

WOMEN IN SERVICE TO PEACE IN GEORGIA



**WOMEN
IN SERVICE
TO PEACE
IN GEORGIA**

2026

CONTENT

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WOMEN IN SERVICE TO PEACE IN GEORGIA

Women – community leaders, the displaced and conflict-affected and those living along the dividing lines – play a special role in implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the local level. Accordingly, their support is an important and, in some cases, decisive factor in building long-lasting and sustainable peace.

UN Women has been working on the localization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Georgia since 2018. The initiative is being implemented in cooperation with three non-governmental organizations: the Women's Information Center, the IDP Women Association "Consent" and the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund "Sukhumi". The implementation of this important work was launched within the framework of the UN Women project "Accelerating Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Georgia" with the support of the UK Government and is now continuing under the project "Women Act for Peace and Security", also with the UK Government's support.

Among the results achieved during this period, the formation of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors is of particular importance. The first large-scale organization of its kind in Georgia, the network was established in 2023 and unites more than 200 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and conflict-affected women and young people across 17 municipalities. All network members have been trained in modern technologies, information collection and documentation, and they are actively involved in local needs

research, policy development and implementation, and advocacy processes.

The volunteer efforts of those strong and exemplary women who are members of the network have laid the foundation for many positive and valuable changes in the villages adjacent to the dividing lines. The stories collected in this publication recount their experiences, adventures and values. They will tell you about these women's genuine love for their homeland, for peace and for people – the love that gives women the motivation and strength to volunteer, to help others unconditionally and to accomplish tasks large and small with a sense of great responsibility.

The real-life stories of amazing humanity and dedication that you will read here will convince you that these women are the ones who create true peace. That is why their involvement in decision-making processes and public diplomacy is critical – to rebuild the bridges destroyed by conflict.

We invite you to meet women from across Georgia working in the service of peace.



A STRONG WOMAN MAKES A STRONG COUNTRY

Madona Okropiridze
68 years old

Kvemo Kartli region
Village of Koda

Madona Okropiridze, 68, is internally displaced from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia. She currently lives in a settlement for internally displaced persons in the village of Koda, where she heads the Koda Community Education Centre.

A PROMISE FULFILLED

"I love my country. I want it to be united and strong when we return home. This gives me strength. Then I remember my age and think, 'How many years do I have to live to see this?'" This is how Madona Okropiridze answers when asked about her energy and motivation.

Madona is originally from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia. She was born in the village of Nuli in the Znauri district and later moved to Tbilisi with her sister. After first studying library science, she then graduated from the Faculty of Economics at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. It was there that she met her future husband, who was also from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, from the village of Disevi. After completing her studies, they both returned to their native land, got married and found jobs there.

In the early 1990s, Georgia was swept by a nationalist movement. Madona and her husband were also actively involved in these processes. Very soon, the situation in Tskhinvali became extremely difficult.* "In 1992, my husband, who was then the governor of the villages of the Patara Liakhvi Gorge, was captured by Ossetian separatists," Madona recalls. "They tortured him so severely that I was able to bury only a third of his body in the end.... That day, I swore that I would continue the work he had sacrificed himself for."

She fulfilled her promise and, left alone with three young children, took over the villages of the Disevi-Ksuisi dis-

trict of the Patara Liakhvi valley. Her appointment as district governor was met with mixed reactions – but not because of her ability to cope with her duties: According to the stereotypical perception at the time, a young woman, especially a widow, should not be thinking about work at all.

"Some even said that such work is unsuitable for [someone like] me, that I should stay at home," Madona recalls. "I ignored it, but when I returned home, I was nervous. Then I once said to myself, 'Who are you listening to? Why are you paying attention [to them]? You should stay where you are, work for your homeland.'"

BUILDING BRIDGES

While in the position of district governor, Madona was also actively involved in peacebuilding, participating in peace talks with the Ossetian side. With the support of the British Embassy, she even went on a study visit to Ireland, and during that period she learned more about the Irish experience in conflict regulation and peaceful resolution. Notwithstanding the personal pain that she has experienced, she believes that there is no alternative to building bridges.

"This is how it goes in war: We, ordinary people, suffer the most losses," Madona says. "I know that feuding doesn't help: You have to win by reconciling. I lost the person most dear to me, but I never told my children that Ossetians were the enemy. I didn't



Madona Okropiridze at the amphitheatre established in the courtyard of the Koda Community Education Centre at her initiative. Madona is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and, together with other women, studies the challenges faced by the displaced community and advocates for their needs.

“ THIS IS HOW IT GOES IN WAR: WE, ORDINARY PEOPLE, SUFFER THE MOST LOSSES. I KNOW THAT FEUDING DOESN'T HELP: YOU HAVE TO WIN BY RECONCILING.

– Madona Okropiridze

raise my children with hatred. There were tragedies on both sides. We were all victims, so I always tried to rebuild the broken bridges.”

Madona did not stop caring about rebuilding bridges after becoming a governor. After leaving public service, she opened a milk collection centre in Disevi with the support of the UN. “It was a gathering place for both sides, an opportunity to restore relations,” she notes.

LIFE AFTER DISPLACEMENT

Madona thought the shooting that began in August 2008*** was another brief aggravation of her situation. She laid out the dishes and other breakable items on the floor and said to herself, “I have to come here tomorrow anyway” and left without taking anything with her, but she never returned.

She first arrived in Tbilisi, where she lived with her student children, and later in Koda, in the IDP settlement. “The conditions were extremely difficult,” Madona recalls. “We didn’t even have water. Besides, I was unemployed. I didn’t want my children to give up their studies. I was worried about their future, so I started walking with other women to the Ialguji Ridge. There is a type of plant there that is suitable for making brooms. We would break it, collect it and hand it in at a special collection point.”

On her way to the Ialguji Ridge, she once saw an advertisement from the organization DVV International posted on the wall. Its “Programme for the In-

tegration of IDPs and Local Populations” was opening a community education centre in Koda, and there was a vacancy for the position of office manager. Madona decided to give it a try. She filled in an application and got the job. First, she worked as the office manager, but since 2014, she has been the director of the Koda Community Education Centre.

Madona continued to build bridges in her new job. With the support of the European Union, she opened vocational and personal development courses to bring the IDP and local population closer together, and she organized trainings for children and young people. “These relationships brought the local and IDP populations very close to each other,” says Madona.

After the project was completed, the centre became a non-governmental organization, and its activities, along with education, became focused on employment opportunities and community development as a whole. An amphitheatre was also set up in the building’s courtyard, which hosts various events.

THE POWER OF WOMEN

Madona has long known that women’s unity brings positive changes. Years ago, she managed to unite 15 women from the villages of Tetrtskaro Municipality for this very purpose and established the Maro Makashvili Women’s Club together with them. The club’s main activities are to empower women, organize exhibitions and sales of local entrepre-



neurs’ products, and conduct cultural and educational events and trainings.

At the same time, Madona is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors. Together with other displaced women, she studies the problems of settlement and then advocates for their solutions. Thanks to the women’s activism, the road to the school has already been paved, and the sewage system near the kindergarten has been repaired.

Madona says that membership in the network has strengthened her even more: “I saw that we may not all have the same opinion, but we have to somehow agree. We must make what unites us a starting point. And when I listen to these active women who do so many good things, I sometimes tell myself, ‘I should not lose my grip. I should be like them too.’”

She believes that women’s main strength is their peaceful nature and that this potential should be used effectively, noting: “They often say that a woman’s place is in the kitchen, and they forget that it was [women] who saved the country in the 1990s. Women should also acknowledge that a strong woman makes a strong country, and [they should] become more active. After all, we had Queen Tamar, so how could we not be confident, not participate more actively – not only in peace politics but also everywhere where decisions are made?”

Madona continues to set an example for others through her work every day: She recently launched a community mobilization initiative with displaced women, formed a self-help group, surveyed needs and will soon begin implementing a new community project.



WALK FORWARD WITH PROUD STEPS

Tamar Sachaleli
45 years old

Shida Kartli region
Village of Kvemo Chala

Tamar Sachaleli in the courtyard of the cultural centre in the village of Kvemo Chala, standing next to a Soviet-era wall mosaic. The mosaic symbolically depicts the prosperity and abundance for which Kvemo Chala was known in the past.

LIFE ON THE DIVIDING LINE

“When the August 2008 war*** began, the village of Kvemo Chala was almost completely desolated. I sent my two young children to live with relatives in Tbilisi, though I myself stayed behind. Well, where else could I go? My husband was also at war, and I didn’t get any updates about him. I couldn’t even contact him by phone,” Tamar Sachaleli says, recalling one of the most difficult times in her life.

Her husband returned home when Tamar thought he had already been captured or killed. Later, she learned that her husband had miraculously survived the bombing.

“[Life] wasn’t easy after the war, when tanks were rolling through the village and I took my eldest son to school with fear, nor is it any easier now,” Tamar says. “Living near the dividing line is always a problem: You never know what and when something might happen, but I’ve never once thought about leaving this place.”

Tamar is an accompanist and works in the village’s cultural centre. She both sings and plays the guitar, piano and panduri, often participating in municipal events. She also teaches children to sing folk songs and popular songs, and she is proud that her students successfully participate in various competitions. She sews as well and also accepts orders in the sewing room she set up on the top floor of her house.

