

**“Missing Women” in the South Caucasus:  
Local perceptions and proposed solutions**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of “missing women” – women who would have been born or survived infancy if their birth or survival hadn’t been deliberately interrupted -- has received global attention since the 1990s. Almost 4 million women under 60 years of age are missing each year throughout the world. Girl babies who were aborted comprise about 40 percent of this number. In China, the one-child policy combined with son preference has led to such a skewed gender balance that many men are unable to find wives, with concomitant rises in social tensions. The same effects are visible in parts of India.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, highly skewed sex ratios at birth have emerged in the South Caucasus. Sex ratios in Armenia (115.1), Azerbaijan (116.6) and Georgia (111) are now among the highest in the world.<sup>1</sup> While some of social consequences seen in China or India may not be significant in the small South Caucasus countries, low fertility rates and ongoing selection for boys may affect future marriage patterns and fertility. There are additional reasons that sex selection should concern the citizens of these countries and their governments. First, it symptomizes and reinforces significant gender inequities. Second, the very practice of sex selection puts pressure on women to bear more children than they wish to, or to terminate pregnancies against their will, thereby violating their fundamental right to make reproductive choices free from coercion.

The purpose of this report is to summarize qualitative research on (i) the factors that encourage sex selection in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, (ii) whether and how these might be changing; (iii) public awareness of and attitudes regarding skewed sex ratios; and to propose potential policy responses. The intention of this report is not to provide a comprehensive view of economic and social progress in or the challenges faced by countries. Rather, the discussion focuses on the specific phenomenon of skewed sex ratios, often conflated with sex selective abortion, but driven by underlying sociological and normative factors. It should be noted that although many of the underlying normative factors and pressures that lead to son preference and create conditions favorable to sex selection are widely shared in the region, only a minority of people act on such preferences by choosing sex selective abortions. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of sex selective abortions has become severe enough to be captured in census and birth registry data.

### *Methodology*

The study is based on qualitative research carried out in 2014 in four communities (including the capital cities) in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Six individual interviews and 6 focus group discussions averaging 8 participants were carried out in each community for a total of about 215 men and women in each country. Focus groups were held with separate groups of men and women, divided by age and marital status (young,

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<sup>1</sup> Data refer to 2005-2010 estimates by the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision*, New York, 2013. Data derived from birth registries for ca2008-2012 show very similar figures: Armenia 114.8; Azerbaijan 116.5; Georgia 111.8.

never married, 18-25 years old; ever married, 26-45; and ever-married 60 and older), with efforts to include diversity in terms of education, profession and respondents' family size and composition. In each community, interviews were carried out with 5 experts (10 in the capital cities, for a total of about 25 expert interviews per country) with informal community leaders or local officials, representatives of NGOs working on gender issues, lawyers, health care providers (gynecologists, obstetricians and/or ultrasound specialists), education providers, religious leaders, sociologists and demographers.

Within each country, **research sites** were selected to include communities with different economic and social profiles, and variation in the sex ratio at birth (SRB), or for Azerbaijan, the sex ratio for ages 01-14 (see Annex 1 for a description of the communities). In **Armenia**, interviews were carried out in **Yerevan** (SRB of 1.13), the capital; **Gyumri**, the country's second largest city; **Akhuryan**, a town in **Shirak province** (SRB 1.18), near Gyumri, and a village in **Aragatsotn province** (SRB of 1.23), characterized by above average sex ratios. In **Georgia**, interviews took place in Tbilisi (SRB of 1.07), in the **Khelvachauri district** of the Ajara Autonomous Republic (SRB of 1.11), in a village in the **Dusheti district** in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti region (SRB of 1.12), and in **Zugdidi**, a town in the Samegrelo-Zvemo Svaneti region (SRB of 1.10).<sup>2</sup> In **Azerbaijan**, research was conducted in **Baku** (sex ratio 01-14, at 1.17); a small town in **Absheron district**; a small town in **Balakan district**, (1.09), and a village in Agdam district (1.17).

### *Organization of the paper*

This paper is organized as follows: **Section 2** examines the factors contributing to smaller families and unbalanced sex ratios in the South Caucasus. **Section 3** looks at the reasons underlying son preference. **Section 4** looks at attitudes toward daughters. **Section 5** describes how intergenerational and gender relationships are starting to change; **Section 6** looks at how son preference affects fertility behavior. **Section 7** considers the factors that make women vulnerable to pressures to produce sons. **Section 8** discusses public awareness of and perceptions about unbalanced sex ratios. **Section 9** proposes some recommendations for addressing the factors that underlie unbalanced sex ratios.

### *Focus on common causes*

This study builds on quantitative and qualitative research that has already been carried out in Armenia and Azerbaijan (UNFPA Armenia; Guilmo 2013; UNFPA Azerbaijan/SCFWCA (2012) and UNFPA Azerbaijan/SCFWCA (2014)) and has contributed to a country study for Georgia (UNFPA, upcoming). The report focuses on common trends across the South Caucasus region, one of the few parts of Europe and Central Asia to display such skewed sex ratios at birth. Indeed, the similarities in viewpoints among people within the three countries are far more striking than differences, which emerge rather in the contrast between capital cities and small towns, men and women, elderly and youth, and different categories of expert interviews. While the generalizations in this report are illustrated by specific examples and comments from

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<sup>2</sup> Data was derived from Geostat's publication "Women and Men in Georgia 2013," and refers to sex ratios at birth in 2012. Note that there are concerns regarding the reliability of vital statistics in Georgia.

respondents in different communities, readers of this report can assume that **the findings and conclusions are applicable across all three countries, unless otherwise specified.**

## **2. THE POST SOVIET TREND: SMALLER FAMILIES, MORE SONS**

### *Soviet collapse and economic hardship*

Many governments, particularly in South and East Asia, have been addressing skewed sex ratios at birth for decades. The emergence of this phenomenon in the South Caucasus and a few countries in Eastern Europe is less well understood, and ordinary people, even some experts, question the accuracy of the statistics.<sup>3</sup>

**Nevertheless, there are many similarities between the South Caucasus and the countries in Asia where the issue has been researched.** In all these countries, skewed sex ratios are associated with patriarchal social structures and expectations that sons will support parents in their old age, while daughters will leave their parents at marriage to invest their labor in their husband's family. This same pattern applies in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, where **societies have long been structured around extended families and joint economies, and families with more sons were better placed to defend their interests.** Strategically arranged marriages, in which brides moved into their husbands' households, allowed families to maintain or expand their wealth and status.

**Women were valued as wives and mothers, but less so as daughters, who were** essentially raised to marry and serve other families. The correlate of men's economic and political domination was their symbolic role as carrier of the family name or bloodline. In the South Caucasus, these social patterns and practices adapted to the new socioeconomic environment. Indeed, kinship relationships served as important resources people could draw upon to circumvent bureaucratic regulations and material shortages (see, for example, Matossian 1962, Heyat 2002 and Dragadze 1988; see also Devtech Systems 2004; UNDP-Azerbaijan 2007; Duban 2010).

Given the importance of having many children, particularly sons, people started families at a young age. Respondents in their sixties and seventies who had grown up under Soviet rule, explained that full (and mandatory) employment allowed couples to marry early and have large families with the confidence that they could afford to raise them. Elderly men in a Tbilisi focus group recalled, "Today, boys have to think twice before they get married. If they don't have a job and they are not established, they cannot get married. ... When I got married I did not have anything. I got married right after I graduated from the Institute, and I had a job and a salary already. I did not have to think about what to do the next day, because my job was guaranteed. ... And now, things are back to where people have to think about how to provide for their families." Another man added, "I have a son, he is 30. He wants to work but can't find job. He graduated from the painting academy, but who wants

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<sup>3</sup>According to the Azerbaijan Human Development Report, 2007, p. 50-51, it was unofficially noted in 2006 that newborn boys outnumbered newborn girls by a 3 to one ratio. Meslé et al. 2007, p. 73, were among the first researchers to analyze recent demographic data and point to the phenomenon in the South Caucasus – but not in any neighboring country.

to employ painters? He wants to get married, but he can't because to get married he needs to have his own income to maintain the family.”

Generous social support meant that one working adult could adequately support a family. An older woman in Aragatsotn province recalled, “Salaries were so low in past. I myself have been working and my salary was 60 rubles. But those 60 rubles were so much that I had been able to care for my needs. And now even 600,000 drams will not be enough because everything is expensive. A sack of flour... which will be eaten by our family within fifteen days - that costs 20,000 drams.” Another woman described her family situation: “In the Soviet era, people were working. Only one employed man was in my home, and we were able to build a house and save money in a bank. I am not saying we were saving a lot of money, but we also had four children and were able to meet their needs, were able to send them to study. The Soviet Union collapsed, and everyone became homeless. It's like we just survive.” An older woman in Yerevan explained, “If in the Soviet period we considered that money is not important, now we realized that we were wrong. Because back then the government was taking care of our social conditions; that's why nowadays there are no spiritual values -- one's brain is only busy with thinking about financial stuff.”

Particularly in rural areas, large families were common, and women often continued to bear children until they produced a son. In some cases, this resulted in large families of many, or only, daughters. Indeed, the accounts of respondents are replete with references to large families of girls. “We were watching TV, the program was exactly about the selection of the child's sex, and my mum who has 3 daughters, said that she was categorically against sex selection. That's true, we are 4 children – 3 girls, and they had me with a hope of a son, but I disappointed them. But they told me many times that my father was so delighted and was behaving so proudly that everybody thought he had a son. My mother says that no difference must be put and if there is a wish to have a son, God will definitely give. My mother has 5 sisters and a brother, my father has 5 sisters and he is the only brother. Ours are all large families.”

Although basic needs were met, older respondents considered that expectations were also lower, in contrast to those of today's youth. Urban families especially were accustomed to multiple generations living together in small apartments. An elderly man in Tbilisi observed, “Would you agree that the modern youth expects to have great success all at once, they are more demanding? I lived in a so-called “Italian neighborhood”: there was a family with 7 members. They were all living in a 17 square meter space. This is impossible now. If you suggest it - and I mean my children as well - they would even be ashamed. They would tell you – ‘are you crazy, Dad?! How can we live together?’ So let them wait until they have something better... young people are more demanding, while we were more accepting.”

### ***Impoverishment and family formation***

The collapse of the Soviet state significantly affected family formation by throwing people out of work and removing the many supports that families could rely upon. The Soviet state had provided free, universal health care and education, other social benefits, and subsidized

infrastructure services. New, post-Soviet governments were unable to maintain even basic services, especially during the early transition years, forcing people to pay out of pocket or go without. By the end of the 1990s, Armenia and Georgia were among the poorest of the Soviet successor states (World Bank 2000, 2003). With state institutions barely functioning, kinship relationships became even more important for coping with these challenges (Dudwick et al, 2003).

The impact of economic collapse was further exacerbated by armed conflicts in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The conflicts resulted in thousands of deaths and internal and external population displacement. Most of these conflicts remain stalemated, and Azerbaijan and Georgia in particular still grapple with large IDP populations. (Tajikistan was the only other Soviet successor state to experience a similar level of violence).

Although these frozen conflicts may not have directly affected individual family planning decisions, they have contributed to an environment where men's value is often expressed in terms of their ability to defend their country. An elderly woman in Baku explained that families "want several sons in the family so that if they lose one at war, another stays with them. This will be a big abyss in the future because the number of girls has decreased."

Most families responded to the economic crisis and institutional changes, however, by reducing the number of children they had. Although many respondents in this study considered three or four children – two boys and two girls - as an ideal number, having one or two children became the norm. Given widespread ignorance and/or resistance to contraceptives, many women resorted to abortions to regulate family size. Although abortion and contraceptives had been restricted in the Soviet Union as part of Stalin's post-war pro-natalist policy, Khrushchev's reforms had eased access to abortion. Since physicians discouraged use of hormonal contraceptives and IUDs and condoms and cervical caps were of poor quality and in short supply, abortion became the most common way of limiting fertility (Michael et al, 2013, p. 97). An older woman in Tbilisi explained, "I personally have had abortions, and not only once. Now I'm ashamed.... The number of abortions was high before because we did not have information about contraceptives. Husbands would probably even divorce their wives if they asked to use protection."

### *The impact of ultrasound technology*

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, restrictions on importing advanced medical technology were loosened, and ultrasound technology, which had already been introduced into Soviet health institutions, rapidly expanded throughout the Soviet successor states. By the end of the 1990s, ready access to ultrasound and abortions allowed people to reduce the size of their families while taking steps to make sure they had at least one son, although only a minority in fact resorted to sex-selective abortion.

