

The Challenges in the Provision of Services to Female Victims of Domestic Violence by the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the COVID-19 Pandemic





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INTRODUCTION

- The goal of the present research is to support the improvement of state services delivered to the victims of domestic violence as part of the ongoing Public Administration Reform (PAR). In particular, key objectives of the research are: to study the attitudes of female victims of domestic violence concerning the services delivered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the “MIA”), including the Public Safety Management Center 112 (hereinafter referred to as “112”), during the period of March-June, 2020 (hereinafter referred to as “during COVID-19”), and to assess the challenges in the delivery of services by these entities resulting from the spread of COVID-19. Quantitative methodology,¹ telephone and face-to-face interview methods as well as qualitative methodology – focus group and in-depth interview methods have been used for data collection in the research. It should be emphasized that the research data are not representative and do not reflect in full the problems and challenges present during COVID-19. Furthermore, the challenges outlined in the report may be relevant only to the research respondents.

KEY FINDINGS

- The study has identified the **causes** and **types** of domestic violence against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the respondents, the pandemic period may have been especially challenging for socially vulnerable women who worked at retail outlets and open markets. After temporary closure of these facilities they were left without income; this, in some cases, has caused the agitation of their abusive husbands and children, resulting in heightened aggression towards them. According to the respondents, in families where women were daily-breaders or sole breadwinners, these very women became victims of violence. Moreover, focus group data shows that the situation emerged in Georgia due to the COVID-19 has triggered domestic violence not only in socially vulnerable families, but in the middle and upper classes as well. Job losses and isolation of people in common space, among others, may have heightened the risk of conflict regardless of the class belonging. According to both quantitative and qualitative data, during the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological and physical violence were listed as the most prevalent types of domestic violence. How-

¹ Due to the use of Multi Select (multiple-choice) questions, in some cases, the total number of answer choices selected for a question may be greater than the number of respondents that answered the question, causing the response percentage indicated in the present study findings to exceed 100 %.

ever, economic and sexual violence have also been observed. For example, 74% of the respondents of the quantitative research are victims of psychological violence, 67% have been subjected to physical violence, 19% - have suffered economic violence, 11% - sexual violence, and 4% are victims of coercive control.

- The research has revealed the key **problems** and **challenges** female victims of domestic violence faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the stories of the respondents, it has been identified that the crucial problem the victims faced during the pandemic was transportation/movement of the victims of domestic violence. Since the police did not work remotely, victims had to visit police stations for interviews and investigative activities. In the absence of public transport, and given their economic hardship, women were unable to get to police stations. This, in their view, resulted in delaying investigations of cases.
- According to the representatives of the MIA, during the COVID-19 pandemic, “112” shifted to emergency operation mode. Specifically, from February to October 2020, 70 additional new staff members were brought in to complement the existing operators’ staff, while in November, during the so-called “second wave” – 230 new operators were hired. Moreover, to reduce waiting time caused by the pandemic and to ensure uninterrupted policing, 112 has been divided into three channels: “112” – Urgent Medical Assistance; “112/1” – Police and Fire/Rescue Service and “112/2” – COVID-19 and Viral Symptoms. Despite the above-listed measures, in the opinion of some of the victims of domestic violence, overloading of “112” phone line has been an issue.
- The research has also studied the **behavior** of female victims of domestic violence. In particular, it looked into who they approached for assistance in cases of violence – “112”, the police or non-governmental organizations. 44% of the respondents stated that they called “112” after an incident of violence, while 56% say they did not call the number. 35% of the respondents said that they did not call “112” due to distrust; 18% did not call because of a delay in answering the calls; and 30% -- due to the lack of awareness. According to defense lawyers, during the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of going to police, victims often approached NGOs working on women’s rights. The lawyers think that the reason for approaching NGOs may be the willingness of victims to first receive competent counseling from a defense lawyer, based on which they would decide on next steps, as well as whether or not to apply to law enforcement authorities for subsequent response. This has been confirmed by quantitative data

as well. Specifically, respondents have stated that they preferred to sort out the situation first, with the help of an NGO, and approach the police afterwards (27 % of the respondents consulted with women's rights NGOs first).

- The study involved the assessment of the **services** provided by the police to female victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the activities carried out by the police. 51% of the interviewed respondents report that regulations and restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 had certain negative effect on the operations of the police. 88% of the respondents stated that the police and investigators did not/could not work remotely; while, the MIA representatives state that the legislation does not allow them to conduct investigation and interview remotely. 28% of surveyed respondents noted that their case investigator was placed in quarantine/self-isolation and did not have a backup. Furthermore, none of the victims of domestic violence who took part in the research were aware of whether or not the MIA had introduced any remote service for the improvement of services provided to victims. The study has established that the respondents do not have complete information about "112" mobile application. In the opinion of lawyers, the pandemic was the excuse for not responding to cases of domestic violence and not launching investigation process during COVID-19; this, in their view, may be an indication of inefficiency of certain representatives of the police.
- The research has also focused on the examination and assessment of the **specific steps** undertaken by the MIA against the cases of domestic violence during COVID-19. Firstly, the awareness-raising video was produced by the MIA designed for victims of domestic violence as well as the division of "112" hotline services into channels, again, tailored specifically to the victims of domestic violence. However, according to the research, despite the lengthy COVID-19 period, the MIA efforts to modify service delivery modalities and respond to the limitations resulting from the pandemic and to alter services or processes may have been limited. The challenges included: delayed investigation, the lack of backup staff in case a person in charge was infected, and the lack of an option of remote counseling or investigation. The respondents also think that government did not assess their situation and did not seek and obtain information about the challenges associated with the pandemic.
- Finally, it should be underlined that the COVID-19 pandemic is an unexpected challenge of an unprecedented scale that has caused numerous difficulties and challeng-

es for the public and other sectors. However, despite these difficulties, provision of basic services to the citizens and especially, responding to and conducting effective investigation on the cases of domestic violence or similar criminal offences should not be hindered. The present research serves this objective – firstly, to highlight the obstacles resulting from COVID-19 in the process of protecting the rights of the victims of domestic violence and secondly, to support resolving these challenges by the government and non-governmental sectors in the future.