Tamar started a family at an early age and was unable to receive higher education, so she always tried to give her children a proper education so that they could have what she lacked. However, her wish to study came true later: At the age of 45, she entered Kaspi Vocational College and is now a gardener.

Tamar is an organic farmer and a member of the biological farming association “Elkana”. This also helped determine her professional choice. For years, she has been growing the useful legume plant Tsulispira and the ancient endemic variety of Georgian wheat Tsiteli Doli without the use of chemicals. In the future, she wants to create a small agritourism facility at home – a space where she will host tourists, conduct culinary masterclasses of local dishes and offer vegetable agritours. In addition to these diverse activities, Tamar is a village leader and activist whose volunteerism is known to everybody.

FROM HOUSEWIFE TO PEACE AMBASSADOR

In 2019, when the Women, Peace and Security agenda began to be localized, Tamar, as an active local woman, was invited to a meeting with the IDP Women Association “Consent”. She also got to know the organization’s activities that day. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her involvement increased even more.

Tamar’s activism began in 2021, when the dividing line in Kvemo Chala was



Tamar Sachaleli at an event marking a local festival. She provides musical accompaniment for young dancers as they prepare to perform.

“ LIVING NEAR THE DIVIDING LINE IS ALWAYS A PROBLEM: YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT AND WHEN SOMETHING MIGHT HAPPEN, BUT I’VE NEVER ONCE THOUGHT ABOUT LEAVING THIS PLACE.

– Tamar Sachaleli



Tamar Sachaleli, a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors, in her own garden. A bio-farmer, Tamar plans to establish a small agritourism initiative at her home and host visitors.

moved 150 metres. The incident greatly frightened the villagers. Tamar decided to write about the incident and share the heartache of Kvemo Chala's residents with the women's group that UN Women created to disseminate information and coordinate support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon, she was invited to an information-sharing meeting on the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) to discuss this topic.

"I didn't know what the meeting was about at all," Tamar recalls of her first public speech. "I didn't have any experience, so I was very nervous, but I think it turned out well in the end. You can't imagine what it meant to me! A peasant woman

who had never travelled outside her village was able to make a speech in front of ministers and ambassadors without blushing."

After that day, Tamar continued to actively participate in IPRM information meetings. Later, she also joined a home-care programme for the elderly. The initiative is implemented by the IDP Women Association "Consent", and Tamar is currently taking care of five elderly people living in Kvemo Chala.

A MOSAIC THAT SHOULD BECOME A REALITY

In the courtyard of the cultural centre where Tamar works, there is a mosaic from the Soviet era. Tamar says that

it symbolically depicts the wealth and prosperity that Kvemo Chala was known for in the past.

"This wall is my inspiration and motivation," she says. "I may not be able to revive the village as it used to be, but my wish is to improve the well-being of the people here, and I am doing everything I can to make that happen."

A large part of the village's population has left their homes. Tamar, who joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and became involved in community mobilization, even forming a self-help group, is diligently studying the needs of the remaining locals.

"We need special pumps so that we can access water for more than two or three hours a day," she explains. "The cultural centre also needs a renovation, [and] the children don't have a wrestling arena or a playground. Lighting and roads are another thing that is also essential. How can security be achieved without this? We need to strengthen the population and try to keep the place from emptying out. Who knows? Maybe some positive changes will take place." She hopes to one day see the village life captured on the mosaic become reality.

A LEADER'S RESPONSIBILITY

Tamar is a source of essential information and the best motivator for many of the villagers. She helps people to write applications and project proposals, as well as to access State services. However, despite this, in re-

turn for her volunteering, she sometimes might see a completely different attitude: "You are idle and wander around", or maybe 'You have a high salary' – sometimes they tell me these things to my face. It turns out that for some people, I am a scoundrel, while for others, I am an example. But I know that I am on the right path, and I want to do good for my village and country."

Tamar also knows that she is an example for many girls, which also imposes a great responsibility, but she has an answer for this: "When you become a leader, you also have to be a role model and constantly develop. It is difficult, but it was my choice to follow this path. I am happy with the leadership [skills] that I have gained, with great effort. The fact that my husband is proud of my work is also testament to my hard work."

She now finds development ideas at the gatherings of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors. She says that the women she meets at these meetings are role models for her: "We only want the best for each other. No one here looks at you stereotypically. On the contrary, I feel the greatest support and am stronger for it: I feel like I have a strong bond with these like-minded women," says Tamar, adding that it is important for their voices to be heard as far as possible and to inspire more girls. "Walk forward with proud steps and be a leader for yourself and others" – this is her message to women.



THE HOPE OF KOSHKA

Lia Mikeladze
58 years old

Shida Kartli region
Village of Koshka

Lia Mikeladze continues her learning and personal development. She works to empower women in the village and seeks to engage many of them in the process of achieving positive change.

DISPLACED TEACHER

“The war taught me how precious the homeland is. You may be a victim, but the most important thing is to live for your country. Realizing this made me stronger,” says Lia Mikeladze, a 58-year-old music teacher and volunteer from the village of Koshka. The locals put great hope in her.

Lia is not from Koshka: She was born and raised in Aspindza, where she graduated from the town’s secondary school and also from its music school. Together with her twin sister, she has sung and played music since childhood. The girls often appeared on stage together and amazed the audience, not only with their similarities but also with their talents.

After finishing grade school, the sisters continued their studies at the Sergo Zakariadze College of Traditional and Modern Arts in Tbilisi, majoring in choral conducting. They were preparing for higher education when Lia was abducted for the purpose of marriage, which back in those days was a traditional practice. After starting a family, she moved to Koshka and began working as a music and singing teacher at the public school in the neighbouring village of Disevi.

After the August 2008 war,^{***} Disevi – and, with it, Lia’s job – was beyond the dividing line. “The first time we were affected was in the 1990s, when the Tskhinvali war* hit us,” Lia recalls. “My husband was working in Tskhinvali at the time and, naturally, he couldn’t

continue his work. At that time, our entire family was dependent on the very small salary I was earning at school. Unfortunately, in 2008, it was my turn to become unemployed.”

The displaced teacher continued to work at the public school in the village of Mereti, but after two years, she found herself unemployed again, this time due to staff reductions. Being unemployed became a major source of stress for Lia. She missed going to classes and seeing her students, so when she heard that the organization Save the Children was looking for local staff in Mereti, she immediately applied and got a job. Lia organized entertainment activities for children of different ages and was always looking for ways to do more for the village.

One day, on a visit to Gori, she went straight to the UN office there and spoke about the needs of the people of Koshka. A week later, Lia was invited to a meeting with representatives of villages along the dividing line. It was there that she met Iulia Kharashvili, the head of the IDP Women Association “Consent”. This meeting completely changed her work. Soon, Lia became an employee of Consent.

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF KOSHKA

In cooperation with Consent, Lia established the Koshka Community Development Centre in 2009. She set up a space on the first floor of her own house



Lia Mikeladze is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and cares for her fellow villagers as she would any member of her own family.

“PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT PROBLEMS, BUT WHEN SOMEONE SAYS, ‘THERE IS NO ROAD TO MY HOUSE’, WE SHOULD THINK ABOUT WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO [HELP THE WHOLE] VILLAGE, NOT ONLY ONE PERSON’S HOUSE.

– Lia Mikeladze



Lia Mikeladze at her home in the village of Koshka in Gori Municipality. Lia is a music and singing teacher; however, after the August 2008 war, the school where she worked was left beyond the dividing line. Since then, Lia has been engaged in volunteer work and activism.

where free tailoring, styling, computer training and leadership courses were held for locals. Trainings were also held on human rights, resident–municipality relations, domestic violence and other topics.

Lia also began collaborating with UN Women with the help of Consent and was able to implement a number of useful initiatives. Thanks to her work, during the COVID-19 pandemic, essential items and hygiene products were distributed in Koshka, outdoor lighting

was installed, a playground was built, and drainage channels were repaired.

Lia, who joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors right after it was founded, says that informal education has had a huge impact on her as well, noting: “When I meet someone on the street, I cannot just say hello. I have to ask them how they are, ask what problems they have, consider [the options], give them advice, [and] ask if I can help them in any way. Activism has strengthened these skills in me as well.”

THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE: DETERMINING WHAT THE VILLAGE NEEDS

Lia has four children and seven grandchildren, but she takes care of everyone in Koshka. Helping the locals is a way of life for her. For years, she has been helping pensioners and the socially vulnerable in the village to use free healthcare services. She gathers people who need medical tests and organizes visits to clinics in Tbilisi. Now she wants to take a home-care course herself, earn a certificate and get involved in the “Dignified Ageing” project.

The villagers always ask Lia for help on everything. If someone is interested in the updates around Koshka, they go straight to her. “Someone has to take care of these people,” Lia says. “Who should I wait for when I can do it myself?”

She constantly studies the needs of the village and then begins to advocate for the topics that the village needs. “People have different problems, but when someone says, ‘There is no road to my house,’ we should think about what needs to be done to [help the whole] village, not only one person’s house,” Lia notes.

She is constantly striving to learn and develop, which is also helped by her membership in the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors. She discusses her ideas with other displaced women and those living

in villages along the dividing line and listens to their views. “I sometimes ask Tamar Sachaleli for her opinion,” Lia says. “I tell her mine, she tells me hers, and then during the conversation, some new idea may emerge. In this way, we strengthen each other by sharing our impressions and experiences.”

