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Swiss Agency for Development
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POLICY BRIEF: AGE AND GENDER IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS



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“The problem[s] of old age... are largely the problems of women.”

Robert Butler, former Director of the National Institute on Ageing, US

HOW DOES AGEING DIFFER FOR MEN AND WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD?

Throughout history, societies have used socio-biological markers, such as gender and age, to assign social positions, prescribe gender and age-based roles, and distribute scarce resources. In the social sciences, scholars tended to look separately at how gender and age shaped human experience, social roles, and resource allocation. However, the conceptual framework and the empirical evidence to understand how both age and gender interact to influence social stratification was only formed in the 1980s (Levy, 1988; Estes et al., 1984).

In the case of age, there are certain historically and socially determined transition patterns, when a person moves from one stage of life to another (receiving education, entering the labor market, marriage, parenthood, and retirement). These patterns and the experiences of age transitions are known to vary for men and women across different countries and from distinct cultural traditions. Moreover, these experiences also tend to be relatively dynamic, where economic conditions change and, perhaps less dynamically, social attitudes and norms undergo transformation.

The economic literature on gender and age intersectionality emphasizes the following tendencies:

- **Longer life span of females vs. males around the world.** Women tend to outlive men worldwide. Globally, life expectancy in 2020 was 75 years for women and 70 for men. Although the gap tends to be smaller in developing countries, in the EECA region, including the South Caucasus, the gap tends to be larger (PRB World Population Data Sheet, 2020).¹
- **Older women tend to be poorer than older men, even in developed countries.** In developed countries (US, EU), the reported poverty rates among the 65+ population are higher for women than for men. This gap has been reduced over the years. For example, in the US, the poverty gap between women and men over 65 was 8.1% in 1981 – i.e. 8.1% more women than men lived in poverty (Estes et al., 1984), whereas in 2020, the 65+ women’s poverty rate was 10.1%, while it was 7.6% among men (Javaid & Tucker, 2021). In European countries, the poverty rate for women over 65 is 16%, whereas for men it is 12% (UN Women, 2015). Older women living alone are in a disadvantaged situation, with 23% poverty rates compared to 17% among the same category of men (ibid).
- The consensus in the literature is that **gender disparities in old age are to a considerable extent driven by the different earnings profiles and labor-force participation histories** of men and women (Estes et al., 1984; Levy, 1988; Vartanyan et al., 2002). Women are much more likely to have their participation in the labor market interrupted over time (due to motherhood, child-rearing responsibilities, etc.). Women on the whole also have lower labor market participation rates (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018), and working women are largely concentrated within low-paying occupations – those that tend to provide more flexibility for

¹ In Georgia, the gap is the largest as women outlive men by 8 years, with 7- and 5-year gaps in Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively (2020).

women with family responsibilities. These factors contribute to lower retirement benefits for women in many countries (Estes et al., 1984; Rank & Williams, 2010; among others).

- In general, the current reports find (NIA, 2019; NASEM, 2020) that **elderly people are more likely to lack social support**, to be susceptible to diseases and disabilities that could be prevented (e.g., injury, social isolation and exclusion, mental health disorders) and elder abuse. Since most of the vulnerable elderly (especially among the “fourth generation” or 75+) are women, these problems become “largely the problems of women”.