**Would earlier access to ultrasound diagnosis would have resulted in the same kind of trends in sex ratios at birth now manifest in the South Caucasus?** Some respondents thought son preference was less marked during the Soviet period, and increased mainly because of people's economic insecurity. An elderly man in Balakan district explained, "After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of people giving preference to male

babies increased, because parents are afraid of problems as the result of unemployment and poverty. They need sons to support them and protect from these negative things.” Another focus group participant added, “Unemployment is another reason. People are afraid to have a daughter; you have to give her education, clothe and feed her. When a father cannot ensure all necessary things, he feels ashamed in front of his daughter.” Older women in a Aragatsotn province focus group had a similar view: “In those years people did not attach that much importance to the sex of the child; nowadays that has changed.” Men in a Baku focus group, argued that “In Soviet times, families wanted both boys and girls, but now they want limited number of children. They now have an ultrasound scanning and if it’s going to be a girl they terminate the pregnancy.” According an elderly man in Balakan district, “If the government creates normal living conditions, takes care of the baby from economic point of view, pays benefits or provides assistance with food, people would not try to define the sex of the baby.”

**Elderly respondents recall that people were more accepting of their children’s sex.** An elderly woman in Baku recalled, “My mother-in-law has five girls. When she was pregnant with her third child, she was told: “Why do you need a girl after two girls?” But she insisted she would not have an abortion.” Another woman in the focus group added: “The wife of my brother-in-law has seven girls, and she had no abortion. All of them are married now.” An older woman in Dusheti district said, “The situation was changed; before, you were content with what you got from the God. It did not matter it was a son or a daughter. If you had two or three girls, then the family tried to deliver a son as an ancestor of the family. Now they go and get an ultrasound. If it is a girl they have an abortion, and if it is a boy, they keep the child.... The desire of having a son existed before, but they had both girls and boys -- now they only need a boy.”

**A preponderance of respondents, however, insists that son preference was always strong.** Older men in a Tbilisi focus group were unanimous that sons had always been preferred, and an elderly man in a Baku focus group concurred: “It was the same previously as well. Everybody wanted a baby boy; nobody said that I wish to have a baby girl. Nowadays due to the possibilities of new medicine and checkups, people use the opportunities and identify sex of the baby.” A Tbilisi woman referred to son preference in her own family: “We were three children in the family, two girls and one boy. My brother, who was the middle son, was worshipped by my mom. Older people had this [habit of favoring the son] more.” An elderly woman from Aragatsotn province, however, felt that no woman really wants many children; rather, their husbands force them. And as an older woman from Zugdidi commented, if people in her day could have found out the sex of the child they were carrying, there would have been fewer girls and more boys born. Interviews across countries included reports from the Soviet period of men who had divorced, abandoned, or otherwise punished their wives for failing to deliver sons.

### **3. THE INSTRUMENTAL AND SYMBOLIC BASES OF SON PREFERENCE**

The ratio of boys to girls in the South Caucasus is now among the highest in the world. Ratios are particularly high for second and third children, as parents balance their desire for sons with their desire for small families (Das Gupta 2014). Consistent with these trends,

most people interviewed for this study confirmed that having at least one son was very important to them (See Box 1 below for a breakdown of how men and women responded to this question). Men and women sometimes commented that men “preferred boys” but often “loved their daughters more;” that sons “were supporters while daughters are more caring, and that “sons carry the coffin, but daughters grieve.” Further probing usually revealed that at least for the men, having at least one son was “a must.” As a woman in Zugdidi put it, “Those who say that they do not care about not having sons -- deep in in their hearts they wish to have one. Just -- they pretend to be cool about it and don’t say it.”

**Box 1: If you could have only one child, would you prefer a boy or a girl, or doesn't it matter?**

During the focus groups and life stories, facilitators asked respondents whether they would prefer a son or daughter if they could only have one child, or whether the child's sex didn't matter to them. Focus group participants responded anonymously by writing their preference on small pieces of paper that the facilitator collected and then read out, to provoke a discussion. See the table in Annex 2.

Within each age and sex category, a majority of women and men of all ages (except for women over 60) indicated that the sex of the child "didn't matter." Respondents may have felt that this was a "preferred" answer, given that the topic of the study reflected concern over the disproportion of boys to girls. For respondents who replied that the child's sex was "God's will," this response may reflect religious conviction. For others, it may have signified that they hadn't thought deeply about the subject, or were uncertain about their deepest preference. A few respondents refused to answer the question as posed and said they preferred one child of each sex (these answers were categorized as "doesn't matter"). Finally, as Das Gupta notes (2014, 29), reported preference does not always correspond to behavior, at least as this can be deduced from sex ratios.

Putting to one side the "doesn't matter" responses, men and women who did express a preference for one sex or the other **clearly preferred boys to girls**. However, men of all ages expressed their son preference much more strongly than did women. Of young men, 39 (out of 104) preferred a son to only three who wanted a daughter, and 41 adult men and 41 older men preferred sons, while only 7 adult men and 8 older men wanted daughters. **For young women, there was no difference** in the number (23) who preferred a son or daughter; the difference was small for adult women (29 preferred sons, while 22 preferred daughters). Although **women over 60 indicated the greatest preference for sons even compared to men, they also indicated the greatest preference for daughters (27) and were the least likely to say it "didn't matter."**

The other striking result is the similarity in preferences expressed among men from country to country, and between urban and rural communities. **Not one man in Agdam, Ajara or Dusheti district, and only one man in Baku, Gyumri and Tbilisi**, expressed preference for a daughter. In **Yerevan**, three men expressed such a preference. Among people expressing a preference, the number who want sons outweighs –and usually quite significantly – those who want girls. Among women, this relationship is different, particularly in cities: **more women expressed a preference for boys than girls in Yerevan and Tbilisi**; the number in **Baku** was close and in **Gyumri**, identical. In **rural communities**, with the one exception of women in **Balakan district**, men and women preferred sons to daughters, although the difference was less dramatic for women than men, most of whom wanted sons.

While men and women both viewed sons as supports in old age, women were likelier to explain that an important reason for wanting sons was to avoid disappointing their husbands. Many women of childbearing age reported having sons under threat of pressure, even violence. For these women, having sons was more a matter of protecting or enhancing their position in their husbands' families than a necessary reflection of deep-seated preference for boys.

**One of the predominant reasons that people prefer sons is that sons bear primary responsibility for taking care of their elderly parents.** Customarily, the youngest son remained with his parents after marriage, while older brothers established new households with their wives, and sisters married and devoted their energies to their husband and his parents. In the past, pensions and social supports allowed the elderly to help their married sons financially, but today, these supports are very meager and old people living on their own are likely to be poor (World Bank 2000, 2003).

**Families considered sons rather than daughters more effective at dealing with a whole range of difficulties,** including government agencies and officials. A Yerevan woman explained, “At present whatever institution you enter and meet with a man, he doesn’t feel at ease communicating with women, he is more relaxed with men; he gets embarrassed. But when there are two people of different sexes he automatically looks at the man while speaking, even if the question was asked by the woman. From an ordinary shop to the highest authorities. When the man speaks to a woman he falls short of striking a deal, it is easier for him to talk and negotiate with a man. And the woman feels humiliated and offended in such cases, as it looks as if she is not considered a person and that itself is not normal. That’s what the issue is about - about the psychological aspect, and not about legislation.”

Honor has always been an important consideration in patriarchal kinship societies, and women’s perceived and actual “purity” is an essential component of a family’s honor. **In families with girls, sons are valued for protecting their sisters.** In Aragatsotn province, a woman cited the Armenian proverb, “The sister said she had a brother; the brother did not say he has a sister,” to illustrate that the protection brothers offer to their sisters is not (and does not need to be) reciprocated. Girls often appreciate this protection; a young woman from Dusheti district, for example, grew up worrying about bride kidnapping<sup>4</sup> and wishing she had an older brother to protect her from it. Sometimes this protection becomes oppressive, however, and young women complained that their brothers were mainly concerned with neighbors’ opinions about their behavior rather than their safety.

Because girls are seen as belonging to another family after marriage, sons **rather than daughters are seen as bulwarks against a lonely or impoverished old age.** Even people who don’t inherently prefer sons worry that when their daughters marry, they won’t be able to rely on her for company or help. People who prefer boys, explained an adult man from Agdam, assume their son will bring his wife home and they won’t be alone in their old age. An elderly male from Agdam explained that although he valued his daughters, the difference was that if he had only had daughters, he and his wife would be alone once they married. Similarly, an elderly Georgian woman in Zugdidi who thought men preferred sons more strongly than did women, still worried that when the last of her five daughters married, she would be alone. In Dusheti district, a women with only daughters confessed,

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<sup>4</sup> Bride kidnapping traditionally involved abduction of a woman against her will. Whether or not she was raped, she was considered to have lost her virginity and thus forced to marry her captor. Today, most cases of bride kidnapping are a matter of consensual elopement, either to avoid parental opposition or costly weddings, but activists say the practice has been increasing in Georgia and Armenia since independence (Sheets 2006).

“Some boys annoy their parents. But if I had a boy, I might not be poor now. My daughters work now, but how can they help me? They have their own poverty.”

**For many respondents, the importance of sons for carrying on the family name is even more fundamental than the material support they give their parents.** According to an elderly woman in Dusheti district, sons are valued because they continue their lineage, not because of the help they give their parents -- particularly now, when so many men go abroad. This attitude is shared by youth as well: a young man in Tbilisi rejected the notion that people have sons to secure their old age: “It does not matter. The desire for having a name carrier does not depend on pensions.” The quality of the bloodline is also important. An elderly woman in Dusheti district explained that in the mountains, people pay attention to bloodline -- prospective in-laws research the “breed” and genetic diseases of the potential husband and wife, and engagements can last months if not years. In some opinions, “females can continue the family bloodline -- but family strength and power is chiefly associated with the males.” To carry on a lineage, at least one grandson is necessary: an elderly woman in Zugdidi conceded that if her husband had a brother and his brother had a son, her husband wouldn’t have needed a son so much.

**Since sons carry on the family name, men without sons may be labeled “childless” even if they have daughters.** In Ajara, a young woman complained that grandfathers aren’t even considered grandfathers if they don’t have grandsons. An elderly woman in Absheron district recalled how mothers-in-law used to rebuke their daughters-in-law as “childless” until they had sons to carry on the family name. In Western Georgia, men don’t celebrate the birth of a baby girl, but fire off a gun when a boy is born. A young woman in Ajara recalled, “When my mom had her third child and it was a boy, only then did my grandpa tell her she was his daughter-in-law.”

**Because sons traditionally remain with and care for their parents, most people support the tradition whereby they inherit their parents’ home.** Families with several sons helped them build or purchase homes; if space allowed, however, the sons might bring their wives to live in the parents’ home. Families that have profitable businesses are said to be especially concerned to keep these “in the family” by passing them on to sons. As a man in Absheron district explained, a wealthy man is proud to say he has a son who will continue the business after he dies, and support his wife and daughter. Because a daughter belongs to another after marriage, property passed on to them passes out of the family. And as an elderly woman in Aragatsotn province asked rhetorically, “Why put so much energy into building a house when the son-in-law would enjoy it instead of one’s own son?”

**The significance of passing one’s home on to a son or daughter has changed in the last 25 years, with the privatization of housing.** During the Soviet period, as an older man in Tbilisi explained, “a flat did not belong to a person, a flat belonged to the state, and whoever was registered in the flat stayed in that flat.” In the 1990, housing was privatized and people could purchase their homes for nominal fees. In the following decade, collective farms were also privatized, and households acquired land. Today, houses, apartments, and land are the primary assets that children inherit when their parents die. Current legislation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia stipulates that when the homeowner dies, unless he or

she has left a will, all children inherit equal shares. Although many people still consider that sons should inherit, actual practice is changing. Many elderly respondents derided the changes. In Dusheti, an older woman recalled that in the past, “the inheritance was passed on to the boy and it didn’t matter if he was good or bad. It was a shame to name the daughter as the heir. It was the daughter’s shame, as well as the family’s. Now everybody acts as if it’s a good thing (elderly woman, Dusheti district). Comments from a focus group among elderly women were also negative: “Only one from a thousand decides to leave something to the daughter;” “The parent who gives their property to the daughter might be unwise.” “I have two daughters and two sons, and it does not matter: if my son’s attitude is bad, nevertheless, I won’t leave [the property] to my daughter.”

