

FINAL REPORT

ASSESSMENT OF COVID-19'S IMPACT
ON WOMEN EMPLOYED AS DOMESTIC
WORKERS IN GEORGIA



The publication was prepared by WeResearch in the framework of the project “Women’s Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus”, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC).

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UN WOMEN

Tbilisi, Georgia,
December, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The WeResearch team would like to thank the interviewees for the time spent taking part in this research study. We would also like to express our special thanks to the staff of UN Women for their valuable feedback and contribution to this research.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations or that of the Swiss Agency

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AEP	COVID-19 Anti-Crisis Economic Plan
ADC	Austrian Development Cooperation
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
EMC	Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEL	Georgian Lari
GTUC	Georgian Trade Unions Confederation
IDI	In-depth Interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISET-PI	International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University – Policy Institute
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoH	Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall purpose of the research study was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women employed as domestic workers and their employers. The study was set to explore the extent of protection provided for domestic workers and whether their needs for support were met during and after the state of emergency. The study also explored employer experiences and attitudes towards domestic workers in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic separately for formal and informal employers. With this aim, 25 in-depth interviews and 8 focus group discussions were conducted with women domestic workers, and 5 focus group discussions were conducted with the employers of domestic workers. In addition, 4 key informant interviews were conducted with state and non-governmental sector representatives. The key findings of the study are presented below.

The working conditions of domestic workers are being impacted deeply by the ongoing pandemic and protective measures employed by the Government of Georgia. As the work of domestic workers requires a physical presence, the restriction on public transport left most domestic workers unemployed and unable to find another job. According to domestic workers, working hours have increased without it being reflected in their compensation, and their working conditions depend on the goodwill of their employers. All of our respondents were facing lessening employment opportunities, forcing them to settle for less favourable job conditions than before. While domestic work has always been an unstable and underappreciated occupation in Georgia and globally, the pandemic further exacerbated its precarious nature. Domestic workers are finding it hard to follow the most basic health recommendations during the coronavirus pandemic. As most of them cannot afford protective equipment, their health and well-being are entirely up to their employers. It is important to note that among the domestic workers participating in the study, nannies employed in Tbilisi had the most favourable working conditions. Many of them were formally employed through agencies and were able to maintain their income even during the lockdown. On the other hand, cleaners participating in the study had unstable jobs based on verbal agreements with multiple employers; therefore, most of them lost their source of livelihood during the lockdown.

The pandemic has affected the personal relationships between domestic workers and their employers. Most domestic workers are trying to maintain a good relationship with their employers, understanding that their employers have financial difficulties too; however,

some respondents admit that an overly friendly relationship sometimes gets in the way of demanding fair pay and defending one's rights. Overall, most employers and employees have become more distanced both physically and in terms of their relationship. Domestic workers avoid talking about sexual harassment; however, most of them discuss different types of abuse specific to domestic workers. Many of them have had employers who abused them psychologically or neglected them and did not provide enough food. These experiences are especially common for live-in employees.

Participants of the present research study are undecided and not sufficiently informed regarding the formalization of their working relationships. Many domestic workers say that they have established trust with their employers and do not need contracts. Others say that the absence of a contract gives them more flexibility in terms of working hours and rest days. In addition, some of the employers are against contracts, so domestic workers avoid confronting them in fear of losing their jobs. Employers too are undecided about formalization. Some of them say that after establishing a certain degree of trust, a contract is simply unnecessary. They also say that formalizing employment relationships with domestic workers is quite uncommon in Georgia, and they have never thought about it before. Others say they have offered domestic workers the opportunity to formalize their employment relationship, but domestic workers were not interested or expressed a fear of tax responsibilities.

The pandemic has increased unpaid labour for domestic workers. Most respondents perform a second shift at home and have no time to themselves beyond paid and unpaid employment. The workload increased drastically for mothers who have school-age children and have to

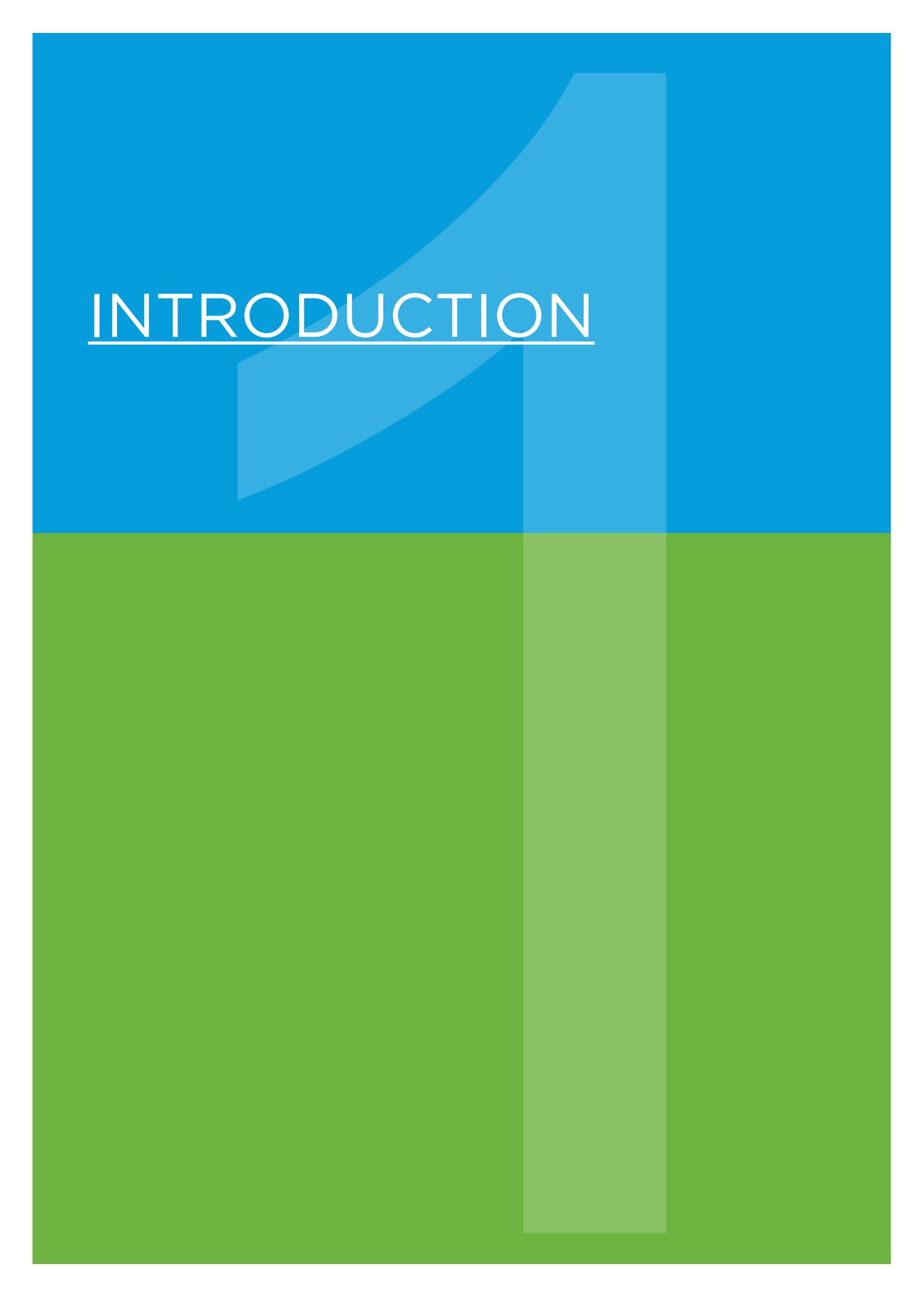
supervise their online studying process. Because of the restrictions on kindergartens and schools, women have to perform the functions of public institutions along with their usual roles.

Due to restrictions and a fear of the virus among the employers, most of our respondents either lost their livelihood altogether or are getting decreased compensation. Many respondents became primary breadwinners for their families because their spouses and/or children lost their jobs. Some double-earner families became single-earners. In some cases, families came to depend entirely on social assistance. In order to survive, many domestic workers and their families took out bank loans that have a considerable interest rate, having an even more negative effect on their long-term financial situation. Most respondents see it as their individual responsibility to cope with these difficulties. According to them, they mostly rely on informal networks and their own sense of responsibility.

Domestic workers who are employed informally found it hard to receive any kind of compensation, and some of them lacked official information from the Government.

While discussing government support, most respondents discussed unemployment compensation, assistance with utility bills, postponement of bank loan payments and financial assistance of GEL 200 for children. Some research participants had difficulties accessing most of the above-mentioned assistance programmes due to their informal employment status. Most of them got information about state programmes from television or social media; however, there were a number of respondents who did not have sufficient information about the Government's crisis response strategy and support programmes and struggled to find out which form of assistance they were eligible for.