COFFEE DIPLOMACY

Lia, who has lived through two wars, believes that conflicts have hurt all sides and that women can play a huge role in healing the pain. “My mother-in-law’s sisters lived [in Tskhinvali], and after the war, during the ongoing tensions, I used to go there to attend burials,” Lia recalls. “It was not safe, but I wanted to make the Ossetians feel like their troubles were my troubles too. I wish I could meet the women there again. If we sat down together and had coffee, trust would soon be restored, relationships would be renewed, we would protect each other, and we would build new bridges.”

But before building bridges, Lia is concerned about activating the women in the village. She believes that more education and awareness-raising are needed so that they are not afraid to take responsibility for themselves and, with their involvement, can lay the foundation for positive change.



VILLAGE AMBASSADOR

Manana Gognadze
43 years old

Shida Kartli region
Village of Chorchana

Manana Gognadze in the garden of her home in Chorchana. In addition to her professional work and volunteer activities, Manana manages the household responsibilities, cultivates the land and takes care of cows, pigs, goats and rabbits.

AS SNAPSHOT FROM CHILDHOOD

When Manana Gognadze heard the sound of the first bomber during the August 2008 war,** she remembered a painful snapshot from her childhood: planes suddenly appearing in the sky over Sokhumi and a building in flames next door. She said goodbye to her hometown at the age of 10. Her mother saved her and her brothers from the war in Abkhazia and took them to their grandmother in the village of Zvare in Kharagauli Municipality, on the last train. Manana's father stayed behind and fought until the fall of Sokhumi.** Manana recalls that her family did not know what happened to him for a long time and looked for him among the missing.

Later, they learned that Manana's father, along with other displaced persons, had walked the Sakeni-Chuberi Pass for nine days and, at last, had come out safely.

It was not easy for the family to adapt to their new reality. The economic hardship that the entire country was experiencing at the time was compounded by the pain of leaving home and the stigma of displacement for Manana. "Unfortunately, the attitude towards us was such that I was ashamed to even reveal the fact that I was from Abkhazia," Manana recalls. "I became very withdrawn; I didn't speak up too much. As a student, I had a hard time studying during that first year. In that darkness, I was most happy when we received the humanitarian aid intended for



Manana Gognadze teaches a Georgian dance class at the Chorchana Public School. Her classes and a wrestling club are among the activities available to children in the village.

displaced persons. I would eagerly await the opening of the box. I knew that there would be sweets in it."

After finishing secondary school, Manana enrolled in the choreography school in the city of Rustavi. She then returned to Zvare and began teaching Georgian dance classes. She also worked in the hospitality industry. At the age of 24, she got married and moved to Chorchana, a village located directly on the dividing line.

LIFE ON THE DIVIDING LINE

During the August 2008 war, Manana took refuge in the village of Zvare. She was already eight months pregnant at the time. After a few months in Zvare, she returned to Chorchana with her baby.

"I was always afraid of being displaced a second time, and it happened: I really had to go through this stress [again], this time in 2008," she says. "Now I'm

afraid for my children: I don't want them to have the same experience."

Manana continues to live in Chorchana with her husband, mother-in-law and three children. In addition to household chores, she also cultivates the land and takes care of cows, pigs, goats and rabbits. At the same time, now for the fourth year, she has been teaching Georgian dance classes at Chorchana Public School, preparing numbers for school

“ IN THIS EVERYDAY LIFE FULL OF FEAR, TO WHICH WE HAVE ALREADY BECOME ACCUSTOMED, I OFTEN THINK TO MYSELF — MAY THE SOUND OF GEORGIAN MUSIC, NOT SHOOTING, ALWAYS BE HEARD FROM HERE.

– Manana Gognadze

events and celebrations. The only activities for the children here are a wrestling club and Manana’s dance classes.

“I don’t say no to anyone: I accept whoever wants to join,” Manana says. “The eager eyes of the students make me happy. I feel how free and bold they become in this hall.”

Teaching dance in a village near the dividing line also has additional connotations: “In this everyday life full of fear, to which we have already become accustomed, I often think to myself – may the sound of Georgian music, not shooting, always be heard from here. This thought also gives me profound motivation,” Manana notes.

THE DETERMINATION OF CHORCHANAN WOMEN

Despite her job and busy daily routine, Manana still finds time to volunteer. In 2019, when UN Women and the Women’s Information Center began implementing the localization component of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Chorchana, she became involved in this work. Together with other women,

Manana has brought many changes to the village. The road, which had been in disrepair every winter, has finally been rehabilitated; outdoor lighting and natural gas lines have been installed; and the locals have their own small grain and flour mill, which they are actively using. Because of these improvements, Chorchana has received the status of a highland village and now enjoys the corresponding benefits. Manana says that thanks to their initiatives, numerous problems have been solved in neighbouring villages as well.

“We had such terrible roads that when women would go to Tbilisi, they had to carry galoshes in their bags so that when they returned, they would be prepared for the mud here,” Manana says. “Later, at the information meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism, advocating for our needs with the municipality representatives helped us a lot. I attended all of them and always spoke out loud about the problems in the village.”

The path to change has not been easy for the women of Chorchana, who are united as one. At times, they were even

told not to spoil anything with their activism, but now everyone is satisfied with the results they have achieved. Locals often say that Chorchanan women can accomplish whatever they set their minds to.

“If we don’t remind them of what the village needs and what we want, nobody will come and ask us,” notes Manana. “Even saying it once doesn’t work; we have to say it many times. We have to remind them of who we are, that we live here too and that we are not asking only for ourselves: If we are strong in the village, we will even be able to help the city dwellers improve their conditions.”

WOMEN STRENGTHEN THE VILLAGE

Being a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors has completely changed Manana and made her life different. “These trainings and meetings took me out of my daily routine and made me discover a leader within myself,” she explains. “I had seen almost nothing out of Chorchana, and suddenly I started meeting the ambassadors, and now, they are already calling me the village ambassador! Isn’t that great motivation? For a woman like me, who gets up at half past six every morning but only starts to wake up while milking in the cowshed, this is hugely important!”

She believes that women – by better understanding and perceiving the needs of their community, listening to people and being active – can change many things, including peacebuilding.



Manana Gognadze, a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors, is internally displaced from Abkhazia, Georgia. Together with other women in Chorchana, a village near the dividing line, she volunteers to improve the living conditions for local residents.

“Today, we women of Chorchana strengthen the village with our lives, our presence here and our actions, which makes me very proud,” Manana says. “However, many still do not realize how valuable we are.”

Manana is already a community worker. She leads a self-help group and, along with community initiatives, continues to work on solving water and Internet problems.

The village ambassador has many more plans ahead.



THE VOICES OF DISPLACED WOMEN ARE IMPORTANT AND NEED TO BE HEARD

Nona Gvazabia
60 years old

Imereti region
City of Kutaisi

Nona Gvazabia, 60, is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors. She lives in an IDP settlement in Kutaisi and volunteers to improve the living conditions for its residents.

FAREWELL

“We lived in Abkhazeti by the sea. We had relatives there. When my father got sick, they came to visit us. When they left, they said goodbye to us in such a way that we realized: This was more of a farewell. They felt that war** was about to start. But we realized it all too late,” Nona Gvadzabia says, recalling the time when her family members still did not think that they would have to leave their home and become displaced.

When 27 September 1993 came and she saw the sky of Sokhumi lit up with bullets from Gulripshi, she realized that they had to leave. “Outside, we could hear the neighbours fuss,” she recalls, “and [there was] turmoil. People were preparing to flee.” Nona, her two sisters and her mother barely managed to move their sick father to a tractor-pulled trailer to get him out of harm’s way.

“I only took a few photographs with me, nothing else, but the most important thing was that I was taking my father with me,” Nona says. “How strange, isn’t it? Some people said, ‘It’s senseless thinking about an old man confined to his bed! We were walking through a pitch black night to the sound of gunfire. It turned out that we made it in the nick of time: The next morning, in the place we lived, a lot of people had been killed.’”

They arrived in Samegrelo, in the village of Rukhi, two days later. Nona was 28 years old at the time. She had already graduated from the Ivanovo Textile

Institute and the Senaki Carpet Factory Training Centre, so when she was offered a job, she moved to Kutaisi with her sister and started working at an electromechanical factory as a carpet weaver.

“My first weaving machine was given to me by an international humanitarian organization,” Nona recalls, “but who had the money to buy my carpets back then? People were starving. It was a very difficult time, but I slowly started collaborating with NGOs and accepting private orders.” Today, Nona is still an entrepreneur, making leather accessories and selling them under the brand “Uzareli”.

ONE’S OWN ROOF

Nona’s husband is also an internally displaced person (IDP) from Abkhazia, from Sokhumi. They moved into the house where they currently live in 2003. This settlement was built in Kutaisi with the support of the Norwegian Government. Before that, there was only a bare field in this place – with neither trees nor grass.

“I remember that the 14 families who first moved in were given eight seedlings [each] as a gift,” Nona recalls. “They made everyone happy. Then we kept adding more plants. We cleaned and took care of the place with our own hands and strength. We were happy that after living in rentals for so many years, we could afford our own roof. This is very important for IDPs. Gradually,



Thanks to Nona Gvadzabia’s efforts, tools were provided to the settlement. Local residents can now mow the tall grass themselves and take better care of the surroundings. Outdoor play is also much safer for the children living there.

