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FROM INSULTS TO ASSAULTS: WEAPONIZING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN PROTESTORS IN GEORGIA

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**





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As pro-European, anti-government protests have swept through Georgia since November 2024, women from diverse backgrounds and age groups have become key actors and a driving force of peaceful resistance to the government crackdown on human rights. However, this prominence has also increasingly made them targets of intimidation, harassment, and gender-based physical and psychological violence by the state.

Scenes of protesters facing unlawful use of force by the police have become disturbingly common in Georgia. Yet in addition to the visible violence, authorities are using more insidious forms of repression. Allegations of sexual harassment, rape threats and the use of degrading, full strip searches – which are expressly prohibited by Georgian legislation¹ – have been mounting, pointing to a deliberate, state sanctioned effort to humiliate and silence protesters, and create a chilling effect on the exercise of human rights. Several individuals, including women, have reported being subjected to invasive, unlawful strip searches without clear legal grounds or proper justification while being detained in connection with protests.²

1. "Upon instruction from the authorized person, the individual is required to remove clothes or expose the relevant parts of their body as necessary... Complete undressing of the person undergoing inspection is prohibited." Article 5. Order #423 of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia August 2, 2016 Tbilisi On Approval of the Typical Charter of the Standard Operating Procedures of the Temporary Detention Isolators of the Ministry of Internal Affairs: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/download/3358653/14/ge/pdf>
 2. Georgian Young lawyers Association. "GYLA News. GYLA responds to the unacceptable practice of stripping detainees", 29 March 2025, <https://gyla.ge/en/post/saia-exmianebe-dakavebulta-gashishvleblis-dausjvebel%20praktikas>

According to recent reports by local human rights defenders and the media, in addition to searches of detained protestors, there has been a noticeable increase in accounts of arbitrary house and office searches³ as well as stop-and-search practices by the police in the streets and public gathering places, examining individuals' clothes, including underwear, requesting them to open their bags, unlock their electronic gadgets and show their private communications.⁴

Unlawful search practices often involving complete undressing are especially intrusive and humiliating, with potential long-term emotional and psychological effects. They also render those affected, especially women, more vulnerable and expose them to a risk of further gender-based violence. The fear of such degrading experiences can deter protestors, especially women, from participating in public demonstrations, reporting abuse, or even moving freely in public spaces, undermining their sense of safety and security.

These practices, conducted with impunity, violate Georgia's international human rights obligations and must end immediately.

3. Civil Georgia. "Homes of Protest-Linked Public Fund Managers Searched." 29 Apr. 2025, <https://civil.ge/archives/678271>.

4. Social Justice Center (SJC) "Luka Kintsurashvili's Unlawful Detention and Degrading Treatment is Another Manifestation of Uncontrolled Police Arbitrariness." 1 Apr. 2025, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/luka-kintsurashvilis-ukanono-dakaveba-da-mis-mimart-damamtsirebeli-mopqroba-politsiis-ukontrolo-tvitnebobis-morigi-gamovlinebaa>; "The Detention of 'Indigo' Journalist Saba Sordia Demonstrated that the Unlawful Search and Detention of Citizens by the Police Has Become Frequent." SJC. 6 Apr. 2025 : <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/indigos-zhurnalistis-saba-sordias-dakaveba-achvenebs-rom-politsiis-mier-mokalakeebis-ukanono-chkhreka-da-dakaveba-bolo-periodshi-gansakutrebis-gakhshirda>. See as well: Kakhaberidze, Kakha. "What You Need to Know When Police Stop You for a Superficial Inspection or Identification." Netgazeti, 4 April, 2025, <https://netgazeti.ge/law/769608/>.



VERBAL ABUSE, THREATS AND INTIMIDATION

Women protesters in Georgia regularly report facing degrading treatment by the police, including sexist verbal abuse, strip searches and threats of violence. To date, no effective investigation has been carried out and none of the officers responsible for these violations have been brought to account. These incidents are not isolated but appear to form part of a broader pattern of abuse and impunity within Georgia's law enforcement agencies. The humiliation, sexist rhetoric and physical violence directed at women protesters in Georgia align with broader efforts to intimidate those expressing critical opinions and participating in ongoing protests.

Amnesty International has received first-hand reports of women being targeted with sexist insults and sexual harassment on several occasions and particularly during the 2 February 2025 demonstration near Tbilisi Mall. Throughout the demonstration and the subsequent march, police taunted protesters for hours, using sexist insults, curses and threats of rape and physical harm to intimidate women participants.

