LIFE STORIES OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN FROM ABKHAZIA

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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The present study was conducted by researchers Lela Javakhishvili and Natia Ubilava in the framework of the project “The Feminist Perspective of Georgia's Recent History: History Seen Through the Eyes of Women Displaced by the War in Abkhazia,” prepared by the NGO Femea with the support of the Women's Fund in Georgia. The research explores the experiences of internally displaced women from Abkhazia before, during, and after the war.

The authors thank the participants for sharing their sensitive experiences and valuable opinions.

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Introduction

Studying Georgia's recent history, especially the conflicts of the 1990s, poses substantial challenges. Although this period represents one of the key periods in the country's contemporary development, studies about this period are often one-sided and incomplete. The historical narrative predominantly reflects the dominant theories and perspectives of male political or military elites.

It is particularly concerning that women's experiences, one of the most vulnerable groups in the conflict, are largely absent from contemporary Georgian historical discourse. While some studies address the needs of IDPs, particularly women, their lives before and after the conflict, as well as feminist perspectives on these events, remain largely unexplored.

This study seeks to address a significant gap in historical discourse by presenting the war in Abkhazia through the lens of women's experiences. It draws on 15 in-depth interviews with internally displaced women from Abkhazia, capturing diverse geographic backgrounds, age groups, and personal experiences. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the conflict's multifaceted impacts and the various strategies women have employed to cope with trauma. Complementing the interviews, desk research summarizes existing knowledge on the topic and establishes a foundation for deeper analysis.

Methodology

The study utilized qualitative research to explore the memories, experiences, and life stories of internally displaced women from Abkhazia. Two data collection methods were employed: desk research and in-depth interviews with these women.

The semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to freely share their memories of living in Abkhazia, their experiences during the war, and its aftermath. This approach also allowed them to discuss issues beyond the original scope of the study. The following objectives guided the research:

- ⇒ **Documenting Pre-Conflict Memories:** Capture and analyze records of pre-conflict Abkhazia as preserved in the memories of internally displaced women, focusing on the existing social structures, daily relations, and coexistence among different ethnic groups.
- ⇒ **Describing Wartime Experiences:** Examine wartime experiences through women's perspectives, documenting and analyzing the history through a feminist lens.

⇒ **Analyzing Historical Trends:** Identify and interpret historical trends shared by women from this period.

⇒ **Identifying Current Challenges:** Highlight the problems and challenges that internally displaced women from Abkhazia face today.

Fifteen respondents participated in the research, selected based on predetermined criteria. In particular, the study included women aged 37-70+ from Abkhazia who held an IDP status and had lived in the region. Among the respondents were women currently residing in Georgia, some of whom also have experiences as immigrants. When selecting respondents, particular care was taken to ensure the inclusion of intersectional groups, such as women from rural or peripheral areas, mothers with multiple children, and veterans. In some instances, respondents included individuals residing in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and members of the queer community. The research process consisted of several stages.

The first stage involved desk research, which included a review of existing literature, studies, and theoretical materials. Based on this review, a research tool - an interview guide - was developed. Subsequently, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted, and detailed transcripts were prepared. Finally, the collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis of qualitative data, with MAXQDA2020 software utilized for data systematization and analysis.

Ethical Approach

The study adhered to strict ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and the researchers ensured that the respondents' confidentiality was maintained while handling sensitive topics with care. To minimize the risk of re-traumatization, interviews concluded with an opportunity for respondents to express their emotions and feelings. To maintain objectivity and prevent bias, the research team held weekly meetings to review the observations and insights gathered during the research process.

Research Limitations

Although the study was conducted within a limited timeframe and with a small number of respondents, it managed to gather the necessary information to create the analytical document and reflect the views of internally displaced women from Abkhazia. The confidentiality policy of the study proved to be a sufficient prerequisite in encouraging respondents to share their traumatic

experiences and critical perspectives openly. Although many in-depth interviews were conducted online, which may be less effective when discussing sensitive topics and can hinder building rapport[1], this did not pose a significant challenge in the context of this study. However, a significant limitation is that the study relies on the respondents' memories of events from years ago, which may have affected the accuracy of their narratives. It should also be noted that, due to the limitations of the research methods, the findings should not be generalized to the experiences of all displaced women, as their life experiences may vary. It is also important to note that the research is focused specifically on the context of the Abkhazian war, which may differ significantly from the experiences of displaced women affected by other conflicts.

[1] **Rapport** represents interpersonal relationships, mutual understanding and trust (Guide to Mental Health Crisis Intervention, 2023).

Desk Research Results

War and conflict affect women differently than men. Various studies suggest that the impacts of conflict on women can differ in terms of cause and intensity, often shaped by a combination of multiple factors. During war, women face significant risks as they strive to protect their children and family members, usually being forced to flee their homes. As a result, women and children comprise more than half of the 80 million internally displaced people, generally increasing their vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (Wave, 2022). The latest data from conflict-affected countries, including Ukraine, Yemen, Syria, and Palestine, reveals that 91% of surveyed women are actively involved in the conflict and, in some instances, play a leading role in supporting their communities (CARE, 2024). This is even though 600 million women worldwide live within 50 kilometers of a conflict zone. Despite these alarming figures, the impact of war on women remains understudied, rendering them either invisible or, at best, solely portrayed as victims (ibid.). In recent decades, feminist theorists have started exploring the gender dimensions of war, creating a framework for analyzing conflicts through a gender lens (Sjoberg, 2013). Studies that are conducted in Georgia in this area indicated that the impact of conflicts on internally displaced women is primarily associated with economic hardships, poor living conditions, and limited opportunity for self-realization. IDP women in Georgia frequently cite challenges such as housing problems, unemployment, domestic violence, lack of development opportunities, and access to comprehensive health care (Anova, 2023). This is further exacerbated by a lack of knowledge of their rights, which limits women survivors of war from access to legal protection mechanisms (UN Women, 2014). Most displaced women have little to no information about engagement opportunities, the right to demand participation, and the services available to them. (Public Defender of Georgia, 2022).

In 1996, in their pursuit and realization of rights, the Women's Association "Consent" was established in Georgia to protect people affected by the conflict [with a focus on internally displaced women] (Mchedlishvili, 2021). Eventually, vocational training programs were created [by the Minister's Office] to empower internally displaced women as well as social services to support emergency and post-crisis needs of domestic violence survivors (Office of the Minister of Justice and Civil Integration of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, 2022). Nevertheless, fundamental issues such as access to housing and various social programs remained challenging for displaced women. In 2012, 39.2% of internally displaced persons resided in collective centers. These collective centers are

typically non-residential buildings repurposed to provide shelter, such as pre-schools, factories, hospitals, etc. Inadequate living conditions in such places cause significant problems for internally displaced women (ISSA, 2014). The lack of access to formal employment creates additional barriers. According to the Public Defender's 2022 report, only a tiny part of the women living in the IDP settlements are employed, and their wages are very low. The primary barriers to employment for women include the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, as well as insufficient state support. The financial assistance provided by the state to internally displaced women facing economic hardships is inadequate. As a result, IDP women indicate that the existing socio-economic challenges ultimately create the need for them to migrate within and outside the country (Public Defender of Georgia, 2022). The studies further reveal that a significant portion of internally displaced women live in poverty (Anova, 2023). Additionally, internally displaced women often lack access to women's rights initiatives and empowerment programs, citing poor dissemination of information as a key barrier. Data indicates that displaced women believe state agencies are not proactive in engaging or communicating with them (Public Defender of Georgia, 2022).

Communication difficulties are also reflected in the fact that internally displaced women are not formally involved in conflict transformation. According to various international studies and theories, their role in conflict transformation and peacebuilding is crucial; however, this is still not realized in Georgia. According to the latest data, internally displaced women generally hold positive attitudes toward populations living in conflict regions. Most respondents support reconciliation with the Abkhazian and Ossetian populations, a crucial foundation for conflict transformation. However, this potential cannot be used due to the limited involvement of women [only 3% reported participation in projects related to peacebuilding and Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions] (Anova, 2023). Although the IDPs' discourse is accompanied by an ambivalent perception of Abkhazians, feelings of aggression and injustice towards them have evolved into a desire for dialogue and finding common ground (The Social Justice Center, 2023).

Before the conflict's transformation, displaced women from the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions faced several problems and needs. The issues are not limited to housing or engagement in political decision-making. Daily challenges hinder peace, such as domestic violence, health issues, daily security, and a need for better basic infrastructure. For IDPs, peace is not only connected to political stability but also to inner peace (mental health), which is limited due to the abovementioned challenges (PMC Research Center, 2022). Based on the discourses of internally displaced women, it is clear that, while leaving Abkhazia, they felt they would return home soon. The inability to meet

existing expectations ultimately forced individuals to seek their ways of survival (Internal Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2008). It is important to note that IDPs from both the 1992-93 and 2008 displacement waves exhibit high levels of anxiety and depression. Notably, IDPs from the second wave (2008) experience higher levels of anxiety compared to those from the first wave. This disparity is influenced by factors such as the anticipation of returning home, living conditions, and financial circumstances (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Institute for Policy Studies, 2012).