**Many people interviewed claimed they would leave their house to the son or daughter who cared for them in their old age;** others had decided to divide their property equally between sons and daughters. In Azerbaijan, respondents referred to Islamic practice of dividing property equally between sons and daughters. If daughters inherit, however, there is a fear that the homes will become abandoned and forgotten -- this is another reason, explained a woman from Gyumri, that Armenians always want a son “so that smoke continues to rise from their chimneys.”

**In some cases, men who have daughters but no sons sometimes “adopt” their daughter’s son by giving him the family surname (with the permission of the daughter’s husband) and passing property directly to him.** This ensures that the property symbolically remains “in the family” even if his daughter (and her husband) benefit from it. This practice is not uncommon –an elderly man in Gyumri, for example, had already arranged for his grandson to inherit his house (thereby passing over his own daughter, who would continue to live with her son, but would not own the house). A young man from Absheron district expressed his intention to do this if he didn’t have a son. Some women expressed resentment at such behavior. A young woman in Gyumri expressed anger that grandparents could consider their son’s children more closely related to them than their daughter’s children; she labeled the desire for a boy to carry on the family name “an illness -- just a surname doesn’t guarantee that one’s appearance, mentality or other features pass from one generation to the next.”

**In some cases, it is hard to disentangle the weight of social pressure and personal preference.** An NGO leader in Ajara said of her own family: “There is very strong desire [to have sons]. It is probably true in all of Georgia, but especially in Khelvachauri district.<sup>5</sup> If a family does not have a son it becomes an object of discussion in society. ... Since my parents did not have a son, who was going to inherit the property was always an issue of discussion. In order to end this discussion, my father decided to give his name to my nephew, and now he has my father’s name. This is very important in Khelvachauri district. We were not planning to do this, but people were talking so much about it that my father decided to solve the problem this way.”

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<sup>5</sup> Khelvachauri district is inhabited predominantly by Georgian Muslims, who preserve patriarchal traditions. See Gelovani 2012.

#### 4. DAUGHTERS ARE “MIGRATORY BIRDS”

**While many men and women said they would like both sons and daughters, some families consider daughters to be liabilities.** Traditional families worry about having daughters whose behavior might damage their families’ reputation and diminish their own chances of marriage. Men of all ages in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia expressed concerns about raising girls in today’s rapidly changing social and cultural environment and exposure to western standards of female behavior. Both boys and girls present challenges, they felt, but girls’ mistakes are irrevocable. A participant of a men’s focus group in Absheron district explained, “You may forgive your son, even if he makes mistakes. But you cannot let your daughter make mistakes in moral matters.” Participants of men’s focus groups in Absheron district and Agdam felt that the possibility of girls sully the family reputation was why people don’t want daughters. Another man in Absheron district planned to remove his daughter from school after 9<sup>th</sup> grade: “We have to do it to keep clean the name of our family.”

**By contrast, when boys get in trouble, society usually forgives them.** In Akhuryan, a man offered the following example: “Look, if a boy ... gets arrested by police once or twice, you will pay about 10,000 dollars and set your son free. Do you think it’s more difficult than having a daughter who has behaved immorally and has left a big stain on your name, your personality, your house? Do you think [that situation is] more difficult than the problem with your son? After all, he is a boy, he will come out of the prison and will change his behavior.” A young woman in Gyumri pointed to the double standard – “society forgives boys who have 50 girlfriends, smoke, drink quarrel, have sex, but a girl who doesn’t remain a virgin is never forgiven.” In Dusheti district, a woman recounted how when she was pregnant for the third time her sons hoped for a brother; they felt that girls talk and dress in such a shameful manner today they were afraid if they had a sister they would be ashamed of her. Another woman in Dusheti district said that because of the “Georgian mentality,” girls commit suicide if they become pregnant and the boy refuses to marry them.

**Yet the perceived breakdown of old patterns of respect and authority and growing criminality has also made people anxious about raising sons.** Many families find it easier to control their daughters’ behavior than their sons, and worry about their sons becoming drug addicts, alcoholics or criminals. “Boys are subject to bad influences, while daughters don’t leave the house,” said a woman in Agdam. A mother in Dusheti district characterized boys as prouder, harder to handle and more aggressive. She worried about influence from “the street” and television violence, and said boys were getting in more fights and even attacking girls. In Zugdidi, a young woman explained that mothers are more attentive to their sons because they fear they might go down the wrong path, while a young Tbilisi woman claimed it has become harder to raise boys who are not “hooligans.” In Ajara, a father agreed that boys are difficult, while girls come home and do their homework. In Balakan district, a young man said: “I would never be upset if I do not have a son. There are so many families that do not have sons. And they are not unhappy. In the neighboring village, a man had three sons, two of them committed crimes and were arrested, and one died in prison. It is better to have an honorable daughter than such sons!”

**A number of women and even a few men said that they preferred sons mainly because girls suffer so many hardships and restrictions, and lack control over their own lives.**

Explaining to the focus group facilitator in Balakan district why no one expressed a preference for daughters, an elderly man suggested it was because girls work so hard in the home, and her parents fear she might not find someone who will defend and protect her in the future. In Akhuryan a woman said, “When you realize that in case of having a daughter you would have to worry about her future, you prefer to have a son whose future is in his own hands. A son is more likely to be happy than a girl.” Women in Aragatsotn province didn’t want to raise girls because their upbringing and adult roles were so restricted. A young woman in Dusheti district said, “I personally agree with having a son preference. Not because he will be the one who continues the family name, or that he will take care of me, but because I pity girls... girls have more problems, a boy seems to have an easier life. Being a mother is very important and a heavy duty. The only obligation a man has is to support the family financially; all other issues are solved by women.”

**Men complained that girls are more expensive to raise than boys because of the importance of providing them with attractive clothing and a good education, both of which reflect on the family.**

Boys may inherit the house, but parents must provide dowries when their daughters marry. Elderly men in Balakan district complained that one was expected to pay for their clothing and education even though another family would benefit. Others noted that men felt ashamed when they couldn’t afford to properly clothe and educate their daughters, and that men had to work two-three times harder to support girls. People in Gyumri and Aragatsotn province concurred that girls were more expensive, although a young woman in Aragatsotn province pointed out that families with several sons had to provide each one with a house, while girls married and were then taken care of by their husbands. A young woman in Gyumri complained that parents like boys because the boys will eventually take care of them, but they don’t see girls as useful because they have to give her a dowry and organize her wedding. Dowries are said to be expensive – depending on family income, they may include expensive appliances or bedroom furniture -- and a girls’ parents usually spend more than the boys’ parents on the wedding ceremony.

**Most importantly, while parents may treasure their daughters, girls are nevertheless viewed as “migratory birds”** (a phrase used in Absheron district and Agdam) who, as a young Zugdidi woman said, “are brought up to serve somebody else.”

Married daughters are said to do their best to assist their own parents as needed, but they are not the masters of their own fates. Both young men and women in rural communities, at least, take such restrictions for granted. A young man interviewed in Absheron district thought his future wife’s visits to her own family should be “not more than once a month. The girl should get adapted to our family.” A young woman in Zugdidi explained, “I know of many husbands’ mothers who don’t let their daughters-in-law visit their parents in the village. Or she might let her visit for one day and the girl has to return the second day. They have domestic animals and once you enter the family, looking after them becomes your obligation.... A girl in my neighborhood visited her parents; I asked her why she didn’t stay more and she replied they [her husband and mother-in-law] didn’t let her.” Several young men in

Balakan district worried about limitations on their sisters' freedom to maintain contact with their parents.

**Even when parents cannot rely on their own sons, they feel uncomfortable relying on the family into which their daughter married.** An older woman in Aragatsotn province complained, "It is already 20 years that my brother has lived in Russia with his family. It is true that financially they sustain my mother in a very good way but that is too little for a son to do toward his mother. She needs her children, and she needs her son. Often she can come to my place and live together with me; there is nothing hindering. But when she comes to my place she stays there only for an hour and then she immediately leaves for her place. She says, 'I cannot stay; it would be better if you come and stay with me.' Both my brother and I help her financially, and her welfare level is high, but she is in need of someone to take care of her: she is more than 80 years old." The reason elderly parents are reluctant to move in with married daughters is that they will be living with "strangers" [in-laws] who have no obligation to treat them well. You are a "king of kings" living with your son, but "suffer tightness in the house of your daughter, always afraid your son-in-law will tell you that you are eating too much" explained an elderly Akhuryan woman. An older woman in Aragatsotn province explained the dilemma as follows: "A daughter-in-law will become like a daughter but a son-in-law will not become a son." Respondents in Absheron district and Balakan district expressed similar views: "I would never live my in-laws, not even for one night" said a young man in Absheron district. Men in particular prefer to depend on their sons, over whom they still retain some authority, rather than on their sons-in-law.

**Daughters who want to remain with and help their own parents after marriage face greater barriers, since husbands who join their in-laws face strong social disapproval unless there are particular mitigating circumstances.** People consider that such men cannot be household heads if they live in a home that belongs to their father-in-law. Despite the practice of disparaging men who live with their in-laws as "brides" or "house husbands," such living arrangements have reportedly increased in recent years. Some people consider it acceptable if the man lacks a home (as in the case of IDPs), or the woman is an only child and her husband's parents live with another son. A Balakan district man described two acquaintances who had moved to their wives' homes. In one case, the man had faced bankruptcy in Russia, and in the other, married an only child and was invited into the home by her parents. "I can understand both men, they did it because of hopelessness. However, they are not respected among community members."

## 5. CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPECTATIONS

**A preponderance of respondents with adult children felt that married daughters often proved more caring and conscientious toward their parents than did sons.** An elderly man in Balakan district who had three daughters observed that sons could be useless: "The son might be ungrateful and will not take care of his mother and father. There is a family I know, where son did not take care of parents, and parents found this warm reception and a nest at her daughter's house, their daughter accepted them. There are daughters that have much more courage than sons. Long live our daughters! ... I've seen a lot of cases when a

son abandoned parents. I visited Lankaran region a lot, I have many friends over there. Having many children is a fashion there. I've witnessed that a person had nine-twelve or thirteen sons and one or two daughters. There is no news from those sons, they disappeared off and these two daughters take care of parents." Asked whether he would have preferred a daughter or son when he started his family, an older man in Yerevan replied, "If I were young, I would say a boy but now in my age I say a girl. Because a daughter is more caring than a daughter-in-law."

**Some health care providers and NGO representatives considered that that the significant role played by adult daughters in caring for elderly parents is not adequately recognized.** A representative of a Gyumri women's organization commented: "Just go and visit nursing homes and see whose fathers and mothers are more in there -- boys' or girls'. Sometimes, even being someone else's daughter-in-law, a girl manages to provide care for her mother, while a son who was supposed to be the head of the family is not capable to do that." In Zugdidi, a young woman thought that people "expect that a son will take care of them, but my neighbors often wish to have daughters instead of the sons they have now, because they see that the daughter-in-law doesn't take care of them, and daughters, no matter where they are in Georgia, will come and take care of their parents. An elderly woman in Tbilisi supported by her daughters said, "I know one family where the grandparents lived with their son and his family, and were taking care of their grandchild; they had the 2 year-old while their daughter-in-law was working. Later, the grandparents retired and went to live in the village... They left all their property to their son and daughter-in-law, but when they needed care in old age, even though their daughter and her family had a very small apartment, she brought them to live with her family, and she took care of them. So the responsibility of sons toward parents has changed more as daughters-in-law have refused to live with their parents-in-law."

**Daughters have taken on a greater role because daughters-in-law are less likely to serve their in-laws as submissively as they did decades ago.** In traditional families in the past, and lingering today, in-married wives submitted unquestioningly to their husband and his parents. An elderly Tbilisi man recalled, "Earlier there were more demands on daughters-in-law, now there are less. Before they were supposed to wash their father-in-law's feet. There was such a rule, that the new daughter-in-law was supposed to get up early in the morning and was supposed to do the same job as the in-laws were doing. Nowadays it's not the same." In Akhuryan, a man nostalgically recalled that when he was young, wives feared their husbands "even at 40-50 meters." When he returned home from work, elderly women of 70 or 75 would stand up out of respect, even though he was only 24 years old at the time. Women didn't even have the right to look into men's eyes, according to a woman in Ajara.