INTRODUCTION

The image features a solid blue upper half and a solid green lower half. A light blue, semi-transparent geometric shape, resembling a stylized arrow or a folded piece of paper, is positioned in the upper right quadrant. The word "INTRODUCTION" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, underlined, and centered horizontally across the blue background.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Georgia on 26 February 2020. As of 8 December, there are 174,383 confirmed cases, 27,482 active cases, 145,287 recovered patients and 1,614 registered deaths in Georgia.¹

The pandemic has had differential effects on social groups, highlighting the inequalities and vulnerabilities of each. Especially vulnerable during the global crisis are women domestic workers, the majority of whom are employed informally. During the COVID-19 crisis, already unstable employment became even more precarious, and the fear of losing one's source of livelihood became a part of domestic workers' lives. According to recent International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, more than 55 million domestic workers around the world (around three quarters of domestic workers worldwide) are facing a threat of unemployment due to the lockdown and insufficient social security coverage, with 37 million of these domestic workers being women.² The decline in hiring families' income from the formal sector reflected negatively on the income of domestic workers.³ Moreover, the restrictions on public transport made it impossible for domestic workers to reach the workplace. For domestic workers, "Stay at Home" measures and restrictions on mobility led to a heightened risk of unemployment and poverty.

In July 2020, the United Nations urged the protection of domestic workers' rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. As most domestic workers are informally employed and unfairly remunerated, they have only had two options during the pandemic: either stop receiving income altogether or risk being exposed to the coronavirus.⁴ Therefore, the United Nations urged States to extend the coverage of labour laws and emergency measures to domestic workers while emphasizing the key role

of domestic work in the care economy and its vital contribution to the well-being of society.⁵

A publication by UN Women, ILO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), focusing on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean, highlights the precarious employment conditions and high vulnerability of domestic workers during the pandemic, as more than 77.5 per cent of women engaged in domestic work in this region are employed informally. In Central America and the Caribbean, informality exceeds 90 per cent on average;⁶ therefore, the arguments and recommendations provided in the publication are relevant to the present research study as they mirror the high rates of informality of domestic work in Georgia. According to a Regulatory Impact Assessment conducted by ISET-PI and UN Women, only 8 per cent of the research participants had signed a written contract, confirming a high engagement of domestic workers in Georgia in informal employment.⁷

Considering these circumstances, especially relevant are the recommendations regarding the extension of unemployment benefits for domestic workers, encouraging the formalization of domestic work, developing health and safety protocols for domestic workers and making the care services a priority.⁸ The ILO has assessed the impact of the pandemic on domestic workers globally and found that by 4 June 2020, 72 per cent of workers were significantly affected by the crisis; however, among the formally employed workers, the rate was lower – 49 per cent.⁹

Some EU countries implemented emergency measures to aid domestic workers during the coronavirus crisis. For example, in France, the Government pays 80 per cent of the wages of those domestic workers who are unable to work due to restrictions.¹⁰ Spain introduced a subsidy of

1 Data accessible at stopcov.ge. (accesses on 30 November 2020)

2 Additional information can be found at: https://www.ilo.org/moscow/news/WCMS_748093/lang--en/index.htm

3 UN Women Georgia and ISET-PI, *Regulatory Impact Assessment C189 – Domestic Workers Convention* (2020, forthcoming).

4 United Nations Department of Global Communications, "UN Urges Protection of Domestic Workers' Rights During COVID-19 Pandemic", 2020. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/un-urges-protection-domestic-workers%E2%80%99-rights-during-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed on 30 December 2020).

5 Ibid.

6 UN Women, ILO and ECLAC, *Domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 crisis* (2020). Available

at https://www.ilo.org/americas/publicaciones/WCMS_751773/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 30 December 2020).

7 UN Women Georgia and ISET-PI, *Regulatory Impact Assessment C189*.

8 Ibid.

9 ILO, "Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on loss of jobs and hours among domestic workers", 15 June 2020. Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/--travail/documents/publication/wcms_747961.pdf.

10 UN Women, ILO and ECLAC, *Domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 crisis* (2020). Available at https://www.ilo.org/americas/publicaciones/WCMS_751773/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 30 December 2020).

up to 70 per cent of their base salary for female domestic workers who are registered with the State's social security services and either lost their jobs or had their work hours reduced due to the pandemic.¹¹

According to the statement made by the International Domestic Workers Federation, domestic workers worldwide are experiencing an increased workload without overtime work compensation. They are particularly vulnerable as the issue of their health and safety is ignored and often violated.¹² Therefore, countries are encouraged to take steps in order to protect the rights of domestic workers during the pandemic, including the right to a safe and hazard-free workplace and the right to paid sick leave and access to health care.¹³

The COVID-19 Anti-Crisis Economic Plan (AEP), introduced by the prime minister of Georgia on 24 April, aimed to financially assist people newly out of a job because of the pandemic while also supporting businesses. Within the plan, utility bills (for electricity, water and waste management) were financed for more than 1.2 million families, and natural gas bills were financed for more than 670,000 families. The State also ensured nine main food products against price spikes by signing contracts with major importers. Another important part of the AEP was that 600,000 people were allowed to defer their bank loans.¹⁴ For stage two, hired employees who lost their jobs or were on unpaid leave received GEL 200 each

month for a period of six months. Persons employed in the informal sector or self-employed persons received one-time assistance of GEL 300 if they provided proof of loss of income. Additionally, families with a social rating score between 65,000 and 100,000; families with a social rating score between 0 and 100,000 with three or more children under the age of 16; and people with severe disabilities and disabled children received GEL 100 each month for a period of six months.¹⁵ Within stage three of the AEP, utility bills were financed for four more months: November, December, January and February. Children up to the age of 17 received one-time financial assistance of GEL 200. About 80,000 people who were unable to present sufficient documentation required to receive unemployment assistance, received it regardless before the end of September.¹⁶ According to stage four of the AEP, people employed in the formal sector who lost their jobs will receive assistance of GEL 1,200 within six months of January 2021. The self-employed will receive GEL 300 in one-time assistance. Families with a social rating score between 65,000 and 100,000; families with a social rating score between 0 and 100,000 with three or more children under the age of 16; and people with severe disabilities and disabled children will receive GEL 600 distributed throughout the period of six months. Moreover, people whose economic activity is restricted in the months of December and January will have a chance to defer their bank loans.

11 Ibid.

12 International Domestic Workers Federation, "Global: IDWF Statement on Protecting Domestic Workers Rights and Fighting the Coronavirus Pandemic", 18 March 2020. Available at <https://idwfed.org/en/updates/global-idwf-statement-on-protecting-domestic-workers-rights-and-fighting-the-coronavirus-pandemic> (accessed on 30 December 2020).

13 Ibid.

14 Georgia, Anti-Crisis Economic Plan (2020). Available at <https://stopcov.ge/ka/Gegma> (accessed on 30 November 2020).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

The background is split horizontally into a blue top half and a green bottom half. Two overlapping circles are centered horizontally, with the top one in the blue section and the bottom one in the green section. The text is white and underlined.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of this research was to conduct an in-depth, qualitative impact assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic on women employed as domestic workers and their employers. The study was set to explore the extent of protection provided for these groups and whether their needs for support were met during and after the state of emergency. The aim is to ascertain necessary adjustments for future response and recovery efforts. The specific objectives of the research study were as follows:

- To study the working conditions and employment practices of domestic workers and how such circumstances were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the effects of the introduced lockdown measures.
 - To understand the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment relationships (e.g. on working hours, vacation and leave, remuneration amount, compensation, etc.), including the personal relationships between domestic workers and their employers.
 - To assess the Government's support provided during the pandemic, including an assessment of the access to information, state-provided services and temporary unemployment assistance, as perceived by domestic workers.
 - To study the effects of the introduced measures (i.e. emergency situation, lockdown, school closures, travel/movement restrictions, working arrangements, self-isolation, etc.) on economic security and the sources of livelihood for domestic workers.
- To explore the differentiated effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers of varying characteristics (e.g. urban or rural, live-in or live out, employed formally through an agency or informally, etc.), also taking into consideration their high-load unpaid care roles in their own households.
 - To study domestic workers' basic needs and coping strategies to secure economic resources and maintain a source of income considering the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - To explore instances of harassment and/or abuse in the workplace and the possible effect of COVID-19 on such instances.
 - To study employer experiences and attitudes towards domestic workers in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic separately for formal (employment agencies and households) and informal employers (households).
 - To explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women during different phases of the pandemic: (a) the lockdown (from March to May); (b) the reduced restrictions (from June to August); and (c) the increased number of cases (from September to October).

