

## **WOMEN'S STATUS IN ABKHAZIA: FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT**

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### *Introduction*

According to a fairly widespread opinion, the position of a woman is one of the indicators of the level of development of a society. In this context, it is especially important to study how the social status of women in Abkhazia has changed at different historical stages, which will make it possible to understand better the dynamics of the sociocultural transformation of the Abkhaz society.

In the traditional culture of the Abkhaz, like many other peoples of the Caucasus, from ancient times women, and especially women-mothers, were treated with great respect. The most authoritative women had the right to vote, not only in the family, but also in public life: in particular, they spoke at crowded national meetings. Insulting a woman was equal to blood insult. Indecent expressions, quarrels or fights in the presence of a woman were absolutely not allowed, and it was considered unworthy of a man to revenge a woman. As indicated in many scientific works, such cases occurred very rarely and were condemned and severely punished, including blood feud.

In the "customary law" system of the Abkhaz there were various ways of enforcing peace. At the same time, as a number of researchers note, an important role in reconciliation of the warring parties was assigned to a woman who, using her natural and social status, could intervene in the conflict and contribute to its resolution. A woman's intervention at times could stop a violent conflict.

Unlike some other Caucasian societies, the Abkhaz woman has always been free to choose a life partner. Parents or relatives, as a rule, could not and did not even try to force her to enter into an unwanted marriage. However, there was a practice of kidnapping girls for the purpose of marriage, although sometimes this happened by prior agreement of the young man and woman. This took place, in particular, in cases where the groom had no opportunity to marry as magnificently as is customary in Abkhazia. In the event of a forced bride abduction, the abductor at first carefully concealed her whereabouts by placing the girl somewhere in the forest, and later - in a wicker hut specially built for the purpose.

It should be noted that social, age and other differences within the women's community existed and partly continue to exist. Therefore, if an older woman is in a special position, then a young married woman does not have the same rights as an older woman. To this day, in some families that adhere to traditional norms of behavior, the daughter-in-law has no right to talk with her elder relatives, especially her father. In their presence, she must behave discreetly and quietly.

At the same time, many researchers also pointed to the unequal position of an unmarried girl and a married woman. If a married woman was busy with household

chores, the unmarried girl was freed from them, she could spend time with her friends, visit relatives, attend weddings, etc.

Considering the above, it should be recognized that there is no reason to unequivocally assert that a woman in Abkhazia was belittled: in Abkhaz folklore and literature, a woman is often described as a kind of ideal. The set of moral and ethical norms of the Abkhaz "Apsuara" behavior, formed because of a long historical process of ethnos development, implies a respectful attitude towards women. However, the patriarchal traditions that gave rise to all sorts of taboos and restrictions, to some extent, suppressed the personality of the woman, restricting her initiative. Despite the respect for the woman, she was still considered, above all, as a mother and mistress in the house.

It is significant that in the past, the Abkhaz woman could not inherit the land, and only the things she received as a dowry were considered her personal property. Despite all her privileges, even the "older" woman could not, without her husband's consent, sell or buy anything, enter into contracts on her own. This is undoubtedly evidence of gender inequality in traditional Abkhaz society.

As many scholars rightly point out, a different approach to the education of girls and boys can be considered as one of the reasons for this unequal status of men and women. A boy is taught to be strong and assertive, and sometimes even aggressive and ruthless. Boys are taught to patiently endure pain, fatigue, cold and hunger, severely suppressing their crying, complaints and any manifestations of weakness. As a result, a man is often ashamed to show such feelings as compassion, weakness, he has to demonstrate self-confidence, even when it does not correspond to his real state.

From an early age, the girl is taught that she should be silent and obedient, do household chores and serve her loved ones. They tend to raise good housewives and skilled needlewomen from the girls. Because of this, many adult women sometimes feel insecure in their abilities in the field of political and professional activities. In addition, often both women and men suffer from such imposition of gender roles.

### *Historical aspects of the status of women in Abkhazia*

Abkhazia, with its peculiar and sometimes archaic traditions, is of considerable interest to historians, culturologists and ethnologists. It is no coincidence that the outstanding Russian writer Konstantin Paustovsky called "amazing" the complex and diverse Abkhaz life, which has partially preserved to this day.