An Amnesty International representative present at the march witnessed police officers, many of whom wore masks and had no identifying signs, laughing and yelling degrading insults at women protesters calling them "whores" and telling them to "go home and wash some dishes instead of standing here". The police also threatened women by saying they would identify who they were, where they lived and who their family members or children were. Several women peaceful protesters were forcibly dragged away by the police while being threatened with sexual violence.

One of the women protesters from the 2 February protest, who conveyed information to Amnesty International on the condition of anonymity, described being targeted with degrading, sexist insults by masked police officers. When she confronted one of them, an officer punched her in the face, splitting her lip, and threatened her with sexual violence.

She told Amnesty International that she did not have any hope for justice in her case, as she did not believe that any of the officers would be identified or punished.⁵

5. Written communication with Amnesty International representative. 6 April, 2025.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND DEGRADING TREATMENT OF NATIA DZIDZIGURI

Natia Dzidziguri, who was detained during a protest outside Georgia State University on 19 November 2024, told Amnesty International that she had experienced sexual harassment and degrading treatment during her arrest and transfer to a police station. According to Natia, she was forced to remain kneeling in a police van full of male officers and detainees during the whole journey, while some of the police officers made insulting remarks and humiliating and sexually charged gestures at her. At the police station, the arrest record falsely listed a female patrol officer as the arresting officer, instead of the male officer who detained her.⁶

SEXIST VERBAL ABUSE AND ILL-TREATMENT OF MZIA AMAGHLOBELI

Mzia Amaghlobeli, a prominent journalist and the founder and director of Batumelebi and Netgazeti media organizations, has come to be the symbol of women protestors standing up to insults and degrading treatment by police.

On 11 January 2025, Mzia Amaghlobeli was arbitrarily detained along with several other activists for attempting to put up a sticker calling for a nationwide protest. She was released shortly afterwards and returned to the protest site, where police continued to carry out arbitrary and violent arrests of peaceful demonstrators.

According to eyewitness reports, the Batumi police chief, along with other officers involved in the arrests, addressed Mzia Amaghlobeli with sexist insults and verbal abuse after she objected to their treatment of peaceful protestors. During the ensuing verbal confrontation, Amaghlobeli slapped the police chief. She was immediately detained and charged with assaulting a police officer - a criminal offense punishable by four to seven years in prison.

Mzia Amaghlobeli later told her lawyer that during her second detention, the Batumi police chief spat in her face, attempted to physically assault her before being restrained by colleagues, and subjected her to further sexist verbal abuse and insults. Video footage capturing the police officer's offensive language against Mzia Amaghlobeli during her arrest supports her allegations. She was denied access to drinking water and restroom facilities as well as a proper medical examination and treatment for the injuries she alleged the police had inflicted on her during her arrest.⁷

6. Amnesty International. Brutal Crackdown on Protestors and Journalists in Georgia: "They May Have Broken Our Bones, but They Won't Break Our Spirits." December 2024. <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/brutal-crackdown-on-protestors-and-journalists-in-georgia-briefing.pdf>.

7. Batumelebi.ge. Batumi Police Chief's Threat to Protester Mzia Amaghlobeli. Facebook post, 29 Apr. 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/batumelebi/videos/787612133562804/>.

She was promptly submitted to court for trial, at which point the court refused to admit most of the evidence put forward by her defence, and to summon the police officers whom the defence wanted to cross-examine.

Mzia Amaghlobeli's trial is ongoing at the time of writing. The injustice she has faced is compounded by the lack of an effective and genuine investigation into allegations of her ill-treatment by the police. At the time of writing, an investigation into the allegations of her ill-treatment had been nominally opened by the Special Investigation Service but has not, as yet, identified any suspects, nor formally recognized any of the complainants as victims, nor publicly reported any progress. This not only delays or denies accountability for the police's alleged abuses, but also starkly contrasts



with the prosecution of Mzia Amaghlobeli—that appears politically motivated and intended to punish her both as a woman and as a journalist critical of the authorities, sending a chilling message to others who dare to speak out.⁸

THE STRIPPING OF DIGNITY: A PRACTICE OF HUMILIATING UNLAWFUL STRIP SEARCHES

ARBITRARY DETENTION, UNLAWFUL STRIP SEARCH AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT OF ELENE KHOSHTARIA

On 28 March, Elene Khoshtaria, a leader of the opposition coalition, was arrested during a peaceful protest outside the Georgian Parliament and accused of petty hooliganism and disobeying police orders, reportedly while trying to cross a zebra crossing in front of the Parliament building.

