



GENDER IMPACT ASSESSMENT (GIA) OF THE STATE STANDARD FOR EARLY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION COMPONENT ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL PROCESS





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Kutaisi

2025

The assessment was carried out under the supervision of the Women Fund “Sukhumi” within the framework of the project “Promoting Gender Policies in Conflict-Affected Communities for Strengthening and Protecting Women and Youth Rights and Building Confidence”

Brot Donor: *Brot für die Welt - Bread for the World – Church*
für die Welt *Development Agency (Germany)*

The research team:

ANA MAMULIA, NANULI RAMISHVILI,
ANA SHALIKIANI, MAKHA ABULADZE

The report was prepared by:

EMA KAMKIA AND KHATUNA GOGUA

This publication has been prepared with the financial support of the international organization Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World). The views and opinions expressed in the publication may not necessarily reflect those of the donor organization.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document represents a gender impact assessment (GIA) of the state standard for early and preschool education, in particular, the component of family and community involvement in the educational process and is largely based upon the findings of the research conducted by the gender impact assessment team.

The activities related to the gender impact assessment were carried out by the Women Fund “Sukhumi”. The research was conducted in close cooperation with Kutaisi Kindergarten Association. The assessment was done within the framework of the project *“Promoting Gender Policies in Conflict-Affected Communities for Strengthening and Protecting Women and Youth Rights and Building Confidence.”* Donor: Bread for the World - Church Development Agency (Germany).

Provision of full-fledged preschool education and care services is pivotal to the state. In October 2017, the Government of Georgia approved state standards and technical regulations for preschool education. The requirement to develop mandatory standards was dictated by the Law on Preschool Education and Care, and UNICEF was involved in their elaboration. The organization “World Vision” also took part in the development of the standard.

The main goal of the state standards for early and preschool education is to promote child-centered education, where the child is viewed as the central figure of the educational process and environment. Everything serves the needs of the child, protection of his/her well-being, development and realization of his/her abilities. Preschool institutions are obliged to take care of

every child, while promoting their development and protecting their best interests.

Early and preschool education **quality standard** defines the minimum criteria necessary to ensure a child-centered environment and educational process in early and preschool education institutions. The standards encompass the following 8 areas: *security and safety; curriculum and methodology; physical environment; relationships; educational process; family and community involvement; inclusive education; management and evaluation.*

Within the scope of the gender impact assessment, the component “family and community involvement” was thoroughly analyzed with a view to determining whether the program contributes to gender equality or, conversely, causes inequalities in terms of engagement, access to resources, rights, gender norms, and values. The program’s role in ensuring equal access to services was assessed, and recommendations were developed for its improvement.

The gender impact assessment team tried to identify ways of addressing distinct needs of the target groups (direct beneficiaries - children; indirect beneficiaries - parents, teachers, service providers, community) under the program; to pinpoint the opportunities for enhancing the gender perspective of the program and improving outcomes for those actors who are directly and indirectly affected by the program.

The overall impact of the program was assessed through different lenses: *“formal and informal communication for the engagement of parents and legal representatives in early and*

preschool education program”; “participation of parents/legal representatives in the activities envisaged by the program in and outside of preschool institutions”; “family support for child’s comprehensive development”; “aspects of community cooperation as per the early and preschool education standard”.

Having conducted an in-depth analysis of the component - “family and community involvement”, a set of findings/conclusions have been drawn: the program views beneficiaries in whole as a gender-neutral group. It puts little emphasis on the measures aimed at encouraging the involvement of specific groups (fathers, employed mothers, migrant parents, parents of children with disabilities/special needs, ethnic minorities, etc.), hence, it is gender neutral.

Given the fact that the program beneficiaries (children-girls/ boys; parents-mothers, fathers, etc.) differ from each other not only biologically, but also in terms of experiences and needs, when talking about preschool education and care services, the need for introducing holistic approach in this field is frequently emphasized. Thus, in order to implement gender-sensitive approaches, it is important to set an appropriate context.

The “standard” introduced by the state offers a set of well-defined indicators, allowing to measure the impact of the “standard” on girls and boys, women and men; to assess the extent to which gender differences/categorization are considered, even in relation to children with specific needs and their parents. As a result of gender impact assessment, their experiences can be utilized; not only can the existing status quo be determined, but the challenges, visions and expectations of beneficiaries can also

be identified and based thereupon, proposals can be prepared to improve the approaches defined by the standard and to integrate indicators based on individual differences.

It can be said that overall, the component of the standard - “family and community involvement” achieves its specific goal, contributing to family and community engagement in preschool education by recognizing and fostering different perspectives. However, given the complexity of the issue, it fails to provide equal opportunities for all actors, since in general, achievement of the goal depends on a number of factors, most of which preschool institutions are not able to directly affect (motivation of community service providers for cooperation, the community realizing its responsibility, awareness of parents/families, stereotypes regarding family roles and obligations, etc.).

By implementing the component of “family and community involvement”, preschool education institutions achieve the goal of establishing a social partnership system for the best interests of the child. However, in some cases, the current practice is not efficient enough due to various reasons (overcrowded groups, shortage of professional staff, fragmented efforts of “positive parenting”, etc.).

On the whole, the program successfully meets its key objectives and indicators, although there is room for further improvement and development. Despite its gender-neutral nature, the program promotes equality and responds to main needs of the target groups.

It is important for the objectives of the program to become even more sensitive; specific needs of men and women as well as

the general demographic profile (which the gender assessment team explored to the extent possible and identified different experiences, expectations, needs) should be considered more. As the conducted assessment reveals, certain categories of direct and indirect target groups tend to be more vulnerable and they face objective obstacles. As a result, they are less involved in preschool education and care services, which negatively affects, first of all, the children in their families.

As the research findings show, the component will contribute more to the achievement of gender equality in case of refining the standard in terms of the program sensitivity, incorporating the existing gender norms and the demographic profile of beneficiaries, collecting and analyzing data (monitoring and evaluation of the standard implementation), introducing evidence-based approaches considering the gender perspective and different needs.

CHAPTER I. CONTEXT OF GENDER IMPACT ASSESSMENT

SECTION 1. BACKGROUND

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, changed the way the children are viewed and treated - children are human beings with a distinct set of rights and not just passive objects of charity. The Convention recognizes that children need special care and protection.

International conventions: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. It was ratified by Georgia in 1994, thus becoming a binding legal document in our country. Some of the rights enshrined in the Convention are particularly important for ensuring child-centered preschool education. The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a legal framework for the states in the process of creating national child-related laws.

“General Comment No. 7 to the Convention on the Rights of the Child – Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood” (2005), which, alongside the Convention, is an important guiding document for the introduction and functioning of child-centered services, including preschool institutions.

“Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” was adopted in 2006, and it was ratified by Georgia in 2014. The adoption of the Convention was conditioned by the fact that persons with disabilities, including children, cannot fully realize their universal human rights due to various social and physical barriers, they are often excluded from social life due to public stigma and negative attitudes, and cannot use the services crucial for life and development.

The effective laws of Georgia in the field of early and preschool education include the Constitution of Georgia, international treaties, the Organic Law of Georgia - “Local Self-Government Code”, the Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education, as well as other legislative and sub-legislative acts.

According to Article 27 of the Constitution of Georgia, everyone has the right to receive education. Preschool education is governed by the Law of Georgia “On Early and Preschool Education”.

“The Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education” establishes the legal grounds for ensuring universal accessibility to, and the development and quality assurance of early and preschool education in Georgia. It determines the organizational structure of early and preschool education institutions, defines the procedure for their foundation, operation and accountability, as well as the binding nature of their authorization. The law also defines the powers, obligations, functions and responsibilities of state bodies, municipalities, other legal and natural entities involved in early and preschool education, while also determining the principles of financing thereof.¹

The powers/responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia in the field of preschool education are defined by the Constitution of Georgia, international treaties, this Law, other laws and sub-legislative acts of Georgia². The Ministry develops state standards for preschool education and care, including standard for school readiness, and submits them to

1 Article 1. Scope of regulation of the law. Source - <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3310237?publication=15>

2 Article 8. Powers/responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia in the field of preschool education. Source - <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3310237?publication=16>

the Government of Georgia. Municipalities are obliged to ensure compliance with the standard.

Congruent to the law, in order to implement, develop and improve state standards for preschool education, the Ministry is obliged to elaborate a system of monitoring the activities of public institutions, to carry out such monitoring and evaluation, and prepare relevant recommendations.³ The powers/responsibilities of municipalities in the field of preschool education are spelled out in Article 10 of the Law.⁴

Municipalities ensure the provision of preschool education services in a manner envisaged by the state standard. To this end, they assess municipal needs, plan local resources and determine budgetary funds. The municipality makes sure that the right to education as well as other rights of the child and his/her parent/legal representative under the Georgian and international laws are protected; it ensures effective communication with children's parents/legal representatives and with the public.

