



“Women in Politics, Public Administration and Civil Society” program

POLICY BRIEF

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Definition
AMD	Armenian Dram
CSO	Civil Society Organization
LSGB	Local Self-Government Body
RA	Republic of Armenia
RA MESCS	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport
RA MLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
RA MOH	Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia
RA MTAI	Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of the Republic of Armenia
SEN	Special educational needs
USS	Unified Social Service

INTRODUCTION

In the RA Government program 2021-2026, the development and realization of state programs and measures aimed at achieving gender equality was emphasized, which is meant to eliminate the inequality between men and women in different spheres of social life¹.

Children and motherhood are of a great value for Armenian society. The welfare of the society is strongly linked to the health and wellbeing of children and mothers². Motherhood brings about happiness and satisfaction but it can also be a cause of stress, which leads to a multitude of problems if the young mother doesn't receive appropriate support from her family, community and government. It is inevitable that young mothers face psychological, social, economic and health challenges, which can cause women to become more vulnerable within society and therefore lead to the unequal position of men and women.

In the RA Government program 2021-2026, the protection of maternal and child health, and the improvement of reproductive health is stated as a priority area. In particular, the program

¹ Հայաստանի Հանրապետության կառավարության ծրագիր (2021-2026թթ.), ՀՀ կառավարության 2021 թվականի օգոստոսի 18-ի N 1363 - Ա որոշման հավելված (Տե՛ս <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/4586.pdf>):

² Մոր և մանկան առողջության ցուցանիշների միտումները, հիմնախնդիրները, առաջիկա ռազմավարական ուղղությունները, Երևան, 2020 (<https://nih.am/assets/pdf/atvk/db7aad88a52714a90f6b69ecca6df204.pdf>):

states: “Special attention will be paid to maternal and child healthcare, safe motherhood, early childhood and adolescent health issues”³.

³ Հայաստանի Հանրապետության կառավարության ծրագիր (2021-2026թթ.), ՀՀ կառավարության 2021 թվականի օգոստոսի 18-ի N 1363 - Ա որոշման հավելված (Տե՛ս <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/4586.pdf>):

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Regional meetings with women: determining the problem priorities

In June-August of 2023, meetings with Women Task Force group, marz level discussions as well as discussions with experts were held. At the first meeting with the Women Task Force on June 16, a brainstorming session:

1. Women's inequality in the age of digital technologies,
2. The low level of inclusion of ethnic minority women in politics,
3. The role of education in the reproduction of gender stereotypes,
4. The lack of opportunities for women's economic empowerment,
5. The challenges of women with disabilities in educational, health and social spheres,
6. The role of women in the post-war society,
7. Women's participation in the community budgeting,
8. Youth engagement and gender equality.

On July 20, during the second meeting of the Women Task Force titled "Social policy in Armenia: positive impacts and gaps (in terms of gender equality), impact on young families and young mothers/women". The gender issues identified during the previous meeting were discussed and clarified. As a result, the following problems were formulated:

1. Single mother status as a trick to get benefits,
2. The difficulties of applying for benefits online,
3. The impact of maternity, childbirth, third and subsequent child, up to 2 years old childcare benefits,
4. The availability of preschool facilities,
5. The lack of babysitting programs.

During the marz level discussion held in Gyumri on July 30, validation of the aforementioned issues was carried out and the following issues were validated as a priority:

1. Support for large families,
2. Accessibility of government online platforms.

During the meeting of experts held on August 25, recommendations targeting these two problems were developed and two priority goals were specified:

1. Development of a package of social services for young mothers,
2. Provision of accessibility to government online platforms (*See Table 1.*).

Table 1. Activities carried out by the OxyGen Foundation for the purpose of raising RA gender issues and setting priorities.

