotliuk, 2023). Beginning in the 1880s, Ukrainian women established organisations that focused on the broader needs of the community (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998), seeking to enhance their role in the national liberation struggle and combat poverty and illiteracy. As women's organisations expanded, they began to adopt a feminist agenda and consciousness that emerged from their activism.

Women's organised activism in Ukraine emerged when Tsarist authorities closed Ukraine's first institution of higher education for women, Higher Courses for Women, at Kyiv University in 1886. In response, Ukrainian women established the first independent women's study circle. Since organisations were required to be sanctioned by the police, these study circles remained informal. For example, a ladies' club that sought permission in the 1880s received approval only after the 1905 Revolution. Women's societies engaged in various activities, such as establishing schools

and organising a hospice for children. Although Women's Hromada, founded in 1901, was exclusively comprised of Ukrainian women, the overall women's movement in Kyiv was multi-ethnic, with instances of cooperation among Ukrainian, Jewish and Russian women (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998).

It was only after the 1905 Revolution that a number of schools for higher education were established in Ukraine. Universities reopened to women in 1906 but only briefly until 1909 (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998). Women joined *Prosvita* (enlightenment) societies, which had been active in Ukraine since the late 1860s, and created women's sections within them. *Prosvita* played a crucial role in the development of Ukrainian national consciousness. However, these societies were suppressed by the Soviet regime in the 1920s.

In Ukraine, women's rights activism was also part of the global movement and did not develop in isolation. Ukrainian women were influenced by Mill's (1869) work *The Subjection of Women* and feminist-socialist ideas. This influence prompted Nataliia Kobrynska to gather about 100 women in Galicia and establish the Society for Ruthenian Women in 1884. The society aimed to enlighten women, create community daycare centres and publish Ukrainian women's literary works. This initiative led to the formation of other branches, women's clubs and circles in various regions of Ukraine (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ukrainian women organised pro-suffrage rallies alongside Polish and Jewish women, drafted petitions and participated in the establishment of daycare centres, the Domestic Servants' Aid Society, cooperatives and various educational courses. Thus, Ukrainian women's activism was initially intertwined with the nationalist liberation struggle, although it faced resistance from Tsarist officials and Ukrainian men. For instance, when Ukrainian men refused to include women's organisations in major gatherings, women organised their own separate meeting on 14 December 1912 to discuss issues such as military training for women, armed struggle for Ukraine's independence and the need for a national emergency fund (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998).

Following the Russian Revolution, Ukraine experienced a brief period of independence. The Ukrainian National Republic declared its independence on 25 January 1918, although it did not include the Western Ukrainian territories (Western Ukrainian National Republic) until 1919. Ukrainian women played an active role in building the independent republic, organising the All-Ukrainian Women's Hromada and participating in relief work, public health initiatives and education. The Ukrainian National Republic only lasted until 1920, after which the Ukrainian government went into exile following Soviet annexation. During the Ukrainian–Soviet War (1917–1921), women actively participated in combat and military activities against the Soviet Union.

Ukrainian women engaged in the public sphere through various means, including the publication of women's magazines and newspapers such as the socialist women's publication *Meta*, which was later published as *Nasha Meta* from 1919 to 1920, as well as *Zhinoche Dilo*. The pre-Soviet period, particularly at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, also saw the production of historical and ethnographic research on women's issues, addressing topics such as premarital sexual relations and women's legal status (Kis, 2012). Ukrainian scholars like Kateryna Hrushevska (1900–1943) criticised mainstream male-oriented historical and ethnographic works, arguing that they tended to treat women outside of their cultural context. Hrushevska noted that 'men's world' and 'male-public aspects of culture' were often researched more thoroughly (Hrushevska, 1929, cited in Kis, 2012).

However, this scholarly direction was abruptly disrupted, as Hrushevska and many other Ukrainian scholars were soon repressed by Soviet authorities (Kis, 2012).

Russian and Soviet scholarship has historically rendered religious and ethnic minorities invisible, overlooking the fact that as early as the beginning of the 20th century, a women's movement emerged among the Crimean Tatars, who were one of the first Muslim nations to grant women voting rights during the pre-Soviet period (Gospodarenko, 2024). Thus, Ukrainian and Crimean women were not only educators and public figures but also politicians. In 1917, several women activists from the national movement joined the governing bodies of the Crimean People's Republic (Marusyak, 2021).

Crimean Tatars were labelled as 'Eastern' and 'Oriental' by Tsarist Russia and have been dehumanised and orientalised in Russian literature (Ram, 2003; Sahni, 1997). For instance, the Russian literary critic Belinsky remarked, 'Having arrived in the Crimean steppes, we came across three nationalities unknown to us so far: the Crimean rams, the Crimean camels, and the Crimean Tatars. They are different species of the same stock, different offshoots of one and the same tribe; there is so much in common in their physiognomies. Although they do not speak the same language, they nevertheless understand one another very well' (cited in Sahni, 1997). In literature, Tatar women are often depicted as ghosts, shadows or statues in veils, while reports from as early as 1820 indicate that older women did not wear veils (Gospodarenko, 2024). In the 19th century, Crimean women advocated for girls' education, founded schools for girls despite pressure from the Russian Empire, and published newspapers and magazines aimed at Muslim women (Gospodarenko, 2024). As a result, the Ukrainian women's movement during the pre-Soviet period was quite multinational, encompassing, for example Ukrainians, Jews, Russians and Crimean Tatar women, who advocated for education, social and political rights and national liberation.

4.2. WOMEN'S FIGHTS IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

The darker side of Soviet imperial practices in Ukraine is exemplified by events such as the Holodomor (a man-made famine), political purges of the Ukrainian national elite in 1937–1938, and the forced deportation of Crimean Tatars. Both the pre-Soviet and Soviet Russian empires pursued policies of Russification intended to suppress Ukrainian identity. As a result, the Ukrainian language was banned numerous times over the past 200 years (Kotliuk, 2023). Language became a battleground that highlighted the national, historical and cultural differences between Ukrainians and Russians. Under Bolshevik rule, the Women's Section (*Zhinviddil*) of the ruling party was established with the aims of spreading literacy, raising political awareness among women, publishing women's journals such as *Selianka Ukrainy* and *Rabotnitsa* (a Russian language journal) and informing women about new codes of law, health and hygiene. The Women's Section also used women to spy on their communities and gather information about anti-Soviet activities.

The official Soviet narrative not only overlooked the history of women's organisations during the pre-Soviet period but also banned independent women's organisations and excluded women who had been at the forefront of such organising. For instance, Olena Pchilka – a writer and organiser – was only permitted to pursue her ethnographic scholarly work. During Perestroika, women became involved in the Ukrainian political movement and founded several large women's organisations, such as the Union of Ukrainian Women and the Women's Hromada of the Popular Movement of Ukraine. However, none of these organisations focused on women's rights; the first was centred

around traditional family values, while the second addressed political and ecological issues (Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 1998).