“ HERE, I LEARNED AND REALIZED THAT I SHOULD NOT GIVE UP, THAT MY PROBLEM WILL NOT BE SOLVED IF I DO NOT TAKE ACTION MYSELF.

– Nona Gvadzabia

Nona Gvadzabia, together with other local women, actively works to disseminate essential information within the IDP settlement.



other families joined us, and now we are up to 150 people.”

VOICES OF IDPs

Nona knew the founders of the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund “Sukhu-

mi” from Abkhazia. She had also participated in their initiatives many times, so three years ago, when she heard that a study of the needs of IDPs was planned as part of a UN Women project, she immediately became interested. She then

rallied other women too, and they got involved in this study together.

It turned out that the problem of transportation in the settlement was the most problematic issue: The asphalt road to the central highway was so severely deteriorated that the population had to use a detour. Reptiles often appeared in the tall grass, so they also needed the necessary landscaping equipment to maintain the environment. In addition, the dampness, which is characteristic of western Georgia, was damaging not only the wooden floors laid in the houses years ago but also the health of the residents.

After conducting the needs assessment, Nona wrote applications, collected signatures and submitted them to the relevant agencies. Thanks to the women’s activism, today five families have concrete floors instead of wood, and this process is still ongoing. They were also given tools, so they can now mow the tall grass themselves, take better care of the surroundings and make it much safer for children to play outside. Additional outdoor lighting was also installed.

“Young people want exercise equipment, but a small playground would also be nice,” Nona says. “Such a space is also necessary, but right now the road is our top priority. We’re working on addressing that issue as well.”

Nona joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors immediately after its inception. She is currently

the only member representing her settlement, but she is supported and assisted by the approximately 10 women she mobilized in the village. In addition to specific initiatives, they also actively disseminate information, as local residents have lots of questions and often need clarification.

“I am proud of these women, of our teamwork that brings prosperity to our settlement,” says Nona, adding that the network has greatly helped her in raising her morale and motivation. “Without our meetings, I would have given up,” she admits, “[but] here, I learned and realized that I should not give up, that my problem will not be solved if I do not take action myself.”

She believes that the existence of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and the commitment of its members show that the voices of displaced women are important: They should be listened to and taken seriously.

THE PAIN MUST BE HEALED

“After the war, I saw Abkhaz people for the first time in Kutaisi,” Nona notes. “They were receiving treatment. I had the feeling that they were very close to me. At the same time, I felt immense pain. It can’t be like this all the time. This pain has to be healed, and our children – our future generation – must also be raised with this feeling,” adding that she believes that forgiveness is necessary to restore relationships and trust.



Kristine Kutateladze in the courtyard of the Tskaltubo IDP settlement, where she lives with her mother and two children.

SMALL STEPS LEAD TO BIG RESULTS

Kristine Kutateladze
36 years old

Imereti region
City of Tskaltubo

ACTIVIST TEACHER

Every time she comes to Tbilisi, Kristine Kutateladze visits the memorial to the heroes who laid down their lives for the unity of Georgia – the monument that bears the names of her father and uncle.

“They fought in the war in Abkhazia** and disappeared without a trace,” Kristine says. “I have taken DNA tests many times, but nothing has been ascertained. I only have this memorial to honour their memory.”

She vaguely remembers her father. She was 3 years old when the war began and her mother fled the danger, taking them to Tbilisi. However, life in the capital became difficult for her, so she soon took Kristine to Tskaltubo, to her native region. Relatives helped them get a small space in a sanatorium allocated for displaced people and start a new life.

Kristine has been a volunteer since childhood. She was still in the eighth grade when she got involved in the initiatives of the Charity Humanitarian

Women Fund “Sukhumi” and joined various study clubs. That period also determined her future: An English teacher by profession, she combined her work with engaging with non-governmental organizations.

In 2019, Kristine, with the support of UN Women, completed a training course in web programming and social media marketing. She changed her profession and now teaches computer technologies in two schools in Tskaltubo.

“You know, there is a misconception that boys are better at technology, so I always want girls to be more involved in these courses,” she says.

At the same time, Kristine collaborates with the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund “Sukhumi”, and she is a representative of the IDP Women’s Initiative Network and the head of the Tskaltubo Women’s Network. She also teaches digital literacy to women members of self-help groups.

“EVERYTHING I DO IS FOR THE DISPLACED. THEY KNOW THAT THEY CAN COME TO ME AT ANY TIME, AND I WILL PUT EVERYTHING ASIDE AND TAKE CARE OF THEIR PROBLEMS.

– Kristine Kutateladze

WHEN EVERYONE PUTS THEIR HOPE IN YOU

Kristine lives in Tskaltubo with her mother and two children. She also received an apartment on Abkhazeti Street, where new buildings for displaced people were built. Her volunteer work is also mostly related to this settlement.

“In 2018, I underwent a leadership training course in Germany,” says Kristine. “There, I discovered what high civic responsibility means [and] how partnership processes are managed. When I returned, I united about 20 women and created an initiative group. We also got involved in implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda.”

The group’s first activity was to study the needs of the IDP settlement. The women identified the problems faced by each family, set the priorities and launched an advocacy process. Their work soon bore fruit.

“We solved these problems, and at the same time, we received small grants from the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund ‘Sukhumi,’” notes Kristine. “With this money, we put up information boards in the buildings, on which we posted all the necessary phone numbers. Among them is the hotline for victims of violence: 116 006. With part of the money, we bought seedlings and yard care equipment; we greened the place [and] cleaned it up. Such small initiatives are actually very important.”

Now the main concern in the settlement is dampness, which poses such



Kristine Kutateladze at the entrance of her apartment building with her neighbours. Kristine is a source of support and hope for everyone in the settlement.

a great threat to people's health that many are leaving their homes. Kristine hopes that they will soon be able to solve this problem.

"We shouldn't lose heart," she insists. "Don't I get tired? Certainly, sometimes I feel like giving up, but it only lasts for a few minutes. My mother tells me, 'Your father was like that too. He was happy to help others.' Everything I do is for the displaced. They know that they can come to me at any time, and I will put everything aside and take care of their problems. What could be more motivating than seeing them all put their hope in you?"

WOMEN'S UNITY BRINGS CHANGE

In the environment where Kristine lives, a large part of society still believes that women should be limited to household chores. That is why volunteering is not easy: If you want to achieve change, you have to overcome many stereotypes.

"The division of household labour is also a big puzzle," Kristine notes. "When I was studying web programming, they told me, 'You're wasting your time. You'd be better off spending that time with your children.' My mother helps me with my [household] workload, but does everyone have someone to help them? Even to just attend a training course? 'You want to go and have fun in a hotel while I take care of the children?!' That's what husbands often say to women."

Kristine knows that progress still brings unity, and when hard work bears fruit, stereotypes and scepticism are replaced with respect. "Twenty women are good, but 200 would be better," she notes. To achieve this goal, she tries to be an example herself, to attract as many like-minded people as possible.

"I always tell women, 'It's okay – it's hard for me too, but I still do it.' We have to follow through, even if it's not much, because even small steps lead to big results," Kristine notes, adding: "By the way, [these women] have changed a lot, and when they talk, I listen with pride."

Kristine has been actively involved in the work of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors since its founding. The unity of women there is most visible: "Now I feel like I have friends in every corner. In general, the women members believe in one another. We are like-minded."

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE UNITES ALL SIDES

People who have experienced war have a common pain, but along with this pain, they are also united in thinking about the future. "Everyone wants peace for their children, especially mothers," Kristine notes. "I believe that if these women sat at the negotiating table, they would bring more empathy and achieve more tangible results."

She believes that to achieve this goal, it is necessary to change society's wrong attitudes towards women and value their voices.



Kristine Kutateladze, 36, is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors. As a volunteer, she implements various initiatives for the people living in the IDP settlement in Tskaltubo.



WOMEN ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE AT THE DECISION- MAKING TABLE

Nuka Kakauridze
32 years old

Imereti region
City of Tskaltubo

Nuka Kakauridze, 32, lives in the Tskaltubo IDP settlement. She is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and works to support the well-being of the settlement's residents.

LIVING THE LIFE OF AN IDP

After she got married, Nuka Kakauridze entered the doors of the sanatorium where the family of her husband, an internally displaced person (IDP) from Abkhazia,** had already been living for years.

“I grew up in Zestaponi and could not imagine that people had to live in such difficult conditions,” Nuka recalls. “Dark corridors, damaged walls, a cracked floor – when I saw all this, I was shocked. What I saw made me decide that I would absolutely fight to change this harsh reality.”

It turned out that the IDPs were living in these conditions while waiting to move to purpose-built apartments, although no one knew when this would happen. Nuka realized that she should not just wait and hope, so she contacted the relevant agencies, wrote a statement together with her neighbours and collected signatures. She then introduced journalists to the harsh conditions in the sanatorium and obtained an expert report confirming that it was too dangerous for people to live there.

“I even got pregnant during this period. I was expecting my first child and continued to be active with a huge belly. The thing was that the construction of housing for IDPs was being delayed. But we tried to speed up the process, which eventually worked out for us,” recalls Nuka, who was one of the first to receive an apartment and leave the harsh conditions of the sanatorium.

WOMEN HELP ONE ANOTHER GROW

Currently, Nuka lives on Abkhazeti Street in a new IDP settlement with her husband and two young children. She is a tourism specialist by profession and loves her job very much. She likes to introduce her country to foreigners. She is now taking the experience she gained from summer jobs in Germany as a student and using it in her homeland, in the field of hospitality.

