

Transformed parenthood

Voices of parents of queer persons:
collective sorrow and power



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TRANSFORMED PARENTHOOD
VOICES OF PARENTS OF QUEER PERSONS: COLLECTIVE SORROW AND POWER

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Voices of parents of queer persons: collective sorrow and power

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GIGA KARAPETIANI

WOMEN'S INITIATIVES SUPPORTING GROUP (WISG)
2025

Women's Initiative Supporting (WISG) is a feminist organization that aims to help building a society based on the principles of social justice, through women's empowerment and political participation.

Women's Initiatives Support Group works with the communities of lesbian and bisexual women, transgender and intersex people and women representing other marginalized groups.

WISG works in the following directions: Advocacy for the integration of women's and LGBTQI+ issues in politics; Community empowerment for social and political participation; Creating publicly accessible critical knowledge about gender and sexuality through research and art projects; Developing practice of intersectional queer feminist organizing.

Women's Initiative Support Group is the author of the key studies and policy analysis on sexual orientation and gender identity in Georgia. Our research studies, shadow reports, policy documents, and information regarding other activities are available on the organization's official website: <https://wisg.org/en>

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FOREWORD

The Women's Initiatives Support Group (WISG) has been working on queer issues in Georgia for over two decades. The organization's efforts in strategic advocacy, community empowerment, and the creation of knowledge on gender and sexuality are guided by a deep understanding of the multifaceted and evolving nature of homo/bi/transphobia. This complexity is further demonstrated through research and analysis of the experiences and needs of the local queer community, as well as shifts in public attitudes within the country.

The majority of society continues to believe that homo/bi/transphobia solely affects members of the LGBTQI community, without recognizing its broader impact on their social environments and relationships at the micro-social level. In reality, however, the damage caused by negative public attitudes is far-reaching, often penetrating even the most intimate spaces, such as the relationship between parent and child.

In a patriarchal society, moral responsibility often falls on the families and parents of queer individuals, since the upbringing they provided is perceived as "wrong." Some parents internalize these societal attitudes, endlessly searching for answers to the question, "Where did we go wrong?" Those who openly support their children may also become victims of bullying, exclusion, or violence from society.

In response to the ongoing challenges, the organization has been creating a safe space for LGBTQ parents for over a decade. This mutually supportive environment serves not only as a platform for the exchange of experiences, knowledge, information, and emotions but also empowers parents to become pillars of support for both their children and one another.

Given the current climate of political homophobia, expanding spaces of mutual care and solidarity has become especially crucial. The voices of queer parents carry exceptional power and responsibility, which is why we have chosen to share their experiences with a broader community through this study.

We would like to express our gratitude to the researcher, Giga Karapetyan, for approaching this issue with exceptional professional ethics and for capturing the unique experiences of queer parents.

We believe that this study has transformative potential and will be of interest not only to researchers and institutions working on social change but also to the wider community.

I woke up. I listened for her breath, which I heard after a moment. much shallower, faster. I became alert, just then the AC unit went on, aurally overtaking the sound of her. This had happened innumerable times before, and it was always a strange bardo for me. Would the breath still be happening when the fan went back off? I strained to hear her breath over the grinding of the fan but couldn't. My torso leapt and sat up to check if her chest was moving. It didn't seem to be. the AC roared. Her left hand puffed the sheet up suddenly, the tiniest, instant Halloween ghost. her first movement—a signalling. I leapt to her, to that hand. her eyes were open now, illuminated, looking up, her mouth was now closed, her face no longer tilted, akimbo. she was beautiful.¹

1 *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson, 2015.

I always knew who I wanted to be. From a very young age. In the 5th grade, I knew exactly; I even knew that my hair should be black, not red. I was certain. I've always lived in the future, thinking about tomorrow. Since childhood, I've been drawing women who look exactly how I look now. It was a dream – and dreams come true.²

Kesaria Abramidze

² TV show "Profile", Season 14, Ep. 7.

A NOTE TO THE READER

I began working on this report in July 2024, with the aim of exploring the needs and experiences of parents of queer people. My goal was to contextualize these experiences within local settings and to identify issues that are particularly significant to these people. This process was not easy – neither for me, as a listener, nor for the parents, as storytellers, who would begin by recounting their past experiences, then assess their present, and, through reflection on both, shared their beliefs and hopes for the future.

In the following sections of this document, I will often refer to this report as a collection of stories or a book based on research. These titles were chosen by the storytellers themselves, who also requested that I write this collection in a way that the general public could understand; to preserve their voices and their language so that this work would be not only for those interested in the study's findings but also accessible to anyone who recognizes the importance of parental support for queer individuals and wishes to understand the parents' perspectives on this often challenging process.

In my view, this study offers queer individuals themselves an opportunity to reflect on significant aspects of their own experiences. Furthermore, as the storytellers expressed, this collection will reveal to readers the multifaceted nature of parenthood: the often unseen similarities and differences between the various phases of parenting, and the experiences of parenthood that can be overlooked or lost within these phases; the realities that form visible and invisible networks of connection among parents.

I would like to express my special gratitude to the Women's Initiatives Support Group for making my dream of working on this collection a reality and for fostering an exceptionally dignified working environment for both me and the central figures of this collection – the parents. I am also thankful to the storytellers who courageously shared their challenging experiences and to my colleagues who offered invaluable advice, particularly regarding the structure of this collection.

PURPOSE OF THE COLLECTION

This document aims to explore the experiences of parenthood among mothers and fathers of queer individuals living in Georgia. The collection highlights the uniqueness of these experiences and, in doing so, seeks to gather information from parents about the political, cultural, and economic context that has shaped their identities and parenthood. Before conducting the interviews, the following topics were identified for the research:

- Youth – social stigma and social connections;
- (Un)Fulfilled expectations regarding marriage and separation;
- Reasons and motivations for choosing to become a parent, along with the challenges it entails;
- Transformed parenthood: parenting a queer individual and adapting to new forms of coexistence with the outside world;
- Perspectives on the future: factors that shape hope or hopelessness.

Before starting the fieldwork, during the task definition stage, it was decided to structure the findings chronologically, following the course of the parents' lives. With this approach in mind, the parents were invited to reflect on their past, present, and future. Additionally, it is important to note that during the interviews, parents had the opportunity to share experiences they found significant, even if these were not initially outlined in the research framework. This openness in data collection allowed for a nuanced, multi-layered understanding of parenthood. Such flexibility, in turn, was made possible by the research methodology, which was grounded in the principles of qualitative and biographical-narrative interviewing methodology.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

METHODOLOGY, APPROACH, AND METHOD

Collaboration with parents to explore their experiences in depth was conducted using a qualitative research methodology. This approach prioritizes the study of unique, lived experiences instead of quantitatively generalizable findings. Additionally, the research is grounded in a feminist framework; it seeks to generate critical knowledge by incorporating lived experiences, examining power asymmetries, and gender issues. Additionally, the focus of the feminist approach is amplifying the voices of those facing systemic barriers and being marginalized in a patriarchal society. In this context, feminist research not only equips scientific disciplines with ethical considerations but also enriches them with emancipatory knowledge. The inclusion of marginalized perspectives challenges dominant patriarchal narratives and exposes the limitations of normative paradigms of thought.

In addition to amplifying marginalized voices, the feminist approach is based on the principle of recognizing subjectivity. This perspective challenges the assumption of universal objectivity by emphasizing that socially constructed identities and roles shape individuals' unique experiences. Therefore, the approach highlights participants' personal perceptions, emotions, and life histories as meaningful reflections of their realities.

Furthermore, this approach acknowledges the researcher as an active participant in the research process. It encourages them to move beyond the role of a neutral observer and critically examine the role they play within the study.

The collaboration with the parents of queer individuals was based on biographical-narrative interviews. This method, on the one hand, focuses on exploring specific experiences aligned with the research objectives, while on the other hand, it remains open to new themes that surface during the conversation – topics that participants themselves consider relevant to the research goal. Biographical-narrative interviews offer participants an opportunity for self-reflection, emphasizing how they interpret and assign meaning to their own experiences. Additionally, this method allows for the contextualization of these experiences through historical, cultural, or personal factors.

The research methodology, approach, and method allowed for a holistic collection of findings aligned with the study's purpose. During the interviews, all parents had the opportunity to share experiences that were meaningful to them and to collaboratively assign meaning or labels to these experiences with me. Consistent with the feminist approach, I openly shared with all participants that I did not have children myself and that parenthood was not a familiar experience for me. Stating my position at the beginning of the interviews allowed me to approach the conversations with greater openness and encouraged me to ask as many clarifying questions as necessary. This approach minimized the risk of misinterpreting the collected findings and empowered participants to frame their experiences within cultural, historical, or personal contexts.

