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





British Embassy  
Tbilisi



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from the British people



Sapari / საპარი



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## **Brief Contents**

The goal of this research is to promote the improvement of state services for domestic violence victims within the ongoing public administration reform in the country. Particularly, the main objectives of the research are to study the attitudes of domestic violence victims towards the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the “MIA”) including Public Security Management Center 112 (hereinafter referred to as “112”) during the period of March-June 2020 (hereinafter referred to as “Covid-19 period”) and to study the challenges emerged by the spread of Covid-19 during their service delivery. Within the frames of research information was collected through quantitative methodology, telephone and face-to-face survey methods and qualitative methodology – focus group and in-depth interview methods. It is noteworthy that the research data are not representative and do not fully reflect the problems and challenges during Covid-19. Furthermore, the problems in the report may only be relevant to the respondents of research.

The study revealed the causes and forms of domestic violence against the backdrop of Covid-19. According to the respondents, the period of the pandemic may have been especially hard for socially vulnerable women who worked at various retail stores and open markets. After these facilities were closed, they were left virtually without income, which in some cases caused the anxiety of their abusive husbands and children and intensified aggression towards them. According to the respondents, in families where a woman was an employed person, or was a sole breadwinner, it was precisely her who became a victim of domestic violence. Simultaneously, the focus group data showed that in Georgia, the reality created by Covid-19 probably caused a phenomenon of domestic violence not only in the socially vulnerable families but also in middle and upper classes. Closing of jobs, and isolation of people in one space may have increased the risk of conflict among them regardless of their belonging to certain class. According to both quantitative and qualitative data, during Covid-19 period psychological and physical violence were named as most common forms of domestic violence. However, forms of economic and sexual violence were listed. For example, as a result of quantitative research, 74% of the respondents are victims of psychological violence, 67% - physical violence, 19% - economic, 11% sexual, and 4% are victims of coercion (marking several answers was possible).

Research revealed the problems and challenges that women victims of domestic violence faced during Covid-19. The respondents’ reports showed that the most important problem during the pandemic was transportation/movement of domestic violence victims. Given that the police didn’t work remotely, victims had to go to the police stations for questioning and investigation

procedures. Due to the absence of public transport women could not go to the police stations because of their financial difficulties. In their opinion, as a result the investigation of the case was hindered.

According to the representatives of MIA, during Covid-19 period, 112 switched to emergency working mode. Specifically, from February 2020 until October 2020, up to 70 new staff members were added to the existing operators, and in November, during the so-called second wave – 230 operators were added. Apart from this, in order to reduce the waiting time caused by the pandemic and to provide continuous police services, 112 was divided into three channels – 112 – emergency medical assistance; 112/1 – police and fire/rescue service and 112/2 – Covid-19 and viral symptoms. Despite the above listed activities, according to some victims of domestic violence there was a problem of 112 hotline overload.

The research also studied the behavior of women victims of domestic violence, particularly who they addressed for help in case of violence – “112”, the police directly or non-governmental organizations. 44% of respondents say they called 112 after an incident of violence, while 56% say they did not make a call. 35% of respondents do not trust 112 and therefore did not make the call. 18% think “it is pointless to call 112” because the call is picked up after a very long time; 30% said they had no information what they were supposed to do and therefore did not make the call; According to the lawyers, during Covid-19 period, instead of police, victims addressed the women’s rights organizations. The lawyers think that the reason for addressing the NGO-s may be the intention of the victims to firstly seek the qualified consultation from a lawyer and only after that decide what steps to take and whether to address the law enforcement bodies for further response. Quantitative data also confirmed this fact, specifically, victim respondents prefer to clarify the situation first, with the help of an NGO, and afterwards go to the police. (27% of the interviewed respondents initially went to women’s’ rights organizations).

The study examined the services provided by the police to victims of domestic violence during the Covid-19 period and the activities carried out for this purpose. 51% of the respondents interviewed report that regulations and restrictions imposed by Covid-19 had certain negative impact on the work of the police. 88% of respondents said police and investigators did not / could not work remotely. The MIA representatives state that according to legislation it is impossible to conduct investigation and questioning remotely. 28% of respondents mention that their investigator was quarantined/self-isolated and had no substitute. Apart from this, none of the domestic violence victims participating in the study had information on whether the MIA introduced any type of remote service to improve the services for victims. The study found that the respondents do not have full information about the mobile application of 112. According to the lawyers, during Covid-19 period, responding to cases of domestic violence and initiating the

investigation process did not start precisely because of the pandemic which in their opinion may indicate the ineffective work of certain representatives of the police.

The research studied and evaluated the steps taken by the MIA against cases of domestic violence during the Covid-19 period. Firstly, the information video intended for victims of domestic violence prepared by the MIA is noteworthy, also dividing “112” into channels which was specifically designed for victims of domestic violence. However, according to research, despite the long period of Covid-19, modifying the service delivery forms of MIA and responding to the restrictions caused by the pandemic as well as making relevant changes to the services or processes may have been minimally implemented. Among the challenges were protraction of the investigation, the lack of replacement staff in case of infection of the responsible person and the impossibility to conduct consultation and investigation remotely. According to the respondents, the public sector did not study their situation and did not gather information about the challenges caused by the pandemic. Finally, it should be noted that Covid-19 pandemic is an unexpected challenge of special scale, that has created a number of difficulties in state as well as in other sectors. However, despite these difficulties, providing basic services to the citizens and especially responding to domestic violence or similar types of criminal offences and effective process of investigation should not be hindered. This research serves precisely this goal – firstly, to highlight the obstacles caused by Covid-19 in the process of defending the rights of domestic violence victims and to further contribute to the resolution of these challenges by the governmental and non-governmental sectors.

### **Introduction/problem review**

Structural social factors, including health-related crises and pandemics, have their influence on domestic violence, and other gender-based crimes. Structural theory considers domestic violence to be an integral part of the social structure and relates it to people's reactions to stress and tension caused by poverty, unemployment, homelessness, isolation, and environmental factors<sup>1</sup>. Therefore it is believed that families with low employment rates and low financial incomes belong to the lower social strata, are more vulnerable to structural tensions and disasters and hence, are more likely to experience domestic violence than other types (middle and upper class) of families<sup>2</sup>.

In this social stratified discourse, it is important not to lose sight of the gender side of domestic violence. At first glance, domestic violence is a neutral term that does not refer to the superiority

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<sup>1</sup> Hongwei Zhang, The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China, *Journal of Family Violence*, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020, pp. 1;

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2;

of one gender over the other, but in reality almost always manifests itself as a gender crime where the victim is mostly a woman and the perpetrator is a man.<sup>3</sup>

Why is this the case?

A pandemic, as a universal health crisis and disaster is often accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These negative emotions, and therefore domestic violence, are caused by fear of infection, social isolation, inadequate medical care, and job / income loss, which should typically be characteristic to people of all genders in poor and low-income families<sup>4</sup>, but according to Michael Kimmel violence has gender and patriarchal society only allows men to express stress in the form of direct violence<sup>5</sup>. There are studies that show how the number of domestic violence increases during large-scale disasters. More specifically, studies in both developing and developed countries have shown that domestic violence increases as a result of natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes). In addition, natural disasters are accompanied by increased levels of divorce, violence against women and children<sup>6</sup>. According to studies, the rate of domestic violence against women also increases during pandemics.<sup>7</sup> Since February 2020, restrictions imposed due to the spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent state of emergency, locking people in one space, have increased domestic violence and violence against women/girls by 1/3 worldwide (for example, in France, the number of reported domestic violence cases increased by 30% after the declaration of quarantine, in Argentina - by 25%, in Cyprus - by 30%, in Singapore - by 33%)<sup>8</sup>. This increase in domestic violence is so critical that researchers often refer to it as a "double pandemic" (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro 2020) and a "new crisis" (Taub 2020).<sup>9</sup>

In this structural phenomenon, one of the main problems is that in the general confusion and panic caused by the pandemic, women victims of domestic violence are left without attention by the state and society, while they need special help and attention precisely during this period. This lack of attention may be caused by the cultural and gender stereotypes that exist in almost every modern society because of patriarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Hongwei Zhang, The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China, Journal of Family Violence, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020, pp 1-4;

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kimmel, The Gendered Society, Fourth Edition, The Gender of Violence, Oxford, 2008, pp. 381-408;

<sup>6</sup> <https://georgia.unfpa.org/en/news/pandemic-rages-women-and-girls-face-intensified-risks-7>

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organization, [COVID-19 and violence against women](#), March 26 2020; UN Women, [COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#).