4.3. WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN POST-SOVIET UKRAINE

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Ukraine officially proclaimed its independence in 1991. The material reality in Ukraine, as in other post-Soviet countries, was dire after the collapse. New economic conditions plunged Ukraine into a crisis that had a gendered impact on its population. The capture of public goods by a small number of people, along with the rise of organised crime and extreme poverty, created a fertile ground for human trafficking (Brennan & Prescott, 2024). The feminisation of unemployment and poverty made women particularly vulnerable to trafficking as they sought ways to migrate, often unknowingly being sold into sexual slavery. Only 15% were aware of their true circumstances, the majority believing they would be employed as maids or waitresses (Malynovska, 2006). According to a 2003 report by the Human Rights Ombudsman of Ukraine, cited by Malynovska (2006), approximately 100000 women became victims of human trafficking in Ukraine during the 1990s.

Post-Soviet Ukrainian women's activism began as NGO activism, focusing on gender equality issues such as human trafficking and domestic violence, often with the support of international organisations. Some of the early women's organisations included the All-Ukrainian Women's Hromada, founded in 1993, and the Women's Consortium of Ukraine, established in 2001. During this period, activists framed their work in terms of human rights and family values rather than overt feminism. While most feminist and women's rights groups primarily employed advocacy approaches, organisations like Insight, founded in 2008, focused on LGBTQI+ rights. By the 2000s, women's activism became more visible, but it also faced backlash from conservative and far-right groups.

Two world-famous women's activist groups in Ukraine are FEMEN and Feminist Ofenzyva. Although these groups' approaches differ, they share a common stance against conventional forms of activism such as petitions advocating for legislative reforms or collaborating with state institutions. FEMEN was founded in 2008 in response to challenges faced by women in Ukraine such as human trafficking and domestic violence. The group used their bodies as a medium of protest, famously staging topless demonstrations with messages inscribed on their breasts to express their discontent with patriarchism. FEMEN was most active from 2008 to 2012. However, their approach to feminism has faced criticism from various feminist groups, which considered it to be an exploitation of the female body. After enduring persistent physical attacks and police searches at their office, the members of FEMEN fled Ukraine in 2013 (Zychowicz, 2020).

Feminist Ofenzyva, established in 2010, was identified as a radical separatist feminist group and active until January 2014. This group organised demonstrations and conferences, and published articles to achieve its goals, which focused on women's economic empowerment, advocacy for sexual education in schools, legal protection, laws against sexual violence and creating space for gender studies and activism (Brennan & Prescott, 2024). During the Maidan protests, Ofenzyva activists organised field hospitals in churches (Zychowicz, 2020).

During the ongoing war, feminist organisations have shifted their focus to supporting internally displaced persons and addressing the needs of women in conflict zones, including the provision of psychological services. The feminist landscape in Ukraine is diverse, encompassing advocacy groups, NGOs, grassroots organisations and direct-action movements. Despite this diversity, grassroots activists report biased support and funding. For instance, although humanitarian outreach in Ukraine has reached historic levels since 2021, totalling billions of dollars, grassroots Ukrainian NGOs receive less than 20% of foreign donor funds directly. Instead, funding is typically allocated to larger organisations, which does not guarantee that it will eventually benefit grassroots NGOs (Wrobel, 2024). In the past few years, grassroots actors in Ukraine have highlighted this asymmetry and called for greater respect and acknowledgment of their work. A shift from foreign-funded NGOs to informal grassroots activism emerged as a significant phenomenon in post-Soviet Ukraine. Over time, the feminist movement has evolved from the fragmented NGOs of the 1990s into more inclusive, multi-issue-based communities.

4.3.1. ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS IN UKRAINE

Gender has become a battleground for the Russian political elite and their ideologues, and sexuality has become a central marker of Russian political strategy. In the 2010s, the term *Gayrope* was coined in Russia to describe European civilisation in contrast to the Orthodox Russian world, drawing a distinction between a Europe that is friendly towards LGBTQI+ rights and the traditional values of the Russian world (Shevtsova, 2023). Notably, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church characterised 'gay pride events in Ukraine' as a justification for Russia's invasion of the country.[44] However, it also had the opposite effect, as, according to the interviewed respondent, some began positioning themselves as supporters of LGBTQI+ rights to distance themselves from the Russian World.[45]

A study conducted by Ukrainian feminist and human rights organisations views anti-gender ideology as a component of Russia's information war against Ukraine; a campaign that intensified following Russia's invasion in 2014 (Ukrainian Women's Fund, 2020). Notably, in Ukraine as well as other post-Soviet countries, anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ narratives are framed as efforts to 'protect family values', which are asserted to be under threat from feminists and LGBTQI+ individuals, whereas in Georgia, beyond LGBTQI+ activism, in recent years, civil society as a whole is portrayed as a threat, purportedly driven by Western interests.

Anti-gender groups direct their criticism towards gender ideology, which they view as incompatible with Christianity and traditional values (Ukrainian Women's Fund, 2020). These groups blame left-leaning political forces for promoting relativism regarding sexuality and gender roles and propagate conspiracy theories about a global plot allegedly supported by international organisations such as the UN and the EU (Ukrainian Women's Fund, 2020). By framing Ukraine as a fortress under siege, anti-gender actors create a narrative that fosters mistrust of those with differing views, limiting dialogue and interaction with political opponents. Feminists, researchers and gender and

[44] See: https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-08-22/h_de0516e0f59ac2214af21bbb0aaf152e

[45] Interview. Ukraine. 5 December 2024.

human rights activists are labelled ‘enemies of the Ukrainian nation’, ‘collaborators with internal occupiers’, ‘Soros supporters’ and ‘leftists’ or ‘leftist puppets’[46] (Ukrainian Women’s Fund, 2020).

Between 2014 and 2020, anti-gender groups in Ukraine encompassed a range of actors, including conservative political forces in parliament united under the banner of Values, Dignity, Family, religious organisations, far-right groups, military units like Azov and homophobic CSOs such as Love Against Homosexuality (Ukrainian Women’s Fund, 2020). The expansion of this anti-gender network was gradual, with the diverse actors sharing a common message centred on family values. This rhetoric was employed to radicalise and mobilise society against gender equality at both legislative and political levels.

The anti-gender offensive contributed to societal polarisation, pitting different groups against one another by contrasting various regions of Ukraine based on their attitudes towards family values (2020). Each time Ukraine inched closer to the EU, anti-gender sentiments emerged; for instance, after signing the Association Agreement with the EU demands arose in Ivano-Frankivsk for a march promoting family values and a ban on abortion. Prior to 2018, resistance to Ukraine’s association with the EU was largely indirect; however, after 2018, it became more overt, manifesting in attempts to prevent Istanbul Convention ratification and proposing a government resolution titled ‘On Measures to Ensure the Protection of Family Values and the Institution of Family in Ukraine’ (2020).

4.3.2. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Gender equality has been enshrined in Ukraine’s legal framework through specific legislation. Throughout the 2010s and 2020s, significant amendments were made to advance gender equality, culminating in the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2022 (despite the anti-gender movement). The state of gender equality in Ukraine has been closely linked to the country’s movement towards democracy and EU integration, as the promotion of gender equality is a key component of the criteria for countries seeking EU membership.

Ukraine ratified the UNs CEDAW in 1981, prior to its independence. In 2017, Ukraine developed a NAP for implementing the CEDAW’s recommendations. However, in 2022, the government discontinued planning for the next period, as it already had other comprehensive NAPs for gender equality in progress.