The “Law of Georgia on Preschool Education” also defines the rights and obligations of preschool institutions. The following are the most important ones: compliance with the standards set for the institution; full transparency in the delivery of preschool education services; effective communication with children’s parents/legal representatives and the public.

3 Ibid

4 Ibid

1.1. METHODOLOGY

Target group of the research - parents of children in public and private preschool education institutions (mothers, fathers, guardians; other family members: grandmothers, grandfathers, other family members involved in child care and education); the children themselves; a special category of beneficiaries - children with special needs (*all research components and data collection activities were carried out in full compliance with applicable laws*); teachers; field specialists (psychologist, occupational therapist); heads of kindergarten associations; social workers from local government children's right protection department, primary school teachers, family doctors.

Research period - September 1 - December 25.

Research team - the team in charge of the fieldwork consists of 4 experts from different fields: gender specialist, early care and education specialist, human rights defender, non-formal education specialist, social psychologist/sociologist. The experts involved in the research explored each section of the selected component vis-à-vis the indicators specified in the program. To collect data, a pre-developed research tool was used. At the subsequent stage, the research leader and assistant wrapped up the research findings and compiled a report.

Methods - to achieve the research objectives, active forms of research were applied: focus group, in-depth interviews, workshops, online surveys to collect quantitative data. A pre-developed questionnaire was used. Within the scope of the quantitative research, 620 respondents were interviewed, among them - 68 men, 552 women. Parents from different categories took part in the survey.

12 focus group meetings, 28 interviews were conducted (the number of respondents in the qualitative research - 112 people: 84 - focus group, 28 - face-to-face interview. By gender: 101 women, 11 men). The study included 732 respondents: 653 women and 79 men.

Representatives of different target groups took part in focus group: parents (mother, father, other family members (grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle), kindergarten teachers, caregivers, psychologists, speech therapists, methodologists.

Parents of children with disabilities/special needs, kindergarten directors, child rights defenders, social workers, service providers, and healthcare specialists were selected as experts for in-depth interviews. The qualitative research covered six state and four private kindergartens in Kutaisi Municipality. **Passive forms** of research were also applied: desk research; consultation with stakeholders; priority setting.

Primary focus of GIA: whether the given program has an impact in terms of reducing, maintaining or increasing existing gender inequalities between girls and boys, women and men.

As part of GIA, the current situation was assessed based on the gender criteria and recommendations/solutions were developed for improving the selected component of the standard. The ultimate goal of GIA is to improve the planning stage for family and community involvement in preschool education, to avoid possible negative impacts on gender equality and to strengthen equal participation through better designed, transformative approaches to preschool education.

Research stages: 1. Defining policy objectives; 2. Checking gender relevance. Subsequent steps: analyzing data; drawing

recommendations (whether there are negative/positive impacts; how to minimize negative impact (suggesting alternative solutions)).

1.2. IMPORTANCE OF THE STANDARD FOR CREATING A CHILD-CENTERED ENVIRONMENT

The state realizes the importance of education for the development of modern society and declares that care for education starts from an early, preschool age.

It can be said that preschool education in Georgia goes beyond the preparation of a child for school and seeks to shape his/her personality in such a way as to equip the child with the skills necessary for becoming a full-fledged member of society. The standard protects the best interests of the child, which implies making the most optimal decision in a particular situation for realizing the rights of the child and ensuring his/her holistic development. In each particular case, it is determined based on the specific circumstances and needs of the child.

Goals of the standard in terms of gender equality: modern theories consider child development in the framework of relationships, which the child experiences in the first years of life, especially in preschool age, in the family and kindergarten. Family involvement has long been a part of preschool education programs in many countries.

To ensure equal opportunities of learning and development for all children - girls and boys, it is crucial to put the values and principles of equality into practice. An equal environment assumes that all children, girls and boys, have the opportunity to

engage in a variety of activities, to pursue their diverse interests, to play and make friends with each other.⁵

To ensure family involvement and efficient work with parents, it is important to consider the type of their employment, social status, age, and other characteristics, so that parents of any category can find ways for greater engagement and participation.

Goals of the standard - the goal of preschool education institutions is to ensure harmonious development of preschool children and to prepare them for school. It includes the intellectual and physical development of the child, the formation of cognitive and creative skills, while also promoting individual and personal self-expression skills and aesthetic taste.

The state realizes the importance of education for the development of modern society and declares that care for education begins from an early, preschool age.

Each standard has indicators that define the set of data for achieving the goals of the standard.

It is noteworthy that the beneficiaries' specific characteristics are less considered in the indicators. They are gender neutral, for instance, towards the parents with more free time on the one hand and employed parents on the other; it's not quite clear whether both parents – mothers and fathers, or other family members are equally involved; in the absence of parents (children from emigrant families), whether the relationship with children's representatives is handled efficiently.

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/georgia/media/3031/file/garemo-romelsac-uyvars-bavshvi.pdf>

SECTION 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM (FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT)

The state standards for early and preschool education (hereinafter referred to as the standards) define the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes a child should acquire within the scope of preschool education. They also describe the environment and quality characteristics of educational process at early and preschool education institutions. The standard is binding for all early and preschool education institutions (regardless of their legal form).

In terms of structure, the standards bring together three types of standards: the standard of child upbringing and education; the state education standard for school readiness; and the quality standard for the environment and educational process at early and preschool education institutions (hereinafter - the quality standard).

Family and community involvement is one of the areas of the **quality standard**. It provides the outcomes that promote active involvement of the child's family in daily activities of early and preschool education institution and ensure positive relationships between the two.

The component of family and community involvement is described in Article 15 of the standard.

Standard 6. Family and community involvement 6.1. When interacting with parents/legal representatives, the institution's employees use formal and informal communication in order to involve them in the program; ***6.2.*** The family has the opportunity to actively engage in the activities envisaged by the program, both

inside and outside of the institution; 6.3. The program provides family support with the child's comprehensive development; 6.4. The program ensures cooperation with the community.

The indicators defined by the document allow us to determine to what extent the goals established by the standard are being met.

SECTION 3. GENDER COMPLIANCE OF THE PROGRAM COMPONENT (FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT)

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, in 2023-2024 academic year, 1,708 public preschool educational institutions were operating across Georgia, with the number of enrolled children making up 141,324. According to the agency, 17,620 teachers/caregivers/special teachers for inclusive education are employed in public kindergartens in the country. According to the Statistics Office, the largest number of public kindergartens - 308 - operate in Imereti region, where 17,729 children are enrolled and 2,707 teachers of various status are employed.

Following the decentralization reform implemented in preschool education sector in 2002, the responsibility for the establishment of preschool institutions, the development of principles for their management and financing has been vested in the local self-government. However, the forms vary from one municipality to another. In Kutaisi, the Kindergartens' Association operates as a non-profit (non-commercial) legal entity and represents

a complex institution of preschool education and upbringing. The Association is headed by a director. It consists of branches (kindergartens), which are run by managers.

The social, psycho-emotional state of the program beneficiaries and the concerned actors, their readiness to be fully involved in the upbringing and education of a child, in creating a healthy, needs-based and friendly environment for them, largely depends on the existing context in terms of gender equality and socio-economic status. Social inequalities, stereotypes, vulnerabilities caused by specific needs of the beneficiaries, the socio-demographic profile of the family - these are the characteristics defining the adjustments that need to be moved to the standard document itself as well as in its approaches and in the way of its implementation to ensure efficiency of preschool education standard and in this case, the component of family and community involvement.

When analyzing the “family and community involvement” standard, which represents a research topic for GIA, it should be considered that the practices existing in the field of preschool education and related challenges affect people in different ways due to their distinct gender roles, social characteristics, vulnerabilities, and priorities. Given the fact that beneficiaries, their parents, and teachers may find themselves in non-standard situations, sometimes due to gender (and may be discriminatory towards the father), sometimes due to demographic profile (for example, migrant or ethnic minority parents), specific needs (families of children with disabilities, families of children with disabilities), social status (displaced families, socially vulnerable families, single parents) and etc., often leading to traumatic, stressful, and difficult experiences, it is exceedingly important

to identify gender differences and take appropriate response measures, which should have a systemic nature.

The gender impact assessment of the program contributes to embedding gender mainstreaming in the component of family and community involvement. Moreover, the experience and knowledge gained from the assessment will have an indirect effect on other areas of the standard by highlighting existing gender differences and needs. It also applies to implementation of the approaches outlined in the standard by public and private kindergartens.



CHAPTER II. GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE STATE STANDARD FOR EARLY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION, IN PARTICULAR, THE COMPONENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS

SECTION 4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1. FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNICATION TO ENGAGE PARENTS AND LEGAL REPRESENTATIVES IN EARLY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The involvement of the family and community in the educational process is a vital tool for ensuring comprehensive education and development of a preschool child, and a window of new opportunities for early and preschool education institutions. Integrating family and community resources and implementing inclusive approaches set a solid basis for creating an environment that is focused on the benefit and development of the child.

