



A NATIONAL QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF THE MUNICIPAL WOMEN'S ROOMS

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REGIONAL MARKET ALLIANCES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS



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This research aims to review the impact, changes and ongoing constraints experienced by the municipal Women's Room service in twenty-eight rooms in twenty-seven municipalities of four regions of Georgia in work that began in 2011.

Thirty-one Women's Rooms are at the time of writing have been opened in Georgia and Armenia. Thirty of these are operational. Twenty-eight rooms were established between 2012-2018 with the direct support of donor projects in twenty seven municipalities of Georgia. Three pilot rooms, facilitated by the SDC project the Mercy Corps implemented Alliances Caucasus programme were opened in 2012, in three municipalities of Kvemo Kartli, a further sixteen between 2014-17 in Kvemo Kartli, Ajara and Samtskhe Javakheti and a further nine in Kakheti from 2018¹. These form the focus of this study. From June 2020 two more rooms facilitated by the ALCP opened in Ozurgeti, Guria and Zestaponi, Imereti². In 2019 under their regional mandate the ALCP facilitated the opening of the first Women's Room in Armenia, in Alaverdi municipality, Lori region with two more, in Tumanyan and Tashir municipalities in Armenia set to open in 2020. Please see Annex 1 for the Women's Rooms Map. For the twenty eight rooms which are the subject of this study, 17,780³ unique users have used the service often becoming regular visitors. 69% of users are women and 31% men (see Annex 1). The goal has always been to see such a practical conduit for benefitting local communities be available to all municipalities in Georgia.

The Alliances programme is a market systems development programme working in the livestock sector. Constraints to women in terms of access to decision making and public goods were seen to be a cross cutting constraint running across all interventions, issues such as unpaid care burdens and lack of running water placed additional constraints on livelihood activities as well as a general feeling that women were unable to directly petition local government for help, engage in dialogue or access existing services or public goods. Attendance of women in village meetings where villagers voted on municipal budget allocation was 3%. An intervention piloted in 2012, was based on utilizing the idea of government as a system, using the incentive of politicians being under pressure to show action on gender related issues and laws being in place but not in use, to pilot facilitation with three local governments to develop guidelines and training for local government representatives with a focal point provided by a 'Women's Room' in each municipal building offering a resource space and information services for rural women.

National results are impressive: the participation of women in community (village) meetings⁴ has risen from 3% to around 35% (see Annex 2). The voting priorities changed to reflect issues most immediately

¹ The rooms in three municipalities in KK and AJ were facilitated by the ALCP, those in Kakheti by the SDC MOLI project based on the ALCP model and the ALCP took over their facilitation from 2019 when MOLI closed and the ALCP's mandate was extended to Kakheti from 2019. The second phase KK rooms and SJ rooms were established through a USAID Broadening Womens Horizon Project written by the ALCP and ICCN and implemented by ICCN and Mercy Corps under which further expansion of the Women's Rooms would take place

² Key local government personnel were invited from across Georgia to the ALCP facilitated [Equitable Empowerment in Georgia](#) event in 2017, to promote WR's. The Mayors of these two municipalities decided to open WR's.

³ According to data provided by the municipalities by March, 2020.

⁴ Community (village) meeting is a form of citizens' participation at local decision making. The meetings are held in all villages of Georgia ones in a year, under the Government's Village Support Programme, where the participants are initiating and voting for the village infrastructure projects to be funded that year from the government. In 2017 the Government stopped this programme and after a two-year gap, still restarted in 2019.

effecting women's lives, the first and second priority issues voted for at the meetings became water provision and kindergartens. To date 678 women instigated community initiatives have been funded by municipal budgets, including the building of 275 water points and seventy kindergartens (see Annex 4); 88 women's business ideas were funded by the Enterprise Georgia Small grants programme; a further twenty-nine women's business projects were funded by donor organizations and through networking at two Women's Business Fora. In total 2,754,200 USD⁵ equivalent in Georgian Lari has been obtained through the Women's Rooms for women's community and business projects (see Annex 3); 126 jobs were created and over 30 civil society organizations have signed MOU's with the rooms to deliver their services or access the communities with whom they wish to work. The best rooms become adapted to and fit for the purpose of their municipalities, reflecting and servicing the needs and nature of individual municipalities and their citizens. They serve a signposting and gateway function to other municipality services, their children's corners provide sometimes vital hours of supervision while professional parents or visitors attend meetings or go to the bank, they are a fora for community projects as diverse as English language lessons, business plan trainings, writers workshops, art classes, dance and poetry groups, special needs self-help groups and charity fund raising for diverse social needs.

However not all rooms function equally. Levels of activity and efficacy depend on the nature and attitude of the individual municipality personnel, most importantly the Mayor and the Women's Room Manager. Some rooms are noticeably more proactive than others, a very small minority barely function at all.

Overall however the sustainability of the rooms (See below *Figure 2 The Women's Rooms Operational Status*) is excellent. The ALCP's sustainability rating of the intervention is 89%⁶. Following co-investment of approximately \$5,000 USD to refurbish the room allocated by the municipality, trainings and materials development no further financial aid has been given to any of the 28 rooms in Georgia which were given the initial grant and facilitation. Out of these, 27 are open and operational, meaning that the rooms upkeep and salary for the manager have been paid by the municipality. Another key indicator of sustainability are the diverse functions of the rooms, adapted and shaped by the needs of the municipalities they serve, the customization which they have undergone. The best rooms offer diverse opportunities shaped for and by their local communities.

Since 2017, the ALCP has aided in the further development of the nine rooms in Kakheti opened under the SDC funded MOLI programme who were themselves expanding the model as part of SDC programming in the livestock sector. This mandate will end in March 2022. In 2019, UN Women funded by SDC and ADA⁷ took over the responsibility to facilitate the spread of the service nationally as a part of a wider regional programme. This has involved (with facilitation and support where required by the ALCP) developing guidelines to be approved by and then promoted to municipalities by the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure to ensure that the service is properly embedded within the functions of

⁵ According to data by March, 2020

⁶ Based on the sustainability rating, given in the ALCP's sustainability dashboard tool, where based on an assessment of Scale, NAIC, Innovation and systemic changes, programme staff allocate scores to an intervention these are aggregated for the final %. It is indeed arbitrary but a useful indicator of the programmes evaluation of interventions based on in depth working knowledge and attributable impact. See [p 5 for a full explanation of the dashboard and P38 for the Women's Rooms dashboard rating and infographic](#).