The image features a vertical split background. The top half is a solid blue color, and the bottom half is a solid green color. Overlapping the boundary between the two colors are several large, semi-transparent circles. One large circle is centered in the blue area, and another large circle is centered in the green area. The word "METHODOLOGY" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font across the middle of the image, positioned over the blue background and partially overlapping the circles. A thin white horizontal line is drawn directly beneath the text.

METHODOLOGY

The research activities were carried out in four phases: the inception phase, desk phase, field phase and synthesis phase. Each phase will be discussed separately below.

3.1 Inception phase

In the inception phase, the research team developed a detailed design of the study that included an exhaustive study methodology and key approaches for all stages of the study, such as a sampling design/respondent recruitment strategy, data collection tools, data collection methods and procedures, and an analysis strategy.

3.2 Desk phase

In order to enhance the understanding of existing knowledge and data on the implications of COVID-19 on women employed as domestic workers, the research team conducted a thorough desk review during the initial stage of the study. The research team analysed existing studies and literature related to the research problem. In addition, in order to provide country context, the team reviewed the country policy documents related to COVID-19. Based on desk review findings, the research team developed guides for the field phase.

3.3 Field phase

The WeResearch team used qualitative research methods. Specifically, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were applied for data collection purposes. The aim of conducting FGDs was to reveal different experiences and narratives related to the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women domestic workers and to encourage the discussions among them. The IDIs aimed to more deeply explore the lived experiences of the domestic workers during the pandemic, while the KIIs were utilized to assess the situation from the perspectives of governmental and non-governmental sector representatives.

3.3.1 Research instruments

Prior to starting the fieldwork, the research team developed semi-structured research guides according to the research objectives. The research team relied on the recommendations and best practices from the ILO and other organizations during the development of the research instruments.¹⁷

The research team developed five different guides for different target groups and methods: FGD guide for domestic workers; FGD guide for the employers of the FGD workers; IDI guide for domestic workers; KII guide for the representatives of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (MoH); and KII guide for the NGO/CSO sector.¹⁸

All guides included questions on demographic data and consisted of open-ended questions. The topics covered in the guides were as follows: the impact of COVID-19 on the working and employment conditions of domestic workers; the access to government support; the impact of the Government's measures against COVID-19 on everyday activities; the financial need and strategies to secure economic resources; and instances of abuse and sexual harassment. The open-ended questions offered the study participants an opportunity to elaborate on their responses based upon their knowledge and experience. Furthermore, open-ended questions allowed the interviewer to not lose the focus of the interview/discussion and simultaneously gave the respondents an opportunity to lead the discussion towards the matters that were of particular importance to them.

3.3.2 Sampling: Target groups and locations

The research team used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to identify study participants.¹⁹ The principles of both sampling methods

17 ILO, *Qualitative research on employment relationship and working conditions: preliminary guidelines* (2014). Available at https://www.ilo.org/travail/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_248899/lang-en/index.htm.

18 Qian Liu and others, "The experiences of health-care providers during the COVID-19 crisis in China: a qualitative study", *The Lancet Global Health*, vol. 8, No. 6 (June 2020). Available at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30204-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30204-7/fulltext);
Carla Felice and others, "Impact of COVID-19 Outbreak on Healthcare Workers in Italy: Results from a National E-Survey", *Journal of Community Health*, vol. 45, No. 4 (May 2020). Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7242177/>;

Jianyu Que and others, "Psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare workers: a cross-sectional study in China", *General Psychiatry*, vol. 33, No. 3 (June 2020). Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7299004/>;
Negin Talaei and others, "Stress and burnout in health care workers during COVID-19 pandemic: validation of a questionnaire", *Nature Public Health Emergency Collection*, 6 June 2020 (1-6). Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7275852/> (accessed on 30 September 2020).

19 Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 2001).

are often applied in qualitative research. The purposive sampling method implies reaching out and selecting study participants by specific characteristics – that is, based on the research objectives – while through utilizing the snowball method, the researcher finds more study participants based on the recommendation of the interview respondents.

The target group of the current research study were women employed as domestic workers. Domestic work is defined as “work performed in or for a household or households”, and domestic workers’ occupation and tasks include cooking, cleaning and taking care of children, the elderly and the disabled.²⁰ In order to produce extensive, comprehensive findings regarding the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the various groups of workers with different employment and living conditions and from different age groups, WeResearch used the strategy of targeted sampling by applying predetermined quotas for various subgroups of the target populations. In particular, the required characteristics of the **domestic workers** included in the research study were residence area (urban or rural), age (mixed, from different age groups), living arrangements (live-in or live-out) and recruitment type (formally through an agency or informally). In the case of **employers of domestic workers**, recruitment criteria included their place of residence (the capital or other cities).

The target locations for the study were Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Marneuli and Tetrtskaro. The research team selected Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi because these cities saw the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases. The reasoning behind selecting Marneuli and Tetrtskaro was that they were under quarantine with travel restrictions in the spring, early in the pandemic. The research team aimed to capture this experience too. Besides this criterion, Tetrtskaro was selected as a rural location, and Marneuli was selected as a location with a comparatively high representation of ethnic minorities.

WeResearch hired local recruiters at each location. The recruiters were responsible for recruiting informally hired

domestic workers as per the detailed guideline provided by the WeResearch team. To recruit the formally hired domestic workers, the research team developed a list of formal employment agencies, contacted them officially and received the contact information of formally hired domestic workers.

3.3.3 Data collection

WeResearch conducted the fieldwork from October to December 2020. The research team planned to conduct fieldwork combining online and offline interviews/discussions, meaning that half of the interviews were planned to be conducted face to face. However, due to the rapid increase of COVID-19 cases in September, WeResearch made the decision to not risk the safety of both data collectors and respondents and instead to conduct all fieldwork online. Consequently, FGDs as well as IDIs and KIIs were conducted via the online platform Zoom. In several cases, the respondents did not have access to Zoom or had a poor Internet connection; therefore, phone interviews were conducted instead.

The research team conducted eight FGDs with domestic workers and five FGDs with the employers of domestic workers. The aim of conducting FGDs was to initiate discussions about the topic and identify different experiences of domestic workers and their employers. The FGDs were distributed across the locations as follows: seven in Tbilisi; three in Kutaisi; two in Batumi; and one in Marneuli.

In addition to FGDs, 25 IDIs were conducted with domestic workers. The aim of the IDIs was to provide a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of the challenges that domestic workers faced due to COVID-19 and their respective coping mechanisms. The number of IDIs conducted at each project location were as follows: 11 in Tbilisi; 5 in Kutaisi; 5 in Batumi; 2 in Marneuli; and 2 in Tetrtskaro. Five out of the interviewed domestic workers were hired formally. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of FGDs and IDIs across the project locations.

20 ILO Convention No. 189. For more information, see <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/domestic-workers/lang-en/index.htm>.

Table 1.
Distribution of FGDs and IDIs across locations

	Tbilisi	Kutaisi	Batumi	Marneuli	Tetritskaro
FGDs	7	3	2	1	0
IDIs	11	5	5	2	2

Finally, four KIIs were conducted with the governmental and non-governmental sectors, specifically with the representatives of the MoH, the Solidarity Network, the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) and the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation (GTUC).

All interviews and discussions were audio recorded with the informed consent of the respondents. The FGD recordings were transcribed. As for the interview recordings, the interviewers developed short summaries of each interview, including key issues and quotations.

3.4 Synthesis phase

During the synthesis phase, WeResearch analysed the collected data and compiled it with desk review findings. In order to ensure the appropriate integration of desk research with qualitative data analysis and allow for the

triangulation of findings, the research team employed a hybrid inductive and deductive thematic coding approach to the qualitative analysis. The hybrid coding approach allows for some flexibility in qualitative analysis by adding thematic codes as appropriate in order to capture new or unexpected phenomena not anticipated in the research design.

The research team used a time frame for purposes of the analysis. In particular, the analysis covered the time frame before and during the pandemic. The period during the pandemic is divided into three phases: (a) the lockdown (from March to May); (b) the reduced restrictions (from June to August); and (c) the increased number of cases (from September to October). Table 2 summarizes the research methodology.