In conclusion, conflicts profoundly impact women, as demonstrated by the experiences of internally displaced women in Georgia. However, further research is crucial, as women have historically not been recognized as a particularly vulnerable group in the context of wars, and empirical data on this subject remains limited. IDP women in Georgia face numerous challenges, including economic hardship, inadequate housing, and employment difficulties. Despite their positive outlook on conflict resolution, their participation in peacebuilding efforts is minimal, underscoring the need for a comprehensive approach that explores their perspectives and potential in greater depth.

Results of In-depth Interviews

Social Profile of Internally Displaced Women From Abkhazia

As mentioned in the beginning, 15 women displaced from Abkhazia participated in this study [in-depth interviews]. Nine were from Tbilisi, and six were from different regions of Georgia. Although respondents share similar wartime experiences, their reflections on the conflict and its aftermath vary. Nearly all participants reported that displacement precluded them from pursuing their pre-war professions. However, some women acquired new skills, allowing them to secure alternative income sources.

> *"When I left, I had a profession - Economist specializing in the food industry, but I had never worked as part of my profession. I have not finished medical school and was passing my fourth year in Chisinau. I left it unfinished and have not returned to it again" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

It is important to note that the respondents participating in the study were from different cities and villages of Abkhazia [Akhaldaba, Gulripshi, Gali, Kindghi, Ochamchire, etc.]. In some cases, it was the geographical location of their residence that determined the route they took to leave the territory of Abkhazia during the war. Women sought to escape the war using various modes of transport - sea, air, and land while caring for young children and elderly family members. Some were forced to undertake this journey on foot.

Years later, they recall their happy lives in Abkhazia, the difficult path to leaving home and living as an IDP, which created additional responsibilities and new challenges for them. In some instances, women could articulate the specific difficulties they faced during the war due to their gender. They openly discuss the war crimes that were committed against the girls and women in their community.

Currently, the women participating in the study live in various forms of housing, including shared accommodations arranged during the initial days of displacement, state-provided apartments after the war, or rented houses. For some, the issue of housing remains unresolved. Among the respondents were single mothers with multiple children; these women worked tirelessly in several jobs to meet their children's basic needs. These women had to rebuild their lives from scratch after

leaving Abkhazia. Beyond material losses, they grapple with the profound moral and spiritual void they have endured since being uprooted from their homes.

The subchapters below display the perspectives of internally displaced women from Abkhazia about their pre-war lives, the war period, and its aftermath. Each experience is unique, making it challenging to discern clear trends. As a result, the study primarily synthesizes the respondents' viewpoints to offer a comprehensive representation of their lived experiences.

1. Life Before the War in Abkhazia

⇒ Family status and housing;
⇒ Family activities and general financial situation in Abkhazia before the war;
⇒ Social networks and activities.

The study participants mainly reflected positively on their time in Abkhazia. They spoke joyfully and enthusiastically about living with their parents in a naturally beautiful environment and pursuing their education at school or university.

> *"I grew up in a perfect environment; we had a good family, house, and relations with relatives and classmates. Everything was perfect; I lived in the Akhali Kindghi village, Ochamchire region, which was on the coast. Like Batumi, we lived in a resort area on the Black Sea coast. My childhood was great before the war started" (48 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Batumi).*

Despite the predominantly positive sentiments, some respondents described this period as one of the most challenging in their lives. In particular, this is related to the cases of bride kidnapping, which led to early marriage and hindered the process of obtaining an education.

> *"When I graduated from school, I was kidnapped the day after prom. That marked the beginning of my family life. I had a proud character, but that person [my husband] was from Lechkhumi, and no one in the family supported my desire to study. On the contrary, everyone was against it. When I first applied to university, I did not tell my husband and began attending lectures. I would keep my student card hidden between the mattresses" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Those who recall their time in Abkhazia positively note that the social situation in the community around them was mainly stable due to fertile land and hardworking people. Those who did not inherit wealth could create life on their own.

> *"Childhood is not always a happy time for everyone, but I genuinely had a joyful childhood, despite my parents not coming from wealthy families; on the contrary, they were both orphans. They started their lives from scratch but had aunts and uncles caring for us. They did everything for us to have a carefree childhood, be it resorts or camps. I had a great childhood" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

It should be emphasized that while discussing the economic situation of their surroundings, internally displaced women associate social well-being with physical labor and intellectual activity. These factors created sufficient conditions for people around them to live without worries.

> *"My parents were physicists and worked at the Physics Research Institute, an important place throughout the Soviet Union. [...] In general, people in Abkhazia did not struggle financially because there were all kinds of opportunities to have an income" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).*

Apart from farming and scientific activities, tourism was also standard in Abkhazia. Respondents recall that it was the primary source of income for their families.

> *"We were also dependent on vacationers; the money we earned from them was a source of income for our family and the people living there. My husband and I also had a job; my mother-in-law was retired, and I had small children. There was a greenhouse complex, and I worked there, then I started working in the poultry factory incubator" (73 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Ozurgeti).*

Based on the data obtained from the research findings, it is evident that internally displaced women practically do not relate the economic hardship to the years of living in Abkhazia and only associate them with the post-war period. When talking about their surroundings, the respondents emphasized that no one was poor around them.

> *"Akhalsopeli was a very wealthy town. Even today, I cannot recall anyone living in so much poverty that they needed our help" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

As respondents state, if it were not for the war, such an environment would reach the point where people would have exceptionally luxurious lives and more material capabilities today. The

respondents frequently highlight that, in the absence of war, the people of Abkhazia would have accumulated significant wealth by now. All the above-mentioned issues were limited to the borders of the Soviet Union, which, despite its material resources, restricted individuals' opportunities to travel beyond its borders.

> *"Our parents always ensured that we were provided everything in that environment. This was when you could not leave the borders of the Soviet Union. Still, within the borders, my sister and I had material and non-material everything - our parents' love, support, a good yard" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Some women were actively involved in the abovementioned economic activities, while others were passive not because of their desire but because of their husbands' will. According to the study participants, anyone could live well if they were not lazy and were willing to work. However, some women were deprived of their right to work. Based on the respondents' reflections, this could be explained by the fact that there was simply no need for it.

> *"My mother and father worked in my family, but I had an aunt who had never worked because her husband did not want her to. […] The husbands had good incomes, and there was no need for women to work, whether they wanted to or not" (47 years old, from Gali, who lives in Tbilisi).*

The social relationships between people in Abkhazia were particularly memorable for the displaced women. According to them, trust was the leading factor in these relationships, which made life there even more comfortable and happy for them.

> *"We were all happy, being a student was extraordinary, the neighborhood, the friendship... There was so much trust... They could take care of me... Where can you find such trust today?!" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

Positive relationships were further enriched by the vibrant social activities that characterized life in Abkhazia for the respondents. These included occasional parades involving school children, literary reading competitions, sports events, gatherings at the Pioneer Palace, Correspondence Circle meetings, regional headquarters meetings, horse racing, and more. Respondents noted that most of these events were centered around the Soviet Union and its holidays.

"I do not remember anything specific because the events that were held were always related to Soviet holidays: May 1, November 7, the October Revolution, and so on" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

For IDP women from Abkhazia, social activities are associated with the sea. Particular memories relate to visiting the sea with children, having guests visit them there, and socializing.

"There was a sea near my house, mountains behind it, amazing nature and extraordinary neighbors. We lived very amicably; we children went to school together and celebrated birthdays" (49 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

Overall, when reflecting on these experiences, it becomes clear that the respondents in the study perceive social activities as the informal, direct relationships they share with the people around them.

Summary: IDP women mostly recall their time in Abkhazia in a positive context. Their stories show that this period was socially and economically stable, which was due to fertile land, diverse agricultural activities, tourism and hardworking people. Notably, the close social relationships and mutual trust within the community significantly contributed to a sense of comfort and well-being. While this period posed significant hardships for some women, respondents rarely associate poverty with their lives in Abkhazia instead link it primarily to the post-war period. Memories of social activities, particularly those involving the sea and public events characteristic of the Soviet era, hold special significance in their recollections.

⇒ Relations with the ethnic Abkhaz population

When discussing their surroundings, respondents highlight a critical aspect of the relations related to the pre-war connection of the displaced women with the ethnic Abkhaz population. Some respondents stated that there were no Abkhazians in their city/village, and even if they were present, there was a certain social distance between them. There were cases when the Abkhazian settlement was separated by a Georgian one, followed by an Abkhazian settlement again. This created a specific barrier between the Georgians and the ethnic Abkhaz population. When revisiting

their childhood memories, the study participants highlight that buses going to Abkhazian villages often refused to let Georgians on and, at times, discreetly threatened them.

> *"My mother says that when Georgians, Russians, Abkhazians, and Azerbaijanis lived in a big building, we children played together. I mean very early in life, when we were 4-5-6 years old. According to her, in general, all children get into fights in the yard, and she remembers that every time something like that happened, the Abkhaz children would say, 'This is our land; get out of here" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Despite this attitude, some respondents still found it unimaginable that all this would ultimately end in war. They said social distance could be felt in public transport and educational institutions. It was also present in mixed families where the daughter-in-law/son-in-law was Abkhaz.

> *"When I was a student, Abkhazians also studied there, and my father would always tell me to keep my distance from them. I did not have any friends. I greeted everyone, but we kept our distance" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

Some respondents noted that Abkhazians and Georgians used the same modes of transport. Opinions on this issue were divided among the participants.