“After we got an apartment, I seriously started thinking about my professional goals,” Nuka recalls. “I wanted to start a business that would be close to tourism. In the meantime, I became friends with Tsira Jugheli, an IDP from Abkhazia who lived next door to me. When I told her about my idea to create a hosting space, we decided to bring the idea to fruition together.”

Soon, the two friends bought a small space in the tourist area near Prometheus Cave, cleaned it up, refurbished it with their own hands and opened a food and recreation space called “Ormukha”.

Just then, Nuka’s next door neighbour Kristine Kutateladze called. Kristine is the head of the Tskaltubo Women’s Network and told her about a new initiative by UN Women and the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund “Sukhumi”. Nuka immediately became interested in the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and joined the trainings.



Nuka Kakauridze in the courtyard of “Ormukha”, a food and recreational space she manages together with a friend.

“ FOR [COMMUNITY] DEVELOPMENT, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOT LET MY FEMININITY STOP ME – [INSTEAD] TO REALIZE MY CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND TO DEFINITELY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGES FOR THE BETTER.

– Nuka Kakauridze

Nuka recalls: "I remember sitting in the first meeting, completely inexperienced and tense, thinking, 'What should I say when it's my turn?' Now I'm much more courageous and confident in my own abilities. I learned what rights I have as a citizen. These meetings have strengthened my resolve to move forward, because other women members of the network will not let me stop."

The trainings she underwent within the framework of the network also helped her improve her personal skills. She did not give up; she got involved in other projects and even received small grants for business development.

Now Nuka is studying the needs of IDPs together with Kristine. Thanks to her and other women, a kindergarten was built in the settlement, and the electrical wiring was repaired, although the work continues: "The walls need to be plastered. Otherwise, there is a lot of dampness here. We will not stop working on this."

BEING A WOMAN IS NOT A BARRIER

Nuka says that there is still distrust in women's abilities. Some people mistakenly think that volunteering brings a lot of financial income, while others consider such work irrelevant. Nuka notes: "They sometimes say, 'You're a woman. Stop. This is not your business.' I'm lucky, as my husband supports me,

and I try to reassure myself. For [community] development, it is important to not let my femininity stop me – [instead] to realize my civic responsibility and to definitely contribute to changes for the better."

Nuka gets special motivation to continue this path precisely at network meetings, listening to the experiences of other women: "When I return home, I am so full of energy, I start planning new steps. I realize that I can do more."

She thinks that the most important thing she has achieved is the change in other women. She sees how purposeful they have become: In addition to doing household chores, they have become involved in public life, and they have learned to believe in their own strength. "Before, they used to say, 'I can't do it,' but through our work and our involvement in initiatives, we have made them realize that their words and deeds are important. I am very proud of that," says Nuka.

WOMEN SHOULD BE ABLE TO REALIZE THEIR POTENTIAL

Women's involvement in any issue, including security and peace, always leads to better results. "More reforms and opportunities are needed for women to realize their potential," says Nuka, who believes that women should always have a place at the decision-making table.



Nuka Kakauridze continuously monitors the needs of the residents. Thanks to her and other women's efforts, a kindergarten was built in the settlement, and infrastructure such as drainage systems was improved.

Nazi Lobzhanidze, 59, is internally displaced from Abkhazia, Georgia. She lives in the IDP settlement in Khoni and is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors.



IF WOMEN STAY ALERT, MANY THINGS CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED

Nazi Lobzhanidze
59 years old

Imereti region
City of Khoni

EXPERIENCING WAR IN REAL LIFE

On the night of 27 September 1993, when Sokhumi fell,** Nazi Lobzhanidze woke up her children and prepared them for departure. The girls were 3 and 4 years old at the time. They did not understand anything that was happening yet and only asked questions about the little boy who lived next door. “They asked me, ‘If we are leaving, why would Seryozha stay?’” Nazi recalls. “They still remember my voice, how I then said to them, ‘We’re leaving because we’re Georgians.’ It was really just that stark.”

She hoped that they would get out of harm’s way very soon, so she packed only a small amount of food for the journey. “I thought we would get over the mountain pass in a couple of days,” she recalls, “but of course, I was wrong. My husband and I, with our two small children, went up the mountains on foot. It was winter. We walked for two weeks! We put the girls to sleep under trees, [and] when they felt hungry, we managed to make a fire and boiled tea for them. Even now, I believe that it was only God’s mercy that saved us. On that road back then, many people simply froze [to death].”

Before the war in Abkhazia, Nazi and her family lived in the village of Oktomberi in the Gulripshi District. When she crossed the Sakeni-Chuberi Pass with other displaced persons, she was 27 years old. She took nothing with her. She thought she would return home very soon. Nazi’s brothers and her husband’s family members also came with them.

Only her parents remained in the village of Tsebelda, where she grew up. “We are already old – who cares what we do? We will be safe here,” they told their children.

“Buses and cars were waiting for us in Samegrelo,” Nazi recalls. “First, they took us to Zestaponi. We were looking for a place, but somehow we could not find anywhere. It turned out that the hotel there was already full, so we continued on our way to Chiatura. In the meantime, my brothers went missing. I found them later in the Khoni IDP settlement.”

For two years, they lived in one room of a Chiatura hotel. Nazi worked there as a housekeeper. She also learned about her parents’ tragic end at that time: “I heard from my brother that they burned our parents alive – locked them in a house so they couldn’t leave and set it on fire. This horrible scene kept me awake for a long time. I know they are buried in the yard, but I can’t go to their graves. I have been crying for my parents for 30 years.”

After this incident, she chose to stay close to her brothers. She moved to the Khoni IDP settlement and soon found a job. “I am an agronomist by profession and worked in my specialty in Abkhazia,” Nazi says. “In Khoni, with the help of a classmate, I started working as a case manager in the Second Brigade of the Ministry of Defence, then I also became a coordinator in the secret unit. I served for 10 years, even receiving the rank of master sergeant, and then, when our unit moved to Kutaisi, I didn’t follow. I already wanted to rest.”

“ WE SHOULD LIVE TOGETHER, SHOULDN'T WE? WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF THIS LAND. WE ARE UNITED BY POINTS OF INTERSECTION, AND WE SHOULD AT LEAST MANAGE TO LIVE IN A WAY THAT FOSTERS NEIGHBOURLINESS.

– Nazi Lobzhanidze

TAKING HER FIRST STEPS INTO ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND VOLUNTEERING

After leaving work, Nazi, with funding from the Produce in Georgia programme (under the Enterprise Georgia agency), purchased a coffee grinder and set up a tasting space in the IDP settlement, along with a shop. “Whether or not we’re hungry, we women can still drink some coffee. That’s how I got this idea. Soon, I added food to the coffee menu. I ran a mixed shop for a year and a half, and then volunteering entered my life,” she recalls.

She took her first steps into volunteerism in 2010. When the renovation of the IDPs’ residential buildings in Khoni was to begin, Nazi discovered that the project did not include the repair of some of the buildings. Together with other IDPs, she formed an initiative group, wrote a statement, collected about 800 signatures and presented it to the president of the country, thus solving the population’s problem. A non-governmental organization, the IDP Integration and Support Center,

whose activities are currently suspended, was also founded at that time.

PEOPLE’S SUPPORT IS MOST IMPORTANT

Nazi knew of the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund “Sukhumi” from her time in the military. When she became involved in addressing the needs of the IDP settlement, she became more closely involved with the organization. She was constantly involved in the localization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and she soon joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors.

“I gathered women for meetings, and we talked about problems,” Nazi explains. “We also disseminated information about domestic violence many times, and we tried to raise awareness. Then we added outdoor lighting and trash cans, and we also solved the water issue.” She continues telling stories of their initiatives, pointing to a patch of land: “Here, in the place of this small square, there was my brother’s vegetable garden. For a year, I would ask him to give it to us, so that we could create



Nazi Lobzhanidze looks through old photographs taken in Abkhazia, Georgia, featuring herself and her family – her husband and children. She managed to preserve these photos while in displacement.

a square. He was a little stubborn in the beginning, but in the end, I finally managed to convince him – after I sent my grandchildren to him,” Nazi half-jokingly recounts.

About 1,200 people live in the settlement. Together with about 20 local women, Nazi constantly studies the needs of the IDPs. They also have a self-help group. They recently did another important job for the settlement. “The rain gutters were not in order,” Nazi says, “so the basements of two buildings were

flooding, and the foundations were also damaged. We gathered our men and repaired everything with our own hands. About 80 families’ apartments were saved.”

Now the women already want to dismantle the old buildings that have survived in the settlement up to now. The dilapidated structures pose a great danger to children who play close by. After that, they want to add lighting to the building entrances and repair the benches in the yard.

“At first, the men here used to joke with me, ‘Nazi, don’t drive our wives crazy. We can’t speak out loud in our families anymore!’ But I’m very proud, because I know that wherever women are alert, everything there will be accomplished,” says Nazi.

ONE SINGLE CONVERTED PERSON

Working with the Charity Humanitarian Women Fund “Sukhumi” has given Nazi several opportunities to talk to other women who have been affected by the conflict, including Abkhaz. These meetings are mostly aimed at sharing the experiences that Nazi has gained through the Khoni IDP settlement initiatives. She speaks about how women began to mobilize and research the community’s needs and then advocate for those needs, bringing them to the authorities and cooperating with local self-government to receive results – and constantly work to improve them.

