



Old Aged Women from Kobuleti

In this article, we will introduce 10 women who are beneficiaries of the project of the Elderly Resource Centre of the Aged Women's Association 'Deserving Old Age'. They will share their short biographies and their points of view about issues related to older women. The women talk about how the association helps them and what has changed since their involvement with the project.

'Deserving Old Age' was founded in 2009. The organization has brought together the elderly living in Kobuleti and carries out various projects with their involvement.

The European Union funds the project's Elderly Resource Centre, through which we prepared this article. It began in 2014 and will continue for two years. The project aims to establish a more favourable legal and social welfare system for the elderly, improve their quality of life and campaign for the interests of the elderly through the maximum use of its resources.

Tatiana Siradze - 90 years old, a doctor, a World War II veteran, the founder of the Association 'Deserving Old Age'

Tatiana Siradze was born in Chokhatauri, in 1923. She graduated from high school and continued her studies at medical school. On 26 June 1941, she was called up to the Front, where she spent four of the toughest years of her life; she was a medical-sanitary nurse at the end of the war. Her list of military awards is very long, having received the Order of the Red Star, I Class Order of the Patriotic War, etc.

After the war, she graduated from the Department of Pediatrics at the Tbilisi State Medical Institute and, having acquired a doctor's diploma, she was sent to Kobuleti, to work in the children's bone, joint and tubercular sanatorium, where she worked until her retirement. She treated children for 45 years - who knows how many teenagers she has healed! In the last two decades of her working life, she was the chief doctor of the sanatorium. She has been awarded the title of Honoured Doctor and has received the Order of Friendship of Peoples. She is an Honorary Citizen of Kobuleti.

She is still working vigorously. She is an excellent cook, loves music, reading and growing flowers, and she is interested in politics. She is a caring mother and grandmother. In 2009, she founded the Aged Women's Association 'Deserving Old Age' and she dreams that all older women will have a full and dignified life.

"We would like the life of older people in our country not to be the expectation of life ending but a logical phase of a normal life. We want to support each other, to create warmth and joy, to care for weak and elderly women. We would like to feel that the community needs us.

We would like to talk about the problems of the elderly and to fight for their rights. We can use our resources to help others and ourselves. We want to pass on our accumulated knowledge and experience to younger generations. Our target group and our priorities are socially disadvantaged people, deprived of family care, older single women, who are often forgotten by the state and society, and their number is increasing every day."

Natela Zhghenti, 77-year-old teacher and poet

Natela Zhghenti was born in the city of Batumi, in 1934. She graduated from the Batumi Pedagogical Institute. From 1967 to 2002, she worked as a history teacher in public schools. In addition, she held several other positions, including with a housing association, as deputy director of a professional college and in the Party Committee. She has two children, seven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Natela Zhghenti's poems and short stories have been published by a literary periodical press. Her first collection of poems was published in 2012 and a collection of short stories in 2013. She lovingly recalls teaching, the cooperation with the Adjara Writers' Union, as well as other social activities. For example, in 2003, when she was ill with a high temperature, she arranged a large rally in Kobuleti during the 'Rose Revolution'. Natela Zhghenti believes that despite the fact that her hopes have not fully come true the positive changes that have been brought to Georgia by the ex-president, Mr. Mikheil Saakashvili, cannot be forgotten.

Natela Zhghenti thinks that a woman's situation in Georgia is much more difficult today than it was in the Communist era, as now women's labour rights are unprotected. Before, a woman could not be dismissed from her job without the intervention of trade unions but now everything is the decision of an employer. "All people are not talented in the same way and all of them have different skills that they reveal in different ways in social activities and in the family, and not everyone is able to merge their talents and skills. Together they are a gift and women who have such gifts should be appreciated," says Natela Zhghenti.

She believes that problems in old age arise from the current social conditions. The health problems of elderly people are often due to a lack of medicine and food.

"The 'Deserving Old Age' project is a huge bonus for a person who has been engaged in social activities all of her life and is now retired. Now I am convinced that a man can do a lot. This project has changed my life," she says.

Her message to the younger generation is graduate, study while you are still young and use your education properly in life. Take care of time.

