



# THE ROLE AND CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

## Introduction

Preventing and responding to violence against women is one of the key priorities of Georgia's social protection system. Social workers play a critical role in identifying victims, providing psychosocial support, and coordinating services, which includes both implementing preventive measures and responding to specific needs.

Despite the policy of decentralizing social work and establishing child protection divisions within municipalities, the lack of financial resources, institutional weaknesses, and insufficient coordination have hindered the effective strengthening of social services at the local level.

During the monitoring process, challenges were identified in social workers' cooperation with schools, kindergartens, medical institutions, and local self-government bodies, significantly delaying the timely identification of groups at risk of violence and the efficient delivery of services. Financial and transportation difficulties, as well as professional overload, are particularly acute in the regions, further reducing the effectiveness of social workers' activities.

Despite these challenges, social workers often succeed in building trust with beneficiaries and responding to individual needs. Cooperation with non-governmental organizations contributes significantly to improving coordination and enhancing the quality of services.

This brief is based on monitoring conducted by the Women's Fund "Sukhumi" between May and October 2024, involving social workers from the municipalities of Imereti and Samegrelo (Kutaisi, Khoni, Baghdati, Samtredia, Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha), who shared their experiences, challenges, and positive practices.

## Legal framework

**The Istanbul Convention (Article 20.2)** The Convention obliges signatory countries to ensure access to specialized services for victims. It emphasizes that social services must have adequate resources and trained specialists who can, when necessary, refer beneficiaries to appropriate services.

### **The Law on Social Work (Article 16, Subsections h, i, j, k)**

Social workers ensure access to shelter services for victims of domestic violence, organize activities aimed at their integration and support, take measures to protect women from violence, and provide care for their rehabilitation and monitoring.

### **The Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and/or Domestic Violence, Protection, and Assistance to Victims of Violence (Article 8)**

Analysis of violence cases, identification of victims, and provision of psychosocial support; risk assessment of perpetrators and ensuring access to rehabilitation programs; protection of children when necessary.

### **National Referral Procedures (Articles 6.9 and 6.13)**

Providing information on violence prevention and support services during home visits conducted by social workers (Article 6.9); identifying and responding to cases of violence in collaboration with municipalities (Art. 6.13.)

### **National Action Plan on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2022–2024):**

Development and implementation of special guidelines for social workers on handling cases of violence against women/domestic violence (2.1.5); Strengthening skills in the identification of victims, response, and referral on domestic violence issues (3.1.7).

## Findings Challenges

### ➤ Training and Specialization of Social Workers

- Monitoring results revealed that social workers regularly attend training sessions organized by the state, the Association of Social Workers, and other NGOs. However, these trainings are generally broad in nature and do not specifically focus on preventing and responding to violence against women. According to the social workers, the lack of specialization hinders their ability to work more effectively and thoroughly on specific cases;
- Additionally, the lack of professional training for other referral actors (teachers, medical professionals) and their insufficient understanding of their roles pose a significant challenge. The absence of response or attempts to conceal cases by referral actors further burdens social workers and complicates the process of providing effective assistance.

### ➤ Integrated Functions, Multiple Responsibilities, Staff Shortages, and Professional Burnout

- Monitoring results highlight that in Georgia, social workers face significant challenges due to their multifaceted responsibilities, integrated functions, and staff shortages. Unlike international practices, where social workers specialize in specific areas, Georgian social workers are required to handle multiple complex roles simultaneously. This reduces their efficiency and leads to professional burnout;
- Staff shortages and high turnover rates force many social workers to cover several municipalities at once. These conditions impose additional burdens, further diminishing their capacity and productivity.

### ➤ Inadequate Compensation and Working Conditions

- The compensation for social workers does not correspond to the volume and complexity of their work. Low salaries, transportation issues, and a lack of necessary resources for their duties significantly limit the effectiveness of their activities. These challenges, particularly in remote regions, further complicate their work with beneficiaries and negatively impact the quality of services provided.

*“We have not undergone specialization in domestic violence. Yes, we have attended training sessions, but these are general trainings, not specialized programs focused on this specific area” -*  
– Social Worker from the Social Services Agency, Samegrelo Region

*“Social workers may have undergone many trainings, but the actions remain one-sided. The burden on this issue falls more heavily on social workers rather than on other actors, such as teachers, about whom I personally have significant concerns. Often, cases are concealed... The medical field is also very distant from the topic—doctors are either unaware of these issues or unwilling to respond. I see no support or action from their side” -* Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Samegrelo Region

*“When I look at international practices, I see that there are specialized social workers who focus on specific areas. It is very beneficial when a social worker has specialization and does not work in multiple directions. This allows them to work more effectively and remain in the system for a longer time” -*  
Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Samegrelo Region

## Findings Challenges

- **Regular visits to beneficiaries' households, a fundamental part of social work, are often hindered due to a lack of transportation.** This issue further reduces the efficiency of services and delays their timely delivery. Social workers emphasize that **transportation support through involvement from mayoral representatives or the police is only provided in specific cases.** However, the lack of systemic support remains a significant obstacle.