SAMPLE

The selection process involves identifying a sample population from the general population. In qualitative research, sampling is based on a non-probability approach, meaning that members of the general population have unequal, or sometimes zero chances of being included in the sample. For this study, the general population consists of parents of queer individuals living in Georgia. Since no quantitative data exists on this population, the sample is inherently non-representative. For more clarity, participants were recruited through a non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling. After defining the study's goals and objectives, I was connected with participants through the Women's Initiatives Supporting Group. The research process revealed that parents' willingness to participate was largely influenced by the trust they had in the organization.

A total of fifteen parents participated in the study, including fourteen mothers and one father. At the time of the interviews, nine parents were in a formal relationship with their partner, while six were not. Ten participants lived in Tbilisi, while five resided in other regions of Georgia. However, twelve parents had also experienced living in different cities at some point in their lives. The average age of the participants was fifty-three years.

FINDINGS AND FIELDWORK

Before involving parents in the study, I contacted them in advance to explain its main purpose. I provided information about confidentiality and emphasized that their diverse experiences related to parenthood would enrich the research. Gaining their consent was not difficult, as they trusted the *Women's Initiative Supporting Group*. The first interview took place on July 11, 2024, and the last on September 26, 2024. On average, the interviews lasted 2 hours and 45 minutes.

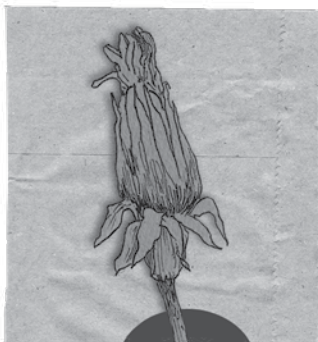
When planning each interview, I carefully outlined the topics to be discussed and rehearsed how to articulate them before meeting each participant. I remember feeling particularly nervous during the first interview – while I knew that staying open to new topics was essential, it was equally important to remain focused on the research goal. I conducted one interview via Zoom, one in Kutaisi, and the remaining thirteen at the organization's office. With each conversation, I felt more empowered for the next, as I learned from the parents' generous cooperation.

In early October, I began re-listening to the interviews and transcribing them. While analysing the collected findings, I organized them into the categories that the reader will find in the following sections of the report – grouping parents' stories into past, present, and future. However, as the findings' section will illustrate, these categories are sometimes fluid, often overlapping with one another. Some memories remain so vivid that they shape the present, while for some parents, past experiences continue to define their future.

At the end of the collection, instead of a summary or concluding remarks, the reader once again encounters the voices of parents. In these voices, parents often address other parents, encouraging them based on their own experiences to reevaluate their perceptions. Now that I have completed work on this collection, I feel that these stories allow for me to leave without a definitive conclusion. Several parents have told me that the needs and experiences of parents are so overlooked that a single collection cannot fill this void. Instead, I hope this work serves as a catalyst for further efforts to explore, understand, and amplify the experiences of parenthood, making queer-feminist discussions more layered and nuanced.

The parents share this hope. They expressed it to me on February 7, 2025, during a general closed meeting, where I met some of the study participants

along with other parents of queer individuals. They appreciated the structure of the report and its main findings, expressing optimism that the collection would reach a wide audience. I hope I have faithfully conveyed their voices and experiences. And I hope that even after the collection is published, I will continue to receive their feedback.



PAST

At the beginning of each interview, I asked the parents to divide our conversation into three main phases, reflecting on the past and present, and then discussing their beliefs about the future. During these conversations, I noticed that parents often found it challenging to reflect on the past. I believe it was due to the complex and multifaceted nature of their experiences. Despite this, many storytellers often noticed that their memory served as a crucial foundation for understanding the past.

They shared how their memories preserved years of their youth, their lifestyle, and the feelings tied to the spontaneous or deliberate decision to have a child. The following section of this collection focuses on parents' memory of the past and organizes them thematically into the following categories: (1) youth: censorship, connections, and stigma; (2) marriage and separation: (un)fulfilled expectations; (3) the decision to become a parent and its difficulties.

YOUTH: CENSORSHIP, CONNECTIONS, AND STIGMA

Each parent I offered to participate in the study were informed in advance that the main subject of our conversation would be parenting queer individuals; I believe that was what prompted them to reflect on their past by sharing their attitudes they held in youth towards queer individuals. The parents noted that they first heard the term „queer“ after their sons/daughters revealed their gender and/or sexual identity. In their youth, society used the term „blue“ to describe the behaviour of gender-nonconforming, primarily feminine men, rather than referring to a specific sexual or gender identity. Interestingly, the term did not always carry negative connotations, but instead had a somewhat neutral, or descriptive meaning. For greater clarity, one of the narrators explained:

You know, back then, we weren't really sure who was a lesbian or gay. It was like "blue" was the term we used to describe people who were different. Trust me, it wasn't always in a negative context that we used that word. My friends and I didn't have any aggression at all, but we would still say – "Oh, that one is 'blue,' he probably likes boys.

It is noteworthy that the word "blue," according to the narrators' recollections, often carried negative connotations, particularly for young men in their communities. This was especially true when the term was used by other men to refer to them:

Let's say, if a certain man said, "he's acting like a 'blue,'" it was over – it meant you were not a man. It was a very negative label, and if one man called another that, it could lead to a huge fight, or even bloodshed. It was considered a massive insult to those men.

Some parents, who confidently stated during our conversation that they had not experienced aggression toward queer people in their youth, shared that their neutral or non-aggressive attitudes were rarely shaped by family. Instead, these attitudes were more often formed through exposure to books, music, films, and friendships. For instance, one parent recalls:

I read a lot and my home, it just felt like a library; imagine, there were more books than furniture in the house, plus, I had an older brother, eight years my senior, who was living a hippie lifestyle at that time; he introduced me to the underground, "Pink Floyd", "Deep Purple" and so on. His friends, what we'd call "Jeans Generation" today, would gather at our place. And nothing surprised them. I was a kid, but I knew they were smoking weed (laughing), and they knew I wouldn't say a word to our parents.

During the conversation, almost all parents expressed regret that information on queer issues was not available through formal education in the Soviet Union. They also noted that, compared to other republics, the situation in Soviet Georgia was somewhat better, particularly when it came to film screenings. Despite

censorship, there were still opportunities for people to watch films that concerned queer topics. Additionally, several parents mentioned that their families had friendships with queer individuals. In most cases, the sexual orientation of these friends was not openly known, but they understood, and neither they, nor other family members felt aggression toward it. For example, one parent recalls:

My parents had a large circle of friends. Among them, there were, so to speak, queer friends as well. I remember one in particular; he was a dancer with "Sukhishvilebi." He adored our family, and whenever he visited Georgia, he would often come to our home as a guest. We still remember him, and we all knew about his orientation, and let me tell you, it was okay, we'd share a glass of wine or even a drinking horn together. I also remember films by Pedro Almodovar. I don't think such films were screened in other Soviet republics. Of course, due to censorship, some scenes were cut, but we still understood that there were queer individuals with beautiful bodies.

According to one of the narrators, while there were individuals in Soviet Georgia who were open to receiving new ideas, society was often rigid and stigmatizing. Manhood was strongly associated with physical strength and grey and black coloured outfits. These formed a pattern that was distinctly different from those associated with women, with women's behaviour or appearance. The narrator explained that if a man displayed any tenderness, even in his voice, he would often be belittled, primarily by other men but also by women, using the term "faggot." Additionally, such men were frequently referred to by various common female names. The narrator noted that not all men who deviated from traditional male behaviours necessarily had a different sexual or gender identity. What distinguished them from others might have been their willingness to care for their children or take on a more active role in household chores. One parent shared:

And another thing; for example, if a man was very involved in child-care, house chores, or helping his wife, it would irritate other men, and then, I would hear them saying, I'm sorry to use the word – "He's a faggot," or they would say, "Look who's coming – Ketino." It was meant to

humiliate them. Looking back now, I realize this humiliation was often more covert. It seemed like they were mocking him, but in an undertone. They wouldn't always say it directly to his face.