⁷ The UN Women project *Women's Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus (WEESC)*, initiated in August 2018 and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Austrian Development Agency (ADA)

local government and their national uptake fully backed. Some ambiguity to date on this front has undoubtedly undermined the functioning of the rooms particularly where personal drive or support of key municipality personnel or an understanding of the benefits of the rooms have been absent. Therefore, this initiative will undoubtedly help solve some of the issues that have been noted in this review regarding indifferent attitudes, patchy inclusion and unsupported staff and rooms in some municipalities. (*See Section: Current Operational Efficiency, Basic Sustainability and Ongoing Constraints*)

The Women's Rooms and the practical means of outreach that they offer has been an extremely successful gender related intervention in Georgia, reaching rural women and men at scale. Approbation and support for the rooms has been publically expressed by key players at all levels of government. Those signing MOU's with the rooms are vocal in their support. It is therefore perplexing as to why a national expansion has not been adopted and supported by national government before now. Facilitation with national players has been ongoing since 2011, and yet there seems to be some invisible barrier, which is preventing a cohesive backing to an initiative with such proven results and sustainability. Georgia as a signatory of the CEDAW convention is bound to report results to the committee every two years. The Women's Rooms network offers the single most effective means to have reached rural women on a variety of key issues over the last decade. Why there should still be a lack of political will to fully back the rooms is inexplicable. It may have suffered at the hands of competing and confused mandates at a national level in which the responsibility for gender and national outreach to municipalities is divided between powerful national actors worried about stepping on each other's toes or who are unwilling to be seen as the ones assuming responsibility. It may also have suffered in the past, from partisan instincts, which on occasion saw some of those working for women, ignoring or refusing to acknowledge activities by or even the existence of the Women's Rooms, as they did not derive from an activity they could claim as their own.

What has enabled and encouraged the successive programmes who have supported the rooms and touches any visitor to the better rooms is the will, enthusiasm and belief generated by the grass roots users, those women and men in their municipalities who have taken this service and developed it into something, which serves and nurtures them, something which lives. It is to be hoped that the will of these people, in tandem with ongoing donor support, manages to finally shift these barriers and move the key decision makers preventing or at least not sufficiently aiding the expansion and further support of this service to all communities in Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the SDC project the Mercy Corps implemented Alliances Caucasus Programme's [Gender Analysis](#) revealed that rural women lacked access to decision making fora at both community and municipal levels. Women did not feel that they were welcome in municipal buildings or community decision making fora and questioned the value of their attendance and the validity of this attendance and of their contribution if they did go. Furthermore, *the Gender Equality Law of Georgia* brought into effect in 2010 was not being enacted at the municipal level. Initial approaches to the three municipality governments of the programme area (Kvemo Kartli region) found that they were open to beginning a series of gender meetings in which mainstreaming the 2010 Gender Law into municipal practice and improving women's access to decision making at all levels of the municipality were discussed. The final plan centered on simplifying the law into easily understandable guidelines⁸ for translating Gender Equality law into action including the training of key members of staff who would in turn train village representatives and developing a focal point in the form of a Women's Room situated within the municipal building as a resource centre, and space for women coming into the town.

The programme entry point was based on the idea of government as a system, using the incentive of politicians being under pressure to show action on gender related issues and laws being in place but not in use. Facilitation began with local government to develop guidelines and training for local government representatives with a focal point provided by a Women's Room in each municipal building offering a resource space and information services for rural women.

The first Women's Rooms opened in 2012 in three municipalities of Kvemo Kartli. The Women's Room itself was a new municipal service, a free information-consultation space for rural women and children who visit the municipal building, facilitated by local government, local women and civil society. The Women's Room could form the focal point for a municipality aiming to improve the access of rural women to local government and decision making processes in tandem with mainstreaming national gender policy requirements into local government. For more information about this service see [How to Set Up a Women's Room and Improve Local Decision Making Guidelines](#).

Ongoing results measurement since 2012 has collected data against impact indicators including the number of users, number and type of services, public goods accessed, participation and results of community meetings against the 2011 baseline. Annexes 1,2,3,4 contain infographics presenting these results Annex 5 contains a recent ILO case study showing how the intervention was harnessed to address unpaid care. This review was conducted to:

- ❖ further evaluate the functionality and performance of the rooms on a scale of excellent to non-functional and the reasons for the variation in this performance.
- ❖ qualitatively assess the effect of WR access on the lives of those rural women using the rooms,
- ❖ form a picture of the difference between a region and municipality with a Women's Room and those without.

⁸ [Guidelines for the Application and Implementation of the Gender Equality Policy of Georgia by Local Self Governments](#). Endorsed by the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure and available on their website. Created in 2012 with lead gender experts and updated to include new changes to citizens participation, gender equality councils and changes to the law on domestic violence in 2017.

METHODOLOGY

The ALCP conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Women’s Rooms representatives, Women’s Rooms users, non-users, and other governance related stakeholders to assess the efficiency of current Women’s Rooms operations, the enabling or constraining conditions for successful operation, user perception and effect of outreach. In total 44 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus groups⁹ were conducted, see Figure 1 below.