Table 2.
Research design

Method	Qualitative study		
Technique	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	In-depth Interview (IDI)	Key informant Interview (KII)
Target group	Formally and informally hired domestic workers Formal and informal employers of domestic workers	Formally and informally hired domestic workers	Representatives of the MoH, Solidarity Network, EMC, GTUC
Sample size	13	25	4
Sampling method	Purposive sampling and snowball method	Purposive sampling and snowball method	Purposive sampling
Study area	Tbilisi, Imereti (Kutaisi), Adjara (Batumi), Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli)	Tbilisi, Imereti (Kutaisi), Adjara (Batumi), Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli and Tetritskaro)	Tbilisi
Approximate length of interview	2 hours	45 min.	70 min.
Fieldwork dates	31 October – 9 November 2020	31 October – 9 November 2020	17 November – 9 December 2020

3.5 Ethical considerations for data collection

To ensure the ethical treatment of participants in this research and the benefits of the study, the following steps were undertaken:

- Prior to the FGDs, IDIs and KIIs, verbal informed consent was obtained from the respondents. The interviewer provided the respondents with all information regarding the objectives of the study and the interview. The respondents were also informed of the process and that they could terminate the interview at any point they wished to.
- The research team maintained the confidentiality of the respondents/participants by not disclosing their name and surname. The information was analysed and presented in a way that minimized all of the characteristics that might make the respondents identifiable.
- The data obtained were shared with other members of the research team for validation purposes based upon the consent of the respondents.
- The research team recorded the meeting with the consent of the participants. The audio recordings were stored until the end of the study period for verification purposes and were destroyed afterwards.
- In addition, following the framework of this research, the IDIs and KIIs were conducted using online tools; accordingly, the research team considered ethical issues intrinsic to Internet-mediated research (IMR) in addition to the above written. Therefore, particular emphasis was made on the following considerations: the public-private domain distinction online; confidentiality and security of online data; procedures for obtaining valid consent; procedures for ensuring withdrawal rights and debriefing; levels of researcher control; and implications for scientific value and potential harm.²¹

3.6 Research limitations

The circumstances of the pandemic changed significantly during the research period. This led to certain methodological limitations that needed to be considered. First of all, the research team conducted fieldwork in October-November 2020. The study reflects the situation during this time frame, but the changes and developments that occurred afterwards could not be covered in the report.

Due to the rapid increase of COVID-19 cases, the research team had to conduct the fieldwork online. Online interviews were efficient for the respondents in terms of saving travel time. However, some group members had technical problems, such as difficulties logging in and difficulties hearing and being heard, among others. These difficulties hindered their full participation in the discussion and limited their opportunities to express their opinion. Additionally, conducting online FGDs influences the group dynamics and the intensity of the discussions; therefore, the moderator needed to make an additional effort and manage the discussion in a way to ensure the lively engagement of all FGD members. Lastly, using online tools for data collection complicated observations on the group dynamics. Non-verbal communication was especially affected. Some of the participants preferred to not turn the video on, or their video feed was compromised because of a poor Internet connection. The lack of non-verbal communication made it difficult for the interviewer to grasp the emotions and meanings behind the words.

Furthermore, since domestic workers are mostly in the larger cities, the study focuses on urban areas. Due to this fact, rural areas are less represented in the research study.

Finally, this research covers the topic of sexual harassment and abuse. However, it should be highlighted that unless the study is focused specifically on sexual harassment, the issue is always downplayed by the respondents.

²¹ British Psychological Society, *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (Leicester, 2017). INF206/04.2017. Available at [https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20\(2017\).pdf](https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20(2017).pdf) (accessed on 3 December 2020).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Working conditions and employment practices of domestic workers and the influence of COVID-19 on employment relationships

4.1.1 The threat of unemployment

As the work of domestic workers requires a physical presence, restrictions on mobility created a significant threat of unemployment. According to the respondents, at least one member of their family lost their job in the spring because of strict protective measures against the pandemic, increasing the financial burden on other family members. The closure of public transport forced them to use taxis, which they cannot afford long-term. Some domestic workers who lost their jobs in the spring found new jobs in the summer when the Government loosened restrictions; however, the demand for domestic workers is usually low during the vacation season. Domestic workers who take public transport are still at a disadvantage. Domestic workers from Tbilisi discussed the risks of public transport as some of them have to change lines and use both the Metro and buses, which places them at a high risk of getting infected and makes them less desirable to employers. During the pandemic, employers prefer nannies and helpers who live close enough to walk to work or who have access to a car, which is rare. One of the domestic workers said her employer was paying the taxi fees, but it got so pricey that she was eventually let go.

“Everyone asks the same question: do you live nearby? Will you be able to walk to work in case another lockdown happens?” (FGD with informal domestic workers, Tbilisi)

The period of unemployment for domestic workers who lost their jobs because of the restrictions lasted anywhere from a couple of weeks to four months. According to the respondents, it is especially hard for women over the age of 40 to find new jobs because employers usually seek younger employees. It is even harder for ethnic minorities who also have a language barrier. Despite these obstacles, many of the domestic workers were employed at the time of the interviews and discussions. They found new jobs when the Government loosened the restrictions

22 Additional information can be found at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31019357.html?fbclid=IwARoM3V6CopR7Da2wrD5cHrs8gtunQN-FZj5Zf4XYlBrVSXlJMTYS5u5QUBo>.

in the summer; however, the size of the population infected with COVID-19 increased drastically in the autumn, renewing the fears of the research participants. It is not surprising that there is a predominant feeling of fear and uncertainty among them. Our research team made follow-up calls to the respondents, asking them whether they were able to maintain their jobs after new restrictions were introduced on 28 November. As of 4 December, most of the respondents were unable to keep their jobs. Domestic workers whose family had access to a car were able to continue working. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that their employers either drive them to and from work or pay their taxi fees.

The continuous control of the employment and health situation is of crucial importance because the circumstances keep changing – the present report was completed before the second curfew (i.e. public transport restrictions) was introduced in Georgia. In December 2020, a report emerged in the media that employers and agencies are seeking domestic workers who have already recovered from COVID-19,²² further complicating the job-seeking process for domestic workers. As the COVID-19 case numbers rise without unemployment benefits and direct cash transfers, this trend may induce some domestic workers to intentionally expose themselves to COVID-19 in order to cope with the dire economic circumstances. The legal and ethical aspects of requesting a COVID-19 diagnosis for employment require further attention and exploration.

While domestic work has always been an unstable and underappreciated occupation in Georgia and globally, the pandemic further exacerbated its precarious nature. Most research participants noted that because of the high demand for domestic workers, they did not experience high levels of anxiety about being unemployed before the pandemic; however, the pandemic and its consequences have upended their reality.

“With messages to stay home and work remotely, the demand for female-dominated domestic labour has declined; curfew and restrictions on public transport also had a big impact. Restrictions were lifted in the summer during the vacation season when the demand for domestic workers is usually low. The situation has worsened again in the autumn.” (KII with the representative of the EMC)

At the time of the fieldwork, most respondents said they were fearful of four things: (1) future restrictions making their work impossible; (2) long periods of unemployment; (3) being infected and transmitting the virus to their own family members and the family members of their employers; and (4) prices of essential products continuing to rise. Many domestic workers noted that even those who are employed formally are at risk of unemployment, let alone those who work informally. According to them, it is common for informal employment to terminate unexpectedly. This is the reason why some domestic workers have multiple jobs, taking up almost all of their time. For example, one of the respondents from Tetrtskaro had two jobs, one as a nanny and another as a cleaner. Others were forced to combine their regular jobs with other jobs. For example, a respondent who was a caregiver for the elderly had to do the job of a cleaner in addition to her regular job and eventually moved in with her employer because of the long hours.

Employers from a nanny agency say that demand for nannies has decreased dramatically during the pandemic and that their work has become more challenging. Everyone either lets nannies go or wants them to switch to a 24-hour workday. There is high demand for nannies who have their own car and do not use public transport. Demand fell in the spring and went back up in the summer. It fell again in the autumn, although public transport was available at the time of the fieldwork. **It is important to note that according to the data collected, the demand for live-in employees has increased, but only a few of our respondents are willing to switch to live-in employment.** Interestingly, most of the domestic workers who agreed to switch to live-in employment live outside of Tbilisi. According to the data collected, jobs are even more scarce in the regions, and women are forced to take live-in jobs in order to maintain a source of income.

“The pandemic changed my typical working day for the worse. Before the pandemic, I used to work from morning to evening and went home afterwards. Now I have to spend the night at my employer’s place and leave my daughter alone at home.” (IDI with informally employed caregiver, Marneuli)

23 UN Women Georgia and ISET-PI, Regulatory Impact Assessment C189.

To sum up, the pandemic had a significant effect on the working conditions and employment practices for domestic workers. All of our respondents were facing an increasing risk of unemployment and shrinking employment opportunities, forcing them to settle for less favourable job conditions than before.