**In some traditional pockets of the each country, these patterns of subordination still persist.** An NGO activist in Ajara contrasted changing behaviors in Batumi with more traditional rural Ajaran communities. "I will use the Batumi example. Before, almost no women used to work and only men did. Now this environment has changed. Professions emerged that men don't want to take and women do. Women became providers for their families. Based on this situation, we can say that something has probably changed, but this

does not concern traditional Ajaran families. There, the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is the same as it used to be, a long time ago.” In such families, “Women should keep traditions. She should not come home late; if she is going somewhere, she should necessarily go with her husband and there is no way she can go alone; she should not talk to men too much; but as I already said, this is not the case in the city anymore.”

As the willingness of daughters-in-law to submit unquestioningly to their in-laws has diminished, women living with married sons noted -- some approvingly and some regretfully -- that it has become impossible to admonish today’s daughters-in-law without a sharp response. Discussing these relationships in a Tbilisi focus group, elderly men confirmed, “Daughters-in-law are more arrogant nowadays. They don’t take remarks well, while before they used to be quiet and take everything quietly.” “It was the same before, that daughters-in-law did not like the remarks of their in-laws, but they would not say anything.” Participants added that daughters-in-law are likelier to face these expectations in rural communities: “Such rules still exist in the regions as well. It’s rare but still happens.”

**The increasing numbers of young couples setting up separate households was attributed to conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.** This kind of conflict is described by a young woman in Dusheti district: “I have heard about the cases when daughters-in-law are not permitted to keep close contact with their parents, which is very sad because it’s quite difficult for a woman to part with her family members...it is believed that when a woman gets married she should be locked up with her new family; women are still oppressed. I don’t want to have such a married life. I cannot put up with the fact that I would not be permitted to contact my parents and see them as often as I want to. This is so basic. I would like to have friends over at my new place and try to make them as welcomed by my in-laws as possible. That is why I want to live with my husband separately - to avoid dealing with such problems.”

**The trend of separate households is not dramatic – many young couples cannot afford to live on their own, and others prefer to live with the parents.** Many young men, particularly those who were only sons, expressed a desire to live with their parents, on the grounds that their parents would be deeply disappointed otherwise. Young women expressed more interest in living independently, although most conceded they would do their best to get along with the in-laws if this was their husband’s desire.<sup>6</sup> This difference is perhaps not surprising, since women are already accustomed to the idea of separating from their own parents, and also know that accommodating to their husbands’ parents may be stressful.

**A significant number of older couples expected their own children to set up separate households after marriage.** A man with two small sons in Aragatsotn province looked

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<sup>6</sup> This difference is consistent with survey findings from Georgia. In 2006, 20 percent of men under 30, compared to 50 percent of women planned to start living separately, and there was little change between 2006 and 2009 (Badurashvili et al., 2009, p. 62).

forward to being on his own when his children grow up: “I would love to live alone... I could wake up and leave the room without getting fully dressed, and my wife could be wearing pajamas... I know people and I have seen how they used to live in the same house and now they live separately and they are very close, they visit each other, the wife and the mother-in-law have much better relations.” A 61-year-old woman from Gyumri welcomed what she characterized as “European notions”: “If you want to know my opinion, I would say that I agree with the youth. People are free in their choice of people to live with, place to live at. They should follow their aspirations, struggle, and live the way they want... While in our time, the youngest son had to live with parents. Today, when I look back into the life I lived, I think that it would make a big difference if we lived separately... Nobody asked what we wanted... young families should earn their living themselves, based on their understanding of life. In that case, they will not blame anybody for their happiness or misfortune.”

**Even when their husbands and in-laws restrict in-person visits to their parents, frequent daily telephone and/or Skype contact has become ubiquitous.** Most men interviewed acknowledged their wives’ right to maintain as much phone contact with their parents as they wished as well as visit frequently. A minority, however, expressed concern that too much intervention from the girl’s parents could have a destabilizing impact on a marriage. Young men in a focus group in Absheron district said, “She may keep in contact as she wishes. But her mother should not interfere our family issues.” Another concurred: “My wife may talk to them as she likes, however she should not tell our family secrets.”

**The only area in which women explicitly challenged their husbands’ right to have the last word concerned the support of needy parents.** Young and many adult women across all three countries insisted that if they earned an income, they would help their parents even if they had to hide their assistance from their husbands. In Dusheti district, a young woman explained: “If I can, I will support my parents financially too and won’t tell my brother anything. I will just buy what is needed – medicine or anything, by myself. If I can’t, I would tell him... I want to add that you should tell you husband about it first. If he is against it, though that is unlikely, I would help my parents behind his back.” A young woman in Aragotspn province reflected, “I think that I made a right choice and my husband will not prohibit me. He will not be against my will to help them. If I will be able to help them, I think that he will not be a hindrance. Besides, it does not matter that I am a daughter and I have got married. Parents always stay parents, especially my mother, who was very attentive and raised me alone.” In Absheron district, a young woman insisted: “Yes, I expect to work after marriage, and preferably in a field where I work now.... I always control my money. Within a family, I believe, all earnings are common, and all costs should be controlled, discussed and planned together. Certainly yes! I would be able to use money to help my parents and brother.”

**Most men expressed support for their wives’ intention to help their own parents.** There was virtually no disagreement on women’s obligation, but rather on the degree of control that their husbands should retain over their support. Several men stipulated that their wives should not provide financial assistance without their permission, and one stated: “I know women who help out their parents without their spouses’ permission. These

women should get divorced.” A participant of the men’s focus group in Baku indignantly asserted that women who helped their parents without their spouses’ permission should be divorced.

**Concurrent with the willingness of daughters to take on new roles in relation to their own parents, they no longer automatically defer to brothers when it comes to inheritance.** Economic hardship has also increased sisters’ greater willingness to demand their share of parental property when their parents die. Many women still considered their dowries to be their share of parental property, and accepted that their brother or brothers would inherit the parental home. Current legislation in each country not only stipulates that all children inherit equal shares, but that a parental will can be contested if it disenfranchises the child who has cared for the parent. According to many respondents as well as the legal experts interviewed for the study, property disputes among siblings have increased in number as women use the legislation to challenge traditional practices.

**Most women wanted to work after marriage, not least to reduce their dependence on their husbands and in-laws.** Older women spoke nostalgically about their work during the Soviet period. They were able to work outside the house, but at the same time, hours were regular, unlike the hours demanded by the current market economies. Older women in Azerbaijan felt they had enjoyed more rights during the Soviet period, when they had a life outside the household and were able to contribute income to the family. Although women wanted to work, most indicated they would have to accept their husband’s decision in the matter, or accepted that they would have to take a pause when their children were small. A few women insisted they would “die” without work, and planned to hire nannies rather than leave their jobs. A woman in Aragatsotn province observed that cases exist when a man does not work but his wife does... they both need to work. Everybody wants to be free; it is not like one should have a free life and the other shouldn’t.” A woman in Gyumri linked women’s employment to her status: “Maybe it has to do with the fact whether a woman works or not. If a woman doesn’t work she will be dependent on her husband. And if a woman is able to earn her money she can sustain herself... she can have a place in the family.”

**Men expressed mixed feelings about their wives earning an independent income.** Some insisted that this would depend on the nature of the work or whether they approved their wives’ colleagues. Others stipulated that their wives couldn’t earn more than they did. A young unmarried man in Absheron district was adamant that his wife wouldn’t work, or even have precise information about his income; rather, he would give her pocket money. His counterpart in Aragatsotn province likewise asserted, “If I can earn enough money, I will not let her work.... She would better stay home with children and take care of their education.” Some younger women noted that their fathers had encouraged their education so that they wouldn’t have to depend completely on their husbands.

**Many respondents linked women’s pursuit of careers to increases in divorce.** In addition to frequent accounts of men divorcing women because of fertility issues, some men linked rising divorces to women’s growing independence and awareness of their rights. Men in a focus group in Absheron district complained, “In the past, women were

afraid of men, and the number of divorces was small. Now women demand divorce if any problem arises.” A woman in Baku felt the reason that more women wish to build a career these days is to become “morally and financially independent from men” and better protect their reproductive rights.

**Migration has profoundly shaken up traditional gender roles within the family.** In Georgia, well over half the labor migrants are women; women (and men) near the Turkish border may have day jobs in Turkey, while other women leave husbands and children for months or years at a time to work in Turkey, Greece and elsewhere in Europe, mainly in domestic jobs. **Even as breadwinners, however, women don’t necessarily enjoy more equality in the household.** Women migrants were found to be so conflicted by their “norm challenging behavior” of leaving their families that they pushed themselves more than male migrants to work extra hours and minimize their own needs in order to maximize remittances. (Badurashvili and Nadareishvili 2012). Indeed, migration is blamed for its disintegrating impact on families, often catalyzed by suspected infidelity and culminating in divorce. An elderly woman in Dusheti district commented that “women’s roles were not valued back then and are not valued now either. For example nowadays, women are abroad working and sending remittances back home. At the same time, their husbands are having a good time here and spend the money their wives send. If women were valued, their husbands would be more careful with the money they send to them.”

Migrants from Armenia and Azerbaijan are primarily men, although the numbers of women migrants to Turkey, particularly from Azerbaijan, are increasing. Although many older people have benefitted from remittances, others have been abandoned or left dependent on neighbors (Manasyan and Poghosyan 2012; Allahveranov, Aliyeva and Sadigov 2012). A community leader in Baku explained, “Women with children and elderly parents mostly have been left behind. Many young men have created a second family in these countries and do not want to return back.”

**When sons migrate, elderly parents are often forced to rely on their married daughters, which they resent:** “My neighbor’s son is abroad. Recently he had a heart attack. He should not do hard work. His wife passed away, his daughter and son-in-law take care of him. And he gets angry for depending on his son-in-law while having a son.” (elderly man, Absheron district). The absence of sons also places greater burdens on their parents to take on responsibility for grandchildren: “Now my youngest son works abroad, his wife and 2 daughters live with me. I am responsible for their education and behaviour. My wife and I feel his absence, he used to help us in the garden as well” (elderly man, Absheron district).

## **6. THE IMPACT OF SON PREFERENCE ON FERTILITY BEHAVIOR**

**Son preference doesn’t just reflect the individual desire for a son, it is strongly conditioned by community pressure.** Men who don’t have sons are often subject to reproach from their parents and close family members, and scorn from neighbors and friends. Men and women, however, viewed this issue quite differently. Some openly acknowledged that men feel ashamed when they don’t have sons, although others preferred

to characterize their feelings as “disappointment.” A young man in Tbilisi agreed that men are ashamed, but mainly because their friends make fun of them; another felt that men who were ashamed were “probably being pressured by their parents.” A young woman in Ajara reported that her brother is mocked by his friends because he has two daughters; his wife is not at all ashamed. Men in Absheron district acknowledged that they felt ashamed, either because of other people’s “inappropriate jokes,” or simply because a Muslim man “must have a son.” In Akhuryan, Yerevan, and Gyumri, men acknowledged that men with daughters were the butt of jokes. Having sons is widely seen as an affirmation of masculinity. In Gyumri, a young man felt that although it seems ridiculous, men claim “only a true man brings a boy to this world.” In Yerevan, a man recounted, “I go to the hospital and they tell me they are going to show me something they are not sure whether it will make me happy or not. I tell them I don’t care what it is, the only thing that matters for me is to have a healthy child, and they get surprised. They say I am one of the rare fathers. They say people come and fight and we hardly take them out of the hospital.”

**Although women acknowledged that a mother’s status rises when she has a son, women were less likely to express shame at having daughters.** According to a woman in Absheron district, if a woman feels shame, it’s because of their husband’s reaction or family pressure. In Akhuryan, an elderly woman noted that women without sons are treated disrespectfully. If men are ashamed because of social condemnation, women are ashamed because they failed in their obligation to their husbands. A young woman in Gyumri said that men “hush up” the fact they don’t have sons even if they love their daughter, while women feel no shame but rather treat their daughters as their best friends. Women generally felt that even if they would like sons, the “obsession” about sons rather comes from the husband, in-laws and even the wife’s parents.

**Although couples are said to discuss the issue together, the husband has the last word as to whether to try for another child or terminate a pregnancy.** Quite a few men and many women appear to consider it natural that husbands make fertility choices, although they were less explicit as to whether this included decisions about abortion. In Agdam, the participant in a men’s focus group asserted: “The opinion of man is more important... If there are two daughters in the family, husbands want to have a son as well. And a woman should not go against his wish.” In Aragatsotn province, a woman explained, “If the man decided something, that is how it will be. It could be that a woman disagrees but the decision will be made by a man, and that’s how it will be.”