When remembering their youth, two mothers emphasized the need to directly address and reflect on the stigmatizing environment that affected them as women – particularly the virginity institute. According to them, one of the most challenging experiences of their youth was related to the societal pressure surrounding a woman's so-called "chastity," which was defined by virginity. As they said, it was crucial to highlight that not all women conformed to these societal norms. Moreover, within their families, many openly voiced their concern and criticized these expectations to other family members. One mother recalled:

Society was probably rigid about everything. In my time, it wasn't just about being a faggot but also about the virginity institute. We don't seem to talk about it much today, but do you know how hard it was for us women? Imagine if someone found out that a woman wasn't a virgin; she could immediately be singled out. The smaller the town or village she lived in, the worse her situation was. And the rumours would spread so quickly... Many women's lives were ruined by this gossip and this so-called preservation of traditions. But there were also women who opposed it and argued against these norms. Some spoke out, saying that this kind of control wasn't right and that, as they now call it – inequality toward women was unjustified.

I would like to emphasize that, for the narrators, reflections on the past involve different periods of time. While life in Soviet Georgia was characterized by censorship and a closed-off existence that limited the space and opportunities for discussing various issues, they associate the first years of independence in Georgia with extreme poverty. Additionally, according to the parents, all forms of security guarantees were completely eroded during those early years of independence. One parent described this period as "complete darkness" and, to provide greater clarity, added:

Darkness reigned. Truly. Not only that we had no electricity. Darkness – how can I put it? Imagine that money does not exist, we are paid with coupons, and you have to buy food with Russian Rubles, which were non-existent. The only thing you could do was find bread and trade it for food in Marneuli. I baked bread and exchanged it to get just something to eat. But do you know what was the hardest? We didn't feel safe at all. Fear was everywhere. People were breaking into homes, there was raping ... We heard about all of it, but it felt like there was nothing we could do to stop it. Honestly, those of us who lived through those years, there's nothing else life can do to scare us now, I think. And yet, I also remember that this independence, this newfound freedom, brought a feeling of elevation, which gave us the energy to keep going.

During the interviews, as I mentioned, the parents enriched the conversations by recalling various experiences when reflecting on the past. However, it became evident that they were particularly interested in sharing memories related to their understanding or experiences that represented their attitudes toward queer individuals or, more broadly, queerness. Notably, two respondents mentioned having received special affection or sympathy from other women. One of the parents shared with me:

During my time in school, I remember one girl used to write me letters. Her name was also Nino³. She would write "Nino + Nino" and so on. At that time, I didn't think much of it; Now I realize, that probably she liked me. To be honest, I didn't know how to react, and when I got irritated by her attention, I said I didn't want to be friends with her anymore. She apologized and even fell on her knees, and I helped her to stand up. She was so worried. Who would have thought, that after so many years, I'd have a queer child, and it would make me reflect on so many things. Now I understand that I treated that girl unfairly.

³ To maintain confidentiality, all names in this document are fictional, and any other identifying details about the parents have been replaced with contextually appropriate content.

In addition to the sympathy from another woman, one of the parents shared that during her school years, she had queer feelings for another girl, that she felt that the connection was mutual. According to the parent, a person can always sense that queer love and affection are quite different from, for example, platonic friendship, and recognizing this distinction often helps individuals name and understand these feelings. The parent shared:

She was rebellious [the girl] yet disciplined in her studies. I was more chaotic. I believe she was incredibly talented, more talented than I was. I remember well how principled she was...[...] When she made a statement, she knew how to follow through and prove her point. But she did so without malice and harshness. She was direct, and that impressed me. She was a kind and good person, and for that reason, she seemed very beautiful to me. We were equals in our studies, but I particularly remember how well she spoke English. She had a unique presence, if you had seen her, you would have noticed her immediately. At least, that's how she appeared to me. I don't know how she is, because she died at the age of nineteen in a catastrophe. It was one of the greatest traumas of my life, and it completely changed everything for me. I don't know what kind of person she would turn out to be...

When reflecting on memories, most parents emphasized that the most significant lesson they had learned from their lives up to this point was that life rarely unfolds as one desires or plans. This sentiment was particularly evident when discussing marriage, which they defined as one of the most significant aspects of their lives. Furthermore, several parents shared their experiences of separating from their spouses, highlighting the personal growth from these experiences. The following section delves into these themes, offering the reader a glimpse into the diverse perspectives of the parents.

MARRIAGE AND SEPARATION: (UN)FULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

Parents spoke about their experiences of marriage in fragmented ways, often starting and ending their reflections spontaneously during the interviews. It was also apparent that some of them were reluctant to discuss this topic; one parent explicitly stated that she did not wish to talk about her husband, adding that she would rather use the opportunity to discuss everything except him. It was evident that the experiences of finding a partner and getting married were significant chapters in their lives. In addition to marriage, a few parents who had gone through separation from their spouses shared that this experience was just as significant as getting married. In this section, I will attempt to present these themes chronologically, structuring the findings in the following sequence: the search for a partner and love, getting married, and separation. I would also like to clarify that issues related to parenthood will not be addressed in this section due to its depth and complexity, and I will cover the topic in the third and final section.

Marriage and love, as several respondents shared, do not always go hand in hand. Some narrators revealed that love, mutual understanding, or agreement on significant matters was not a prerequisite for their marriages. They said that during their youth, marriage was often not a decision based on mutual agreement but was instead initiated through the kidnapping of a woman by a man. In many instances, women had seen their future husbands only several times before they had to start a family with them. According to these women, alongside the normalization of such practices, public opinion also influenced their lives. It seemed it restricted their ability to escape from abusive marriages. Some women noted that memories of physical and psychological violence inflicted by current or former partners were still present. At the same time, they spoke about the internalized pressure to suppress these memories and avoid discussing them openly:

[My] marriage is when everything started to go wrong. Unfortunately, these kidnappings were very common at the time, and I became a victim of one. The truth is, I didn't know my husband – I had seen him only two or three times before. Then, [after the kidnapping], I ended up in his family. But I stayed. I stayed because of the times... Society wouldn't accept a woman who had been kidnapped and then returned home. Years went by, and everything I'm telling you now is something I've locked away in a

black box. I try not to open that box because it was such a dark and painful time. It was bad because it was tied to violence and humiliation. I was so inexperienced and naive. Everything became more and more difficult, yet I couldn't free myself. I suffered both physically and spiritually.

These words, shared with me by one of the mothers, highlight an important reality – marriage, for some women, did not offer the chance to meet or choose their future partner, nor did it signify that starting a family was a mutual decision. After recounting difficult experiences with violence, I asked the same mother how she managed to cope with these challenges and whether there was anyone she turned to for support. In response, she shared:

There was simply no one, no one [to help me]. The worst part was that I had no one close to talk to. My family was in Tbilisi, and I had been kidnapped to the [...] region. The only people around me were my husband's family, his mother, father, and him. Everyone I was with took his side. I had no one to confide in, no one to ask for help or even to give me verbal encouragement.

I gained different perspectives on starting a family from a father. During our conversation, he shared that starting a family held a sacred meaning for him. He often emphasized that his desire to start a family was deeply rooted in his religious worldview. According to him, he wanted a family, a wife and children, built on Christian values. He mentioned that he met his current wife at the baptism of one of his relatives, and the first thing that captivated him was her manner of speaking. The father explained that it was challenging for him to grow up with his mother and grandmother who were atheists, frequently having arguments about religion. This experience motivated him to start a family with a woman who shared his religious connection, with other common values. However, he acknowledged that life for him and his wife became difficult over time. One of the main reasons for their challenges was the economically unstable environment, which forced them to live with his mother and grandmother. Although he avoided delving into the details, it was apparent that living with his mother and grandmother was a significant factor contributing to the strained relationship between him and his wife. The father shared with me:

After some time, our family situation became challenging. Perhaps many people interrupted our relationship. At one point, it was even possible for my wife and I to move out and live separately. I stayed with my mother because she was more financially stable. But my mother always wanted to take the lead in everything. There was also a degree of selfishness on her part, which I believe was coming from her own upbringing. I was three when she left my father, and I ended up living with my mother and grandmother. I guess it caused a little strain between me and my wife. I knew my mother was an atheist, and I often had struggles and resistance in that regard too. Despite these challenges, I tried to live my life according to the blessing of my pastor and in the glory of God. I don't know how successful I've been in doing so, but today, my wife and I are still together, raising our children together.

When discussing the topic of getting to know a partner, several parents mentioned that, during their youth, the spaces for forming close connections with others were limited. Women, in particular, shared that they were raised with different expectations than men. They explained that it was not socially acceptable for women to take the initiative in getting to know a man. However, it did not mean that all women adhered to this societal norm. Reflecting on family life, the parents often concluded family life was a challenging matter. Some noted that even families built on love are not always as stable as one might expect. For instance, one woman shared with me:

Me and my husband had the chance to fall in love before we got married. We lived in Tbilisi, and the situation there was a little different. Everyone around us knew we loved each other, and no one showed aggression or interfered in our relationship. On the contrary, if I was in love and happy, my family was happy about it too. But I was just saying that, despite this, we eventually broke up. We separated. There are moments in life that happen unexpectedly, that's how life is. That's why the saying "never say never" holds so much truth. Good things happen in life, but even the good things can come to an end or you might as well end it.