Lena Megrelidze – 87-year-old athlete, culture worker

Lena Megrelidze was born in 1927 in Samtredia. She graduated from high school there and then from the Pedagogical Professional School. She worked at an orphanage in Didi Jikhaishi and took an active part in sporting competitions, in particular in riding. The government of Adjara invited her to join the Kobuleti equestrian team (the team didn't have a female member and without a woman they would not have been allowed to compete in certain competitions). She won competitions with the team and as an individual. She married in Kobuleti and after that she stopped competing in sporting events. She worked at the Pioneers Home, where she was head of drama, and later she was appointed as the director of the Culture House.

Lena Megrelidze has had many victories in her life, one of which was very special. She often proudly recalls that she rode a horse on the bed of the Tbilisi Sea, until the water level began to rise. She won first place in a classic horse riding competition. She is also proud of the fact that she played, to great acclaim, the role of grandmother in the play *Grandmother, Iliko, Ilarion and Me* at the Kobuleti Public Theatre, and she was compared to the legendary actress Ms. Cecilia Takaishvili.

She says that work has always been very important to her and she has always fulfilled her obligations with great responsibility and love. She thinks that nowadays the role of women has changed considerably. Women have become key figures in the family and society and women are fulfilling the functions of men as well.

Lena Megrelidze believes that the biggest problem for the elderly is the low minimum pension and that the government could help the elderly and introduce benefits to help them pay for utilities.

She says: "The Elderly Resource Centre is a place of peace that extends our lives. Each day spent here gives us hope that the next one will be more beautiful, that's why old people are happy to come here.

I would like to say to the younger generation – love each other and respect the past. Believe in a happy future!"

Gulsunda Mdivani – 80-year-old, a doctor, a gynecologist

Gulsunda Mdivani was born in 1934 in Batumi. In 1938, her father, an economist, Valerian Mdivani, was shot during Stalin's repression period. In 1959, she graduated from the Medical Institute and has worked as a gynaecologist for 50 years.

She still loves her profession. She recalls one time when was looking after 11 pregnant ladies during the night. She has always tried to help pregnant women, to ease the pain for them. In addition, she has been engaged in charity work. She was actively involved in the social movement of 'Women's Life and Health'. The group visited every village in Kobuleti and provided free counselling, medical supplies, clothing and food for rural women.

Gulsunda Mdivani is concerned that, in recent years, not only have women's rights not been respected but also those of the elderly – “They called us ‘drained intellectuals’. I am still offended. I hope that one day people will not be refused work because of their age; the pension does not take in to account work experience. I personally have 50 years of working experience as a doctor.” She says that she lives alone and does not know what she would do if she didn't have relatives and friends...

Gulsunda Mdivani says: “I appreciate going to the Elderly Resource Centre, where many good events are held. It was wonderful when, together, we celebrated the International Day of Older Persons on the 1st of October. I am glad that young people come to the centre as well. This project has made me feel 20 years younger. I would give some advice to the next generation – learn well, be polite, love flora and fauna, and take into account that someday you will get older as well.”

Nona Kokhia– 80-year-old, a cook, a refugee from Abkhazia

Nona Kokhia was born in 1934 in Martivli. After she married, she lived in Sukhumi. She has a son and a daughter.

Over the years, she worked as a cook in a hotel in Sukhumi. The job was very important to her, not only for financial reasons but also because it gave her an opportunity to use her talents.

She says: “In 1993, during the war in Abkhazia, when Sukhumi fell, my husband and I spent two days and nights in snow and wind in the woods as we passed through the Tchuber-Sakeni Pass on foot with two little children. Our daughter-in-law was pregnant, she could not come with us, and she went by helicopter. Unfortunately, the helicopter exploded at Babushera airport. After that, we lived in Kobuleti. At first, the government housed us at a sanatorium, where we had no suitable conditions for living. Soon my husband died. I brought up my grandchildren alone. I did everything I could so that my little ones did not go hungry. I cleaned houses, baked and sold pies. It was very difficult to make ends meet. Unfortunately, we are still living in our home country as refugees and the government helps me to bear this status with only 28 Georgian Laris.”

Nona Kokhia says that a woman's role in society has changed; women are actively involved in politics and business, and have spoken out about some traditions that are harmful. Most importantly, women have changed the opinion that they are weak creatures.

She believes that the pension is so small that it does not cover expenses for health; although treatment is free, older people do not have the money to buy medicines. “We must not hide our problems from the younger generation and should show ourselves as we are,” she says.