Evaluating communication tools used for engaging parents in the program and assessing their effectiveness is one of the study areas of this **research**.

The official quality standard provides a clear list of indicators and presents mechanisms and opportunities for community and family involvement. The indicator defines formal and informal forms of communication to increase the engagement of parents/legal representatives in preschool education programs. Diverse forms of communication - direct, written, electronic, telephone, parent boards, information booklets, social networks – considerably increase the possibilities of using convenient tools for ensuring parent involvement.

Meantime, it is noteworthy that the official quality standard does not contain any gender-specific entry that would explicitly declare the possibility of engaging both parents and considering their interests equally, which would ultimately balance the practical scope of the document in terms of gender.

The materials obtained from the survey, the findings and identified trends demonstrate to what extent the existing standard is being implemented in practice and what is the degree of gender impact on beneficiaries.

For purposes of the gender impact assessment, it would be interesting to determine the number of people who are aware about the existence of the quality standard document. As the quantitative research materials confirmed, 61.1% of the surveyed parents are informed about the component of family and community involvement in preschool education programs. By its nature, the obtained picture is positive and should be regarded as a step forward. However, when disaggregated by gender, the figures worsen the awareness indicator and bring up one of the major challenges - lack of awareness among fathers. Only 11% of father/parents say that they are informed about the document.

As the majority of respondents noted, in most cases, the main communication channel for them is messenger chat, telephone or face-to-face communication. As it turns out, communication via social networks (messenger chats) is most effective, often aligning the interests of all types of parents and increasing the level of engagement.

According to gender-segregated data, users of these communication tools are mainly women: mothers or grandmothers (in case

if the mother is an emigrant or employed). Despite equal access to chats, the involvement of fathers is still low.

The data obtained from the qualitative research shows the same picture. It is evident that the practice of fathers' involvement in such chats is virtually non-existent. As an exception, there are some cases when mother is an emigrant and the child's father is the only contact person.

“In chat, mostly there are mothers, or grandmothers. Almost no fathers. There was one father in the chat because the child's mother was in emigration, although he never was active. Maybe he never even read the information. He was just there, listed formally.” - M. D., 29 years old, mother.

Nevertheless, messenger chat is still considered the main platform for communication and exchange of information. Its advantage is explained by the fact that it is a space where news and initiatives are discussed between parents and kindergarten staff, which subsequently has a positive impact on the overall educational activities of kindergartens and their main beneficiaries.

The survey showed that online chats are one of the important communication channels for emigrant parents, often used by kindergartens for more specific activities as well.

“We had a book week in the kindergarten, parents would come and read two or three pages; parents who were abroad also joined us online. This had an amazing effect. It caused great happiness, firstly, among their children. Then this emotion spread to everyone. The whole group was delighted.” - M. B., 24 years old, parent of a public kindergarten.

Father of one of the children mentioned in an interview that there was a case when he himself initiated joining the parents' chat, but in the end a separate chat was opened for fathers and

the group continued with two separate chats for mothers and fathers, which, of course, turned out to be irrelevant.

Despite the fact that the format of communication in chat is highly active and acceptable to most, the vast majority of the respondents still prefer individual relationship with the institution's staff (78.4%). It is noteworthy that a big number of fathers (62.38%) also recognize the advantage of this format. The same is confirmed by the qualitative data.

“I prefer to talk to the kindergarten staff when I pick up or drop off my kid and enquire about my child's performance. I find such talk more beneficial. I don't know what's going on in the chat, I'm not it's member at all.” - M. B., 24 years old, father.

E-mail is almost never used as a means of communication. The reason behind it is pretty commonplace; the technical equipment of kindergartens themselves is not up to standard, they do not have proper Internet, or a computer. Accordingly, this communication platform is not used much.

In almost all kindergartens, the information board is actively used by parents as a primary source of information. The majority of parents confirm that they get information with the help of those boards - for example, about the nutrition, activities planned in the kindergarten or other news. This opinion was expressed in focus groups as well, where most of respondents were mothers.

“Every day, when I enter the kindergarten, I check the information board to learn the news. It is very important. Official information gets posted there, and I am interested to learn. If there is a change or something new is added, I notice it immediately.” - T. K., 31 years old, mother.

Within the scope of the research, not a single case of using information booklets or parent guides, where all types of information would be consolidated and equally accessible to all, was observed on the part of kindergartens to involve parents/legal representatives in the program.

The survey provided an insight on what prompts higher involvement and participation of parents in preschool education and development programs, which party is responsible for specific initiatives: according to quantitative figures, 49.54% of respondents believe that initiatives coming from kindergartens would increase parental involvement.

As the quantitative data showed, 21.4% of respondents believe that interest should also come from parents. Based on the data obtained we can conclude that unilateral initiatives are not sufficient and to increase parental involvement, motivation should come from both sides.

As we found out, public kindergartens tend to put greater effort into improving communication format with parents. This finding was confirmed by focus group discussions as well.

“At first, I took my children to a private kindergarten. The kindergarten staff seemed to be willing to cooperate, but after a while I discovered that the kindergarten itself did not encourage my involvement as a parent. Then I took both of my kids back to public kindergarten. I think in this light the situation is better here.” - B. G., 29 years old, father.

This opinion is corroborated by expert views from in-depth interviews, which confirm that public kindergartens stand out more with their encouraging initiatives: e.g., they give certificates to active parents, award nominations, and apply different types of encouragements.

However, diversity of such initiatives depends more on the disposition of specific people rather than on the indicators defined by the standard document.

It is noteworthy that the quality of communication with parents of children with disabilities/special needs differs significantly between private and public kindergartens.

As a challenge, it was observed that there is a category of parents who take their children to special centers, while not discussing this fact with the preschool staff. They do not realize the necessity and importance of sharing information about the general psychosomatic condition of a child with disabilities/special needs.

Public kindergartens are more flexible in dealing with this type of challenge. If a kindergarten has a psychologist, in this case he or she undertakes to reach out to the center's psychologist, request information and get familiar with the child's psychosocial condition, study the individual program of working with the child and based on the results, continue working in the same manner. However, it turns out that such tactics do not pay off with all parents, and sometimes kindergarten teachers need to work additionally to convince them of the need for such coordination in order to come up with a common approach to the child's comprehensive development:

“Communication with parents of children with disabilities/special needs in public kindergartens is very close, and when working with parents, individual needs are considered. Such cooperation always yields positive results, making a favorable impact on the child. “- T. I., public kindergarten teacher.

Experts point out that private sector is less expected to meet the needs of children with special needs and their parents, since

private kindergartens do not have the luxury of hiring a special teacher and psychologist. In case of children with disabilities and special needs, the role of kindergartens in the process of their adaptation to the environment and development of general skills is relatively low. There are no special initiatives on the part of parents either and in the end, children are left with the services of specialized programs only.

From gender perspective, the situation gets even worse when it comes to distribution of responsibilities between the parents of children with disabilities/special needs. Based on the qualitative research data, respondents have difficulty recalling facts when father/parent would be actively involved in special development programs for a disabled child. In such cases, mothers undertake the whole responsibility while fathers find it difficult to even talk about the child's needs.

“We had several kids with special needs. Mostly, fathers would bring them by car, and then mothers would accompany them to kindergarten. We constantly had dialogue with mothers, mainly about the child's condition. Once, the father came alone to pick up the child, and when I started talking to him about the child, he awkwardly pushed me away, saying that his mother knew all about it and I had to talk to her. He didn't even want to listen.”- M. I., kindergarten caregiver.

Child psychologists and other specialists working in this field consider equal parental involvement absolutely necessary and argue about its positive impact at all stages of child development.

According to the indicator of the quality standard, parents/legal representatives should be informed about the methodology selected within the program, the goals of the curriculum, and the planned activities.

Here too, a significant difference between private and public kindergartens becomes evident. Based on the collected qualitative materials, we can assume that public kindergartens are more interested in making such documents public. At the beginning of the year, they already know what kind of activities are planned in the kindergarten. Meantime, private kindergartens have less responsibility for publicizing such documents. This finding is confirmed by focus group participants - both teachers and parents.

“In public kindergartens, things are more transparent, you can get this information. In private kindergartens, there is a different approach. There is less opportunity to get familiar with such documents.” - M. K., kindergarten teacher.

“We have a parent’s corner, where plans, programs, and curricula are displayed. Posts are frequently updated and parents can easily access the information.” - T. D., 31 years old, mother.

According to the research findings, information about the planned activities is shared in advance via social network, where all parents have an equal opportunity to participate in the events. By their nature, these activities are gender-neutral from the very beginning, and both parents have an equal opportunity to engage. However, in the end, there is absolute imbalance in gender participation rate: in all celebrations organized in kindergartens, mothers or grandmothers (if mothers are absent or are abroad) are mostly involved.