Following independence, women were primarily perceived by the state as objects of public policy rather than active subjects. Their roles were often framed in the context of family, marriage and motherhood, with social expectations centred on reproduction, nurturing and homemaking (Tolstokorova, 2012). Consequently, women were conceptualised as ‘dependent on men’ and ‘responsible for nurturing and rearing children’ (Tolstokorova, 2012); a perception that predominantly confined their role to the domestic sphere.

Major steps towards advancing gender equality in Ukraine began in the 2000s. In early 2001, a Presidential Decree was issued on the Promotion of the Social Status of Women in Ukraine,

[46] Labels used against activists in Ukrainian: «ворогами української нації» та «сепаратистами»/»пособниками внутрішніх окупантів», «соросятами», «ліваками»/«лівими (лівацькими) підстилками».

emphasising the need for equal opportunities for women in both social and political spheres. That same year, Ukraine enacted a law aimed at the Prevention of Violence in the Family. In response to the pressing issue of human trafficking, Ukraine became a party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2000.

In 2005, Ukraine passed the Act on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men, which defined gender equality as the equal legal rights of women and men and providing equal opportunities for participation in all spheres of public life. However, the government's approach to gender equality continued to operate within a gender binary framework. In the same year, three NAPs focusing on gender were established, addressing workplace discrimination, human trafficking and education. This period marked the beginning of gender mainstreaming as a policy principle in Ukraine (Tolstokorova, 2012).

Significant legislative advances towards gender equality were made in the 2010s. In 2015, Ukraine adopted the Act on Amending Certain Legislative Acts of Ukraine, which aimed to prevent gender-based discrimination in the labour market. Additionally, Ukraine committed itself to advancing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In 2017, the Ukrainian Health Ministry abolished a decree that had prohibited women from being employed in 450 professions – a restriction that dated back to Soviet times and was justified on the grounds of protecting women's reproductive health. Moreover, women's roles in the military expanded: in 2016, sergeant and sergeant-major positions were opened to women under military contracts. Before this decree, women serving in military roles as snipers or gunners had to be officially registered in non-combat positions, such as cooks or nurses. By 2022, the year of the onset of the Russian invasion, nearly 60000 women were serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces (Brennan & Prescott, 2024). At the time of writing, the war is ongoing.

In 2017, Ukraine amended its legislation to strengthen its commitment to preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. This wording stems directly from the Istanbul Convention. However, according to the Ukrainian Center for Gender Policy (EU4Gender, 2023), the legal framework still presents several limitations. A progressive step in the direction of gender equality was an amendment extending paternal parental leave.[47] In 2023, the Gender Equality Committee and several members of parliament initiated further amendments to legislation related to parental leave (EU4Gender, 2023). Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 and taking into account a petition signed by 25000 Ukrainian citizens, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention in July and passed a bill in December banning hate speech against LGBTQI+ individuals in the media. This legislation had previously been vehemently opposed by anti-gender groups for six years, who claimed it would legitimise same-sex marriage and undermine family values (Enloe, 2023).

Additionally, Ukraine adopted the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include commitments related to gender equality, although these are not well-integrated into national policies. In 2020, Ukraine joined the Equal Pay International Coalition, committing to developing strategies and taking concrete steps to reduce the gender pay gap. Overall, while Ukrainian legislation is not gender-blind and does not establish gender-based barriers, it lacks sufficient gender sensitivity to

[47] See Ukrainian Act on Amending Certain Legal Acts on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities of Fathers and Mothers to Childcare: https://iportal.rada.gov.ua/news/Povidomlennya/206881.html

eliminate gender inequality and address the underrepresentation of women in certain economic sectors.

4.3.3. REVOLUTIONARY PRESENCE, INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS: WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING AND POLITICS IN UKRAINE

Ukrainian women have actively participated in formal and informal politics, asserting their presence in various political spheres, including revolutionary movements and military spaces.
The Euromaidan protests occurred between 2013 and 2014 in response to President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU. Estimates suggest that between half a million to one million people participated in the protests, with women constituting approximately half of the participants (Brennan & Prescott, 2024). The protests were marked by state violence, resulting in the deaths of 108 civilian protesters and 13 police officers (Brennan & Prescott, 2022). Feminists and leftists supported the Revolution, believing that closer ties with Europe would promote political and economic rights (Brennan & Prescott, 2024).

As of the 2021 parliamentary elections, women held only 21% of seats in the Ukrainian parliament, while men held 79%. This data remain relevant as there have been no elections since 2021 due to Russia's invasion in 2022 and the ongoing war. In 2013, Ukraine introduced a 30% gender quota for political parties; however, this measure failed to significantly increase women's representation on party lists due to the absence of sanctions for non-compliance. In 2020, a more stringent 40% gender quota was implemented, requiring political parties to ensure that 40–60% of their electoral lists comprised women or men.

Women are better represented at lower levels of government. For instance, women make up 27.8% of elected members in regional councils and 34.3% in district councils (EU4Gender, 2023). However, women hold only 16.6% of leadership positions as heads of local councils, highlighting a significant gap in access to higher-level positions associated with resource control and distribution. This reflects a persistent glass ceiling effect within the public service system, where women are often blocked from advancing beyond certain hierarchical levels.

An exception to the underrepresentation trend in decision-making roles is found in the judicial sector, where women constituted 53.6% of all judges in 2020. They are particularly well-represented in local courts, making up 54.6% of judges (EU4Gender, 2023). However, men still dominate leadership positions within judicial institutions despite this numerical majority.

In the diplomatic sector, women's representation has seen a gradual increase, rising from 4.4% in 2015 to 13.9% in 2020. Nonetheless, women continue to face significant barriers not only in formal politics but also within CSOs, where women only lead 28.1% of registered organisations (UCGP, 2023). Additionally, a survey conducted by Insight Ukraine in 2022 revealed that 45% of men and 21% of women believe that men make better political leaders, highlighting the prevailing gender biases that persist in societal attitudes towards leadership.

4.3.4. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION: FROM PAY GAPS TO INVISIBLE LABOUR

In Ukraine, the poverty rate among women stands at 10.8%, which is slightly higher than the 7.9% rate for men. Elderly women are the most affected, with a poverty rate of 35.6%. Gender disparity is particularly pronounced among populations in small towns (32.4%) and rural areas (31.5%)

(UKRSTAT, 2022). Women often experience multi-dimensional poverty, which escalates alongside the number of children in the household. Similar to trends observed in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, female-headed households in Ukraine are especially vulnerable to poverty (EU4Gender, 2023). Apart from female-headed households and elderly women, women in rural areas are at risk of monetary poverty, facing multiple deprivations and social exclusion (UCGP, 2023). According to the World Bank, the overall poverty rate in Ukraine surged from 5.5% to 24.2% in 2022, indicating that an additional 7.1 million people were pushed into poverty due to the war's impact on livelihoods, particularly among the population's most vulnerable segments (Beaumont, 2023, cited in UCGP, 2023). Notably, women comprise 72% of social protection beneficiaries in Ukraine (EU4Gender, 2023).