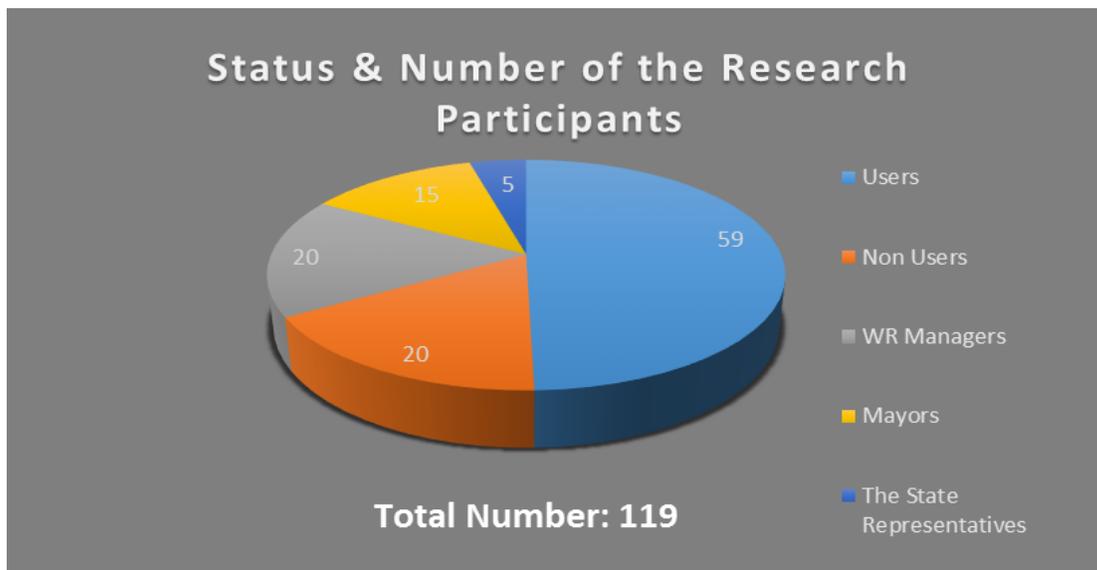


Figure 1 Status and Number of Research Participants

The field work was conducted in Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Ajara, and Kakheti regions, where the twenty eight Women’s Rooms established between 2012 and 2018 are present and in Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi regions where currently Women’s Rooms are not present (See Annex 1 for map of current Women’s Rooms). The respondents were purposefully selected to represent a wide and diverse sampling. The sampling included different ethnic groups, different genders (male / female), different geographical locations (lowland, highland plateau, mountainous) and Women’s Rooms with a varying level of performance. The scoring was based on the following criteria; the number of users, the number of services available, the number of meetings held and the percentage of women’s participation in local community fora - the village meetings.

⁹ All focus groups were with users of the room. The focus group with non-users planned for Racha was cancelled due to COVID-19 and interviews were conducted with non-users individually over the phone.

MAIN FINDINGS

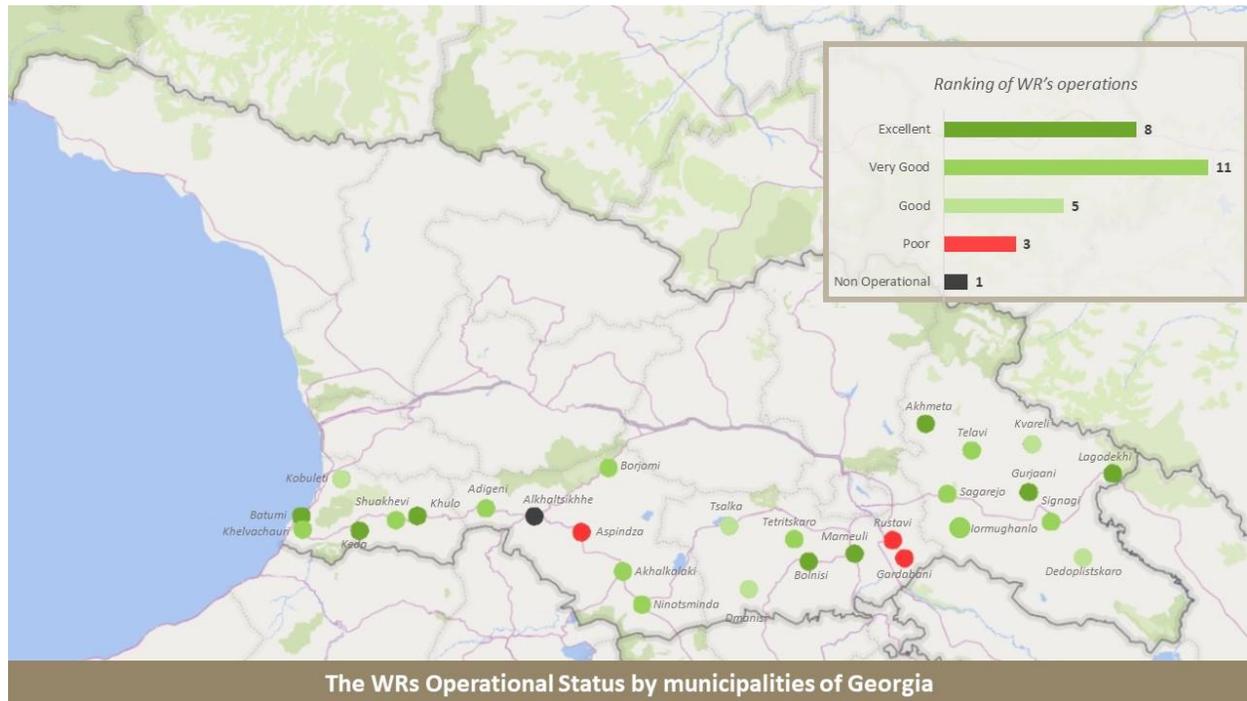


Figure 2 Operational Status of Women's Rooms (established 2012-2018) in Georgia

Ninety seven per cent (27/28) of the twenty-eight rooms opened in Georgia from 2012-2018 are operational. Of these 29% (8/28) are excellent, 39% (11/28) are very good, 18% (5/28) are good, 11% (3/28) are poor and 3% (1/28) is non-operational. The one non-operational and three poorly functioning rooms in KK and SJ were set up under a USAID project in which the model was copied for expansion. This three year project finished in 2016, and involved setting up ten Women's Rooms in addition to other activities and ongoing facilitation post-opening was therefore limited. In addition, the ALCP has learned over the years that sustainability is compromised when a model is only partially copied. The pilot rooms were based on the low visibility principle within a clear Market Systems Development (MSD) approach, with emphasis on local ownership of the rooms with the local municipality as the 'face' of the intervention. In the latter project it translated into more of a direct donor-beneficiary relationship in which high visibility is customary and which can tend to detract from local ownership. Lack of ownership particularly where there is disinterest from key decision makers mainly mayors, has been found to be one of the main reasons for poor performing rooms.

The research broke down the conditions dictating whether a Women's Room functions well or not.

In well-functioning rooms:

- Municipal decision makers understand and support gender equality principals, communicate with the Women's Room managers and use the Women's Rooms as intended;
- Women's Room managers are also the municipality Gender Focal Points (stipulated by law) and are situated in the room; have a good knowledge of the Gender Equality Principals; have direct and

everyday contact with municipality Mayors and key decision makers and have close contact with local women and NGO's;

- Women's Room managers have good communication skills, high personal accountability and enthusiasm to support local women.
- Women's Room managers are empowered.

In poor functioning or non-functioning rooms:

- Local decision makers lack understanding of the Gender equality policy and acknowledgement of Gender laws or simply do not feel it is important or do not care;
- There is a lack of 'ownership' of the Women's Room service by the municipality.
- The Women's Room manager has another main job to do;
- The space allocated for the Women's Room is not respected for its purpose and has been appropriated for other things.
- Women's Room managers are disempowered.

