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COUNTRY CASE STUDY: ABKHAZIA

# SUPPORTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POST-CONFLICT GOVERNANCE:

The Case of Abkhazia

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# SUPPORTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POST-CONFLICT GOVERNANCE:

The Case of Abkhazia

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## ACRONYMS

|              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>AAW</b>   | Association of Abkhaz Women    |
| <b>IfP</b>   | Initiative for Peacebuilding   |
| <b>NGO</b>   | Non-governmental organisation  |
| <b>UNSCR</b> | UN Security Council Resolution |

## INTRODUCTION

The 1992–93 Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict was one of a number of ethno-national self-determination conflicts occurring as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Lasting for a brutal 14 months, it resulted in the exodus of over 200,000 ethnic Georgians and Mingrelians, among other nationalities. While an estimated 50,000 people subsequently returned to the Gal/i<sup>1</sup> district of Abkhazia bordering Georgian-controlled territory, the issue of return remains highly contentious. A Ceasefire and Separation of Forces Agreement was signed in Moscow in May 1994 and the constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia was adopted in November of the same year. Five years later Abkhazia held a referendum and formally declared independence from Georgia, although Russia was the first to formally recognise this in August 2008 following the five-day Georgia–Russia war over South Ossetia. Since then, three other UN Member States have recognised Abkhazia. Georgia and the remainder of the international community continue to assert Georgian territorial integrity.

As is often the case in other conflict contexts, Abkhazian women faced a range of insecurities during the violence and were primary actors in responding to the conflict, providing family income, actively rebuilding the social fabric and setting up small enterprises.<sup>2</sup> They also fought as combatants, worked in military hospitals, were correspondents on the front and helped refugees survive. Indeed, there were women among those awarded honours and medals. Despite their integral roles during and after the war, women find themselves underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles in the current political sphere.

Peacebuilding entails the development of inclusive, accountable post-conflict governance systems to facilitate political legitimacy, sustainability and stability. This principle of inclusivity was reinforced by the UN through the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2000.<sup>3</sup> It was the first of a series of normative frameworks which explicitly urge the international community to include women, their perspectives and priorities, and their skills and capacities in peacebuilding and security matters. Improving women's participation in decision-making is a core principle of UNSCR 1325, and it urges women's increased representation at all decision-making levels in national institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this briefing note is to deepen policymakers' understanding of the existing challenges that women face both in engaging in public life in Abkhazia and in articulating and addressing their specific concerns in the current political environment. It is based on a research paper by the Association of Abkhaz Women (AAW). In early 2010 AAW conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with ten women and five men from the capital. In addition, nine focus groups were conducted with 76 people (60 women and 16 men) between the ages of 26 and 82 from different Abkhaz cities. Interviewees and focus-group participants included parliamentarians, local councillors, public servants, trade unionists and party activists, non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders, journalists, academics and ordinary voters.

1 Georgians and Abkhaz use different spellings for place names, e.g. the Abkhaz refer to 'Gal District' and Georgians 'Gali District'. Where possible, this report using both spellings.

2 Educated women found themselves working in markets, or trading fruit across the Russian border (men generally were less likely to accept the drop in status). In rural areas, women rarely do paid work (though they do agricultural work) and are sometimes forbidden by their husbands from working. Common professions for women include journalism, teaching and medicine. 'A survey of access to information in Abkhazia and its impact on people's lives' (2007). Article 19. Available at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/abkhazia-foi-report.pdf>

3 Text of Resolution S/RES/1325 (2000). Available at [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf); and Secretary-General's Report to the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security, S/2010/173.

4 The first article of UNSCR 1325 'urges increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for prevention, management and resolution of conflict'.

## ABKHAZIA'S LEGAL BASIS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Abkhazia has declared itself to be a 'sovereign, democratic state, which recognizes and guarantees the rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights and other universally recognized international legal acts'.<sup>5</sup>