“After arriving at the Elderly Resource Centre my life has been changed and has become more joyful. The events that take place at the centre and the relationships that I have formed with other women have encouraged me. Such projects are essential for the older generation to forget their past lives, full of problems, and to spend their old age with dignity.

I would like to say to the young generation – We are your salvation and perdition at the same time, try to find the salvation when looking at us, live with faith and hope for a better future, walk straight and do not turn back.

Natela Chelebadze, 81-year-old agronomist, Labour Hero

Natela Chelebadze was born in 1933, in Kobuleti. Her childhood coincided with the Second World War; she had to begin picking tea when she was seven. At the age of 13, she gathered a record amount of tea and was awarded the title of Labour Hero. She was the first teenager, member of the pioneer movement to receive the title of Hero of Socialist Labour (USSR). She recalls that streets in Germany and Belarus were named after her, as well as School #131 in Tbilisi. She was a member of the Peace Committee of Adjara, and a member of the Georgia and Soviet Union Women's Committee.

For 30 years, Natela Chelebadze worked as a director of a tea factory. She was the Second Secretary of the Regional Committee Party in Keda, Adjara. She has received the Order of Lenin and many other awards.

Natela Chelebadze believes that the most important moments of her life are related to social activities. She worked at the Peace Committee together with prominent figures in Georgian culture and science, such as Niko Ketskhoveli¹, George Leonidze², Nato Vachnadze, Medea Chakhava, Medea Japharidze³ and Akaki Khorava⁴.

She worries that today conditions for women are worse than they used to be and often the heavy burden of supporting their families falls on them. That is why they often leave their homes and go abroad to work.

“Almost every day we encounter people of our generation who are in need, both material and moral. Young people find it difficult to comprehend that ageing is accompanied by a melancholy and nostalgia for the past. That is why they cannot feel sympathy for us. Unfortunately, due to old age, I am no longer actively involved in public life. I am unemployed and my experience is not important to young people.”

“The Elderly Resource Centre is a really good project, which has prolonged our lives, bringing enjoyment and contentment. There, I meet my friends, my peers, and we share with each other our joys and feelings.”

“We should show the next generation both our good and bad sides, and we will do our best to persuade them to choose a healthy and enjoyable life and to hate evil.”

¹ Botanist, founder of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences (GNAS) [the editors].

² Poet, prose writer and literary scholar (1899-1966) [the editors].

³ Well-known Georgian actresses in the 20th century [the editors].

⁴ Well-known Georgian actor (1895-1972) [the editors].

Nargiz Tsivadze - 80-year-old physics teacher, mother of many children

Nargiz Tsivadze was born in 1933 in the village of Bobokvati, Kobuleti. In 1951, she graduated from high school with distinction, and then graduated from the Mathematics Department of the Batumi Pedagogical Institute of Physics. From 1954, she worked for 40 years at Khutsubani high school as a physics teacher. She is an honoured teacher of Adjara A.R., and has received numerous certificates and awards. She has seven children, 18 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

"I have had many important moments in my life. However, I have to admit that the award that was given to me in Kintrishi valley in 2011, as an honourable resident of the valley, was wonderful, and I feel that I have done something good for my village. For my whole life, I have done more things outside the home than at home. My mother-in-law and children have helped me. During holidays, I gave extra free classes to pupils. I am very proud that among my pupils there are many successful people," she says.

"Ageing is a gift from God. Traditions protect us in Georgia... Our people appreciate older people. My health is poor now and this is the biggest problem for me. I have lived life at a very fast pace and now I cannot stand the peace of life."

"The Elderly Resource Centre project increases our self-confidence and instills in us the feeling that our work and contributions are appreciated. Thanks to the organizers of this project and everyone who assists with this noble activity."

"It is important that young people know the value of their homeland, love it with all their heart and feel responsibility for their country, their parents and their duties."

Eter Chkhaidze – 83-year-old, a journalist

Eter Chkhaidze was born in Ozurgeti in 1931. She graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy at Tbilisi State University. She later worked for the local newspaper of Kobuleti; from 1964, she was the company secretary of the same newspaper. Later, she was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper Adjara P.S. She has three children.