There are numerous testimonies of scholars and travelers who have studied the traditions and life of the Abkhaz regarding the position and role of women in society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, the well-known expert on the Abkhaz life, Nikolay Albov, in 1893, wrote about the Black Sea Circassians: "girls keep themselves completely free here - just as freely as in Abkhazia". However, he also noted the unequal position of an unmarried girl and a married woman. The same scientist pointed out that, although the Abkhaz woman held a subordinate position, she was never treated rudely, and the insult of a woman was considered a disgrace to the Abkhaz.

Judging by the available data, among Abkhaz and Circassians a woman occupied a more free position in society compared to some other mountain peoples of the Caucasus. As many experts of the Abkhaz life emphasized, an Abkhaz woman could act in court, defending her own interests or the interests of her relatives. Abkhaz women from privileged classes had a particularly high status: they took part in public affairs on a par with men, sometimes even led by armed detachments, participating in hostilities. Historian Konstantin Machavariani noted that the Abkhaz women were "exemplary riders, like their husbands - they were, in a way, fearless and brave Amazons". It is also known that at the historical Duripsh national gathering of the Abkhaz in 1931, of three hundred women present, six were given the opportunity to speak.

As other scholars point out, the most authoritative women, who were famous for their experience and wisdom, participated in popular gatherings, in village and town meetings, in court hearings and always had the right to vote at these events. The prominent Abkhaz historian, ethnologist and literary scholar Shalva Inal-Ipa paid much attention in his writings to the position of women in Abkhaz society. He pointed out that the woman enjoyed quite high prestige and respect; she was protected from hard physical work and overwork. In addition, the widowed woman or family, in which there were no adult men, neighbors helped together, until the children grew up.

According to S. Inal-Ipa, the Nart epos is the most vivid confirmation of the existence of matriarchy among the ancient Abkhaz matriarchs. In particular, the scientist points out, this can be attributed to the image of the great mother of the Narts Sataney-Guasha, who "heats without the sun, sparkles without the moon." Sataney-Guasha acts as the ancestor and head of the family, the keeper of the family hearth and a wise diviner who predicts the future. Another bright female image is the only sister of the Narts Gunda The Beautiful.

By the way, an elderly woman, wise with life experience, was always listened to not only in the family, but also in the district. There were cases when they turned to a woman for advice on how to resolve the conflict, and she gave effective advice, which ultimately led to the pacification of the parties to the conflict. In many historical and folklore episodes, the Abkhaz woman acts not only as a keeper of the hearth and continuer of her clan, but also as a defender of the Fatherland and conciliator in various conflicts.

The famous Abkhaz ethnologist Marina Bartsyts names three main principles on which the Abkhaz culture rests - a respectful attitude to the elders, respect for the woman and hospitality. In the family, M. Bartsyts is convinced, women were not powerless creatures, and their husbands rarely resorted to violence or swearing. The one who used violence or allowed himself to disrespect a woman was subjected to public condemnation.

As M. Bartsyts emphasizes, after the marriage, the woman did not break with her father's house, which at any time could come forward in defense of her interests, provide her with moral and material assistance. The woman continued to consider her father's house as her "big house". With the support of her family, she felt more confident in her husband's house, and her husband was obliged to take care of his wife.

Some travelers, as evidence of respect for a woman, cite as an example the Abkhaz proverb: "A good dog doesn't bark at a woman". According to tradition, if husbands resorted to beatings and curses, this would conflict with the moral and ethical code of Apsuara and be condemned. As a rule, the husband was respectful of his wife's relatives as well. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that in the past, family scandals rarely took place in Abkhaz families, which many scientists were surprised at, saying that the family life of the Abkhaz was not familiar with the "home scenes".

According to the Abkhaz ethnologist Valery Biguaa, the daughter-in-law occupied a special place in the traditional Abkhaz family. She was treated with some caution and greater tact, especially the younger one, as a new family member who had not yet managed to adapt to an unusual way of life. Relatives of her husband did not allow freedom in relation to the daughter-in-law, but she, in turn, had to be polite and helpful to them, and especially to older family members.

As a rule, in the morning the sister-in-law got up before everyone else, and at night she went to bed last. In the morning, she had to tidy up the house, and then take up other household chores — look after the cattle, cook the food. In the evening, during dinner, the daughter-in-law was supposed to serve other family members, and if guests came, she had to cook hominy for them, which was called "the bride's hominy".

