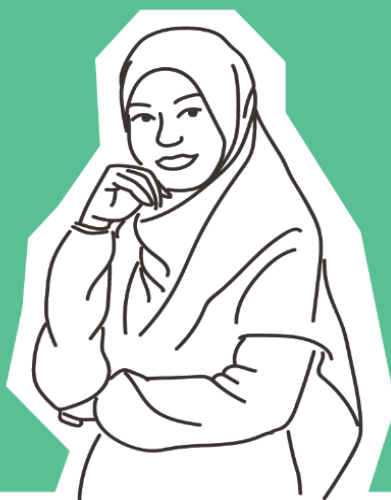


SHRINKING SPACE FOR QUEER AND WOMEN ACTIVISTS





ქაღთა ფონდი საქართველოში
WOMEN'S FUND IN GEORGIA



Shrinking Space for Queer and Women Activists

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Preface

This research was conducted within the framework of the Women's Fund in Georgia's project “Grassroots Women Mobilize for Democracy” by the organization WeResearch, with the financial support of the German women's fund filia.die frauenstiftung.

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Opinions and conclusions expressed in the research may not reflect the position of “Women's Fund in Georgia”.

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1. Introduction

The shrinking democratic space is a global problem. Many international organizations report on shrinking space for CSOs and human rights' defenders (HRD) as well as democracy. Shrinking space is defined as "an environment of reduced opportunities for CSOs and NGOs to undertake a wide range of public actions."¹ It is a "part of a general authoritarian pushback against democracy." The causes and roots of this phenomenon are linked to the world's authoritarian spin and anti-liberal² social agenda.³ Shrinking space is when the space for civic engagement and activism is closing and external support, such as donor funding opportunities, are being eliminated for democracy and human rights activities. As discussed in a Civicus review, the fundamental rights of civil society which enable activism are being significantly challenged. These fundamental rights are a) the right of association, b) the right to peaceful assembly, and c) the right to freedom of expression.⁴

Shrinking democracy is a global issue, manifested through actions or threats against democracy and human rights. However, the manifestation is different in different contexts and for different groups of actors.⁵ In some cases, government creates legal and administrative barriers for CSOs and activists to get external funding to accomplish their agenda. In other cases, CSOs are prevented from participating in different processes or expressing their views. Individual civic activists and human rights defenders (HRDs) often experience harassment, physical abuse, and/or intimidation.⁶ In ILGA-Europe's report "*Promoting an Enabling*

Civil Society Environment" some general restrictions are discussed around the shrinking civic space. These restrictions can include exclusion from participation in policy making, feeling unsafe and stigmatized, restrictions on peaceful protest, limitations and exclusion from funding, and restrictions through legislation.¹

Far-right authoritarian groups serve as a tool for government to shrink the space for civic activism. Intimidation and violent attacks against civil society by religious conservatives, corporations, and far-right actors are among the largest challenges that shrink the space for democracy in many countries. These groups create existential threats to civic activists and their operations, jeopardizing their right to be free from fear through direct threats, intimidation, and violence in both the physical and digital spaces.⁷

Shrinking space is a gendered phenomenon, meaning that frequently groups experience closing space due to their gender or gender-oriented work and activism.

Shrinking space creates restrictions to the fundamental rights for all groups of civic activists and CSOs. Research also shows that it is a gendered phenomenon, meaning that frequently groups experience closing space due to their gender or gender-oriented work and activism.

¹ ILGA-Europe. (2015). *Promoting an Enabling Civil Society Environment*. The report is available [here](#).

² Note: Under the term "liberal" and "anti-liberal" we mean value system and not political ideology.

³ EU. (2017). *Shrinking space for civil society: the EU response*. The report is available [here](#).

⁴ Civicus. (2016). *Year in Review: Civic Space. Socs 2016 civic space: rights in retreat, civil society fighting back*, p 2. Accessed 30 November 2016.

⁵ Forum Syd. (2017). *SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY - CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 AGENDA*. The report is available [here](#).

⁶ ILGA-Europe. *Civil Society Space*. The information is available [here](#).

⁷ Transnational Institute. (2017). *On "Shrinking Space". A framing paper*. The report is available [here](#).

Furthermore, the strategies through which they are targeted are also gendered. Sexual harassment, violence, and intimidation are universals for women human rights defenders (WHRD) and women led organization representatives.⁸ According to Kvinna till Kvinna, an absolute majority of women human right defenders (WHRDs) claim that shrinking civic space affects WHRDs. This takes place through eliminating funding opportunities for women's organizations and increasing the emphasis on women's traditional role as caretakers. At the same time, actors ignore women's role as actors for change and exclude them from political participation.⁹ In gendered terms, the *Feminist Resistance and Resilience* report defines the shrinking civic space as "a result of deliberate efforts to silence dissenting voices — actions that stem from a reasserting hetero-patriarchal governance."¹⁰

Feminist and WHRD activists in many countries experience direct and extreme restrictions and violence from government. For example, for two years in a row, Turkish police used tear gas against women activists celebrating International Women's Day in Istanbul.¹¹ Far-right groups also interrupted a peaceful demonstration on International Women's Day in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on March 8, 2020.¹² Violence and the detention of several activists interrupted the women's march in Baku.¹³

Apart from such extreme closure, WHRDs in many countries face restrictions in disguise. For example, government might not directly, physically threaten them. However, they are not supported at the legislative level. The spread of anti-WHRD discourse via government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) and far-

right actors is also a widespread practice and manifestation of the shrinking space for WHRDs.

The academic literature argues that the shrinking space is closely interlinked with the prevalence of patriarchal, traditional, and nationalist discourses. The predominance of discriminatory values in a society amplifies the effect of the shrinking space and makes feminist activists and WHRDs even more vulnerable. As a result, they experience restrictions more severely and are easier targets for government and far-right groups. As mentioned in an Urgent Action Fund report, women and queer activists "experience closing civil society space as being driven, at least in part, by an increase in state-sponsored rhetoric that prescribes and enforces narrow patriarchal and heteronormative gendered behavior and sexual identity, and which is maintained through violence, threats and stigma."⁸

The shrinking space is closely interlinked with the prevalence of patriarchal, traditional, and nationalist discourses.

In Georgia, the shrinking of civic space is taking place in an indirect and disguised manner. There are no explicit exclusions or persecutions of WHRD activists, and the legal framework grants the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly to its citizens equally. Yet, the government provides no proactive support to these groups. Thus, WHRD's and LGBTQI+ group's exercise of basic rights is of a token nature. The

⁸ Mama Cash/Urgent Action Fund. (2017). *Women- and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society*. The report is available [here](#).

⁹ Kvinna till Kvinna. (2018). *Suffocating the Movement – Shrinking Space for Women's rights*. Retrieved from [here](#).