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament, [COVID-19: Stopping the rise in domestic violence during lockdown](#), April 7, 2020; UN Women, [COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#).

<sup>9</sup> Hongwei Zhang, The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China, Journal of Family Violence, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020, p. 2;

According to these stereotypes, men are considered superior to women in modern societies, and it is almost universally believed that "domestic violence must be handled within the family" and that intervention of the police is not necessary<sup>10</sup>. Such a patriarchal ideology is so deeply imbedded in all aspects of social life of the majority of societies, that domestic violence is often seen as a problem of a particular family and not of the society as a whole.

The situation is similar in Georgia. According to the study "Public perceptions on Gender Equality in Politics and Business", the majority (63%) of respondents think that a good wife should obey her husband even if she disagrees with him. This opinion is shared by 56% of women and 72 % of men. Also, a large part of respondents (44%) agree with the provision that it is important for a man to show his wife/partner who is in charge of the family<sup>11</sup>. During the pandemic, with the increase in domestic violence, the gender stereotypes discussed above (man is superior to woman, domestic violence should not go out of the family, the couple should solve the family problem without the help from police, etc.) may intensify in a patriarchal society, which is why Georgian women victims of violence have to face double oppression. On the one hand, they are oppressed by an abusive family member, and on the other hand, by stereotypes in the society, which may be shared by state structures, that should be protecting the rights of victims. The activities of the police and the policemen themselves may have those stereotypes, that encourage and reproduce domestic violence.

During a pandemic, victims of domestic violence need immediate and intensive support from both governmental and non-governmental organizations. It is imperative that various social agencies and government institutions resume pre-pandemic functions. It is especially important to adapt the existing services and activities of the police and the MIA to the new reality, to assist the victims of violence. It is necessary to develop specific policies for the service of domestic violence victims, to increase the level of knowledge and sensitivity of police officers, investigators and judges on cases of domestic violence. The MIA should look into the challenges of domestic violence investigation during the pandemic and devise new plans to deal with them.

State and non-state actors around the world provide targeted intervention to deal with domestic violence increased during the pandemic. In some countries, the police use existing online applications for policing, such as WhatsApp, while others have created new free instant messaging programs. Some of them are aimed at raising awareness of the police, while others are improving the emergency services of the victims. A number of modern technology-based applications and online programs have been developed to provide immediate assistance to

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<sup>10</sup> Hongwei Zhang, The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China, *Journal of Family Violence*, Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020, pp. 1-4;

<sup>11</sup> " Public perceptions on Gender Equality in Politics and Business", UNDP, ACT, Tbilisi 2013, p. 20.



victims. During the quarantine period, a similar mobile application Safe You was translated into Georgian and launched, which makes a variety of information available to women, also free assistance and the option to send alarm messages to both organizations and their loved ones<sup>12</sup>. Innovative platforms have been created in many countries that do not require mobile phones and internet.

During the Covid-19 period, the need to study and evaluate public services for victims of domestic violence, including police activity, also emerged in Georgia. A study was planned and conducted, the results and recommendations of which will help the state to take adequate and data-based steps in relation to the existing challenges. The study was conducted by Union Sapari with the support of the United Nations Development Fund. It is noteworthy that Union Sapari has been implementing the USAID-funded project "Protection of Women's Rights" since 2017, which aims to protect the rights of women and girls through strategic litigation, legal aid and awareness raising. In the last 4 years, Sapari has provided up to 2000 legal consultations and up to 1000 litigations. After the spread of Covid-19, the number of appeals to Sapari hotline and Facebook page have increased, compared to the previous quarters (September-December 2019 - 100 consultations).

The lawyers of Sapari had to conduct 131 telephone and online consultations between March and June 2020 alone. It should be noted that during Covid-19 in Georgia, the number of appeals to the police regarding domestic violence and the number of restraining orders did not increase significantly<sup>13</sup>. It may be assumed that the relevant state services, as well as the services of 112, patrol police and Ministry of Health either did not work in best interests of the victims, or victims did not trust these services and they preferred to cooperate with NGOs.

The present study is important in terms of studying domestic violence against women during Covid-19 in general, in addition, it responds to public administration reform, one of the tasks of which is to improve the delivery of public services, including the services of the MIA. In this regard, the aim of the reform is to improve the service delivery system in Georgia in such a way that it is citizen-oriented and well-managed, and to provide high quality and accessible services to all citizens of Georgia.

## **Research aim and objectives**

**The aim of the study** is to facilitate the collection of information about the work of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the MIA) in relation to domestic violence cases

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<sup>12</sup> See detailed information about Safe You on the official website: <https://safeyou.space>;

<sup>13</sup> Number of restraining orders: 2019 – 5521, 2020 - 5699;

within the public administration reform “delivery of state services”, specifically during the pandemic (March-June, 2020), and the **objectives** are:

- To study the attitudes of domestic violence victims toward the work of the MIA and 112 during the Covid-19 period;
- To identify / study the challenges and problems caused by the spread of Covid-19 in the work of the MIA and 112.

The study also has **sub-objectives**:

- To identify the causes and forms of domestic violence during Covid-19;
- To identify the problems and challenges that women victims of domestic violence faced during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- To study the behavior of women victims of domestic violence (who they address for help in case of violence - 112, directly to the police or non-governmental organizations);
- To study the work of the police, policemen, investigator, investigation and activities of the police departments in relation to domestic violence cases during Covid-19;
- To identify and evaluate the steps taken by the MIA against the problems and challenges of increased cases of domestic violence during Covid-19.

## **Methodology, methods and sampling**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods of social research have been used to collect primary sociological information. Initially, two focus groups were conducted. The first invited lawyers/advocates of Sapari, PHR, Anti-violence Network of Georgia and GYLA, and the second – the MIA staff, police officers, investigators, representatives of the Press Center and Monitoring Service. In total, the focus groups were attended by 20 respondents, 10 lawyers/advocates and 10 police officers. Lawyers spoke about domestic violence cases they had been dealing with from February to July 2020, when the country declared its first pandemic emergency. The employees of the MIA talked about their own activities and the activities of the MIA with a focus on the Covid-19 period.