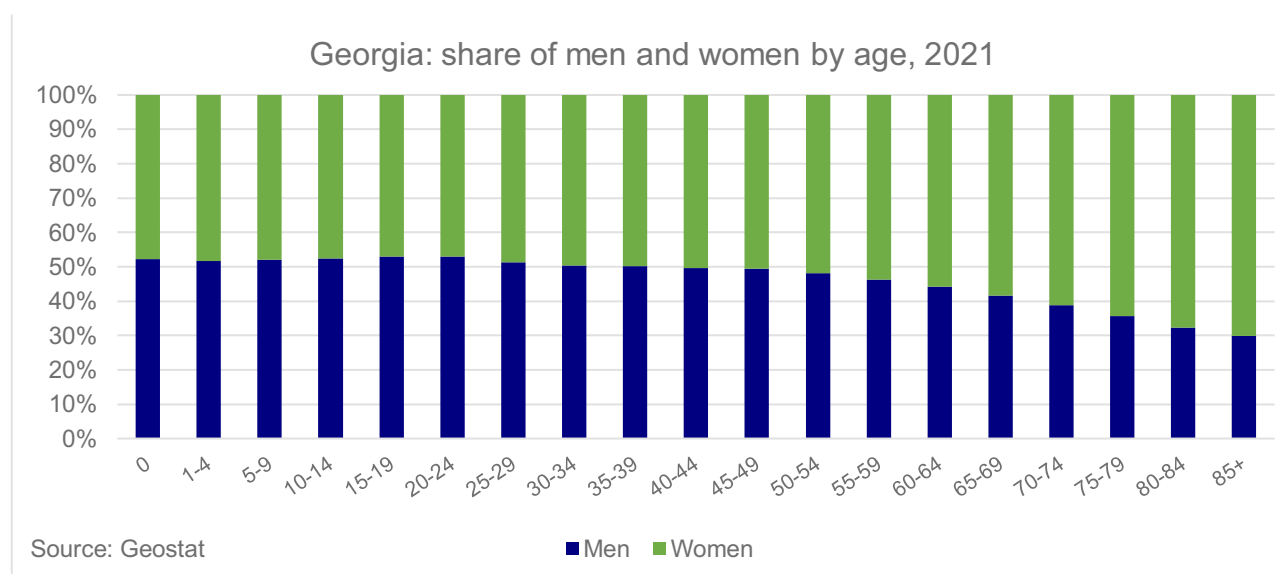
The question is whether the problems of elderly women can be attributed to complications of ageing in general, or whether there is something particular in their condition, stemming from gender-based inequities which compound over a life cycle. As such, it is important to question which policies are required to help overcome both these age-induced and inequity-induced disparities? The focus of this policy brief is to define the joint gender and age profile across the three countries of the South Caucasus – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

GENDER AND AGE PROFILE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

In relation to problems pertaining to gender and age, which have already been outlined in the literature, what can be discerned about the situation in the South Caucasus?

Like in many countries around the world, women tend to outlive men in all three South Caucasus countries. According to the World Population Data Sheet report (PRC, 2020), life expectancy in Georgia was 70 years for men and 78 years for women. **The Georgian life expectancy gap is the largest** among the three countries, as the comparable gaps in Armenia and Azerbaijan are 7 and 5 years, respectively. This difference in life expectancy is primarily driven by **longer life expectancy for men in Armenia and Azerbaijan** (72 and 73 years, respectively), while the life expectancy for women was largely the same as in Georgia (79 and 78, respectively).

The demographic data further reveals that, overall, there are 166 women for every 100 men over the age of 65 in Georgia, whereas in the 80+ age group the share of women reaches 68%.



The situation in Armenia is a bit different. According to their national statistics, the overall share of women in the total population is about the same as in Georgia (53%), however there are 155 women for every 100 men over the age of 65, and the share of women above the age of 80 is only 64% (compared to 68% in Georgia).

In Azerbaijan, there are 134 women for every 100 men over the age of 65, and the share of women in the 80+ category is lower than in any of the other two countries at 61%. Thus, gender parity at old age is better in Azerbaijan and worse in Georgia. This may be reflective of the **lower life expectancy of men in Georgia as opposed to Armenia and Azerbaijan**.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION, LIVING CONDITIONS, AND THE POVERTY OF ELDERLY WOMEN

According to the 2014 Population Census in Georgia, the elderly population was unevenly distributed among the regions. In particular, the capital city of Tbilisi had the lowest share of people over 65 (12%), while the mountainous regions of Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti had the highest share (28.3%). Notably, the latter regions have very limited access to infrastructure.² Additionally, they are also the poorest, with the highest share of older people receiving subsistence payments or social assistance.³ As for the oldest group (over 80), it must be noted that the majority of 80+ women (and men) live in rural areas of Georgia, with consequently lower levels of infrastructural access. This has a direct impact on their quality of life and health, in particular, access to timely and quality healthcare. In contrast, both **Azerbaijan and Armenia seem to have a more even age distribution** of the population throughout different regions; a similar share of elderly men and women live in the capital city vs. the rest of the country. The difference between rural and urban regions is also not very pronounced (particularly for Armenia).⁴