MAIN FINDINGS FOR THE REGIONS WITH WOMEN'S ROOMS

The research showed that the key constraints identified in 2011, namely:

- that women lacked access to decision making fora at both community and municipal levels,
- that women did not feel that they were welcome in municipal buildings or community decision making fora and questioned the value of their attendance and the validity of this attendance and of their contribution if they did go
- and that the *Gender Equality Law of Georgia* brought into effect in 2010 was not being enacted at the municipal level in relation to the above,

had mostly been eliminated for users of the women's rooms and key local personnel, in the municipalities with an operational Women's Room service and that there is a strong attribution between these changes and the rooms existence. Attribution is related specifically to the constraints listed above. Other gender legislation aimed at local government was brought in in 2016 and it outside the scope of this study to determine the effect of these laws at municipal level. For more detail see *Main Findings for Regions Without Women's Rooms*. The main findings attributable to the Womens Rooms are listed below.

FINDING 1: INCREASED MUTUAL TRUST AND GREATER SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT TO PUBLIC GOODS BY LOCAL WOMEN

The interviewed rural women who use the women's rooms and municipal decision makers stressed the evidence of increased mutual trust between local government representatives and women. The women interviewees and the room managers stressed that men were initially quite skeptical regarding the creation of Women's Rooms in the municipality, but after seeing so much positive influence they are also actively using them. More women are now coming to the municipal buildings if there is a Women's Room. None of the interviewed women had visited the municipality building before the room was opened. Now it is easier for them to visit, due to the existence of this space. They did not think it was that easy to come and get information from the municipality City Hall before. The Deputy Mayor of Akhalkalaki Municipality (SJ) stressed that women have become more involved in different activities, they started to visit the room and make suggestions on different topics, when before none of the women visited the municipality building.

The interviewed rural women really like the room as it is a different space (to the rest of the municipality spaces) and they feel free there. The Women's Room is a favorite place for them and considered by them as an amazing opportunity to establish linkages with other active women.

'I see that trust from people has significantly increased and the number of visitors in the Women's Room is increasing.'

Chairwoman of the Gender Council of Khulo Municipality, Ajara.

The room use varies according to region with the most active engagement found in Ajara where about 70% of the interviewed women visit the room on a weekly basis and the remainder at least once every two-three weeks. In Samstkhe-Javakheti 70% of interviewed women visit the room every two to three weeks with the remainder on a weekly basis. In Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti 60% of interviewed women normally visit the room every two to three weeks. The majority of Women's Room users use the room's services at least twice a month, but when they need something in particular, they come to the Women's Room until it is resolved or call the Manager directly.

'We have gained a feeling that in the case of any problems or issues, we can visit the Women's Room and will get all information needed.'

Ajara Women's Room User.

The top three Women's Services most in demand are:

- information about government services,
- consultation about funding opportunities for business or other initiatives
- help obtaining social support.

This however varies according to regions. In Ajara the most in demand service is consultation regarding obtaining grants and filling in applications, while in Kakheti social support seems to be in most demand, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Women's Rooms are more focused on providing information on governmental programmes and services. In general, the activity and the interest of the users seems to be very much dependent on the manager, whether she is active or not and what kind of information is she providing to the visitors. Bilingual Women's Room managers are hired in areas with significant ethnic populations to ensure inclusion and equal opportunities.

'The Women's Room changed our lives, we found a space where we can come, talk about our problems and get advice.'

Akhalkalaki, Samstkhe Javakheti Women's Room User.

'I work at the municipality building and I use the room more than twice a week. For me the main benefit is that I can use internet and computer services, printing and get information. My colleagues also use the service if they need to receive or send information. Recently there were exams for all public officials and many of us used it for preparing for the exams.'

Tetrtskaro, Kvemo Kartli, Male Women's Room User

FINDING 2: RURAL WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING FORA HAS INCREASED

According to the rural women users, the Women's Room played an important role in increasing their involvement and that of others in community (village) meetings organized by local governments once a year in each village to decide which infrastructural projects should be funded by the local budgets. Women's

Rooms Managers have helped to motivate women to be active and be involved. Womens Rooms Managers also coordinate with Village Representatives to include women when organizing the meetings. The female participation rate increased from 3-5% to an average of 28% in three regions (KK, SJ, AJ) in 2015-2016. In 2017-2018 the government stopped these meetings and reintroducing them in 2019. The 2019 and 2020 data again showed increased figures of women's participation, a 34% and 37% in four regions (see Annex 2 for regional breakdowns) women were coming of their own volition and were more confident in voicing their ideas.

'Women's participation in the village meetings has significantly increased from 10% to 48% this year (2019). This was a result of active work of the Women's Room Manager, who is a Gender Advisor at the same time. Several trainings and information meetings motivated women to be more involved in the decision-making process.'

Keda Mayor, Ajara

This trend has included municipalities of Kvemo Kartli and Samstkhe Javakheti regions where ethnic minorities still have strong cultural-traditional restrictions for women. These restrictions were relieved when local government asked women to participate in village meetings. In Samstkhe Javakheti a higher proportion of Armenian women now participate in village meetings. The focus group participants in Ninotsminda and Adigeni (SJ) said that the Village Representatives actively use the Women's Rooms service to reach more women and the women have started writing applications for village projects, with the help of the managers, mainly asking for water and kindergartens.

'In Damia Village women took the initiative to solve water problems, each family in that village now has a water point in their yards, also with the women initiatives we renovated a kindergarten in that village, solved street light problems and renovated a playground. Before women did not express their initiatives regarding community problems.'

Marneuli Mayor, Kvemo Kartli.

FINDING 3: INCREASED LOCAL GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP ON GENDER ISSUES

All local decision makers from excellent, very good and good rooms, showed a high sense of ownership of the Women's Room service, they are proud of the results and not questioning the importance of this service and the necessity of women's empowerment.

The role of Women's Rooms is proving significant in raising awareness of the issues related to defeating stereotypes and vicious traditions existing in our society. The more initiatives and ideas the Women's Rooms managers are instigating, the more effective this municipal service becomes.'

Head of Local Self-Government Relations Department, Kakheti region

Women's Rooms in all four regions are helping NGO's who have signed memorandums of understanding with the rooms, to plan and organize different trainings, information meetings and conduct surveys. About half of the interviewed Mayors stated that the Women's Rooms helped them in establishing cooperation with other entities/NGOs and that they are now partners in implementing various projects. When assessing the Women's Rooms work, the interviewed local decision makers from municipalities with well-functioning rooms are not mentioning that they need any help from NGOs, quite the opposite, the room is cooperating with and helping NGOs to perform better and reach their desired target group. The

municipalities where local Gender Councils and Women's Rooms managers work together have better results than those without cooperation and have better quality annual Gender Action Plans which integrate the Women's Rooms.