Several mothers, when discussing family, observed that disagreements between spouses often stem from the lack of material resources for them to live independently. They explained that, in most cases, women were required to live with their husband's parents, a situation that is almost never easy. The parents emphasized that creating a family is a huge responsibility, and both men and women should be prepared for these responsibilities independently. Additionally, several mothers reflected on their younger years, noted that they did not know how to establish healthy boundaries between their personal lives and say, extended family members. On this subject, one mother, who had the experience of living separately with her husband, shared with me:

I don't know, I didn't make a conscious effort to set boundaries between others and our family. It just happened naturally, and you know why? Because we lived alone from the very beginning, and that's so important. It's essential to keep your life and family to yourself. [...] When you live separately, you don't have other people around you 24/7 interfering in everything. Starting a family doesn't mean losing your independence. It's not like that at all. What it means is learning to live with your spouse and, later, with your children. During those times, it becomes difficult to also live with other people, even if they're loved ones. We were, so to speak, free from the influence of others.

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that this part of the text would also explore the experiences of parents separating from their spouses. According to the parents, their life stories are not solely defined by milestones such as getting an education, getting married, or having children, but also by the journey of starting an independent life after separation. Those who had experienced separation shared that it is often viewed by society in a predominantly negative light. One of the narrators highlighted this through the commonly used term ruined family, which carries an inherently negative connotation. However, she explained that separation can, in some cases, mark the beginning of a new chapter and serve as a catalyst for empowerment, particularly when it enables women to free themselves from abusive husbands and focus on saving themselves. One of the parents shared with me:

He started gambling. I'm probably telling the story of many women. I wasn't very happy, but I still loved him. There was some kind of attachment I had with him. We were married for fifteen years before I finally decided to end it. By that time, I was already financially independent, while he had become financially dependent on me (laughs). I'm so glad I had the courage to do it. Many women don't dare to take that step. When I left him, everyone was shocked. In a small town like ours, people don't expect such things from a woman. On top of that, we were considered an exceptional couple, we listened to rock music, had a good sense of humour, and seemed to have a good relationship. [...] For a while, he even abused drugs. When I told people I wasn't feeling well in the relationship, some didn't understand. People often don't realize what you're going through, which is why you have to act in a way that feels right for you. Looking back, I'm so glad I made the decision to leave.

One of the parents, who had also experienced separation from her husband, shared her perspective, explaining that men often feel envious of women. Particularly when women achieve career fulfilment, when they work, have their own income, and, most importantly, are not dependent on their husbands. According to her, men sometimes look for ways to discourage women from pursuing their careers, attempting to confine them to the domestic sphere, where they become more subordinate to family responsibilities. She shared with me:

My job used to annoy him [ex-husband]. It was almost as if he was jealous of my work, of my independence. I remember when I was first offered from work to go to Germany. This was before visa liberalization, and Germany is such a prosperous country, he should have been happy for me, right? But no. When I arrived, I remember that he didn't even share his thoughts with me. That's when I realized he was actually bothered by my success. I would stay up late at night to work, making sure that my children had everything. Today, I'm incredibly grateful for those late nights, everything turned out well, and I thank God that I didn't give up. I did what I knew was right for myself and my children.

When discussing separation from their spouses, the parents tried to describe to me the specific circumstances that led them to part ways with their partners. It seemed that the conversation was also a form of self-reflection for the narrators. Among many layered experiences, one parent's words stood out: "Sometimes, you might not even find a clear reason. The reason could simply be that you just can't get along with the person anymore." This same parent shared with me:

I had an extraordinary husband. He imposed absolutely no restrictions on me or our children. My ex-husband was a perfectly normal man in every way. Our children were also raised with a strong sense of freedom. I didn't separate from him to gain some form of freedom. However, I eventually realized that I simply didn't want to live with him anymore. And so, I decided to separate. We had a lot of love, and when we started discussing the separation, everyone was shocked. No one expected it. But now, looking back, I can honestly say that I'm happier. I wasn't restricted in any way, yet I can still say that I'm happier today.

Parents' reflections on past memories revealed that, for them, creating a family was the result of various experiences. This complexity was shaped by personal but also by social and circumstantial contexts. Several female narrators emphasized that they had never experienced the process of meeting and falling in love with their future spouse as a prerequisite for starting a family. It's also noteworthy that, according to some parents, in their youth, society frowned upon women taking the initiative to meet a man. Additionally, kidnapping women by men was normalized in the country, and women often did not have the opportunity to free themselves sooner from unwanted marriages, including from abusive partners. The interviews also revealed that, alongside marriage, the experience of separation was significant for those parents who had gone through divorce. For them, separation was just as much a part of their life story as starting a family and other important life experiences.

In sharing their past memories, the parents reflected that separation from their spouses allowed women to begin a new stage in life. I also found that when discussing their experiences of separation or cohabitation with their spouses, all parents mentioned their children, that creating conditions for their children's

well-being was the main factor influencing their decision to either maintain the family or separate. In the next section of the report, I will present reflections on parenthood and the decision to become a parent. I will explore the circumstances that enabled the narrators to become parents and how this process subsequently transformed their lives. From the collected findings, I will also attempt to describe the period of parenthood before the parents became aware of their children's gender or sexual identity.

THE DECISION OF BECOMING A PARENT AND ITS DIFFICULTIES

For the parents involved in the study, reflecting on the period of having a child was profoundly significant. Significant in a sense that after the birth of a child, their lives underwent a transformation. They spoke of changes in life plans and added responsibilities.

Some of the female narrators, while reflecting on their decision to have children, shared that it felt natural at the time, as societal expectations for women were cantered around being a good wife and, inevitably, a good mother. However, they noted that the situation has changed. For instance, one woman, reflecting on the values and perspectives of her daughter, observed:

Times have really changed now. First of all, girls are more courageous in organizing their own lives, and I'm very happy about that. [...] [One of] my children, a girl, is now planning her life; how to develop her career. To move forward, to buy a house. She has a boyfriend and is in a heterosexual relationship, but she doesn't think it's that important to have a child. When I look at it, it's so interesting; maybe because it reminds me of times of my youth. In my time, you had to have a husband, and a husband alone wasn't enough. [You had to have children] with your husband to become a woman. Whatever else I had to do, I thought back then that maybe, somehow, this society wouldn't accept me as a woman, anyway.

The narrators' shared memories of motherhood highlighted that being a mother was regarded as a defining status for women in society. Some parents, with a sense of surprise, posed rhetorical questions about the expectations of hav-

ing children during challenging civil and political times. For instance, one asked, “Imagine there was a civil war, and yet people still asked, why don’t you have a child?” They reflected on how the societal pressures to become a mother often overlooked the difficulties of protecting children, ensuring their safety, and meeting their basic material needs under such circumstances. The narrators also pointed out that some women in society chose not to have children, challenging traditional expectations. One of the narrators, sharing her personal story about the unplanned birth of her first child, connected this experience to the beginning of her sexual life and explained:

To be honest, I tell my friends that, looking back, it [pregnancy] felt like a natural outcome of the circumstances. I was a young girl from a province, overwhelmed by hormones; it happens to everyone. I couldn’t have had a relationship with my boyfriend any other way, and I think many women became mothers like that, it was not planned so to speak. Back then, living freely with the person you loved wasn’t an option. My parents would have lost their minds. I had Giorgi, and oh, I was crazy about him. I loved him deeply, and he loved me too. It was the typical story of youthful hormones and instincts. That’s how I got pregnant. I remember wanting a child, I really did. But now, looking back, I realize it was probably too early, probably I wasn’t fully prepared for the responsibility. If I could go back in time, I don’t know if I would have done it the same way. I might have waited and planned the birth of my child more carefully.