“For a woman, peace is always the starting point,” Nazi says. “I wish to God that [one day] they will tell us that we can return [home]. If only we could find at least one person who has converted, who has changed his or her mind – wouldn’t it be nice? We should live together, shouldn’t we? We are all children of this land. We are united by points of intersection, and we should at least manage to live in a way that fosters neighbourliness,” says Nazi, who is always ready to help people living in Abkhazia – something that the people across the Enguri River already know.



Nazi Lobzhanidze, a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors, in the Khoni IDP settlement’s small square, which was established at her initiative.

Tiko Lagvilava regularly participates in local and international platforms to amplify the voices of young women peacebuilders to wider audiences.



TODAY, PEACE IS BEING CREATED BY YOUNG WOMEN

Tiko Lagvilava
20 years old

Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region
City of Zugdidi

THE MEETING THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Every time Tiko Lagvilava returns to her native Zugdidi, she remembers the story of when, as a schoolgirl, she brought humanitarian aid to a family of displaced persons from Abkhazia, Georgia. It was nothing special – just flour, oil and potatoes – but she has never forgotten how even a small amount of food made them happy.

“The elders had gone to pick hazelnuts,” Tiko recalls. “The children who met us at home were crying with joy: They said, ‘Mom will make us pies in the evening!’ It was this meeting that radically changed me. For a long time, my conscience bothered me [about the fact] that I had so much, that I had the ‘luxury’ to say ‘I don’t like it!’ about some dishes that my family made at home. This was the story that made me decide to continue supporting the IDPs [internally displaced persons].”

Tiko grew up in Zugdidi and, of course, like many locals, had heard many of the painful stories of the war in Abkhazia** and knew the IDPs living in her neighbourhood since childhood. Then she began to work on their needs.

She was still in eighth grade when she completed a mentoring programme as a Red Cross volunteer through the NGO “Neogeni” and continued her work there. She worked on empowering women and young people affected by the conflict. She organized meetings to discuss the needs and problems of IDPs. Later, Tiko gathered her peers and united them in the Young Leaders Hub. She helped them develop presentation and leadership skills, learn how to write a project proposal, and gain other valuable knowledge. Together with them, she organized events in villages near the dividing lines. Due to her student status, she no longer works in the organization, but the Hub continues its activities.

Tiko has even linked her career to conflict transformation and peacebuilding: She is already a fourth-year student at New Vision University, studying politics and diplomacy. At the same time, she is actively involved in implementing both the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda in Georgia. She participates in local and international platforms to make the voices of

“ WHEREVER DECISIONS ARE MADE,
WOMEN SHOULD HAVE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND
BE PROPERLY REPRESENTED.

– Tiko Lagvilava

young women peacebuilders heard by as many people as possible.

THE STIGMA OF DISPLACEMENT

Along with the severity of the war, IDPs from Abkhazia, especially women, have had to endure a number of stereotypes and painful attitudes. Tiko says that this reality continues to some extent even now. Many even hide the fact that they are from Abkhazia, and the host community still has difficulty accepting them.

“For example,” Tiko says, “in Zugdidi, marrying an IDP woman was never desirable. They looked down on them, so to speak. And you know what’s interesting? After the war, many IDP women married locals just because they needed to have their own roof over their heads. Imagine how terrible that is: You are unwanted and, at the same time, are forced to start a family only because you need [somewhere to live].”

Tiko thinks that the segregation of IDP settlements also exacerbates the stereotypes and exclusion. “After all these years,” she adds, “these people are living isolated from the locals, which is wrong. Integration cannot happen this way.”

OBSTACLES TURNED INTO SUCCESSES

In 2024, with the help of the Women’s Information Center, Tiko joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors as a young activist. This association made it possible for Tiko to become

better informed about the different experiences of IDPs from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia.

“The first meeting and the stories that the women shared made a huge impression on me,” she recalls. “When I heard about how hard they work, how much work they do to change reality, it motivated me. I realized that if I don’t have something, I shouldn’t lose heart. On the contrary, I have to change [the situation]. Despite my age, I’m friends with every one of [the network members]. They are sincere, and that’s their strength. They create a success story from an obstacle, and then they make you feel a sense of joy and pride through these stories. I’m sure that with their determination and activism, they also inspire women living in neighbouring communities.”

Tiko herself is constantly inspired by the meetings. She says that when she talks about women’s participation in peacebuilding, she always mentions the stories of network members. “Their examples prove that wherever decisions are made, women should have equal opportunities and be properly represented,” Tiko adds.

EDUCATION BRINGS CHANGE

For young women, education is the best opportunity for change. Tiko says that in patriarchal societies, girls’ education is often not a priority, or professions for girls are predetermined, defined by stereotypes.



Tiko Lagvilava became a Red Cross volunteer while still in the eighth grade and has been engaged in activism ever since.

“When I decided to study politics and diplomacy, [people] didn’t like my choice either,” Tiko notes. “They told me that politics, conflicts and peace were not suitable areas of work for a woman. Despite my parents’ support, I had to work hard on myself, on my development, to prove to myself that yes, I can do this job.”

The young activist believes that in reality, women – especially those who have experienced the hardships of war

themselves – know best the consequences that conflict brings for future generations.

“The data confirm that negotiations in which women participate are successful and peaceful in the long run,” says Tiko. She believes that the involvement of women, especially of young women, will also positively change attitudes and bring progress in peacebuilding, because today, peace is being created by young women.



WHEN YOU ARE PART OF SOMETHING BIG

Ana Leponava
33 years old

Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region
City of Zugdidi

Ana Leponava, 33, is a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors and an activist from Zugdidi.

FROM FINANCIER TO VOLUNTEER

“I was still working at a bank then. The principal of the school in the village of Rukhi called me and asked me to go to a meeting of the IDP Women Association ‘Consent’ because one of the teachers was unable to go. Since that day, this organization has become a part of my life. The non-governmental sector turned out to be the field in which I found myself,” says Ana Leponava, a financier by profession and now an employee of the IDP Women Association “Consent”.

Together with her husband and 9-year-old son, Ana has just recently moved from Rukhi to her native Zugdidi. Rukhi is a village near the dividing line, with a large population of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Ana also started volunteering by taking care of these people.

When she got to know the needs of the locals, she discovered that the breached fence of the settlement posed a threat to both livestock and the population, and because of the polluted well, the locals constantly had a problem with drinking water. The only minibus that connected people living near the dividing line to Zugdidi was also damaged and dangerous. Together with the IDP Women Association “Consent”, the young activist constantly spoke about these topics at meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism and did not stop advocating for the issues. In the end, the work bore fruit: Today, not only does the IDP set-

tlement have a new fence, but the well was cleaned, the water problem was solved, and the transportation system was changed.

AN EMBOLDENED ANA

Ana joined the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors immediately after its establishment. When she learned about this group, she quickly decided that she, along with eight other local women, had to participate in the initiative by any means.

“I immediately had the feeling that it was a very progressive idea,” Ana recalls. “Indeed, at the very first meeting, I realized that I was becoming a part of something big – an idea that would change the way women think and interact, that would help us and allow us to share experiences. I keep remembering how, at one of the gatherings, women living in the eastern and western parts of the country, Gori and Ingiri, discovered that they had an identical sewage problem and then used the experience of Gori to solve the problem in Ingiri.”

Now the women meet one another like family members, and their friendship continues online: They share all of their important information and opportunities there. And most importantly, they know that they have like-minded people in every corner of Georgia.

“I am motivated by the initiatives of each of these women, by the work they



Ana Leponava visiting the IDP settlement in the village of Rukhi, where her efforts have led to the implementation of several beneficial initiatives.

“ WHEN WE WOMEN SIT AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, WE THINK ABOUT OUR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND HOMELAND, AND THEN ABOUT THE TERRITORY. PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT TO US.

– Ana Leponava

Ana Leponava lived in the Rukhi IDP settlement for several years after being displaced. Her volunteer work began there.



do, and I am strengthened by their success stories," says Ana.

Joining the network has also had a positive impact on the women's

activities. Local activism has become more effective, and concrete steps have been taken more quickly. As an example, Ana often cites the story of a

displaced woman from Abkhazia who lived in a school building for years and was waiting for the money she needed for an apartment. It was through the network's advocacy that she received the funding she needed and bought her own house. "Such stories make me even more determined to fight," Ana says. "When I see that my work is bringing results, I feel so emboldened that it fills me with a sense of accomplishment."

ACTIVISM DESPITE BARRIERS

"[My son] Achiko was 2 years old when he first accompanied me to a training," recalls Ana. "After that, I took him to all the meetings. Many people asked me, 'Don't you feel sorry for your child?' They used [him] as an excuse, but in reality [they were hinting] that such activism was not suitable for a married woman. It always filled me with a feeling of protest, which made me continue my activities with more stubbornness."

For the activists living in the region, everyday life is full of many discriminatory social norms. Along with their work, they have to overcome lots of obstacles, on top of dealing with false public perceptions. This struggle means not only fulfilling their own duty but also paving the way for future activists.