It is noteworthy that, according to the surveyed respondents, positive trends have been observed recently in terms of fathers’ involvement, which they attribute to active efforts taken by kindergartens.

“The attitude of fathers has changed a lot. At my group’s graduation party, for example, father played a drum and the child was so excited” .“Fathers also engage actively in outdoor activities, which brings very good results. They participate in sports games. One of the fathers was also chairing a committee and always attended the meetings. In this regard, we have a better picture. Fathers are becoming more modern.” - B. G., kindergarten manager.

Although such individual cases can hardly change the overall picture created by gender imbalance, they certainly help to promote best practices. Apart from parents, kindergartens also encourage the involvement of other family members, which confirms the positive impact from implementing the standard. According to teachers, they try to involve other family members in events so that they realize the responsibility over psychological safety of the child, to make him/her feel comfortable.

“Grandfathers also engage in our activities. We needed to install birdhouses in the yard. We encouraged them and grandmothers also got happily involved. In addition to parents, siblings also take part in different activities. For example, we had a fairy tale reading week in kindergarten and apart from mothers, other family members took part. They also participated in the planning process, we always consider their views and ideas. Most importantly, such joint involvement has a very good impact on the child.”- K. R., public kindergarten teacher.

According to the indicator of the standard, kindergarten staff are given the freedom to determine by themselves the number of communications/meetings with parents, as per the need. The record runs as follows: “regular meetings are to be held with parents/legal representatives regarding the progress of the program - if needed or desired, the number of meetings can

be increased.” This clearly confirms that the main goal of the standard is to promote the development and progress of the child. To achieve this progress, it is crucial to **periodically evaluate the outcomes of the program, which should be done through a monitoring system. It is evident that the internal monitoring system hardly exists in kindergartens at all and there are also difficulties with the assessment of the program’s impact.**

Qualitative research reveals that since the practice of collecting and analyzing data necessary for assessment is lacking, for the most part, feedback received from parents is used to identify needs and implement appropriate initiatives.

“Kindergarten teachers often ask us whether we like the existing programs, or how the children evaluate them. We share our problems with them. Whatever needs to be changed, is changed. It is done first and foremost for our kids.” - S. A., 26 years old, mother.

“When we plan an activity, we discuss it with parents; we recall past events, discuss what we did not like from previous experience, and start fixing the gaps.” - D. S., kindergarten teacher.

Congruent to the indicator specified in the quality standard, public institutions ensure operation of the advisory council and support the involvement of interested parents/legal representatives in its work.

According to Article 31 of the “Internal Regulation of the Branches of Kutaisi Kindergarten Association”, the advisory council consists of 7 members: 5 parents/legal representatives and 2 caregivers-teachers. Despite the fact that every kindergarten has a parent advisory council, they cannot always fulfill their function effectively. As reported, the work of the advisory council is often

hindered by the absence of the so-called parents' room (meeting space).

“It would be ideal for the council, which exists in all kindergartens, and its members to have one room in the kindergarten building. Parents would have the opportunity to be involved in various kindergarten activities. The council should have its own plan on how it accumulates the information necessary for the child’s development in coordination with parents and the kindergarten administration.”- S. M., manager of a public kindergarten.

Given its nature, the work of the council is highly important and is focused on comprehensive development of the child. As a challenge, it should be noted that the gender impact can hardly be positive, since the composition of the advisory council is not balanced from gender perspective. In most cases, its members are mothers, which excludes the possibility of using fathers' resources and their visions in the process of preschool care and education.

Kindergarten administrations themselves are aware of this challenge and are focused on changing the picture. Qualitative data confirms that the process is dynamically taking a positive turn, although attaining the gender balance still remains limited to mere attempts.

“We spare no efforts and are eager to bring fathers in the advisory council. We have a slightly better picture, however having them merely on the list does not solve the problem. Therefore, we are trying to adjust the council meetings to fathers’ schedules so that they do not remain just as passive members.”- T. G., kindergarten teacher.

Wrapping up the given direction, it can be concluded that the effect from practical implementation of this component of

the state standard is pretty positive and a diverse format of communication and cooperation is available. The challenges identified in this area are manageable. Strengthening communication and cooperation, securing a gender-balanced environment, and improving parental involvement will contribute to the creation of a full-fledged environment, tailored to all categories of children.

4.2. INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVES OF A CHILD IN THE ACTIVITIES PROVIDED BY THE PROGRAM WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS

The quality program seeks to create opportunities for families to actively engage in the activities provided by the program within and outside of preschool institutions. This is confirmed by the official entry of the document. Effective implementation of child-centered educational process largely contributes to comprehensive development of each child. The entire process is oriented towards ensuring that the child receives more benefits and there is a positive dynamic in the matters of his/her upbringing and development.

To achieve tangible progress, it is important to cooperate with families and involve them in the planning and implementation of educational processes.

Protecting the interests of the child also implies granting access to all the resources and opportunities that are available outside of the program, in the community. In the process of establishing a preschool education system, a decisive role is assigned to defining educational programs and recommended activities, involving both parents in this process, which all put together, contribute to

the creation of a full-fledged environment for the development of a preschool child.

The indicators of the standard clearly state that kindergarten staff have certain responsibility to encourage parents/legal representatives to actively engage in activities in and outside of kindergartens.

Even more interesting is the following indicator, which explicitly spells out that both parents have the possibility to engage and participate in the activities. Theoretically, this indicator provides basis for balancing the picture from a gender perspective. It is noteworthy that this is the only entry which declares from the very beginning that not only the mother, but also the father needs to be involved, breaking stereotypical approach regarding the secondary role of the father. The entry **“both parents” is already an important foothold for assessing the gender impact which the implementation of this document should have.**

The research provided insight on how the practice of cooperation with families works in the course of planning events and how relevant preschool programs are. According to the quantitative research data, 57.3% of respondents note that their involvement is maximum in the activities organized in the kindergarten. Qualitative data shows that in most cases, parents' involvement in planned events is about preparing children for the celebration: for example, choosing uniforms and other preparatory work. Although not directly related to the standard, some parents brought to the fore a gender-sensitive topic that is related to the concerns of socially vulnerable families and the financial costs required for these events, on which decisions are made by the entire group at the initiative of individual parents:

“All parents are actively involved during celebrations, there are issues that need to be discussed and agreed upon] ...[It all involves financial expenses, and during such involvement, many parents are stressed because these costs are burdensome.” - E. T., 28 years old, mother.

The quantitative research shows that 46.27% of parents highlight the role of cooperation with preschool staff in discussing the needs of their child. The obtained indicator is clearly positive and also raises appropriate expectations. However, since the research is more about practical application of the document and gender impact assessment, it would be interesting to view segregated data that would allow us to analyze the picture in terms of gender. According to the data obtained, in all types of activities, be it face-to-face meetings, individual communication, use of services or other, the involvement and participation of mothers is the highest - 91.43%.

A gender-balanced environment can be created with the support of both parents and the child’s legal representatives, as positive impact can hardly be attained in any other way or by any other means. The gender imbalance reflected in figures clearly demonstrates one of the major challenges in this area of research - minimal involvement of fathers, which, overall, hinders the prospects of creating an equal environment.

According to the indicators of the standard, the staff of childcare institutions shall implement stimulating activities to facilitate involvement, to make the learning environment diverse by tapping on creative and cultural skills of parents. A number of such positive examples were brought during the focus group discussions:

“ I was invited to “Pizza Baking” day in kindergarten, I had to bake a pizza. It was all a bit unusual for the children and they were looking at me with amazement. They were so happy with the process.”- M. D., grandmother, 64 years old. “I took part in reading fairy tales. I couldn’t recognize my child, he was so overwhelmed with emotions.” - K. G., 22 years old, mother.

The research respondents believe that initiatives coming from kindergarten alone will not be enough to neutralize the gender imbalance in parental involvement. Initiatives coming from parents, especially fathers, would increase positive impact on children.

“All family members should take part in planning and implementing the educational process; in case of encouragement from the side of kindergartens, more fathers would be motivated to engage in planning events and assuming certain roles. This would diversify the process and, most importantly, children would be satisfied.”- M. K., 34 years old, father.

In terms of fathers’ engagement, while individual stories and positive examples cannot balance the existing situation, they set precedent for fathers’ involvement and, most importantly, clearly demonstrate the positive impact and benefits for both fathers and their children:

“[Involvement in activities] had an amazing impact on me. This is the emotion that all parents need to experience. I realize that this is not enough, more attention is required from fathers, more time should be dedicated to participation in the learning process and in the life of the kindergarten in general.” - D. G., 30 years old, father.

Quantitative data helps to identify the general disposition of the surveyed respondents, who cite the reasons hindering the involvement of parents, including fathers and other categories of parents. 56.32% of respondents state that the needs of different categories, including fathers and employed parents, their work schedules and other specifics are not considered, which prevents their engagement.