¹⁰ Urgent Action Funds Sister Funds. (2017). *Feminist Resistance and Resilience. Reflections on Closing Civic Space*. The report is available [here](#).

¹¹ Additional information can be found [here](#).

¹² Further information is available [here](#).

¹³ Additional information is available [here](#).

IDAHOBIT and Tbilisi Pride events (discussed in depth below) are obvious illustrations of such tokenism. Meanwhile, informal far-right groups and the church create a hostile and violent environment for WHRD activists. Despite the complexity of the problem, a systematic and thorough analysis of the shrinking space for WHRD activism in Georgia has yet to be conducted.

This study analyzes women's rights and queer activism in the context of shrinking democracy in Georgia. The research provides an overview of the current context by looking at the attitudes prevalent in society and the discourse far-right groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church spread.¹⁴ Furthermore, the research analyzes how women's rights and queer activists operate in the shrinking space, what their strategies are for spreading their narrative, and the threats they face. The target group of the research was defined as any cis or trans woman actor whose activism includes gender equality issues and women's and queer rights.

With this aim, the research team conducted qualitative data collection and analysis, using a

variety of methods. Desk research was used to analyze the existing literature and the narrative of the far-right groups. Content analysis of the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church's epistles was conducted to describe the discourse the institution spreads. Secondary data analysis was used to elucidate public attitudes towards women and LGBTQI+ issues. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with women's rights and queer activists to identify their narrative and practices related to activism. Fifteen interviews were conducted with women's and queer right defenders, women's rights and LGBTQI+ activists, and journalists/bloggers who write on women's and queer issues. Four respondents were from outside Tbilisi, and two were ethnic minorities.

This report proceeds as follows. The next section provides country context. Thereafter, an overview of the women's rights and queer movements in Georgia is provided, which is followed by an analysis of the shrinking space for these movements in Georgia.

¹⁴ The Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most trusted institutions in Georgia, according to numerous [surveys](#).

2. Country Context

This chapter provides an overview of the country context, including analysis of the far-right groups and Orthodox Church's anti-gender equality and anti-queer discourses as well as the public's attitudes towards women's and LGBTQI+ issues.

2.1. Far-right discourse and dynamics

In the past decade, far-right movements have become progressively more powerful in Georgia. On May 17, 2013 far-right extremist groups,¹⁵ supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church, physically attacked peaceful demonstrators celebrating the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT).¹⁶ This incident was one of the first large-scale, far-right group attacks in Georgia. This particular event gave visibility, definition, and a physical existence to a discourse which was already present in Georgia.¹⁷ Extremist groups became more active and visible in society. Because the state did not take action against the far-right groups, more protests were held, more far-right movements were registered officially, and more social media pages were created to spread their narrative to the broader society.¹⁸ CRRC Georgia's 2018 publication illustrates that the number of far-right group supporters increased in the past few years in the country.¹⁹

Analysis of Georgian legislation shows that the country's legal system restricts extreme right rhetoric and action. Consequently, extreme groups do not have many opportunities at the policy level. However, implementation of laws still depends on

political will. At this level, politicians indirectly support far-right groups.¹⁸ Some officials do not openly condemn the actions of far-right groups, avoid criticizing their demonstrations, and are even sympathetic towards them.²⁰ Furthermore, far-right groups are often related to Russia. The connections are both ideological and financial.²¹ However, the far-right discourse in Georgia is not openly pro-Russian. Rather, it is anti-Western and anti-European.²⁰

There are many far-right groups in Georgia including, Georgian March, Georgian Power, National Movement, Georgian Idea, Georgian National Unity, Georgian Mission, and Civic Solidarity among others. In summer 2020, the far-right groups formed a new political party.²²

The narrative of far-right groups is homophobic, xenophobic, and anti-liberal.

Far-right groups see social media as an opportunity to create alternative platforms to spread their narrative, ideology, values, to comment on ongoing issues, and to find and keep supporters.²³ The content that far-right groups spread in social media is mainly related to history, religion, traditions, and culture, which strengthens

¹⁵ In the framework of this report, far-right groups are defined as follows: Groups which strengthen anti-liberal and anti-Western values and whose discourse is significantly homophobic, xenophobic, and nationalist.

¹⁶ Photos depicting the protest are available [here](#).

¹⁷ Rekviasvili, A. (2018). *Homonationalism or propaganda of homosexuality. Geopolitical analysis of May 17*. The article is available [here](#) in Georgian

¹⁸ Gelashvili, T. (2019). Political Opportunities for the Extreme Right in Georgia. The policy brief is available [here](#).

¹⁹ CRRC. (2018). *Countering Anti-Western Discourse in social media. The research report is available* [here](#).

²⁰ Abashidze, Z., Pipia, D., Mikadze, L. (2018). The Georgian March against migrants and NATO. Jam News. Available [here](#).

²¹ Transparency International Georgia. (2018). *The Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism*. The report is available [here](#).

²² Further information is available [here](#) in Georgian.

²³ Sartania, Ketevan, Tsumava, Aleksandre. 2019. *Ultranationalist Narrative of Online Groups in Georgia*.

nationalistic rhetoric.²³ Their narrative is also homophobic, xenophobic, and anti-liberal.²⁴

Detailed analysis of the far-right narrative illustrates that the LGBTQI+ community is viewed as an enemy, as people who are not members of society, and as a threat to the nation.²³ As for women, analysis of Facebook posts shows that Georgian March puts forth two contradictory narratives related to Georgian women opposing feminists. “Beautiful and harmonious”, non-feminist women are contrasted with feminists who are always depicted as ugly. “Good women” are always conservative and in addition to their beauty, they have the spirit of a warrior. The far-right groups are against abortion, and they accuse the feminists of supporting murder.²³

2.2. The Georgian Orthodox Church’s Discourse

Far-right groups often rely on the Georgian Orthodox Church’s influence and base their homophobic discourse on religious arguments.²⁴ They use religious texts, symbols, and the Patriarch’s preaching to justify and legitimize their actions.²³ The Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most trusted institutions in the country. According to 2019 data, 71% of the Georgian population trusts the Church.²⁵ Even though the percentage has declined slightly in the past few years, the Church has a strong influence over the values spread in society.

To understand the Orthodox Church’s discourse on gender equality and LGBTQI+ issues, the research team analyzed the Patriarch’s Christmas and Easter epistles from 2011 to 2019. The analysis shows that family values are one of the central topics in the Patriarch’s epistles. The Georgian Orthodox Church considers family as a sphere of its influence as marriage is among the seven

sacraments. Family is believed to be a “small church”. Therefore, the Church has the legitimacy to define the relations within the family. Emphasis on family and marriage were made in the epistles of 2014 and 2015. This could be explained by the fact that the Church declared May 17, also the IDAHOBIT, as Family Holiness Day in 2014. Therefore, the epistles define what an Orthodox family should be like. Everything that challenges the idea of a traditional family, including changing the traditional roles of a husband and a wife, abortion, divorce, surrogacy, artificial insemination, and same-sex marriage, is considered as a threat.