**Many women considered that the mother-in-law rather than the husband was the main source of pressure, which suggests the extent to which women themselves have internalized and transmit the strong value placed on sons.** A young man from Zugdidi thought this happened most often if the husband were an only son. A woman in Absheron district recounted: “My friend is praying -- she gave birth to 3 daughters, as she considers abortion to be a sin. Her husband did not interfere, but every day her mother-in-law used to say you, should divorce this woman. Now they are distant with her mother-in-law; she does not even visit her grandchildren.” A young woman in Dusheti district explained, “You can’t completely forget about your parents and relatives and live independently, especially

when a man is dependent on his parents financially. The reason in-laws interfere in couples' family matters is because they provide economic assistance to their son."

In many cases, the husband's mother was said to be the one accompanying the wife to the hospital. An elderly woman in Akhuryan recounted "When we learned that my daughter-in-law was going to have her second girl we decided to go to hospital to have an abortion. When we reached the hospital I felt very bad. While they were measuring my blood pressure and prescribing some medicine to me, the doctors had advised my daughter-in-law not to have abortion to avoid later complications." Another woman added, "I have told my daughter to have an abortion if her second child is again a girl... What could I do? She had one daughter and her husband wanted to have a son very much."

**Mothers-in-law have been identified as instigators of violence by recent research on domestic violence in Armenia.** An Amnesty International report states "that in a significant number of cases it is mothers-in-law in multi-generational households who perpetrate domestic violence in Armenia, especially, though not exclusively, in rural areas. This is confirmed by the statistical evidence gathered for the Women's Rights Centre survey, according to which 10 per cent of women subjected to physical violence reported their mothers-in-law to be the perpetrator." According to women interviewed for Amnesty's study, mothers-in-law reportedly also incite their sons to use violence against daughters-in-law they do not approve of. (Amnesty International 2008, p. 19). A man in Yerevan observed "Women undergo violence by their mothers-in law or husbands. If violence stops, the number of abortions would decrease."

**Son preference translates into pressure on women to get pregnant until they conceive a son.** Before women were able to ascertain the sex of the fetus through ultrasound, according to respondents across all three countries, their husbands pressured them to bear child after child until they delivered a son: "The wife may not say that she that she suffers psychologically and is physically abused at home. But when you see that she has given birth to 4 or 5 daughters you understand that she is, and she will not stop giving birth to children until she has given birth to a son." (young woman in Akhuryan). "A woman seeks abortion only in case she has no other choice," explained an elderly woman in Baku.

**Reproductive choices are often made on the basis of considerable ignorance.** Several elderly men and women proffered the view that bearing children was good for women, improving her health and making her younger, according to elderly discussants in Tbilisi: "I have also heard that the more children women have, the healthier their body is. I know one family where the woman wanted to get another abortion, and the doctor said that she could not have an abortion for health reasons, and she had to have a child." "I have a friend, who has a 37 year old daughter with 7 children, and she looks like she has never been married."

A medical professional noted that even educated people do not understand the basis for sex determination; if they did, he thought, men would have fewer reasons to reproach their wives for failing to conceive boys. Women in Georgia and Armenia referred to different "calculations" – a folk belief that by selecting the "right" day for conceiving a child

(according to birthdays, parental blood types, exact moment in the ovulation cycle, and so forth) —one can increase chances of conceiving a boy. “Calculations of my mother-in-law prove right by 90%,” according to a woman in Yerevan. A woman in Tbilisi referred to “tables... for example, Japanese ones that can detect the sex according to those tables. In most cases, I’ve heard it’s successful. It’s better to use this kind of planning than getting abortions.”

**Many young women appeared less concerned about the sex of their children;** many wanted a son with whom they would live later in life; most also wanted at least one daughter to be their “best friend,” and a few expressed a marked preference for girls. Young women predicted that their husbands would be deeply disappointed without at least one son to carry on the family name. A young man from Agdam stated, “Maybe I could be upset with her [my wife], because I have a strong wish to have a son. Of course, I would not beat her, but would be upset. I think that my parents would be upset as well, if they saw me upset.”

**While quite a few young men were adamant that they would keep trying for sons, young women were more split on the issue.** Some agree they would try up to three (in some cases four) children, finances allowing, while others insisted they would not have more than two children. A young woman in Dusheti district said, “I wouldn’t try to have more children after two girls. There are me and my sister in the family and my mother has never mentioned that she wished she had a boy as well, or if she had had a boy that things would be otherwise. However, my father had some regrets; he wanted to have a baby boy, but it was more in the past and I haven’t heard anything like that from him recently.”

**As harder times have caused families to reduce family size, husbands and their parents have exerted increasing pressure on their wives to terminate pregnancies rather than give birth to girls.** “Generally, women listen to them because in most cases she has no other viable option,” explained a woman in Akhuryan. In some cases, women reported relatives or neighbors who had hidden their pregnancies for four or five months, too late to terminate them if ultrasound determined that they were going to have a girl. A woman in Absheron district confessed, “I had to terminate the pregnancy with the third girl after [having] my daughters, because my husband did not want [her]. The main reason for divorce was his statement that I could not deliver a son.” Similarly, an elderly woman in Agdam recalled that when she went for ultrasound in her fourth month, her husband said she “should not come home without terminating the pregnancy if it was a girl. Otherwise, he would punish me.” Indeed, both men and women recounted instances (in some cases from personal experiences) when women delivered their third or fourth child in the hospital and their husband had refused to take them home. In some cases, they returned temporarily or even permanently to their own parents.

**Both infertility and failure to have a son were associated with divorce or physical abuse.** Most respondents knew of childless couples who had divorced, although now some couples seek in vitro treatments or adopt from an orphanage. “There are families who couldn’t have children but now they do through artificial insemination. I think husbands cope with that; it is not like it was before. Before husbands would divorces their wives,

now the medicine offers solutions and husbands accept them” (elderly man in Balakan district). Infertility, however, is still generally considered the women’s fault; indeed, suggesting the man might be infertile is considered insulting. A young female teacher in Baku explained: “We have a teacher, she has two daughters and she is pregnant. They thought the child was a boy. Now it is the eighth month and they know it is a girl. The woman is from time to time thrown out from house; her husband does not speak to her and is very rude. And there is another teacher. She cannot have a child. And the reason is the health status of her husband. But the man always attacks her, insults, blames and threatens to kick her out.”

**Given overriding importance of having children, some women reported being urged, even forced by in-laws to give a newborn (generally a girl) to a childless relative.** The following emotional account by an elderly Aragatsotn province woman details the severe pressure she experienced, and also reflects the pervasive unwillingness to accept that men can be infertile: “I got pregnant and I didn’t know I was expecting a girl. My husband’s brother’s wife could not have kids, and my mother-in-law wanted to have them divorced because of that. Everyone knew that they couldn’t have kids because of my brother-in-law, but they were blaming his wife.” Even though her sister-in-law wanted to adopt one of her own brother’s children, however, the mother-in-law opposed this solution because this mean that the grandfather’s property would have been inherited by “another child” [e.g. a descendent of the sister’s husband]” and “not one of our own” [e.g. a direct biological descendent of the grandfather]. Another woman reported giving birth to twins (a boy and girl) and being forced to give her daughter to a relative.

## 7. SOURCES OF WOMEN’S VULNERABILITY

**Although men and women share the values expressed in son preference, women’s willingness to produce a son at all costs varies considerably.** Not only are they less willing than men to have many children in order to have a son, they are also more reluctant to repeatedly terminate pregnancies, although many do so either to satisfy their husband’s wish, or simply to avoid abuse.

A number of male respondents and experts, particularly in urban areas, claimed not to know anything about violence toward women in their country, and alleged that on the contrary, women are revered as wives and mothers.<sup>7</sup> Women, however, and some men, provided many concrete examples of violence and abuse, including psychological pressure, threats of divorce and abandonment, and beatings, that they themselves, relatives, and neighbors had experienced, most often linked to infertility or failure to produce a son.

Some respondents considered that violence toward women had increased after the demise of the Soviet Union, in part because unemployment and coping strategies have profoundly

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<sup>7</sup> Recent studies on gender based violence in Armenia (Amnesty International 2008 and Police-Public Partnership 2011), Azerbaijan (UNDP Azerbaijan 2007 and Rule of Law and Human Rights Unit 2013 and Georgia (Chitashvili et al 2010) confirm the contrast between attitudes that domestic violence must not be discussed outside the household, and the significant proportion of women who have needed been victims of physical violence

disrupted traditional gender roles in families. “During Soviet times women worked together with men in the plants and factories with the same rights, and came home in the evening. However, now maybe 70-80 percent of women are subject to domestic violence, this is stated on various TV programs” (elderly man, Balakan district). Another man in Balakan district explained, “The status of modern women is not equal to the status of women of Soviet era. The Soviet Union was very democratic country, i.e. could protect all rights of women. Now the state bodies do not review the complaint of woman on man and do not protect their rights. Now women are more subject to violence.” A community leader in Baku noted that women are particularly vulnerable because of hard economic conditions: “Women are now very reluctant to divorce because they know that it will be hard to raise their children alone and survive in this difficult time. There is a little chance for her for the second time to get married and find a good husband. Therefore husbands often misuse this situation though moral abuse, unfaithfulness, drinking alcohol and physical violence. Men are less afraid of divorce because they believe that they can always marry a second time. There is a widespread opinion that just very few people want to marry a woman with children.”

**In cases of abuse, women have few resources to call upon.** Although police are being trained in all three countries, most women noted that they were likely to advise women to return home and make peace with their husbands. A lawyer in Gyumri commented: “You know, one of the disappointing things in our society is that laws in our country are very good, even perfect. They assume any type of protection (including court, legal and other) for anybody. Mechanisms for applying these laws are missing. There are also no functional mechanisms for restoring one’s rights. There are no trained specialists to work on family violence cases. Police assumes that role. They have biased opinions and whenever they hear about such complaints from women, they immediately link it to prostitution and infidelity.”

A few NGO and/or government-funded shelters for battered women exist, but they are severely underfunded and at best they can provide places for only a few women during the worst of a crisis. Lawyers in all three countries, however, noted the rise in divorce and its association with domestic violence. Women have to bring criminal charges against the abuser, but so many are economically dependent on their husbands they are afraid to address their complaints to the police or the courts. If their husbands are sentenced, the women cannot go back to their husband’s family and might not be accepted in their own families. In Georgia, lawyers in Ajara and Dusheti district found that women were often intimidated by their husbands’ threats to take the children in case of divorce.

**Even if women are willing to contemplate divorce, however, they are severely disadvantaged by post-Soviet property law.** In Armenia, according to the attorney in Gyumri, a wife can get temporary residency in her husband’s or in-laws’ house with the owner’s permission. Women who are not registered, and who signed a disclaimer to their own parents’ inheritance in favor of their brothers, are left without property or even shelter if they divorce. In some cases, however, women have successfully appealed to the courts for their share of property. In other cases, however, an Amnesty International study “encountered cases where former husbands would not agree to a post-divorce division of

common property, forcing their ex-wives to continue co-habitation” so that they and their children wouldn’t lose their homes (Amnesty International 2008, p. 33).

**In Georgia, women can only make claims on property they and their husband acquired after marriage;** they have no ownership claims on property owned by their in-laws or even inherited by their husband before marriage (although their children can inherit after their father’s death). Unless a woman’s parents accept her home after divorce, she may end up with nowhere to go. According to an attorney in Dusheti district, “in families where women don’t have any income and are financially dependent on the head of the family, for them it is difficult to make the decision because they have nowhere to go.” Even if their families accept them back, “it is still seen negatively by society that she left her family, and she is a bigger problem because they usually have brothers; they might have 2, 3 brothers who have their own wives and children. So women feel uncomfortable going there with their own children. Sometimes it is even difficult because there is not enough space for them.” In practice, this means that women with children, may feel they have no alternative to remaining in abusive situations. The situation is similar in Armenia.

**The Azerbaijan 2000 Family code presents some weaknesses in protecting women’s rights in case of divorce.** If a woman moves into the house registered in name of her mother-in-law or other member of her husband’s family, she gets no compensation if she divorces, explains an attorney in Baku. If the house is in the name of husband, however, she is entitled to live there for least one year before the divorce. A woman in Balakan district explained, “There are divorced families, they do not give anything to the women, since nothing is registered in her name. But she is living somewhere.” Another woman in the same focus group pointed out that unless the husband has already inherited some of his fathers’ property, his wife and children end up homeless if they divorce -- “This is the biggest gap in the legislation.”