Abkhaz historian Larisa Smyr noted that, despite the heavy economic burden, they tried to protect the woman from too much hard work. In the Abkhaz culture there was a clear sex-role division of activities. The eldest in the house, usually the father of the family, was in charge of "foreign policy" affairs, one of the sons managed the tillage, the other was herding cattle, the third was indulging in military sports activities. The man considered it unacceptable to engage in "women's affairs" - to carry water, cultivate a vegetable garden and work around the house. Inside the house, a full-fledged mistress was a woman. According to Valery Biguaa, "the daughter-in-law did enjoy some privileges. Possible mistakes, omissions or omissions on the part of the daughter-in-law by family members, as a rule, were forgiven or "not noticed". In the case of a quarrel between the daughter-in-law and her husband, the family members defended not their son, but his wife, even if she was wrong."

In the event of a divorce initiated by the wife, the children remained in their father's house, the wife took only her dowry and could return to her home without any formalities. The dowry, which often reached quite considerable sizes and which belonged to the wife under any circumstances, made the woman somewhat independent in material terms.

If the husband was the initiator of the divorce, the children went with her mother to her parents, and half of the common property was to be transferred to the former daughter-in-law. Divorce without valid reasons (childlessness or adultery) was not admitted, as a result, according to V. Biguaa, divorces were an infrequent phenomenon in Abkhazia.

As many researchers note, the Abkhaz culture, as well as the Caucasus as a whole, is a military culture, which in many respects predetermined the attitude towards a woman. According to M. Bartsyts, masculinity and militancy are the basic components

of traditional Abkhaz culture and everyday life. It is no coincidence that the birth of a boy, as a rule, rejoiced much more than the birth of a girl. This is partly due to the fact that the daughter was considered by her parents as a temporary family member, until she married and moved to her husband. This is evidenced by the Abkhaz saying "Daughter in the house is a guest". A son was considered the successor of the family. All this testifies to the stability of patriarchal traditions in Abkhazia, as well as in the Caucasus as a whole.

Perhaps, in some way, the condescending, if not knightly, attitude of men towards women is associated precisely with the masculinity and militancy of Abkhaz men. Aware of their strength and superiority, the "real" men considered it inferior to offend a representative of the weaker sex, as a result of which the Abkhaz husbands in the past almost never resorted to beatings and insults to their wives.

With all this in mind, we can conclude that the position of a woman in Abkhazia, as in the Caucasus as a whole, can be called ambivalent. The role of women has been strictly predetermined by traditions and sustainable gender roles and stereotypes. However, during the Soviet period, these stereotypes were partly destroyed. In the 30s of the 20th century, when the process of collectivization was intensively going on in the USSR, women of Abkhazia began to work on tea and tobacco plantations. Gradually, on collective farms, the main labor force became the representatives of the weaker sex. They often became agronomists, brigadiers, link managers. In addition, many women began to work in factories. The work of women was especially in demand during the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), when many men went to the front.

At the same time, women continued to perform their family duties - raising children, cleaning up the house, cooking food, etc. All this has complicated the lives of women and led to the fact that some family traditions were not so strictly observed. If the daughter-in-law needed to go to work, the children were supervised by the mother-in-law, sister-in-law or other women.

Admittedly, during the Soviet period, women had a little more opportunity to make a career. In Soviet Abkhazia, it has always been considered prestigious for a girl to receive a higher education. In part, this was considered a prerequisite for a successful marriage. Especially popular among potential brides were diplomas of doctors and teachers.

Because of this, in Soviet times, as to this day, there are many women who traditionally have higher education in Abkhazia - about half of the total. Many women have graduated from secondary special and higher educational institutions. Among the students in the universities of Abkhazia, both in the Soviet period and to this day, about half are girls, some of whom later become candidates and doctors of science. At the same time, there was not and is not a single woman rector of a higher educational institution or director of a scientific research institute.

During the Soviet period, more and more women appeared to become teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, etc. This allowed women to express themselves and achieve some success in those areas where men did not particularly strive - in the agricultural sector, textile, clothing, food industry, in education, medicine, etc.

As is well known in the USSR, there was an unofficial quota system, due to which women were represented in the legislative branch and sometimes held ministerial posts. In the Soviet years, approximately 30–40% of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR were women. These were mostly “noble” tea growers and tobacco growers, workers and then representatives of the intelligentsia.