In Ukraine, the economic activity rate for women is 56%, significantly lower than the 68.5% rate for men. Similarly, the employment rate stands at 55% for women compared to 61% for men (UKRSTAT, 2022). Beyond the impact of the war, unpaid household labour further constrains women's economic activity, vertical and horizontal labour segregation and introduces a higher likelihood of self-employment in the informal sector (UCGP, 2023). One of the contributing factors to occupational segregation is the gender divide in academic disciplines, which affects the fields in which women and men pursue vocational and higher education. Since 2022, the employment rate for both genders has fallen, with many businesses closing. In 2022, 42% of small and medium-sized enterprises were put on hold, while 31% ceased operations entirely. According to the European Business Association, only 17% of businesses were operating at pre-war levels (Zanuda, 2022).

The gender pay gap in Ukraine has decreased from 26% in 2015 to 18.6% in 2021. However, it remains pronounced in certain sectors, with disparities reaching as high as 30% and even 75% in some fields. The highest pay gaps are found in arts, sports, entertainment, financial insurance activities and air transport (UKRSTAT, 2021). The gender pay gap, low salaries and the burden of unpaid care work are significant factors discouraging women from participating in the labour force. In Ukraine, unpaid household labour is disproportionately shouldered by women, who spend an average of 29 hours per week on such tasks, while men contribute only 15 hours. This unequal distribution intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war (UNFPA, 2018). The discrepancy is even more pronounced when examining childcare responsibilities: women spend approximately 49 hours per week on childcare, compared to just 22 hours for men (UNFPA, 2018).

The unequal division of unpaid household labour severely limits women's opportunities for career development, employment and income generation. Moreover, prevailing gender stereotypes further entrench these disparities. For instance, 61% of men compared to 54% of women believe that women should prioritise childcare over employment. Additionally, 61% of men versus 37% of women think that 'men should have the final word' in household decisions (UNFPA, 2018). Notably, 31% of young men, compared to 17% of young women, believe that men make better business leaders (Insight Ukraine, 2022).

4.3.5. GENDERED BARRIERS IN HEALTHCARE: GENDERED INEQUITIES AND UNEQUAL ACCESS

Women in Ukraine encounter numerous challenges within the healthcare system, both as healthcare workers and as patients. While women comprise a significant majority of the workforce in the health sector – 80% of all doctors and 90% of nurses – they remain severely

underrepresented in decision-making positions, with only 50% serving as chief doctors. This disparity is further reflected in wage inequality, with women earning less than their male counterparts (EU4Gender, 2023).

While gender is not always a barrier to healthcare access in Ukraine, it becomes a significant obstacle when combined with other factors such as age, income and rural residence. Women are twice as likely to seek preventive healthcare as men, with 15% of women doing so compared to 6% of men (EU4Gender, 2023). Barriers to healthcare access include distrust in doctors, high out-of-pocket expenses, long waiting times for urban residents and limited transportation options for those in rural areas. Although the government launched the Affordable Medicines Programme to make medications more accessible, many low-income populations, and especially women, still struggle to afford necessary treatments (EU4Gender, 2023). Additionally, out-of-pocket expenditures tend to be higher among low-income individuals compared to their high-income counterparts. This situation is exacerbated by the prevalence of informal payments; a significant issue within Ukraine's healthcare system. Overall, the most vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities, residents in rural areas, internally displaced persons and ethnic minorities, often lack access to quality healthcare.

The ongoing war has severely impacted access to SRHR. Reports indicate increased risks of premature births due to infections, poor nutrition, stress and a lack of medical care (UN Women, 2022). Women have also reported shortages of menstrual hygiene supplies and a lack of gynaecological services in rural areas. Furthermore, the war has caused significant damage to healthcare infrastructure due to shelling and power outages (EU4Gender, 2023).

4.3.6. BEYOND VICTIMHOOD: UKRAINIAN WOMEN CONFRONT WAR, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND IMPERIALISM

The war has created significant challenges and barriers for women in Ukraine. Following the Maidan Revolution, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, leading to military conscription of men, which forced women to take on new roles. The situation escalated after the full-scale invasion in 2022, resulting in approximately eight million Ukrainian refugees, predominantly women and children, being displaced (EU4Gender, 2023). Additionally, the number of internally displaced persons has reached 5.4 million, with women constituting 63% of this group (IOM, 2023). Men of ages suitable for military service have been restricted from leaving the country. During the war, girls and women are particularly vulnerable to displacement and face an elevated risk of human trafficking during migration (Brennan & Prescott, 2024). Conflict-related sexual violence has become prevalent during the war, with accusations against Russia of using rape as a weapon of war, disproportionately affecting women and exacerbating the issue of GBV.

While women were not required to serve in combat roles, a survey conducted in March 2022 revealed that 59% of Ukrainian women were willing to volunteer for combat (Al Orami & Antwi-Boateng, 2023). The high level of interest led to the establishment of a waiting list for female volunteers. The war has transformed women's roles, allowing them to take on combat positions in addition to traditional roles as surgeons and nurses. Following a pattern observed in other war contexts, women are increasingly participating in frontline units, serving as drivers and paramedics. Despite the growing presence of women in the Armed Forces, they continue to face challenges of sexual harassment, a lack of gender-inclusive infrastructure and uniforms and persistent stereotypes against women in the defence sector (EU4Gender, 2023).

Ukrainian women have also emerged as heads of households, adopting humanitarian roles, acting as educators and homeschooling teachers, documenting war atrocities and engaging in anti-war activism (Al Orami & Antwi-Boateng, 2023). Ukrainian women confront the multi-faceted consequences of conflict, including sexual violence, psychological trauma, educational disruption, unemployment, increased poverty, sexual trafficking and the marginalisation of the LGBTQI+ community.

Alarmingly, two out of three women in Ukraine report experiencing psychological, physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes (EU4Gender, 2023), with the prevalence of GBV increasing since 2020. Violence against LGBTQI+ individuals remains a significant concern. Following the Russian invasion, funding for shelters supporting victims of domestic violence has decreased as governmental priorities shifted (Enloe, 2023). The threat of violence has increased, particularly for women living alone in villages, where reduced street lighting and a higher presence of armed men contribute to an unsafe environment. While conflict-related sexual violence by Russian soldiers is a primary concern, it is not the only form of violence faced by Ukrainian women during the war (Enloe, 2023).

In the context of war, gender disinformation has become a key strategy for Russia to silence female journalists, politicians and activists in Ukraine. Beyond political and civic activists, Russia's targets also include refugees who were forced to leave Ukraine to escape the war, as well as those who joined the defence forces. In the information field, the Kremlin spreads gendered disinformation based on so-called traditional values to discredit Ukrainian women, portraying them as frivolous individuals who move abroad for personal gain, sell their bodies and are indifferent to the fate of their country amidst ongoing conflict (Kuzmenko & Kompantseva, 2023).

Following the occupation of Crimea in 2014, Crimean Tatars have become victims of everyday discriminatory rhetoric and practices, including the marking of Crimean Tatar homes, threats and refusal to buy or sell goods or services to or from Crimean Tatars (Anti-Discrimination Centre, 2021). They have been portrayed in the Russian media and public discourse as collaborators and traitors of the Soviet Union during World War II, with the narrative that they must be deported again being propagated (Anti-Discrimination Centre, 2021). In addition, Russian politicians and media have spread a distorted image of Crimean Tatars as extremists and Islamists. In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights issued a judgment on complaints from 2014 to 2018, addressing a pattern of human rights violations in Crimea, and found Russia responsible for widespread and systematic violations of a number of human rights and freedoms in occupied Crimea (ECHR, 2024).[48] Crimean Tatar women have been central to the current resistance against the Russian occupation. Women activists and family members of persecuted activists have been targeted by the Russian security forces. Members of the Crimean Tatar People's Mejlis[49] and hundreds of women activists have faced persecution and intimidation (Marusyak, 2021).