Some women shared with me during our conversations that they had always wanted to have children, since childhood and began contemplating more about it in their youth. However, they reflected that motherhood, whether planned or not, comes with responsibilities that are far more complex and challenging. Some parents, when recalling the early years of raising a child, spoke about the hardships they faced. Particularly those few women who, at some point in their lives, found themselves excluded from public life. These women emphasized that a family, husband and children, cannot fully substitute for a woman’s lack of engagement in the public sphere. This is especially true for women who are driven by professional growth and career aspirations. One of the women shared with me:

My children could not fulfil my other interests and desires. They could not fulfil them because [...] I worked at a research institute. During that difficult time, the institute was losing its function, so I couldn't go there every day. Both Nino and my youngest child used to say the same thing – "mom is depressed." Being at home didn't fulfil me at all. I wore an oversized bathrobe and sat in the kitchen with a cigarette in hand. It was a very difficult period, and there were horrors happening outside as well. Then the civil war began. During the war, my eldest son would wake up crying. He cried because he could hear the sounds of explosions and gunfire, he couldn't understand what was happening.

Some other narrators pointed to the unequal involvement of fathers in raising their children. During the conversations, they emphasized that this imbalance had confined them to the family space for a significant period. The women shared that their challenging situation affected their children as well, as the children became distressed seeing their parent struggling. I asked one of the women to reflect on what she would call and how she would characterize this difficult period, as well as how she was able to free herself from it. She shared:

What an interesting question – what would I call this period? I'd probably call it "mom is depressed." It was the hardest time for me and, I think, for my children too. But I've escaped it, escaped it after separating from my husband. The time after the separation, how can I describe it... it felt like a transition – from confusion to clarity. To give you a better example, it's like someone returning from an unwanted emigration and suddenly finding themselves back in their own home, a warm, welcoming home where they finally feel free. That's exactly how I felt.

The interviewees in the study who had multiple children shared that both getting pregnant and giving birth to their first child marked a particularly memorable stage in their lives. They recalled experiencing an intense fear of having a baby during the first months of pregnancy, a fear that would periodically be replaced by a feeling of overwhelming joy. When discussing motherhood, many parents noted that they were unable to express their fears about having their first

child. Some explained that speaking openly about such fears was not socially acceptable at the time. Society, they said, expected only positive emotions from future mothers. According to them, it remains challenging to articulate the range of emotions experienced during the first pregnancy. As one mother expressed, it is probably impossible to fully convey those feelings in words. Having their first child, however, made the experience of having subsequent children emotionally easier. One mother explained, "It made it easier for me because, at least, I already knew what was ahead." Some mothers who had more than one child reflected on their attitudes toward their firstborn. They admitted to developing an overly positive and, at times, unhealthy attitude towards their first child. One mother, in hindsight, recognized this and shared:

There is a small [age] gap between my children. My daughter is my first child, and my son is my second. From the very beginning, it seemed, I became very close to my first child. Despite the small age gap between my children. I became friends with her and held some exaggerated opinions about her, something she herself has pointed out. My friends and I truly believed she was a genius. Not just smart, but a genius. Whatever she did, drawing, writing, we would praise and say how exceptional she was. That child is a Leo, and, as you know, Leos have a certain energy, they radiate confidence and charisma. We praised her excessively for those traits. Today, she says that treating a child like that can actually be destructive. Looking back, I don't think I had the same issue with my second child. I treated him more normally and perceived him as a regular child. Now that I'm older, I've come to believe that seeing a child as normal is healthier and far less harmful for children.

When discussing having a child, some parents repeatedly emphasized how incredibly difficult it was to raise children in the 1990s. They spoke about the dire economic situation and highlighted how after the birth of their children their sense of security in the country was completely gone. According to their assessment, there was no guarantee that they or their children would even physically survive. One parent, who lived in a rural area, reflected on this period and noted that, even in those challenging times, there were parents who experienced a different kind of pain. They shared:

Motherhood is always challenging. Even now, I think about how I took the risk and gave birth to four children. They needed so many things, and there was such extreme poverty. You can't imagine how terrible the nineties were, we struggled financially, and for a time, my family helped us out. But back then, you couldn't really ask anyone for help because no one had anything to give. Everyone was dealing with their own hardships. Some people might have had a little more materially, but we didn't even have that. Poverty, combined with the cruelty of those times... I honestly don't know how we managed to survive all of that. [...] Of course, I had [after having children] even more responsibilities. I kept worrying, I did not want them to get hurt, to feel neglected, to be deprived. And yet, they lacked so much because we simply didn't have the means. Still, I gave them everything I could. I wanted them to learn, to build a future.

When discussing the challenges of raising children, I asked mothers whether they received help from other family members and about the involvement of fathers in raising children. Some mothers shared that fathers had minimal involvement but did not elaborate further. In most cases, mothers spoke about the support they received from other female family members, either from their own mothers or their mothers-in-law. According to the parents, these women helped with household chores and played an active role in raising the children. One parent with more than one child told me, "If I hadn't relied on my mother, I wouldn't have had more than one child." Another parent shared:

When I had my first child, I already had some experience. But that experience didn't seem to be enough. I moved in with my mother, and she was helping me. After a while, I returned home again. Imagine I had two little ones, and I was alone at home. Can you imagine how much work that was? Other parents, perhaps, had it even harder. I was only looking after the children and didn't have to dig the ground, but I still had so much to do. Sometimes, I would want a glass of water, but I'd forget to drink because I had so many things to do.

When discussing the help mothers received from other women in the family while raising their children, one parent shared that her mother was so involved in raising her child that it felt as though she owed her mother something in return. I asked the narrator to elaborate on this feeling so I could better understand her perspective. She explained:

I had a strange feeling. I lived with my mother, and she was helping me raise my children. But then I started feeling a certain way; I didn't want the children to fall or get hurt, because I didn't want my mother to see it [laughs]. It felt like it was her child, and I was taking her child for a walk.

At the end of our conversation about the period of having children and the challenges of caring for them, I asked the parents involved in the study if, over time, they felt relieved of any of the responsibilities they had during the early years of parenting. I mentioned that I had no personal experience with having children and was eager to better understand their perspectives on this topic. Most of the parents I asked said that parental responsibilities did not necessarily decrease as their children grew up but rather shifted. Several parents noted that these responsibilities become more specific, especially when a parent has a son/daughter who is not well-accepted by society. They emphasized that the experience of parenthood is so complex that each parent's experience has its own unique characteristics. One parent reflected:

I can tell you, that as a parent, I still don't feel free from parental responsibility. I think I'm just a certain type of mother. I don't know, maybe everyone is different. But I'm always worried about my child. Now I feel a little different, she's not a little girl anymore and doesn't even sound like one. But I'm still very emotional about it. They argue with me [laughs], saying, "we're grownups, you're always chasing us and calling us." But I can't help it. I need to hear her voice; I just want to call her and feel relief. To make sure that she is okay.

After sharing their experiences surrounding the planned or unplanned decision to have children and the complexities of caring for them, the parents naturally transitioned into discussing their children's sexual and gender identities. They reflected that, while the challenges of parenthood are unique for everyone, parenting becomes particularly more complex when their son/daughter is queer. The parents shared how their lives were profoundly altered upon learning about their son's/daughter's queerness. While this understanding belonged to their past, they still reflected on it from the present perspective. Many noted that discovering more about their son's/daughter's identities radically reshaped their perceptions of the outside world. During the interviews, some parents described their current lives as being filled with strange challenges. The following section of this story collection, titled Present, seeks to explore the memory of their child's queerness and, through the lens of reflection, examine the parents' current perspectives.



PRESENT

All the interviews I conducted with parents convinced me that, when reflecting on their life experiences, the narrators frequently connected their past and present lives. This connection was most often expressed through discussions of parenthood, both as it is experienced in the present and how it has evolved over time. During self-reflection, several parents told me that their initial expectations of parenthood were different from the reality they faced; they did not expect it to be easy, but somewhat lighter. Throughout the interviews, almost all the parents emphasized the existence of an invisible network that connects everyone involved in caring for their child. Yet, they also highlighted the vast diversity of parenting experiences, with their unique struggles and responsibilities, that divide parents into distinct social groups with varying needs and challenges. The title of the next section draws on the words of one of the parents. Through the title, I try to illustrate the varied, and often conflicting, realities that parents faced at that stage of their lives when they learned about their child's queerness.

TRANSFORMED PARENTHOOD

The gender and sexual identity of their queer sons/daughters were a central aspect of the lives of the parents involved in this study. On the one hand, the parents often described their own experiences and those of their son/daughter in similar terms; on the other hand, their narratives revealed significant differences between the parents in how they perceived these experiences. During the interviews, I asked the parents to reflect on how their lives had changed since learning about their child's queerness. As part of this reflection, I encouraged them to divide their lives into distinct phases and assign names to them. Rather than posing specific questions, I offered broad topics for discussion, allowing the parents to draw upon their personal experiences in their own way.