Date	Participants	Format	Purpose	Result
16.06.2023	Women Task Force	Online	Brainstorming	Problem identification
20.07.2023	Women Task Force	Online	Discussion if the identified problems	Determining issue priority
31.07.2023	Marz level meeting with Gyumri NGOs and community representatives	Offline	Problem validation	1. Support for large families 2. Accessibility of government online platforms
25.08.2023	Meeting with experts	Online	Setting priorities	1. Development of a package of social services for young mothers 2. Provision of accessibility to government online platforms

Statistical data analysis

The measures aimed at ensuring the increase in birth rate that were implemented by the RA Government, including: maternity financial support, one-time financial support for the birth of a child, monthly financial support of 50,000 AMD for the birth of the third and subsequent children, financial support for children up to two years old, rural parent financial support⁴ have had a significant impact on the demographic situation of RA. In particular:

1. During the years 2019-2021, along with the increasing of the total number of permanent population in RA, from 2,959,700 to 2,961,400, rural population has grown, increasing from 1,067,600 to 1,069,200⁵.
2. During the years 2019-2021, an increase in the number of births is observed. While the number of children born in 2019 is 12,200, in 2021 it has grown to 12,400. At the same time, in rural areas, this figure was 12 900⁶.
3. During the years 2020-2022, the number of children under one year of age increased from 35,900 to 36,400. Moreover, it grew from 12,300 to 13,700 in rural areas.⁷
4. During the years 2019-2021, the total number of third and subsequent births and their share among total births also increased (*See Table 2.*).

⁴ Երեխայի ծննդյան կապակցությամբ պետության կողմից տրվող նպաստներն ու դրանց չափը, 13 հունվարի, 2022 (Տե՛ս <https://www.mlsa.am/?p=32385>):

⁵ Հայաստանի վիճակագրական տարեգիրք, 2022 (Տե՛ս <https://armstat.am/file/doc/99535998.pdf>):

⁶ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

⁷ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

Table 2. The number of third and subsequent live births and their share in the total number of births⁸.

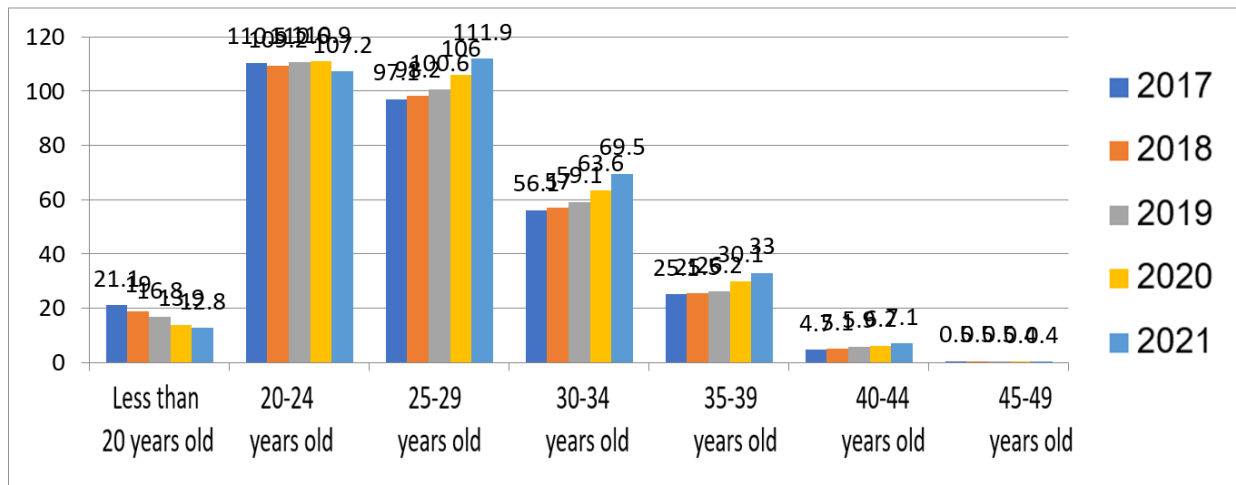
Year	2019	2020	2021
Third and subsequent children	9001	10131	11438
% of total births	25%	27.9%	31.2%

5. During the years 2017-2021, the average age of motherhood increased from 24.8 to 25.7⁹.
6. During the years 2017-2021, birth rate decreased among women of the up to 24 age group, and increased among women of the 25 and over age group (See Table 3. and Diagram 1.).

Table 3. Age-specific birth rates by mothers' age (live births per 1,000 women of specified age)¹⁰.