'Gender issues have become a priority in my work. I'm more involved in the community meetings and personally ask women to take part, to express their needs. Women from Tskhmorisi Village asked for the children's playground, I decided to use the reserve fund of the municipality to build it. Also, we repaired the water system in Dandallo Village, based on the request of female farmers. I try to make the point about the importance of the women involvement in my media interviews and while speaking with farmers. I am very proud to see so many empowered women as a result of our work.'

Keda Mayor, Ajara Region

FINDING 4: THE WOMEN'S ROOM CONNECTS RURAL WOMEN AND INCREASES LOCAL NETWORKING AND LOCAL INITIATIVES:

For many rural women from all four regions the Women's Room is a favorite place to gather and establish linkages with other active women. They are sharing experiences and motivating each other. According to the majority of the focus groups the rural women using the rooms have established important linkages with each other, especially those who are interested in trainings, entrepreneurship, local charity and social initiatives¹⁰. Some of them have also created online informal groups (using Facebook Messenger) and continue communication outside of Women's Room. One beneficiary in Kakheti even started organizing information meetings within her community to share information received through the Women's Room.

'I've always had a lot of ideas of how to improve rural people's life. While attending a local government meeting, I found out about the Women's Room and immediately felt that this was what we needed in our village. I asked the municipality to help me to create the same service in my community consisting of six ethnic minority villages. The Women's Room helped me to receive the financing from the municipal budget and we opened a room in our village where local men and women have already participated in many discussions with the public officials on existing problems, including street lighting and waste management. Many of the women have already received information on domestic violence and gender equality. We copied the work plan from the Women's Room, they taught us how to manage the space.'

Nargiza Mamedova, Marneuli Women's Room visitor.

FINDING 5: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE WOMEN'S ROOM IS TANGIBLE:

The room has significant role in promoting grants and other financial sources for women. It provides special support for rural women interested in entrepreneurship. The municipalities now have a database of rural women entrepreneurs and they are better represented at and attend the different events, trainings and information meetings organized locally. They actively participate at the Women's Business Forum, which is now organized every year in Batumi. If not for the rooms many female rural entrepreneurs women would be hidden.

¹⁰ These include English lessons, business lessons, driving, learning disability support groups, craft groups, fund raising for families in difficulty or in need of specialist health care, civic education for school children, poetry and writing groups, art groups, music and dance group, psychological support sessions.

The Women's Room provides its users with information about the governmental and NGO programmes they can apply to for funds. 40% of interviewed women who received both information and help to write applications through the Women's Room for the Produce in Georgia small grants programme, had applied for and won a grant to develop their livelihoods that has changed their lives, including; guesthouse services, pastry shop and handicrafts. They have established new contacts and increased income. Before women were getting information on grants and trainings mainly through the internet but the information was limited and poor quality and there was no such free space for them to come to and communicate with each other and receive support whilst writing proposals. Thus, they are now more confident about having new ideas, writing business proposals and applying for funds.

'I got information about the governmental programme 'Enterprise Georgia' and the Room helped me to fill in the application, I got a grant and purchased four female goats for my farm. Now I have become more business oriented, I participate in many agricultural conferences and meet with foreigners, I want to present my product in English and I attend English class in Woman's Room.'

Tetrtskaro, Kvemo Kartli, Women's Room User.

FINDING 6: WOMEN ARE ABLE TO SPEAK-OUT ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND EARLY MARRIAGES:

Early marriage and domestic violence are problems women were and are ashamed to speak out about in Georgia. To support women and girls from ethnic minority communities, where these problems are based on traditions and culture, Women's Rooms managers in collaboration with the office of Public Defender of Georgia, police and NGOs are conducting regular information meetings and events. The focus group participant women in Marneuli said they feel free to come and talk about it with the manager to get assistance and help. Iormuganlo Women's Room in Sagarejo municipality, Kakheti, which serves a big ethnic minority community, has helped two girls (15 and 16 ages) from entering early marriages and cooperates with the Public Defender's and the Police offices conducting information meetings and trainings on this topic.

'I am a fifteen year old girl and the Women's Room rescued me from an early marriage last year. Two days before the planned wedding I ran out of the house and came to the room for help. If it hadn't been for the Women's Room's manager I wouldn't have been able to avoid this. Now I continue studying at school and have a friendship with the Women's Room manager. I know two more girls like me who addressed the Women's Room for the same reason from my village.'

Iormuganlo Village, Sagarejo, Kakheti

FINDING 7: WOMEN ARE GETTING "MEN'S JOBS":

Key positions in local government structures are male dominated and considered 'men's jobs'. The Women's Room promotes young women to participate in competitions for these kind of public jobs. Three young women became village representatives in Keda municipality and one - in Bolnisi municipality; two women became Sakrebulo members in Akhalkalaki.

'We never had women as members of the Sakrebulo before and it is a result of our Gender policy and Women's Room'

Deputy Mayor of Akhalkalaki, Samstkhe Javakheti

'I have become a village representative with the great support of Bolnisi Women's Room. It was a first precedent in our municipality, because before this job was considered as Men's job' only'.

A new female village representative of Tandzia Village, Bolnisi, Kvemo Kartli

CONTINUING CONSTRAINTS AND THE MEANS TO SOLVE THEM

Despite the achieved results and positive responses from its users, Women's Rooms still face some constraints, which are hindering their development. In rooms that are underperforming there is commonly a lack of support and acknowledgement of the Women's Rooms and their work from local decision makers. Depending on the will of the main decision makers and personality and will of the manager, they will be either empowered or disempowered. The success of the room mainly depends on its manager's personal relationships with the key local decision makers. If the manager does not have enough confidence and influence, the room's performance tends to be low.

Women's Rooms receive annual municipal funding from the municipal budget as a recognized part of the administrative department of Local Self Government (LSG). However in a municipality where the rooms and their value is not understood or considered important, the legitimacy of the Women's Room and their managers as a part of local self-government apparatus is currently not robust or standardized enough to ensure that mandatory local procedures are in place to bolster their position. This mainly comes from the fact that the majority, 92%¹¹ of Sakrebulo, the executive councils of the local government, have not properly authorized the rooms as they should have done when creating a new municipal service, that is the making of a statute¹² and its approval by the Sakrebulo. The main reason for this lack of substantiation seems to have been that although Georgian LSG's have the power and remit to make these changes, they are trepidatious about doing this without a recommendation implying tacit approval from central government specifically the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure (MRDI)¹³.

Work on addressing the regulatory, standardization and legitimacy issues mentioned above is ongoing¹⁴, with guidelines now prepared in consultation with the MRDI and submitted to address these issues. Specifically they include: a description of the service, how it works, role descriptions, what benefits the municipality will gain from this service and how it will contribute to enhance coordination on gender related issues between central, regional and municipal level governments. The goal is that the MRDI issues these guidelines as an official recommendation to LSG's to create and support the service.