In the history of Soviet Abkhazia, many authoritative and educated women have left their bright mark. For example, Sariya Lakoba, whom Fazil Iskander characterized as the greatest woman of Abkhazia, was the wife and associate of the prominent Abkhaz political figure Nestor Lakoba.

Nelli Trapsh, who headed the department of industry, transport and communications of the Abkhaz Regional Committee of the Communist Party, was elected second secretary of the Sukhum Municipal Committee, and then worked as secretary of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR. Lyubov Nazadze was elected deputy of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR of several convocations, and then headed the State Planning Commission. There are many more women, who will forever remain in the memory of the people of Abkhazia.

At the same time, it should be noted that in Abkhazia, as elsewhere in the USSR, women had almost no chance of becoming the first persons in the party and Soviet hierarchy, and were forced to be content with, at best, secondary roles. At the same time, in Abkhazia, along with ethnic, gender quotas existed behind the scenes. Therefore, if the first secretary of the Sukhum Municipal Committee of the Communist Party was to be a man - a Georgian, then the third secretary could be an Abkhaz woman. If the minister was a man - a Georgian, then among the deputies there could be a woman - an Abkhaz. At the same time, as a rule, at least one woman was a government minister.

Thus, the position of women in Abkhazia in the pre-war period was relatively good: they could make a career in science and education, and with a “good biography” or personal connections - in the party and Soviet official structures. However, at the same time, there was a “glass ceiling”, which no woman could achieve, since the leadership positions were occupied mostly by men. In addition, although formally there were no restrictions for women, a noticeable breakthrough in the field of gender equality did not happen.

### *Women of Abkhazia in the postwar period*

As is well known, in societies that have survived an armed conflict, the burden on women increases many times: in conditions where many men died in a war or became disabled, women have to bear the brunt of family maintenance, child rearing and care for sick and elderly family members. According to many experts, changing gender roles and the destruction of the traditional family structure is characteristic of any society that has survived a war.

For Abkhazia, the situation was complicated by the fact that the collapse of the USSR and the transition to a new political and economic system coincided with a bloody

armed conflict with Georgia. Already after the end of the hostilities of 1992-93, the post-war devastation in Abkhazia was aggravated by the blockade imposed in 1994 at the summit of the CIS countries at the request of Georgia. All these overlapping events have dealt a serious blow to the basics of life of Abkhaz society and contributed to the degradation of the economy of Abkhazia. Being focused on the resort sector and the export of subtropical agricultural products, the republic's economy, already undermined by the war, found itself in a critical situation because of the blockade.

In fact, the sanctions imposed on Abkhazia discriminated against residents of Abkhazia based on gender and age: men aged 16 to 60 were prohibited from crossing the Russian - Abkhaz border along the Psou River. It hit both men and women, and contributed to the radical transformation of gender roles and the partial destruction of family traditions and attitudes. Taking back greens and fruits from Abkhazia in a wheelbarrow, women brought back everyday goods. Since frontier trade was at that time the main source for the survival of many families in post-war Abkhazia, the woman had to become the main "breadwinner" in the family.

Although the modern Abkhaz family continues to preserve the traditional way in many respects, however, the time and the ongoing transformation of society unswervingly make their own changes in family traditions, simplifying family relations. Describing the modern Abkhaz family, the ethnologist Valery Biguaa uses the term "nuclear family", i.e. family consisting only of parents and children. At the head of the family is the father, and in those families where there is no father, the mother dominates. At the same time, the scholar notes that sometimes the wife earns no less than the husband. "Since the economy of a modern Abkhaz rural family has acquired a market value, it's mainly the woman who sells the goods, because the traditional neglect of Abkhaz men for trade is still noticeably preserved," Mr. Biguaa said.

As the difficult post-war period of life in Abkhazia has shown, women adapt more easily to the changed living conditions. If men, as a rule, were inclined to look for a prestigious job, corresponding to their educational level and social status, then the woman was ready to accept any job if only to create conditions for the survival of her family. Therefore, among those who decided to engage in business activities in Abkhazia, there are still quite a few women today. In the trade rows, in the Abkhaz markets, women predominate, and many of them have a higher education.

One of the dangerous consequences of a war is the increase in the level of aggression in society, which negatively affects the institution of the family. In the postwar period, the number of domestic violence incidents increased markedly. In the course of a qualitative sociological survey conducted by the Association of Women, a number of experts stated that they consider the "postponed" consequences of the war to be the reason for the increase in manifestations of domestic violence. According to them, among these consequences are psychological trauma of war veterans and civilians affected by the hostilities.