When parents discussed first learning about their son's/daughter's queerness, they described different periods and forms of realization. Some parents shared that they began to consider their son's/daughter's queerness when they were still very young. This was particularly true for parents of transgender individuals, who recalled that their sons/daughters expressed an opposite-gender identity early on. According to these parents, this expression was often demonstrated

through clothing choices and, in some cases, by their son/daughter choosing an opposite-gender name for themselves. It is important to note that several parents reflected on their initial confusion during this time. They admitted that they did not fully understand what was happening in their lives and in their son's/daughter's lives. One parent shared that she initially thought their son/daughter was gay because they lacked any knowledge about transgender identity. She explained:

The first thing that struck me was that she had given herself a boy's name. I didn't think much of her wearing boyish clothes. Back then, a girl wearing pants or boyish clothes didn't really mean anything. [...] But the boy's name [...] that felt strange to me. I remember thinking, "What's going on? Maybe she is gay?" I didn't share this with anyone. At the time, I didn't know anything about transgender topics. It wasn't until she grew older and was certain about things that I understood.

Some parents also shared that their sons/daughters created premises that informed their parents about their queerness from an early age. To delve deeper into these dynamics, I asked one parent of a transgender son to elaborate on what she meant. She shared:

We didn't have a formal conversation about it. In my case, it was different. I think I'm an exception. My son, at three or four years old, had already chosen a boy's name. He was in preschool and already very boyish. [...] I remember one time we forced him to wear a dress. He was just three or four years old at the time, and we have a picture from that day. That day, he didn't play, didn't engage in anything. He was very withdrawn, and that's when I realized I had made a big mistake, did not let him be. After that day, I never made that mistake again. Even before I fully understood everything or dug deeper into the situation, I thought, if this is the way he is, then forcing him to wear a dress, trousers, or punishing him for that isn't going to change anything. This happened twenty-five to twenty-seven years ago.

Some female narrators recounted that when they first began to have doubts about their child's queerness, they were deeply worried. They worried that it would be difficult for their children to live and integrate into society. Their concerns often revolved around the challenges their sons/daughters would face in society and the difficult lives that might await them. Several parents reflected that their anxieties about their son's/daughter's future coincided with societal questions or remarks about their child's queerness. One parent, whose son is transgender, described an early, painful experience related to her workplace. When I asked her to elaborate on what led to this situation and how she felt, she shared:

Sometimes he called himself Giorgi, sometimes Nikusha. By the time my son was thirteen or fifteen, he had already chosen a new name. Even on Facebook, he changed it. Now, of course, he's my Facebook friend, but I found out my coworkers too had seen this change online. Before that, there were already questions. At school, the parents of his classmates would ask me, "Did he decide whether he is a girl or a boy?" It's not easy to provoke me on these topics; it's not easy to shake me. Sometimes I'd answer with humour, trying to navigate the situation as best I could. But at work, it was a different story, it was extremely stressful when they directly asked me, "Is your son gay?" Honestly, I don't think they said it with bad intentions. But I was caught completely off guard. I felt like I had been caught doing something wrong, as if I had stolen something, and they had caught up with me. My vision blurred; I wanted nothing more than to go home, to tear my son apart (laughs), and demand that he tell me everything first! That way, I could have been prepared. Up until that point, I still had this hope that he would grow out of it. But since then, I've learned so much...

During the interview, the same parent recalled that she often spoke with his son and acknowledged that these conversations were not always easy. Despite the challenges, she emphasized that she always tried to show his son unconditional support during their discussions. Over time, the parent explained, his primary concern shifted from her son's queerness to the challenges his son would face living as a transgender man in society. He shared that she could not imagine

expecting her son to navigate such an environment that is filled with so much aggression. Throughout the interview, the parent periodically reflected on how, as time went on, she was able to understand and connect with her son more deeply. she came to realize that his son could not hide his true self or live a lie, which he saw as a defining trait of a strong person. When discussing this topic, I asked the parent to elaborate on his feelings and how she valued the process of his son sharing his gender identity with him. The parent recalled:

It was all very difficult. I was accepting and did not resist it, but I was deeply worried because this life is not easy, especially here, in Georgia, where it's hard for anyone to establish themselves, and being transgender here makes life even more challenging.

That said, today I am very proud of my son. I am proud of his courage, he never once considered hiding who he truly is. He never thought of pretending to be someone else or trying to deceive us. In fact, he's the kind of person who never lies and refuses to deceive others, which indicates his self-respect. Maybe this comes from a sense of pride, this stance of yes, this is who I am – what to do about it? This is who I am, take it or leave it. If you don't like it, go find someone else, be someone else's mother, someone else's father, someone else's friend. He is so authentic naturally, that perhaps that is the reason why none of his friends have never shown him any unhealthy attitudes. [...]

During my interviews, I discovered that some parents of transgender individuals expressed feelings of regret during the period when they discovered their son's/daughter's gender identity. However, many of them also mentioned feeling more empowered today as their interactions with their sons/daughters had significantly increased their understanding of gender and sexual identities. They described this awareness as a form of knowledge and emphasized that it had a personally empowering effect on them. To delve deeper into the topic of regret, I asked the parents several times if they had any specific memories about their son/daughter that they now looked back on with a certain sense of regret. One parent, the mother of a transgender man, shared with me:

Of course, I accepted my son as he is. Now I believe even more so that a person's life belongs to them; their personal life is entirely their own. I always had that belief, but it became even stronger over time. I'll admit, though, that I've had moments of regret [laughs]. You know what I regret? His voice. My son's voice. You might laugh, but when I watch old recordings and hear his extraordinary voice from when he was still a girl, I can't hold back my tears. [...] Once, he sent me a video saying, "Look what I found", and I couldn't help but cry. I realized that nothing was left from that voice. [...] I still remember the transition period; it was very difficult for my son, but it was also hard for me. I remember when he grew a beard and how it changed the way I kissed his cheek. It took me time to adjust to it; I won't say it was easy. [...] That voice is something I still miss from the time when my son was a girl. But today, everything has changed, and life goes on as it should.

When discussing relationships with their sons and daughters, feelings of regret, and the journey of transformed parenthood, many narrators emphasized that they felt closer to their adult children today than ever before. I asked several parents who expressed regret about parenting a queer son/daughter to reflect on whether there was anything in their memory they would change, something they would have done differently if they could go back to their first conversation with their child. During these discussions, some parents could not hold their tears back. They shared that they were reluctant to revisit the pain they had already worked through. However, for others, reflecting on and verbalizing this pain seemed important. Words that stood out to me came from the mother of a transgender man. She used a powerful metaphor, describing her actions as locking her son in a closet, to describe her initial struggles after learning her child's gender identity. She explained:

I admit, there was a moment when I forbade my son, I don't even know how to put it, to be himself. Looking back, I now realize that, at the time, I locked my son away; I hid him, figuratively locking him in a closet. I just didn't know how to handle it any other way – it was such a shock to me. Do you know what I think about today? If he had spoken to me first, if he had revealed it to me personally, I probably

wouldn't have reacted that way. I was suspicious, overwhelmed by the questions of others, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances. If I'd had some warning, even a week to prepare myself, I think I would have handled it differently. [...] It's like knowing someone's going to strike you; you prepare for it. Today, I remember with pain how he, because of me, had to go back to using the name that wasn't his. He lived with a name he didn't like, which didn't represent who he was. Now, I'm so ashamed. I'm ashamed that he made such a sacrifice for me, that he was forced to carry a name that did not align with his personality. How much time was wasted? How much did it get in his way? I try not to remember that time, it somehow weighs on me. I think about the acceptance I had. But I'd rather forget how I stood in his way; how I made him choose a name all over again. The second time, he couldn't bring himself to pick the same one. [...] I admit, when I was finally confronted with the truth, it was incredibly hard for me to process.

I asked the same parent for a deeper reflection on the circumstances that contributed to her being in that condition. For greater clarity, I asked about what, apart from her acceptance of her son's gender identity, had also contributed to a sense of rejection. Her response turned into a moment of self-reflection on the past, as she told me that she had not previously considered this issue. She then shared with me:

I have not thought about it. Today, I think, do you know what was truly the worst? I believed that I was the only mother in the world facing this situation. I thought I was the only one on earth with this "problem." Strangely, I also believed I was the only mother who had accepted her transgender son as they were. Acceptance is good, but I felt as though I was doing something wrong. [...] Maybe because the environment around me was so harsh, I began to see my right behaviour as wrong. Of course, now I know it was the right thing to accept my son as he was, and so quickly, but back then, I thought I was some sort of idiot mother for accepting my son. It's like looking in a distorted mirror and seeing yourself as ugly, even when you're beautiful. That's how I felt. Later, I met other people [other parents of queer sons/daughters], and

I realized that in situations like ours, we all think we're alone. I think that's why fathers often hide. They hide because they believe they're the only ones going through this, the only ones standing by their child. [...] They fear being ostracized, victimized. But it's not like that. All of us parents love our sons and daughters with all our hearts. We love them, but we're afraid. We don't know how to act or how to express it because we think we're isolated. That's why it's so important for our sons/daughters to find one another [...] and parents too, we need to see that we're not alone.