Women's age	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
under 20 years old	21.1	19.0	16.8	13.9	12.8
20-24 years old	110.5	109.2	110.6	110.9	107.2
25-29 years old	97.1	98.2	100.6	106.0	111.9
30-34 years old	56.1	57.0	59.1	63.6	69.5
35-39 years old	25.1	25.5	26.2	30.1	33.0
40-44 years old	4.7	5.1	5.9	6.2	7.1
45-49 years old	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4
15-49 years old	49.5	48.5	48.2	48.8	49.2

Diagram 1. Age-specific birth rates by mothers' age (live births per 1,000 women of specified age)¹¹.



⁸ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

⁹ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

¹⁰ Հայաստանի վիճակագրական տարեգիրք, 2022 (Տե՛ս <https://armstat.am/file/doc/99535998.pdf>):

¹¹ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

At the same time, according to 2018 official data, among the total number of deaths of children under 5 years of age, the share of infant (0-1 years) mortality was 85.9% and the share of neonatal (0-28 days) mortality was 65%. Accidents and injuries play a major role among the causes of death of children aged 0-5 years old. While in the 0-1 age group the share of deaths caused by them is only 0.4%, and in the age group 0-5 the share is 5.7%, in the age group 1-5 is 31% (almost 1/3 of the total number of deaths at this age). Essentially, the cause of death of every third child who died at the age 1-5 is an accident (trauma, poisoning, traffic accident, burn, etc.), all of which are preventable if the appropriate measures aimed at children's safety are implemented¹².

Accidental death rates for children grow as age groups get older. Thus, if in the 0-5 age group it is 5.7% of all causes of death, and in the 5-14 age group 8.8%, then the mortality rate of 14-19 year olds it occupies the first position, making up 42% of deaths. The mortality rate among boys in all age groups is almost 5 times higher than among girls and much higher in marzes. In the older age group of children, the majority of accidents are traffic accidents. The latter also are at the first position among the causes of death of children under the age of 19. This number (calculated per 100,000 inhabitants of given age group) has nearly doubled in the years 2016-2017 (4.6/100,000 in 2016 and 8.9/100,000 in 2017): Deliberate self-inflicted injuries due to mental health problems have a significant place among the causes of death of this group of children (1,8/100,000 in 2017)¹³.

While for the 1-5 age group the safety of the environment is most important at home, in the yard and in the kindergarten, for school-age children it's most important on the street and at school¹⁴.

During the regional discussions organized by the OxyGen foundation in 2023, the following thoughts and examples related to this issue were voiced.

“I know families which do not have access to basic living conditions but are having their 6th child” (From regional discussions with women).

¹² Մոր և մանկան առողջության ցուցանիշների միտումները, հիմնախնդիրները, առաջիկա ռազմավարական ուղղությունները, Երևան, 2020 (<https://nih.am/assets/pdf/atvk/db7aad88a52714a90f6b69ecca6df204.pdf>):

¹³ Տե՛ս նույն տեղը:

¹⁴ Մոր և մանկան առողջության ցուցանիշների միտումները, հիմնախնդիրները, առաջիկա ռազմավարական ուղղությունները, Երևան, 2020 (<https://nih.am/assets/pdf/atvk/db7aad88a52714a90f6b69ecca6df204.pdf>):

“A woman reported that her husband who was recently released from prison and told her that she had to have a 7th child so that he could buy a car” (From regional discussions with women).

Analysis of statistical data and meetings with women’s working groups prove that state measures aimed at increasing birth rates are quite effective especially in rural areas. On the one hand, the birth rate is increasing, while on the other, the tendency to have third and subsequent children is increasing. At the same time, data on child mortality document that accidents and deliberate self-harm due to mental health problems predominate among the causes of death of children belonging to different age. Part of the latter is directly or indirectly linked to the lack of parenting skills.

SITUATION ANALYSIS: Lack of services for young mothers

The government of RA has developed and implemented a number of measures aimed at increasing the birth rate, such as:

1. maternity financial support,
2. one-time financial support for the birth of a child,
3. monthly financial support of 50,000 AMD for the birth of the third and subsequent children,
4. financial support for children up to two years old,
5. rural parent financial support.