While there is an institutional framework in place, which in practical terms governs Abkhazia, as an unrecognised (now partially recognised) entity Abkhazia has been unable to have formal foreign relations as a state (until recently). However, laws passed by the Abkhaz authorities are still not recognised under international law and Abkhazia cannot become a signatory to international agreements. Also due to its "non-recognised" status, Abkhazia has received comparatively little development or post-conflict rehabilitation assistance,<sup>6</sup> though, after Russia recognised Abkhazia's independence, it provided considerable economic and financial support. This contested status has resulted in a limited definition of "peacebuilding" being applied to Abkhazia. For instance, as long as a proportion of the pre-war population remain displaced, the development of "inclusive, accountable governance" is considered to be strengthening the Abkhaz claim for independence and thus is contrary to a potential resolution within the framework of Georgian territorial integrity. On the other hand, some argue that fostering a culture of democratic accountability and inclusivity is essential for longer-term peaceful coexistence, regardless of the nature of the eventual settlement. Either way, non-recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state should not be an obstacle to promoting gender equality and the development of an equitable, inclusive, tolerant society, and certainly should not be used to limit opportunities for any section of the population.

Given these specific difficulties that Abkhazia has faced, it is quite a remarkable achievement by local NGOs that they successfully lobbied for a law 'On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the Republic of Abkhazia', which came into force in 2009. It is still too early to expect full implementation of such a law, especially one which requires a fundamental change in attitudes, behaviours and political culture. As one survey respondent stated, 'We have adopted this law, but it is declarative. Stereotypes about men and women's roles in society have not yet been overcome'. Gender equality within Abkhazia's political framework needs to be addressed through the population and its expectations of women's roles in public life.

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5 Article 3 of the Abkhaz constitution states that 'The Republic of Abkhazia is the subject of international law'.

6 Though it has received considerably more than has been provided to either South Ossetia or Nagorny Karabakh, the other two "non-recognised" entities in the Caucasus region.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S INITIATIVES

Civil society in Abkhazia is vibrant, with women particularly prominent among its ranks, and one could conclude, as one of the survey respondents did, that 'this says a lot about the important role of women'. Women have founded civil society organisations to tackle a variety of pressing needs and problems, including the provision of humanitarian assistance, creating livelihoods and advocating for democratic and political reforms. Women also founded the first independent newspaper, *Nuzhnaya Gazeta* ("Necessary Newspaper").

In addition to the success of the NGO-led process of introducing the Law on Gender Equality, NGOs also contributed to the preparation and lobbying for the Law on Access to Information, adopted in 2008, and have been particularly active in lobbying for transparent, free and fair elections and their monitoring, with the aim of promoting a more inclusive political culture.

Active civil society organisations provide potential space for women to influence policy, improve women's status and eventually increase the access and representation of women in leadership positions in the broader political arena. However, so far the development of this outlet for vigorous, educated and independent women has occurred in parallel to a steadily diminishing female presence in the Abkhaz decision-making structures. Furthermore, their prevalence in this field has led to compartmentalising women in this niche sector, creating assumptions that "the place" for women's public voice is in civil society rather than in political leadership.

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES

A cursory overview of Abkhaz ruling structures reveals that women are occupying some prominent positions and are present across the judiciary and parliament. However, Abkhaz experts interviewed noted that they are few and attested that women in power do not always represent women's interests: 'Of course, the number of women present matters. If there were more at decision-making levels, they could change things. But today we cannot see the influence of women'.

In the early 1990s the Soviet tradition continued and women were still able to enter parliament, but over time this has decreased. Women themselves are not particularly influential or active in political parties and do not seek to run for positions of responsibility. In the parliamentary elections in Abkhazia in 2007, a mere 16 women out of 130 candidates were registered to contest 35 parliamentary seats. Women make up just over 11 percent of current parliamentarians. This is a downturn from the parliament of 1996–2002 when 5 out of 35 deputies were women. In 2007 the Assembly elected two deputy speakers – one man and one woman. In the Sukhum/i town Assembly, 6 out of 25 members (24 percent) are female. However, outside the capital, representation of women is much lower, with only one district assembly headed by a woman. No women have ever been nominated for president in the three presidential elections, although in 2004–05 one woman stood as a candidate for vice-president. Some interviewees considered this to be tokenism in order to win women's votes.