During one of the interviews, a woman with a lesbian daughter shared that she never had a direct conversation with her daughter about sexual identity, as she came to understand it in an unspoken and natural way. According to this parent, the process of understanding her child's queerness and adapting to the new reality was a long process. She described it as both difficult and easy at the same time. Some parents shared the opposite experience, recalling the specific day when they first spoke with their sons and daughters and learned about their sexual or gender identity. Some of them described the day in detail – describing the room they sat together in, what they and their sons/daughters were wearing, but since those conversations were probably very intimate, they tended to share only fragments of it.

As I write this, I remember one of the women who participated in the study, a parent of a gay man. I remember her because she described in detail the day she spoke with her son, and the self-reflection that followed left an impression on me. During the interview, I asked the mother not only to recount that day but also to verbalize the emotions she experienced while talking to her son. She shared with me:

To be honest, when I first learned about it, I thought, "I wish I could change it." My son was seventeen when he first told me. How can I forget – it was on his birthday [...] when he came out to me. I can't describe what I felt at that moment. I wanted it to be a joke. I didn't want to believe what Giorgi was telling me was true. I so desperately wanted it to be a joke, what I was hearing. It was especially hard because I had just separated from my husband. I hadn't even recovered

from one battle, and now I was stepping into another one. A battle where my son, the most precious thing in my life, was already on the battlefield. On that day, when [...] he told me, the only thing I felt was fear. Oh, how scared I was, you can't imagine. My mind was racing, my God. I thought – he might get killed, might get verbally attacked, or humiliated at school. I thought of all those things I was worried about. I think, maybe I wasn't even listening to what he was saying anymore [laughs]. This worry consumed me entirely.

During the conversation, the parent also began to reflect on how she imagined his life would change after learning about his son's sexual orientation. She emphasized that she felt as though she was losing the sense of peace she had fought so hard to achieve. However, she also noted that from that day on, her life underwent a certain transformation. She reevaluated many of her views on life and, as if for the first time, truly realized that there was no one more valuable to her in this world than her child. The parent shared the following about the change in her life and the loss of peace:

Now I realize that my entire life, all my efforts, and everything I have done and continue to do have been driven by a single goal: to live in peace. When Giorgi revealed to me that he was gay, everything I had built for the sake of my and my children's peace was turned upside down. Looking back, I can say this clearly, but at the time, I only felt it; I couldn't fully understand what it was that I was losing. It turned out to be peace. I was losing peace, I did not want that for me nor for my children. [Throughout my life] I've always had this approach, solve one thing, after another, and feel good about it, but how could I solve this?

All parents frequently brought up the issue of safety when discussing their child's queer identity; in fact, it appeared to be a central concern in their lives. Most parents reported that their son's/daughter's physical safety was, in many cases, the only thing that made them lose their peace of mind. One parent shared:

It's like I have to be vigilant all the time. If I let my guard down, even for a moment, I feel like something terrible will happen, like I'll be blindsided, and someone will harm my son.

During the conversation, some parents shared that they supported their son's/daughter's decision to leave the country, specifically for safety reasons. These parents emphasized that their overwhelming concern for their son's/daughter's physical safety had overshadowed the typical worries most parents have. I asked one mother to elaborate on what those concerns were for her. She explained: "All parents worry about what school they will go to, what job they will get; but I'm in a situation where I think – will my son/daughter survive?"

Creating a sense of security for her son seemed especially significant to one parent. She explained that she did everything in her power to ensure her son had opportunities to travel to various countries in Europe. For her, this was also a deliberate strategy to encourage her son to envision a life in a safe and secure country. The parent believed that her son's safety would, in turn, bring greater peace to her own life. She shared with me:

I remember that, for a time, I frequently encouraged him to go abroad. Looking back now, I think I subconsciously wanted him to leave this environment. I wanted him to be safe. [...] When he travelled to Italy, I kept watching to see if he would notice the rainbow flags waving beautifully in the streets, if he would realize that this was a safe place for him. [...] But when I suggested it a few times, he told me something along the lines – "you want me to leave Georgia so that I won't be here, so I won't cause you trouble or make your life harder." And I realized that, deep down, I was probably urging him to live in a calmer, safer environment, while it would also make my life easier.

When discussing their son's/daughter's queer identities, parents noted that one of the significant challenges they face in coping with this reality, besides their own struggles, is their son's/daughter's limited awareness on topics related to human sexuality. They explained that at no stage in their education did they have the opportunity to learn even the basics about human sexuality and its diverse forms of expression from a qualified professional. In their view, the

information they sought years ago on the Internet was also problematic. Even today, they believe the distinction between valid, scientific information and unscientific, unreliable sources remains unclear. Parents observed that many rely on unscientific information when attempting to better understand their son's or daughter's queerness. While they acknowledge that awareness on these topics has likely improved in recent years, they emphasize that significant challenges persist. Moreover, parents highlighted that queer individuals themselves often struggle to accurately articulate issues related to their identities. This lack of clarity can ultimately hinder meaningful conversations with their parents as well. On the topic of awareness and its critical role in the process of coming out, one parent shared a particularly insightful reflection with me:

Imagine how difficult it is, children feel something, but they don't know what it is; Neither school nor anyone else teaches them about it. Can you imagine how stressful that is? When the outside world tells you terrible things about what you feel inside, but at the same time, you can't even access qualified information. [...] I remember that after my first conversation with [my son/daughter], I googled some terms; I googled "trans," "transgender," "gay," and "lesbian." And do you know what happened? Google only showed me porn sites. There wasn't any reliable information to read. The only things I found in Georgian were poorly written, supposedly academic pieces. I read them, hoping to learn something, but they were absolute nonsense, and I just gave up.

Some parents noted that, years ago, accessing reliable information was only available in English, which posed a significant challenge for them. They also recalled searching not only for information but also for a trusted person with whom they could discuss their child's queer identity and seek help to raise their own awareness. One parent of a transgender son/daughter shared the methods she used to become more informed. She told me:

Unfortunately, I don't speak English. Back then, however, the reliable information that existed was mostly in English. Thankfully, my son's godfather, who lives in France and speaks French fluently, helped me. I called him, and he read everything he could find in French on Google

and translated it for me. He told me everything, how these countries supported transgender women, what the key challenges were, how medications were introduced, and what risks came with them. He explained how a person could achieve the body they wanted to live in.

During the interviews, when discussing their current concerns, parents highlighted the challenges their sons/daughters face in Georgia. As noted in the methodology section, the study included parents of gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals. A significant finding was that, when discussing their concerns, almost all parents indicated that parents' worries probably felt especially intense with having a transgender child. While expressed in different ways, the underlying message was consistent – parents believed that the situation for transgender individuals in Georgia is particularly challenging. They noted that society struggles to accept and adapt to a person's new self, the self in which they feel happy. One parent, who had a lesbian daughter, shared with me:

Transgender girls are probably the most marginalized. They often become victims of severe bullying starting in school. Imagine how difficult it is for these children to focus on learning when everyone is mocking them. For me, all transgender individuals who have managed to achieve something, overcome obstacles, and work miracles to have a profession are heroes. It's unbelievably hard, being constantly victimized yet still refusing to stop fighting; It takes a kind of superhuman strength. I know one transgender girl who had quite a difficult time choosing a profession. She enrolled in a program, dropped out, returned to her studies, and invested an immense amount of effort and resources. She studied, and where can she apply her intelligence? Where can she work? She can't find a path forward. This is why transgender girls often end up on the margins of society, including in sex work. If there's anything we, as a society, should feel ashamed of, it's this. It's a shame for our country. We abandon these individuals; we leave them to God and push them out of our communities. I've also seen how incredibly difficult the transition period is; for the son/daughter and the parent. And then, they have to deal with this environment.

Parents were particularly emotional when recounting the day, they first learned about their child's queer identity. They emphasized that they would never forget it, because of the emotions they experienced on that day. Some parents noted that, on that day, they came face to face with a reality they had long sensed but hadn't fully acknowledged. Others shared that the words their son/daughter shared were completely unexpected.