4.1.2 Working hours, remuneration and vacation

According to Article 24 of the Labour Code of Georgia, standard working hours should not exceed 40 hours a week. However, most domestic workers are beyond the guarantees set by the Labour Code due to the informality of the work they perform. According to the Regulatory Impact Assessment conducted by ISET-PI and UN Women, four out of five domestic workers work more than 40 hours per week, compared to about half of other workers.²³ The pandemic further aggravated the ambiguity of the legal status of domestic workers and worsened their working conditions. Most of the participants of this research say that their working time was unregulated and was beyond the 40-hour standard even before the pandemic; however, the hours and the job duties became even more unruly since the start of the pandemic. Various recommendations from health-care authorities regarding protective measures (hygiene and sanitation) against COVID-19 increased the working hours for domestic workers as they have to spend extra time on disinfecting the apartments or take special measures in terms of personal hygiene. It also had a considerable effect on the time beyond paid employment for domestic workers, especially nannies, who try to avoid all social interactions to minimize the risk of infecting the children.

Many employers stress the importance of domestic workers in their lives, especially during the pandemic. According to them, they would not have been able to work from home without paid help at home. Formal employers say they provide paid vacation to their nannies, or they pay half of the regular compensation; however, informal employers are not obliged to do so, and it is entirely up to their goodwill. There are some who cannot keep domestic workers because of their children’s online learning. They say children need peace and quiet during their online lessons, and cleaners would make noise. When asked about the health risks of the employees, most respondents talk about their own risk of getting the COVID-19 from domestic workers.

It is important to note that among the domestic workers participating in the research study, nannies employed in Tbilisi had the most favourable working conditions. Many of them were employed through agencies and had contracts, guaranteeing them a basic level of protection during the pandemic. Most of these nannies were able to maintain their income even during the lockdown. On the other hand, cleaners participating in the study had unstable jobs based on verbal agreements with multiple employers; therefore, most of them lost their source of livelihood during the lockdown in the spring and again in the autumn.

Generally, the functions of domestic workers are not defined clearly by the employers, and they often have to do diverse tasks not directly related to their main occupation. Some have to combine their tasks with the tasks of other employees who were let go because of the pandemic. One of the respondents who was hired as a caregiver for the elderly mentioned that during the pandemic, the employer required her to clean and cook for the whole family in addition to her regular responsibilities without extra payment. Rather, according to research participants, in most cases, remuneration for their work has decreased significantly; however, they are forced to agree to these conditions risking their health in order to maintain their employment.

“I only have two options. I either work and get infected with COVID, or don’t work and starve.” (FGD with informally employed cleaners, Tbilisi)

Most informal employers participating in the research study express respect towards domestic workers. Many of them say they paid their employees even when it was impossible for them to work because of the lockdown. They see and acknowledge the hard work of domestic workers; however, most say they are currently unable to reflect their positive feelings towards their employees through their pay. It is clear that domestic workers’ pay is in direct correlation with the employers’ income, which provides little to no stability, especially during a global pandemic. Domestic workers employed informally depend on the salaries of their employers from the formal sector. As there is no minimum wage for domestic workers remuneration depends on the goodwill of the employer.

“I will increase her pay as soon as my salary increases. It’s been eight years since my salary changed, and nevertheless, I’ve been supporting her more and more all these years...” (FGD with informal employers, Tbilisi)

When it comes to vacations, some of the respondents say they have never used vacation days, even before the pandemic; others, who were employed informally, noted that they preferred to not use vacation days during the pandemic, both for health and financial reasons. There are domestic workers who negotiate vacation days themselves before starting a new job. Meanwhile, agencies negotiate for those who are employed through them. For the rest, whether the domestic workers have vacation days or not (and whether it is paid) depends on the goodwill of their employer, sometimes even for those who are employed formally.

All respondents agree that they are underpaid for their work, and they agree to such conditions because there are not many other options for them in Georgia. Nannies emphasize the difficulty of their job, requiring constant focus on children, which leads to exhaustion. Vacation time, as well as other aspects of the employment relationship, mostly depends on the goodwill of the employer.

To sum up, working conditions for domestic workers are being impacted deeply by the ongoing pandemic and the protective measures employed by the Government. The restriction on public transport left most of the domestic workers unemployed and unable to find another job. According to the respondents, working hours have increased without it being reflected in their compensation.

4.1.3 Working relationships: Contracts

In the Regulatory Impact Assessment conducted by ISET-PI, only 23 per cent of the respondents were interested in formalizing their employment relationships, while the remaining 77 per cent were against formalization of their work either because they do not trust the Government (39 per cent) or do not want to pay taxes (16 per cent).²⁴ Correspondingly, participants of the present research study are not sufficiently informed about the benefits of formalizing their work. For many respondents, having

²⁴ Ibid.

a contract is only associated with tax responsibilities. Some domestic workers say that they have established trust with their employers and do not need contracts. Others say that the absence of a contract gives them more flexibility in terms of working hours and rest days. Moreover, some of the employers are against contracts, so domestic workers avoid confronting them in fear of losing their jobs. There are also respondents who feel uncomfortable about asking employers for a contract because they were recommended to them by common acquaintances.

“When a person trusts you enough to take care of their child, talk about contracts is unnecessary.” (FGD with informally employed nannies, Tbilisi)

According to the Regulatory Impact Assessment report, the majority of the respondents changed their attitudes towards formalization during the crisis: 72 per cent said they would consider joining the formal sector if it guaranteed access to anti-crisis aid, while 36 per cent would consider it for working rights.²⁵ Similarly, after discussing the pros and cons with the interviewer/moderator, most of the respondents of the present research study changed their attitudes towards formalization. Many respondents agreed that the State should control the working hours and overtime pay. According to them, they often feel uncomfortable about taking overtime pay from their employers with whom they have a very close, family-like relationship. They would not have such obstacles if their employers were required by law to pay for extra work hours. **It is important to note that the pandemic changed their attitudes towards formalization significantly. Workers started associating formal employment with benefits (like state-provided financial assistance), whereas before the pandemic, they associated it with taxes only. However, as experts noted, these temporary benefits are not enough for domestic workers to formalize their employment relationships considering the obligations they would have under the contract.**

²⁵ Ibid.

“For the first time in Georgia, people started thinking about formalization differently. Before the pandemic, no one wanted to be a formal worker and pay taxes, but now they see that it is attached to certain benefits.” (KII with the representative of the Solidarity Network)

Most of the respondents have never thought of becoming members of professional unions; however, after discussing the idea with the interviewers/moderators, most of them expressed interest, while others said they would not invest their time in unions. As one of the respondents said, she would like to be a part of a union for domestic workers if it would help them get more support from the Government.

Employers too are undecided about formalization. Some of them say that after establishing a certain degree of trust, a contract is unnecessary. They also say that formalizing employment relationships with domestic workers is simply uncommon in Georgia, and they have never thought about it before. Others say they have offered domestic workers the opportunity to formalize their employment relationship, but domestic workers were not interested or expressed a fear of having to pay taxes.

“It is related to extra costs. You have to arrange a contract and get it notarized. After that, you have to pay income tax. No one wants that...” (FGD with informal employers, Tbilisi)

Some employers found domestic workers through friends' recommendations and say they could not just let a stranger into their homes. They do not even trust agencies in this matter and prefer to get personal recommendations from their own circle of people. Employers do not feel the need to negotiate a contract

with someone they found through a friend or relative and instead reach an agreement verbally.

Some agencies have a contract with the employer, not the employee. Others have agreements with three signatories. They do not provide health insurance. For the formal workers mentioned above, agencies do provide documents for compensation for those who lost their jobs during the pandemic. Agencies have blacklisted employees, and they share these lists with one another.

“The main recommendation is to formalize the informal employment. The Government should be interested in this process and create incentives. For example, during the pandemic, formal employees got six months of GEL 200 compensation instead of a single GEL 300 in assistance.” (KII with the representative of the GTUC)

To sum up, most respondents are against contracts as they are not aware of the benefits of formal agreements; however, after discussing it with the interviewers and focus group moderators, many of them changed their minds.

4.1.4 Personal relationships with the employer

Although the workload of domestic workers increased without it being reflected in their remuneration, many of our respondents still expressed sympathy for their employers. According to them, they fully understand that some of the employers can no longer afford to hire them and are fearful of getting the virus from them.

“Our relationship has not changed a bit. I fully understand their situation. I would rather get GEL 50 to GEL 100 less and maintain a good relationship than work in a hostile environment.” (FGD with formally employed nannies, Tbilisi)

Many research participants talked about a bond and the almost family-like relationship they have with their employers. Overall, in the absence of a formal agreement, this close personal relationship gives them a feeling of security and stability; however, there are downsides to being close to one’s employer.

“We become such good friends with our employers that we feel uncomfortable asking for overtime pay. The Government should define working hours and overtime compensation clearly so that we don’t have to face such problems.” (FGD with formally employed nannies, Tbilisi)

Many respondents admit that the personal relationship with their employers has become more distanced during the pandemic; however, they have sustained a good relationship. People are trying to maintain physical distance, and some even mentioned eating separately. Although most of the domestic workers describe their current employers positively, a few respondents say that their attitudes have changed during the pandemic, with some of them expressing resentment towards the employers who refused to pay them during the lockdown.