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The analysis shows that in a traditional family a husband must be the “head of the family”, while the wife should always obey him. The responsibilities of a wife are no less important. However, the hierarchy should always be kept. Motherhood has a central role for women and everything that empowers women and make them independent, such as a career and personal interests, are considered to be a sin and a threat to “good motherhood”. Abortion is associated with murder, and it is a sin not only for parents but also for the medical staff involved in the process. Furthermore, the Georgian Orthodox Church condemns surrogacy and artificial insemination and believes that a family where a child is born

²⁴ Democracy Research Institute. 2019. Media monitoring results are available [here](#) in Georgian.

²⁵ Further information is available [here](#).

with the help of a surrogate mother cannot be happy.

This narrative defines the norms of a “good woman”, and every woman who is non-conforming to these norms is automatically stigmatized. Furthermore, the non-conformity to the traditional understanding of the distribution and functionality of gender roles within the family is considered to be a possible reason for femicide.

“Aggression is especially high among those [men] who are left without a job and the function and lost the role of a breadwinner. This creates tension between both sides [husband and wife] and sometimes ends with fatal consequences for women” (Christmas Epistle, 2015).

In the epistles the LGBTQI+ community are depicted as sinners and same-sex marriage is considered to be a threat to the family.

As discussed above, far-right groups often base their arguments on the Georgian Orthodox Church’s narrative. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church openly offers support to far-right groups, and Church representatives are often present at their protests. Additionally, the Church often uses the efforts of affiliated organizations such as the Orthodox Parent’s Union and World Congress of Families. Together, these actors have a strong influence over society and make significant contributions to framing public attitudes towards gender equality, women, and queer rights.

2.3. Attitudes towards gender equality and queer issues

A variety of research indicates that attitudes prevalent in Georgian society are very similar to the narratives the Georgian Orthodox Church and far-right groups spread. For example, in the wider

society, it is believed that a woman should obey her husband, father, or any male member of the family. It is believed that the main role of women is to be a mother and to do house chores.²⁶ Women still face challenges in their careers and politics. The glass ceiling and gender pay-gap are still unrecognized problems.²⁷ Although violence in general is not tolerated, violence against women is still justifiable in some circumstances. Furthermore, sexual harassment, including at the workplace, is a largely normalized phenomenon. Indeed, in most cases, women themselves perceive it as a compliment.²⁶

Although attitudes are changing, many issues remain. People find some topics more threatening. Unacceptance and negative attitudes are more intense towards such topics. For example, women’s sexuality is still a sensitive topic, and the public does not support women’s sexual freedom. This has remained a constant over the years (figure 1).

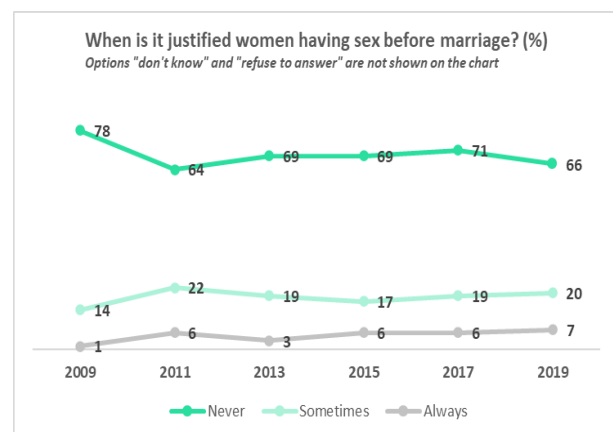


Figure 1: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019) " Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on May 3, 2020.

Most in Georgia do not accept the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia. This group has been one of the most marginalized throughout the years according to public opinion surveys (figure 2).

²⁶ UN Women (2017). *National study of Violence Against Women in Georgia*. The research report is available [here](#).

²⁷ UN Women (2020). *Analysis of Gender Pay Gap and Gender Inequality in the Labour Market in Georgia*. The research report is available [here](#).

Furthermore, protection of their rights is not acknowledged as important (figure 3).

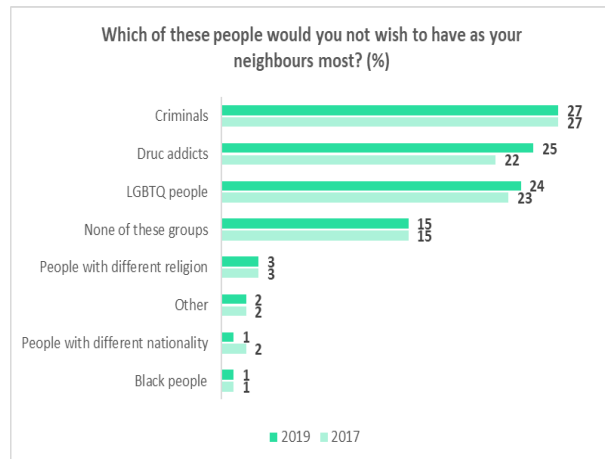


Figure 2: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017, 2019) "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on May 3, 2020.

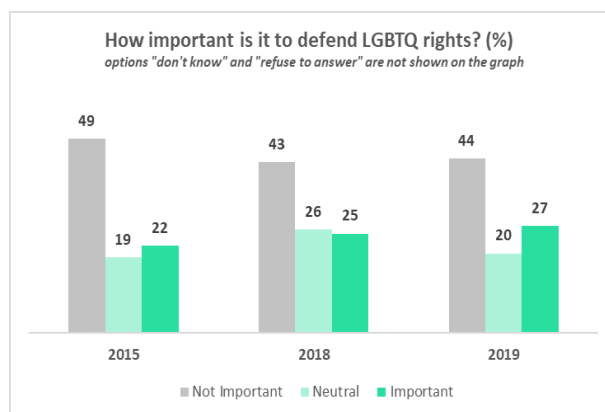


Figure 3: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015, 2018, 2019) "NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on May 3, 2020.

Attitudes towards the above issues define the attitudes towards activists fighting for women's and queer rights as well as for equality. In general, respondents report women's rights and queer activism is associated with radicalism. Thus, it is less accepted in society. Women's non-conformity to the traditionally accepted image of women among frontline activists was identified as a key driver of the lack of acceptance of women's rights and queer activists. The society does not accept women's activism. It is considered an inappropriate behavior for women. It is not proper for a "mother" to stay in the streets, to speak out openly, or to fight for her rights.

The country context does not create a welcoming environment for the development of alternative narratives.