### ➤ Excessive Dependence of Beneficiaries on Social Workers

- **Women who have experienced violence often lack proactive involvement in the response process.** Their reliance on social workers extends beyond psychosocial support to include requests for assistance with tasks they could handle independently, such as contacting law enforcement agencies. On one hand, this reflects a high level of trust in social workers; on the other hand, it adds to their workload and contributes to professional burnout.

### ➤ Passivity of Referral Actors and Overburdening of Social Workers

- Monitoring results reveal that the **work of social workers is further complicated by the passivity of other entities, particularly educational and medical institutions, as well as representatives of local self-governments (mayor's representatives).** Their tendencies to avoid formal processes, rely on verbal communication, refrain from preparing formal referrals, or conceal information frequently hinder efforts to prevent and respond to violence effectively;
- Social workers emphasize that this attitude creates a systemic issue, **as information that should be promptly provided by referral actors is either delayed or incomplete.** This, combined with the fact that a significant portion of responsibilities falls solely on social workers, exacerbates their workload and challenges the effectiveness of their efforts.

*"Transportation remains a challenge, along with lack of personnel. A beneficiary may come to us once, but we have to conduct multiple visits, which need to be systematic. We don't have adequate transportation for this. In many cases, we are in a worse position than the beneficiaries when traveling to villages. However, mayor's representatives are very helpful. Once our involvement is confirmed, they assist us with transportation"* - **Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Samegrelo Region**

*"If the case involves the police and we need it, they provide transportation. Home visits should happen at least once a month, but in crisis situations, we have to go more often"* - **Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Samegrelo Region**

*"Mayor's representatives prefer providing verbal information and refrain from written requests. The same happens in kindergartens, schools, and medical institutions. They expect maximum response from us, but when we need their support, they withdraw"* - **Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Imereti Region**

*"We do our utmost, but when responding to cases of violence, everything is demanded from us - we are expected to be psychologists, advocates, and carry out all the visits ourselves. It's very difficult when everyone points the finger at you"* - **Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Imereti Region**

## Findings Challenges

### ► Factors Hindering Effective Responses to Violence

- According to social workers, **systemic and emotional barriers often prevent women who have experienced violence from making decisions to leave abusive environments.** Despite the efforts of social workers, beneficiaries frequently lack trust in law enforcement and social protection systems, which exacerbates their fear and sense of vulnerability.

#### Key hindering factors include:

- Low trust in law enforcement agencies;
- Insufficient support networks;
- Financial and housing dependence on the abuser;
- Fear of being unable to lead an independent life due to societal and familial pressures.

*“When a woman comes to us specifically for consultation and receives comprehensive information, in most cases, she refrains from taking action... The main barrier is their hesitation. They lack trust in the law enforcement system and fear whether their rights will be protected. It is common for victims to say they don’t want to create problems for their husbands, the fathers of their children. There are also those who lack a support network and don’t know where to go or how to continue their lives after separation” - Social Worker from the Social Service Agency, Imereti Region*

### ► Professional Burnout Among Social Workers and Insufficient Support Mechanisms

- The work of social workers often involves challenging conditions and emotionally demanding cases, such as supporting child victims of sexual violence or navigating complex family situations. These factors significantly increase the risk of professional burnout. Despite these challenges, psychosocial rehabilitation and support mechanisms for social workers are minimal, exacerbating burnout and contributing to staff turnover.

### ► Potential for Using Social Workers’ Reports to Improve Access to Municipal Services

- Qualitative research highlights the potential for social workers’ reports to become a key tool in enhancing access to municipal social assistance programs. This is particularly important in municipalities where victim status is still a prerequisite for receiving services and where women avoid contacting law enforcement agencies or crisis centers.

## Positive Experiences of Social Workers

- Cooperation with municipal child protection departments, enhancing the effectiveness of beneficiary support;
- Support from mayor’s representatives and the police in transportation and responding to crisis cases;
- Empowering women’s self-esteem through psychosocial support and information sharing;
- Raising awareness on violence against women in vulnerable and at-risk families and strengthening beneficiaries’ decision-making skills;
- Partnerships with non-governmental organizations, facilitating the fulfillment of individual needs.

*“No one remembers that we, too, need energizers—emotional ventilation is essential. Every social worker needs this periodically. It’s difficult when our reality is constant stress and emotional tension, yet there are no support mechanisms in place” - Social Worker from the Social Services Agency, Imereti Region*

## Recommendations

- **Provide specialized training** for social workers and **differentiate areas of focus** (e.g., violence against women, child protection, elder support);
- Utilize **social workers’ reports as a basis for accessing municipal services**;
- **Strengthen collaboration mechanisms with schools, medical institutions,** and other referral actors.
- **Improve working conditions for social workers and ensure emotional support systems.**