Stereotypical approaches prevalent in society regarding the “secondary” role of fathers significantly impede the involvement - this is the opinion expressed by 24.62% of respondents.

Among the reasons, respondents name overcrowded groups (41.62%). Absence of an appropriate strategy for implementing the program is viewed as an obstacle by 21.38% of respondents.

The focus group participants boldly state that without cooperation in the educational process and involvement in activities outside the kindergarten, the chances of creating a full-fledged educational process are very low:

“Only together with parents, through joint efforts, can kindergarten teachers fill children with great human happiness. If any of these components is missing, it will immediately affect the comprehensive development of a child.”- M. D., 32 years old, mother.

According to the finding, while parental involvement in activities inside the kindergarten tends to be active and high during celebrations only, the case is opposite during the events held outside the kindergarten. Often, along with mothers, other family members, such as grandmothers and aunts, participate in such events.

“We planned an activity outside the kindergarten. We took children to the botanical garden, and much to our surprise, all the parents and other family members showed up. The children looked amazing, trying to be more confident and show off in front of their parents”. - B. J., kindergarten teacher.

Kindergarten teachers and parents point out that fathers are more likely to engage in outdoor activities and they feel better in such setting.

“Our group was going to the puppet theater. My husband told me he would take the child himself. It was a bit unexpected; he had never attended any kindergarten celebration. He liked it so much; he never refuses to take part in such outdoor activities.”- M. J., 28 years old, mother.

Presumably, these findings are again related to stereotypes. The majority of fathers do not see outdoor activities as an “unsuitable” role for men, as confirmed by their level of comfort. The respondents themselves note that kindergartens can use this finding to enhance fathers’ involvement by planning greater number of outdoor activities.

In addition, the data obtained from the research confirms that participation in programs outside of kindergarten gives parents the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in a different light. It is through such informal meetings that some parents are found to be singing well, others - being good at dancing or reading stories. It all serves as important material for the kindergarten teacher, who can use the parents’ resources in activities initiated by the kindergarten. This applies equally to both parents, because the research contains positive examples when, together with the mother, the father was a storyteller

during the event planned in the kindergarten, the grandmother was a kind magician, etc.

Another important aspect that emerges from outdoor meetings is that parents get better familiar with internal affairs of the childcare facility, they start to realize what methodological materials caregivers need, what difficulties are faced in the process of working with children; subsequently, the form of their involvement changes and they adapt well to the environment, since they have already explored it.

The data obtained confirms that private and state kindergartens have different working styles. As representatives of private kindergartens told us, they work independently and are guided by programs that differ from state ones. When creating curricula, only some managers try to stick to the basic principles of state standards, aligning their working style with them.

In this case, greater degree of independence stems from the lack of a monitoring mechanism, as well as financial independence.

“We don’t get funds from the municipality, so we have greater independence, we don’t depend on anyone else. We use state standards, of course, but we are more independent in decision-making.”- L. P., private kindergarten teacher.

Another challenge that emerges from a gender perspective is the existing monotony in terms of staffing. Teachers, caregivers, and other personnel, with a few exceptions, are all women, so in the course of elaborating action plans and programs in state kindergartens, mostly women’s interests and views are considered. Such kind of gender imbalance puts fathers and mothers in unequal positions. The research participants consider this issue to be a significant challenge, citing it as one of the reasons for low involvement of fathers.

“In Kutaisi, kindergarten staff is composed of women, kindergarten managers are also women, all programs are developed and implemented by women, and therefore, mainly women’s interests are reflected. If there were more men at least in the administration, it would help attract fathers, arouse their interest, and involve them in educational programs.”- K. Ts., 34 years old, mother.

A preschool institution where the head of administration is a man is named as an example of positive practice. During one of the focus group discussions, it was noted that in this institution, measures aimed at promoting active participation of fathers are much more diverse and they are less fragmented by their nature.

The importance of kindergarten advisory councils and their coordinating function was highlighted in relation to this issue as well: during interviews, managers of private and state kindergartens, social workers, and psychologists spoke frankly about expanding the functions of advisory councils. They believe that the council’s resources can be used to align the interests of both parents and to expand the format of mutual cooperation in program activities in and outside of preschool institutions. B. K., a psychologist at a public kindergarten, says that the council should not have a formal nature. The interests of all categories of parents and family members should be consolidated here, and their views should be taken into account.

If we look at the positive outcomes from the implementation of the “family and community involvement” component in terms of gender, it will become clear that sometimes the obstacle is low gender sensitivity in families. On many occasions, parents’ education is not in line with their gender sensitivity. Stereotypical

approaches prevent parents from perceiving the interests of boys and girls in different lights. This holds particularly true for older family members.

To achieve a positive gender impact from the principles of the standard, an important task in response to these challenges is working with families, raising their awareness (both parents, older family members) on gender issues, and equipping them with appropriate skills to consider the needs and interests of girls/boys, so as to maximize cooperation between kindergarten staff and parents within and outside of the institution.

4.3. FAMILY SUPPORT IN COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

The main objective of the quality standard is to secure full support of the family in child's comprehensive development and to promote the implementation of various activities through joint efforts.

If we look through the official text of the standard, the indicator clearly and explicitly defines the responsibility of the educational institution to inform parents/legal representatives about the goals and objectives of the program. According to the indicator, at least three meetings should be held per year to discuss the child's development and progress. Parents unequivocally support the need to increase the number of these individual meetings and confirm that the intensity of the meetings should be based on the child's needs.

The research participants agree that for comprehensive development of a child, it is important for parents to have

information about the quality standard from the very beginning, so that they define their own role and mission in terms of involvement and initiatives.

The research data shows how parents are involved in comprehensive child development programs, to what extent the document contributes to close cooperation with parents, and to the creation of a child-centric environment.

Based on the qualitative data, the interviewed parents are aware about the existence of the standard document, although their knowledge of its content is rather superficial. Accordingly, they find it difficult to talk about the importance and necessity of parental support and involvement.

“The documents are publicly available; they are posted on the information board and any interested person can read them. It is difficult for me to talk about what parents are obliged to do or not to do under these documents.”- M. G., 25 years old, mother.

While at the beginning of the research it was found out that private kindergartens were lagging behind public ones in terms of awareness about the quality standard, since the authorization of private kindergartens requires them to approximate their activities with the standard, the staff of private kindergartens study the document, which affects their awareness. Accordingly, private kindergartens do have the information, although scarce versus the public kindergartens.

“Authorization requires private kindergartens to align with the mentioned standard, therefore, the document is being thoroughly explored. Obviously, the awareness of the personnel has also increased.” - V. I., private kindergarten teacher.

If we look at the materials obtained from focus groups, we will clearly see that the family support in the elaboration of

programs aimed at comprehensive development of the child is relatively weak. Hence, the impact of the standard is neutral. The underlying reason is the mismatch between the work schedules of kindergartens and employed parents, which blocks the communication channels between them and reduces the prospects for cooperation.

Such inconsistency with the work schedule often prompts parents to take their children to private kindergartens, since the schedule is much more convenient there. However, in this case, financial obligations increase for the family. It also has a negative psychological effect on a child. The process of adapting to the new environment starts anew, causing additional stress.

After employed parents, the situation is also tough for emigrant parents, as apart from messenger chats, other options are rarely used for their involvement. They are deprived of the opportunity to observe the stages of their child's development or to help them, when necessary. Furthermore, they don't have the possibility to see for themselves the importance of their involvement in establishing efficient approaches in childcare. The research participants recalled just a few cases when an emigrant parent joined a meeting held remotely. However, such individual cases can hardly change the overall picture.

In the matter of promoting child's comprehensive development, cooperation with parents of children with disabilities/special needs is sometimes hindered by low openness on the part of parents. At all stages of the practical implementation of the document, it is evident that there is lack of readiness on the part of parents to talk about the child's condition. In the end, it all has a negative impact on the child's upbringing and becomes a barrier in mobilizing the resources necessary for his/her full development.

The quality standard indicator states that teachers and caregivers should systematically inform the parent/legal representative about the observations and assessments of the child. This type of relationship and exchange of information has a positive nature, being fully oriented on the realization of the child's interests and aspirations.

“There was a case when mother didn’t even know her child was excellent at drawing. She hadn’t noticed anything similar at home. On one occasion, we discovered in kindergarten that the child had musical abilities and asked the parent to help the kid develop the skills. That child is now a winner of competitions. There was also a case when a parent informed us her child could make parodies, and we actively used that ability during kindergarten celebrations.” - V. K., kindergarten teacher.

It is crucial to constantly exchange information in a similar format with parents of children with disabilities and special needs. Given high degree of vulnerability, the psycho-somatic state of such children should be under permanent supervision and approaches should be adjusted according to individual records. Harmonization of upbringing methods between parents and kindergarten can create an environment fully centered on each and every child.