After the focus groups were completed, a structured quantitative survey questionnaire was developed and **telephone and face-to-face surveys** were conducted with the beneficiaries. To select the beneficiaries, the organization's electronic database<sup>14</sup> of victims was used, which provides the telephone numbers and e-mails of the beneficiaries. Simple random sampling was

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<sup>14</sup> In addition, the data of AVNG (Anti-Violence Network of Georgia) and GYLA (Georgian Young Lawyers Association) were used.

used as a sampling method. A total of 103 respondents were interviewed during the study, of which 76 telephone and face-to face interviews were ultimately useful for the study. 90% confidence interval is maintained. Generalization of study results to all domestic violence victims in the period of March-June 2020 is impossible, because the majority of respondents were only the beneficiaries of Sapari, AVNG and GYLA and there are also other victims besides them, who probably faced similar or different problems during the pandemic. However, it is noteworthy that the research has been conducted from the feminist viewpoint, which aims to facilitate the collection of subjective information from oppressed women's groups, in this particular case women victims of domestic violence and its objective is not only to gather representative quantitative data. Precisely for this purpose, apart from quantitative survey, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted as part of the study, using a semi-structured questionnaire with the beneficiaries of Sapari, Anti-violence Network of Georgia and GYLA, also with 1 social worker and 1 lawyer. Non-random, purposive sampling method was used to select respondents for in-depth interviews.

The sociological information collected as a result of the survey and face-to-face interviews was quantified, using the program SPSS, a one-variable analysis was performed due to the small sample size, and the qualitative information was analyzed by narrative analysis (based on the respondents' narrative the lawyer and the social worker evaluated what problems the MIA and the victims of domestic violence were facing during Covid-19).

The research audience, which will use the research results and recommendations, will be the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its services (and the offices responsible for its services), as well as non-governmental organizations working with victims of domestic violence. In addition, it is possible that the Covid-19 wave will be repeated several times and it is possible that the state will again have to declare restrictions and a state of emergency. Accordingly, the findings and data of this study will be useful in eliminating future shortcomings and improving the existing strategies to respond to the incidents of violence and fight against them.

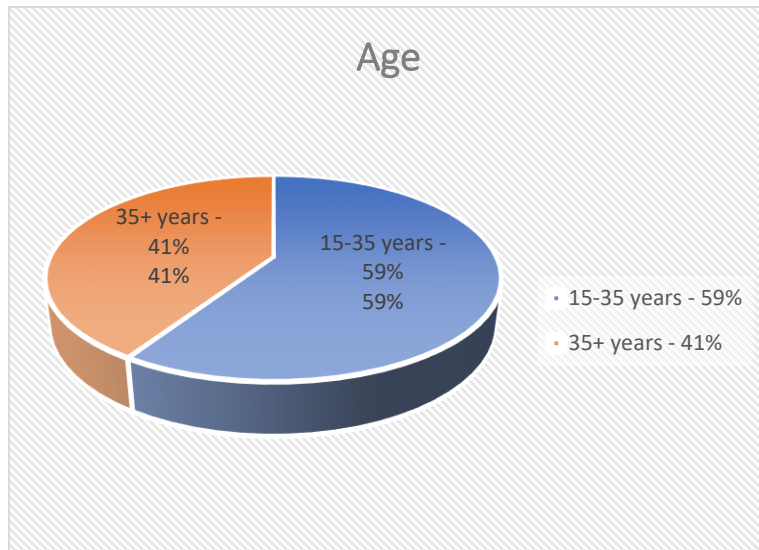
Finally, as already mentioned above, a methodology was developed during the research, which can then be further refined and used within the frames of Public Administration Reform, specifically as an example of methodology for conducting Citizen Satisfaction Surveys. Consequently, research has both practical as well as theoretical significance.

The main limitation of the study were the restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 itself, the state of emergency and the lack of the possibility of face-to-face communication. Consequently, focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted remotely, using the Zoom program.

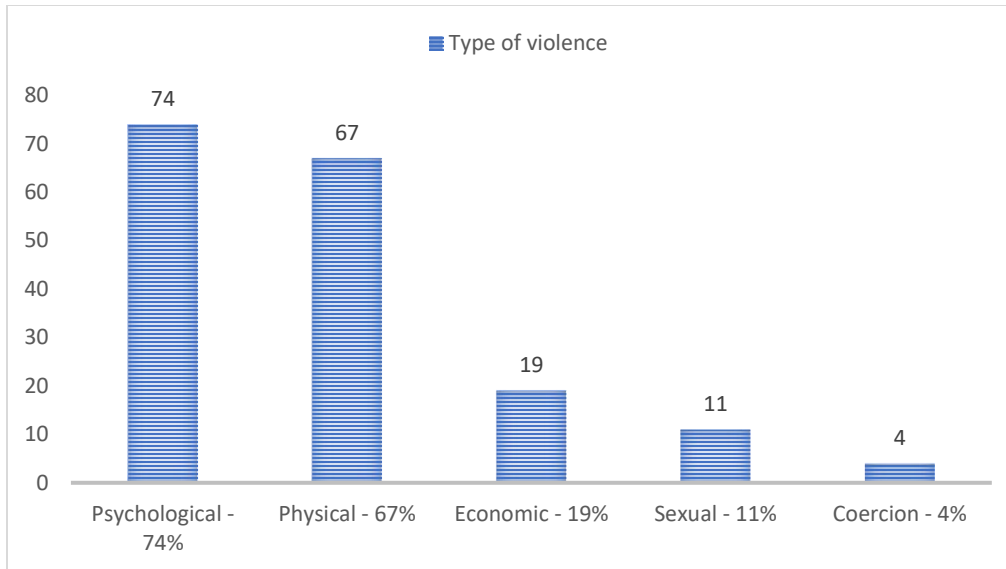
The following chapters provide analysis and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative research data according to the objectives and sub-objectives. Initially, quantitative data analysis is presented.

## Quantitative data analysis

59% of respondents surveyed during the study are 15-35 years old, and 41% - 35+ years old. 100% of respondents are female.



76% of them live in Tbilisi and 24% in the region. According to the types of violence, the responses of the respondents were distributed as follows: 74% of the respondents are victims of psychological violence, 67% - physical violence, 19% - economic, 11% sexual, and 4% are victims of coercion. During the Covid-19 period, most often physical and psychological violence occurred in the family.



The study sought to find out to what extent victims of domestic violence trust the services of the MIA, specifically 112, and how often they call 112 or patrol police for help in case of violence.

44% of respondents said they called 112 after an incident of violence, while 56% said they did not call. Respondents who answered that they did not call 112 stated the answer why they did not call. 35% of respondents do not trust 112 and therefore did not call. 18% think it makes no sense to call 112 because the operators answer the call after a long time; 30% said they had no information about what they were supposed to do and therefore did not call; 27% say that with the advice of a friend, they first visited an NGO to be clear about the situation; 10% of respondents preferred to go directly to the police. From the statistically insignificant answers, the following are interesting: "I do not support calling the police"; "I did not want to complain" and "Abuser was watching me (was standing over my head)." These answers may become statistically significant data in the case of a large sample.

71% of respondents who have used 112 in general, are dissatisfied with the service provided by 112. They cited the long waiting line as the main reason for dissatisfaction, especially since 112 is also connected to the Covid-19 hotline.

According to the representatives of the MIA, during Covid-19 period, 112 switched to emergency working mode. Specifically, from February 2020 until October 2020, up to 70 new staff members were added to the existing operators, and in November, during the so-called second wave – 230 operators were added. Apart from this, in order to reduce the waiting time caused by the pandemic and to provide continuous police services, 112 was divided into three channels – 112 – emergency medical assistance; 112/1 – police and fire/rescue service and 112/2 – Covid-19 and

viral symptoms. Despite the above listed activities, according to some victims of domestic violence there was a problem of 112 hotline overload.