To sum up, most domestic workers are trying to maintain a good relationship with their employers, understanding that their employers have financial difficulties too; however, some respondents admit that an overly friendly relationship sometimes gets in the way of demanding fair pay and defending one’s rights. Overall, most employers and employees have become more distanced, both physically and in terms of their relationship.

4.1.5 Health-related needs

Most respondents say they try their best to follow recommendations from the Government; however, it is not always possible or affordable. According to the respondents, there are employers who do not take the pandemic seriously and, therefore, do not follow any health-care recommendations at home or provide domestic workers with protective equipment. These domestic workers have to buy masks and disinfectant solutions themselves. Not everyone can afford to wear a new mask every few hours.

“I have been wearing the same mask for over two months now. I wash it when I go home and then reuse it the next day. I cannot afford to change masks every hour. I have to wear this mask in public so that I do not get fined. I cannot afford to think about myself. I do not even have a disinfectant with me or at home.” (FGD with a mixed group of domestic workers, Kutaisi)

Obviously, reusing disposable masks is not safe for domestic workers, their families, their employers or the general public. Fortunately, there are employers who share their supply of protective equipment with their employees and take health risks seriously.

While COVID-19 cases increase, domestic workers who have chronic health conditions feel increased stress and anxiety. Some of our respondents said they were feeling all sorts of negative emotions, and a few reported being depressed because of the pandemic.

To sum up, domestic workers are finding it hard to follow the most basic health recommendations during the coronavirus pandemic. As most of them cannot afford protective equipment, their health and well-being are entirely up to their employers.

4.1.6 Instances of harassment and abuse

According to the Labour Code of Georgia, harassment in the workplace (including sexual harassment) is a form of discrimination and includes any undesirable behaviour towards a person that aims at or causes a violation of his or her dignity and creates a threatening, hostile, humiliating, degrading or abusive environment. In addition to this, violence and harassment can manifest in the following ways: verbal abuse, insults, threats, accusations of theft, insufficient provision of food, inhumane living conditions (in the case of live-in domestic workers), excessively long workdays and a lack of rest.²⁶

None of the respondents shared their experience of sexual harassment. They say they have heard of such cases but have not experienced it themselves; on the other hand, the majority of them stated that verbal and psychological abuse towards domestic workers is common, including insults, threats, accusations of theft, insufficient provision of food, inhumane accommodation and excessively long working hours with no rest.

“There are women who work in very harsh conditions. Some people literally starve their employees.” (FGD with informally employed nannies, Tbilisi)

²⁶ UN Women and ILO, Handbook: *Addressing Violence and Harassment against Women in the World of Work* (UN Women, 2019). Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/03/handbook-addressing-violence-and-harassment-against-women-in-the-world-of-work>.

There were a few respondents who have experienced constant psychological abuse from their past employers. One of them wanted to sue the employer but eventually decided it was not worth the time and money. Respondents note that it would be easier for them to prove harassment and abuse if they had contractual relationships with their employers, and they would feel more secure in this regard. Research participants also point out the need for their basic rights to be protected under a legal document considering the specificities of their work. Data gathered from KIIs are in agreement with the above-mentioned information. According to key informants, domestic workers are excluded from using any formal protective mechanisms and are at increased risk of sexual harassment and abuse, especially during the pandemic as they face the need to switch to live-in work arrangements.

To sum up, domestic workers avoid talking about sexual harassment; however, most of them discuss different types of abuse specific to domestic workers. Many of them have had employers who abused them psychologically or neglected them and did not provide enough food. This kind of abuse is especially obvious for live-in caregivers who have to spend most of the day with their employers.

4.2 Effects of COVID-19 in terms of high-load unpaid care roles

According to a 2018 research study by UN Women, women reported spending on average 45 hours on unpaid labour, while men only reported 15 hours of housework per week.²⁷ According to the GTUC representative, many women had to leave the labour force because of the increased burden of unpaid labour.

“Before the pandemic, preschool and school education was accessible. This changed during the pandemic. People employed in the care sector who have children are at a huge disadvantage. It is extremely hard to combine full-time work and full-time childcare.” (KII with the representative of the GTUC)

²⁷ UN Women Georgia, *Women’s Economic Inactivity and Engagement in the Informal Sector in Georgia* (2018). Available at <https://georgia.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/womens-economic-inactivity-and-engagement-in-the-informal-sector-in-georgia> (accessed on 9 December 2020).

The respondents of the present research study carry out a disproportionate share of housework and care work. Some of them get up earlier than their family members in the morning to clean the house and prepare meals for when they are not home. Those respondents who live with other female family members get help with housework. One of the respondents mentioned she has two sons, and neither them nor her husband helps her out with housework just because they are men. She said she would have raised her sons differently if she had known the consequences.

“I am the only woman in the house and the only one to do housework. I often wish I had raised my sons differently. Now they’re used to everything being handed to them. I often cook until 2 a.m. and spend my weekends shopping for groceries and preparing meals for the week.” (FGD with formally employed nannies, Tbilisi)

Time strain is tough on single mothers. Generally, research participants (both formal and informal employees) have little to no time beyond paid and unpaid work. Having no discretionary time leads to burnout and health complications. Some respondents have serious health issues that they do not have time to attend to. Those who have children in school have the additional burden of helping them adapt to online learning. They try to find more flexible jobs so they can help out their children with this transition.

“The closure of schools and kindergartens, online learning – it all increases women’s burden. I think this is the reason why so many women struggle to find or keep jobs.” (FGD with a mixed group of informally employed domestic workers, Kutaisi)

Respondents also mentioned that they could no longer afford cleaning products like washing detergent, cleaning cloths and other supplies. Therefore, their cleaning takes longer and is not as effective as before, increasing health risks during the pandemic.

To sum up, most respondents perform a second shift at home and have no time to themselves beyond paid and unpaid employment. The pandemic increased the workload at home for mothers who have school-age

children and have to supervise their online studying process. Because of the restrictions on kindergartens and schools, women have to perform the functions of public institutions along with their usual roles.

4.3 Effects of introduced measures on economic security and sources of livelihood

After the introduction of strict lockdown measures (especially restrictions on public transport), the income of many respondents’ families decreased significantly, or they lost their jobs altogether. Domestic work by its nature entails close contact with the employers and their residence, so the restrictions hit domestic workers harder than other occupations. The biggest blow took place in the spring when strict protective measures were enforced. According to the respondents, with the prices of goods rising, they barely have enough means to survive.

“Everything is more expensive during the pandemic. I have to pay GEL 11 for my regular medication, which cost GEL 6 before the pandemic.” (FGD with a mixed group of informally employed domestic workers, Tbilisi)

The representative of the EMC noted that domestic workers are underpaid, and therefore, most of them do not have savings. For domestic workers, especially those who are employed informally and do not have access to government support, rapid termination of employment led to extreme poverty in a very short period of time. Many research participants mentioned they struggle to find new jobs. The number of new job postings is extremely limited, and according to respondents, there are a few reasons for this:

1. Employers are afraid of getting COVID-19 from their employees. Most of the domestic workers have more than one job and are in contact with many people, so the risk of getting infected is high.
2. Due to restrictions on public transport, employers started looking for domestic workers who live nearby or who have access to a car. Most employers cannot afford taxi rides for domestic workers. Moreover, they are afraid that domestic workers will get infected via public transport and spread the virus to their families.

3. Due to the economic crisis, employers simply cannot afford domestic workers any more.
4. As many people switched to remote working and people spend most of their time at home, employers do not see the need to hire nannies or cleaners.
5. **It is hard for women over the age of 40 to find new jobs.** According to the respondents, employers prefer younger domestic workers. **It is even more challenging for ethnic minorities to find new jobs** because of the language barrier.

Those who continued working during the pandemic spent most of their salary on taxis in the spring. Many complained about the prices of protective equipment like masks, hand sanitizer and other products. Some employers provide this equipment to domestic workers, but other domestic workers have to purchase everything themselves, increasing their costs significantly.

“I cannot afford to change masks every few hours, so I use one for days, sometimes even weeks.” (FGD with a mixed group of informally employed domestic workers, Kutaisi)

According to the KII with the representative of the EMC, the effects of the pandemic are especially hard on women from urban areas as it is harder to find alternative sources of livelihood in the city.