> *"Yes, we had Abkhazians living in our neighborhood, and we had no bad attitude. I do not know what happened in the government, but we can see the result. We used the same transport. We would not have different transport for Abkhazians and Georgians, would we? We traveled by the same transport, and some came from Abkhazian villages" (73 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Ozurgeti).*

In some cases, study participants recall their relationship with Abkhazians positively, but at the same time, they indicate that it was somewhat tricky. For example, if Georgian songs were performed at the events held during the studying process, it was also necessary to perform Abkhazian songs. The war also affected these relatively positive cases of relationships. Respondents recall that all the problems appeared simultaneously at that time – The university, the Writers Union, and the theater became separated. In particular, a separate Abkhazian sector emerged, and the Greeks, Armenians, and various ethnic groups living nearby had to choose a side.

Respondents recall that they perceived Abkhazians ethnically in the same way as Svans, Megrelians, and people from different regions. They were unaware that the Abkhazians had hostile feelings towards them from the very beginning.

“When the first clash occurred, it was suppressed, but they still had this anger and hatred. Perhaps the Russians also influenced this, but the Abkhazians were mobilized from the beginning to expel the Georgian people” (51 years old, from Gagra, lives in Tskaltubo).

The study participants mention that Abkhazians offered Georgians prominent in intellectual circles the option to list "Abkhaz" in their passports in exchange for certain privileges. They believe this was an attempt to attract members of the intelligentsia.

“The Abkhazians tried to attract intelligentsia because they wanted many Abkhazians to be intellectuals. Negotiations were going on about settling accounts with Georgians who had authority. Negotiations with my father to have Abkhazian origin recorded in his passport were also negotiations. If he did so, he would be assigned to a chairman” (48 years old, from Sokhumi, who lives in Tbilisi).

Despite the evident negative dynamics associated with relations with Abkhazians, some people recall positive cases. For example, displaced women discuss their good relations with Abkhazians and friendships with Abkhaz classmates. However, they say these ties do not indicate positive relations within the group.

“No, we had good relations. My classmate was also an Abkhazian; we grew up together, and years later, she came here from Moscow specifically for me; she became my maid of honor and my child's godfather. Everyone can have a (Abkhaz) friend” (49 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

While discussing positive characteristics, it should also be noted that at the beginning of the war, there were certain cases when both Georgians and Abkhazians protected or kept each other safe from danger during critical moments.

“There was a woman, Makvala, living alone on our street, and when the chaos started, the first thing my father, who was fighting in the war, said was that whoever dared to say a word to her would have to deal with him directly. She still remembers how my father protected her and made her feel safe” (44 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: According to the respondents, pre-war relations between Georgians and Abkhazians were complex and multifaceted. While positive personal relationships did exist, there was significant social distance and tension at the community level. These tensions were evident both in daily life and within the broader socio-political context, where the Abkhaz side sought to strengthen its influence through various means, including offering privileges to members of the intelligentsia in exchange for changing their ethnic identity. Despite these challenges, during the outbreak of the war, there were notable instances where individuals from both sides protected and assisted each other in critical situations.

⇒ Anticipations Regarding The Outbreak of War

The information presented in the previous chapter on the relationship between the ethnic Abkhaz and Georgian populations may indicate the start of the conflict. Still, the study participants emphasized that they did not anticipate the imminent outbreak of war.

> *"I could not imagine there would be a war. However, they would tell us with a laugh that while we were digging for gold, they were collecting weapons" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Despite these sentiments, respondents, reflecting from today's perspective, acknowledged that the warning signs of war were evident. However, they either failed to recognize these signs or dismissed their significance. This continued until more overt signals, such as the confiscation of weapons, became apparent.

> *" Their remarks became increasingly frequent towards the end, with claims that we would have to leave our homes and that they would take control. We used to laugh at such comments […]. Before the war started, I was already living in Sokhumi. They came to my family home, where we had four officially registered weapons. They confiscated the buttocks, stating that they needed to inspect them. They took all the buttstocks" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo)*

For some respondents, even this was not enough to predict the start of war. Interestingly, when the sound of shooting could already be heard, people still had difficulty believing that the threat of war was real.

> *"On August 15, when we heard the sound of shooting, I did not think it was significant and continued my journey as I was going to my friend's house. Someone ran up to me and said, 'What are you doing? There is shooting; the war has started.' […] Kitovani's army was*

coming, and all the news circulated rapidly, but we still could not believe that it was a war" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).

However, everything before the war indicated that something was being prepared. The respondents recall the meeting of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples held in Sokhumi, which their neighboring Abkhazian families were especially prepared for. From this perspective, the study participants guessed the dialogue was about harming the Georgian population.

"We could feel that something was about to happen, and everyone was waiting for it, but even then, we would still expect things to improve. We had a close relationship with Akaki Bakradze in the national movement. In our conversations, we could always feel that things were not going well, that they would do everything to tear Abkhazia apart" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).

Some respondents, who found the situation more apparent from the outset, mentioned that it was preceded by initial clashes, the division of the Abkhazian State University, the appointment of Abkhazians and Russians to leadership positions, the prioritization of the Russian language, and so on.

"It started in 1989 when the first clash between Abkhazians and Georgians happened in Abkhazia. That is when I found some conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians. It all started when the university was separated from the Abkhazian State University. The Sokhumi branch was supposed to become part of Tbilisi State University, but it caused a great resistance from the Abkhazians" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).

"Near the end, you had to work to accumulate experience, and as I remember, Georgians were not appointed as superiors; you had to be either Russian or Abkhazian for it. I graduated from a Georgian school, and when I was filling out an application for a job, a Russian woman told me to write "Zayavlenie" in Russian instead" (53 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

The IDP women respondents often highlight that they did not perceive the risks of the outbreak of war in Gali until the very last moment. According to them, the people in Gali constantly felt that they were not in danger and that the war was taking place somewhere else, far away.

"They had the illusion that nothing would happen, that no one would touch Gali. You are panicky, they would say. I am not panicking; I cannot do it. I am afraid – I replied. The next

morning, everyone [of the population] moved [from Gali to Zugdidi]; there was so much horror; I will never forget those days. When you are afraid, you leave your house; you leave everything. That thought did not even cross my mind; I only wanted to get the children out alive" (70 years old, from Gali, who lives in Gali).

Summary: This subchapter highlights that despite the many warning signs (The confiscation of weapons and subsequent disarmament of Georgians, Mountain People Confederation meeting, separating educational institutions, the exclusion of Georgians from leadership positions, etc.), most of the population found it difficult to believe in the imminent threat of war. This sentiment was particularly pronounced among the Gali population, who maintained hope until the very end that the conflict would not impact them. Reflecting from today's perspective, respondents acknowledge that these signs were clear. However, at the time, the combination of an information vacuum and the challenges of fully grasping the looming danger prevented them from recognizing the seriousness of the situation until hostilities had already commenced.

2. Life During the War in Abkhazia

⇒ The Outbreak of War

For respondents, the war's outbreak remains a vivid yet deeply distressing memory. Discussing this topic during interviews evoked strong emotions among the women as they reflected on their initial shock and terror. Some recalled hearing gunshots while outside, while others were at home and witnessed the events unfold from there. One respondent recounted her experience working in a women's consultation center, where she was responsible for transporting pregnant women's blood tests to Sokhumi by ambulance. On one occasion, as she prepared to pick up the test results, gunfire erupted, and the car came to a sudden halt. She vividly described how the bullets struck nearby pine trees, filling the air with pine pollen or dust. The scene quickly turned chaotic, with people running in all directions, and the Georgians were left startled and shaken by the sudden violence.

"I saw my neighbor (full name) being killed; it happened in the center of Gulripshi [...]. I saw with my own eyes how they brought him, beat him and shot him in the knees, gunned him down" (53 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

One of the respondents recalled that an order was quickly given to move women and children to the sturdiest house in the area, dividing them into groups. Tragically, 300 individuals were placed in one basement, which ultimately ended in disaster. The remaining women and children were instructed to drape their houses with white sheets to signal their presence, but they chose not to comply, a decision that, in hindsight, may have been a fortunate one.

The opposing side also proposed a peace corridor to allow women and children to leave unharmed if they surrendered. However, this offer did not sound particularly convincing, leaving many doubtful of its sincerity.

> *"There was a dead silence; you can even get used to the sound of bullets. [...] The bombing started, something round was flying, it was on fire, and it hit the neighbor's house. A rain of bullets followed the bombing, and I lay down. At that moment, I was scared; I was thinking about dying there without having anyone to bury me. […]. They had to take 300 women and children hostages, and they did not spare any men; they even made mothers watch their sons getting murdered" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

The existing situation mainly affected women psychologically because they felt a constant threat from the Abkhaz fighters. The respondents recall that as soon as the war began, they tried to speak in Russian because every movement was accompanied by fear.

> *"After the June clashes, I was afraid and tried to speak in Russian because I was a young girl and did not know what this many Abkhaz rebels would do. We had to protect ourselves. The bus broke down once, it got dark, and I arrived in Sokhumi late; an Abkhazian guy came and started talking to me strangely. An Armenian woman appeared, kissed me on the cheek, and said, "Oh, I have been waiting for you for so long." She protected me and took me home" (51 years old, from Gagra, lives in Tskaltubo).*

The effect of unexpectedness accompanies each story about the outbreak of war. Some respondents revealed that they were living their daily routines when suddenly confronted with the news of war.