42% of respondents say the patrol police arrived in 10-15 minutes, while 58% said they came to the crime scene after more than 15 minutes. 63% of those who called the patrol are dissatisfied with the service provided by the team. 70% of respondents do not remember exactly if the police filled out the risk assessment questionnaire. However, this is explained by the fact that they may have been nervous and may not have paid attention. The majority of respondents - 85% - say that a restraining order was issued and 100% of them think that they themselves wanted this order to be issued. 51% of respondents said that the regulations and restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 had a negative impact on the work of the police and this impact was reflected in the following factors:

- **Time resource factor** - investigations, forensics, interrogations were protracted;
- **Human resource factor** - for example, translators for deaf people/people with hearing impairment were in isolation and could not be replaced by another colleague and the investigation could not be continued;
- **Transport / mobility factor** (the MIA did not have a remote, online questioning format during Covid-19. Victims had to go to police stations. After the public transport stopped working, it became impossible for them to go to the police station, and if they went, due to hard social-economic conditions, they often had to walk several kilometers on foot);
- **Hotline overload factor** - for example, 112 was overloaded due to Covid-19 and victims of domestic violence had to wait in line for hours;
- **Cultural factor** – for example, some respondents believe that police officers, even without Covid-19, are negligent, insensitive, cynical and indifferent to gender-based, domestic violence cases and they become even more indifferent in the time of Covid-19;
- **The NGO factor** – for example, according to respondents, if an NGO lawyer is involved in the investigation, police officers become more observant in policing, especially in the regions.

79% of the victims surveyed went to the police for questioning, with 62% of them reporting that police officers wore face masks; 66% said their hands were treated with a special solution. According to 47% of respondents, police officers did not keep their distance in the police building.

It was interesting to assess the attitude of the police toward domestic violence cases by the respondents during Covid-19. 39% of respondents said that the police had the following position: "Is there a time for domestic violence and calling the police during the pandemic?!".

The study sought to find out whether Georgian police / investigators worked remotely during Covid-19 emergency situations. 88% of respondents said police and investigators did not work remotely. The MIA representatives say that according to legislation it is impossible to conduct interrogation remotely. 28% of the surveyed victims mention that their investigator was quarantined and isolated and had no substitute.

100% of the respondents do not know if the MIA introduced any type of remote service to improve the services for victims. The study found that the respondents have no information about the 112 mobile application.

The study also looked at whether the MIA attempted to contact the current victims and ask them about the challenges and difficulties they faced, due to restrictions and the state of emergency during Covid-19. 100% of respondents say that the MIA has not conducted such a survey.

### **Findings and interpretation of qualitative data**

Narrative analysis and interpretation of primary qualitative sociological data collected from victims, lawyers, police officers and social workers was analyzed according to the sub-objectives given at the beginning of the study.

### ***Causes and forms of domestic violence during Covid-19***

The study primarily sought to identify the causes and forms of domestic violence in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As stated in introduction, domestic violence may stem from structural factors, unemployment, and poverty. According to one of the lawyers in the focus group, the pandemic period was especially difficult for women from the lower classes who worked in markets, malls and open markets; After the closure of these facilities, they were left with virtually no income, which led to the anxiety of their abusive husbands and children and intensified aggression toward them. In families where a woman was an employed person, or was a sole breadwinner, it was probably her who became the victim of domestic violence. At the same time, the focus group data showed that in Georgia, the reality created by Covid-19 probably caused a phenomenon of domestic violence not only in the socially vulnerable families but also in middle and upper classes. Closing of jobs, and isolation of people in one space increased the risk of conflict among them regardless of their belonging to certain class.

According to both quantitative and qualitative data, during Covid-19 period, **psychological** and **physical** violence were named as the most common forms of domestic violence. However, forms of **economic and sexual** violence were also mentioned.

According to one of the lawyers, economic violence was particularly frequent during the pandemic, when one family member forbade another member to use goods of common consumption and property. For example, abusive husbands forbade wives to use items that were their common property. Restrictions on the use of co-owned items and inheritance rights have become more frequent. It is noteworthy that women victims of domestic violence were unable to return to their parental homes. The siblings or parents did not take them back because they believed that "a married woman has nothing to do in her ancestral home." "Unfortunately, we have a number of cases where a brother, a father or a mother has left a woman victim of domestic violence out in the open" said one lawyer. Additionally, according to one of the respondents: "during Covid-19 period, of 100 women, approximately 25 are the victims of economic violence".

A focus group of lawyers revealed that during the pandemic, cases of sexual violence and disseminating information and photos containing personal information have increased. The lawyers stated this was caused by people being locked in their homes, causing relationships to shift into a virtual social space. Instead of dating, people send each other erotic photos and videos in "chat". The abusive men took advantage of this and started blackmailing the victims with photos and videos.

The study revealed the problem of investigating sexual violence cases in Georgia in general. One of the lawyers recalled the statistics given in the Public Defender's report: out of hundreds of calls about sexual violence, only a small part of the cases resulted in conviction. Lawyers say that in cases of sexual violence, the police, investigators and prosecutors only ask for direct evidence, which is difficult to obtain in this type of crime, and in the absence of direct evidence, the investigation is hampered, investigators do nothing and become very inert. Cases are not solved. Respondents said that police officers, investigators and prosecutors are more vigilant and cautious in cases of physical violence than in cases of sexual violence. According to the respondents, their sensitivity to this form of violence may be low.

### ***Challenges of women victims during Covid-19*** **Transportation/movement**

The respondents' reports revealed that the most important problem they faced during the pandemic was transportation/movement of domestic violence victims. Given that the police



didn't work remotely, victims had to go to the police stations for questioning and investigation procedures. Due to the absence of public transport women could not go to the police stations because of their financial difficulties. In their opinion, as a result the investigation of the case was hindered.

*“The police tell me, come to us, the day after tomorrow to the police station, but I don't know how to get there, because there is a problem of transport, right? And afterwards the victim gives up” (victim respondent).*

*„It (the incident) happened then, in front of four kids, and I had to walk to the police station” (victim respondent).*

The problem of transportation is especially severe in villages. A social worker states that questioning of victims and witnesses cannot be conducted due to transport restrictions.

*„The interrogations cannot be carried out, the people can't come from villages and also you know what the situation is like in villages? Five villages have one police station. In reality these villages are so scattered that without transportation a person cannot walk to the police station form home” (social worker).*

There is transportation problem also in big cities, for example in Tbilisi:

*„In reality you are far away, you can't get there. How many kilometers will you walk? Today I have to walk 2 kilometers, but what can I do, all the business is in the MIA and some affairs are such that you have to meet the deadlines, you have to fit in time” (victim respondent).*

The victims mention that introduction of remote questioning method will completely resolve the transportation/movement problem.

*„I don't understand, why can't there be an online questioning in the police? Firstly, they themselves will be more protected, we will also be more protected. There is also a financial crisis and you can get to the police station only by taxi” (victim respondent).*

### ***Behavior and assessments of women victims during Covid-19***

The study also looked at the behavior of women victims during cases of domestic violence. One of the lawyers mentioned that during Covid-19, the rate of victims' appeals to the police did not increase significantly, probably because they were in the presence of abusers and could not manage to call the patrol police. According to the lawyers, there were also many cases when the victim intentionally did not call the police. As the respondents stated, victims and abusers reconciled during Covid-19 and blamed their conflict on Covid-19 pandemic. According to a lawyer of one of the organizations, the number of appeals to the police did not increase because the women endured the facts of domestic violence and refrained from escalating the conflict during the pandemic.

*„I expected that the number of appeals to the MIA would increase, but it turned out that women “were understanding” to this situation. <...> I am saying this understanding in quotes in this case, they simply thought, this emergency situation will be for a short time, I will endure the violence and then, if it intensifies, I will have a reaction” (lawyer respondent).*

Similar to the lawyers, the police officers say that the victims feel sorry for the abusers, which is a hindering factor for continuing the investigation of a domestic violence case.