**Women living in unregistered marriages are even more vulnerable, because even if they have children, they cannot make any claims to their husband’s property.** Such marriages have increased in recent years in all three countries for a number of reasons. In Armenia, some rural couples delay registration so women can receive benefits targeting single mothers. In other cases, couples delay registration simply because of the additional costs or complications entailed, while they move forward with the traditional wedding celebration. In some cases, couples delay registration until they have children.<sup>8</sup> In Azerbaijan, for example, a recent survey shows that the proportion of people registering marriages with the civil authorities decreased from about 97% in 2001 to 90% in 2009, while over a quarter of the population now consider it acceptable not to register marriages (Sattarov 2010). The trend is not dramatic, but it does contribute one more source of vulnerability to women living in abusive marriages. In all three countries, another group of women living in unregistered marriages are girls below the legal age of marriage, some as young as 11. The girls lose their opportunity to complete their education, and are much more likely to experience domestic violence (Verdiyev, Vardiashvili, 2013, and Grigoryan 2012).

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<sup>8</sup> Pers. Comm., Mariam Bandzeladze, UNFPA, and Anna Sarkissyan, CRRC.

**Some respondents argued that women should be empowered to resist pressures to deliver a son, whether by repeat pregnancies or abortions.** Women rather than men were likelier to take this perspective, as were many professionals (particularly lawyers, NGO representatives, and doctors) in the capital cities and in some smaller communities. This line of argumentation involved strengthening women's resistance to psychological or physical abuse by creating conditions for women to become more economically independent. Although respondents were skeptical of change, they felt that greater financial assistance to single or divorced mothers would make women more willing to resist pressures about baby girls, in the belief they would have the resources to raise their child if their husbands abandoned them.

**Many women felt that if laws were better enforced, might feel they had recourse from abuse and would not allow themselves to be pressured to terminate pregnancies.** In such a case, a young woman in Agdam said, "if the law supports a woman, her husband can never state that he would kill or divorce her if she did not give birth to a boy." And an elderly Agdam woman added that "if men were afraid of the law they wouldn't humiliate women." Religious figures and some men, however, objected on the grounds that greater protections for women might encourage them to divorce for trivial reasons.

Urban respondents as well as NGO activists argued that **raising women's status and engagement in economic, social and political life is a prerequisite for reducing son preference.** The Yerevan director of an NGO argued that increasing women's status would not necessarily make them want to have boys, but it would help them understand that they alone are responsible for their bodies and have the right to decide whether to give birth or have an abortion. A Tbilisi demographer agreed that while a woman with her own income won't succumb to violence, ultimately, social norms must change if son preference is to decline. Several respondents felt that teachers should be at the forefront beginning in kindergarten to change stereotypes that boys are strong and girls are weak. In addition, respondents pointed out that women themselves need to understand that if they encourage violence in their sons, this violence may ultimately be directed at women.

According to some expert respondents, **women's disempowerment is linked to strong social sanctions on their participation in public life, and their own internalized sense of being less capable than men** (see box 2, below). While most urban and many rural residents have been exposed to programs or media events on gender, the impacts have been short-lived. A Yerevan woman commented, "A campaign is a breeze, which passes by and doesn't leave any trace. I even see their gains in it -- to show themselves, to appear good, to deliver a speech on TV, etc. Only that much." A community leader in Baku, responding to questions about the efficacy of the media, replied, "Honestly, it is really hard to call...[them] campaigns. There are several programs on our national TV -- I cannot remember their names -- but they are uncoordinated, have no systematic character. Therefore it is difficult to consider them as media campaigns, as they are very rare, not regular." A lawyer in Baku emphasized that campaigns can only change attitudes if they are "carried out persistently and systematically."

### **Box 2: Women in public life**

“There are active women, but not many. We need to find them and support them. We need to teach them how to become politicians, how to give public presentations, how to speak, how to dress. We teach many things: how to organize a press conference if they need to cover some issues. We always conduct meetings once or twice a year and the meeting facilities are usually full because women are so interested in how to become leaders. But once the decisions are made, I don’t know if these women will be included in any [party] list. Men make this decision.... The most important thing that came up during meetings was that women are more likely to vote for men than women. This might be female egoism, they say – “this woman will not be able to accomplish anything.” We advised them to vote for women and not to think that women will not be able to do their job. We told them that they need to vote for women to give them a chance -- who knows; maybe they will be able to do their job very well? They need to get a chance.” (NGO leader, Ajara)

“Women’s role should be enhanced and accentuated. However, we have to ensure that the image of women officials is not associated with the image of prostitutes. For example, people often make negative remarks about women delegates in the National Assembly. They say that it is not proper for them to be in the National Assembly, and if they were good wives, they would be doing laundry at home. This is absolutely a misconstrued perception, because women also can have their contribution in the social and public sector development issues. Our national mentality holds us back.” (Lawyer, Gyumri)

## **8. PUBLIC PERSPECTIVES REGARDING SEX SELECTION**

### ***Public awareness about unequal sex ratios at birth***

**Despite widespread awareness about sex-selective abortion, when the interviewers explained that the study was motivated by concerns about unequal sex ratios at birth, most people were surprised, even skeptical.** Sociologists and demographers in Armenia and Georgia were aware of the unequal sex ratios in their country, but Georgia, only one of the interviewed demographers fully acknowledged the problem. She noted that because Georgians like to see themselves as European, and Europeans don’t practice sex-selective abortion, even well trained professionals are reluctant to acknowledge the issue.

**Even among people who knew about or were willing to accept the information that sex ratios in their country were very skewed, only about half made the link with sex-selective abortions.** Others attributed the current imbalance to the pervasive belief that “nature” rights the balance after wars by creating a peak in male births. Several respondents alluded to a Soviet era publication. A man in Tbilisi explained, “I’d like to interrupt regarding the topic. About 30-35 years ago there was a magazine, “*Nauka I Zhizn*” [Russian, *Science and Life*], and there was information in there that after cataclysms – wars, etc. – nature itself caused male reproduction rates to increase in comparison with girls. I am not going to discard the reason you mentioned, but since [the whole of the previous] 10 or 20 years have not been so peaceful here, it could be possible that nature is trying to eliminate the imbalance.” Many Georgian respondents disputed the premise of the study regarding the disproportion of boys to girls, arguing that according to media discussions

they had heard, more girls were being born than boys. Gynecologists, who might be expected to note changing trends in sex ratios at birth, expressed mixed views. In Akhuryan and Agdam, they had noticed the trends, but attributed it to the war. The obstetrician in Zugdidi had also observed the trend but argued that it varied year by year.

*Concern about potential consequences of unequal sex ratios at birth*

**To the extent that people are aware of skewed sex ratios in their country, the source of information has generally been television programs and discussions, and secondarily, their own observations.** Armenian and Azerbaijani respondents cited many TV programs that had addressed this issue. Young women in Balakan district had heard TV discussions about son preference: “I have watched on TV on Hoshgadam’s program that when there are a lot of girls in the family, fathers leave their families and go to Russia.” Some linked this information to their own observations: a women in an Akhuryan focus group had observed that wives are now older than husbands, which she thought suggested that men were outnumbering women. A few had been struck by the imbalance they observed in classrooms and were concerned about the effect on girls: An elderly Aragatsotn province women expressed concerns for her granddaughter: “Recently, we saw this program about how we have more boys than girls; that program affected me badly... I went to my granddaughter's school a few days after. I saw that there were 14 boys and 4 girls in her class.... What is she going to do among so many boys -- she is so beautiful!”

**Relatively few respondents evinced concern over the likelihood of negative social consequences of skewed sex ratios.** With the exception of professionals in Yerevan, many health care providers, religious figures and community leaders thought that international organizations were exaggerating the problem. Others argued that the imbalance was unlikely to have much impact, given the large outmigration of men and their greater proneness to die in accidents. Those who did consider the consequences alarming thought that a shortage of marriageable women might trigger increased alcoholism, crime and adultery; others feared the dearth of women would promote homosexuality.

**A small number of respondents did express concern about the depopulation of these small countries.** Some linked this to the declining number of potential wives and mothers, others simply to the falling birth rate, as evidence by this response from an older man in Yerevan: “You know, when I heard about this problem on TV, I didn’t pay much attention. I didn’t attach importance to it; I considered it something accidental. What worries me is that birthrate has decreased. First of all we should be concerned with the fact that today no children or a few children are born. First of all the problem of birthrate must be solved, and only then that of sex difference.”

**Although some respondents speculated that it might become harder for their sons to marry in their own country, most cited long traditions of intermarriage.** Compared to India and China, where the imbalance between boys and girls has long been observed, the South Caucasus countries are small, and marriage with Russians and Ukrainians has been frequent. The attitude toward “foreign wives” varied from those who felt it would weaken their “national gene pool” to those who took it for granted. Few people actually thought

that their own son or grandson would be unable to marry. But asked to imagine whether, if the number of women did sharply decline, they would rather have sons who never married or daughters who married and had children, a majority of women and some men said they would rather have daughters who could carry on the family. A young man in Balakan district said he “would choose a daughter who would get married and have babies. The son that would remain single will not be a useful descendant.” His counterpart in Aragatsotn province felt the same: “If a guy is not going to have heirs, then who cares?”

**Some people, including many experts, considered the preponderance of boys to be a positive development, emphasizing the importance of boys to “defend our borders,” “protect the homeland,” and “create strong states.”** Historically, explained a young man in Tbilisi, there were so many wars and attacks that every Georgian family needed a son to fight for them. Armenians pointed out that sons had saved their nation right up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Respondents across the three countries referred to the significant conflict and loss of lives in the last 25 years; many of these conflicts remain stalemated. Although respondents were clear that no one wants to have a baby for the purpose of sending him to war, the need for strong national defense enhances the value of sons. In addition, men are seen as more prone to accidents and early death: An elderly woman in Baku observed, “We lost our men in wars, in car accidents. Some die after falling from tall buildings, others commit suicide. Even if the number of boys exceeds [that of girls], most of them die. So I think this imbalance will remain because we will obviously be engaged in a war in the near future. Men die at a certain age, women live longer.”

**Both ordinary people and experts felt that their governments should create economic conditions to allow people to satisfy their desire for sons by having more children.** A local official in Aragatsotn province argued, “Why change preference for a son? It is better to improve people’s social condition, so that they don’t have to worry about having another daughter and keep having babies until they have a son.” Generally, most people interviewed saw this solution as desirable because they were concerned their countries would otherwise become depopulated. In Tbilisi, an elderly man argued: “In Soviet times in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian population was declining and the government introduced incentives. They monetarily supported new couples for each child they had, and plus if the couple did not have an apartment the government was providing one for them. This intervention helped the population to grow. We are a small country and something like that from the government is a necessity. If the government does not support population growth, our neighbors will grow more and Georgians will become extinct.”

**Some people felt that increasing the financial incentives paid upon the birth of a child might induce people to have more children.** A minority considered that increased pensions might make older people feel more secure and, conceivably, less in need of sons. The overwhelming majority, however, argued that pensions were irrelevant to the fundamental desire of men to have their name survive through the birth of a son. A Tbilisi health professional noted, “Having a son is an issue of pride rather than economic well-being.” In Azerbaijan, however, some respondents thought poor people would welcome education grants for girls, because they were unable to educate their daughters. A sociologist in Agdam commented, “Money allocated to a girl of 18 years old would ensure

her future, and protect her from streets if parents will not be able to take care of her.” For the most part, however, the idea of financial incentives evoked either lukewarm approval, or cynicism by respondents who didn’t trust their governments to follow through on promises.

**Some respondents condemned sex-selective abortion primarily because they interpreted it as a manifestation of the relative devaluation of girls and women.** A sociologist in Baku specializing in gender issues argued: “I personally don’t consider that the issue of ‘family creation’ for boys who are born nowadays is a crucial one as there are many ways out of this situation (international marriages). I also disagree that we should be approaching the issue only from the demographic perspective (“there won’t be enough women in future to take care of boys, cook, clean and deliver babies for them”). Many societies were facing surplus of men and women at certain stages and were switching on adjustment mechanisms to overcome it. .... It leads to an idea, that women are foremost viewed as mothers and wives. It is more important to focus on value issues. Why the selection happens? Why people attach different value for boy and girl children? Without this it would not be possible to seek remedies to improve the situation.”