¹¹ 22 out of 24 well- functioning rooms. Bolnisi and Keda have ratified their rooms and the WEESC UN Women Programme with facilitation from the ALCP have produced guidelines to address these issues.

¹² Including budget and staff jobs descriptions of the new 'service'

¹³ Womens Room [Guidelines](#) were approved by the MRDI in 2013

¹⁴ The SDC, ADA *Womens Economic Empowerment in the South Caucasus* UN Women Programme with facilitation from the ALCP have produced comprehensive guidelines to address these issues.

It can be hoped that regularizing and legitimizing the Women's Rooms more clearly, will help bolster those municipalities where the Women's Rooms service is not optimized and support the continuation of those where it is. However, lack of political will including dismissive or disengaged attitudes by key local and national government officials and a lack of understanding of the civic benefits that equitable local governance brings, may need tackling more systematically by national government at all levels.

MAIN FINDINGS FOR REGIONS WITHOUT WOMEN'S ROOMS

During the last five years, some gender related changes have been made in several laws¹⁵ and there was a possibility that the impact described in the main findings above, was not fully or clearly attributable to the Women's Rooms. However after interviewing key decision makers and women in regions without a Women's Room, it is clear that the findings described above, which describe *practical access* to public goods and outreach, are almost entirely attributable to the Women's Rooms and their managers. In addition, a comparison between municipalities with and without Women's Rooms showed that the above mentioned legislative changes were better adopted and implemented where well-functioning Womens Rooms¹⁶ are present.

Interviews in regions with no Women's Rooms were done in Imereti region with the Mayor of Zestaponi municipality and ten local women and in Racha-Lechkhumi region with ten local women from Oni and Ambrolauri municipalities and the Gender Focal Point at the Governor's office.

In Imereti, seven out of ten women said that they has never applied for or received any consultation from the municipality and in the case of need, they would ask their husbands to go to the municipal building for them. All women were aware about the problems of their villages including lack of water, kindergartens, municipal transport and street lighting. They all discuss these topics with their neighbors but never address the Municipality as they are not sure of what support they would receive. Five interviewed women between 30-45 years of age stated that they have business ideas but lack information about possible funding or any consultancy, and if the municipality created a special space for women they would definitely go there. The Mayor was well informed about gender related legislation. The municipality has created a Gender Council at Sakrebulo level in response to the 2016 changes in legislation and has gender disaggregated statistics on its employees, gender related staff and a Gender Action Plan, first approved in May 2019. The Mayor also wants to establish a Women's Room.

I would be glad to have such service and make effective use of it. Women's Room services should be active in all matters, seeking investors or other donor organizations to improve their services and implement

¹⁵Changes were made in the Code of Local Self Government of Georgia (*February 5, 2014, additional changes in the Local Self-Governance Code were adopted on July 26, 2017*) regarding the requirements for citizens' participation in local self-governance though not specifically a gender law it referred to equal participation; the Law on Gender Equality (*May 13, 2016 and April 28, 2016*) concerning the establishment of Municipality Gender Equality Councils and the appointment of Public Servant Responsible for Gender Issues (informally known as a Gender Focal Point); and changes in the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence, and the Assistance and Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence (*February, 2016*) concerning the mandate of local self-government to help prevent gender based domestic violence and assist victims.

¹⁶ Unsurprisingly as in the well-functioning rooms the manager is often also the Gender Focal Point.

projects. We have an idea of establishing a women's entrepreneurship organization that would then collaborate with our women's room'.

Mayor of Zestaponi, Imereti Region

In Ambrolauri and Oni municipalities, Racha-Lechkhumi and Zemo Svaneti region, interviewed rural women said that when the villagers have any problems, women are communicating with neighbors, and actively participate in signing petitions but only men go to the municipal buildings to represent the village. All ten interviewees said that if the municipality opens a space for women they will definitely go there. The regional Gender Focal Point was very well informed about the Women's Room service from colleagues from other regions with Women's Rooms and also confident that establishment of Women's Rooms in their municipalities would ease her work¹⁷ and support the implementation of the existing municipal Gender plans. All municipalities will open such spaces if they receive the recommendation from the Central Government, she said.