*„I will say one version; I think it is some kind of syndrome that they feel sorry for the abusers. There are so many cases, when in the beginning they are sort of angry, and willing to get rid of this <...>” but afterwards, when they are at the final stage, they feel sorry for them, “I don't want him imprisoned, no, I pity him, how can I do this to the father of my children, etc.” (police officer respondent).*

### **Appeals to women's rights organizations**

According to lawyers, during Covid-19, the victims addressed the women's organizations instead of the police. According to them when calling an NGO, the victims are emotionally free and do not think that their behavior will be followed by the immediate arrest of the abuser who is their husband, child or partner. Also, due to the lack of information on legal issues, they prefer firstly to get the qualified consultation from a lawyer and afterwards decide what legal steps to take. Quantitative data also confirmed this phenomenon, specifically, victim respondents prefer to clarify the situation with the help of an NGO first, and afterwards go to the police. Apart from this, victims who were unable to call the police, wrote to the NGOs on Facebook page and with

their request the lawyers of this organization addressed the police. According to lawyer respondents, although the victims addressed the NGOs, not even a third of them went to the police.

As mentioned above, after the incidents of domestic violence, victim respondents prefer to contact the NGOs first, due to the lack of information on legal issues, and then go straight to the police. This corresponds with the information provided by lawyers and police officers.

*„So I needed a consultation, to know what to do and how, and also to have a representative in the police and in court, and not to just simply go there with my child in my hands. That is why I addressed an NGO” (victim respondent).*

### **The response of the MIA to the cases of domestic violence**

The focus group of police officers revealed that during the period of Covid-19, the number of appeals of domestic violence victims to the police increased only by 2%. The police officers explain this by the MIA's strict policy against domestic violence.

*“The appeals did not increase because the population knows the very strict policy of MIA, of course together with the Prosecutor's Office. Almost everyone knows that the perpetrator will be arrested, so the victims think, if I call the police, my husband or family member will probably get arrested”. (policeman respondent).*

In the focus group one of the police officers mentioned that during Covid-19 period, the number of restraining orders may be the indicator of increase in domestic violence cases, instead of the number of appeals. According to him, the number of the former increased slightly more during the Covid-19 period.

According to the policemen, the difference in appeals between them and the NGOs is based on the nature of these two structures. Addressing an NGO may always be associated more with consultation for the victim, or receiving support, whereas when addressing the law enforcement institution, they know that it will be followed by legal response and the perpetrator may be arrested, which is always a difficult step for a victim.

### **Caution caused by Covid-19**

Policemen and investigators mention that the spread of Covid-19 may have caused the decreased number of appeals to the police. According to one of the policemen's information, due to the

fear of getting infected, the victims avoid going to the police station. Also, they often do not open the door to the law enforcers who visit the location of domestic violence incident for monitoring of the restraining order.

*“Firstly it should be noted that they avoided coming to the police station. Often the law enforcement officer, the inspector has visited them in their apartments but they have not opened the door. They are scared that they will get infected” (policeman respondent).*

### **Cases of personal phone use by a police officer**

The focus group of lawyers revealed an interesting phenomenon, the policemen give victims their personal phone number and ask them, in case of domestic violence, to directly call them instead of calling the police. According to the respondents, this is especially common in regions. One of the lawyers mentions:

*„When the MIA says that there is a low number of appeals in 112, this is because in regions, policemen give their personal number to the victim, so that the latter doesn’t call 112” (lawyer respondent)*

According to lawyers, this is why domestic violence cases are not officially accurately registered. At the same time, additional problems rise due to this occurrence. Often a policeman uses the victim’s telephone number unconscientiously and informally and starts sexually harassing and coercing her, etc. Apart from this, the victim’s call to the police is additional evidence for the case and if the victim calls the policeman instead of 112, no voice recording is made, and the latter can always deny it and the victim’s defense will have one evidence less during litigation. One of the lawyers states:

*“Many policemen categorically tell the victims, ok let’s do it like this, I’ll help you deal with this from the inside, I’ll be your private policeman, you call us and let’s not make a call to 112”(lawyer respondent).*

### **Mobile application of 112**

The focus group of lawyers revealed that domestic violence victims did not use the 112 mobile application during Covid-19. Firstly, the perpetrator was close by and the victim could not use the cell phone, and secondly, the majority of the victims do not have information about this application. According to quantitative data, 100 % of respondents do not have any information about the mobile application created by the MIA. The qualitative data analysis showed that the

victims probably do not use the application due to access to their location; according to them, nobody likes when their movement or location is constantly controlled by someone, especially the MIA.

*“For example, for some people it is unpleasant that this application constantly requires “location”, someone may even refuse to use it because of this. I have this application, it needs constant location and it is unpleasant for me, that the MIA constantly has information where I am” (lawyer respondent).*

However, it is noteworthy that according to the MIA representatives, the mobile application does not require indicating the location in order to work, which itself indicates the low level of information on using the application both among victims and lawyers<sup>15</sup>.

### **Urban and rural differences**

The research showed that when domestic violence occurs, whether the victim goes to the police or not may depend on where it happened, in urban or rural settlement. According to the lawyers' information, the perpetrators living in villages can more easily solve the escalated conflict by negotiating with the victim's relatives (mostly men) and neighbors. As the lawyers tell, there is always a lower number of appeals to the police in villages and regions, compared to Tbilisi and other big cities, where apart from the police and NGOs, the victim has “nobody to help her” and the perpetrator has “no one to help deal with this business”.

### **The activities of 112, patrol police, investigator and forensics during Covid-19**

The next objective of the study was to assess various state services that exist for victims of domestic violence. Primarily, the work of 112 was evaluated. According to lawyers, two large categories of victims have emerged: first category, that has already addressed 112 and due to past negative experience (waiting, inattentiveness, indifference) does not call 112 anymore, and the second, which itself is divided into: victim that uses 112 for the first time but has previously received a consultation from an NGO, and a victim, that uses 112 for the first time, but has not received a consultation from an NGO. As lawyer respondents state, victims who have received

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<sup>15</sup> Note of authors: When downloading the Safe You application, the user decides for himself/herself whether to grant the application access to the GPS, or their current location. In case the user does not give the application access to the location, he / she will not be able to use the SOS messaging feature and can only send alarm SMS or call.

consultations from NGOs, are aware of certain legal issues, they clearly know how to talk to the operator and policeman of 112, but the victim who has not received a consultation is so confused and pressured by the 112 operators that after the very first negative experience she closes off and does not call 112 at all any more.

The domestic violence victims also indicated that the operators are often ironic and cynical towards the cases of domestic violence. In their opinion, the 112 operators probably do not take the victim's condition into account, who, in the moment of the call does not know what type of violence she was subjected to, she is unwell and needs help. According to one victim respondent, in that moment the 112 operators ask such questions that answering them requires certain peace of mind and thinking, and they do not have time for that. The victims think it is better if the police arrive quickly to the location of violence and afterwards the investigator decides what actually happened.

*“Who is the perpetrator, was there a murder, was there a threat. <...> I can't do that, right? I need help. Afterwards, the police and the detective should determine who is who and name everything as it is. First they should arrive and afterwards clarify the situation “ (victim respondent).*

One victim respondent thinks that in modern technology world, 112 and generally contacting the police by telephone is an outdated method. She thinks it is time for the MIA to switch to services that do not require a telephone call or a telephone connected to the internet. It is also noteworthy that according to the information provided by the MIA representatives, using the MIA services does not require internet, which partly indicates the lack of knowledge about this issue among victims.

### **Activities of the police during Covid-19**

According to the lawyers, during Covid-19 the police may not have been effective, especially in the regions. They told victims, that due to the pandemic, there was no time to investigate domestic violence and often “tried to shame women, telling them, oh is there a time for this now when the country is on lockdown?” or they would tell them, “where will the perpetrator go during the pandemic? He will freeze in the street”

One of the lawyers told that the police may not be directly telling the victims that the fact of domestic violence is of secondary importance during the pandemic, but their attitude, indifference and low gender sensitivity scare the victims and suppress their willingness to

cooperate with the police. The victims complain about this later with the lawyers and advocates, that the police do not act in their interests and show indifference.