These measures have contributed to the improvement of the demographic situation in Armenia. The birthrate increases in socially disadvantaged families for the most part, which, in case of a lack of a supporting social service system can and already does have negative side effects and contains social risks. These risks include:

1. Abusing a woman's body for the purpose of childbirth to receive financial support from the government,
2. Increasing social vulnerability of young mothers,
3. Deterioration of family relations,
4. Psychological, physical, and sexual violence against women,
5. Neglect of psychological, physical, and sexual violence against children,
6. Risks for women's life and health,
7. Risks for the children's life and health,
8. Increasing social vulnerability of children,
9. Child abandonment,
10. Gaps during the socialization of children.

The 44-day Artsakh war of 2020 contributed to the increase of women's and young mother's vulnerability, the war left many women without husbands and/or sons, many men returned from war with disabilities and almost all of them-with psychological problems.

Both the members of the Women task force group and the experts in the field note that efforts are not being made to prevent the above-mentioned risks with every family, and the family model in society is being distorted. There are families that have children to receive the financial support

of 1 or 1.5 million AMD without having sufficient management and parenting skills. The money doesn't serve the purpose it was provided for- the healthy development and socialization of the child, and the family remains in the socially vulnerable position. There exist many cases where children are born for covering debts, solving economic problems of the family, making large purchases such as household appliances, cars, etc. In such families, many problems arise relating to the protection of the rights of women and children.

This situation shows that only monetary support, without social services, as a means of promoting fertility, not only has a short-term effect, but also brings about a multitude of new issues. Financial support contributes to the increase in birth rate in predominantly disadvantaged families, and from the point of view of the quality of life of the child born, it is necessary to create a network of social services supporting families and young mothers.

At the same time, there are quite a number of state and non-governmental organizations operating in the social sphere in Armenia; there is a need for effective distribution of functions between those organizations and improvement of cooperation formats. Existing structures often lack sufficient resources to function effectively. Measures aimed at prevention are relatively few, structures are activated when the situation becomes complicated and there is a need for intervention.

Different forms and approaches of social support, opportunities for timely intervention are needed, which will allow ensuring not only an increase in the number of births, but also the social protection of each child born.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Network of social work services for young mothers

Recommendations for the MLSA

1. It is necessary to develop a package of social work services provided along with financial support to the family in case of the birth of each child. The policy should be aimed at protecting the rights of the child and the young mother, so that a network of support services is available for every family.
2. Social work services provided to the family should become part of a cooperative network, which includes preschools, schools, primary health care centers, etc. For this purpose, it is necessary to develop a format and procedures of effective cooperation between these structures, which can be coordinated by the MLSA or LSGs. *(In cooperation with MESCS and MOH)*
3. It is necessary to regularly assess and improve the capacities of these structures to provide social work services and provide them with the necessary material, technical, human resources, and emergency powers.
4. Provide women who are under pressure or in dangerous relationships with means that will be available to them, such as a telephone hotline, groups on social networks, the ability to alert about a problematic situation without having to be physically present in any structure, which can be linked to additional difficulties. Professionals must have sufficient knowledge and skills to adequately respond to the alerts received through hotlines, social networks or other channels.
5. Financial literacy, budget management and lifestyle training should be mandatory for parents who have been assessed by social workers as needing to develop such skills.
6. Receipt of the above social work services and participation in the courses should be a prerequisite for the payment of state financial support and benefits by the Territorial Centers of Unified Social Services (USS). This provision may be included in the new Family Vulnerability Assessment System, which is scheduled to be implemented from March 2024.
7. The above mentioned services and trainings should be provided in the community by USS Territorial Centers, kindergartens, schools, or primary health care center (and/or online) by relevant professionals, so that they are accessible to all parents.

8. Creation of a network of crèches-kindergartens for working mothers, where it will be possible to leave children aged 1-3 during the workday.
9. Organizations working with families and children should have the skills and authority to perform the function of early detection, prevention and early intervention: the USS Territorial Centers, the Community, Kindergartens, Schools, Primary Health Care Units. ***(In cooperation with the MESCS and MTAI)***
10. In order to provide targeted specialized social work services to vulnerable families in relatively complex cases, it is necessary to increase the number of community social workers in the communities, and to establish appropriate social work structures in large settlements. As of now, one social worker position per 5,000 inhabitants is set, which is highly exaggerated and negatively affects the quality of social worker services. It is proposed to define the ratio of one social worker position per 2000 inhabitants. ***(In cooperation with MTAI)***
11. LSG bodies, primary health care units, USS Territorial Centers, kindergartens and schools should inform women about the network of services operating in the community. ***(In cooperation with the MOH, MTAI, and MESCS)***
12. Raise women's awareness with knowledge of their rights.