The above analysis shows that the country context does not create a welcoming environment for the development of alternative narratives. The following sections describe the narratives women's rights and queer activists disseminate and analyzes the most acceptable and unacceptable women's rights and queer narratives for the broader society.

3. Women's rights and the queer movement in Georgia

Women's activism started to develop in Georgia in parallel to the European women's movement. The Soviet authorities interrupted its development, making artificial changes towards building an egalitarian society and then declaring women's issues as settled. The historical past of the women's movement was intentionally forgotten in Soviet Georgia, which later supported the idea that feminism and the women's movement was an invasion from western society. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new dynamic in the women's movement emerged, starting with "NGO-ization" and then moving towards "Grassroots Activism". Today, the movement is still evolving.

In the publication *Feminist Dialogue*, Beraia²⁸ described three generations of feminists. The first generation of feminists started to operate from 1990 till the 2000s. They are characterized as "NGO-ization", dominated by international organizations such as the UN. As Beraia notes, the first generation of activists mostly worked in local NGOs and were financed by international donors. As a result, the working agenda of local NGOs was donor driven for a long time. Financial dependence on donors constrained their authority, and they were unable to make radical structural changes.²⁹ The "NGO-ization" tendency started to change from 2011, when grassroots activism started to evolve. This is called the second generation of feminists.²⁸ In 2011, non-formal and non-

hierarchical groups like the Partisan Girls and Independent Group of Feminists (IGF) were created, followed by the Georgian Women's Movement established in 2014. The Partisan Girls project no longer functions, but the Independent Group of Feminists and Georgian Women's Movement are still active. The third generation of the feminist movement started to develop in 2015, which put intersectionality on the agenda of

feminist movements in Georgia. This generation of feminists supports radical, socialist, and queer tendencies.²⁸

This study discusses two of the main groups of activists from the second and third generations, including those who identify as women's rights activist feminists and queer activists. The challenges and operating context are different for these two groups, which is discussed below.

3.1. Women's rights and queer activists' narratives in Georgia

Women's rights and queer activists' groups have much in common. However, they spread different narratives. The narratives are disseminated through different formats, utilizing a variety of channels and tactics. What was common for both groups is that their target groups are mainly women. Activists noted that they aim to increase the number of supporters among women. Even though far-right groups were listed as one of the main threat groups, none of the activists mentioned them as target groups on which they are working or going to work in the future.

Those groups who identify themselves as **women's rights activists** mentioned that they work on issues that are important and concern women as a social group. They specifically mentioned the following topics in interviews: sexual harassment, early marriage, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and violence against women, including



²⁸ Beraia, A. (2017). *Feminist Dialogue*. The article is available [here](#).

²⁹ Melashvili, T. (2014). *Contemporary Feminist Activism in Georgia*. The article is available [here](#).

The target group for women's rights and queer activists is mainly women. Their aim is to increase number of supporters among women.

femicide, violence against public figures including female politicians, and sexual violence. Activists also mentioned that they actively work on awareness raising with their target audience regarding feminism, gender discrimination, sexual education, and women's empowerment among other issues. Some women's rights activists who were interviewed were also confident that over the years, they have managed to take control over the discourse in the media and managed to put women's rights issues on the political agenda.

When it comes to the **queer and LGBTQI+ activists**, two main groups were identified. One supports and advocates for the accessibility of basic services for queer people. They believe that access to basic services and socio-economic rights are the primary need of the LGBTQI+ community, and especially the trans community. Another group works on increasing the visibility of queer people, considering visibility as a key condition for society to recognize it.

"There is no sense to ask for anything in a broken system, where none of the rights are secured. I think it's inappropriate to talk about LGBTQ rights in the context of visibility while we have so many other problems" (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

"It is well said 'visibility comes before acceptance', which means that visibility is a condition for acceptance and if we do not start talking about these issues, show up, and engage in discussions, acceptance will not come" (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

Those groups who identified themselves as **queers**, actively mentioned intersectionality as a topic that they are trying to concentrate on more. Specifically, activists mentioned that intersectionality is a way to put queer and LGBTQI+ issues into the broader social context and a "way to come closer" to society:

"In my speeches, I always try to emphasize intersectionality, as there are definitely many problems in the country and sometimes society thinks that LGBTQ people are interested only in the issues that concern only their rights and discrimination, and we always try to show that we are also concerned with all the key problems in the country such as poverty, unemployment, climate issues, occupation etc. [We] try to explain all these in the context of problems of queer people and their marginalization" (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

The dynamics of narrative development for women's rights and queer activists is different. Women's rights activists mention that they still have many issues to fight for, however, things have changed positively for them since 2011. If in the beginning of their activism, they had to work on increasing public awareness of the basics of gender equality and had to fight for the adoption of laws and national policies (e.g. Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, or Law of Georgia on Elimination of Domestic Violence, Protection and Support of Victims of Domestic Violence), now they have moved one step forward and work on better implementation of existing laws. As for the queer groups, their narrative has not changed much in recent years, since they still have to fight for the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

"Queer people do not have basic rights, even the constitution has changed to take the right of marriage from them.³⁰ That's why their focus frequently is a fight for space and for free

³⁰ According to 2017 constitutional amendments, a family is defined as the unity of a man and woman.

assembly. Women are able to assemble and fight for their rights. While for the past several years, queer people have been fighting for the rights to come out in the street, to show that they exist, that they are part of the society, and not to be beaten or killed for that” (Women’s rights Activist, Tbilisi).

3.2. Tactics for spreading narratives in society

During the past several years the activists improved their skills. They have learned from their experiences how to formulate messages, how to target audiences, what forms to use to gain attention properly, and what spaces and platforms to use, among other skills. In the process, they have moved towards more proactive activism.

Two different approaches to activism co-exist when spreading narratives – “emotional activism” and “rational activism”. One group of activists, who support the emotional approach, believes that honesty and spontaneity are key drivers for successful activism.

“The easiest solution is being honest. You have less to think [about] or to plan. Yes, it’s very easy and you won’t be stuck, as you are honest with yourself” (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).



Activists use two different approaches for spreading their narratives: “emotional activism” and “rational activism”.

Another group prefers the rational approach, i.e. careful planning of strategy and actions. These activists plan all protests and advocacy campaigns in advance with framed message boxes and a defined strategy. Activists believe argument-based discussion can take control of the discourse. They cite the discussion about sexual harassment as a success story:

“When we plan events for March 8 or November 25, we plan beforehand what messages to disseminate and in what forms to reach out to the broader society and to make them more understandable for people” (Women’s rights Activist, Tbilisi).

Furthermore, some of the activists stress the importance of collaborating with government bodies and political parties. The respondents mentioned that they use argument-based strategies to advocate for their agenda with the government. Additionally, some interviewees believe that involving political parties can be a successful tactic as well. Particularly, they strive to convince the political parties to incorporate LGBTQI+ issues in their pre-election programs, and thus create a basis for further demands and possible development.