One of the victim recalled the investigator tolling her: “I have three children, a family and I do not want to bring the virus home”. The policeman’s failure to fulfill his duties was justified by Covid-19. Also, several respondents mentioned that the policemen send the victims who go to the police station, back home, telling them “now there is no time for domestic violence, there is Covid-19, when all this is over, we will deal with these issues”.

It is interesting that during the pandemic a new social phenomenon emerged, “it is the fault of Covid”. One lawyer mentions:

*“The pre-trial hearing of the majority of cases was postponed, precisely because the policemen were saying that during Covid-19 period they could not carry out investigative activities” (lawyer respondent).*

Apart from this, since the policeman and detective are under subordination of the Prosecutor in the part of investigation, they say that they cannot carry on with the investigation without the prosecutor. The prosecutors go to work once every three weeks due to current restrictions and regulations. Georgian police officers and investigators have turned the prosecutors’ working schedule during Covid-19 into one more justifying factor for protracting the investigation of cases. One lawyer mentions:

*“The policemen were pointing their fingers at prosecutors and saying that that the prosecutors were unable to supervise the case because they went to work once every two or three weeks due to Covid-19, and this significantly protracts the cases in time” (lawyer respondent).*

As the lawyers say, additional obstacles emerged when the police said that due to Covid-19 restrictions they would be unable to question the witnesses, which was also negatively reflected in the investigation of individual cases.

*“Covid was an excuse, to justify their neglect, to cover it well, and for example we had five or six cases of juveniles and they did not question the witness, because they said it was Covid-19 and they needed time and meanwhile the MIA deadline approached and they could not question the witness and the case failed. (lawyer respondent)*

The NGO lawyers state that in the long-term perspective, almost all cases under investigation failed and the police officers justified this with Covid-19. According to the respondents, in reality the prosecutor was late to look into the cases or the policemen were negligent.

The focus group of lawyers revealed that Covid-19, as a problem was not actually such a hindrance for policing and investigation, it was **artificially turned into such** a problem. For example, one of the lawyers states that s/he himself managed to get the passes in emergency situation, in order to question juveniles in the town of Mtskheta, when the police was unable to do that and because of this the case got protracted and failed. According to the lawyer respondent the police probably used Covid-19 to justify and cover their own gender insensitivity, and this in turn may be the gender lenses which are transferred to the police through cultural coding during socialization. According to the lawyer respondent, the policemen do not think that they violate anything by being negligent, whereas because of this, the victims of domestic violence may not receive relevant services from the state.

### **Substitute investigator**

The research showed that if the investigator got infected with Covid-19, or was in isolation due to the contact with the infected person, the MIA did not have anyone to replace them and the state also did not have a clear message about what the victim and the witnesses identified by the victim should do in this case. One of the lawyers tells us:

*“There were two witnesses to be interrogated, who were supposed to arrive from Kutaisi, it was agreed with the investigator that they had to come on Thursday. On Wednesday they are calling the investigator and asking what time should they arrive and the investigator tells them that I am in isolation and I cannot question you and he doesn’t tell them anything else” (lawyer respondent).*

The lawyers tell that the argument of the investigator being in isolation, as well as the argument of Covid-19 existence in general are used to justify the inaction of the MIA structures, their lack of qualification and laziness. All this hinders the case and damages the victims. One lawyer mentions that during the pandemic he went on business to the Prosecutor’s Office in Western Georgia to look into a case, he talked the previous day with the investigator who confirmed his arrival, but after he went there he told him that he was in self-isolation and could not meet him. The lawyer had to stay for three days in that town and after three days he barely managed to access the case files when it was very simple to solve this issue, if the investigator had had replacement staff and if he had delivered the case files to that particular person replacing him. Besides the isolation being used to justify the protraction of cases, it was revealed that the MIA



has not set up a mechanism for delivering the violence cases from one investigator to another. When one investigator starts an investigation, s/he does not know how to give this case to another investigator.

The representative of the police and the MIA admit that they are lacking the staff during Covid-19, however despite this, they promise to effectively provide service to the victims.

*“Today we have a problem, because the investigators also get Covid-19 infection, regardless of this . . . we guarantee that their rights will be fully protected (policeman respondent).*

### **Impossibility of remote questioning**

The in-depth interviews of victims revealed that the MIA did not have the service to remotely question the victims of violence, witnesses and perpetrators, which caused additional problems. One of the lawyers mentions that after one investigator was transferred to quarantine, he asked the MIA to question the witnesses remotely, but was denied to do so.

*“There is no online investigation. They say this is inadmissible and it was very hard for us to have my witnesses and the investigator simultaneously ready for questioning” (lawyer respondent).*

As the victims say, besides the MIA not having remote services – questioning, investigation, after they called the investigators to ask about the case, they avoided them and did not answer clearly.

*“No, the police don’t do anything remotely. Even when you call the Prosecutor’s Office, I was interested in something, or I had a question, they were like what do you want, ok and then hung up, they do not communicate normally with you. You can’t feel as a human being and you get even more stressed and draw back even more” (victim respondent).*

The victims think that online questioning would in fact solve many problems. In the first place, it would take up less time. Online platforms have the recording function – “you record and copy the depositions, you save time.” According to one of the respondents, the police uses archaic methods. Writing down the testimony is outdated. However, an interesting phenomenon is revealed here: the police officer often makes the victim to change the handwritten testimony, “you are not writing it correctly, they say”. One of the victims points out that it seems “the police

has a certain scheme of testifying and having online platforms is not beneficial for them, because they will no longer be able to change or falsify the evidence”, to fit it in the existing interrogation schemes.

*“ You are telling, they type it in the computer, they give it to you to read and then you sign, but very often they say, you know this cannot be written this way and they make their own corrections, they write the way that is easier for them, they probably have a scheme, I don’t know.” (victim respondent).*

### **Restraining order**

The policemen tell that often the victims themselves refuse to use preventive measures against the perpetrator during the investigation process. Additionally, they mention that victims can’t decide whether they want a restraining order issued against the perpetrator. Initially they agree to the issuance of the order, but once they learn what follows the violation of this order, they don’t want it anymore. However, as it was mentioned above by a representative of the MIA, the cases of issuing the restraining order during the Covid-19 have increased, showing that the pandemic affected the victims’ behavior and they no longer avoid to request the issuance of a restraining order against the perpetrator.

### **Forensics**

The investigators mention that Covid-19 has affected the Samkharauli Forensics Bureau, its procedures get protracted in time due to Covid-19 regulations and restrictions, causing the annoyance of the victims.

*“At Samkharauli Forensics bureau we have restrictions on entrance. We have to make special verification protocols in the database. When we are taking a person, for instance a violence victim to the expertise, we have to check if their family members had been in isolation, whether they had contact with them, then, when we get there, the citizens are not allowed to enter, we have to wait by the stairs, for three four hours. . . . this of course causes aggression in the victim (investigator respondent)”*

According to the victim respondents as well, Covid-19 has had certain impact on the forensics.

*“I don’t know, I call the forensics bureau and one day they tell me this and another day something else, I am waiting for an answer and there are these unclear situations” (victim respondent).*

### **Compliance with the regulations imposed during Covid-19**

According to the lawyers, rules and regulations due to Covid-19 in the police department are often violated.

*“In all departments where I have been, when you start communication, they have these face masks and after some time they are not wearing them any more” (lawyer respondent).*

We learn from the victims’ narratives that the restrictions and regulations due to Covid-19 are not observed in the police departments.