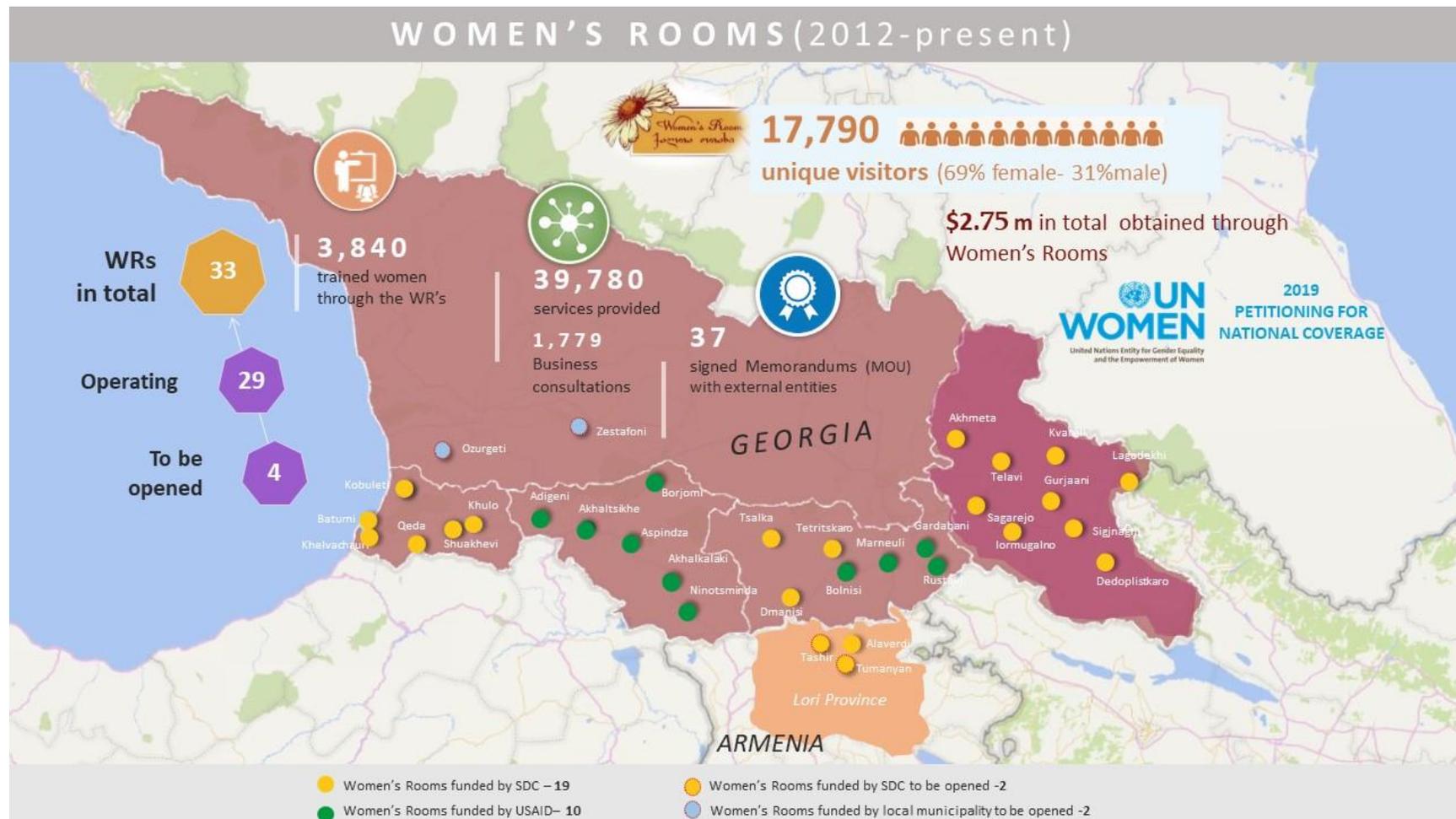
CONCLUSION

The research showed that the impact of the Women's Rooms is being borne out in rural women using the rooms, becoming more active, participating in village meetings and decision making processes, advocating for their needs and launching or developing their businesses. Women have started coming to self-government buildings for resolution of their problems and addressing their needs and stopped avoiding it or only accessing it through their male family members. Women's Room users have become more economically empowered and apply for various grants and funds, which help them start and develop their own businesses and livelihoods. Women's Rooms have become sources of information provision, networking, self-help and a catalyst and support for community action. They have also become the focal point for many organisations seeking to reach rural populations.

Currently twenty-seven municipalities from sixty have Women's Rooms. There are still areas for improvement and work to address these areas through standardizing the position of the Womens Room within national governance structures and shoring up their integration has been finalized on paper. Work is now ongoing to see the Ministry of Rural Development and Infrastructure issue a recommendation to the remaining 58% of Local Self Government structures who do not have the Women's Room service to open one and in doing so shore up the legitimacy and confidence of some of the 42% who do have them and who would benefit from that affirmation. The Women's Room is and was conceived as a simple idea from the beginning; as a conduit for providing access for women and the larger community to public goods. Despite some issues as described in this review, the majority have captured the enthusiasm and grass roots dedication of key local government and civil society actors who support them to perform that function. The rooms are linking to and generating resources and are providing support and opportunities for self-affirmation, comfort, hope, and sometimes joy, to people who previously had no clear avenue to public communal support.

¹⁷ Which means to report and support the central government regarding the Gender Equality related issues and activities in the region.

ANNEX 1. A MAP OF THE EXISTING WOMEN'S ROOMS IN GEORGIA AND ARMENIA



Village Meetings 2020 Results

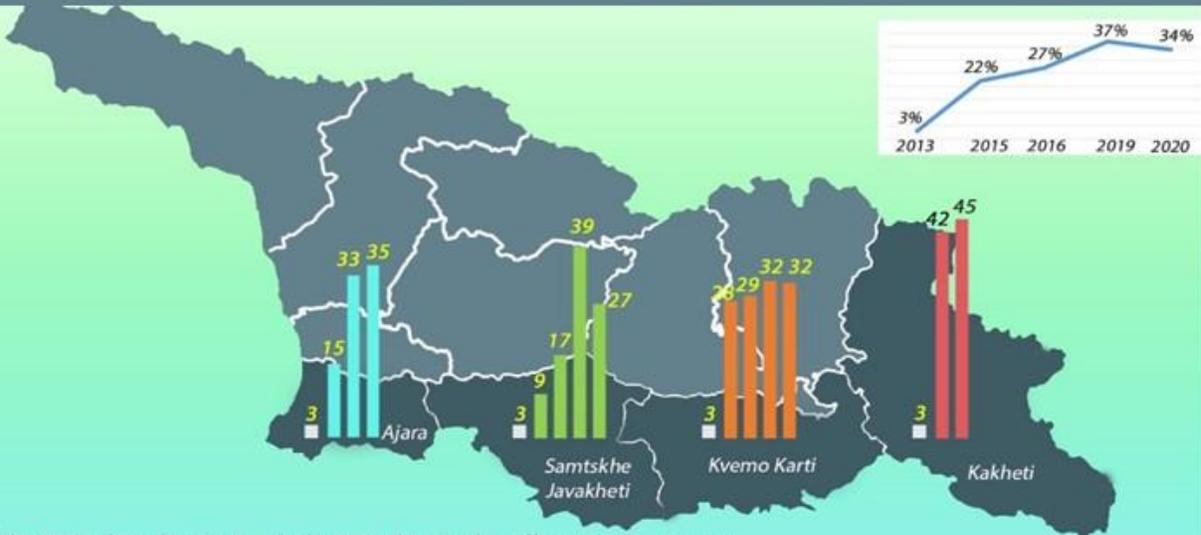
Ajara¹, Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe- Javakheti, Kakheti



Women's Instigated Community Initiatives

- ✓ Water projects
- ✓ Kindergartens
- ✓ Roads and access to Kindergarten and lands for cultivation
- ✓ Street lightning
- ✓ Public toilets
- ✓ Medical center rehab
- ✓ Mini stadiums
- ✓ Parks with kid's attractions

Share (%) of women in village meetings by regions and years 2015,16,19,20



¹ The 2020 data does not include Ajara data as the village meetings were postponed for May, due to COVID situation in the country

HELPING WOMEN ACCESS FUNDS

The Women's Rooms support their visitors in planning and fulfilling their own activities and backs them in communicating with local government

29 WOMEN'S ROOMS



\$2,754,200
IN TOTAL OBTAINED THROUGH
WOMEN'S ROOMS



126

Jobs Created through
The Women's Rooms



112



14

482 (Government Small Grants Programme) business proposals submitted by 267 women and 215 men 2016-2018;
88 funded - **\$402,000**