### *Attitudes toward abortion*

**Although few people worried about skewed sex ratios, there was considerably more concern about widespread abortion.** Surprisingly, given the ubiquity of abortion during the Soviet period as a family planning method, many respondents attributed a considerable array of negative health consequences to it, including infertility, cancer, and infection, as well as depression. For many respondents, animosity toward abortion was powered by fears, noted above, regarding shrinking populations, as well as by opposition based on religious belief. Many people cited the media regarding their attitudes; several people in both Georgia and Armenia, for example, had seen a documentary purporting to depict a fetus in utero actively trying to avoid the surgical instrument during an abortion.

**In all three countries, the popular increase in religiosity has influenced opinion about reproductive matters.** Particularly in Georgia and Armenia, the national orthodox churches have served as a core of national identity and have strongly reasserted themselves in the post-Soviet environment. In all three countries, religious leaders (including Georgian Muslims and Armenian Catholics) espoused a traditional view of gender relationships that emphasize the doctrinal bases for male dominance and female submission in marriage, and the primary importance of marriage and motherhood for women. Without exception, the interviewed religious leaders condemned abortion as murder. While many of these authorities considered that the desire for sons was inherent in the national mentality, they encouraged people to achieve this aspiration by simply having more children. In Georgia, respondents attributed declining abortions and increasing family size to the Patriarch’s promise to baptize the third child born to a family.

**Despite a qualified disapproval, however, most respondents nevertheless considered abortion an understandable response to bad economic conditions and difficult personal circumstances -- coupled with the necessity to have a son.** Most respondents

were aware that boys are almost never aborted, but, as an elderly woman in Akhuryan explained, “If it is a girl then in most cases it will not have a chance to be born.” While most medical practitioners also claimed to deplore selective abortion, they acknowledged it was hard to combat: “We should be a bit rational on this matter. Sometimes there are already 3-4 daughters in the family. What do you expect in this situation?” argued a Baku ultrasound specialist.

**There were mixed reactions to the idea that the sex of an unborn child not be disclosed to parents before the fourth or fifth month.** Some adamantly supported such regulations; others felt that motivated parents would always find other sources of information. Worse, some argued, it would lead to more late-term abortions or abandonment of unwanted children. One suggestion was to at least prohibit advertisements about ultrasound determination of fetal sex. Others felt that the government should not intrude in such personal matters. An elderly woman in Baku asserted, “The government should not tell. It totally depends on the woman. If she wants, she gives birth to a child or not. The government does not have right to interfere in this delicate and personal sphere. It is the family issue, it should be solved between husband and wife.”

**Ordinary respondents and experts (with the exception of religious leaders) unequivocally opposed banning abortion.** They argued that a ban would simply drive abortions underground, resulting in worse health consequences from botched abortions. Women who want abortions would seek out unqualified practitioners, have home abortions or provoke miscarriages, with potentially life-threatening consequences. While respondents felt physicians should more actively counsel women and couples regarding the physical and moral implications of abortion, others pointed out that doctors have no interest in dissuading women because performing abortions is so lucrative. An elderly man in Yerevan explained, “There is not as much commerce anywhere as it is here in the healthcare system. Healthcare has been extremely commercialized in Armenia. Besides abortions, the hospitals and doctors benefit also from Caesarean sections. It’s economically very beneficial, and nowadays we have a terribly huge number of Caesarean sections. This is very expedient to doctors and instead they officially have preventive abortions among their functions. .... It’s all right to terminate a twelve-week pregnancy when it’s done at the woman’s wish. After that period it is called ‘belated abortion,’ which is permitted only on the doctor’s instructions. These include the conditions that may jeopardize the woman and the fetus, some legal issues – consequences of rape... When necessary, they are all formulated as threatening the woman’s health and are thus removed.”

## 9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *The evolving context of son preference*

Since the early 1990s, the proportion of newborn boys to girls has steadily risen in the South Caucasus. **The timing, as well as extensive interviews undertaken for this and other research, argue for a confluence of contributing factors:** economic downturn and conflict in the South Caucasus countries led families to restrict the number of children they

had. Given the traditional patriarchal values and strong son preference, abortion as the most common family planning instrument and increased availability of ultrasound technology during the 1990s together gave people the possibility of choosing to restrict family size while ensuring they had at least one son.

**It is entirely possible that skewed sex ratios would have appeared earlier had ultrasound technology had been available.** Interviews with older respondents suggest that while many people were willing to have large families in an effort to produce a son, women were still under considerable pressure to give birth to boys. In the harsh economic circumstances following dissolution of the Soviet state, traditions of women's subordination within the household have, in some cases, become stronger. Either women have been restricted from entering the labor market, or their breadwinner roles have not been acknowledged by their husbands, who feel humiliated by this role reversal.

About 10 years ago, some demographers began to raise the alarm about the trend, now at levels previously seen only in Asia, and its association with sex-selective abortion. The governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have evinced increasing concern over the problem. It is true that out-migration of men (except for Georgia, where many women are migrating for work) and long traditions of intermarriage with women from neighboring countries may mitigate or slow the more severe social problems experienced China and India, where many men unmarried or resort to trafficked brides. But **the very prevalence of outmigration and the relative decrease in the number of women at home will, over time, decrease already small populations**, which none of the governments welcome.

To date, the response has been to mandate restrictions on disclosing fetal sex to parents until the fourth month, and make late-term abortions illegal in the absence of mitigating medical reasons. Proposed solutions include making access to even early abortions more complicated. This research, as well as findings on the effectiveness of such legal responses in other parts of the world (Das Gupta 2014), suggests that restrictions are not likely to be successful. **Addressing the problem of skewed sex ratios by making abortion more difficult will simply provide a new source of corruption among medical providers willing to bend the law, and push women to seek dangerous folk remedies or home abortions.** It is argued here that a more effective, long-term solution is to better understand and more effectively address the underlying reasons for sex-selection.

With the rare exception of people who terminate pregnancies because of a fear of sex-linked genetic anomalies or illnesses, **the underlying reason for sex-selective abortion is that men have more value in patriarchal societies where patrilineal kinship ties help people navigate through life.** Sons have both instrumental and symbolic value. They are seen as the main supporters of their parents, who remain with a married son, and recent conflicts has given them enhanced value as defenders of the homeland. The symbolic role of sons is equally valued – only men can carry on the “family name.” Having a son thus assures the place of a wife in her husband's extended family, and also affirms the masculinity of the husband.

**Son preference does not necessarily reflect personal preferences so much as strong social pressure** – men are often shamed by their peers for failing to produce sons, while women may be subjected to abuse. Many respondents, in fact, spoke of the deep emotional ties between parents and daughters, and acknowledged that daughters often prove more caring toward their elderly parents than do sons. The tie between daughters and their own parents has traditionally been more fragile, however, because after marriage, daughters are expected to internalize the interests of their husband’s family and put the interests of their own parents and siblings in second place.

Both men and women express a strong desire to have at least one son, although women are likelier to say they would also like a daughter. Yet while son preference might be shared, interviews make it clear that **women often feel pressured – sometimes under threat of physical violence – to produce a son at the cost of repeated pregnancies and abortions.** Most respondents agreed that husbands generally have the final word when it comes to choices about fertility, and their mothers also play a role, either urging divorce when their daughters-in-law cannot get pregnant, or pushing them to terminate pregnancies. The pressure on women is exacerbated by considerable ignorance about reproductive matters – even educated people are said to be unaware about the physiology of sex determination; many older people in particular believe that frequent childbirth enhances women’s health, and many people are poorly informed about contraception.

**Despite the value men and women place on having sons, continuing economic challenges are affecting relations between generations and sexes.** Although people may still think of sons as “supporters,” the new reality is that in many cases women have become primary breadwinners, in part because men are less likely than women to take on the less prestigious and poorly paid service jobs. Georgian women in particular are now supporting children and in some cases parents through remittances, while women in Armenia and Azerbaijan are taking on more responsibilities for elderly parents and in-laws when their husbands and brothers migrate abroad for work.

**While men may still be recognized as carriers of the family name, they are less assured of inheriting and preserving family property.** Privatization of homes and economic hardship have made housing more valuable, and lawyers note that women are increasingly asserting their rights to inherit, along with their brothers, an equal share of the family property when a surviving parent dies. While older respondents felt it right and property that men inherit, a surprising number of respondents of middle and younger ages felt excluding women was unfair; quite a few specified they would leave their homes to the child who supported them; others planned to divide the property equally among sons and daughters.

Respondents of all ages observed a big shift in relationships between in-laws and daughters-in-law. Daughters-in-law are no longer willing to serve their in-laws, and conflicts are reportedly the cause of many couples establishing separate households. Older people have acknowledged that **married daughters have stepped into the breach and are taking on responsibility for their parents.**

While most women implicitly or explicitly accepted their present or future husbands' authority in the household, **younger women were likelier to assert their desire to work outside the home, exert some control over family finances, and to live apart from their in-laws after marriage.** Married daughters now retain more contact with their parents than in past generations, not least because of expanded access to modern communication, while the influence that mothers-in-law exert over daughters-in-law has, with some exceptions, declined. Migration has upended many traditional relationships, and young people's exposure to the media, Internet, and travel has also affected gender attitudes.

**Attitudes toward the overriding importance of sons are shifting, more quickly in urban areas, and to a greater extent among women.** At the same time, exposure to Internet, media discussions, and travel mean that except in very isolated rural communities, there is considerable heterogeneity in attitudes even outside urban centers. Likewise, while young men often express more conservative views than young women, others speak out surprisingly strongly about the disparagement of women.

### *Implications for policy*

Many people interviewed for this study are dubious about the existence – or significance – of skewed sex ratios. **But many people, in part because of objections from religious authorities, are very concerned indeed about the moral and demographic implication of high abortion rates.** Only a few people, most often sociologists, demographers, or gender specialists, linked the skewed sex ratios to unequal gender relations and violence toward women.

**A conclusion of this report, however, is that sex-selective abortions should not be the focus of intervention to restore normal sex ratios.** Rather, the focus should be on the underlying causes of son preference and gender inequalities, including women's social, economic, and political disempowerment. Skewed sex ratios have come about because men are valued in society more than women, and women are not free to make their own reproductive choices. Within this approach, it is clear that policies and interventions must be tailored to specific local circumstances, and some policies might be more suitable and likely to succeed in some countries than others. What follows is therefore a set of broad recommendations that can be adapted as appropriate to the local context.

### *Recommendations*

**The following recommendations are based on the views of respondents as well as findings from other parts of the world (Das Gupta 2014) regarding the relative effectiveness of policies for changing reproductive behavior.** The first set of recommendations comprises measures to increase women's resilience to pressure, whether to become pregnant or to terminate a pregnancy. The second set of measures comprises policies and actions to enhance the perceived value of daughters.

**Limiting women's rights to abortion is not recommended.** There was widespread agreement among respondents, including experts, that bans are dangerous and likely to

drive abortion underground, with serious or fatal consequences to pregnant women. While a number of respondents thought banning disclosure might reduce sex-selective abortion, such measures have not proved effective elsewhere. For one thing, new technologies already allow earlier sex determination through simple blood tests (Michael et al 2013). Respondents emphasized that in the current medical culture, a ban would simply provide a new source of income for medical practitioners willing to bend the law and accept bribes.

*Increase women's empowerment and resilience to pressure*

**Increase women's economic independence.** Despite the fact that many women have become significant contributors to household income, they still suffer from workplace discrimination and sexual harassment, labor market segmentation, and a significant gender wage gap (see, for example, World Bank and CRRC-Armenia 2013). In many cases, laws to ensure gender equality in economic life are in place, but their enforcement is weak. Few workplaces are friendly to pregnant women or women with small children. These are all issues that public authorities could address more aggressively, even within the framework of current legislation.

**Increase women's access to assets.** Although legislation in each country gives daughters and sons equal rights to inherit their parents' property, social norms often result in women voluntarily giving up their rights to inherit, or brothers in pressuring their sisters to disclaim their inheritance. Greater legal literacy (and access to affordable legal advice) provided by NGOs or disseminated through various communication media could encourage women to take the necessary steps to ensure they can access the property to which they are legally entitled.