Among the findings is the lack of planned meetings with the parents of children with disabilities/special needs. The standard defines the responsibility for supporting parents; however, the parents participating in the research had difficulty recalling meetings where they would have received information about the child's development, behavioral difficulties, or other age-specific issues, which would make it easier for the group to manage their children's behavior, while also ensuring harmonization with the kindergarten's approaches when choosing a management model.

As it became evident, information about how to care after the children with special needs and how to manage their behavior is not provided to parents in a competent way. In many cases, parents rely on the information obtained from the Internet, or trust parents of other children and rely on their experience the most. In this process, it is particularly important to consolidate all opportunities and resources to multiply positive cases. In research materials, one of the parents talks about how she became a consultant for another parent and how such a format of communication turned out to be useful for the child.

“My child is autistic, is involved in all state programs and is a beneficiary of all services. My life is centered around the needs of my child. A new girl joined our group, everything seemed OK at first glance, although I am quite experienced in this matter and I noticed it. I went to the child’s mother and told her the story of my child. I asked her to take the child to a specialist. The kindergarten teachers had hard time talking to her. She wouldn’t let anyone get close. But she immediately started to trust me, probably because we were in the same boat. Now she is working according to her diagnosis and the child seems to be getting better.”- Z. D., mother of a child with autism, 26 years old.

Research data confirm that sometimes kindergarten teachers do not have the proper competence to communicate with children with special needs, finding it difficult to be sensitive and flexible when working with this category of kids. Depending on the need, sometimes parents themselves take on the role of paraspecialists.

“My child’s teacher used to say herself that in the educational space, it was her first touch with the children with autism spectrum. I served as a source of knowledge, information, and experience in this process, not only for parents, but also for kindergarten teachers.” – Psycho-consultant, mother of a child with special needs.

The research data confirm that information about psycho-emotional development centers is actively shared in kindergartens. Upon detecting atypical processes in the child's development, information is provided to specific parents directly.

In the educational process, it is important to identify individual needs in order to ensure full-fledged development of the child. One of the hindering factors to assessing individual needs is overcrowded groups, where the chance of making individual observations is almost ruled out.

“According to the standard, from 3.5 years and above, there should be one caregiver and one assistant per fifteen children. The actual practice shows that up to 40 children are registered in groups. Under such circumstances, the teacher’s focus shifts to ensuring physical safety of the children and performing the activities prescribed by the program collectively. Under such conditions, individual observation, discovery of the child’s strengths and weaknesses, and subsequent support for their individual development can hardly be provided.”- M. D., psychotherapist.

There is also a shortage of educational toys for children with disabilities, while they are vital for their development.

The research data shows that communication between kindergartens and parents in the process of identifying and referring the cases of violence is relatively weak. While the referral mechanism envisages such responsibility, there are very few examples of cooperation between kindergartens and various institutions concerning children's rights. The measures aimed at educating parents are of fragmented nature, as confirmed by child rights defenders.

“[The responsibility of a preschool institution] includes, as part of the referral process, involving various institutions in cases of child abuse or other needs, offering services, and promoting positive parenting.” - A. Ch., child rights defender, lawyer.

The service of a psychologist in kindergartens provides the necessary guarantees for the protection of children’s rights and the creation of a non-violent environment. In face-to-face interviews, psychologists themselves talk about strengthening the role of psychologists in the process of violence prevention and referral, the starting point of which is precisely the kindergarten.

In the long run, right the educational institutions represent a prerequisite for creating a gender-balanced and equal society. Respondents point out that the kindergarten system is a fairly large institution, with outreach to a big number of children, and upon having a teacher equipped with the right vision and skills, it can play a turning point in the life of a child. In the absence of a psychologist, it is important to train kindergarten teachers and parents in order to increase their gender competences and strengthen their sensitive skills.

“Given the fact that the introduction of psychologists’ institute in kindergartens still remains a challenge, training teachers and enhancing their competence would more or less balance this challenge and create a child-centered psycho-social environment.” - F. L., psychologist.

Another important factor for successful implementation of the educational process is the focus of the educational staff on their own professional development, since only qualified personnel can ensure the quality of the program and achieve predefined results. Qualification of preschool teachers remains a significant challenge, standing more acute in private kindergartens.

Only a small number of caregivers employed in private kindergartens have taken training about the standard. Most of them have not attended any professional training courses on such topics as: working with children with special needs, managing difficult behavior, violence against children, gender, areas of child development and general thematic directions.

The research participants talk about ineffectiveness of outdated, traditional forms of communication between kindergartens and families. The research participants believe that new, innovative methods of communication need to be introduced. They give preference to open conversations and constructive discussions, feedback system, provision of information in the form of presentations, photo collages and videos.

4.4. AWARENESS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND KEY ASPECTS OF COOPERATION

This area of research aims to study the implementation of early and preschool education standards in terms of community involvement, since an environment focused on child interests and education implies in itself consolidation of all resources available in the community for the needs and interests of the child, and their use in educational activities of the kindergarten for the benefit of the child.

In the standard document, relationship of childcare institutions with the community is one of the important topics. The indicators of the standard clearly spell out the responsibility of kindergartens to ensure communication with the community, to contribute to full-fledged education of early and preschool age children by utilizing community resources.

According to the indicator, kindergarten staff should have information about the services available in the community and share it with families. Kindertartens serve as a connecting link between the community and families. It all is aimed at ensuring that the child and family receive as much benefit as possible and the services targeting preschool children are more refined and diversified.

The research materials reveal how the document works to achieve the stated goal; what challenges are identified in terms of cooperation: sometimes, the services available in the community are not fully studied by preschool institutions. Employees do not have detailed information on the cultural, educational, development programs and social services available in the community. From children's educational and cultural programs, puppet theaters enjoy particular popularity among the kindertartens. Although rare, there are still individual cases when collective trips to the museum are initiated by kindertarten. There is also practice of planning and conducting activities in botanical gardens. Initiatives aimed at familiarizing children with various social environments and professions are highly welcome.

Information on cultural-educational and sports-recreational services available in the community, cooperation with parents to facilitate use of those services, and promotion of a social partnership system are important for achieving the objectives defined by the standard. It helps children to adapt to the social environment and promotes the development of positive relations between parents and kindertarten staff.

The finding shows a positive impact on psycho-emotional state of children.

“Children grow more confident and more relaxed. They become calm and balanced. They demonstrate their social abilities of their own will.”- E. M., head of a preschool institution.

By applying new approaches, many preschool institutions are trying to help children adapt to social environment, and this is done in close cooperation with parents.

In this area of research, the social services that are available in the community for children with disabilities and special needs are of particular interest. Focus groups and in-depth interviews helped to identify how cooperation, envisioned by the indicators of the standard, is ongoing with community provider organizations in the field of early childhood development, where a large number of children with disabilities and special needs from kindergartens are involved.

During focus group discussions, therapists working in different fields (behavioral, speech, occupational therapists) put emphasis on those important issues that they manage to achieve through effective cooperation with parents or fail to achieve in the course of working with children with various disorders. As they firmly believe, kindergartens should play an important coordinating role here, helping parents and acting as their partner to gain maximum benefit for the child, since the program will only work if the parent continues using the same approaches at home, together with other family members.

“Since we work with children with disabilities, the therapist’s role is of great importance – by what course and how the therapist works; however, one or two hours spent here will not yield desired result if the parent does not generalize the approach. Considering this specificity, involvement of the parent and family as well as preschool institution is of great importance; it is directly commensurate with the result the child achieves.” - K. K., behavioral therapist.

Kindergarten has the ability to influence the problem of only mothers being involved in the processes surrounding the child, while fathers are mostly passive, being less involved in the process.

Behavioral therapists believe that parenting such children is a big challenge for fathers. When they realize that their child needs some kind of help and his/her development is not going according to his/her age, they find it difficult to understand their own role. They seem confused, unable to realize their own mission. Specialists note with concern that:

“Mothers further encourage their position. One mother told me that father couldn’t bear to watch his child’s condition, so she had taken all the responsibility upon herself. This is a serious issue; it needs to be addressed.”- T. B., speech therapist.

The research materials show that, despite cooperation, there is a problem of intensive communication between kindergartens and community development centers. The current format of communication is not sufficient to ensure provision of all the necessary information about early development services to kindergartens and parents of kindergarten children.

Participants in focus group discussions say that to balance the situation, it would be good to have memoranda of understanding between kindergartens and centers, unified guidelines and written protocols, where all relations would be legally formalized and would not be contingent upon the goodwill of the staff.

As a result of communication with parents and specialists, findings were made regarding accessibility of services for children with special needs and disabilities, how effective the practice of cooperation between kindergartens, service providers and parents is, and what kind of challenges exist in this domain. Focus group participants confirm that cooperation and coordination is

adequate. A multifunctional team works intensively with such vulnerable groups: a special education teacher, psychologist, and therapists. Condition of each child is studied individually together with the center's psychologists and all interventions are carried out in agreement with them, considering the child's general state.

