



Local Action Group (LAG) Women Participate in Tbilisi's Global Business Forum

Women as Role Models for Regional Community Development

The Georgian Rural Development Department of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GRDD of GIPA) has been running its Promoting a New Rural Development Approach in Akhalkalaki project over the last ten months since starting up in November 2016 and with growing successes and notable achievements.

The project, organized with funding from the European Union for Georgia's Support to Agriculture and Rural Development ENPARD program, has established a Local Action Group (LAG) in the town of Akhalkalaki in south-central Georgia with a view to engaging members of the public, and private and civil sectors in activities of community development; in particular, to work together on the drafting of a comprehensive Local Development Strategy for the municipality. The project also features a sub-granting component which will solicit proposals for community development projects from citizens and then provide the winning ideas with financial support for activities targeting the economic, social, cultural and educational development of the Akhalkalaki Municipality.

A recent and wholly unique achievement for the Akhalkalaki Local Action Group (LAG) has been the participation of tree of its women members at the Global Business Forum, organized by the Union of Business Ladies of Georgia, which took place from September 15-16, 2017 at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Tbilisi.

(Video link: <https://youtu.be/FDJQRMCfFSc>)

The women joined the event as a part of their work on the Women and Youth Support Group which seeks to motivate and encourage women and youth to become involved in community-building activities with a particular focus on developing project proposals for the sub-granting component. Anush Giloyan, Shogik Raisyan and Dali Agdgomeladze were three of the participants from the Akhalkalaki Local Action Group (LAG)'s Women and Youth Support Group delegation.



"I was really looking forward to the event," said Anush Giloyan, a young native Akhalkalaki resident. "I learned so many things. For instance, it does not matter where you come from or what

kind of background you have. If you try hard, you can achieve everything. I listened to one lady from India who was raised in a similar mentality as ours. She did it all. She started from zero. And now she has a business of her own. We have to shift away from the mentality that we have which holds us back. For us in Akhalkalaki, we need to hear these kinds of stories and believe that we can accomplish anything we want,” said Giloyan.

Dali Agdgomeladze echoed the impressions of Anush Giloyan. “We got to see real women who have real businesses which they started on their own,” she began. “I met women from different countries and different cultures and it was interesting to see how they are working and how they are gaining success. I spoke with a teacher from England who also works as a champagne distributor in addition to her job in a school. The example shows that we can work in diverse spheres.”



The Global Business Forum offered participants two days of local and international speakers, panel discussions and networking sessions on topics including entrepreneurial trends and business ethics in different cultures, strategies to harmonize old and new trends in business, women’s roles in strengthening their countries’ economies and the

particular challenges of the 21st century business environment. The Forum, envisaged to be held annually, is the work of the Union of Business Ladies which seeks to bring together successful women in business to share experiences and develop professional partnerships.

“Our mentality has to change. Our youth must realize that they don’t have to get married at the age of 17 or 18. They must know that they have a choice to study, to go abroad, to see other countries and to see how people with different mentalities live their lives”

– Anush Giloyan

“Motivation. Real motivation,” replied Anush Giloyan when asked what she will take most from her participation in the Global Business Forum. “It gave me the motivation that women have their place in business. I met women from all around the world who were telling me that we can do something, make something and that we can be equal to men in the business sector. During the breaks, I was uploading news and videos of various different speakers to social media so that those back at home could also listen to and see them. Their responses were immediate. They also became motivated. Young people were asking me where I was, what was happening, what were the issues being discussed. When I returned to Akhalkalaki, we met and discussed all of the different topics. There was real interest,” she said.

The Akhalkalaki Municipality, as with many regional communities in Georgia, faces challenges and obstacles in its development owing to the still very traditional and conservative mindsets and mentalities of the population emanating from both

the geographical as well as the socio-cultural isolation from the urban mainstream. In parallel, the role of women in the family and the community is restricted as the old beliefs remain concerning women's roles as predominantly domestic and confined to the house and hearth as opposed to the position of men in activities of business and other leadership. While the participation of women in the Akhalkalaki Local Action Group (LAG) is represented, their number does fall short of initial predictions for women members. This notwithstanding, the women who are active members are making their voices heard.

"I am working to empower our local women," said Dali Agdgomeladze. "At my teaching center, we frequently hold meetings with women from the community and I tell them: if you want to be free and independent in your life, you need to earn money and so the main thing for you is to get a good education and a good job. I tell them not to get married at such young ages as is the practice here. Women who do not have a life of their own are often victims of domestic violence. I work with women on a daily basis. They need to understand that they have the right to education and decent work. They have to believe that they have the ability to look after their family and have a job at the same time."

The Local Action Group (LAG) office in Akhalkalaki continues to run a full agenda of activity covering 63 villages and 22 communities in the municipality. Awareness raising campaigns, teaching and

implementing the LEADER approach (an acronym from the original French, Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rural, which means 'links between activities for the development of rural economy') among the membership, working on the Local Development Strategy document for the municipality, soliciting proposals for community development projects and selecting winning applicants for funding, creating a women and youth support group and planning a study visit to Ireland are among the roster of current and upcoming activities.

"I am blessed to have such an opportunity to work with young people and help shape their minds," said Dali Agdgomeladze when asked about women as role models for regional community development. "I would never even think of moving to another foreign country because I love what I am doing here and I have an important responsibility to teach Akhalkalaki's young population and share my experiences. Everyone has ideas for good things to be done but they are afraid to speak out because of fears of what others will think. People need to be more confident in their abilities. Recently, one of our teachers announced her candidacy for mayor but she worries about the opinion of others. Women must have and use their voices and not be afraid of anything."

GRDD of GIPA's Promoting a New Rural Development Approach in Akhalkalaki project will continue until July 2020.

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