"When you are married," Ana notes, "you have to stick to the rules, finish work by 6pm, stay home at night, and don't go to training courses that may

be held in Tbilisi because that's not appropriate for a married woman. People can't understand that you want to use the knowledge you gain there for the benefit of your community. Often, even working in an NGO is not considered worthwhile." But Ana also notes that her main source of motivation is her child and homeland, adding: "I want Achiko, who wants his mother to be a successful, professionally accomplished [person], to be proud of me and live in a better Georgia. This gives me motivation, strengthens me every day and convinces me that I am in the right place, serving the right cause."

WHEN WOMEN SIT AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

Ana believes that we should look at any topic from the perspective of our children's future, adding that women mostly act that way already: "When we women sit at the negotiating table, we think about our children, families and homeland, and then about the territory. People are important to us. I was not present during the war in Abkhazia,** but I remember what we went through in August 2008,*** what feelings we had. I don't want my child to have to go through the same thing. Other women feel the same way too."

Ana believes that the involvement of women in peace processes is an absolute necessity for the well-being of future generations.



ONGOING CHILDHOOD SOLIDARITY

Sopho Shengelaia
43 years old

Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region
Village of Akhali Abastumani

Sopho Shengelaia, a member of the Network of Women and Youth Peace Ambassadors, lives in the village of Akhali Abastumani and works to improve the living conditions for IDPs in Zugdidi Municipality.

A TEACHER SEEKING INNOVATION

“During the war in Abkhazia,** our displaced relatives took shelter with our neighbour’s family. There were many of them, so my parents brought some of them to our place. My brother and I gave up our beds for them and laid our mattresses on the floor, expressing our childish solidarity in this way. I was deeply moved by their heavy emotions and words full of pain. Years later, when I was given the opportunity to help displaced people from Abkhazeti again, I remembered my old feelings and tried to do everything that I was not able to do back then because of my age,” recalls Sopho Shengelaia, whose work in recent years has been related to helping displaced people.

Sopho has a husband and three children. She grew up in Zugdidi Municipality, in the Zugdidi Kombinati settlement. Since getting married, she has lived with her family in the neighbouring village of Akhali Abastumani. She is a primary school teacher by profession and works as a kindergarten teacher in her native settlement.

“I love my profession,” Sopho says. “Teaching means constantly searching for something new, which I especially like. Non-formal education and connections with non-governmental organizations also help me a lot. I also use the knowledge I gain from trainings and other workshops in my pedagogy.”

VOLUNTEERISM AS A CHOICE

Informal education and volunteering emerged in Sopho’s life in 2019 after engaging with the IDP Women Association “Consent”. The organization was creating an Academy of Women Leaders and was looking for active women in the regions. It was Sopho who participated in the Academy from Akhali Abastumani.

“I suddenly learned that the village had nominated me for this project,” Sopho recalls. “I had young children, and it was difficult for me to devote time to anything other than work. However, everything changed at the first meeting: I discovered skills I never knew I had. I learned that I could convey the needs of the village to the authorities, advocate [for those needs] and take them in the right direction. This news fascinated me so much that I realized: I definitely had to become part of the large family of volunteers.”

In addition to communication, leadership, sustainability and other topics at the Academy of Women Leaders, Sopho also underwent a training-of-trainers course. She then shared the knowledge she had gained with local women and youth at meetings organized in the courtyard of the Akhali Abastumani administration building. She soon realized that a dedicated space was needed to disseminate information, so with the support of the IDP Women Association “Consent”, she took a room in the same building from the local government (under usufruct), renovated it and turned it



Sopho Shengelaia in the courtyard of the Akhali Abastumani local administration building. Years ago, she shared knowledge here with the community on topics such as communication, leadership, resilience and more.

“ I DISCOVERED SKILLS I NEVER KNEW I HAD. I LEARNED THAT I COULD CONVEY THE NEEDS OF THE VILLAGE TO THE AUTHORITIES, ADVOCATE [FOR THOSE NEEDS] AND TAKE THEM IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

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Sopho Shengelaia near the stone workshop in Akhali Abastumani. For years, IDPs – including young children – lived under harsh conditions in this courtyard. Thanks to Sopho’s active involvement, all residents were provided with alternative living spaces, and the workshop area was vacated.

into a gathering place for fellow villagers. This space hosted many meetings, including those on breast cancer prevention and domestic violence.

A VILLAGE VISITED DOOR TO DOOR

In parallel with organizing meetings, Sopho began to study the needs of

Akhali Abastumani and disseminate useful information. She went door to door and told the villagers about free programmes and opportunities while also learning about their problems.

“We had a little boys’ football team called ‘Phoenix,’” Sopho recalls. “They had neither uniforms nor a logo. The

children could not participate in tournaments and were heartbroken. With the support of ‘Consent’, we helped them with everything: We bought them uniforms, prepared [their] ready-to-use equipment and [made them] a logo. Then the girls also wanted to create a team, so we supported them too. Although they have played for only four years, they have brought the village many victories and trophies.”

Sopho is particularly proud of one story – the story of the IDPs living in the courtyard of a stone workshop, under unbearable conditions. “For years, these people’s daily lives were filled with construction dust, noise and a polluted environment,” she explains. “Together with ‘Consent’, I worked very hard to obtain appropriate reports from experts, and then, in cooperation with the local government, to provide alternative living spaces for all four families. I was happy when I heard this story and realized that the young children living there would now be able to breathe normal air.”

THE UNITY OF WOMEN

Through her activism, Sopho has recruited six women from her village and has also brought about changes in other IDP settlements. In one of them, the problem of drinking water was solved, and in another settlement, where the population also carried water by hand, they took care of arranging a well. Currently, the women are advocating for the treatment of IDP residential

buildings with waterproof paint and the allocation of a new building for the village kindergarten.

Gathering like-minded people turned out to be rather difficult for Sopho: “At times like these, you get labelled with a thousand different [things]. [People say] that you are unemployed, or that you earn a lot of money, or they wonder why you don’t devote all your time to your children. The trainings gave me the opportunity to withstand this pressure and continue helping others. Fortunately, this negative attitude has gradually changed.”

WOMEN’S UNREALIZED POTENTIAL

Sopho believes that stereotypes are the primary barrier to women’s involvement in public life and to the realization of their potential.

“Women’s different views are essential to representing the needs of the community,” Sopho explains. “For example, in the IDP settlement, where we are currently working on the problem of dampness in the buildings, only women are active. But don’t men also know that this issue needs to be solved? My being a woman has also helped me a lot in seeing the problems that are around me. Women have enormous unrealized potential, and this worries me a lot,” adding that she believes that women’s unique perspectives will also play an important role in post-conflict reconstruction processes.

Nato Subari, Director of the Chuberi Public School and a teacher of Georgian language and literature, was among those who sheltered internally displaced persons who crossed the Sakeni-Chuberi mountain pass in the autumn of 1993.



PATRIOTISM TURNED INTO ACTION

Nato Subari
63 years old

Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region
Village of Chuberi

RETURNING HOME

“The time has come to turn patriotic slogans into action.” This is how Nato Subari explains the decision she made years ago, when she, a fifth-year student at the Faculty of Philology, gave up life in Tbilisi and returned to her native village, Chuberi, to become a teacher of Georgian language and literature.

Nato came to the capital at the age of 17. At first, she worked in a silk factory, but she then decided to continue her studies and entered Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. Her final years as a student coincided with the explosion of the national liberation movement. At that time, for Nato, like many other young people, anti-Soviet rallies demanding Georgia’s independence became an integral part of life.

“It was 1989,” recalls Nato, “and the entire university and I were filled with patriotic fervor. At that time, I learned that our faculty had received a specific request from the Ministry of Education. The school in my native Chuberi no longer had a teacher of Georgian language and literature, and they wanted me to return as a teacher. By the way, at that time there was a shortage of staff in other villages as well, so many of my friends made the same decision and went to teach in different regions.”

The then 28-year-old thought she would return to the village temporarily, but that did not happen. “There was a

need to stay, [so] I stayed,” says Nato, who still teaches Georgian language and literature at Chuberi Public School and has been its director for 30 years.

CHUBERI’S BURDEN

During the war in Abkhazia** on 27 September 1993, when the city of Sokhumi fell, tens of thousands of displaced persons set off on the Sakeni-Chuberi Pass. That year, it started to snow unusually early. People had to walk in the cold and hunger, under difficult conditions. The number of those who died while crossing the pass is still unknown.

Chuberi was one of the first to receive internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Abkhazia. On 28 September, six rescue helicopters filled with people fleeing the war had already flown into the village. Most of them were sheltered by Nato’s school. The flow of people coming through the pass continued for a long time. It took until early November for the educational process to resume in the school, where only the walls remained.

“People who were miserable, freezing, in a terrible situation – people who had lost everything and had gone through the most difficult experience – used doors, windows, floors, even books to warm themselves,” Nato recalls. “At that time, it was hard for me to understand why they were afraid to go outside, to communicate with the strangers living in the next room –

“ THE HOMELAND IS NOT JUST LAND — THE HOMELAND IS PRIMARILY PEOPLE, AND I WANT THEM TO LIVE WELL.

– Nato Subari

why they were afraid of everyone and everything. [But] if you haven't experienced it yourself, you can't understand it.”

Recalling a story that has particularly stuck in her memories, Nato continues: “We had new computers in the physics room. We were very careful with them, so one day I went to check on them. Just as I entered the room, I saw a woman who desperately begged, ‘Please don't throw me out!’ Then I saw that someone was lying on the table nearby, covered with a cloth, so I couldn't see who they were. It turned out that it was this woman's granddaughter – a little girl whom her grandmother was hiding and protecting from being raped. You see,” Nato adds, “such are the horrors that accompany war.”