*“Everyone is in one room, no two-meter distance. They do everything but sterilization. You enter police without anyone measuring your temperature” (victim respondent).*

The victims’ reports reveal that the restrictions and regulations due to Covid-19 are only observed by the patrol police.

*“When we called the police, they were wearing masks, gloves as well, I don’t know about anything else, afterwards we were transferred to the department and when we had contact and communication with them, the patrol was observing these restrictions more” (victim respondent).*

In contrast to this narrative, the policemen say that the citizens were not observing the rules and regulations imposed due to Covid-19 and because of this, they even had to isolate the entire department. The policemen say that their departments and offices are equipped with face masks and sanitizers.

*“We had that case too, when a Covid-infected lady came to the department and we had to isolate half of the department precisely because that citizen did not observe basic security norms. However, our departments are equipped with face masks and sanitizers” (policeman respondent)*

## Gender stereotypes

A social phenomenon was revealed in the focus group of lawyers: ***a policeman and being a policeman as a cultural problem***. The lawyers tell that although policemen attend various trainings on gender issues, there still remains a part of them, who repeat the gender stereotypes existing in the community in their police work (man is a priority compared to a woman, a woman must tolerate domestic violence, domestic violence should be resolved within the family, without the involvement of the police). The lawyers agree, that this is a cultural arrangement and coding learnt by the policemen during socialization and not the task coming from the administration that they should be gender insensitive and cynically inclined towards women victims.

The victims prefer to communicate with an NGO instead of the police. According to one of the victim respondents, the sensitivity towards a victim in an NGO is higher than in the police. As the victim points out, the police itself often victimizes the victim, trying to convince her that she was the one who caused the perpetrator's behavior and it is better if she tolerates that.

*“When [the police] come, in the first place they start saying, ok lady, it is not a big deal, it happens, he is a man, he got worried, it was probably your fault. They attack you and blame you, that you probably provoked him but this does not happen in NGOs, I am not saying that in NGOs they cuddle you, no, they just have a healthy approach and they are more sensitive” (victim respondent).*

## Involvement of NGOs

The victims tell that when NGOs get involved in their cases, the attitude of the policemen and investigators change – they have a more serious and diligent approach to investigation. One of the victims tells us that after the lawyer of Union Sapari has started defending her rights, the policemen are very attentive toward her, even when they meet her on the street they ask how her case is going. The victims say that together with an NGO lawyer they feel more emancipated and stronger. In their opinion, until the NGOs get involved in the case, the police are so negligent towards the victim and find the violence case so ridiculous that the victim closes off and does not continue litigation any more.

## Ethnic minorities

According to the lawyers, there are challenges in the regions where minorities live. The problem in these regions is not only a policeman who is gender insensitive towards victims, but also the

victims themselves, who, due to the language barrier do not have information about how they should conduct litigation in case of domestic violence.

*“in places populated by ethnic minorities, the police are completely inadequate, they may identify a woman as a perpetrator because she spoke out against her husband. <...> and the second problem is the phenomenon of a woman victim. She doesn't know whether she should declare about domestic violence in the police, due to the language barrier the legal information is not available for them, and the MIA does not work to introduce any type of education or raise awareness in this community, print information leaflets in local language, because it does not benefit them” (lawyer respondents)*

### **Steps taken in response to Covid-19**

Next objective of research was to know what steps the MIA took to overcome the difficulties emerged during Covid-19 and to offer a well-functioning service to the victims.

Firstly, as mentioned above, before Covid-19 and in the time of Covid-19, according to the victims and lawyers, the MIA had a “frightening” image. One victim respondent mentions that often the victims are as scared of the MIA as they are of male perpetrators. According to some respondents, such approach of the MIA may be the reason for victims to refrain from appealing or to feel certain confusion. The victim and lawyer respondents point out that the MIA has not done anything to destroy this image, neither before the pandemic, nor afterwards.

According to the police and lawyer respondents, the MIA has such a frightening image because the process and details of police work are not clear to the population. The police have guidelines that are not public and people can't see them, they don't know the standards of policing. This is also confirmed by the police officers. They say that certain standards of their police activities are not public because these are internal-agency documents and the guidelines are only intended for them.

*“We have not made them publicly available, because this is an internal document, for internal activities and usually, it is used directly during police activities, consequently, it has not been made public” (policeman respondent)*

As for the Covid-19 period itself, the interviews with the victims and lawyers revealed that the MIA may not have been appropriately flexible about the challenges and problems emerged due to Covid-19 – increase in violence, remote working, observing the regulations and restrictions. According to one of the victims, unlike the government that was at least sending the Covid-

related messages to the population, the MIA has not had any messaging or a large scale campaign for victims about how to avoid domestic violence or how to protect themselves from it. The victims and lawyers can only recall an advertisement broadcast on the Public broadcaster calling on the victims to go the police in case of domestic violence in the time of Covid-19. One victim respondent mentions:

*“Any SMS, or something like that, there was nothing, during Covid you remember the government saying wash your hands, some very basic stuff. I can’t recall anything similar from 112, or an SMS. I remember on Public broadcaster there was something like an information advertisement, that despite the pandemic, they said, do not stop and call us”*

### **The problem of electronic mail**

The lawyers and victims agree that the MIA does not have even one email that functions, where the lawyers and victims can send the information and documents. Also, the emails of investigators working remotely from home due to Covid-19 are not available. As the respondents state, it is necessary to have public emails, that will help avoid protraction of cases in time. As one respondent mentions:

*“it is not hard to set up an email, I think that it simply requires the will and the MIA and Prosecutor’s Office can do it and simplify the process. It is hard to move around the city even in Tbilisi, you may not always be able to go to that specific department and why shouldn’t it be possible to appeal electronically so that you know your document will reach its destination and you will receive confirmation electronically that they have received the document” (lawyer respondent)*

According to one victim, the MIA turned out to be very inflexible, rigid and retrograde, unlike the universities and other state institutions, which were able to introduce remote services.

*“For example, in the universities there was no face-to-face teaching going on, they introduced some platforms, zoom or team and that’s where they have lectures” (victim respondent).*

The MIA representatives state that they implemented a number of activities to eliminate domestic violence during Covid-19.

*„Regarding this, I will point out that even in the context of the pandemic, despite the imposed restrictions, the department continued to actively work in this direction and conducted a number of online meetings and conferences with representatives of various regions, to fully explain the general concept of domestic violence and the legal mechanisms that a citizen may require when dealing with these issues” (policeman respondent)*

The policemen say that the MIA even created a special video to inform the victims of domestic violence.

*“The information video was also made with the support of the US embassy, which was broadcast on national TV channels. Consequently, I think that information campaign is clearly very important in this regard and I think that the MIA is very active in this direction” (policeman respondent)*

The police say that they incorporated an additional channel in the service of 112, in order to have relevant response to the cases of domestic violence.

*“We decided to have a separate line for patrol calls, in order not to miss such (domestic violence) calls; when 112 is overloaded with medical calls, not to miss the calls to the patrol police” (policeman respondent)*

However, they themselves admit that the waiting time has increased, hindering the service.

*“The waiting period of course has now drastically increased. Of course I can’t name a concrete number, it will be hard, but the waiting time has increased significantly” (policeman respondent)*

One of the policemen explained the rigidity of the MIA during Covid-19 with the inflexibility of legislation. As he stated, the questioning process is described in the Criminal Code and adapting this service to remote platforms is not easy.