“In an urban area, you can only have money as an income, while in a village, you can find alternative sources of livelihood if you, for example, engage in agricultural activities.” (KII with the representative of the EMC)

Some domestic workers’ families survived on the remittances received from family members working abroad. However, due to the global nature of the pandemic, the number of remittances decreased as well. **Many respondents became the primary breadwinners for their families because their spouses and/or children lost their jobs. Some double-earner families became single-earners. In some cases, families came to depend entirely on social assistance, which is not sufficient for covering basic necessities.** Most families had to take out a loan of some kind to afford basic needs in the spring. In order to

survive, many respondents and their families took out bank loans that have a very high interest rate, having an even more negative effect on their long-term financial situation.

4.3.1 Basic needs and coping strategies

A primary coping strategy, according to the respondents, is their own sense of responsibility and hard-working nature. They do not feel like they can rely on the assistance from the Government or their employer in a time of crisis. Some of them have turned their hobbies into sources of additional income; for example, one of the respondents takes knitting orders, while another started sewing and selling protective masks. Many of the respondents had to take out bank loans in order to survive during the period of unemployment. Several respondents said the majority of their income goes straight into bank payments.

Another coping strategy is relying on relatives and friends for financial and psychological support. Informal networks are essential parts of the respondents’ surviving strategies. As mentioned above, many domestic workers have established strong bonds with their employers, which gives them hope for stability; however, in the absence of formal agreements, they are not guaranteed anything.

Although respondents understand the global nature and systemic effects of the pandemic, they see it as their individual challenge to cope with.

To sum up, due to restrictions and a fear of the virus among the employers, most of our respondents either lost their livelihood altogether or are receiving decreased compensation. They see it as their individual responsibility to cope with these difficulties and do not expect help from the Government or the employers. They mostly rely on informal networks and their own self.

4.4 Government support

4.4.1 Access to programmes

While discussing government support, most respondents discussed unemployment compensation, assistance with utility bills, postponement of bank loan payments and financial assistance of GEL 200 for children. Some research participants had difficulties accessing all of the above-mentioned assistance programmes due to their informal employment status. Most of them got information about state programmes from television or social media.

The COVID-19 Anti-Crisis Economic Plan (AEP),²⁸ introduced by the prime minister of Georgia on 24 April, aimed to financially assist people newly out of a job because of the pandemic while also supporting businesses. For stage one of the AEP, utility bills (for electricity, water and waste management) were financed for more than 1.2 million families, and natural gas bills were financed for more than 670,000 families. The State also ensured nine main food products against price spikes by signing contracts with major importers. Another important part of the AEP was that 600,000 people were allowed to defer their bank loans.²⁹ For stage two, hired employees who lost their jobs or were on unpaid leave received GEL 200 each month for a period of six months. Persons employed in the informal sector or self-employed persons received one-time assistance of GEL 300 if they provided proof of loss of income. Additionally, families with a social rating score between 65,000 and 100,000; families with a social rating score between 0 and 100,000 with three or more children under the age of 16; and people with severe disabilities and disabled children received GEL 100 each month for a period of six months.³⁰ Within stage three of the AEP, utility bills were financed for four more months: November, December, January and February. Children up to the age of 17 received one-time financial assistance of GEL 200. About 80,000 people who were unable to present sufficient documentation required to receive unemployment assistance, received it regardless before the end of September.³¹ According to stage four of the AEP, people employed in the formal sector who lost their jobs will receive assistance of GEL 1,200 within six months of January 2021. The self-employed will receive GEL 300 in one-time assistance. Families with a social rating score between 65,000 and 100,000; families with a social rating score between 0 and 100,000 with three or more children under the age of 16; and people with severe disabilities and disabled children will receive GEL 600 throughout the period of six months. Moreover, people whose economic activity is restricted in the months of December and January will have a chance to defer their bank loans.

Domestic workers who were employed formally and whose employers provided them with the necessary documentation received either a one-time payment (if they are self-employed) or six months of financial assistance (for the formally employed) from the Government. Many respondents stated that they would

prefer if the Government made this assistance available to everyone regardless of their employment status. Some of them found it difficult to gather the necessary documents and therefore did not receive assistance. Those who were eligible for assistance stated that the amount is not enough for families to survive.

“The majority of domestic workers are employed on the basis of a verbal agreement; therefore, they are excluded from the protection of the law. Moreover, as most of them receive compensation in cash, they are unable to present bank statements and are refused access to state assistance.”
(KII with the representative of the EMC)

According to the KII conducted with the representative of the MoH, during the early stages of the pandemic, many domestic workers were not eligible to receive financial assistance from the Government. According to the respondent, the government resolution required employees to present proof of employment from a legal entity. Many domestic workers presented this proof from the families they worked for, which was not sufficient; however, according to the key informant from the MoH, eligibility criteria were changed along the way, and everyone who applied received the one-time compensation of GEL 300 regardless of their employment status.

“Many domestic workers applied for the one-time compensation and presented proof of employment from the families they informally worked for; for this reason, they were denied the compensation. However, it was later decided to grant all applicants the compensation regardless of the criteria set in the government resolution.”
(KII with the representative of the MoH)

This explains why some of the domestic workers say they were denied the compensation for not having relevant documentation, while others did not face similar problems and received the one-time compensation of GEL 300 upon application.

28 Georgia, Anti-Crisis Economic Plan.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

Large families whose utility costs exceeded free limits did not receive support from the Government and had to pay the whole sum as usual. Some respondents noted that they received grocery packages from the Government; however, they complained about the quality of the products as well as the unfair distribution of these packages. According to research participants, these products were not enough to feed large families, even for a short period of time. As for assistance with the banks, many respondents deferred their loans; however, most of them are not satisfied, reporting that they ultimately had to pay more in bank interest.

It is important to note that the crisis response strategy of the Government did not extend to informal workers, who comprise 34.7 per cent of the workforce.³² Our respondents, all of whom are involved in care work (most of them informally), are directly affected by government regulations as their physical presence is required for their jobs, and their mobility is limited. Nevertheless, there is no government programme targeting their specific problems.

One of the respondents who is a single mother stated that the Government needs to pay attention to single mothers, who are the sole caregivers and primary breadwinners in the family during the pandemic.

4.4.2 Access to information

Most respondents said that they got information about the state programmes from television and social media; however, there were a number of respondents who did

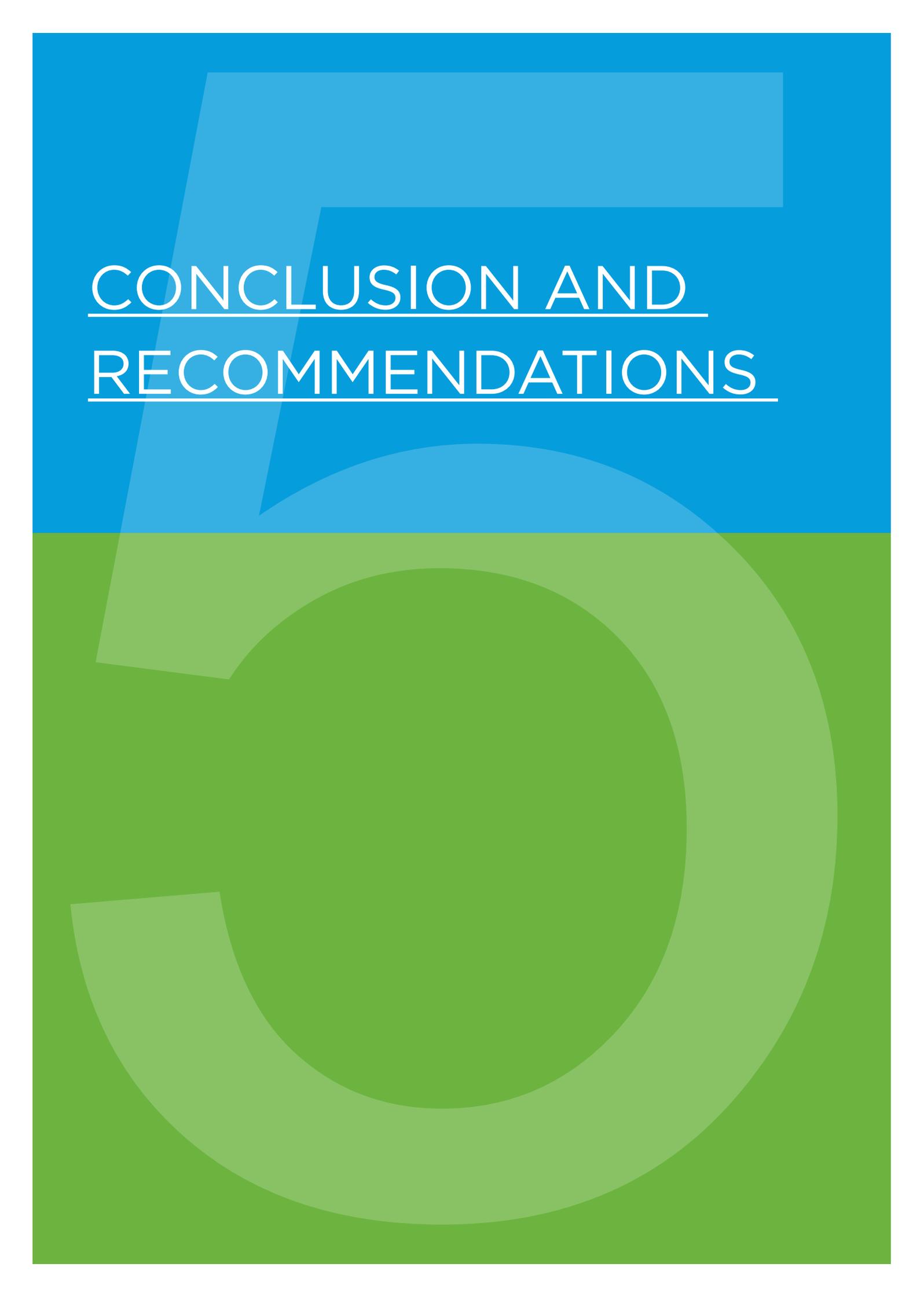
not have sufficient information about the Government's crisis response strategy and support programmes and struggled to find out which form of assistance they were eligible for.