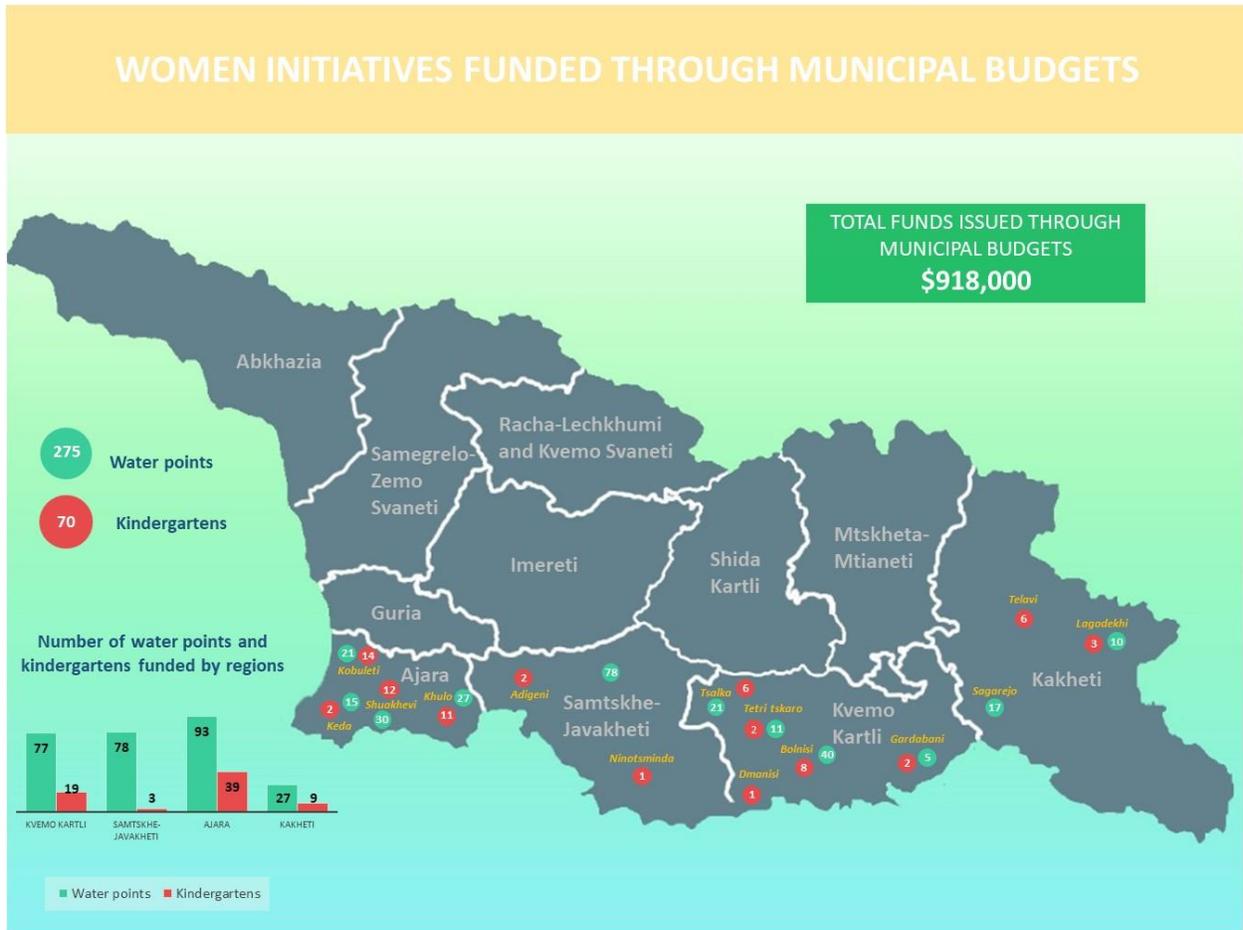
678

projects/initiatives funded through **Municipal Budgets \$2,074,000**;
Out of which: **70 Kindergartens**
275 Water Points

16 women's business projects worth **\$67,000** funded by **other donors** through Women's Rooms



13 women funded through networking at two **Women's Business Fora \$248,000** 2017/2018



Case Study: Alliances Caucasus Programme, Georgia

The **Alliances Caucasus Programme (ALCP)** is a market systems project working in the **livestock market system** across Georgia. Since 2011, the project has mainstreamed gender and women's economic empowerment throughout its interventions, incorporating a gender lens into its market systems analyses and carrying out more detailed, standalone **gender analyses**.²²

The gender analyses showed multiple constraints on women's time, mobility, access and agency, including a **lack of childcare and running water**. However, the key cross-cutting constraint identified by the programme was **women's exclusion from local decision-making processes**. Public decision-making often revolves around voting in municipal meetings, but women were strongly disenfranchised – with a participation rate of barely 5 per cent. Most did not even feel comfortable entering the municipal building. **Without meaningful participation in village meetings, women could neither voice their needs nor vote for resources to be channelled towards these needs.**

To enhance their voice, the ALCP supported the development of **women's rooms**, which **provided a dedicated space for women and children within local municipal buildings**. Additionally, the project **trained local village representatives** on how to include women in meetings. Here, the ALCP helped operationalise a government law on gender equality that lacked practical guidance on its implementation. The team helped put together a simplified set of **gender guidelines** which included a code of conduct for village representatives and a meeting checklist, addressing mobility and agency constraints limiting women's participation.

²² For guidance on how to put gender and WEE into practice in MSD programmes, see [this paper](#) on the ALCP from the DCED.

After this, **female participation in village meetings increased** to 30 to 40 per cent on average. This led to **significant changes in village priorities**, with two 'women-oriented' issues consistently being raised in meetings: **childcare and running water**. Once women were able to voice their needs and vote on them, municipal budget was allocated towards them. As a result, kindergartens were finally realised as a true public good for these communities: **between 2014 and 2018 seventy kindergartens were made operational, serving over 2,500 children.**

Looking at the impact of these kindergartens on women's economic empowerment, the ALCP documented a number of findings, including:

- ▶ **Increased income and control over resources:** childcare has allowed women to be more involved in income-generating activities such as the ALCP-facilitated dairy SMEs.
- ▶ **Decreased feeling of over-work:** despite greater involvement in income-generating activities, women reported feeling less overloaded due to a reduction in unpaid care work.
- ▶ **More time for self-care:** this included visiting beauty salons, dental clinics, relatives and celebrating birthdays, contributing to a greater sense of well-being.
- ▶ **Greater involvement in decision-making:** women saw the results of their participation in municipal decision-making and took part even more in meetings, especially as their time had been freed up by the kindergarten service.
- ▶ **New jobs for women:** 30 new jobs were created for women at the kindergarten centres – an important impact on women's economic empowerment often overlooked when focusing only on the benefits to mothers and their children.