According to the study participants, the clashes were not intense at the beginning of the fight. However, as soon as they realized that they were being met with force by Georgians, Abkhazians involved Russians, Chechens, and Cossacks in the war. The women believe that Chechens showed the most extraordinary hatred, which they attribute to religious motives. Based on their stories, the outbreak of war was preceded by unrest. However, the passage of Mkhedrioni through Samegrelo and Abkhazia left the most fear-inducing impressions in their memories.

"I remember that day very well; it was August 14, 1992. I was 16 years old, and it was a holiday period. It was a normal morning. All this was preceded by unrest in Georgia when Mkhedrioni passed through Samegrelo and then into Abkhazia. The events that occurred in Samegrelo made us very scared. They passed through Abkhazia, and the commander drank the water of Psou and turned back. In the summer, a rumor spread that Karkarashvili, the commander-in-chief, was coming again with a military convoy. I did not attach any importance to it. Then, one random day came, and I was at home with my mother, aunt, and grandmother. Our relatives lived mainly in the neighborhood; some were at the market, and some were at work. Suddenly, a rumor spread that something had happened; there was a shooting in one of the populated areas, and they said that the war had started" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: The start of the war in Abkhazia as can be seen from the memories of the women respondents of the study, was both expected and unexpected for them. Although the tension in the region and previous events created the foundation for the conflict outbreak, the war started as people were busy with their daily activities. The respondents' stories emphasize the initial shock, fear, and tragic events that followed the outbreak of the war - the first casualties, chaos, shootings, and the particular danger to women and children. Their narratives show that initially, the clashes were relatively light, but they soon escalated when Russians, Chechens, and Cossacks became involved in the conflict. The constant danger to women was especially severe from Abkhazian fighters and it forced them to speak Russian and protect themselves this way. However, despite the brutality of the conflict, the stories of the respondents also reveal examples of the preservation of humanity - both from Georgians and representatives of other nationalities. Their personal experiences present a diverse but equally tragic picture of the beginning of the war, where each respondent's story is unique, but together, they create a complete, emotional, and realistic description of that period.

⇒ Leaving Abkhazia

The war's progression necessitated leaving their homes, which some people accepted initially, but others could not fully grasp. The women participating in the study say that before the fall of Sokhumi, there were episodes of strikes when their parents took them away from Abkhazia precisely because of their gender ["girlhood"] and the dangers associated with it. However, later, as the school year approached, everyone returned home.

“I was not young at that time. I was in the tenth grade. I studied the eleventh grade in Kutaisi because I was a girl, and they wanted me to escape” (48 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Batumi).

Those who could not leave Abkhazia in the previous period are grateful because they survived the Abkhazian men.

When deciding to leave Abkhazia, women cited their personal safety and, in some cases, the goal of protecting their children.

“When I left with the last ship on September 27, I was ready to leave with the children; my husband stayed at the headquarters. We were supposed to cross the mountains when someone called out that the ships had arrived, and that is exactly what we wanted” (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).

The women's responsibilities did not end there; some also had to consider other female family members, whether their mother, an elderly grandmother, a younger sister, a neighbor, or a female relative.

“I had a grandmother who could barely walk with a cane, and we had to think very quickly about how we would take her. Our fate was being decided. It took time to get the women out, and 11 men took over the village; they did not need more, and reinforcements probably arrived later. My aunt could not leave her mother; she said she would not leave” (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).

There were also all-women households. As the situation worsened, they had to decide to leave Abkhazia promptly and quickly find a way to implement this action. The women say it was not an easy task, as all means of transport were already crowded, making their survival chances increasingly slim.

“A plane would land, fill up with passengers, and it did not matter where or how, the main thing was that the passengers could get on the plane and it would fly in any direction” (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).

In families where men went to fight, the decision to leave Abkhazia often fell to the women. However, sometimes, unexpected opportunities arose, offering desperate, lonesome women a chance to escape.

“Soldiers were coming in front of our house, dragging machine guns. At that time, my father and brother were not home; they were fighting, so there were only women there. My mother ran to them with the child, begging them to tell her what was happening and whether they should have left or stayed. One of the soldiers got behind the army and told her that Sokhumi had surrendered; it was no longer there and to save ourselves. It was an elderly grandmother, my mother, a six-month-old baby, and me at home. We had no men, so where were we supposed to go?” (49 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

Those who remained in Abkhazia until the very last moment recall spending the last period without electricity and with food shortages.

“We ground and baked corn, pretending it was “Mchadi.” What else would you do in a raging war? We went through a tough time; we lived in fear for a year […] There were no telephones. Otherwise, the war in Ukraine would be nothing compared to that, let alone the world, the God would come down from heaven” (44 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

Some respondents managed to leave Abkhazia by sea, land, and air transport, while for others, the only option was to walk and crawl on the ground in dangerous sections. The women participating in the study recall that the trains were packed, and people could not fit in the cars. This, in addition to the physical damage, brought them emotional shock.

The chaos caused by the people's flow caused casualties. If women would manage to get into a transport, they had to take the additional responsibility of caring for the wounded and injured. This, along with everything else, was still emotionally draining.

“There was a disaster on the ship; you could not get on. There were many people; everyone wanted to save themselves, even the men, but they would not let them on because women and children should have been the first to get on. In this situation, one man died on the ship’s ladder; he had a heart attack because they would not let him on the ship. They got us there with great difficulty, and I was dragged out of the sea by my hair. When we got on, we saw it was a big ship that could hold 6500 people. However, at that time, we were not taking seats as usual; we were spread out, and there were so many people that you could not even stand still. […] It is easy to say now, but it is hard to go through it, to see so many dead, wounded, and miserable people being transported” (49 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

Those who managed to leave by sea also encountered many obstacles. Even air transport did not seem safe to them.

> *"A helicopter landed, they told us that only children and women could get in, we were told that they would not let us in alone. The helicopter was overloaded and crashed into a rock in front of us" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).*

The women participating in the study say that getting into any transport required great effort.

> *"They took my sister and me out of the pilot's door, and when they were helping the wounded one, my sister begged to take me on board at least. I refused, but they dragged me out of the pilot's door. I guess they probably felt sorry for my sister and pulled her out too, but we barely managed to get out of there" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, who lives in Kutaisi).*

Due to the traffic flow, the road was blocked in a specific section, which was followed by the Abkhazian tanks moving up and shooting. After blocking various roads, part of the population crossed the river. At this time, the women were helped by the men of the village, who would form a chain on the river and carry the women with the children. After that, the women had to cross the road independently.

> *"After a certain point, we and other women, mothers, and the elderly had to find our way because the men were fighting in the war" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).*

Summary: During the war, women faced unique and significant challenges during the evacuation process from Abkhazia. They were not only responsible for ensuring their own safety but also bore the full responsibility of protecting their family members - children, the elderly, and other vulnerable individuals. This was particularly demanding for families where the men were away fighting or where only women were present.

The evacuation process occurred under extremely difficult and perilous conditions. Women had to rely on various modes of transport by sea, air, or land often in chaotic and life-threatening circumstances. Beyond the physical dangers, they carried a substantial emotional burden, caring for the wounded, managing crisis situations, and simultaneously safeguarding themselves and their loved ones. These experiences reveal that, during the conflict, women navigated dual roles as both victims and decision-makers. They demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness, shouldering immense responsibilities and managing crises to ensure their own survival and that of others.

⇒ Belongings from Abkhazia

When leaving Abkhazia, people were forced to decide what possessions to take. Some could not take anything at all, while others managed to keep a few items. According to the study participants, the decision to leave was often so abrupt that they were confused and overwhelmed about what to prioritize. Ultimately, most chose to bring necessities, but they recalled the process as chaotic and emotionally taxing.

> *"I was confused for a long time; I did not know what to do. We brought a small backpack with baby clothes; my youngest son was seven months old. I left on September 27, thinking that we would return. I lived like that for several years; I would take out that backpack and put it back in, thinking we would suddenly be able to leave. There was nothing to sort out" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Amid the chaos and confusion of evacuation, some respondents reported leaving behind essential personal documents in Abkhazia. Experiences with valuable items varied significantly. While some respondents managed to gather their jewelry and take it with them, others could not and were left with only necessities, such as clothing and photographs, as their sole connections to their former lives. In this study, pictures, photo albums, and a small amount of clothing appeared to be the main items most respondents managed to take with them.

> *"As the years passed, my father would jokingly ask my mother, 'Why didn't you take money?' The house had gold and money, but my mom took the photos. We left with the clothes we were already wearing because when Sokhumi fell, we were under siege and had to cross rivers. These photos remind me of that place" (37 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Tbilisi).*

According to the respondents' stories, there were also cases when they returned to Abkhazia to pick up things and found the house already looted or when they managed to take some things away.

> *"We gathered the neighborhood and went there; that is when they took some of it. My house was looted, and they immediately took everything valuable. The only items left were*

what my aunt managed to hide and bring to us" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).

According to the displaced women, those who left Abkhazia last had information about the looters. Some neighbors saved other people's belongings, while others took them for themselves. Respondents who could not keep their belongings thought that this was the least important problem among all the things they had to endure.

"Then, when I think about it, I do not care about those things. I do not want to think and worry about it because it is unimportant; we have repurchased the plates and the apartment, even though I started living from zero. The main thing is that we are alive and healthy. Many people could not survive this story; they spent years waiting to go back and eventually had a heart attack and died" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: The forced displacement from Abkhazia was marked by chaos and unpredictability, profoundly affecting what people could bring with them. Most evacuees managed to take only basic necessities, such as clothing and a few personal items. Notably, photo albums emerged as the most cherished relics, with many respondents prioritizing their preservation. While some were able to bring valuables, many left without even their essential documents. Later, a few managed to return to Abkhazia to retrieve additional belongings. However, they often found their homes looted, leaving little to recover beyond the memories attached to those places.