Elene Khoshtaria later described that she had been tightly handcuffed behind her back during her detention, resulting in significant physical pain and visible bruising on her shoulders, and that police officers injured her jaw and teeth. The abuse escalated in the detention centre, when two female officers restrained her by twisting her arms behind her back and another one forcibly undressed her, despite her voluntarily consenting to empty her pockets. She was then forced to lie down naked, while officers scanned her body with a metal detector – an act she later described as violent, unlawful and humiliating, intended to punish and intimidate her.

⁸ See Amnesty International, "Georgia: Justice for Journalist Mzia Amaghlobeli", Urgent Action, 14 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/9262/2025/en/>.



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Elene Khoshtaria also reported that during her detention, police officers confiscated her prescribed medication and refused to provide it even when she was experiencing a medical crisis of hypertension and repeated vomiting. Her requests to use the bathroom were denied, further exacerbating her condition.⁹

On 1 April, following a public outcry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs released a statement asserting that Elene Khoshtaria had resisted lawful procedures and acted aggressively while in custody. The Ministry also alleged that she was found in possession of a “potentially illegal substance” to be sent for examination. The statement also specified that procedures for placement in the detention facility were recorded by the facility's video surveillance cameras which in case of interest and with the consent of the detainee, could be made available to the relevant authorities.¹⁰ Elene Khoshtaria alleged that the implied threat of publicly releasing the video footage of her abuse served as a deliberate attempt to further humiliate her.¹¹

Elene Khoshtaria's lawyer Theona Zakariashvili told Amnesty International that Elene Khoshtaria did not possess any illegal substances at the time of her detention and that this accusation only appeared after allegations of mistreatment became public. At the time of writing, there had been no charges brought against Elene Khoshtaria related to possession of an illegal substance. In her Facebook post published on 28 March, Elene Khoshtaria shared her reasons for speaking publicly about her degrading strip search and ill-treatment by the police: “I thought of all the vulnerable and inexperienced people who fall into their hands. Some are too afraid to speak about it, others are too ashamed. Of course, discussing these details is sensitive—but it is essential that we talk about them, pursue justice to the end, hold the perpetrators accountable, and put an end to this inhumane treatment.”¹²

9 Video interview with TV Pirveli: “Elene Khoshtaria Is Free and Speaks About the Shocking Facts of Degrading Treatment.” YouTube, uploaded by Nodar Meladze's Saturday, 29 Mar 2025; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8nxe1t1i00> see as well: see as well: OC Media. “Opposition Leader Khoshtaria Says She Was Assaulted and Stripped Naked after Being Detained.” 2025, <https://oc-media.org/opposition-leader-khoshtaria-says-she-was-assaulted-and-stripped-naked-after-being-detained/>.

10 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. MIA Facebook post 29 March, 2025: <https://www.facebook.com/MIAofGeorgia/posts/pfbid02mffwzYf1rqzTPCzT8ix9VU8cygo3ekVf99CTDXzb6KgT7xzYUgB7y1b7G7LivYQZl>.

11 Helen Khoshtaria, “Police violence and degrading treatment was not enough” (პოლიციაში ძალადობა და დამამცირებელი მოპყრობა არ აკმარებს) Facebook post, 1 April, 11:53 p.m. 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/Llaka>;

12 Helen Khoshtaria, “Letter from Digomi Detention Centre (“წერილი დღმის იზოლაციიდან”) Facebook post, 29 March. 2025, 11:53 p.m., <https://www.facebook.com/Llaka> unofficial translation from Georgian

UNLAWFUL STRIP SEARCH AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT OF KRISTINA BOTKOVELI

Kristina Botkoveli (also known as Nancy Woland), an activist and co-founder of Daitove, a Facebook group providing a forum for protest participants, told Amnesty International that she was forced to strip naked and subjected to harassment, threats and other police abuse during a house search on 1 February 2025. The incident, which also involved her older mother, resulted in an acute panic attack, requiring the help of an ambulance and forcing her to take a temporary break from her work and activism.



According to Kristina Botkoveli, the police entered her home without any warning, threatening to break down the door if she refused to let them in. During the search, female officers ordered her to completely strip and perform certain movements while naked, allegedly to ensure that she was not hiding anything on her body. She described the stripping order as being carried out in front of her older mother and with her male lawyer present in a different room, adding further humiliation to the already degrading treatment.