Activists use different forms of spreading their messages to make content understandable, catchy, and reach society. Activists consider target audiences while framing content and language, and creating dissemination strategies for their messages. Together with protest rallies and demonstrations, the activists frequently use

creative approaches, such as performances and art.

Some activists use traditional elements to bring their messages closer to society. This approach is an attempt to reduce the gap between public discourse and the narrative they spread.

“We tried to have Georgian elements while planning Tbilisi Pride. We took the Kinto character from old Tbilisi traditions. Everyone knows that Kintos were homosexuals and no one stoned or beat them” (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

Activists choose their language carefully, depending on target audience and dissemination channel. Respondents report that they use every possible space for their activism, starting from physical space like demonstrations and face-to-face meetings as well as traditional and online media.

Traditional media remains the main source for narrative dissemination, while online media plays an important role for activists to reach out to younger audiences and to organize events.

“When I am on TV, I always imagine my 82-year-old grandmother and try to speak so that she also understands what I am talking about. So, I am trying to use more general language and terms. For example, I say that I have the rights to love and I should not be beaten for that ... when I want to be more open, radical, and to be more identified as queer woman, I post on Instagram” (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

³¹ More information available [here](#).

3.3. Consonant and Dissonant Narratives

Some narratives that are spread by activists are more widely accepted, while others receive an extremely negative reaction from the public. The public resonance of narratives the activists spread reflects existing public attitudes towards issues.

A narrative which is relatively acceptable in society is the criminalization of extreme violence, including femicide and violence against women. According to the respondents, when they talk about these issues, they receive less aggression from the wider society. It is argued that people become more tolerant and supportive when a victim is helpless and vulnerable.

However, a majority of the messages remain unacceptable and lead to negative reactions from the public. The least tolerated narratives are related to female sexuality and the female body. This is particularly the case as relates sexual identity, sexual freedom, sexual harassment, sexual education, and the rights to reproductive health and abortion. Public discussions of these topics always result in tremendous aggression and backlash. Furthermore, whenever activists' narratives incorporate obvious critiques of the Georgian Orthodox Church or Patriarchy, the negative reaction from the public increases.

The least tolerated narratives are related to female sexuality and the female body.

“In case of women, freedom of sexuality is the most critical issue. On the page of ‘Women of Georgia’³¹, whenever women start to talk about their sexuality, comments [explode], and it results in the biggest discussion. Or when there is the story of a

lesbian women, society blows a gasket” (Women’s rights Activist, Tbilisi).

The level of acceptance of activists’ narratives differ between Tbilisi and elsewhere in the country. For example, the inconsistency between women’s traditional roles as a mother and a wife and women’s emancipation is less accepted outside Tbilisi. By comparison issues that are still not tolerated in the capital, for example LGBTQI+ problems, are taboo outside Tbilisi.

“In our newspaper, we had an article about the legal aspects of divorce, explaining legal procedures. In other words, [the article discussed] what steps a woman should take to get a divorce. This caused very negative feedback [from the local society]” (Women’s rights Activist, Region).

A slightly different dynamic was at play in interviews with ethnic minority activists. They emphasized that discussing community problems outside the community is not acceptable and is perceived as a betrayal. This makes ethnic minority

women’s rights activists’ narratives even less tolerated among community members.

As discussed previously, the country context analysis shows that far-right groups became stronger in the past decade in Georgia, and their anti-western narratives coincide with the Georgian Orthodox Church’s discourse. This in turn influences public attitudes due to high trust in society. These two actors together with society’s support largely define the space for women’s rights and queer activists. They frame the discursive context and create a hostile environment for activism. Women’s rights and queer activists operating in such unwelcoming contexts experience a shrinking of the space for their activism. They apply a variety of tactics to achieve their goals. During this process, activists face different threats and challenges which are discussed in the following chapters.

4. Shrinking space for the women's rights and queer movements in Georgia

Based on the above-discussed country context and the analysis of women's rights and queer activism, it is obvious that the risk of space continuing to shrink is high. The cases that occurred in the past decade as well as the interviews confirm that women's rights and queer activists' fundamental rights related to activism, including freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, are severely hindered.

Physical and symbolic expulsion from public space is the most obvious violation of the rights of LGBTQI+ people to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. As it was indicated above, on May 17, 2013 thousands of far-right extremists physically attacked IDAHOBIT demonstrators and disrupted a peaceful demonstration. They managed to seize the physical space from activists.

The following year, the Georgian Orthodox Church declared May 17th Family Holiness Day. This was a direct manifestation of shrinking space at the social and symbolic levels. With this act, the Georgian Orthodox Church put "family values", which is of highest importance for Georgian society, into confrontation with LGBTQI+ rights, which are perceived as the largest threat for family.

This creates clashes between far-right groups and LGBTQI+ activists every year on May 17. For example, in 2018, LGBTQI+ activists had to cancel their event as there was a significant threat from the far-right groups. Only a small number of activists managed to gather for a short period of time. Meanwhile thousands of far-right group members and representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church marched down the central streets in Tbilisi.³²

The Georgian Orthodox Church put "family values", which is of highest importance for Georgian society, into confrontation with LGBTQI+ rights, which are perceived as the largest threat for family.

The Family Holiness Day overlaps with IDAHOBIT activities. Mass-media and public attention is directed to the Family Holiness Day which Georgian priests lead and thousands of Orthodox Christians participate in. In social space, Family Holiness Day overshadows IDAHOBIT, and the main aim of IDAHOBIT, increasing awareness of homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, is not achieved. Only narrow social groups acknowledge IDAHOBIT. Family Holiness Day usually takes place in the main streets in the center of Tbilisi, which seizes the physical space. Since there are far fewer participants in IDAHOBIT than the Family Holiness Day, city authorities do not guarantee their safety and advise them to use remote locations, far from the city center. This is another important factor for why IDAHOBIT does not receive wider public attention.

In 2019, Tbilisi Pride could not be held as arranged and the organizers had to change the plan of their action, because the state openly declared that the police was not able to ensure Pride participants' safety. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs did not collaborate with Tbilisi Pride and refused to ensure transportation for participants.³³ Therefore, although the State does not officially ban gatherings for the LGBTQI+ community, no specific measures are taken to ensure the

³² Further information is available in Georgian on the following [link](#).

³³ Further information is available [here](#) in Georgian.

protection of LGBTQI+ rights activists. What is more, the government indirectly supports the shrinking of civic space by making activists responsible for the far-right violence against them. This leads to self-limitation and self-censorship among activists. Formally, activist groups do have the right of peaceful assembly, however practically this right is not realizable.