Recommendations for the MOH

13. Counseling services for young mothers should become mandatory, including a full package of professional counselling: psychological, legal, economic, social, medical and rehabilitative.
14. Participation in parenting courses for parents during pregnancy and after the birth of the child at different stages caused by the child's age crises should be periodic and mandatory.
15. Restart the "Maternity Schools" attached to primary health care units, which will provide parenting skills courses and social work services along with medical counseling to pregnant women.

SITUATION ANALYSIS: Access to online platforms for vulnerable groups of women

For many countries around the world, the digitization of public services is no longer just a goal, it is a reality. In all countries, the number of public services requiring personal contact with a civil servant is actively being reduced. For instance, In Estonia, only services related to marriage, divorce and real estate purchases still require personal contact with a civil servant¹⁵. Other countries' governments are also digitizing their services, making them as attractive as the products of some leading internet companies. Digitization of public services is carried out by focusing on customer needs and applying fast-paced "test and learn" practices used by online giants. Armenia is not an exception to this. Over the course of the last few years, the procedures for applying for and using pre-educational, educational, health, social and a number of other public services have been digitized in Armenia.

Digitization of public services, on the one hand, implies technological development, speeding up procedures and increasing transparency, simplifying processes, saving time, human and other resources, changing the behavior of citizens, reducing corruption risks, continuously improving services, increasing customer satisfaction, and on the other hand, it contains certain challenges, such as resource constraints, budget constraints, the need for regulatory compliance, the challenges of transforming large systems, ensuring data privacy and security, resistance to change, skills shortages, etc.¹⁶.

Taking into account the views expressed by the women's working group and experts, this policy brief will address the challenges of skills shortages and resistance to change. Any systemic change creates resistance. The digitalization of public services causes resistance both from within the system and from its users, which is closely related to the lack of skills of both the customers and the professionals who maintain the system. 50% of the users of any public service, and a higher percentage in the field of pre-education, education, health and social services, are women. Considering the intersectional nature of gender issues, women representing different social groups become more vulnerable in the context of digitalization in the public sphere. For women and girls, challenges to digitization may be particularly strong due to, among others, factors such as age,

¹⁵ Digitizing the state: Five tasks for national governments, McKinsey and Company, November 5, 2017 (St'u <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/digitizing-the-state-five-tasks-for-national-governments>):

¹⁶ Digital Transformation in the Public Sector: Opportunities and Challenges, London Premier Centre, UK Training Provider, 05 August, 2023 (St'u <https://www.lpcentre.com/articles/digital-transformation-in-the-public-sector-opportunities-and-challenges>):

race, disability, educational level, sexual orientation, belonging to an ethnic minority, lack of language skills, political affiliation, religion, social background, marital status, migrant or refugee status, health status¹⁷.

During the discussions of the women's working group and experts, a number of opinions and examples related to the issue of access to online platforms of public services were voiced: ***"Usually, in a somewhat rude tone, they say: don't you have a neighbor? Let your neighbor do it for you. Or: isn't there a child in your house, tell them to fill in the formular"***.

Despite the progress the world has seen over the years in terms of access to public services, as well as the availability of new apps and more affordable phones, there are still challenges that need to be overcome to ensure that women can equally access and use digital platforms. Effective use of new digital technologies by women will contribute to economic and social development. However, representatives of many vulnerable groups remain behind in the opportunities to effectively use ICTs and online platforms for public services. As many areas of everyday life and basic services are delivered through digital technologies, only people with appropriate skills will be able to effectively use the digital economy, communicate through social networks and benefit from improved public and private services, which creates new foundations for inequalities. The well-being gap between those with access to ICT and those who are digitally excluded will widen, particularly the gap between women and men.