The Russian invasion has reshaped feminist priorities and visions in Ukraine, becoming the subject of heated debate. International and Ukrainian anti-war feminist movements have diverged on issues of anti-militarism, peace and self-defence. Many Ukrainian feminists perceive anti-war stances from Western experts as neglecting local voices, particularly criticisms of military support that they view as undermining Ukraine's right to self-defence against an imperial power (Kotliuk,

[48] See: https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{%22itemid%22:[%22002-14347%22

[49] Mejlis is the highest executive-representative body of the Crimean Tatars.

2023). Notably, an anti-war manifesto signed by 151 feminist scholars including Nancy Fraser and Sylvia Federici opposed supplying Ukraine with self-defence weapons, which sparked backlash among Ukrainian feminists. In response, Ukrainian feminists issued a manifesto titled The Right to Resist, [50] emphasising the need to rethink feminist solidarity. Feminist researchers such as Tsymbalyuk and Zamuruieva (2022) advocate for air defence, asserting that 'pacifism kills'.[51] While they criticise militarisation, they see no alternative to resisting Russia's invasion. As one of the interviewed experts noted 'Pacifism is a privilege of a society not affected by the war', for Ukrainians to be able to defend themselves is ' a matter of survival'.[52] Ukrainian feminists stress the importance of balancing support for self-defence with a critique of nationalist militaristic rhetoric, arguing that opposition to imperialism is fundamentally a feminist struggle.

CONCLUSION

During the pre-Soviet period, the Ukrainian women's movement emerged at the intersection of national liberation and feminist activism, advocating for education, suffrage and social reforms. Despite restrictions under Tsarist rule, Ukrainian women organised study circles, founded educational institutions and collaborated across ethnic lines, including Jewish, Russian and Crimean Tatar women. Their activism challenged both imperial domination and patriarchal norms, laying the groundwork for feminist consciousness before the Soviet period. During the Soviet period women were primarily mobilised as productive workers and mothers serving the socialist state, rather than as autonomous political subjects. Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the post-Soviet economic crisis had a deeply gendered impact, with poverty and unemployment driving many women into vulnerable situations, including human trafficking. Early women's activism in Ukraine focused on issues like domestic violence and trafficking, largely supported by international donors and framed around human rights rather than feminism. In the 2000s, feminist organising became more visible and diverse. More recently, amidst war and humanitarian crisis, feminist efforts have shifted towards grassroots, community-based support, although these actors often face unequal access to funding and recognition.

In post-2014 Ukraine, gender and sexuality became central to both Russia's ideological warfare and domestic political polarisation, with anti-gender rhetoric framing feminism and LGBTQI+ rights as threats to national and family values. These narratives, amplified by conservative politicians, religious groups and far-right actors, were used to mobilise opposition to gender equality and EU integration, often labelling feminist and human rights advocates as enemies of the state. While this campaign fuelled societal division, it also prompted some Ukrainians to align more visibly with LGBTQI+ rights as a way to distance themselves from the 'Russian World'.

Since independence, Ukraine has made significant legal strides towards gender equality, particularly in the 2000s and 2010s, culminating in the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2022. Ukrainian women have played a vital role in both formal and informal political arenas, notably participating in the Euromaidan protests, yet they remain underrepresented in high-level

[50] Https://commons.com.ua/en/right-resist-feminist-manifesto/ March 2022.
[51] Darya Tsymbalyuk and Iryna Zamuruieva, 'Why we as feminists must lobby for air defense for Ukraine', https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-russia-war-feminists-we-must-lobby-for-air-defence/ March 2022.
[52] Interview. Ukraine. 29 November 2024.

decision-making positions despite recent gender quotas. While women are better represented in local governance and the judiciary, significant barriers and societal biases continue to limit their access to leadership roles in politics, diplomacy and civil society. Although the gender pay gap has narrowed, women's participation in the labour force remains constrained by occupational segregation, informal employment and deeply rooted gender stereotypes. These structural inequalities have been further intensified by the war and ongoing economic instability. Women in Ukraine face systemic challenges in the healthcare sector, including wage disparities, vertical segregation of labour and barriers to access shaped by income, age and geography. The ongoing war has further strained healthcare access, particularly for sexual and reproductive health, while disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations through infrastructure damage and service disruptions.

The war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped women's lives, forcing them into new roles as combatants, heads of households, activists and humanitarian workers while exposing them to heightened risks of violence, displacement and discrimination. Despite their growing presence in defence and civil society, Ukrainian women continue to face structural inequalities and challenges, including GBV, underrepresentation and targeted disinformation campaigns. Feminist responses have been diverse, with local activists calling for solidarity that recognises both the need for self-defence and the dangers of imperial domination.

FINAL CONCLUSION

The post-Soviet period has revealed significant shifts and continuities in gender inequality across Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. While formal Soviet-era gender equality often concealed deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, the post-Soviet period exposed, and in some cases deepened, these disparities as state protections eroded. In many cases, the transition period, marked by economic crises and political instability, exacerbated gender inequalities, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of economic restructuring. One of the consequences of these shifts was massive emigration from all four countries, with a notable increase in the feminisation of migration over the years. This trend has created a care deficit in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Political representation reflects divergent patterns across the countries in this study. In Georgia, for example, progress in women's participation is slow, exemplified by the short-lived introduction of 25% electoral quotas and their abolition in 2024. In contrast, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine have implemented 30–40% gender quotas. Women's overall political representation is higher in countries with mandatory quotas. During the post-Soviet period, all countries implemented a range of important legislative and institutional initiatives promoting gender equality. This was later followed by the emergence of an anti-gender movement and campaigns intended to hinder the adoption of conventions aligned with gender justice.

Women's rights activism in these countries did not develop in isolation but was part of the global women's movement. Since the 1990s, women's activism has evolved significantly in these four countries. While in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine, women's activism extends beyond the NGO realm, including informal groups, initiatives and tactics, in Moldova, women's activism predominantly remains formal and linked to NGOs, with only minimal non-NGO or smaller

initiatives. This dynamic reflects the shifting issues addressed by women's rights activism. In Moldova, violence against women has been the leading issue, while in Georgia, it was the dominant issue in the 2000s and continues to be important, but since the 2010s, openly feminist activism emerged addressing a broad range of gender equality issues. Similarly, in Ukraine, formal NGO activism dominated in the early years, but by the end of the 2000s, feminist-identified formal and informal groups gained prominence. In Armenia, three periods can be distinguished: 1990s humanitarian activism, 2000s formal NGOs, and since 2010, diverse feminist voices. In all four countries, critical feminist voices argue that mainstream NGO activism on women's rights is insufficient, existing frameworks must be expanded and small initiatives supported.