⇒ Sources of Obtaining Information About The Course of The War

After being forced to leave Abkhazia, IDPs followed events in their villages through various sources, mainly word of mouth. Respondents recalled that after the fall of Sokhumi, reports mentioned that Abkhazians were celebrating it with great joy. However, there were no sufficient conditions for celebrating, so later, burial rights were permitted to reduce the discomfort caused by seeing unburied bodies.

Therefore, information typically came from the last individuals to leave Abkhazia. Periodic gatherings were held to share updates and discuss missing persons. For example, gatherings were held on the main square of Zugdidi or in Tbilisi, near "Iveria."

"We would hear from relatives because some of our relatives were in Ochamchire. I do not even remember how we managed it, but somehow, we would hear about what was happening there. I have a daughter-in-law, my cousin's wife, who had parents in Abkhazia, and the news spread that they had been killed. Some people say that a pig ate them, others say that someone buried them, and such terrible things were happening" (50 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

In general, it was difficult to disseminate information because there was no electricity. As the respondents noted, only two television channels operated during that time, and it was up to individuals to decide which of those they trusted to get news. Respondents mentioned that they chose to believe the channel aligned with their preferred narrative.

For the women participating in the study, one of the particular difficulties was the lack of information about other family members. They recall that after leaving Abkhazia, they knew nothing about their husbands, brothers, or fathers. In addition, they could not provide information about themselves to the people they sought. According to the respondents, there were cases when they heard their name and surname on the list of missing people on television. Because of this, they often went to the post office and stood in long lines to make long-distance calls, but still, they were unable to make a call.

"On the fifth day, I was able to contact my husband's cousin to tell them that we were alive, and it was a big shock because they thought we had died" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).

According to the study participants, sometimes people were told that a particular person had died in the war, but it turned out that they had survived.

People recalled that those who left last witnessed their homes being looted, neighbors' belongings taken, and residents killed. Some Abkhazians who were friends with specific IDPs became unexpected sources of information; interestingly, contact with them persists today.

"I have asked to be taken there, to show me what Sokhumi is like now […], but they have refused, saying that I would be very sad, that Sokhumi is no longer how I remember anymore. There are no friends and neighbors, and now there is nothing but nature there" (49 years old, from Gulripshi, who lives in Tbilisi).

For some time, people who managed to sneak into Abkhazia also became sources of information. This is how many families learned what had happened to their family members who could not leave Abkhazia with them.

> *"For a while, we did not know anything about my grandmother; then, after months, people started to sneak across because they could not control the border. Someone brought us news that she was alive, but my grandmother had gone through tough days. She was bedridden and sick, but when she saw the hardship, she managed to stand up. The woman whose death we were expecting got up" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Respondents believe that if telecommunication had been as developed during the war as it is now, the people who were the last to leave Abkhazia would have survived.

> *"My grandfather's neighbor could not cross the Enguri River, and he was in a terrible condition; he was decomposed when they saw him. If there had been such a means back then, someone would have seen him, written to him, called him. There were no mobile phones either [...] If there had been such items then, at least those who died at the last stages would have survived" (43 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Summary: After the forced displacement from Abkhazia, the main source of information for the displaced people was word of mouth. The stories of those who had left the territory last became especially important. Information exchange was possible by gathering in central areas of cities. Due to technological limitations, obtaining information was difficult. The displaced also received new information from Abkhazian friends and from people who later managed to sneak into Abkhazia. Respondents believe that if modern means of communication had been available then, many lives would be saved.

3. Living as an IDP

⇒ New Responsibilities for Women Caused By Displacement

The internally displaced women from Abkhazia who participated in the study were able to name all the new responsibilities that they had to take after becoming IDPs. The responsibilities were mainly related to providing for the family, caring for children, finding housing, and everything else a person

left without any financial resources might need. In addition to meeting their children's basic needs, women had to care for their education.

> "The financial support of/providing for the children fell on my shoulders, which was difficult. I may have already been doing it there, but taking on this responsibility was still difficult. I started thinking about how to support the children" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).

This responsibility was sometimes effectively shared with their parents and spouses. However, for those whose spouses and family members died in the war, the only solution was to mobilize themselves.

Among the participants in the study, some decided to start a family after becoming IDPs. In some cases, this was initially a freedom-seeking manifesto, but ultimately, it became an additional responsibility.

> *"I got married at 27. We were living in one room and had absolutely nothing, and I thought, if only I could escape it, I would agree to climb mountains. It was seeking freedom… We flew to Moscow, got married... He did not know me, and I did not know him" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, who lives in Tbilisi).*

IDP women believe that those who became victims of war crimes and could not survive rape, torture, and degrading acts by soldiers have gained not an additional responsibility but a permanent trauma that was caused solely because of their gender. Being an IDP was somewhat of a scar for women. Respondents note that at that time, it was evident that internally displaced girls and women were marginalized. Some of them could not withstand this pressure and, after escaping the war, ended their lives by suicide.

Some women managed to make ends meet by emigrating. This was due to the economic responsibilities imposed on them.

> *"Yes, you have to adapt to where you live. Life went on; I graduated, got married, had a child, and more responsibilities were imposed on me. I had never been outside Abkhazia, not even in Tbilisi. I was a refugee in my own country; we had to fight and provide for our children. When the second child grew up, I became a refugee in emigration. You have to fight whether you want to or not. When you have a child, you must leave when you do not have the opportunity to raise and care for your child in Georgia. I arrived in Tbilisi as a*

homeless woman; I did everything in my power, and when there was no opportunity left, I went to Turkey" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Batumi).

Based on the research findings, it is clear that the most significant challenge mothers faced was transporting their children from Abkhazia alive. This all happened during the war when their own lives were at risk. Thus, some women took their children to peacekeeping with other female family members, while others left Abkhazia with their children in challenging circumstances.

Young girls took responsibility for providing food for their families by standing on the breadlines for hours, constantly fighting with poverty.

"There was a moment when I stole bread. I was a group leader, and I had scholarship money because we distributed money manually, and they gave scholarships to 5 students. I paid off my debt with my scholarship and did not have any money left for bread, so I thought I would buy bread with that money and then ask my classmates to lend it to me. I went into the market, bought it, and after giving coupons to the cashier, saw that they gave me more change than was needed. I cannot explain how fast I ran away; it was wild (50 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: This chapter displays the experiences of displaced women from Abkhazia, who were imposed many new responsibilities since the conflict. Their main challenges were to protect their children during the hostilities and to care for them afterwards, to find housing and to support their families without any existing resources. The women chose various ways to cope with these hardships - some chose to emigrate, some got married, and some relied on humanitarian aid. The situation was particularly difficult for single mothers and women who had experienced sexual violence during the war. The stories described in the report demonstrate that displacement significantly changed gender roles and responsibilities in families, with women becoming the main breadwinners and decision-makers.

⇒ Support System and the Role of the State

After leaving Abkhazia, the displaced women received help in various ways. When discussing this topic, they mainly focus on the support from relatives who sheltered them in their homes after their forced displacement.

"My mother is from Imereti and had relatives in Imereti and Tbilisi. We lived with my aunt in Kutaisi until the end of January. After that period, I did not like Kutaisi anymore because I was forced to be there, and it was not my choice" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, who lives in Tbilisi).

Unfortunately, relatives were not equally empathetic to everyone. Some women recall that when they needed bare necessities, their relatives living in other regions did not spare anything other than old and second-hand dishes and refrained from giving new ones, fearing that the IDPs might lose these items again.

The participants in the research positively recall strangers who unexpectedly appeared in their support circle. The women said that after moving into the collective centers, locals would come to them, bringing them clothes, household items, and food.

The mutual support of the IDPs from Abkhazia is also an important factor. Respondents noted that they often shared canned food and constantly expressed their support for each other.

Participants in the study expressed mixed feelings about the state's support. In anticipation of support from state structures, some displaced women turned to them after leaving Abkhazia. Their wishes were met in some instances, while others still await a response. It should be noted that even at the stage of communication with the state, women constantly faced threats that were determined by their gender.

"The first thing I did was go to the Minister of Defense; he was a Russian-speaking man, and I wrote a proposal. There was a military settlement in Tbilisi, and I wrote in Russian to ask if I would be provided with a temporary apartment; I promised that if I could, I would be the first to cross the Enguri River with my children. He read it, called me, asked me questions, and said he would see what could be done. I was going there and meeting some men at the headquarters. They would look at me, a woman in search of housing, with objectifying eyes, and one time, one of them said to me, "If we become friends, I can help you find an apartment" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).

When discussing the state as a supporter, women noted that their support was insufficient and inappropriate. It was often not very respectful of displaced women.

"State assistance was minimal; you could not live on it" (60-year-old from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).

They periodically received humanitarian aid and financial support, which was paused as soon as they earned a certain income.

Some respondents still live in collective centers and have not been provided housing by the state. For such people, the space where they have lived for years has not been registered in their name, which is a challenge. This is precisely why there are eviction cases that cause additional harm to displaced women.