As of 2015, according to Equals Global Partnerships, 200 million fewer women worldwide owned a mobile phone, 250 million fewer women than men used the Internet, and only 6% of women developed computer and mobile applications¹⁸. In 2023, According to GSMA Connected Women's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023, data shows a further slowdown in women's digital inclusion, with women using mobile internet 19% less than men. The gender gaps in smartphone ownership and mobile access are 7% and 17%, respectively¹⁹.

¹⁷ GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women, GREVIO(2021)20, Adopted on 20 October 2021, Published on 24 November 2021, Secretariat of the monitoring mechanism of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Council of Europe – 2021, Strasbourg (Střu www.coe.int/conventionviolence):

¹⁸ Mariscal, Judith, Mayne, Gloria, Aneja, Urvashi and Sorgner, Alina. "Bridging the Gender Digital Gap" *Economics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 20190009. <https://doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2019-9>:

¹⁹ The Mobile Gender Gap Report, GSMA, 2023 (Střu <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap/>; https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2023.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=download-button&utm_campaign=gender-gap-2023):

According to AfterAccess research, the main reason behind the digital gender divide is the high cost of digital devices and services, lack of connectivity, inaccessibility of devices, low literacy and lack of digital skills. Equally important are socio-cultural barriers²⁰.

If gender gaps in digital inclusion are not addressed, they are likely to exacerbate gender inequality in many other areas, including labor market inequality and reduced economic opportunities for women. The main reason for this is that digital technologies are everywhere and digitization affects all areas of our lives. Consequently digitally excluded women will not be able to get access to more attractive and well paying jobs. Digital exclusion from public services can increase women's vulnerability. The digital inclusion of women will significantly improve their social and economic inclusion. Time is another important factor here; the more time is needed to bridge the digital gender gap, the less information capital will be generated by women and the gender gap will grow wider.²¹

While discussing the availability of digital social services with the Women Task Force and the experts, accessibility constraints for the following vulnerable groups of women were highlighted.

- Elderly women,
- Women representing national minorities,
- Illiterate women,
- Women with disabilities,
- Women with vision impairments,
- Women with mental disabilities,
- Women representing families who do not have access to any devices or the Internet.

²⁰ Mariscal, Judith, Mayne, Gloria, Aneja, Urvashi and Sorgner, Alina. "Bridging the Gender Digital Gap" *Economics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 20190009. <https://doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2019-9>:

²¹ Mariscal, Judith, Mayne, Gloria, Aneja, Urvashi and Sorgner, Alina. "Bridging the Gender Digital Gap" *Economics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 20190009. <https://doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2019-9>:

RECOMMENDATIONS: Towards increasing access to online digital platforms of public services for vulnerable groups of women

To overcome the above mentioned challenges, government agencies must adopt a strategic approach to digital transformation that includes clear goals, an implementation roadmap, and continuous communication with service providers, customers, and all other stakeholders. Policies aimed at reducing gender gaps in digitization will empower women by preventing and reducing gender inequality in labor markets and improving women's public engagement. To achieve that goal, it is recommended to:

Recommendations for the MESCS

1. Develop measures to increase the digital literacy of women and girls, which will include educational, awareness raising and cyber security trainings targeting different vulnerable groups of women at certain intervals. The process can be coordinated by the MESCS, delegating the preparation and conducting of trainings to CSOs.
2. Taking into account the inaccessibility of digital platforms for the above-mentioned vulnerable groups, to temporarily plan the position of a social assistant in various public services, who will help and teach citizens to use the new platforms.

Recommendations for all Ministries

3. Provide the opportunity to use platforms (USS, Ministries' websites and social networks) in different languages: Yezidi, Russian, English.
4. Provide audio guides to the platforms, which will increase the accessibility of the platforms both for citizens with vision impairments and for other groups who cannot read.
5. Provide the platforms with subtitles, which will increase the accessibility of the platforms for the citizens with hearing impairments.
6. Develop guides, videos that will provide information on services and the simplified step by step instructions for citizens.
7. Provide the platforms with 24-hour chat rooms that will support the user while using the platform and the services.
8. Provide platforms with a simplified system for accepting and processing of complaints.

This policy brief has been prepared based on an analysis of the results of the research carried out in Armenia over the recent years and reflects the viewpoints of the project's experts, as well as of participants in policy dialogue events held in Yerevan and the RA marzes.

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