In contrast to European countries, where poverty rates are reported to be considerably higher for pension age women than for pension age men (UNSTATS, 2015), in the South Caucasus older women do not face a substantially higher risk of poverty than older men. For example, research compiled by ISET-PI on poverty rates among different groups of the population in Georgia suggests that men above the pension age face a somewhat lower poverty rate than women,⁵ though the difference is not large (12.9 percent for pension age men vs. 14.4 percent for the equivalent in women). The poverty rate for the elderly is generally lower than national poverty rates, which stands at 18.9 percent.

In addition, the same applies for pensioners in female and male headed households. For instance, in 2021 the poverty rate among pensioners in female-headed households was 13.6 percent and 13.8 percent for pensioners in male-headed households. This may be because Georgia has a flat pension

² In Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, only 27% of households had access to the central gas supply system, as opposed to 54.8% of households in the second most infrastructurally poor region of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti.

³ Based on 2014 data, as share of people over 65: 46.5% in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti vs. 5.5% in Tbilisi.

⁴ Source: the national statistical offices of the respective countries.

⁵ The numbers provided here refer to the relative poverty rate, which is defined as living in a household where the consumption per equivalent adult is below 60% of median consumption.

benefits system, where the level of benefits is set at around the level of the subsistence minimum, whereas in European countries the amount of pension benefit is often tied to contributions during the working life of a person. The latter approach tends to skew the old age income gap in favor of men, who generally have higher lifetime earnings than women. Furthermore, women tend to live longer, which stretches their lifetime savings over more years.

In the other countries of the South Caucasus the picture is similar. In Armenia, poverty rates in 2020 for people 65+ were among the lowest relative to other age groups (22.3 percent vs. 27 percent for the general population). Similarly, in Azerbaijan, pension age people (60+) have lower poverty rates than almost any other age category (IMF, 2003). The picture changes, however, when we consider older people living alone or heading households. Poverty rates for 60+ household heads in Azerbaijan were reported to be among the highest (ibid) relative to households with younger headship.⁶

Besides monetary poverty, there are other aspects of ageing which affect the quality of life of the elderly. Widowhood is one other source of deterioration of the quality of life in old age (Peña-Longobardo, 2021), which is associated with significant negative health effects, social isolation, and depression. **In Georgia, around 59% of women over the age of 65 were widowed, as opposed to 18.7% of men of the same age.** Widowhood is often also accompanied by social isolation. According to the 2014 Population Census, 20% of females 65+ in Georgia lived alone, while only 11% of males 65+ did. A higher percentage of men than women over 65 were married. The surveys find that the elderly tend to live apart from their extended family in rural areas, which contributes to women's social isolation and poor living conditions in old age. **For Azerbaijan, an analogous situation can be observed. About 55% of women over 60 were widowed, as opposed to 16% of men.**

Additionally, in all three countries social security schemes do not have survivor benefits for pension-age widowed partners (Gadbury, 2011; Universal Pensions in Azerbaijan, 2016; SSA, 2018). **In Georgia**, this implies that women are likely to forfeit their pension income from their partners upon widowhood, and consequently lose some of the economies of scale implied with an additional person's income. **In Azerbaijan**, the high earnings gap between men and women also denotes a higher pension gap between men and women (for the labor pension, which includes a wage-based insurance component). Moreover, women are more likely to work in non-formal jobs, which contributes to a lower income in retirement. **In Armenia**, a comparable situation is observable, although the rate of widowhood for women older than 60 was somewhat lower than in Azerbaijan or Georgia.⁷ The high earnings gap during productive years, however, contributes to inequality in pensionable income between the genders.

⁶ The data points are not provided here, since the detailed gender and age analysis of poverty is only available for 2001, when poverty rates were in general much higher in Azerbaijan than they are today.