> *"In 2012, my mother was forcibly taken out of the sanatorium. She loved it so much. The walls were filled with paintings and embroideries from the period of displacement. It was like a gallery. She went to the IDP settlement, and there was no apartment for her. Many people were given apartments, but my mother was not. They told her she had to move to the sanatorium and wait until she found another apartment. I told her that I would go to Batumi; maybe they would give us one there, but they did not give us one there either. I did everything possible, and the whole family was given a one-room apartment. I arrived and the next day my mother died. She could not bear to be kicked out of the sanatorium so undeservedly. They did not even give an apartment to a woman who had sacrificed her child" (51 years old, from Gagra, Tskaltubo).*

The women participating in the study also expressed that the state may have support services for them. However, there is a lack of information about this. In addition, women, tired of the constant struggle, already find it challenging to contact the state and request information about existing programs on their own.

Summary: Based on the data presented in the study, it is clear that the support system for internally displaced women from Abkhazia was based on three primary sources - relatives, strangers, and the state. Although relatives mainly provided shelter to the displaced, their attitude was sometimes stereotypical and less supportive. Support from strangers and other displaced people was mainly expressed in food and clothing. As for state assistance, it was insufficient, unsystematic, and often even humiliating – insubstantial financial assistance, poor-quality humanitarian products, and problems with housing remain unsolved challenges for many displaced women to this day.

⇒ In Search for Housing

As mentioned in the previous chapters, many displaced women initially turned to relatives for support. However, sometimes, this was not entirely their choice. One respondent recalled that when she boarded a ship to leave Abkhazia, her husband, who had been a victim of violence himself, told her to go to Lechkhumi to visit his [husband's] relatives after leaving the conflict zone.

The sudden loss of housing had a particularly negative impact on the women. According to the participants in the study, after moving into collective centers, the women felt nervous, physically unwell, and seemed to have suddenly aged.

Those with a relatively fierce spirit had to make much effort to find housing.

> *"After one room, I broke into another, then a third, because it could not accommodate us enough. This man [the head of the sanatorium] came and called us partisans. I told him, call us partisans; I need housing. It was challenging; winter came; whoever was in the sanatorium had no parquet on the first floor, was closed, the Russians did not go there for vacation, and the rain poured into the building. Those who came from the mountains with children were cold; they took the parquet and burned them to save the frozen children with fire. They still scold us for this" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Those who avoided collective centers believe they did not make a strategically profitable decision. They say this could have been the best way to get a house from the state. However, if we look at the experience of those who spent their time there, we will see that this factor practically does not affect the ability to receive an apartment from the state.

It should be noted that some respondents have already been provided housing by the state.

> *"I received an apartment in Dirsi. My request was granted in 2019. At that time, all three of my children were minors. We came from Moscow; we were deported in 2004. Today, we work and live in Dirsi in a beautiful, cozy apartment" (56-year-old from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

Experiences in this regard are radically different from each other. Among the respondents are women still waiting in vain for an apartment from the state. Among them were single mothers living in rented accommodations with their children

"Many people are still waiting for apartments, but many have already received them. I am probably the exception because I have nothing. Not only were my neighbors provided with accommodation, but some had children, and their children received separate apartments, as did their grandchildren. When we had a minister from Gali, he gave apartments to people from Gali; when the minister was from Svaneti, he provided flats to people from Svaneti, and sometimes I joke that the minister from Sokhumi has not been appointed yet" (53 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).

Finding housing was sometimes accompanied by charity. One displaced woman says that a stranger gave her family a house—she still does not know where he found them. Despite poverty and cramped conditions, the apartment provided some relief.

"We were lucky that this man [a stranger] gave us the first floor, and we had neighbors who were also struggling, but when we got up in the morning, we would find either beans on the table, corn, or firewood lying around" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).

Among the stories studied are personal tragedies, such as when people tried to buy a house independently from state support, and the money they saved ended up in the hands of scammers.

"Years later, my parents went to Russia and saved some money for an apartment. When we were supposed to buy an apartment, my mother had an idea to save up more and buy a better one. In the end, we decided to take out a mortgage, but it turned out that some scammer rented the apartment and then mortgaged it to us. At that time, there was a sixth department, and with the assistance of acquaintances, we got this money back in installments of 100 dollars*. I remember that when they were compactly settled, they took one room there" (44 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

In the end, the IDPs who were settled with relatives, on private property, or with strangers had to overcome many barriers to avoid living in the open air. In the first stage, they did not have a bed, dishes, or necessary household items. However, as they say, they managed to start life from scratch.

Summary: The research revealed that the experiences of displaced women in finding housing were one of the most difficult challenges of their lives. While some initially found shelter with relatives, many were placed in collective centers, where they had to live in difficult conditions. Some women received housing from the state, but many are still waiting for it. The research revealed both success stories in finding housing (cases of receiving help from strangers) and difficult experiences (e.g., becoming a victim of fraud). Despite numerous difficulties - be it lack of basic household items or the uneven distribution of state assistance - displaced women managed to start life from scratch and fight for survival.

⇒ Adapting to the New Living Environment

Besides searching for accommodation, the initial stages of displacement also created specific challenges related to adapting to the new environment. Some respondents did not have any difficulties during this stage, which, as they state, was because they found themselves in a friendly neighborhood and environment, but for some, this stage of life turned out to be traumatic.

> *"When I went to the cafeteria and looked around, I saw people sickly eating soup. Everyone seemed weak, and I started crying; I thought about leaving and jumping out the window. My son-in-law told my parents that I would lose my sanity here, and they took me to Russia. I was there for a year but could not stay there; I wanted to return. I got hives from nostalgia; it broke out all over my body, and after the treatment had no results, the doctor asked me to move back home because the hives were caused by me missing my homeland" (51 years old, from Gagra, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Also, bride kidnapping was widespread there, which made the adaptation process even more difficult.

> *"I came to live with my parents, and within three months, my husband took me, and I got married in Tsageri. No one could understand why I would get married there" (51 years old, from Gagra, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Respondents believe people reacted differently to the war back then than now, for example, in Ukraine. According to them, locals viewed the IDPs as a lower social group, and "refugee" was used as a disrespectful word. Additionally, there were cases when girls were not accepted into families as daughters-in-law because of this. Fortunately, according to the participants in the study, these attitudes have now changed, which was also facilitated by the experience gained in the August war.

> *"It was tough. Almost all of my classmates were refugees, and we were all the same, but in general, the fact was that we were poor and miserable refugees. I have walked barefoot many times. There has been snow up to my knees, and I would still walk in "ballet shoes." People would laugh at me, saying, "Look what this crazy person is wearing" (50 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Young girls also found it hard to adapt to their new living environment; recalling their school memories, note that bullying related to being IDP was quite common in the educational environment.

The women participating in the study took much time and effort to adjust to their new living environment. Transitioning from a comfortable and happy environment to a new, challenging situation was painful for them. However, they realized themselves over time and gathered people around them who improved their lives.

Summary: The narratives presented here show that adapting to the new environment was rather painful and traumatic – some people even developed psychosomatic disorders because of nostalgia, while others became victims of social stigma. Particularly devastating was the attitude towards IDPs - they were referred to as "scum" and "pitiful", and the word "refugee" had a derogatory connotation. Young girls were bullied in schools, and in certain cases, being an IDP became an obstacle to getting married. Over time, especially after the August 2008 war, society's attitude changed and IDP women became better in adapting and fulfillin themselves in the new environment.

⇒ Searching for Income Sources

Respondents went through many things on the path to financial independence. Some tried learning new professions, while others got jobs in the service sector. It should be noted that in some cases, the abovementioned choices were determined by their negative life experiences as women.

> *"I decided to graduate from law school after becoming an IDP because I saw that I needed this profession. I wanted to do it earlier, but what happened happened. I was abducted for marriage at a very early age, which is a separate story itself" (60 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tskaltubo).*

Given that women took on most of the economic responsibilities, they began planning where to work, how to provide for their children, and how to manage time as soon as they left Abkhazia. At times, the work they did was degrading. For example, other women - possibly former acquaintances or, at one point, on a lower financial level - looked down on them with irony. Women had to overcome such barriers in Georgia and abroad when emigrating. These gradually weakened their health, but walking this path was crucial for survival.

When discussing their experiences of working abroad, internally displaced women from Abkhazia mostly talk about Russia. Based on their statements, at that time, it was a place where physical or intellectual labor was convenient for them since there was no language barrier, and they already had relatives or friends in various cities of Russia who could help if needed.

Those who decided to stay in Georgia studied various crafts and professions, got jobs, and earned their income. They also started small businesses, which were successful in some cases and unsuccessful in others.

> *"I went through the whole pandemic with that business [by creating a cleaning company], but when the girls [employees] saw how much income it brought, each of them created their own companies. I lost my employees, but I had a relative at "Ambassador," who helped me start working as a dishwasher. I got a second job as a dishwasher again" (53 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).*

> *"My son was 40 days old when I left. I worked, cooked, and cleaned. I wanted to do something for my son. Then, I emigrated, and my son graduated from school. I did not have another son at that time. I did everything I could, and I gave my son a future. I worked in Turkey for years and almost did not come to Georgia for four and a half years. I worked illegally there" (48 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Batumi).*

Summary: After becoming IDPs, internally displaced women from Abkhazia had to take economic responsibility on themselves and try different ways to earn an income - some learned a new profession, some got a job in the service sector, some even tried to start their own business. Many of them had to overcome social stigma and take on "demeaning" jobs. Difficult economic situation sometimes forced them to go abroad to work. The most popular place for this regard was Russia, where they had no language barrier and could rely on the help of relatives. Despite tireless work, often, it still was not enough to properly provide for their children, which is why many mothers had to emigrate and spend years away from their families.

