



Submission to the 14th Session of the UN Open-ended Working Group on Ageing

Submitted by

**The National Human Rights Institution – Public Defender
(Ombudsman) of Georgia**

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Participation in public life and in decision-making processes

Georgia is a small European country with a population of about 4 million. Unfortunately, like many other countries in Europe, older persons in Georgia, who make up approximately 16% of the population, face severe challenges. They are often exposed to negative attitudes and age discrimination when it comes to accessing healthcare, employment, goods and services, information, and education. This leads to increasing barriers to their participation, making them more dependent on others and causing them to lose some or all their personal autonomy. These risks to their dignity can also make them more susceptible to neglect, abuse, and violation of their rights.

Office of the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia is an A-status NHRI which supervises the protection of human rights in Georgia. Although the Public Defender has discussed these problems and provided recommendations to the responsible state institutions, the state has failed to take effective measures to improve the well-being of older persons.

In Georgia, some older individuals strive to maintain their independence and remain engaged in social activities. However, others face the risk of homelessness, poverty, and social isolation due to the lack of adequate services and protection mechanisms. Discrimination against older persons is based on various characteristics, such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic origin, and even health status.

There are several challenges that hinder the involvement of older persons in decision-making processes and policy development. These obstacles include social isolation, digital exclusion, gender roles, ageism, cultural beliefs, habits, and the lack of concrete opportunities to participate. In addition, a lack of political will or insufficient financial and human resources can also create barriers to implementing participatory approaches.

In Georgia, there is a considerable representation of older persons in legislative authority. However, the same cannot be said for local governments, which unfortunately lack significant representation of older persons. Consequently, older persons are often excluded from participating in policy-making processes within local governments. Research conducted by the Office of the Public Defender shows that the needs of older women, including their daily mobility, access to transport, and time resources allocated for movement, are not adequately considered by municipalities.

Older persons living in rural areas face several challenges, including inadequate access to social, health, and basic services, as well as economic opportunities. They also have limited opportunities to participate effectively in political and public life, especially in decision-making related to the agricultural sector. This limits their ability to exercise their active and passive electoral rights.

The absence of a mandatory regulatory mechanism that addresses these challenges and issues is a significant concern. Therefore, the Public Defender supports the creation of a new international, legally binding instrument to protect the human rights of older persons.

Social inclusion

In Georgia, older persons are increasingly becoming isolated and marginalized. The National Statistics Office of Georgia reports that as of 2023, the population aged 65 and above accounts approximately 16% of the entire population, with most of them living at or below the poverty line. Many of them live in loneliness or have been abandoned. Even those who live with their families may feel lonely as they are often considered a burden. The COVID-19 pandemic has put older people at risk of poverty, discrimination, and social isolation. The restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the virus have led to a threat of social exclusion among older people living alone. This long social isolation also has a negative impact on the mental health of older persons, especially those with cognitive decline and dementia, and those who are dependent on care.

To address this issue, psychosocial support programs should be implemented for older persons to help them cope with the stress caused by the pandemic and social isolation. It is also important to improve their access to mobile telephones and modern technologies to increase their access to digital technologies. Remote counselling sessions can be provided to older persons placed in care institutions to provide psychological support and help them cope with the stress caused by the high risk of disease. However, older persons who live outside care institutions do not have access to such support. Increasing access to counselling, especially for those living alone, is crucial for their mental health.

Care facilities for older persons often lead to feelings of loneliness and exclusion. The existing standards in the country should protect older persons from exclusion and promote their participation in cultural, recreational, and other programs, which positively impact their physical, social, intellectual, and creative activity. However, these standards are not properly observed in practice. Monitoring by the Office of the Public Defender showed that the motivation of older persons to engage in relevant activities is low. The lockdown of aged beneficiaries during the first phase of the pandemic resulted in some negative consequences even after regulations were eased. It is essential to address these issues and provide better care and support for older persons, especially during these difficult times.

Based on the monitoring work of the office of the Public Defender lack of social services for older women is problematic in some rural areas of Georgia. The government lacks legal instruments, policies, and programmes to address the challenges faced by older women. Older women face specific concerns in enjoying their economic, social, and cultural rights (social protection, health, education, work, adequate standard of living, and land and property ownership). Older women may face multiple discrimination, mainly on two grounds: gender and age. Challenges for older women are also lack of access to health programs and medications, lack of a care system, and a stigma in society that detracts them from active lives. Older persons, living alone are in difficult socioeconomic and living conditions, they face threat of poverty and homelessness. The main challenges they come across are the lack of adequate targeted programmes and measures for the welfare.