Within government, four out of twelve ministries are headed by women (Economy, Labour & Social Development, Justice, Education). However, there are no women heading up any of the six state committees, and only two out of nine departments under the Cabinet of Ministers are headed by women (Department for Statistics and the Department for Building & Architecture). Of eight state funds, two are headed by women (fund for the development of Abkhaz language, and the medical insurance fund). The official information agency, Apsnypress, is also headed by a woman.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that statistics do not meaningfully reflect the realities and complexities of women's political participation. Firstly, numerical gains can be achieved *inter alia* through external pressure, elite status and connections or changes in electoral systems and policies, and do not necessarily indicate the quality and influence of women represented in the formal political domain. Secondly, women do not naturally represent women's interests, not least because women are a heterogeneous constituency. Finally, even where women were present, they were generally not in leadership positions: 'There are not many women among the decision-makers and senior executives. There are more women working in areas where the preparations for decision-making take place. Therefore, they do not have such a significant influence'. Nevertheless, achieving a critical mass of women represented may have some positive impacts: interviewees noted that, if it was difficult now for women to enter politics, their greater presence might make it easier to be a woman in politics. Furthermore, as one declared, 'The emergence of women politicians who could participate, for instance, in the Abkhaz Security Council, could significantly change our political future because today we are following trodden paths: the same people offer their own solutions but they have exhausted their creative resources regarding possible development models'.

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7 [http://apsnypress.info/state\\_power](http://apsnypress.info/state_power)

## CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Currently, Abkhazia is a long way from achieving a critical mass of women in public structures and, furthermore, the significance of their political participation cannot be measured by statistics. The research carried out by AAW indicates that a constellation of factors continue to block women's numerical gains in public office, as well as their meaningful impact on decision-making processes. These challenges can be broadly grouped into three categories.

### TRADITIONAL ROLES, STEREOTYPES AND WOMEN'S STATUS

Interviewees attributed the lack of women decision-makers and political leaders to stereotypes about women's responsibility as mothers and homemakers.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, local male politicians worried that 'if all the women go into politics, how we will address the demographic problem?'<sup>9</sup> Such cultural and attitudinal barriers were explained by a former parliamentarian who felt that 'the problem exists more in society itself which is not ready to see such a change. But it won't prepare itself for change – public opinion needs to be formed, people's minds need to be changed'. Society is accustomed to giving decision-making responsibilities to men and there is a tendency for women to be taken less seriously as actors in public life. Women are unthinkingly denied information or excluded from conversations concerning politics, which is demonstrated in an analysis of women's access to information showing that public administrative information tends to be directed at men.<sup>10</sup>

Women also report discrimination in the judicial process or by law enforcement. One particular interviewee noted that, despite being treated politely by public officials as a woman, she feels she is not taken seriously precisely because she is female. Furthermore, respondents noted that, when women are firm and direct, they are subtly reminded of their sex and what is expected traditionally of a woman. Such cultural reflexes are often unconscious; however, they effectively prevent women from asserting themselves.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, several respondents declared they had not thought about these issues before being asked.

However, active opinions appear to be held more consciously by some male political actors. Young male town council deputies interviewed thought that including more women was not necessary: 'Let the men deal with politics – is that bad?!' Others, including the chairman of the Council of Elders, maintained that women 'are very influential and effective'. This seemed to be an acceptance of the status quo; for instance, the head of an independent television company stated that women are a strong, indirectly effective channel of influence on husbands, brothers and sons who, as officials of various ranks, were often influenced by their womenfolk.

8 In the soviet period the quota system enabled some women to hold positions of power. Earlier the eldest male represented the household, and men and women had separate roles. The eldest female had a high status and was listened to; however, historically, an Abkhaz woman could not inherit land, buy, sell or sign a contract without her husband's agreement.

9 The 'demographic problem' relates to the proportion of population that is ethnically Abkhaz just reaching majority. It is thus an existential issue for the Abkhaz and highly political, putting the onus on women to increase the Abkhaz population as a means of state-building rather than through participation in public life.

10 'A survey of access to information in Abkhazia and its impact on people's lives' (2007). Article 19.

11 Ibid. Research also found that state-run and independent and opposition media in Abkhazia lack both gender sensitivity and the interest in improving the image of woman politicians.

A different opinion was also heard in the research, claiming that, in Abkhazian society, discrimination against women does not exist, and access to power for women is no more complicated than for men. Many men and some women sincerely believe that women could achieve success in politics if only they wanted to, but that women simply do not aspire to such positions. Officials at all levels and both sexes as a rule rejected the existence of a gender imbalance in decision-making and their responses indicated that they were not open to change in this regard. Conflicting opinions on the existence of a problem combined with a lack of awareness of the issue prove a significant challenge to increasing women's political participation.

## LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES, INCENTIVES AND RESOURCES

Women's frequent de facto exclusion from public conversation limits their access to information on public matters and decision-making. This is particularly the case in the political sphere in Abkhazia, where information relies predominantly on word of mouth. Women also have significantly less access to financial and administrative resources and this adds to their marginalisation from politics.

Personalities rather than policy issues rule the small political scene in Abkhazia, where the political culture is relatively underdeveloped. This closed, elite framework hinders newcomers, and women are therefore less likely to put themselves forward, excluding them from decision-making processes. The use of "dirty politics", the lack of clear rules on media coverage of election campaigns and poor political awareness in society have all contributed to make a political career a less attractive option for women. Several women felt that unfair election techniques posed a major barrier, as women 'don't want to be tainted by this dirt'. Personal attacks appear to have a greater effect on women as individuals than on men due to traditional social expectations of female attributes and behaviour. Women are likely to be criticised more vigorously and are unable to fall back on a party structure.

Civil society could have a role in developing a more transparent, inclusive and accountable political culture and issue-based debate, rather than being personality driven as it is currently. One respondent voiced the hope that, 'If our parties can become political institutions in reality, and not only on paper, and they include women decision-makers, I think we'll have the [women] candidates'.

## INSECURE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION

Women frequently bear the brunt of austere socio-economic conditions and carry the responsibility for the survival and wellbeing of families. They undertake agricultural and informal work, which is generally more labour-intensive, and socio-economic policies are not designed to ease their burdens. Little gender-disaggregated data is available upon which to develop policies responsive to the specific needs of women, including their health, economic or legal status. The overall lack of gender analysis and policies in public administration (and the media) means that there are no coordinated measures to strengthen their position in society and that their care-giving responsibilities are often a significant barrier to their involvement in public life, let alone leadership positions.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Women are particularly active civil society actors in Abkhazia, yet are underrepresented in decision-making structures. Civil society has relatively good relations with the authorities – providing an opportunity to develop women leaders from among civil society actors. There is a locally enforceable legal basis for equality in the Law on Gender Equality, even though amendments to other laws failed to incorporate its basic tenets and Abkhazia's laws are not internationally recognised. Furthermore, its institutions provide a structure for political participation despite the political culture being relatively underdeveloped. Barriers to women's participation include strong emphasis on the traditional roles of women as mothers and homemakers, as well as supporters rather than leaders. Women's access to mainstream politics, information and resources is limited, partly due to their socio-economic burdens and responsibilities for maintaining their families and communities, but also due to assumptions about their irrelevance to politics and the personality-based and elite nature of the political environment. While laws do not take into account gender differences, they are rarely gender-neutral in practice, to the detriment of women.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The partially recognised status of Abkhazia means it is problematic for the international community to engage formally on issues relating to women's political participation in governance of the region. However, this should not deter the international community from supporting the aim of gender equality in Abkhazia. A valuable entry point for addressing the continued exclusion of women from public structures is civil society. Civil society is vibrant and could continue to provide an avenue for active women to engage in public matters and to raise awareness of structural gender inequalities in socio-political life. The following recommendations to the EU have been shaped with this in mind.

### **Raise awareness of the principles behind the 2009 Law on Gender Equality**

- Encourage cooperation between civil society and authorities through the establishment of a Gender Equality Forum. Such a space would allow for the regular interaction to share ideas and good practice on tackling gender equality and the treatment of women.
- Provide expertise on the development of gender-disaggregated data-gathering systems and strengthen the capacity of civil society and the authorities to analyse the data to inform policies and interventions to address structural inequalities.
- Develop training programmes and awareness-raising programmes for politicians and security and justice actors on gender equality and human rights.

### **Strengthen civil society's capacity to address women's political, social and economic marginalisation**

- Assist civil society in developing public information campaigns on the multiple roles of women and on the importance of women's influence on decision-making processes, as well as the barriers to women's participation.
- Facilitate the development of a more inclusive political culture which is more open to women by working with civil society, the media and political parties to address "dirty politics" through promoting issue-based campaigning and debate.

### **Address the perpetuation of rigid gender stereotypes through education and training**

- Develop teacher-training and education materials that teach and integrate gender equality, and support girls in their own educational and professional development.
- Support women entering public leadership roles by developing adult education programmes on political practice and the development of practical skills, such as debating, public speaking, policy development and campaigning. Include members of political parties in women's educational programmes.

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