Women's economic activity remains a significant challenge to gender equality in all four countries, with participation rates lower than those of men. These patterns underscore structural factors such as low-paid jobs, inadequate parental leave policies, insufficient childcare services and a lack of state-provided care infrastructure, all of which contribute to women's economic inactivity. They also reflect societal attitudes towards women's roles, where a prevailing belief persists that a woman's primary job is to care for family members (UN Women, 2019; Onyshchenko et al., 2022). The gender pay gap remains a challenge across these countries. According to 2023 data, the gap is highest in Armenia at 32.5%, followed by Georgia at 23%, Ukraine at 18.6% and Moldova at 15.5%.

Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights SRHR remains central to women's rights and decision-making authority, but they continue to be a challenge, particularly with notable urban–rural disparities. The authoritarian regime in Georgia threatens to further curtail these rights. In all four countries, government spending on healthcare remains low compared to overall GDP, making access to SRHR services particularly difficult in rural areas. Views on abortion vary by country, but women generally show more support for freedom of choice compared to men. Overall, on all issues concerning gender equality, women in these countries show more support for equality than men.

Gender issues do not affect all women similarly. In all four countries, power imbalances highlight the intersection of gender with other forms of inequality such as ethnicity, religion, class and rural–urban divides, complicating the experiences of marginalised women. While there has been some progress in overall gender equality, advancements are less pronounced when examining the intersections of gender with other social exclusion groups. This underscores the need for more nuanced approaches to addressing gender inequality. The issues of poverty, class, ethnicity and religious divisions should be included within feminist politics.

Post-Soviet wars have significantly shaped gender dynamics in the affected regions. While Ukraine remains embroiled in an ongoing war, Armenia has recently experienced armed conflict and Moldova and Georgia have frozen conflicts. Armed conflicts not only disrupted the regular way of life but also women's rights activism in Ukraine and Armenia. They found themselves in a new survival mode, learning to find new ways of coping. As a result, women's organisations in Ukraine and Armenia turned to security issues and service provision for women to address their specific needs in the context of war. Overall, women have been underrepresented in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in these countries.

Anti-genderism, amidst shifting global powers, poses a common challenge for all four countries. Anti-genderism has become symbolic glue for the Kremlin to mobilise anti-Western forces, serving

as a strategic tool to generate distrust towards the West. This serves several purposes: It undermines the international order by legitimising the occupation of sovereign territories, justifies authoritarianism within Russia and uses anti-gender rhetoric to support anti-democratic practices in these countries. The anti-gender movement in these countries influences public opinion on gender equality and has opposed – and, in case of Armenia and Ukraine, even hindered – the adoption of progressive laws and the ratification of international conventions. However, by 2024, Georgia has become the only country among the four where the ruling party has embraced anti-gender rhetoric.

The post-Soviet experiences in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine demonstrate that gender inequality is neither monolithic nor static but is shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, economic conditions and socio-political factors. These countries share common developments in terms of gender equality, the dynamics of women's activism over the last 30 years and their responses to shared geopolitical challenges. However, each country's unique context also presents distinctive challenges and strengths in the ongoing struggle for a gender-just society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are for national and international NGOs and reflect the historical and socio-political contexts outlined in the study. Thus, these organisations must:

- Support initiatives that move beyond narrow, single-issue agendas and adopt a more comprehensive intersectional approach that reflects the multi-dimensional realities of women's lives and address the broader structural, economic and political factors that shape gender inequality. Similarly, they must support intersectional, disaggregated research that captures the specific challenges faced by minority, rural and underprivileged women and women with disabilities. Current data are insufficient to fully understand and address these overlapping vulnerabilities.

- Ensure that funding prioritises feminist actors and initiatives that genuinely promote gender equality and structural change.

- Support diverse feminist organising and diversify funding. It is important to support a diverse range of formal and informal groups working on gender equality, including informal, independent, non-mainstream feminist organisations and initiatives that foster a plurality of feminist approaches. This will strengthen diverse feminist groups and tactics, particularly those rooted in intersectional, grassroots and critical perspectives. Moreover, this can contribute to a more resilient and inclusive women's rights movement, which requires a conscious diversification of funding mechanisms. In the context of increasing political backlash across the region, investing in varied forms of activism, apart from legal advocacy, grassroots organising and informal feminist initiatives, is essential for sustaining progress. In Georgia, for example, the rollback of previous legal gains highlights the critical importance of non-institutional forms of feminist activism in defending and advancing gender equality.

- Support initiatives that address the structural barriers to women's economic participation and persistent time poverty, particularly during reproductive years, should be prioritised.

This includes funding programmes and advocacy efforts to improve access to childcare, ensure gender just parental leave policies, promote gender-sensitive labour market reforms and redistribute unpaid care work. Supporting such interventions can help reduce the gender gap in employment and enhance women's long-term economic security and autonomy. Women from vulnerable backgrounds, including rural women, displaced women and ethnic and religious minorities face particularly strong structural barriers that limit their economic participation and require targeted support.

- Support women's SRHR, which is more crucial than ever given the rise of anti-gender politics in the region. Particular attention should be paid to addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalised women from accessing essential healthcare. Support should prioritise expanding SRHR services in rural areas and strengthening the healthcare system through continuous, gender-sensitive training for medical professionals.

- Strengthen comprehensive GBV prevention, protection and response systems. They must support survivor-centred approaches to GBV, including shelters, legal support, trauma-informed healthcare and services tailored to women with disabilities.

- Invest in expanding the framing of women's issues that would allow for more comprehensive and sustainable interventions, ensuring that programmes reflect the diverse and intersecting challenges women face rather than focusing only on women's victimhood.

- Support initiatives that promote women's participation and leadership in peace and security, particularly those that increase women's representation in formal negotiation spaces and support women-led peacebuilding initiatives and platforms that ensure meaningful participation of conflict-affected women in peace processes.

- Support community-based programmes that address and promote human and societal security for displaced and conflict-affected women and girls in all four countries. Support relevant stakeholders to ensure economic integration of women from displaced communities.

- Support initiatives that address gendered disinformation and technology-facilitated GBV, which has become a key tool of anti-gender politics in the countries examined in this study as women politicians are disproportionately affected by gendered attacks that often involve violations of personal boundaries and incitement to violence. They must also support programmes that monitor, document and counter gender disinformation. This includes support for digital literacy campaigns, protective mechanisms for women in public life and media advocacy that challenges the instrumentalisation of gender narratives for political purposes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acker, J., Barry, K., & Esseveld, J. (1983). Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research. *Women's Studies International Forum, 6*(4), 423–435.

Ackerly, B. A., & True, J. (2010). *Doing feminist research in political and social science*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Al Oraimi, S., & Antwi-Boateng, O. (2023). Surviving patriarchy: Ukrainian women and the Russia-Ukraine war. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 25*(6), Article 8. https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss6/8/

Applebaum, A. (2003). *Gulag: A history of the Soviet camps*. Doubleday.

Barkaia, M. (2017). "The Country of the Happiest Women"? Ideology and Gender in Soviet Georgia. In M. Barkaia & A. Waterston (Eds.), *Gender in Georgia: Feminist perspectives on culture, nation, and history in the South Caucasus* (pp. 33–46). Berghahn Books.

Bekishvili, N. (2017). *Women in the Soviet village: Oral histories* [in Georgian]. TASO Foundation.