A number of respondents note that, despite the fact that in Abkhaz families mother, wife and sister enjoyed special respect, and in the etiquette of the Abkhaz family, assault was considered a disgrace, in post-war Abkhazia the situation deteriorated

markedly. The lack of institutionalized psychological, medical, legal and social assistance to victims of domestic violence by the state, as well as the law on domestic violence, extremely complicates the fight against this negative phenomenon. The result is a reduction in the self-esteem of women exposed to domestic violence, as well as an increase in the number of psychosomatic and mental diseases and suicide incidents among victims of this negative phenomenon.

It should be noted that, in the period after the end of the Patriotic War of 1992-93. surprisingly, in Abkhazia, there is a certain strengthening of patriarchal traditions, and these processes require analysis and reflection. Today again, it is often said that the main functions of a woman are the keeper of the family hearth, the wife and the mother. It is impossible to agree with this: there is irrefutable evidence that a woman can perfectly combine the above functions with political, economic and social activities. It is clear that, despite the fact that many women are not inferior to men in terms of intelligence, professional training and a sense of responsibility, power in patriarchal societies is associated with the male mentality.

While after the war, many women had to take care of the maintenance of the family, men came to the political forefront, most of whom had military merit or had access to power and material and financial resources with the end of the war. The woman was almost completely ousted from political life. If, by inertia, women were elected to Parliament in the early 90s, over time, the struggle for deputy mandates became more acute, and the woman, on whose side, as a rule, much less, both financial and administrative resources, was doomed to political marginalization. So, if in the prewar and military Supreme Council (Parliament) of Abkhazia (1991–96) there were 6 women out of 65 deputies (that is, 9%), in the following (1997–2002) - 4 out of 35 - those deputies (i.e., 11%), then in the present People's Assembly / Parliament - only 1 woman out of 35 deputies (i.e., 3%).

As for the executive authorities, men have always been prime ministers in Abkhazia. Now all the deputy prime ministers are men, and there are only 2 women among the ministers.

This situation, of course, does not suit many women. According to Irina Agrba, ex-Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of the RA, the chairwoman of the public organization "Woman in Politics": "In order to stop the trend of political degradation in the Abkhaz society, it is necessary to increase the role of women in the political life of the republic. I. Agrba also clarified that "lately the need for the women's social movement has increased tremendously, since today in the Republic there is a "monopoly of men in the sphere of politics". At the same time, I. Agrba is convinced, "the ambitions of male politicians often lead us to the brink of the abyss."

Attention is drawn to the fact that the higher the level of posts, the lower the percentage of women's representation in them. In addition, although at the legislative level there are no discriminatory provisions against women in Abkhazia, in real life there is a gap between the legal and de facto equal rights of men and women. It should be noted that the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution of Abkhazia, but this is not supported in practice. Even the most superficial analysis of legislative



acts gives grounds to declare their gender neutrality. Thus, hidden discrimination against women is manifested both in the social and labor sphere and in the sphere of politics - when making responsible government decisions.

Thanks to the efforts of the public organization "Association of Women of Abkhazia" and with the support of the Swedish Women's Foundation "Kvinna till Kvinna", a draft law "On ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the Republic of Abkhazia" was developed. In 2008, the Law was adopted by the People's Assembly / Parliament of Abkhazia. However, it should be recognized that this did not lead to significant advances in achieving gender equality, because appropriate mechanisms for the practical implementation of this law have not been developed. Often when applying for a job, employers openly give preference to a man, even if a woman is not inferior to him in terms of the level of education and training. In addition, women themselves are not yet ready to defend their right to work in legal instances due to insufficient legal literacy and lack of confidence in their abilities.

As mentioned above, although in the post-war period women showed themselves more adaptive, flexible and psychologically stable, however, this did not help them overcome gender inequality. As practice shows, negative trends towards the exclusion of women from political life only increase with time, as can be seen from the example of the 2016 elections to local governments. Thus, out of 374 candidates registered for deputies of local assemblies, there were only 53 women. The defeat of the overwhelming majority of women candidates in the last parliamentary elections is the result of a more acute pre-election struggle than before, for which women were not ready.