The Chuberi residents also sheltered the displaced people in their homes, and Nato was one of them. On 28 September, she received the first 11 people – fighters from Tbilisi who learned about the fall of Sokhumi that evening on television. “It was like a gunshot – everyone was crying loudly,” Nato recalls.

Between September and November, 35–40 IDPs lived in the house of the Georgian language and literature teacher. The rooms looked like a hospital: People slept wherever there was a place. But the most important thing was not to leave anyone outside, without shelter.

Nato had a newborn nephew, and, fortunately, they had a supply of meat from a 100-pound deer slaughtered in his name. So they cooked a nutritious meal in a 40-litre pot and managed to feed everyone with a bowl of hot soup. The IDPs survived this way for two weeks. Then they started to receive the food that had been sent as aid.

The women of Chuberi managed to work hard and helped the displaced people. The burden of hospitality, care and nurturing mostly fell on them. “People saw the dead on the road and realized that the same thing could have happened to any one of them,” Nato says. “They told us heart-wrenching stories. Everyone tried to tell us what they had been through, how they lived [in Abkhazia] and what they had lost there. They needed this – and we, the women,



Nato Subari's family home in Chuberi. In 1993, between September and November, 35–40 internally displaced persons lived in this house on a permanent basis.

had to listen to them. And besides, we too had to be ready – to help them.”

Despite the fact that the village sheltered so many displaced, Chuberi came through the pass still have difficulty remembering Chuberi, and they even blame the locals for the crime. “One morning, a tired woman appeared on the road,” Nato recalls. “She was carrying a large bag. She rested for a while and went down to the river to catch her breath. When she turned around, her bag was gone. She was in a terrible state – her screams shook the area. It turned out that her child had died on the road, and she

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was carrying the body in her bag. It's possible that some rascal had grabbed the bag and then didn't confess. I can't rule out anything. Once, a displaced person who was sheltering in a school building even angrily told me, 'Don't blame me. Blame those who are robbing us at the pass.' I am always ready to listen to criticism, and so is the village. I want to know the truth, even if it torments me."

IDPs FROM CHUBERI

Chuberi is a village near the dividing line and is home to 320 families. Among them are those displaced who stayed here after the war. Many women from Abkhazia married locals, and when the children born in 1994 started school, there were 22 students in the first grade – a very large number for Chuberi. "Usually, we have an average of 10 children [per grade level], but that year, it seemed as if goodness and joy were born from those tragic days," Nato recalls.

Even now, 30–40 students with IDP status are permanently enrolled in Chuberi's school. There are also IDPs among the teachers. Nato's closeness to them is a great help, as she can support them in dealing with their problems and advocating for their needs.

She first learned about the localization of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at a meeting with local governments in Tbilisi. At that time, this process was just beginning. Nato also

spoke about the problems of the IDPs living in Chuberi. Soon, this meeting was followed by a needs assessment and a subsequent meeting, which she attended with two IDP teachers.

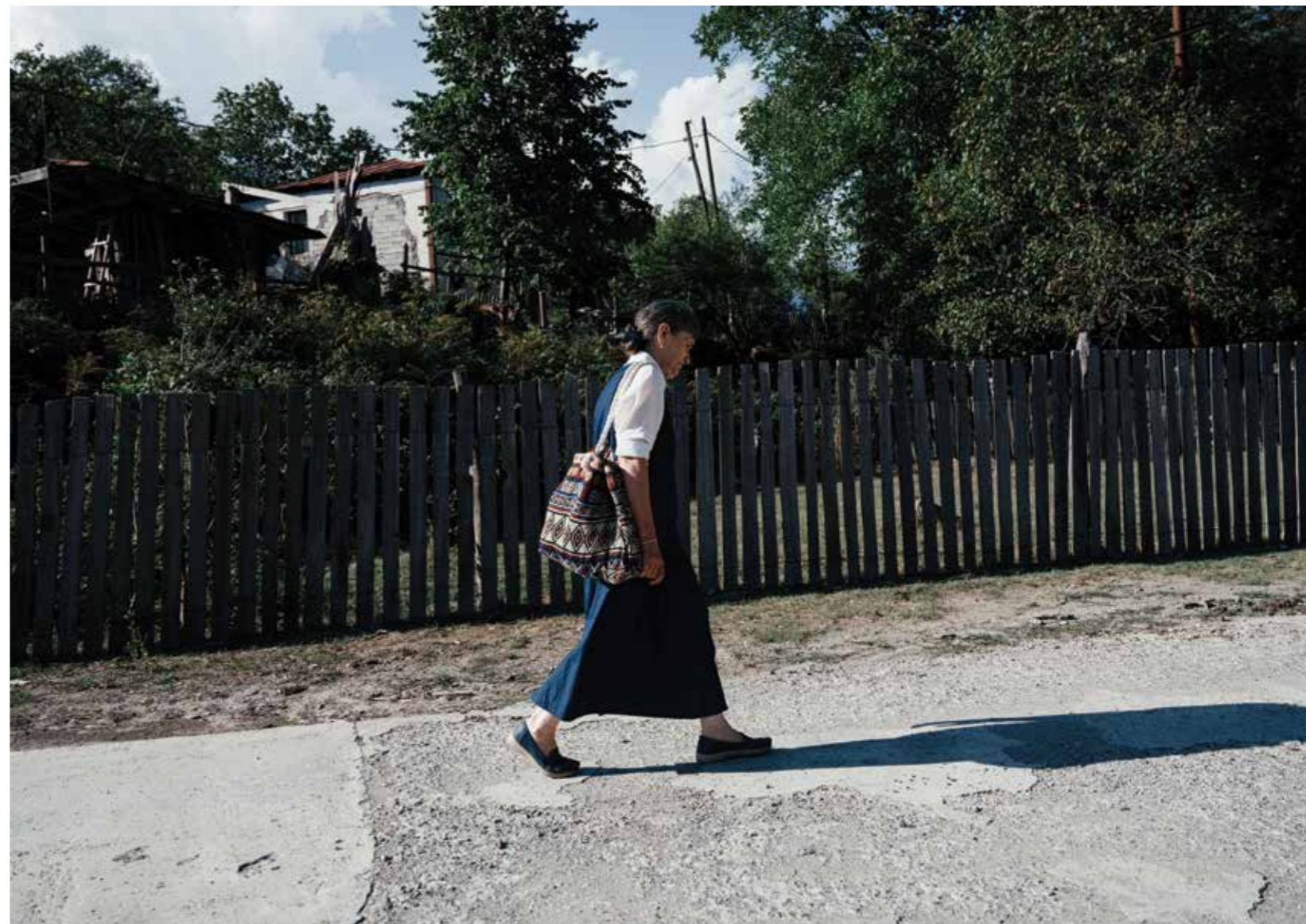
"We had small initiatives that the municipality took into account," Nato says. "They [gave us] trash cans, started solving the water problem and finished a section of the road that needed repair. The project [also] provided us with an amplifier and two microphones, which we use for events at the school. Most importantly, the women realized that they too can demand what belongs to them, that they too can bring change. This is [our] biggest achievement."

Now, together with other women, Nato is trying to make the environment in the village even better by implementing interesting initiatives and improving services.

MORE VOLUNTEERING MEANS MORE CHANGE

"I want [to see] more changes for women," says Nato, "so when I'm at a training session or a meeting, I'm always thinking about what I can bring back to the people of Chuberi. I love my country very much. This love is the decisive factor in everything. The homeland is not just land – the homeland is primarily people, and I want them to live well."

Nato believes that the path to change lies through education and volunteer-



Nato Subari on her way home from teaching.

ing. Access to either higher or vocational education helps women realize their full potential and protect their own interests. And without thinking like a volunteer

and doing things selflessly, there would be no change. Nato often talks to her students about this topic and ignites their interest in volunteering.

NOTES

* **The War in Tskhinvali**

In the late 1980s, conflict ignited in Georgia's Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, escalating into full-scale war in 1991–1992. According to various sources, up to 1,000 people lost their lives, while more than 60,000 were displaced.

** **The War in Abkhazia**

The conflict that unfolded in Georgia's Abkhazia region in 1992–1993 claimed the lives of more than 10,000 ethnic Georgians, with hundreds reported missing. Nearly 300,000 people were forced to flee their homes and continue to live as internally displaced persons within their own country. On 27 September 1993, the city of Sokhumi fell. Tens of thousands of displaced people crossed the Sakeni-Chuberi mountain pass on foot, enduring an extremely difficult journey. The exact number of those who died along the way from cold and hunger remains unknown. Once they reached safety, displaced families were relocated across different parts of the country, primarily to hotels and sanatoriums, where they lived for years under harsh conditions.

*** **The August War**

In August 2008, a new flashpoint emerged in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia. Rising tensions soon culminated in the Russia-Georgia war, which lasted five days and ended on 16 August 2008 with the signing of a six-point ceasefire agreement between President Mikheil Saakashvili and his Russian counterpart, President Dmitry Medvedev. The agreement was brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, representing France and the then-presidency of the European Union. As a result of the Russia–Georgia war, 412 Georgians were killed, more than 1,700 were wounded, and 138,000 people became internally displaced. Some of them became displaced for the second time and remain unable to return to their homes to this day.