Beraia, A. (2017a). რუსეთის რევოლუცია და ქართველი ფემინისტები: ქალი, როგორც პოლიტიკური სუბიექტი [The Russian Revolution and Georgian feminists: Woman as a political subject]. *Khma Kartveli Kalisa* [Women's Voice], *1*. https://womensvoice.tsu.ge/index.php/WOM/article/view/1795

Beraia, A. (2017b). *Feminist dialogue*. Safari. https://sapari.ge/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/dialogi-cigni.pdf

Bogatu, E. (2024). "Implications of women in education for society: The case of the Republic of Moldova." *Political Image, Theory and Philosophy*, 21(1), 3–19. https://annalindhfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/ISPRI.pdf

Bohachevsky-Chomiak, M. (1998). Women in Ukraine: The political potential of community organizations. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, *22*, 29–47.

Brennan, E., & Prescott, H. (2024). *Women, Gender and Activism in Contemporary Ukraine*. https://openpress.digital.conncoll.edu/beingukraine/chapter/chapter-8/

Cook, J. A., & Fonow, M. M. (1990). Knowledge and women's interests: Issues of epistemology and methodology in feminist sociological research. In J. M. Nielsen (Ed.), *Feminist research methods: Exemplary readings in the social sciences* (pp. 69–93). Westview Press.

Council of Europe. (2025). *Sixth Report Submitted by the Republic of Moldova. Pursuant to Article 25, paragraph 2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities – received on 1 April 2025.* https://rm.coe.int/6th-sr-moldova-en/1680b51635

Creighton, C. (1996). The "family wage" as a class-rational strategy. *The Sociological Review*, *44*(2), 204–224.

CRRC Georgia. (2021). *Violence against women in politics on Facebook*. https://crrc.ge/en/25673/

Delap, L. (2020). *Feminisms: A global history*. Pelican Books.

DeVault, M. L., & Gross, G. (2007). Feminist interviewing: Experience, talk, and knowledge. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 173–197). SAGE Publications.

Dunbar, W. (2018, March 8). The world's first democratically elected Muslim woman was from Georgia: Sofieva's story reflects the huge promise and terrible losses Georgia experienced in the first half of the 20th century. *Eurasianet*.

Dussap, S. (2020). *Mayda: Echoes of Protest.* AIWA.

Ekmekcioglu, L. (2023). Communist Armenian women's history: *Hai Guine* of postwar France and the feminist repatriation to Soviet Armenia (1947–1949). *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines*, (15), 63–96.

ECMI. (2014). What's Next for Moldova's minorities after Crimea. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182879/Brief_33.pdf

EU4Gender. (2023). *Ukraine Country Gender Profile (UCGP)*. European Union Neighbourhood East. https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf

EU4Gender. (2024). *Country gender profile: Armenia*. EU Neighbours East.

Fabian, K., Johnson, J. E., & Lazda, M. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge handbook of gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. Routledge.

Gaprindashvili, L. (2016). ქართველთა შორის წერა-კითხვის გამავრცელებელი საზოგადოების მონუმენტი. [Monument to the Society for the Advancement of Literacy Among Georgians]. Heinrich Böll Foundation – South Caucasus.

Gaprindashvili, L. (2017). Pioneer women: 'Herstories' of feminist movements in Georgia. In M. Barkaia & A. Waterston (Eds.), *Gender in Georgia: Feminist perspectives on culture, nation, and history in the South Caucasus.* Berghahn Books.

GEOSTAT (National Statistics Office of Georgia). (2023). *Women and men in Georgia*. https://geostat.ge/media/67524/Women-and-Men-in-Georgia_2024.pdf

GEOSTAT (National Statistics Office of Georgia). (2024). *Women and men in Georgia*. https://geostat.ge/media/67524/Women-and-Men-in-Georgia_2024.pdf

GEOSTAT, & UN Women. (2023). *National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia 2022.* https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/12/national-study-on-violence-against-women-in-georgia-2022-0

Goldman, W. Z. (1993). *Women, the state, and revolution: Soviet family policy and social life, 1917–1936*. Cambridge University Press.

Grzebalska, W., Kováts, E., & Pető, A. (2017). *Gender as symbolic glue: How 'gender' became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order. Political Critique.* https://krytykapolityczna.pl/political-critique-archive/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/

Harutyunyan, A. (2016, March 31). Lessons of history: Public activism of Armenian women in the 19th and early 20th century. *Heinrich Böll Foundation*. https://feminism-boell.org/en/2016/03/31/lessons-history-public-activism-armenian-women-19th-and-early-20th-century

Hasratyan, J., Zakaryan, L., Hovnatanyan, T., & Armaghanova, G. (2014). *Women's political participation in parliamentary elections in 2012*. Association of Women with University Education and OSCE Office. https://www.osce.org/yerevan/116089

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2011). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Horn, M. D. (2006). *The First Image Reversed: American Foreign Policy, Democratization, and Gender Politics in Transnational States (Estonia, Moldova).* Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University.

Horn, M. D. (2010). *Women, Civil Society and the Geopolitics of Democratization*. Routledge.

Hrycak, A. (2002). From mothers' rights to equal rights: Post-Soviet grassroots women's associations. In N. Naples & M. K. Desai (Eds.), *Women's community activism and feminist politics: Local and global perspectives* (pp. 135–158). Routledge.

ILO. (2018). *Roma women and the world-of-work in the Republic of Moldova.* International Labour Office.

Ishkanian, A. (2002). Mobile motherhood: Armenian women's labor migration in the post-Soviet period. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, *11*(3), 383–415.

Jilozian, A. (2017). *Backlash against equality: Anti-gender campaigns in Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine - A comparative study*. Women's Support Center.

Khalapyan, H. (2019, March 12). Armenian women's writing in the Ottoman Empire, late 19th to early 20th centuries. *EVN Report*. https://evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/armenian-womens-writing-in-the-ottoman-empire-late-19th-to-early-20th-centuries/

Kis, O. (2012). (Re)constructing Ukrainian women's history: Actors, authors, and narratives. In O. Hankivsky & A. Salnykova (Eds.), *Gender, politics and society in Ukraine* (pp. 152–179). University of Toronto Press.

Kollontai, A. (1920). *Communism and the family* (A. Holt, Trans.). In *Selected writings of Alexandra Kollontai*. Marxists Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm

Kotliuk, G. (2023, October 30). *Feminism in Ukraine is always anti-colonial*. Gunda-Werner-Institute, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2023/10/30/feminism-ukraine-always-anti-colonial

Kuzmenko, L., & Kompantseva, L. (2023). *An underestimated threat: Gendered disinformation about Ukrainian women journalists*. Commission on Journalistic Ethics. https://cje.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/WEB-ENG-Gendered-Disinformation.pdf

MDF (2024). *გენდერული და იდენტობაზე დაფუძნებული დეზინფორმაცია* [Gender and identity-based disinformation]. Media Development Foundation. https://mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view-library/263

Melashvili, T. (2014). თანამედროვე ფემინისტური აქტივიზმი საქართველოში [Contemporary feminist activism in Georgia]. *Feminism and Gender Democracy*. Heinrich Böll Foundation - South Caucasus.