⇒ Expectations Related to Returning to Abkhazia

Hopes and expectations related to returning to Abkhazia are key issues that practically unify the opinions of internally displaced women. They recall that even during the war, they constantly hoped

that everything would pass soon and that they would return home. Years would pass, but they did not lose this hope.

According to them, there was a constant discussion about returning, and these feelings were stimulated by the information they received

> *"I laugh bitterly now because they promised we would return for the New Year and Easter. The UN resolution was adopted, negotiations were over, and nothing happened afterward. People lived temporarily with this hope, living out of their suitcases, not even unpacking clothes. They thought there was no point in buying a house, and people lived in such conditions for a long time" (60 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Kutaisi).*

> *"They kept telling us that we would return. This happened three times, and after that, I stopped believing. I then moved to Tbilisi. They were harassing us... It was a terrible feeling..." (70 years old, from Gali lives in Gali).*

It is important to note that some respondents still expect to return to Abkhazia, while others consider this unrealistic. However, they know that there will no longer be a friendly environment in Abkhazia, and things will not be as they were before leaving Abkhazia. Internally displaced women are given hope when the reports state that Abkhazians show negative attitudes towards Russians.

> *"I have a little hope today because my brother-in-law returned to Abkhazia 15 years ago, now lives in Gagra, and tells us that the situation is agitated. The Abkhazians hate the Russians so much that there is an internal conflict" (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).*

Those who have lost hope of returning attribute this to the day Sokhumi fell. For this reason, September 27 is still associated with painful memories for them.

> *"No one expected that everything would end like this. To this day, September 27 is still black on the calendar. Once, I was on a shift and did not remember what day it was, but I was feeling sick and at some point realized that it was September 27" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).*

Summary: The hope and expectation of returning to Abkhazia is a central theme connecting the experiences of internally displaced women. During the war and the immediate post-war period, they were convinced that their displacement was temporary and that they would return soon. This belief led many to live out of their suitcases for years, avoiding thoughts of settling into permanent housing. Over time, however, the need to raise and support their children forced them to adapt to their new environments. Despite these adjustments, the hope of returning to Abkhazia remains alive for many, serving as a source of resilience and a connection to their past.

4. Lives of Internally Displaced Women Today

⇒ Reflection of War From Today's Perspective

Given the time since the war, the respondents could discuss the events. According to them, the last period spent in Abkhazia was the most challenging stage of their lives. This raised many fears later, which the women still cannot overcome. During the interview, the study participants openly talked about their fear of weapon sounds and the phobias of harmless sounds caused by them, such as a bursting balloon, a car engine sound, etc.

> *"For the first month we were in fear, we would run upstairs at the sound of a car because of this fear. Even the dog was afraid of hearing a car" (70 years old, from Gali, lives in Gali).*

> *"Ever since childhood, I have feared the sound of gunfire. I am still afraid of a balloon bursting, but during that war, I was in such a state that I could already tell what kind of weapon they were shooting from" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, lives in Tbilisi).*

There is also another radical side among the respondents, who, on the contrary, are no longer afraid of anything after what they have experienced.

> *"I am strong in that some people may be afraid of something, and I am not afraid of anything. The fear I felt, for example, when we saw the Abkhazians, made me stronger. I wish there had been no war, and I would not have wanted to be that strong, but something still lingers. Your fear makes you stronger" (43 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

For some of them, the war period coincided with their teenage years. This is already a unique stage in a person's life, and changing their residence at such a time made it even more difficult for adolescents to establish themselves.

> *"Then it was a difficult experience, not so much in Zugdidi as in Tbilisi when you could always hear swearing – "refugees have arrived," and you were always being pointed at or bullied—the finger-pointing about being a refugee continued until 2008. I had a friend I visited years later, and a girl she knew came too. They took the children to kindergarten/school together. They were discussing schools, and this girl suddenly said that she could not take her child to a particular school because the refugees took their children there. It was a shame for her kid to grow up with refugees" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

For these and similar reasons, respondents openly admit that they avoid talking about the war, as it brings back painful memories they strive to forget. However, for some, sharing their experiences provides relief and liberation, allowing them to finally express what they have carried within themselves for so long.

The conversations with the research participants make it evident that the war significantly impacted their current lives and how their personalities were formed. This impact was present not only in their financial state but also in their psychological state.

> *"It affected us psychologically, and our purpose in life changed as well. Whether we like it or not, we must do something to survive. Most of all, we need psychological support and help. I still need it now" (48-year-old from Ochamchire, who lives in Batumi).*

According to them, leaving everything in Abkhazia also influenced the fact that they were no longer afraid of losing anything. Women perceive this as empowerment and use it as a protective shield when speaking.

> *"I think it all starts in childhood. When I think about myself and the stages of my life, I can say that I am a powerful person. I think that there is no challenge that I cannot overcome for the sake of my loved ones. Maybe the war has caused it…" (37 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Tbilisi).*

Summary: Post-war reflections indicate that the displacement experience profoundly influenced women's lives. Psychological trauma manifested in two primary forms: some remain burdened by fears and phobias linked to war, while others claim that the hardships strengthened their resilience. Adolescents particularly faced significant challenges as they endured displacement and stigma. While some avoid discussing the war due to trauma, others find therapeutic value in revisiting the topic. The experience reshaped their life goals and personal characteristics.

⇒ Attitudes Toward Abkhazians and Russians

After leaving Abkhazia, some women in the study could return occasionally, while others never had any personal interaction with Abkhazians again. Those who have visited Abkhazia occasionally highlight a sense of alienation from the local population. They attribute this partly to the stark differences in development levels, with respondents noting that the standards they have grown accustomed to are absent. Corruption, bureaucracy, and the normalization of inhumane treatment are among the key issues they cite to illustrate the differences they perceive between Georgians and Abkhazians.

> *"We are used to the one-stop shop principle here, but it is a disaster. They love money and will gladly put it in their pocket if you give them rubles, and I am surprised because we are no longer used to that. If you give money to someone in the justice system here, they might insult you. [...] When you cross this bridge, they look down on you. There are queues there, but they do not care, and I do not have an excellent attitude towards this. [...] I have an aunt there, and I take care of her when I am there. I buy things, and when we go there by minibus, they make you get everything off the minibus, and you have to drag products by hand. What will you have, potatoes, chicken? What else can there be, right?" (43 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

The existing point of contact is so unpleasant for the IDPs that each time they go to Abkhazia, it brings them additional sorrow. Nevertheless, the dominant opinion among the respondents is that if they should have complaints about the war with anyone, it is Russians and not Abkhazians.

In this way, the displaced women from Abkhazia directly indicate that everything happened because the Russians and Abkhazians were not asked anything in this regard.

"Russia destroyed us... When I went to Abkhazia, I saw that Russia had taken it away from us. Even now, when I cross the bridge, the Russians act as "the bosses," and no one asks them anything [the Abkhazians]. Maybe some Abkhazians regret it, but they will die before they say anything about it. Russia was against us; it is a region that Putin wanted and took away" (43 years old, from Gali, who lives in Tbilisi).

The respondents cite the current situation in which the opposition forces in Abkhazia are protesting against Russia.

At the same time, some believe that not only the Russians but also Georgians are to blame since many of them were involved in "selling the country" to enemies and, in some way, contributed to the aggravation of the situation.

"It was not just the Russians; many Georgians were involved who also took part in selling the country. Some of our people were behind the Russians, and if we look at politics, we will be able to see this. Russia alone cannot do anything if you do not break down the door from the inside" (48 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Batumi).

Despite the mostly positive and tolerant attitude towards the Abkhazians, some respondents believe that the Abkhazians are primarily to blame for starting the war. That is why the Abkhazians who arrived in Tbilisi evoked negative emotions.

"Tbilisi is full of Abkhazians. How dare anyone even speak Abkhazian? Even without it, I quickly realized that they were Abkhazians. When they talk to Russian, I notice the accent, and I feel hatred towards them. There are many of them here; I see many who have come to get treatment. As I have towards Russians... I do not hate the nation, but how they talk in Russian..." (56 years old, from Akhaldaba, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: Internally displaced women's attitudes toward ethnic Abkhaz people are complex and ambivalent. While the majority place the primary blame for the war on Russia rather than Abkhazia, they express feelings of alienation due to Abkhazia's bureaucracy, corruption, and perceived underdevelopment. Some respondents also attribute responsibility for the war to Georgian traitors, while a minority directly blames the Abkhaz population. The prevailing sentiment among many is that Abkhazians were themselves victims of Russian policies, a perspective supported by contemporary anti-Russian sentiment within certain Abkhaz opposition circles. This nuanced outlook reflects the shared suffering and lingering tensions between the two communities.

⇒ Connection with Abkhazia

Almost all respondents say they still manage to maintain some connection with Abkhazia. Social networks significantly facilitated this.