“There was a case when a child had difficulty speaking and the parent did not know we had a speech therapist. We explained that the speech therapist had special literature and exercises. She was very happy and agreed to cooperate. Currently, a speech therapist and a psychologist are working with the child, we regularly discuss the results with the parent and agree on them.”- L. J., public kindergarten teacher.

Despite a somewhat balanced picture in terms of service accessibility, hindering factors still do exist. One of such obstacles is the “artificial” detachment from the problem from the side of parents, when they hear information about the existing services, but do not properly estimate the role of kindergarten's involvement in the process; as a result, the information gets ignored, thus limiting the possibility of using the service.

Though rarely, access to services is sometimes hindered by lack of awareness on the part of some educational institutions about the child development centers operating in the community. In such case, parents of disabled children become a source of spreading relevant information.

“Sometimes kindergartens don't even know about those centers. Other parents often ask me which center my child goes to. Unfortunately, kindergarten does not provide parents with necessary information. It would be good to have information booklets that would help parents discern warning signs by themselves. “ - T. D., mother of a child with special needs, 34 years old.

According to parents, it is important to have meetings with the management of centers, which should be organized by kindergartens. The initial information received from them is very important for families of children with disabilities. In their opinion, such exchange of information would have a completely different effect.

It is interesting to learn the opinion of an early development center representative, on what prevents kindergartens from disseminating information. She speaks about lack of coordination and limited access to specialized services for those using private kindergartens:

“We should single out several reasons: one is that parents do not believe and do not accept this information. They simply do not feel obligated to even verify the information. The second factor is that the kindergarten itself has no information and is not aware about the centers operating in the city. This is a more systemic problem. Then, there is an issue with special teachers, public kindergartens have staff, while private ones do not have this obligation; it depends on their goodwill, on their resources whether they will have a special teacher.”- Kh. G., early development expert.

While discussing this topic, it was stated that with active involvement of advisory councils, these challenges would be easier to address; advisory councils could freely act as a conduit of information between parents and kindergartens, while the child would benefit in the end.

While discussing the resources available in the community, another important problem was identified, which concerns raising parents’ awareness about children’s rights. Experts involved in in-depth interviews point out that meetings are held with parents

at the Children Rights Center operating at the university several times a year regarding positive parenting, children's rights and bullying, but these meetings are not enough to ensure better parental involvement. A plan needs to be developed on how to establish better communication and raise awareness in this direction, since the existing stereotypes prevent parents from being positive and supportive parents.

The research emphasized the need for closer communication between preschool institutions and the City Hall's Child Rights Protection and Support Department, so that kindergartens can fully utilize the resources of this structure.

An in-depth interview with a representative of the department confirmed that there has not been a single case of application from kindergartens over the last five years. Cases of initiating cooperation could not be observed on the part of Child Rights Department either. No kind of informational meeting has been held, even for the purpose of disseminating information or introducing the work specific of the Child Support Department. Meanwhile, both sides acknowledge the need for strengthening cooperation and communication practices.

The research clearly identified different needs in the process of cooperation between kindergartens, parents of children with disabilities/special needs, and child support specialists: as it became evident, it is important to support parents of children with disabilities/special needs, since they also require psycho-emotional assistance and need to be equipped with necessary information. Since communication with children with various disorders requires special sensitivity, such parents need a lot of effort not only in the process of working with the child, but also in recognizing their role in society. It has been repeatedly

emphasized that fathers are especially vulnerable in this regard. Not only do they refrain from showing initiatives but also try to avoid talking about the child's needs with teachers and caregivers. It is all coupled with the existing grave social background and economic poverty, which negatively affects parents, as well as the system of social partnership between the kindergarten, family, and community in general.

As the findings of the research showed, qualification of kindergarten staff also remains a challenge, since frequently, they don't know how to handle the children with difficult behavior. They have difficulty ensuring coordination between families, community services, and kindergartens, in the manner envisaged by the "standard".

"I think that kindergartens should have qualified specialists and not so-called "special teachers" who are employed in kindergarten. They should have a good understanding of behavioral analysis; they should have taken an ABA therapy course in order to understand the needs of these children and manage their behavior correctly." -T. K., behavior therapist.

The research materials clearly show that there hasn't been any initiative from the kindergartens for holding meetings between parents and service providers. Meantime, everyone agrees on the necessity of having such meetings. The lack of cooperation negatively affects the development of the child.

In the area of working with parents and the community, respondents highlight the positive practice of multidisciplinary teamwork as well as the practice of studying the experience of other kindergartens, which are being applied by kindergarten psychologists and social workers themselves:

“There are 28 children with special needs in our kindergarten. A multidisciplinary team works with children of different categories and their parents efficiently, in a consolidated manner. We have our work plans, which we introduce to parents during seminars and meetings, we try to create individual educational programs for them. But this is not enough. We are interested in the experience of other kindergartens. Especially in light of working with autistic children who need special support.”- N. D., social worker, public kindergarten.

Another important gap identified as a finding is weak communication with medical personnel. Kindergartens do not have close communication with medical staff; therefore, they do not have full information about the psycho-somatic condition of the child. The research data shows that the involvement of the medical segment plays an important role in creating a full-fledged, safe environment for the child. As pediatricians note with regret, the number of children with special needs has increased significantly and against such backdrop, kindergartens’ close cooperation with centers and timely consideration of pediatrician’s recommendations could at least partially solve or alleviate problems of the child at an early age. They believe that holding meetings with medical personnel in kindergartens is an essential part of preschool education, which would also have the function of preventing various diseases. Moreover, it would help to channel the process of managing child needs in the right direction.

“Health is defined as physical, mental and social well-being and not the presence or absence of any disease. A person may not be suffering from any disease, but he or she may not be considered healthy, and this also applies to children. In today’s stressful environment, information meetings of preventive nature are particularly important”. - Ts. P., pediatrician/family doctor.

According to specialists, it is much easier to work with children with special needs when a child has a diagnosis. Having unidentified, the so-called “undocumented” cases, where the child’s diagnosis is not still defined, poses a problem. The majority of such children are left beyond services, and parents “play a role” in it.

From gender perspective, even deeper challenges are revealed in parental involvement. Fathers of children with disabilities/special needs automatically consider caring for such children to be “the mother’s” job. They avoid talking about this issue, and mothers take on the main responsibility.

“Mothers are in kindergartens, mothers are in centers, mothers are present during all events. As if fathers did not exist at all. The most interesting part is that mothers think this is the norm; no one objects, no one expresses dissatisfaction.”- S. A., kindergarten teacher.

The expectation that kindergartens can be the primary source of information about community services for thousands of families stems from the following fact: funding and management of kindergartens is within the competence of the municipality. As such, information about programs and services financed from the municipal budget quickly reaches the kindergarten administration, which considerably increases the likelihood of its dissemination.

Kindergarten managers and social workers note that recently, the number of “dysfunctional families” has increased statistically. Due to their low social status, they cannot cope with their functions, their adaptive skills diminish significantly, and the process of child upbringing is not proceeding properly. This type of family requires active and long-term support from kindergarten managers and caregivers.

“A family that has a lot of social problems and is solely focused only on how to feed children will never be able to mobilize its own resources and focus on improving the psychological environment for the child. On the contrary, such parents always need support and encouragement.”- V. G., kindergarten psychologist.

The respondents believe that in external activities, alongside the community, the business sector should be involved in the process of cooperation. Creation of child-friendly and child-oriented services should be based on cooperation between business providers, parents, and kindergartens:

“While studying external services, we discover that in parallel to state programs, private companies, private psychologists, and paraspecialists are working, who offer paid services. Obviously, these services also have their users. The problem is that we, kindergartens, do not have information about the quality of those services and don’t know how effective they are, so it is difficult for us to make recommendations. If we had cooperation, we would know more and would disseminate information more boldly, we would send people there with greater confidence.”- Ts. G., kindergarten psychologist.

Based on the research data, it is possible to talk about the positive impact of family and community involvement and the benefit for beneficiaries. In our case, the main focus of the research is the assessment of gender impact and benefit for the child from application of the quality standard; based on quantitative data, it is possible to determine the nature of that benefit.

When asked what impact active parent involvement in kindergarten programs has on children, 74.19% of respondents say that kindergarten environment becomes more attractive for children, both girls and boys. 61.93% believe that they better develop social skills. 40.32% cite greater emotional attachment

to parents, especially fathers. According to 37.41%, children's needs are better considered.

Active involvement of parents reduces children's problematic behavior - this is the opinion shared by 30.48%. 27.58% focus on improved mood and behavior in children.

As for the benefit and positive impact for parents, they are given the opportunity to co-participate in the processes unfolding in childcare institutions. During the survey, parents, in their turn, often emphasized that as a result of involvement, they became more confident and active; they received more information about the work of the kindergarten and, most importantly, better understood the psycho-emotional needs of their children at that important stage of their development.