**Legislative reform should ensure that if women do leave their marriages, they are not left homeless.** Current legislation gives women no rights to compensation if they were living in a home owned by their in-laws or inherited by their husband before the marriage. Women living in unregistered marriages, reportedly increasing in all three countries, should enjoy similar rights. This need is particularly acute in the case of women with children, who don't always have the option of returning to live with their own parents, or underage women, who are particularly defenseless.

**Women need greater protection from gender-based violence.** This can be addressed in several ways, including educating men and women alike: women must internalize the understanding that violence is unacceptable, and both men and women as parents must inculcate this understanding in their own sons and daughters. While NGOs have been active in this arena in all three countries, they lack the funding to provide shelter, much less ongoing support for women in abusive situations. Better training and socialization of police and counselors is also essential and would build upon measures already undertaken in each country to equip police to address domestic violence more sympathetically and effectively.

**Education about reproductive health and sexuality should be introduced in schools, so that young people have a factual basis for making decisions about their own sexual**

**and reproductive behavior.** Schools, NGOs and the media all have important roles to play in providing information about reproductive issues and family planning. The message should be conveyed that women have the final say about whether and when to get pregnant and whether to deliver or terminate a pregnancy. As teachers are now largely unequipped to provide such instruction, they would need to be supported by training and curricula. The UN and other donors have played a role in these countries in disseminating information and making contraceptives available, but these tasks should also be the responsibility of public health systems in each country.

**Men and women of all ages would benefit from learning more about reproductive issues through unbiased and informative** presentations on TV, radio, Internet, social media, and other public events. While international organizations and NGOs have made inroads outside major cities, there is still widespread ignorance and/or resistance to contraceptive usage (more among men than women) outside major cities and unrealistic fears about their impact on health. Young people would likewise benefit from basic knowledge about reproduction, as well as the opportunity to consider ethical questions about reproductive rights.

*Enhance the value of daughters*

**Address teacher and textbook biases in the school system. Textbooks present stereotypes of girls as mothers and housewives, and boys as breadwinners.** Although gender disparities in school enrollment and school completion are not significant in most communities, textbooks perpetuate gender stereotypes about appropriate professions for boys and girls, and teachers are guided by their own gender biases to discourage girls from pursuing certain professions. These biases effectively reduce girls' educational and professional opportunities, steering girls away from well-paid professions in stereotypically masculine professions such as engineering, and resulting in the proportion of women steadily diminishing within most given professions as rank and salary increase.

**Exploit the TV, radio, internet and social media such as Facebook to promote the view of women as active citizens, not just wives and mothers, and men as partners in the household, not just breadwinners.** Respondents largely supported the idea of outreach to different population groups, with different messages targeting the elderly, seen as responsible for passing down attitudes of son preference; men, who often claim for themselves the right to make decisions on behalf of their wives; and youth, whose attitudes are still forming.

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## ANNEX 1: RESEARCH SITES

In each country, interviews were carried out in four urban and rural communities, including the capital city, chosen to reflect varied sex ratios at birth, ethnic diversity, presence of IDPs, and differing socio-economic situations. The information below, except for sex ratios at birth, was provided by community leaders interviewed for this study. The names of smaller communities have not been provided so as to respect respondent confidentiality.

### ARMENIA



**1. Yerevan, pop. 1,060,000.** Yerevan is the capital of Armenia, and home to a third of the country's population. Social and health services are readily available. SRB is somewhat lower than the national average of 1.18. Respondents were sampled across several communities.

**2. Gyumri, pop. 121,000 (Shirak province),** is Armenia's second largest city. It has not completely recovered from the large earthquake in 1988 that destroyed urban infrastructure and housing. Heavy outmigration has reduced its population to just over 121,000 people. The economy relies primarily on construction and manufacturing. About 31.5% of the population lives in poverty. SRB in Shirak is way above the national average (2001-2010 average was 1.18).

**3. Akhuryan (Shirak province), pop. 10,000,** is an agricultural town a few km from Gyumri. An estimated 40 percent of the working age population is unemployed, although a large share engages in subsistence agriculture. About 45 percent of the population lives in poverty.

**4. A village, pop. 4,200, in Aragsotn province,** just over 30 km from Yerevan and 6 km from the closest town, Ashtarak. The Aragsotn province displays the highest sex ratios at birth in the country: 123 boys per 100 girls (2001-2010). Most families in the community work on their own land; some are also employed in agricultural processing (e.g. wineries, flower cultivation) and wood manufacturing. The community has a small medical clinic and a secondary school.

## AZERBAIJAN



**5. Baku, pop. 2 million,** is the economic, political and cultural center of the country. Its population has increased in recent decades due to an influx of rural migrants and IDPs. Job creation, however, has remained low, and youth unemployment is a concern. Data collection took place in the Nizami district of Baku, situated between the city center and the suburbs. It is home to representatives of all major economic, professional and ethnic groups. According to local vital statistics, the sex ratio among 0-14 year olds is 1.17.

**6. Absheron district, pop. 7,800 (Absheron district),** is a small industrial town with low levels of unemployment and poverty. It houses 500 IDP families in addition to its base. Absheron's economy is relatively diversified, including agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as mining, food processing and light industry. The population is known for its strong adherence of religion and tradition. This rayon has among the highest SRBs in the country (1.20 for 0-14 years old).

**7. Magamalar, pop. 7,300, (Balakan district)** is a rural mountainous community near the border with Georgia and Dagestan, Russia, and 2 km from the district center. The population includes Lezgins, Tsakhurs, Avars, and other ethnic groups; Avars (Sunni Muslims) constitute the majority. The local economy relies on crop and livestock production, but a large share of youth work across the border in Dagestan. The sex ratio at birth is among the lowest in the country, 1.09 of 0-14 year olds.

**8. A village, pop. 3,000, in Agdam district,** located in a rural lowland area. The nearest health facilities are 15 km away. Agdam is characterized by a lack of economic activity and high rates of unemployment and poverty. Fewer men from this district migrate, but rather remain in the area to respond to tensions on the frontline. People practice subsistence agriculture and some livestock breeding. Educational levels are low. The sex ratio among 0-14 year olds is the same as the national average (1.17).

## GEORGIA



**9. Tbilisi, pop. 1,137,000**, is the capital, and home to a fourth of the country's population. Data was collected in the relatively prosperous Tbilisi neighborhoods of Vake-Saburtalo district, where the local economy is based on commerce, construction, education and medical services. The district's socioeconomic homogeneity is gradually changing in response to an influx of rural migrants. Tbilisi has one of the lowest sex ratios at birth in the country.

**10. Zugdidi, pop. 64,571 (plus approximately 20,000 displaced from Abkhazia)**, is the district capital of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region. Although it is a district capital, Zugdidi is significantly less developed than Tbilisi. Much of the population cultivates its own land in neighboring villages, in addition to working in construction or trade. The closure of several industries following independence led to a significant economic downturn and widespread dissatisfaction. Zugdidi is socially conservative, with significant numbers of labor migrants (including many women) who leave the country for seasonal work abroad. Sex ratios at birth in the district are higher than the national average (1.10 in 2012).

**11. Village, pop. 4,900 in Khelvachauri district, Autonomous Republic of Ajara**, a lowland rural community 10 km from Batumi. The community is relatively well off by local standards, and is inhabited by both Muslim and Georgian Orthodox households. Bordering Turkey, the region as a whole sends a large share of the population there for seasonal work. The region is inhabited mostly by Georgian Muslims, and is considered socially conservative. Sex ratios at birth, according to available statistics, are higher than the national average.

**12. A village, pop. 4,000, in Dusheti district district, Mtskheta-Mtianeti region.** The village is about 7 km from the district capital, where the nearest health facilities are located. It is in a remote area in the highlands where social norms remain restrictive and poverty is widespread. Much of the population works in subsistence agriculture, and formal employment is low. The area has also experienced considerable outmigration, including of women. The region has one of the highest sex ratios at birth.

## ANNEX 2: Would you rather have a son or a daughter?

	Expressed preference	Men			Totals	Women			Totals
		Youth	Adult	60+		Youth	Adult	60+	
<b>Yerevan</b>	boys	5	5	5	<b>15</b>	2	2	0	<b>4</b>
	girls	0	3	0	<b>3</b>	2	1	2	<b>5</b>
	Doesn't matter	4	2	4	<b>10</b>	5	6	8	<b>21</b>
<b>Akhuryan</b>	boys	2	6	1	<b>9</b>	3	4	8	<b>15</b>
	girls	0	0	2	<b>2</b>	3	0	0	<b>3</b>
	doesn't matter	7	4	4	<b>15</b>	3	5	2	<b>10</b>
<b>Gyumri</b>	boys	0	6	2	<b>8</b>	2	3	4	<b>9</b>
	girls	0	0	1	<b>1</b>	3	2	4	<b>9</b>
	doesn't matter	8	3	5	<b>16</b>	4	4	1	<b>9</b>
<b>Aragatsotn province</b>	boys	7	4	7	<b>18</b>	1	6	7	<b>14</b>
	girls	1	2	0	<b>3</b>	2	3	2	<b>7</b>
	doesn't matter	2	4	2	<b>8</b>	8	1	1	<b>10</b>
<b>Armenia totals</b>	boys	15	21	15	<b>50</b>	8	15	19	<b>42</b>
	girls	1	5	3	<b>9</b>	10	6	8	<b>24</b>
	doesn't matter	21	13	15	<b>49</b>	20	15	12	<b>50</b>
<b>Baku</b>	boys	4	4	3	<b>11</b>	0	3	4	<b>7</b>
	girls	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	2	2	1	<b>5</b>
	doesn't matter	4	4	7	<b>15</b>	7	3	3	<b>13</b>
<b>Absheron district</b>	boys	4	2	1	<b>7</b>	1	2	4	<b>7</b>
	girls	0	1	1	<b>2</b>	0	3	2	<b>5</b>
	doesn't matter	4	5	6	<b>15</b>	7	3	2	<b>12</b>
<b>Agdam district</b>	boys	1	3	0	<b>4</b>	3	0	5	<b>8</b>
	girls	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	2	4	0	<b>6</b>
	doesn't matter	8	5	7/1	<b>21</b>	4	5	3	<b>12</b>
<b>Balakan district</b>	boys	0	2	2	<b>4</b>	2	5	0	<b>7</b>
	girls	0	1	0	<b>1</b>	2	1	5	<b>8</b>

	doesn't matter	9	5	6	<b>20</b>	4	2	3	<b>9</b>
<b>Azerbaijan totals</b>		9	11	6	<b>26</b>	6	10	13	<b>29</b>
		1	2	1	<b>4</b>	6	10	8	<b>24</b>
		25	19	27	<b>71</b>	22	13	11	<b>46</b>
<b>Tbilisi</b>	boys	6/1	4/1 <sup>9</sup>	4/1	<b>17</b>	1	2	3	<b>6</b>
	girls	0	1 <sup>1</sup>	0	<b>1</b>	3	4	2	<b>9</b>
	doesn't matter	2	5/5 <sup>1</sup>	4	<b>16</b>	6	3	4	<b>13</b>
<b>Khelvacha- uri district</b>	boys	6	1	6	<b>14</b>	4	0	7	<b>11</b>
	girls	0	0	1	<b>1</b>	2/1	0	3	<b>6</b>
	doesn't matter	2	8	3	<b>13</b>	2	8/1	0	<b>11</b>
<b>Dusheti district</b>	boys	0	3/1	4	<b>8</b>	1	1	1	<b>3</b>
	girls	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	1	0	3	<b>4</b>
	doesn't matter	8	5	5	<b>18</b>	7	7	5	<b>19</b>
<b>Zugdidi</b>	boys	3	2	5	<b>10</b>	3	1	3	<b>7</b>
	girls	1	0	2	<b>3</b>	0	1	2	<b>3</b>
	doesn't matter	4	6	1	<b>11</b>	5	6	3	<b>14</b>
<b>Georgia totals</b>	boys	16	12	20	<b>49</b>	9	4	14	<b>27</b>
	girls	1	1	3	<b>5</b>	7	5	10	<b>22</b>
	doesn't matter	16	29	13	<b>58</b>	21	24	12	<b>57</b>
<b>Totals by age and gender</b>	<b>Boys</b>	39	42	41	<b>121</b>	23	29	46	<b>98</b>
	<b>Girls</b>	3	8	8	<b>28</b>	23	22	27	<b>72</b>
	<b>Doesn't matter</b>	62	59	53	<b>173</b>	63	54	35	<b>154</b>

<sup>9</sup> These numbers are from an extra focus group carried out in Tbilisi of men, age 26-55.