⁷ According to 2011 Census data, 33% of 60-69 y.o. women were widowed as opposed to 6% of men, and the figure for 70+ was correspondingly 62% for women and 25% for men. These indicators are lower than similar indicators for Azerbaijan and Georgia.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND WAGE INEQUALITY OF MEN AND WOMEN

In many countries, **labor force participation and wage inequality** are the main drivers of income disparity between women and men in old age. In the South Caucasus, gender wage inequality is considerably higher than in the developed world. **In Georgia, women earned 67.6% of what men earned per month (raw gap based on nominal monthly earnings in 2020).** This figure was **63.3% in Azerbaijan and 60% in Armenia in 2020** (UN Women, 2020a, 2020b; Pastore et al., 2016)

According to the respective national statistics offices, in certain South Caucasus countries (namely Georgia and Armenia), **the main gap in economic activity between men and women is observed during reproductive ages** (25-34) and (35-44). For example, in Georgia the economic activity rate of women is considerably lower than that of men between 25 and 34 years of age, corresponding to the peak reproductive age (2020 data). Labor force participation for women increases between 45-54 and then again declines after 55 (most likely due to an increase in domestic responsibilities, such as helping care for grandchildren). In Armenia (2018 data), a similar situation is observed with the economic activity gap between men and women becoming largest between 25-34 years of age. The gap narrows between 45-49 and then widens again, as perceived in Georgia.

In contrast, **the labor force participation gap between men and women is much lower in Azerbaijan (2020 data)**, given the oversized role of state employment on the labor market. Overall, for the 15+ population, 64% of women and 69% of men are reported to be economically active. However, the earnings gap is still quite high, since women hold more lower-paying and part-time jobs. This contributes to the gender earnings gap in older age; even though employment for women is more even and is not interrupted as much during child-bearing years.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY OPTIONS

In the South Caucasus, we observe similar disparities in gender profiles among the elderly as in other countries around the world, with certain notable differences. In particular, the countries of the South Caucasus suffer a much wider earnings gap between men and women than detected in developed and emerging economies in Europe (UN Women, 2020a, 2020b; Pastore et al., 2016). The difference in labor earnings and years of employment also feeds into retirement income disparities, in particular under the pensions systems in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The policy options that can address the aforementioned disparities may include:

- Introducing a survivor's benefit for lower-earning pension-age widows and widowers in these countries. This measure would reduce vulnerability to income swings in older women and diminish the dependency on their extended family in old age.
- Vigorously pursuing labor market policies that would help address gender segregation by sector and equalize the wage gap between men and women. These policies would include the creation of conditions for young women and girls to pursue education and careers in high-paying technical and STEM fields, where women are presently underrepresented. These

measures should also work hand in hand with codifying “work-life” balance rights within the labor code for both men and women,⁸ which would ensure that women are not discriminated against for requesting flexible arrangements when taking care of family or children. Finally, social perceptions relating to women’s responsibility for taking care of young children and family members in need should be addressed through advocacy and information campaigns. Thus, equality in the division of responsibilities between men and women for unpaid domestic work should be promoted at the state level.

For Georgia, the earnings gap is less significant for pensionable income, since pension compensation does not predominately depend on labor-market status or wage. Nevertheless, the fact that women outlive men by nearly eight years in Georgia contributes to their greater vulnerability to the other negative impacts associated with ageing (namely, health effects, social isolation, depression).

Policy solutions in this respect could focus on “active ageing” policies, those which promote social activity and engagement among older people. From the public health perspective, working on removing the stigma surrounding age-related diseases (such as dementia, Alzheimer’s, depression) could benefit both the elderly and their families.

On a final note, although data on gender and age profiles has become more accessible in recent years, there is still much we do not know about the intersection of gender and age in the South Caucasus. For example, in relation to the differences in asset ownership between elderly men and women. Besides the economic dimension, *it is important for policy makers to assess the quality of social support systems available for the elderly of different genders*, the prevalence of preventable age-related diseases and disabilities (injuries and mental health), and appropriate ways to address them. Due to the lack of data, little is known about prospects and trends for “active ageing” in the South Caucasus, and how social norms contribute to different experiences between ageing among men and women. All of these are important policy issues that still necessitate further research.

⁸ Similar legislation exists in the EU, codified in the following Directives: [Directive 2019/1158](#); [Directive 2019/1158](#); [Directive 2006/54](#); [Directive 2010/41](#).

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