Once the search was completed, additional male police officers in civilian clothing entered her home again and demanded that she come with them to the police station. When Kristina Botkoveli's mother tried to record the search on her phone, one of the officers attempted to take it from her and threw her to the ground. This caused Kristina Botkoveli to suffer a panic attack and breathing difficulty, requiring an ambulance to be called to the scene.

During the search, the police confiscated Kristina Botkoveli's personal belongings, including her computer, which contained her artwork and work projects, as well as a home security camera that stored personal footage. This was the second time Kristina's home had been raided since December 2024.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs stated on the same day that it was conducting searches in various locations across Tbilisi, including the residences of civil activist Kristina Botkoveli as part of an investigation launched into the alleged organization and leading of group violence, as well as organizing, or actively participating in, group actions that disrupt public order, under Articles 225 and 226 of the Criminal Code.¹³ However, there has been no publicly available evidence to support these allegations, suggesting that the searches were politically motivated attempts to intimidate and punish Kristina Botkoveli and other individuals for their activism. Kristina Botkoveli told Amnesty International that many of her fellow women activists detained during protests have experienced unlawful strip searches and were made to perform squats in humiliating and demeaning conditions. She says that the authorities are using every possible means to suppress activists, particularly those playing key roles in the protest movement, including home searches, provocation and detention as part of their strategy to silence dissent.

13. Interpressnews. "MIA on Searches of Activists' Homes: Investigation Is Underway into Facts of Organizing Group Violence and Organizing Group Action." 1 Feb. 2025, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/137305-mia-on-searches-of-activists-homes-investigation-is-underway-into-facts-of-organizing-group-violence-and-organizing-group-action/>.

ARBITRARY DETENTION, UNLAWFUL STRIP SEARCH AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT OF NINO MAKHARADZE

Another activist, Nino Makharadze, told Amnesty International that she was subjected to an unlawful strip search and other handling that could amount to ill-treatment after being detained for protesting peacefully in front of a judges' corporate event on 13 January 2025.¹⁴



According to Nino Makharadze, she was apprehended by several police officers while standing and protesting peacefully at the pavement who used force against her. The police officers dragged her by her hair, twisting her limbs while carrying her to a police van. The pain and stress caused her to faint momentarily.

Police accused Nino Makharadze of petty hooliganism and disobeying police orders and transferred her to the temporary detention centre in the Digomi district of Tbilisi. There, a female police officer and a medical worker told her, without providing any justification or explanation, to remove all her clothes.

Describing the experience as degrading, humiliating and emotionally scarring, Nino Makharadze told Amnesty International that she was at the time unaware that the procedure was arbitrary and unlawful. She was also not allowed to inform her family and friends of her whereabouts and was only given access to the lawyer after being strip searched. The next day, she was taken to a court, found guilty of disobedience to police orders in the summary proceeding and fined 3,000 GEL (approximately US\$1,050).

After being released, Nino Makharadze submitted complaints of the abuse she suffered to the Special Investigative Service and to the Public Defender's Office. However, at the time of writing there has been no communication regarding her case, and she was unaware if a probe or a formal investigation had been initiated.

Shortly after speaking publicly about her ordeal, on 5 May Nino Makharadze reported being ambushed along with two female friends while returning home from a protest. An unknown assailant sprayed them with pepper spray and green paint while hurling insults. All three women reportedly sustained injuries, including chemical burns that required hospitalization. An investigation into the incident has been opened.¹⁵

Georgian human rights defenders have emphasized that evasive and degrading strip searches are not isolated occurrences. They have reported an alarming pattern in Georgia, where detainees, including women, are illegally stripped naked. Many victims remain silent out of shame or fear of retaliation, further reinforcing the chilling effect of these abuses.