“[The state’s] approach towards LGBTQI+ demonstrations, IDAHOBIT, and Pride events is that throughout the years they create such circumstances for us, that we have to cancel the events ourselves. They can’t ban events directly, due to international commitments, because it is a peaceful assembly in the frame of the constitution. So, it is easier to make you scared so that you cancel it by yourself. [...] There was massive pressure. They blamed us, saying that all that violence that followed with LGBTQI+ events was caused by us.”
(Queer activist, Tbilisi).

The far right frequently attempts to interrupt gatherings and events related to LGBTQI+ issues. This is a manifestation of the shrinking of civic space. The protests held against screening the film “And then we danced” serve as an example. In November 2019, far-right groups protested in front of cinemas and prevented people from entering buildings. Some of the people who wanted to see the movie were physically attacked and injured.³⁴

Importantly, women’s rights activists have more access to public space than LGBTQI+ activists. They can practice the rights of assembly and freedom of expression. However, there are threatening practices used against them as well, which are discussed in the following chapters. Additionally, the queer activists mentioned during the interviews that the shrinking space affects queer

women more, because heterosexual women dominate the women’s rights while queer men dominate the queer space.

“Queer activism is led by gay men. Despite the fact that women are the pulling force in the organization and despite that we always say there should be a gender balance in the organization, the management is always constituted by men”
(Queer activist, Tbilisi).

As the cases discussed above illustrate, the state cannot ensure the safety of LGBTQI+ activists. The state cannot protect the activists from radical groups and urges them not to express their opinion openly and to leave the public space. In this way, LGBTQI+ activists cannot practice their fundamental rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Besides the above cases, the shrinking space is manifest in everyday life and the practices of women’s rights and queer activists. One of the most prevalent forms of shrinking space for activism is creating **disruptions at work**. Activists from Tbilisi and outside it mentioned that different actors create artificial challenges to interrupt their activities. For example, a young women’s rights activist from outside Tbilisi shared that local authorities hindered her from distributing posters on International Women’s Day. Many respondents mentioned that they cannot rent an office or could not find a space for a LGBTQI+ related performance. Even some service providers refuse to collaborate with them. One activist, who created videos on sexual education, mentioned that donors are limiting funding due to her past activism that received an extremely negative response from certain groups.

“[Donors] give me money, but for other projects. I can understand them too. They could not imagine that [my videos] would cause such a reaction. Working on these topics is very risky. When you are

³⁴ Further information is available [here](#) in Georgian.

acknowledged as something 'anti-state' by a certain group, then it is doubtful whether it is worth it to support you or not. Because they do not know our context and then I have to explain and prove that I am not doing anything wrong.” (Women’s rights Activist, Tbilisi).

Simultaneously with public space, safe personal spaces are also shrinking for activists. Trans activists are often kicked out of their homes, experience challenges in receiving services, and are forced to leave the country.

Respondents also mentioned avoiding public transport and losing safe informal spaces:

“Music festivals are a space which I considered the safest for me. When you are at a demonstration, you might expect some threats. But [at a music festival] I did not expect it at all, but still [a physical attack] happened” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

The above cases of shrinking spaces are a clear indication that women’s rights and queer activists in Georgia have limited access to their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. However, the activists pursue their goals and try to implement their agenda in spite of the shrinking space. In this process, they face different threats and challenges that significantly impact their personal safety and well-being.

4.1. Threats that women and queer activists face in Georgia

The above analysis of the shrinking spaces, as well as the interviews with respondents, identify far-right groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church as the main sources of threats for women’s rights and queer activists in Georgia. Furthermore, the respondents named troll factories, several political

parties that support a far-right ideology, some state institutions that do not ensure the safety of activists, and public figures associated with far-right groups, as groups that create additional threats for activists. Women’s rights and queer activists face different types of threats in their everyday professional and personal lives from these groups.

All respondents experience bullying and hate speech. Women’s rights and queer activists face bullying everywhere in different forms, from in physical space to online bullying.

Bullying that women activists experience is mainly gendered, i.e. they are criticized because of their appearance, for being “bad mothers”, etc.

Slut-shaming, derision, condescension, and professional libel are also quite common forms of bullying that women activists encounter.

“I was writing [blog] during that tough period of my life and they took a photo of me for this [blog]. If you look at that photo, I look ten years older there. All that stress, sleeplessness, anxiety, and everything is on my face. And that photo was shared and discussed everywhere, shaming like ‘she even does not know skincare and her hair is dirty...’ [.....] The epithets that were used towards me and the content of the bullying is very much linked to my gender identity. They directly called me a slut, saying ‘she is not even a woman’, ‘she can’t even grow a child’. I was disparaged as a mother, and I became devalued, because a mother should not be like me” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

“I feel a huge disgust and aggression towards me. I feel it when I am on TV, and it is followed by the reactions on social media. I feel it when I give a

speech at a demonstration, and I get insulted there. I feel huge bullying, hate speech, and aggression in every corner” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Libel against the professional capacities of activists is a common threat women activists face in Georgia. This is done through spreading fake information about activists and their work, or intentionally misrepresenting their words. This eventually leads to questioning of activists’ professionalism. Another tactic for discrediting activist groups is affiliating them with different political parties. This leads to lost trust and support. Ultimately, this is linked to career problems that women’s rights and queer activists face frequently in Georgia.

“I think that [activism] might cause serious career problems. [...] I know that the door is closed for me in many companies, not to speak of the civil service. Even private companies might refuse to hire me because of my activism” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Activists also experience physical threats, including physical attacks, intimidation, attacks on offices, sexual harassment, and sexual threats. Such threats are mainly experienced by groups that challenge the most important values of the society, such as family traditions. Thus, activists fighting for LGBTQI+ rights, sex education, and sexuality in general, are mostly exposed to physical threats. Women activists in ethnic minority regions can face the threat of kidnapping, in addition to the above mentioned threats.

“Those women’s rights [activists], who try to break taboos on sexuality, who are not interested in men and are queers, who write on these topics, they are under the biggest threat, because they are not those women anymore, who are respected by society and by men. Actually, they are not women at all in their eyes and the [social rule] ‘not to hit a woman’ is not relevant anymore, and I know that if they need, they will hit me.” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

“When I was writing on abortion rights, radical groups were intimidating me and saying that my body should be cut as the fetus is cut in the womb” (Women’s rights activist, Tbilisi).

Surveillance, blackmail, leaking internal work plans and related information, and threatening to or actually revealing the details of people’s personal life are another type of threat. This mainly occurs in the **digital space** and is usually used prior to or following specific events, such as demonstrations and LGBTQI+ marches. For instance, activists were planning a gathering for Tbilisi Pride 2019. The planning was happening in a closed Facebook group. However, the day before the event, information about the gathering place leaked and the activists had to cancel the event. Respondents report that social networks and digital space in general pose additional threats, because information is easily accessible. Thus, additional skills are required to manage profiles and public information about themselves. However, many activists lack such skills.