According to the KII conducted with the representative of the GTUC, information was not easily accessible to the population, and their legal assistance team was overwhelmed with questions from people who wanted to know which exact compensation they qualified for and what bureaucratic procedure they had to go through. The representative of the EMC stated that it was especially hard for informal employees to take hold of the right information. According to her, being an informal employee meant being excluded not only from the field of formal labour but also from the field of formal information.

“Our research showed that women who are employed informally have less information about the government response. So, there is a correlation between the type of employment and the type of information received by the employee.”
(KII with the representative of the EMC)

To sum up, domestic workers who are employed informally found it difficult to receive any kind of compensation, and some of them lacked official information from the Government.

³² National Statistics Office of Georgia, “Employment and Unemployment”, 2019. Available at <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/683/ddu>.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to conduct an in-depth, qualitative impact assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers and explore the ways in which the Government of Georgia ensured support and protection for this group during the crisis. The aim is to determine necessary adjustments for the subsequent response and recovery efforts.

Domestic workers as a group were largely invisible and undervalued before the pandemic; however, the pandemic highlighted their vulnerability and made their work even more unreliable and precarious. As the job of a domestic worker requires their physical presence and close interaction with the members of the hiring family (especially for nannies and caregivers for the elderly), they were highly affected by the restrictions on mobility, and many lost their jobs. The income of domestic workers is directly connected to the income of their employers (paid from the formal sector) and their working hours, and the number of vacation days depends on the goodwill of the employers. This group of women work without any guarantees or protection from the State. Most of them are employed informally and are not sufficiently informed about the benefits of formalization.

Recommendations

- Domestic workers are in a particularly vulnerable situation as most of them are employed informally and are beyond the labour regulations and the mandate of the Labour Inspectorate; therefore, the Government should work on extending the scope of application of the labour laws to vulnerable groups like domestic workers who represent the informal economy. Moreover, the Government should take advantage of the changing attitudes towards formalization during the pandemic.

The formalization of domestic work is a global challenge but is among the key factors to improve the situation of domestic workers, even during the pandemic. Therefore, countries are developing different strategies and incentives in order to encourage formalization, including the reduction of fines, the introduction of fiscal incentives, the facilitation of online procedures and the reduction of bureaucracy, among other measures.³³

- The Government should ensure access to information and legal advice to domestic workers regarding their labour rights during the pandemic

as well as protection measures against COVID-19. It is crucial that information is accessible through different resources to circumvent the digital divide, and it must also be available in different languages so that it is accessible to ethnic minorities.

- **It is recommended that the Government ensures that domestic workers have access to unemployment benefits for the workers who lost their jobs, regardless of their legal status of employment and especially during the lockdown measures and the introduction of public transport restrictions.** The State should consider the needs of domestic workers as one of the most vulnerable groups of workers. As many of them are employed informally, based on a verbal agreement and receiving compensation in cash, they are unable to gather sufficient documentation for required to receive government assistance. It is recommended that the Government continues issuing compensation based on the proof of informal employment (i.e. letters provided by informal employers and/or proof of cash transfers).
- **It is recommended that the financial needs of domestic workers are studied throughout the pandemic and that the compensation is determined accordingly for the appropriate period of time. It is also recommended that domestic workers receive emergency cash transfers during the whole period when public transport is shut down** as such restrictions render domestic workers unable to get to their workplace. Due to the nature of their work, it is impossible for domestic workers to work remotely; therefore, many domestic workers have lost their sources of livelihood.

Moreover, according to a media report in December 2020, some employers were seeking domestic workers who have already recovered from and are immune to COVID-19 to protect themselves and their families from exposure to the coronavirus. It is important to provide direct cash transfers so unemployed domestic workers are not incentivized to resort to extreme measures to gain employment. **Accordingly, the legality and ethical considerations of such job requirements should be further explored, which is beyond the scope of this research.**

- **It is necessary to set special safety standards for domestic workers, as one of the vulnerable groups during the pandemic due to their potential**

33 UN Women, ILO and ECLAC, *Domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 crisis* (2020). Available

at https://www.ilo.org/americas/publicaciones/WCMS_751773/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 30 December 2020).

exposure to the virus at work. It is essential for the Labour Inspectorate to set the safety protocols and allow complaints from domestic workers regarding safety violations, regardless of the informality of their work.

Domestic workers have to work under precarious conditions and have strenuous schedules during the pandemic, which places their health at high risk. Since domestic workers belong to the category of workers who are exposed to COVID-19 because of their work, it is important to continue their access to free testing (and even simplify access to testing if/when necessary). The International Domestic Workers Federation recommends that governments take active steps in order to create a safe and hazard-free workplace, including the provision of protective equipment and training to use it correctly.³⁴

It is important to consider the above-mentioned trend of hiring domestic workers who have already recovered from COVID-19. This trend could discourage domestic workers from following safety recommendations, as they are much more likely to get hired after exposure to COVID-19. **As stated above, the legality and ethical considerations of such job requirements should be further explored, including the effect it may have on containing the pandemic situation.**

- It is necessary to promote awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of domestic workers so that they have information about their entitlement to labour rights – this will assist in the implementation of all above-stated recommendations.
- The Government of Georgia does not have a policy regarding domestic work, which became especially obvious during the pandemic; therefore, based on the findings of the present research study and the findings of the Regulatory Impact Assessment conducted by ISET-PI and UN Women, **it is recommended that the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), is ratified in Georgia and that state legislation is harmonized with the Convention.**

Recommendations in the publication by UN Women, ILO and ECLAC present the Convention as an important legal instrument for countries to promote public policies that protect domestic workers.³⁵ This instrument could create a solid basis for policy responses to the needs of domestic workers during the crisis and ensure decent work conditions during the coronavirus crisis.³⁶

- As schools and kindergartens are closed, women have an increased burden of unpaid labour. Women with school-age children have to spend more time caring for children, while also helping them adapt to online learning. Women who are caregivers to elderly family members need to put extra effort into care, especially under the weakened social protection and institutional mechanisms. **It is recommended that the State mobilizes resources for strengthening the social infrastructure so that the burden of care does not fall entirely on women during such periods of crisis.**

The State could also consider making care a priority by ratifying the ILO Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156),³⁷ which provides significant guidance on measures to be taken in order to help workers with the reconciliation of work and family life.³⁸

- The findings of this study suggest that the cultural attitude towards women's role in society is one of the main reasons why women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid labour; therefore, **it is recommended that awareness-raising campaigns are conducted aiming to normalize sharing the burden of caregiving and household responsibilities.**
- **It is recommended that continued research is conducted regarding the effects of the pandemic on domestic workers in order to identify the basic needs of this group during the different stages of the ongoing crisis, as well as their employment and hiring conditions.**

34 International Domestic Workers Federation, "Global: IDWF Statement on Protecting Domestic Workers Rights and Fighting the Coronavirus Pandemic".

35 UN Women, ILO and ECLAC, *Domestic workers in Latin America and the Caribbean during the COVID-19 crisis* (2020). Available at https://www.ilo.org/americas/publicaciones/WCMS_751773/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 30 December 2020).

36 Ibid.

37 ILO, *C156 – Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)*. Available at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C156 (accessed on 17 December 2020).

38 ILO, "International labour standard instruments on work and family". Available at https://www.ilo.org/travail/aboutus/WCMS_119237/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 17 December 2020).



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