Mikeladze, K. (1917). თანასწოროება სქესთა წინაშე კანონისა [Equality of the sexes before the law]. *Khma Kartveli Kalisa* [Women's Voice], *33*(1).

Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333–358.

Nakhutsrishvili, L. (Ed.). (2024). *Democratic Republic of Georgia: In search of form and content*. Ziari Press.

Nikoghosyan, A. (2017). The Paradox of Armenia's Domestic Violence Law. *OpenDemocracy.* https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/paradox-of-armenia-s-domestic-violence-law/

Onyshchenko, A., et al. (2022). *Baseline study on gender norms and stereotypes in the countries of the Eastern Partnership.* UN Women & UNFPA.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2022). *A Review of Georgian Emigrants*. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/a-review-of-georgian-emigrants_00df3f32-en

Osipov, V., & Sargizova, J. (2016). *Men and gender equality in Armenia*. UNFPA Armenia.

OxYgen Foundation. (2020). *Women's political participation in the Republic of Armenia: Analysis*. OxYgen Foundation. https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Women-PP_ENG.pdf

OxYgen Foundation. (2022). *National Assembly and Local Self-Government Elections 2021: Peculiarities of Women's Electoral Behaviour*. https://oxygen.org.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/REPORT_Women-Electoral-Behaviour_2022_ENG.pdf

PDO (Public Defender of Georgia). (2022). *Assessment of the needs of women and girls with disabilities and the state of protection of their rights in Georgia*. https://ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022032913195226234.pdf

Papikyan, A. (2020). *Beyond accusation: Women's repressions in Soviet Armenia during the Second World War*. Heinrich Böll Foundation – Yerevan. https://feminism-boell.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/BEYOND%20ACCUSATION.pdf

Pataraia, B. (2024). *გენდერული დეზინფორმაცია პოლიტიკოსი ქალების წინააღმდეგ* [Gendered disinformation against women politicians]. Tbilisi: Sapari.

PINK and CRRC. (2016). *From Prejudice to Equality: Study of societal attitudes towards LGBTI people in Armenia*. Public Information and Need of Knowledge NGO.

Raffi. (1990). The Armenian Woman. *Collection of Works,* 11, 99–199.

Ram, H. (2003). *The imperial sublime: A Russian poetics of empire*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Ray, R. (1999). *Fields of protest: Women's movements in India*. University of Minnesota Press.

Roth, B. (2004). *Separate roads to feminism: Black, Chicana, and White feminist movements in America's second wave*. Cambridge University Press.

Sabedashvili, T. (2011). *The identification and regulation of domestic violence in Georgia (1991–2006)* [Doctoral dissertation, Central European University].

Sabedashvili, T. (2017). The domestic violence challenge to Soviet Women's empowerment policies. In M. Barkaia & A. Waterston (Eds.), *Gender in Georgia: Feminist perspectives on culture, nation, and history in the South Caucasus* (pp. 95–109). Berghahn Books.

Sahni, K. (1997). *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of the Caucasus and Central Asia*. Orchid Press.

Sanjian, A. (1991). Social problems, political issues: Marriage and divorce in the USSR. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *43*(4), 629–649.

Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *The American Historical Review, 91*(5), 1053–1075.

Shahnazaryan, G. (2011, September 30). Challenging patriarchy in the South Caucasus. *Global Dialogue*, *2*(1). https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/challenging-patriarchy-in-the-south-caucasus

Shahnazaryan, N., Aslanova, A., & Badasyan, E. (2016, September 15). *Under the rainbow flags: LGBTI rights in the South Caucasus*. Caucasus Edition. https://caucasusedition.net/under-the-rainbow-flags-lgbti-rights-in-the-south-caucasus/

Shevtsova, M. (2023). Religion, nation, state, and anti-gender politics in Georgia and Ukraine. *Problems of Post-Communism, 70*(2), 163–174.

Snyder, T. (2010). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books.

Socioscope. (2023). *Women about sexual violence: Perceptions and experiences*. Socioscope. https://socioscope.am/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/%D4%B6%D5%A5%D5%AF%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B5%D6%81-66_compressed.pdf

Stites, R. (1978). *The women's liberation movement in Russia: Feminism, nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930*. Princeton University Press.

Tolstokorova, A. (2012). Of women's bondage: Socio-economic effects of labour migration on the situation of Ukrainian women and family. *Social Analysis. Acta Universitatis Sapientiae*, 2(1), 9–29.

Tskhadadze, T., & Barkaia, M. (2023). *Manufacturing fear: The crisis of democracy, antigenderism, and response pathways in Georgia*. Women's Fund in Georgia.

Tskipurishvili, N. (2021). განმანათლებლობა და სექსუალობა მე-19 და მე-20 საუკუნეების მიჯნაზე მოღვაწე ქართველი ქალი ავტორების ნაწარმოებებში [Enlightenment and sexuality in the works of Georgian women authors at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries]. *Khma Kartveli Kalisa* [Women's Voice], *3*. https://doi.org/10.48614/vgw.3.2021.3094

Tsymbalyuk, D., & Zamuruieva, I. (2022, March 16). Why we as feminists must lobby for air defence for Ukraine. *openDemocracy*. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-russia-war-feminists-we-must-lobby-for-air-defence/

UNICEF & National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat). (2018). *Georgia multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS) 2018*. UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/georgia/reports/2018-georgia-mics-multiple-indicator-cluster-survey

UNFPA. (2018). Masculinity today: Men's attitudes to gender stereotypes and violence against women. UNFPA. https://ukraine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Masculinity%20Today%20Men%27s_Report.pdf

UN Women. (2021). *Republic of Moldova country gender equality brief*. UN Women Europe and Central Asia. https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/12/republic-of-moldova-country-gender-equality-brief

UN Women. (2022). *Time use survey in Georgia 2020–2021*. UN Women Georgia. https://georgia.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/12/time-use-survey-in-georgia-2020-2021

UN Women. (2024). *Country gender equality profile of Georgia 2023*. UN Women Georgia. https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/cgep_eng_web2b.pdf

UN Women, & CRRC Georgia. (2025). *Gender equality attitudes study in Georgia*. UN Women Georgia. https://georgia.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/gender-equality-attitudes-study-in-georgia

Vadatchkoria, N. (2018). *Women's movement in contemporary Georgia and the role of Facebook in developments of the movement* (Master's thesis, Lund University). Lund University Publications.

Wolfe Jancar, B. (1978). *Women under communism*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Women's Law Center. (2015). *Men and gender equality in the Republic of Moldova*. Women's Law Center.

Women's Law Center. (2024). *Men and gender equality in the Republic of Moldova*. Women's Law Center.

Wylie, G., & McRedmond, P. (Eds.). (2010). *Human trafficking in Europe: Character, causes and consequences*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Zdravomyslova, E., & Temkina, A. (2005). Gendered citizenship in Soviet and post-Soviet societies. In V. Tolz & S. Booth (Eds.), *Nation and gender in contemporary Europe* (pp. 96–116). Manchester University Press.

Zychowicz, J. (2020). *Superfluous women: Art, feminism, and revolution in twenty-first-century Ukraine*. University of Toronto Press.

KVINFO
CHRISTIANS BRYGGE 3
1219 KØBENHAVN K
TEL +45 33 13 50 88
kvinfo@kvinfo.dk
www.kvinfo.dk