Family and the well-being of family members is very sensitive and crucial for anyone. This is very frequently used to hinder activism. All respondents have experienced manipulation through or of family members and **threats against family** and children in particular. Threats that family members might face due to their activism, makes women’s rights and queer activists particularly vulnerable. This is the point at which they start think about giving up.

“I felt real fear, when I read a threatening message towards my child, saying that my child will be raped by them. I shuddered when I read this. I felt very bad. I felt guilty, and I felt huge responsibility. It is easy to be brave when it’s only you, and you are responsible only for yourself. But, it gets difficult when another person depends on you.” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

“I do not feel safe at all. How can I feel safe, when people know my home address? They even know

what I eat, how I breath, and I feel very real threats not only towards me, but towards my family too.” (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Family members are also frequently used as a tool of manipulation. For instance, if a family member is an employee at a state organization, s/he might be sent to the activist to ask them not to do or not to say something.

“I apologized officially on Facebook because of my brother’s work. They asked him to request an apology from me as an older brother. [...] Then, for some period I stopped activism because of my family, not fully stopped but just decided not to speak too loudly.” (Women’s rights activist, ethnic minority).

“I feel anxiety for many things, e.g. when a family member is a state employee and etc. I have caught myself that I am anxious, fearing that someone might be harmed because of my activism.” (Women’s rights activist, Tbilisi).

It should be highlighted that the types and content of threats towards women’s rights and queer activists are largely defined by their gender identity. The physical threats against women’s rights and queer activists often have sexual content and include threats of rape. Furthermore, criticizing activists due to their appearance and discrediting their roles as women and mothers, according to the traditional understanding of these two roles, is common. In some cases, queer activists are not considered women, which leads to threats and the legitimization of aggressive actions against activists.

4.2. Factors exacerbating existing threats

The threats that women’s rights and queer activists face increases their insecurity and creates risks for their activism. However, the respondents identified additional factors that elevate their

vulnerability within an already hostile environment.

As the **visibility** of activists increase, their safety and security level decreases. This is a critical problem for activists in general. Activism implies speaking up, acknowledgment, and attracting public attention. Sometimes, the non-conforming appearances of the activists, especially queer activists, increases the risks they face significantly. However, as the activists mentioned, they realize this effect of increased visibility.

“Those women, who are brave enough to fight for freedom are the most unprotected. Us, who actively fight not locally for our personal freedom, but at the wider societal level are involved in the activism. We are accessible for lots of people who are annoyed by us and actually, it seems that we put ourselves at risk consciously” (queer activist, Tbilisi).

The most important factor that most respondents mentioned is a **lack of trust in state institutions**, because they do not ensure the safety of activists in different situations. Respondents recalled cases of an attempt to collaborate with state agencies, requesting protection guarantees from police during demonstrations. However, the state either does not provide such guarantees at all or requests compromises and even the cancellation of events, as took place with Tbilisi Pride 2019. Activists also mentioned police not investigating crime. For example, one activist, who was threatened with abuse and murder, reported the case. None of the suspects were interrogated. In another case, a politician who insulted an LGBTQI+ person was fined GEL 1.³⁵ In general, activists report that they do not trust government and police. To a certain extent, they are perceived as supporters of the far-right movement in Georgia.

Importantly, state institutions have something of a hybrid position. The state is obliged by national

³⁵ Further information is available [here](#).

and international law to protect activists, including those advocating for women's and queer rights. Therefore, the activists seek to collaborate with them. But, at the same time, they express fear of the state. It can be argued that the state changes its actions based on the context. If protection of women's rights and queer activists leads to protests in the broader society and thus creates a threat for the state, the state stands with the majority.

"I am afraid of government, exactly as much as I am afraid of far-right groups." (queer activist, Tbilisi)

"When we plan [an event] and want to make a mapping of supporters and opponents, we are lost when it comes to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. We have to collaborate with them. We cannot do anything without them, especially during the protests, which might have a large resonance in society. One need is a guarantee of safety. This is not something to be thankful for. This is our right and this is their obligation." (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

Although, in general, media is considered as a supporter of activism, in some cases, **unethical coverage** can create additional threats. For example, during the planning for one of the IDAHOBIT events, journalists came to the office of an LGBTQI+ organization and started live broadcasting directly in front of the office. This unintentionally made the location of the office public. In general, whether the media is supportive, or a threat depends on the media outlet.

"Everyone learned our office location and after a week, or so, our office was attacked. The whole neighborhood learned who we are... it was almost impossible to walk on that street calmly; people were swearing at us. [...] I think that such unethical coverage by journalists is quite problematic for us,

even more, it might cause bigger problems..." (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Respondents discussed a number of other factors that nurture the hostile operational and living environment. **Confrontations among the activist groups, a lack of solidarity, and poor coordination** were all named. Respondents mentioned uncoordinated activities as a cause of harm for other activists. Confrontations are a more severe problem among LGBTQI+ activist groups. They have different priorities and interests that cause clashes and scattering between the groups.

"We have severe confrontations among queer movements. That started in 2018 and was the result of the intimidation and spreading of fake information within the group from the state. We were united for the first time, and then suddenly we scattered, and we crashed. It was hell... [...] and it continues today." (Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Problems among the activist groups that are linked to different interests and an unequal power distribution lead to a waste of resources, including emotional resources which are crucial for activism. This ultimately leads to an increased variety of threats and decreases the feeling of security.

"I am really worried because of such inter-group confrontations. Honestly, this hampers me the most. This is a huge demotivator for me. It represents the Women's Movement in bad manner. How can we reach others and explain things, if we can't communicate internally in a civilized manner?" (Women's rights activist, Tbilisi).

Based on respondents' stories, it is obvious that many of them **lack the capacity to assess** the severity and reality of the threats they face. This is particularly true of the physical threats. Activists struggle to admit that they actually are facing such extreme threats. Those who have not experienced physical attacks or threats do not assess the risks realistically.

"I am not able to calculate danger. I can never assess the possible risks in advance, and it makes me scared, because some activity that is harmless in my opinion, might cause an enormous reaction."
(Queer activist, Tbilisi).

Visibility of the activists, lack of trust in state institutions, unethical media coverage, lack of coordination and solidarity among activists, and low capacity to assess the risks increase activists' vulnerability.