It should be noted that today many Abkhaz women are independent financially, successful in their jobs or in family life, but at the same time, most of them do not seek to go into power. Their main arguments are: "Politics is a dirty business," "Can I cope with it?," "Women are not voted for in Abkhazia," etc.

It cannot be excluded that the unwillingness of many women to express themselves in politics is also a result of the impact of gender stereotypes, which are part of family education. Perhaps because of this, a considerable number of women suffer from low self-esteem and are not confident in their abilities, which contrasts sharply with the moods of most men, who, as a rule, are absolutely confident in their abilities and are ready to take any post.

According to a fairly widespread opinion, today, almost everywhere in the post - Soviet space, the social status of women has dropped significantly. If in the Soviet era, as already noted, there was a tacit quota system secretly in place that made women represented in the legislature, then after the collapse of the USSR, women actually had to start "from scratch" for their participation in the decision-making process.

However, in Abkhazia, the situation in the field of women's political participation is even more complicated due to a number of circumstances. First of all, the unresolved Georgian-Abkhaz conflict contributes to the militarization of society, which hinders the promotion of gender equality in the country. It should also be noted that the political status of Abkhazia, as a "partially recognized state," leads to the isolation of the

Republic and does not allow its membership in various international organizations. This situation is extremely negative for the situation of women in Abkhazia. The territory of Abkhazia falls out of the focus of attention of the majority of international structures designed to promote respect for the rights of women and increase their political and social activity. Not being a full member of the international community, Abkhazia has no international obligation to combat discrimination against women and promote gender equality. These circumstances, of course, do not contribute to ensuring the political rights of women. If in the recognized states of the South Caucasus many projects are carried out under the auspices of various international organizations aimed at enhancing the potential of women and increasing their electoral activity, only a few of them are willing to work with women's organizations in Abkhazia.

The low representation of women at all levels of government does not allow them to really influence either policy formation or decision-making that takes into account the interests of the whole society, as well as the solution of pressing social problems. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that, according to world statistics, if 30–40% of women are present in the country's power structures, the society develops more stably, it is socially oriented, and issues of the social sphere, protection of motherhood and childhood are solved much more effectively in the state etc.

There is a reason to believe that women are aware of the existing barriers to enhancing their political role in the Abkhaz context. These include: existing gender stereotypes and some traditional features of Abkhaz society, the lack of a positive image of a female leader, lack of female solidarity and cohesion, the lack of financial base and support groups for participation in election campaigns, as well as many another.

It is known that a woman who goes into politics is more demanding than a man, and her mistakes and flaws are more intolerable than the mistakes of male leaders. The presence of gender stereotypes leads to the fact that many women are afraid of public disapproval, if they show independence and vigorously strive to make a political career. The taboo of a broad discussion of issues related to the status of women and the low level of their representation in the government does not allow the general public to openly admit the existence of hidden discrimination against women in the country.

Among the reasons for the low representation of women in the legislative branch should also be called the imperfection of the electoral system. Today, there is a majority electoral system in Abkhazia, which, as international practice shows, does not contribute to the advancement of women into power. The formation of the modern electoral system of Abkhazia took place in the difficult post-war period, when Abkhazia was in fact in international isolation and blockade and was unable to develop an optimal model of the electoral system based on international experience. In this respect, the experience of the friendly for Abkhazia Republic of South Ossetia, which uses a proportional electoral system, is very indicative, thanks to which a higher level of representation of women in the legislative structures of power is achieved.

As is known, in the system of proportional representation, voters vote for the party, and not for a specific person. In many countries, there is a system of party quotas, in

particular, for women. However, perhaps due to the presence of gender stereotypes in Abkhazia, political parties operating in the country today do not seek to involve women. Women themselves do not show any particular desire to join the party, because they do not see for themselves the prospects for career growth in the conditions of a majority electoral system and the absence of a quota system.

In order to change the situation for the better, the Law on Political Parties should be amended to increase the participation of women in party activities and initiate electoral technologies that would create more favorable conditions for women's victory in elections. In addition, the introduction of party quotas for women candidates in elections will help ensure that women will more actively contribute to the reform of the electoral system of Abkhazia and the introduction of a proportional or mixed - majority-proportional election system. The preservation of a majoritarian electoral system in Abkhazia will not allow political parties to play a more prominent role in political life. An important role in supporting women candidates during the election campaign can be played by the media, popularizing the positive image of a female political leader, and thus creating an atmosphere conducive to a supportive social perception of women in politics. In addition, women's public organizations play an important role in promoting and implementing the policy of gender equality, therefore it is necessary to promote in every way the creation of new women's organizations and the development of the potential of existing ones.