In terms of cooperation with families and communities, full use of their resources opens up new opportunities for kindergarten staff, both in terms of developing their own organization and ensuring professional growth of employees. Responsibility is shared, the needs of children are better identified; this cooperation is also important for the development of community services and their adaptation to beneficiary needs.

SECTION 5. IDENTIFICATION OF GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

The gender impact assessment team identified specific challenges, which in some cases directly relate to the "standard", while in others, are caused by gender stereotypes (the secondary role of the father in the upbringing process; parenting methods obtruded by older family members on young parents, etc.); they are also related to objective and subjective reasons behind lower accessibility of necessary services for children with special needs.

Barriers to fathers' involvement - fathers who want to be actively involved in preschool education often face barriers that greatly constrain and often discourage them from participating in the entire process, rather than in one-off, demonstrative events.

By the current trend, the obligation to cooperate with preschool institutions tends to be assigned to a certain group (for example, mothers). This norm established in society leads to the loss of fathers' resources in preschool education and negatively affects children, who need to see their parents as active participants in the educational process.

Limited financial resources pose impediments to indirect target groups (teachers) in the course of work, since sometimes institutions do not have appropriate material base, sufficient developmental toys for children with special needs, appropriate methodological support.

Private kindergartens (where the service is financed by the parent) operate on the principle of private business, therefore, they have less opportunity to invite field specialists for children with special needs. In this regard, they do not have any support from the state.

Lack of incentives to promote engagement of employed parents: objectively, preschool institutions cooperate more with those parents who have greater free time. However, there is a category of parents who are willing to engage and would be happy to devote time to participating in education process.



CHAPTER III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SECTION 6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The main benefits from the Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) of the family and community involvement component can be summarized as follows: better understanding of the needs faced by the target group from a gender perspective; better insight into the real impact of “family and community involvement” on specific target groups; timely identification of unplanned/unintended impacts of the program; stakeholders had the opportunity to present their needs and express their views on program improvement; statistics and gender-disaggregated data were collected, which will increase awareness among early and preschool education policy makers; better understanding of gender differences among early and preschool education policy makers and program beneficiaries.

The program has a positive impact, for example, on migrant parents, when preschool institutions try to involve them in various initiatives; though, it has more or less fragmented nature and requires more systemic approach to highlight their importance and provide appropriate support.

Under the “family and community involvement” component, certain incentives and supporting measures are required for employed parents, so that they can more actively combine their parental responsibilities with their professional activities and engage more intensively in the initiatives of preschool institutions.

The program has a negative impact on mothers of children with disabilities/special needs in the sense that the importance of working with fathers is less emphasized. The fact that fathers ignore their own role in working with children in special programs is viewed as a norm. This has a negative impact on young beneficiaries, as the fathers' resources are not utilized. Also, the negative impact on staff working with children can be minimized by adding gender-sensitive indicators that will emphasize the kindergarten's authority to make it mandatory for fathers to cooperate in the process of working with their children, especially children with special needs. Various incentives should be introduced to facilitate involvement of other family members. **In general, it is important to take greater account of beneficiaries' gender specifics in the indicators of the standard.**

SECTION 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE PROGRAM IN TERMS OF GENDER EQUALITY

In response to the findings from the gender impact assessment (GIA) of the selected component, it is important to take a set of effective measures for enhancing the positive impact of the state standard for early and preschool education - in particular, the component of family and community involvement in educational process:

Finding	Suggestion/alternative
<p>The standard has a neutrally positive impact on both parents and other family members in terms of their involvement; however, the stereotypes prevalent in society regarding the secondary role of fathers in upbringing pose the need for additional interventions.</p>	<p>It is important to further encourage the equal involvement of both parents in the process of upbringing and education, to facilitate the involvement of other family members in kindergarten’s internal and outdoor activities. Gender-sensitive indicators ensuring greater engagement of fathers should be integrated into the standard.</p>
<p>The system of social partnership between preschool institutions and service providers needs to be improved. This issue is intertwined with the problem of children with the so-called “undocumented”, unidentified cases.</p>	<p>Closer cooperation between early childhood development centers and kindergartens, as well as the City Hall’s Child Rights Protection Department, is incredibly important. It is desirable to have memorandums of understanding, unified guidelines, and written protocols with service providers, with all relationships formalized and officially outlined, in order to ensure that children are timely diagnosed and appropriate services are duly provided.</p>
<p>The vast majority of parents recognize the importance of personal meetings and individual support. The lack of adequate space for individual meetings negatively affects the implementation of the “family and community involvement” component.</p>	<p>It is important that kindergarten offers parents personal meetings with teachers, where they would individually discuss the child’s development, progress and needs. This will make the cooperation more personalized and efficient. Introducing the practice of individual meetings and allocating appropriate multifunctional space is particularly important for parents of children with special needs.</p>

<p>It is exceedingly important that service providers create opportunities for implementing the standard. Given the current reality, the need for educating parents, as well as equipping teachers with the appropriate material base required for modern methods of preschool education and upbringing stands acute.</p>	<p>It is important to find resources in local self-government early education programs to ensure better material equipment of kindergartens, to provide training to parents and teachers. It is desirable that service providers invite and involve field specialists – education consultants and psychologists, representatives of early development centers. They can provide training to parents and teachers to introduce them to new and modern standards in childcare, education and development. Training will better prepare parents for working with children, and will help teachers in continuous development, mastering new methods and approaches. It is also important to have “parent schools”, also at the base of kindergarten associations, where parents will have the opportunity to meet with various specialists, psychologists and other staff working in the field of child development.</p>
<p>Kindergartens have limited number of staff working with children with special needs and their parents (especially fathers), and there is also lack of qualification.</p>	<p>It is important to increase the number of psychologists, special educators, speech therapists, and social workers in preschool institutions through financial and methodological support from the side of relevant state structures and other stakeholders. A system of competency-building and experience sharing should be put in place.</p>

<p>In preschool institutions, groups are often overcrowded, which negatively affects the quality of preschool education services.</p>	<p>It is important that relevant structures take the necessary measures to reduce overcrowded groups, reduce the limits of children who can be registered in a group. This will allow teachers-caregivers to devote more time to identifying individual abilities and needs of children and to promote their development; to cooperate more productively with parents.</p>
<p>Different categories of parents - employed, migrant parents - are unable to fully engage in educational activities of preschool institutions.</p>	<p>When planning group meetings, as well as outdoor activities of institutions, it is necessary to consider the motivation for engagement on the part of employed, migrant parents and agree on the most optimal/acceptable timing and format of engagement.</p>
<p>Since adhering to the principles of the standard are not mandatory for private kindergartens, it poses a threat to the quality of the service they deliver.</p>	<p>It is important that private kindergartens get methodological support from the Ministry/municipalities in the area of considering standards. This will significantly improve the quality of the service provided by these types of institutions and will ensure their compliance with modern standards.</p>

<p>The gender imbalance in the advisory council of preschool institutions negatively affects the planning process and does not create opportunities for equal involvement.</p>	<p>It is important to further encourage the involvement of fathers in the work of the council, to consider their views in the process of education and care. As a result, the education process will become much more interesting, multifaceted, and inclusive. It will be aimed at deepening mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation, which will ultimately contribute to better education of a child; it will deepen the positive impact of the standard on children, their families, and the kindergarten staff themselves.</p>
<p>Currently, the system of monitoring and evaluating the standard is not well developed, its application is not appropriate, and feedback from preschool institutions, parents, field specialist, and the community is not sufficient.</p>	<p>It is exceedingly important for the Ministry to develop a monitoring system, to involve municipalities and stakeholders in its planning and implementation process. It is necessary to periodically update the standard to align it with the existing reality, which is a prerequisite for further improvement of the service.</p>

The gender impact assessment of the “family and community involvement” component of the “standard” has revealed that gender characteristics and needs of different categories of beneficiaries are important aspects that should be taken into account when developing and implementing programs governing

preschool education and care. Such programs have immense potential to improve the environment for the target group and facilitate the integration of necessary interventions. Tangible results will be achieved if the existing gender differences and needs are well understood and considered, and in response, appropriate measures are taken.

The “standard,” as a whole, has huge potential to make preschool education and care services focused on the best interests of the child; to create a well-functioning system of social partnership in their upbringing and education. By incorporating gender-sensitive approaches in the principles of the “standard,” the state will manage to provide a child-centered environment and ensure institutionalization of family and community involvement in preschool education.





Editor - LALI SHENGELIA
Design LIA KOSTAVA

Addresses:

A. Mitskevich St. #29 B, Office Space #2, Tbilisi, Georgia

Mgaloblishvili St. #6, Kutaisi, Georgia

womansukhumi@gmail.com

fundsukhumi@bilisi@gmail.com

www.fsokhumi.ge

www.facebook.com/fsokhumi