The vulnerability of queer and women's rights activists increases due to external and internal factors. Lack of trust towards the state and unethical coverage by media are external factors. These factors exist independently from the activists, and they are not able to control them. Confrontations among the activist's groups, lack of coordination and solidarity, and low capacity to assess risks are internal factors that the activists could effectively manage. These factors take up significant resources, time, and energy, ultimately decreasing the effectiveness of their activism. The "Recommendation Document: Movement's Capacity Assessment Tool Analysis and Strategy for Grant-giving" identified the strengths and weaknesses of the feminist movements using the women's movement capacity assessment tool (MCAT).³⁶ According to the document, strengthening coordination among the movement's internal and external stakeholders, as well as safety skills, particularly in digital safety, were identified as major needs of the women's movement in Georgia. Furthermore, shared

leadership, knowledge sharing, shared spaces, and stronger local grassroots movements were identified in need of further improvement for the effective functioning of the women's movement in Georgia.³⁷

4.3. The Impact of threats

The hostile environment and the results of the shrinking space have negative effects on activists' professional and personal lives. Psychological problems, such as burnout, fear, paranoia, anxiety, and depression are very common among activists. Furthermore, some young activists reported doubting themselves due to society's reactions to their activism. They question themselves and their work. Some of them changed their behavior due to violent experiences. Negative psychological effects were also accompanied with health complications.

"I do not wear those clothes anymore that I wore in those videos. It is very difficult for me. I do not go to a certain place that I used to go in that period, I forbade it for myself."
(Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

This negatively affects their activism as well. Self-censorship is commonly practiced to avoid the consequences of speaking freely. Activists change their narrative or refuse to say anything at all. Some activists chose to limit their audience to avoid violence. They refuse to be involved in the discussion, express their opinion with certain people, and do not boost videos on Facebook.

The ultimate aim of a shrinking space is to eliminate opportunities for activists and to stop activism. This can be done in several ways. Either through radical means, such as activists being killed, or limiting spaces in a way that activists quit activism on their own. Based on interviews, the

³⁶ Information about MCAT is available [here](#).

³⁷ Women's Fund in Georgia, Taso Foundation, Global Fund for Women (2019). *Recommendation Document*:

Movement's Capacity Assessment Tool Analysis and Strategy for Grant-giving.

latter was identified as the most common result of shrinking space in the Georgian context. The respondents' narratives show that the risk of giving up is higher among young activists and among those who themselves question their actions. The risk of giving up is also closely linked with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), burnout, and other extremely negative experiences more broadly speaking. Some activists choose to take time out and stay low profile periodically, while others give up on activism all together.

"For me, this life is a huge self-censorship, and everything I do in my life is overcoming this self-censorship. The universe does not accept me at all. It does not accept my sexuality... nothing. If I want to be who I really am, I must step over lots of things, and when I do not do this, this is already self-censorship." (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

4.4. Creating Safe Space

Activists utilize a variety of approaches and mechanisms to eliminate the threats and cope with the hostile environment. Distancing, i.e. not reading bullying comments on social media and not engaging in toxic conversations, is quite a common approach among the activists. They try to control the content on social media, and thus create safe online space at a certain level. Some respondents mentioned self-care related activities as coping mechanisms, e.g. psychological

consultations, workshops on emotional burnout, etc. Some of them chose physical preparedness (e.g. kickboxing) and equipping themselves with self-defense tools (e.g. pepper spray). This approach increases the feeling of safety and security.

Communication with like-minded individuals and groups, keeping contacts with trusted police, and safe networking were also mentioned as effective coping mechanisms, as this ensures a feeling of support and solidarity from other people.

Since support networks are very important for women's rights and queer activists, they seek to increase the number of support groups. Women NGOs, international organizations, and other activist movements, such as the "Shame Movement" and the "White Noise Movement"³⁸, were identified as support groups for women's rights and queer activists in Georgia.

The Public Defender's Office was identified as the only supporter for women's rights and queer activists among government bodies. Although, activists generally do not trust state institutions, the relationships are heavily dependent on the individuals involved.

Finally, family and close friends represent the most important supporters for the activists.

"I am lucky to have supporting surroundings. I know that if anything happens, there are always my friends, my community members, just supporting individuals to whom I can approach for help anytime. This is very important for me." (Queer Activist, Tbilisi).

³⁸ Further information can be found here: ["Shame Movement"](#) and ["White Noise Movement"](#)

5. Conclusions

Basic rights such as the right to peaceful assembly, right to freedom of expression, and right of association are significantly challenged in many countries. These rights are fundamental for proper activism in social movements. The violation of these rights is the primary indicator of a shrinking democratic space. The shrinking democratic space is a challenge in Georgia too. While Georgia's legal framework grants equal fundamental rights to citizens, exercising these rights adequately is not possible in practice for many activist groups. Thus, it can be considered tokenism. This study analyzed women's rights and queer activism as well as the forms and features of the threat's activists face in the context of shrinking democracy in Georgia. The country context analysis shows that far-right groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church create a hostile environment for women's rights and queer activism. Both far-right groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church have support from the larger society at the attitudinal level. At the same time, the Church is one of the most trusted institutions in the country and has a strong influence over public attitudes. Far right groups and the Church have considerable support from state officials and politicians. This is for either political reasons and/or shared values. This elevates the hostile and unsafe environment for women's rights and queer activism. The discourse that the Georgian Orthodox Church and far right groups spread is conservative, anti-western, and anti-liberal. Therefore, they oppose the narratives women's rights and queer activists disseminate. They use family values to confront women's rights and queer narratives. Considering the existing context, the narratives the women's rights and queer activists spread usually receive negative responses. The most dissonant narratives disseminated are those which challenge the idea of a traditional family, including changing the traditional roles of a husband and a wife/woman and any issue related to women's sexuality.

Women's rights and queer activists experience different forms of threats in their professional and personal lives, as a result of operating in the shrinking space. Their rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are violated as they are expelled from the physical public spaces. Furthermore, they receive threats in their everyday life that threaten their physical and digital security. These threats are mostly framed in terms of the gender identity of activists, as well as their work or activism that is focused on gender issues. The forms of threats they face, such as sexual harassment, sexual violence, or intimidation, bullying and libel based on gender or sexuality are strictly defined by hetero-patriarchal values and its harmful practices. A variety of external and internal factors such as lack of trust in state institutions, unethical media coverage, lack of coordination and solidarity among activists, and low capacity to assess the risks increase activists' vulnerability. Additionally, queer women are more effected by the shrinking space, as women's rights activism is dominated by the agenda of heterosexual women's activism and the queer space is largely dominated by queer men. All the above ultimately affect the personal and professional wellbeing of activists. In some cases, they even quit activism.

The shrinking democratic space, together with the accompanying threats, puts the wellbeing and lives of individual activists at risk. It hinders activism. This ultimately prevents the establishment of a more egalitarian and inclusive discourse in society. Considering the above, it is extremely important to elaborate a strategy and take determined measures aimed at strengthening women's and queer movements in Georgia, to enable them to safely operate in the existing environment and to continue effective dissemination of women's rights and queer supportive discourses.