> *"Go ahead, go to my Facebook, and you will see. I gathered my friends after 32 years, but I told the young people I was doing it for their parents so that they could see it. We always stay in touch. I know where everyone lives; when someone comes here, they come over, and we gather and have dinner. We no longer live in such lives to have daily contact with each other, but we try to maintain these relationships and pass them on to our children as well" (49 years old, from Gulripshi, lives in Tbilisi).*

> *"I talk to my classmates and relatives over the Internet. Today, we live in a situation where not everyone can visit others. Maybe if it is a funeral or something. We used to go when the people in our village would die. When we gathered, no one remembered the deceased anymore" (48 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Batumi*).

Respondents also note that when IDPs from Abkhazia meet by chance, they may not even recognize each other because the interaction is less frequent now, and connections gradually become forgotten.

Based on the information provided by their relatives from Abkhazia, women conclude that many Abkhazians have also left their homes because life has become unbearable.

> *"Our [Abkhaz] neighbors went to Ukraine […]. When my mother died, she came back, and she was very worried. Now we keep in touch through Facebook" (43 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

In addition, many Georgians have returned to Gali, which has become one way for respondents to maintain their connection with Abkhazia.

> *"My uncle's family lives there. It is like the people from Gali have returned, but you are not considered a human being there" (50 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Summary: Social media, especially Facebook, has played an important role in maintaining relations with Abkhazia, allowing internally displaced women to keep up with the lives of old friends and relatives. However, when meeting face-to-face, years later, they often find it difficult to even recognize each other. According to respondents, Abkhazians themselves left the region in search of a better life, which was due to the difficult socio-economic and criminal situation. Displaced women manage to introduce Abkhazia and its memories to their children, by which they try to maintain a connection between generations.

⇒ Memories from Abkhazia That Make Displaced Women Feel Happy At This Stage of Their Lives

Despite the tragedies that internally displaced women have experienced, they still associate the happiest memories of their lives with Abkhazia. They say it was "a splendid memory you could even write a book about." When the moment comes when they are in a bad mood, they recall their childhood in Abkhazia, and everything changes for the better. These memories are associated with the sea, mountains, climate, and warm relationships there. These primary factors made it easy for the residents to overcome daily challenges.

> *„There are many like that, for example, when the whole family would go to the sea and bring watermelon, melon, cheese, and bread with us. We would feast on Saint Mary's Day; the whole neighborhood would be outside, a big fire would be lit, and corn and potatoes would be roasted afterward. It is a pleasant memory when I would sleep in during the summer holidays" (47 years old, from Gali, lives in Tbilisi).*

Happy memories are those significant moments that respondents celebrated in Abkhazia, even when the war was raging.

This fact causes respondents to experience tears alongside joy when recalling positive memories. Their dreams are often filled with images of Abkhazia, particularly from childhood, and details that have left an indelible mark on their subconscious.

According to the participants of the study, memories of Abkhazia in a positive way not only bring a feeling of happiness but also hope.

"I often find it helpful to think about Abkhazia and hope we return soon. Looking at the current situation in Georgia, I do not know why I believe it, but I strongly believe that we will return soon. I think this will happen in my lifetime; I will go and live there" (37-year-old from Ochamchire, lives in Tbilisi).

Summary: *For internally displaced women from Abkhazia, the years spent there are associated with pleasant memories, mostly related to nature (sea, mountains, climate, citrus gardens) and warm social relations. They can vividly imagine family picnics on the seashore, village holidays, celebrating Chiakokonoba with neighbors, and other traditional rituals. Interestingly, positive memories are even associated with events during the war, such as school graduations. These memories are not only a source of nostalgia for them but also a source of hope - many of them still hope that it will be possible to return to Abkhazia and continue their lives there.*

⇒ Experiences of Returning to Abkhazia

In previous chapters, it was repeatedly noted that some of the study participants managed to return to Abkhazia once or several times after the war ended. In some cases, this was related to the death of relatives there; however, this was not enough reason for the women to be transferred across the border without problems.

What they saw there evoked similar associations and practically made them lose the desire to return.

"In 2001, my mother managed to visit Abkhazia for a few days, but she said she did not want to see Sokhumi like this anymore because the situation was so bad. She did not even recognize the alley near our house; everything is so abandoned and neglected" (48 years old, from Sokhumi, who lives in Tbilisi).

Those who have not yet attempted to visit their homes mention the requirement of a special permit as a reason for not doing so, as they find it offensive. They also consider the emotional difficulties that seeing Abkhazia may evoke in them.

As an exception, the study included an IDP woman who returned to Abkhazia several years ago. She said that she found all the houses in her neighborhood burned down, but her home had survived. Others have also returned to Gali and continued living there.

"NGOs worked hard here; they helped those whose houses were burned down, rebuilt them, which is why people have returned. Those who were my students brought their children to me, and now I teach their kids. I feel sorry for these kids when the lessons are in Russian because they speak neither Russian nor Georgian. There is no environment for them to speak, but they still manage to do so" (70 years old, from Gali, lives in Gali).

Along with the resettlement, it was natural that some relationship with the Abkhazians would arise. The respondent recalls this rare interaction in a positive context.

Life in Abkhazia is challenging due to problems like electricity and water, which people are fighting at their own expense. In particular, they drill wells and bring water from there. At this stage, the issue of fear is not critical; however, the tension related to the elections in Tbilisi and the reactions of the Abkhazians to it is having a particular impact on the Georgian population of Gali.

"They react very quickly, either by blocking our road or something. Even during the pandemic, the road was blocked, and I could not go to Zugdidi on my mother's birthday. We have such problems here now" (70 years old, from Gali, lives in Gali).

Women who cross the so-called border to deliver or buy products encounter insulting and humiliating circumstances. According to the respondent, this applies to Russian and Abkhaz law enforcement officers and Georgians.

"You have to go through so many checkpoints, Russians, Abkhazians, but they [Georgians] make you very angry there... They ask what you have and then attack your bags. When I worked in a bakery, they made me aware of human rights, and I knew the laws. What right do you have to grab someone else's bag? If you reply, some of them already know my face and will not touch me. They drag women around like dogs, asking what they have in bags. How is this even possible?" (70 years old, from Gali, lives in Gali).

Summary: This chapter displays the diverse experiences of returning to Abkhazia from the perspective of displaced women. Some of them managed to return temporarily, but what they saw there - burnt houses and deserted streets - caused a strong emotional reaction in them. This made them lose their desire to return. The experience of one respondent who returned to live in Gali is particularly interesting. Despite some positive aspects (fertile land, the opportunity to organize their own farm), returnees still face significant challenges - infrastructural problems, the impact of political tensions and the difficulties associated with moving across the so-called border.

⇒ Advice for Other Women In War

Based on their experience, respondents advise women in war to remain resilient and not lose hope. However, those who have become victims of war crimes cannot depend on this advice, and respondents see the need for a psychologist. They also consider it essential to observe others' examples, such as how internally displaced women from Abkhazia managed to find everything from scratch and reestablish themselves.

According to displaced women from Abkhazia, the situation of women in post-Soviet countries is primarily tricky, and people have to go through many challenges solely because they are women.

The women in the study emphasized that while they could not endure the same experiences again, they felt themselves growing more potent during the war and believed it was possible to overcome the challenges. For this reason, their wishes for other women often focus on the importance of psychological and physical resilience.

> *"It probably takes much strength, and war is terrible [...]. I wish them psychological and physical strength. You have to be a powerful person mentally. There are Georgian women in Ukraine, too, and I wish them strength of character. When you see how painful it is on the screen and imagine what it is like to deal with it in real life, you probably need a powerful psyche to endure it" (37 years old, from Ochamchire, lives in Tbilisi).*

It is important that among the respondents, there were also those who, from the moment of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, expressed a desire to participate in the war actively.

> *"When the war started in Ukraine, I thought about going there. I have a very close circle of friends, and they told me to look at my passport first and then think about leaving after that. They would say – you are already elderly and do not need to go there" (60-year-old from Sokhumi, who lives in Tskaltubo).*

Summary: The advice of internally displaced women to others in war mainly emphasizes the importance of psychological resilience and maintaining hope. According to the respondents, they would not be able to go through such trauma a second time, but they stress the significance of discovering inner strength during wartime and advocating for psychological support for victims of war crimes. Drawing from their own experiences, they believe it is possible to rebuild one's life, despite the challenges, particularly for women in the post-Soviet context who, they believe, face additional gender-related obstacles.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the experience of internally displaced women from Abkhazia, both before and after the war, is complex and multi-layered. They mostly remember the pre-war period positively, as it was a socially and economically stable time for them. However, that period was also characterized by inevitable tensions between ethnic groups, affecting various aspects of public life.

Despite the many warning signs, the outbreak of war still surprised the population. During the hostilities, women had a special responsibility. They had to ensure their safety and that of their family members. The evacuation process took place in challenging and dangerous conditions.

During the displacement process, women navigated challenges such as finding housing, supporting children, and coping with social stigma. Many assumed economic responsibilities and explored various ways to earn income. Their support networks included relatives, strangers, and state aid, which was often inadequate and inconsistent.

The hope of returning to Abkhazia is an essential aspect of the experiences of the women participating in the study. Initially, they expected to return soon, but over time, along with understanding the reality, they had to settle and adapt to their new living environment. The war left a lasting psychological impact on them - some women continue to struggle with fears related to the war, while others believe the hardships strengthened them.

The attitude of the displaced women towards the Abkhazians is ambivalent. The majority consider Russia to be the main culprit and believe that the Abkhazians themselves are victims of Russian policy.

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