*“You know this will be a little difficult, because the process of investigation and questioning is written in the Criminal Code and what are you saying, does this mean that the Criminal Procedure Code must be changed and adapted to Covid-19?” (policeman respondent)*

According to policemen, the MIA has not prepared and published the report on domestic violence during Covid-19. According to them, no conference or working meetings have been conducted on this issue. The MIA only fulfills the obligations defined in the protocol by the government, but beyond that it has not reflected on what challenges the country faces during the pandemic regarding the investigation of domestic violence cases and litigation. According to the MIA representatives they also have not invited a foreign expert or an experienced professional to share their experience.

*“No, unfortunately I can’t recall any conferences directly related to Covid-19, or the involvement of international experts, but we are open to any suggestions”  
(policeman respondent)*

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The analysis collected through quantitative and qualitative data showed the challenges related to the activities of the MIA regarding domestic violence victims, which were aggravated during Covid-19.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the measures taken by the MIA in the situation caused by the pandemic have proved to be insufficient (state of emergency, remote work, closing of public transportation, fear of getting infected with Covid-19). 100 % of victim respondents point out that during the pandemic the MIA has not even collected the information from victims what challenges they had to face. According to research data, the MIA may not have adapted to the new challenges and its actions revealed through data analysis (video intended for domestic violence victims, additional telephone channels of 112 specifically for domestic violence victims) proved to be minimal to solve the victims’ problems. According to research data, the victims and lawyers demand the adjustment of MIA services to the problems caused by the Covid-19 (remote questioning, online services, including a well- functioning electronic mail and instead of 112, absence of a new hotline), which according to the study was not done until December 2020. 28% of the interviewed state that their investigator was in isolation and 100 % of them mention that they did not have the replacement staff, due to which their case got protracted and the investigation process was hindered.

The interviewed policemen also do not deny the fact that during Covid-19, the MIA did not have remote practice, for example the practice of victim’s online questioning, but they explain this fact by stating that online questioning is legally impossible.



In the context when it is unknown when the world will defeat Covid-19, a question arises, why certain legislative changes are not being planned and implemented, which will ensure the online questioning of the victims? When the majority of state services have switched to remote working mode, by the respondents' narrative the MIA cannot even remotely include a lawyer or an interpreter during implementation of policing in Georgia.

The respondents' narrative additionally revealed that stopping the public transport and imposing the curfew during the pandemic significantly complicated the work of the police. Additionally, fear of getting infected with Covid-19 became one of the factors, due to which the domestic violence victims avoid going to the police building and being on a several-hour long questioning. Consequently, the first recommendation is **to explore the ways of remote policing and remote service delivery to victims**. Additionally, according to one of the respondents, online questioning has an advantage – the recording is made which allows the victim to avoid the repeated testimony as well as re-traumatization. Also, during face-to-face questioning, the protocol of witness questioning, devised by a police officer, is made up according to a template, pre-described scheme, which may not fully coincide with the reality. Next recommendation **is for the MIA to study the possibility of audio or video recording during the victim's questioning, which may exclude the repetition of testifying and at the same time ensure its accuracy.**

The lawyers and victims state that the MIA does not have even one working email, where sending the information and documents would be possible. According to research data, the MIA may not be actively using modern electronic means to investigate domestic violence cases, which is negatively reflected in the quality of their service. **Next recommendation is the active use of modern communication systems during policing among them, email.**

According to the respondents, another problem identified by the study is the absence of the replacement staff in case of the investigator's isolation or infection. Based on the information gathered through in-depth interviews, it was determined that in case of the investigator's infection, the police work practically stopped, and the victim waited for the investigator's return to work. The research revealed that the MIA may not have a well-set mechanism for delivering domestic violence cases from one investigator to another. It was mentioned in the focus group of policemen that there is a lack of investigators in the MIA, which became more apparent in the context of Covid-19. **Further recommendation is for the MIA to study the need for adding the staff during the pandemic and ensure the process of delivering the current case to the substitute investigator.**

The qualitative data showed that the 112 operators may lack the sensitivity towards domestic violence victims. **Consequently, the following recommendation is additional training of hotline**

**operators to increase their sensitivity towards gender-based /domestic violence, especially during the pandemics.**

The study showed the practice of policemen sharing their private cell phone number with the victims, which probably reduces the number of calls to 112. The mentioned practice is dangerous in several aspects. On the one hand, the number of calls to 112 actually decreases and the statistical data on the appeals to the MIA regarding cases of violence are distorted, on the other hand, unlike 112, where the call made by the victim is recorded, enabling the monitoring of the calls, in case of policemen's sharing of private number, this data is lost. This data represents an additional evidence in domestic violence case. In the case of private communication, this evidence no longer exists. Consequently, based on the victim's interests, it is always desirable that the call is made using 112. **Accordingly, next recommendation is to analyze the practice of using the policeman's personal cell phone number and to give the police officers appropriate recommendations.**

The quantitative study showed that victim respondents do not have information about the mobile application of 112. Only lawyer respondents in the focus group had that information. **Further recommendation is for the MIA to carry out a more active campaign to popularize the electronic application.**

The study showed that the police may not observe the safety rules related to Covid-19. The respondents tell that often not everybody wears face masks in the police building, or if they wear them in the beginning, they remove them later, in the middle of questioning. Distance is not observed, sanitizers are not offered in every department and sometimes the temperature is not measured. **Next recommendation is for the MIA to pay more attention that its staff observes Covid-19 regulations which can be done through inter-agency monitoring and assessment.**

The study also showed problems that are not directly related to the pandemic and probably existed before as well, and will still be present after the pandemic is over, if specific steps are not taken to eliminate them. One such problem that was revealed during the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data is related to cultural factors, specifically to stereotypical attitudes towards domestic violence and women victims. The interviewed beneficiaries pointed out that the police are indifferent towards domestic violence cases, which was even more aggravated by Covid-19. The respondents think that the attitude towards the cases of domestic violence became more apparent during Covid-19 ("is there a time for domestic violence now?!"). The study participants think that these stereotypes are a cultural problem. The mentioned problem is not new, **so the recommendation is to continue trainings and campaigns in the MIA to increase sensitivity toward these issues.**

According to the information gathered from the focus group of policemen, the victim has difficulty deciding whether to issue a restraining order and often changes her mind. **A necessary recommendation is that the police independently decide to issue a restraining order based on the risk assessment questionnaire. The victim's position should not have a decisive role, especially considering that there is a mechanism of appealing against the order.**

The qualitative data of research also revealed the negative effect of the Prosecutor's Office's delayed work on the investigation process and policing. Based on the information gathered from the study the prosecutors went to work only once every three weeks and looked into cases with delay, which significantly hindered the investigation process. **Next recommendation is for the MIA to explore the communication between the Prosecutor's Office and the investigator and elaborate recommendations to avoid protraction of investigation.** It should also be mentioned that in the focus group of lawyers it was suggested that in reality "blaming the prosecutor" for protracting the investigation may have been an attempt to place the blame for own responsibility on someone else.

The study revealed the dissatisfaction of domestic violence victims with the work of Levan Samkharauli Forensics Bureau. The focus group participants also confirmed that during Covid-19 the procedures of forensics have become prolonged and complicated. The national forensics bureau may not have been able to take necessary measures in terms of Covid-19 pandemic and the service quality has worsened. **Next recommendation is for the MIA to study and reveal the hindering factors to policing on quarterly basis, take care to solve them and adjust them to the problems caused by the pandemic.**

And finally, it is desirable that the MIA review its own policy, have a more critical approach to the implementation process of policing and based on the specificity of the pandemic, take appropriate measures, including through the legislative changes. Covid-19 is not over yet, and it is unknown when it will end, especially when there is a possibility that other pandemics may also occur. It is necessary that the MIA is prepared to work in a different environment and introduce the employment of new technologies, in which the above mentioned recommendations will provide assistance.

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