14. A telephone interview with Nino Makharadze 5 April 2025. Recording on file.

15. publicaeenglish. 5 May 2025. Woman attacked together with Nino Makharadze covered with green pain having difficulty breathing [Video]. Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJSQPimMLrd/>

16. Tamar Oniani. "This post is about the alarming practice of forcibly stripping detainees naked under the pretext of a 'personal search' — a violation of human dignity and rights." X, 28 Mar. 2025, <https://x.com/OnianiTamara/status/1905985039248068882>

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND DOMESTIC LAW

Georgia has an obligation under international human rights law to comply with the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment¹⁷ which includes the prevention, investigation, prosecution and punishment of each and every act, and ensuring that survivors are rehabilitated, compensated and afforded other means of redress.¹⁸ The Georgian authorities also have an obligation to guarantee the human rights of everyone deprived of liberty, and to treat them with dignity and respect, and without discrimination. Moreover, arresting, punishing and harassing individuals for peacefully protesting or criticising the authorities also violates their human rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

The international community has developed further regulations pertaining to treatment of detainees, including women. The UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment stipulates that all persons under any form of detention or imprisonment shall be treated in a humane manner and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.²⁰

According to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), searches shall be conducted in a manner that is respectful of the inherent human dignity and privacy of the individual being searched, as well as the principles of proportionality, legality and necessity.²¹ Intrusive searches, including strip searches, should be undertaken only if absolutely necessary.²² Prison administrations are expected to develop and use appropriate alternatives to intrusive searches, and intrusive searches are to be conducted in private and by trained staff of the same sex as the prisoner.

The UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules) contain further details of how these regulations should apply to searches of women prisoners. They require states to take effective measures to ensure that women prisoners' dignity and respect are protected during personal searches, which should be carried out by women staff who have been properly trained in appropriate search methods and in accordance with established procedures.²³ It also stipulates the need to develop alternative screening methods, such as scans, to replace strip searches and invasive body searches.²⁴

17. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 7; Convention Against Torture, Article 2(1).

18. HRC General Comment 20, para. 8.

19. ICCPR, Article 10(1).

20. UN General Assembly, Body of Principles, 1988, Principle 1.

21. UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), 2015, Rule 50.

22. Nelson Mandela Rules, Rule 52(1).

23. UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), 2010, Rule 19.

24. Bangkok Rules, Rule 20.

Furthermore, international standards clarify that strip searches should never be carried out on a routine basis. No prisoner – regardless of gender – should be humiliated or be required to strip completely during a search. Such searches can be carried out by exposing parts of the body only in turn to protect, to the extent possible, the dignity of the individual being searched. Special sensitivity should be demonstrated in the case of women, because they are particularly likely to feel the humiliation of undergoing intimate searches.²⁵

When law enforcement officials violate these regulations, the relevant authorities must conduct a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into each and every reported incident of such violence, as well as of instances of reported discrimination or harassment of women, to identify and bring to justice in fair proceedings anyone complicit in such acts. The authorities also have an obligation to ensure that both national legislation and practice are fully compliant with international human rights standards.

Georgian domestic legislation contains similar guarantees of rights to privacy, freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.²⁶ It explicitly prohibits complete undressing of an individual during a search.²⁷

Amnesty International is concerned that the apparent proliferation of verbal and physical abuse against protestors, threats of rape and other gender-based violence and unlawful strip searches, all with virtually no accountability, suggests a targeted campaign to intimidate and silence protestors, especially women protesters, and create a chilling effect on the exercise of the human rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

26. Constitution of Georgia, Articles 15, 21, 22, 17(1), 9.

27. Article 5. Order #423 of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia August 2, 2016 Tbilisi On Approval of the Typical Charter of the Standard Operating Procedures of the Temporary Detention Isolators of the Ministry of Internal Affairs: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/download/3358653/14/ge/pdf> see footnote 1.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE GEORGIAN AUTHORITIES TO:

- Ensure the full compliance with the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of those exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, paying specific attention to gender-based violence and the particular risks of torture and other ill-treatment faced by women and girls;
- End the practice of arbitrary searches, including intrusive unlawful strip searches, and adopt a clear written policy explaining the legal grounds and specific procedure (including an individualized risk assessment and the fulfilment of the requirement of absolute necessity and proportionality), including the requirement for prior written authorization and, where necessary and proportionate, replace them with less intrusive methods, such as screening methods (e.g. scans or ultrasound) as much as possible;
- Carry out prompt, effective, impartial and independent investigations into all allegations of verbal abuse, threats, physical violence against women, and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as discrimination, by police with a view to holding those responsible to account under appropriate charges, including of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment;
- Ensure that appropriate measures are taken in relation to law enforcement officers suspected of serious misconduct, including sexual violence, and in particular mandatory suspension during investigations, to prevent interference and protect victims;
- Provide victims of these violations with timely access to justice, and with full and effective remedies and reparations including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation and guarantees of non-repetition.