Eter Chkhaidze believes that the journalism profession allows you to meet many people with a variety of interests, fates and views. These meetings often leave unforgettable impressions. She is glad that her articles and interviews have had great resonance. Although she often worked all day and night to publish her articles she never complained about it.

“The gender issue is very real today. An undemocratic society and the government limit women’s public activities. Great efforts are needed to overcome such limits. Family responsibilities add to all of this. Our society believes that women are mostly mothers and housewives, which is an injustice,” says Eter Chkhaidze.

She thinks that the main problem for elderly people in Georgia is low pensions, which ignore any length of service and merit. She says: “Old age has given me the most severe problem, which is isolation from society. I have lived an active life and I love interacting with the public.”

“The Elderly Resource Centre gives isolated elderly people an opportunity to return to the community. The organization tries to engage them in meaningful activities. Training sessions, events, and advice forums are held there. This project has given us a second chance in life.”

“I would say to young people – Go your own way and let people say whatever they want.”

Liana Berishvili - 69-year-old agronomist, Doctor of Agricultural Sciences

Liana Berishvili was born in 1945, in Chokhatauri. From 1968 to 1975, she studied at the Moscow All-Union Agricultural Institute. She then undertook postgraduate studies. In 1986, she was awarded a doctorate. Today, she is a Doctor of Agricultural Science. From 1968 to 2006, she worked at the Garden for Medical Plants, Caucasian Zone Experimental Station, Kobuleti, as a Deputy Director for Research. Since 2006, she has been a senior scientist at the Kutateladze Institute of Pharmacochimistry of Medicinal Plants in Kobuleti. At the same time, she has been engaged in teaching activities at the Agricultural Institute of Batumi Green Cape and in the Batumi branch of the Tbilisi Political-Humanitarian Medical Institute.

She thinks that the most important events in her life are associated with receiving a degree and with the birth of her nephew. In addition, she places great importance on her teaching activities. She says that while the role of women in society has improved significantly, it is still not enough. It is necessary for women to be actively involved in social activities and to be more active.

She says that the well-being of older people depends on a healthy way of life and secure financial conditions. She says that the elderly need attention and a calm environment. She advises the younger generation to live a healthy lifestyle, to exercise regularly and to provide for an active old age.

She says that the Deserving Old Age Association is like springtime and the arrival of the first swallow; that, because of the project, older people have new hope and faith. She says that everyone hopes for a long life.

Svetlana Safaridze - 68-year-old accountant, repressed person

Svetlana Safaridze was born in 1946 in Poti. In 1965, she graduated from high school in Kobuleti. She was two-years-old when the Stalinist regime exiled her entire family to Kazakhstan, where she spent eight hard years.

Svetlana's 95-year-old mother Helen Kakulidi recalls: "Suddenly we heard knocking on the door. The KGB entered our home and, without any explanation, arrested me and my two-year-old daughter, my parents and my brother. After a few days, they took us to the railway station, threw us in dirty grey vans, irrespective of gender and age, and we were exiled to Kazakhstan. The journey took a month. Many people died on the way because of the unbearable conditions. Finally, we arrived in Kazakhstan and we were housed in wooden barracks located on a steppe. Hunger and infectious diseases were common there, and the biggest problem was the lack of drinking water. After rehabilitation, we returned to our homeland. Another family had lived in our house but we were still happy to be home and started life all over again."

Svetlana Safaridze has worked in human resources in oil and then in trade companies. She married in 1969 and has three children and eight grandchildren. She recalls that she did not have time for anything until the children were small; she did not even have time to go on trips together with co-workers and she has always been sorry about that. She believes that a woman's role in society is still important and is increasing over time. "I often meet talented, intelligent and purposeful women. Still, men often scoff at women's public activities. They think that a woman's job is cooking and childcare. The elderly suffer from a severe disconnect from society, negligence from young people, they are not given warmth and attention. No one cares about their opinions, no one asks them to share their rich life and professional experience. If there were none of these problems, life for older people would be very interesting," she says.

"The Elderly Resource Centre project has brightened my life. I have met many interesting women. Meetings, concerts and other events are often held as part of the project. We are delighted and pleased that there are young people who are involved who can give warmth and care to older people.

I would like young people to look back to the past and to respect all elderly people, who built this country where they now live. Most importantly, I would tell them to give a lot of warmth and love to their parents and grandparents."

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