#### *Women as a driving force for the development of civil society*

According to widespread opinion, civil society is an integral part of a modern democratic state and is a system of self-sufficient and independent from the state public institutions and relations designed to provide conditions for the realization of the interests and needs of individuals and groups for the social, cultural and spiritual spheres.

Speaking about the problems in the field of promotion of women to the level of decision-making, it is impossible not to note that women in recent years have achieved some success in the public life of Abkhazia. Although the most prestigious positions in government and management structures, with rare exceptions, still go to men, however, the civil activity of women in Abkhazia has increased markedly in recent years. Women dominate in the civil society organizations, as well as in the media.

It must be admitted that civil society in Abkhazia is developing quite successfully, although it should be borne in mind that this is much more noticeable in the capital - Sukhum non-governmental organizations have concentrated in their ranks educated, talented people and enterprising youth. In the regional centers, the presence of civil society is less sensed, and in rural areas, the voice of civil society is not heard at all.

One of the most important functions of civil society is to ensure the protection of society from various abuses on the part of the authorities, in particular - from corruption, various manifestations of human rights violations, etc. Civil society can influence the state's law-making activities, supporting or criticizing bills, making

amendments to them, or proposing new ones. Civil society can also have a serious impact on the law enforcement activity of the state, which should be under the tireless control of civil society structures.

In Abkhazia, as in a number of other post-Soviet countries, despite the low level of female representation in power structures, women have a noticeable influence in the public sphere, where their voice is heard the most. This in some way can influence the decision-making process at the state and political levels. Most neutral observers agree that in the field of civic activism, women are noticeably ahead of men. In addition, among civil society activists there are quite a few women leaders, the voice of which both representatives of the government and the public listen.

The main activities of the civil organizations of Abkhazia are: protection of human rights and support for democratic institutions, psycho-social rehabilitation of those who lost loved ones in the war and suffer from the effects of post-traumatic syndrome. Social work (assistance to the disabled, elderly and lonely old people), psychological and legal support to victims of gender-based violence, anti-corruption, environmental protection plays an important role in the activities of civil society activists. There is also active work with children and young people, preparation of young women for political activities, trainings are conducted on the development of women's leadership, strengthening the capacity of women's organizations. Women in most cases are not only participants, but also authors and inspirers of a number of projects and initiatives. At the initiative of civil society activists, a Civil Forum was held in Sukhum in August 2018, among the most important tasks of which can be identified: informing the public about the activities of Abkhaz NGOs, as well as awareness of the long overdue need for a constructive dialogue between the government and civil organizations.

The Civil Forum participants unanimously adopted the Appeal, which, in particular, stated: "Over the years that have passed since the end of the war, Abkhaz society managed to create the most important democratic institutions, thereby laying the foundation for the civilized development of Abkhazia in the 21st century. Civil organizations throughout Abkhazia supplement the efforts of state structures, promptly responding to the needs of socially vulnerable groups of the population - war veterans, disabled people and large families. It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of civil organizations to raising the level of civil and political culture, the introduction of modernization and innovation in the educational sphere, the development of local self-government. Significant achievements of civil organizations in the field of human rights protection, contributing to the formation of a positive image of Abkhazia. The Country of Soul has deserved appreciation from both our friends and external political opponents, as a young state in which strong civic organizations were formed, which is a sign of a modern democratic state.

We, representatives of civil society organizations, carry out our activities in order to contribute not only to the solution of social problems, but also to the formation of a political culture in our society, which should be based on such important values as civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, equality of all citizens before the law, the rule

of law, etc. We believe that only such a path will allow the Abkhaz society to build a viable legal state and strengthen the sovereignty of the Republic.”

As some participants of the Civil Forum noted in their speeches, world practice shows that the interaction of government and civil society brings the most positive results. Thus, in the opinion of the speakers, the strengthening of civilian control and the introduction of public expertise will increase the transparency of the work of state and local authorities, which, in turn, will contribute to increasing public confidence in government, strengthening the fight against various manifestations of corruption, and hence strengthening political stability in the country.