One parent even shared that learning from their daughter about her lesbian identity was an enormous tragedy for her: "I did not expect it, my world was shattered. It was a massive tragedy, there are no words to describe it."

I remember one parent who, during an interview, reflected on the days following her child's disclosure of their queer identity. She spoke about the specific worries that consumed her during that time and how she ultimately managed to cope with them. I asked her to elaborate on her feelings in those days and to recall what her subsequent conversations with her daughter were like. I also inquired whether her daughter had offered her any advice to help her navigate this reality. The parent shared with me:

You know, when I found out, I felt very bad for a long time, but after three days, I reconnected with my child. I tried to reach out to them, but I was devastated for quite some time. It felt as though the sky had fallen over me, I couldn't tell anyone about it. Then [my child] wrote to me and advised, "I beg you, if you're feeling this way, talk to your closest friend, someone you trust." But I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't speak about this topic. They later suggested that I see a psychologist. At first, I refused, but the idea stayed with me. There was no one in my circle who was lesbian. I had some knowledge, I had read about it, seen things in movies, but I didn't know anyone personally I could talk to and learn from. So, after giving it some thought, I finally decided to go to a psychologist. [...] When I went, I realized I had made the right decision. The psychologist explained to me exactly what stages I was going through. It was then that I understood that this wasn't just happening to me, that I wasn't alone in this experience.

I asked the same parent to describe the stages she went through, which were communicated to them by a psychologist. The parent explained that she experienced three main stages and was able to describe each of them in detail:

I'm not sure how many stages there were. But the first stage was the hardest. At the time, I thought it was completely unimaginable. I kept thinking, this can't be happening to me, it's not real. The second stage was also incredibly difficult. During this stage, I constantly asked myself, why me? Why did this have to happen to me? After that, I reached a stage where I was finally able to breathe. I realized that this wasn't just happening to me, and I began to see that there is nothing a person can't handle. I came to understand that this wasn't a tragedy after all, and that I could get support. I realized that what mattered to me the most was my child's happiness. I wanted her to find her own happiness, and I knew I had to stand by her through it all.

Although I asked mothers about the fathers' or partners' role during this challenging time, many seemed hesitant to reflect on the issue. Some mothers did note, however, that there were instances in our society where fathers accepted their son's/daughter's queerness. Despite this, they argued that fathers often lacked the courage to openly express this acceptance to others. While reflecting on the role of fathers, one woman, now married to her second husband, shared that men often did not take their son's/daughter's sexuality seriously and were preoccupied with addressing other challenges. When I asked her to share insights from both the father's and her partner's perspectives, she explained:

There are fathers who do accept their children as they are, but that's not the whole story. Fathers often struggle to admit openly that they stand by their son/daughter, support them, fearing the criticism and judgment they might face. As a result, the burden often falls on the mother. It seems like mothers, on an instinctive level, feel urged to shield their sons and daughters when they become targets, to protect, replace, or stand alongside them. Fathers, on the other hand, tend to remain on the sidelines. For example, my child's father initially stopped communicating. My son felt an inner need to explain themselves, to

share how far they had to go, and to ask if not just for support, then for recognition; recognition of who he truly was. I don't know where my son got that idea from, that their father would understand that [laughs]. Of course, there are fathers who do understand and stand firmly by their sons and daughters. [...] Take my second husband, for instance, he believes these problems don't exist. He is refusing to confront or engage with the reality.

To better understand the fathers' perspective, I asked one of the mothers to share how she perceived the differences in the support mothers and fathers expressed for their queer sons and daughters. In response, the woman reflected on her experience and compared her perspective with that of her ex-husband:

I'm not trying to brag, but I am braver [than the child's father]. For instance, I've spoken up in certain situations, I don't hide myself as much. I try to connect with queer individuals and other parents like me. He's not like that; he's very closed off. He avoids meeting other people or, for example, reaching out to LGBTQ+ organizations that support queer individuals. He's completely absent from these discussions and has no contact with anyone on these topics. Of course, I'm not saying I'm very strong either. For example, I still can't go public and announce that my daughter is a lesbian because I know the backlash would be overwhelming. But everyone close to me knows about it. [...] I've told everyone because I personally wanted them to know. Just as my daughter didn't want to hide, I suppose I didn't want to hide either.

When discussing the challenges of coming to terms with their child's queer identity, some parents also shared the strategies they used to overcome these difficulties. However, it's worth noting that some parents were unable to recall specific strategies, stating that nothing and no one could help them during that difficult period. They admitted that, initially, instead of coping, they attempted to ignore the issue and continue their lives as if nothing had changed. However, during the interview, they acknowledged that it was a wrong approach, for both them and their sons/daughters. They came to believe that confronting reality was far more beneficial for everyone involved and that hiding from the truth

would not lead to any positive change. One parent shared her thoughts regarding coping strategies:

I remember being in such a state of mind, throwing my fists against the wall and asking, Why me? Why us? I kept questioning what was going to happen with my son/daughter and what was going to happen with me. That was my first emotion, which consumed me entirely. Then, I entered a new stage, where I started to think more meaningful thoughts. One question stood out for me as a mother: What is important to you? The answer was clear: my child's happiness. It wasn't the first time I had thought about that, but at that moment, it became a realization that pulled me out of my despair. It solidified my belief that I could not abandon my son/daughter in their hardship. I couldn't leave them to face their trials alone. [...] How hard it was for them, do you understand? I knew I had to support them. [...] Then darker thoughts came, thoughts about suicide. I worried endlessly, what if I do something wrong? What if my son/daughter is left completely alone and ends up taking their own life? I realized that if I, as a parent, distanced myself from my child, everything could happen. [...] I already knew it when they admitted that, like me, they also had withdrawn and had no contact with others. Imagine, they were left practically alone. On top of that, they were in a foreign country, they were not in Georgia at the time. Then it made me think differently. I don't know what to call it, but I told myself that the most important thing was my child's physical safety. This was the main insight I had in my mind, that I would do anything to protect my child. When this became clear to me, I finally felt calmer as a mother. Because I found a goal; my goal was to protect my child. That was my new, strong sense of purpose.

On the topic of coping strategies, one parent from the countryside shared her experience of caring for flowers, which appeared to have a therapeutic and empowering effect on her. The mother told me:

My husband and I don't really like to talk much to each other. We're both more closed off. When my son/daughter told me about it, I kind of shut myself off from everyone. Besides, there was always a lot of work to do in the village, so I tried to distract myself with that. I liked interacting with flowers. I enjoyed tending to them. This year, I stayed in Tbilisi for two weeks [with my child], and the roses dried up. I was so upset. Now, I'm rooting them myself, growing them... I don't know, maybe flowers won't respond to you, but they're beautiful [laughs]. I've heard people in the village scolding me for standing by my child, but I didn't pay attention to them. Flowers help me calm down. [...] When I sit with my flowers and drink my coffee, and for that moment, my life feels more beautiful.

When reflecting on coping strategies and the challenges of adjusting to a changed reality, one parent communicated a unique situation. The mother of a transgender man shared that she could not think of any specific coping strategies. She explained that her son had children before transitioning, and her concerns extended beyond her son's gender identity to how she could make things easier for her grandchildren. The mother expressed that her situation felt particularly complex, and she struggled to find a way forward. She explained that if one day she was consumed by worry about her son, the next day her concern shifted to her grandchildren. She wondered how she would be able to communicate with them and how she would handle the social pressures they would face. Reflecting on this difficult period, she noted that these memories now give her strength. "It strengthens me to see how much I've been able to overcome," she said. She also recalled:

[...] I neither believed nor accepted it. It was hard for me to come to terms with the fact that I had a son who had previously been a woman and had children. It was quite difficult to even comprehend. The thoughts overwhelmed me. [...] There was a time when I couldn't address her by her [new] name, because she wouldn't accept her old name, and I couldn't bring myself to use the new one. What could I do? I admit that it was a very difficult period for me. [...] I ended up calling her "my child." Another thing that worried me deeply was

that she had children at the time her transition began. I thought a lot about it and offered the adoption of the children. I was afraid; I didn't know how our lives would go on. It was hard, but yesterday, when you called and invited me for this interview, I told my relative about it. Do you know what they said? "You're so strong." And I replied, "I'm not strong, I'm just an ordinary, weak woman." But now that I think, maybe I am a strong woman. I stood by my son to the very end, and I distanced myself from anyone who didn't understand or respect my son. I didn't allow anyone in my life who would harm my son in any way. If that is a sign of strength, then maybe I really am a strong woman after all.

In various sections of the gathered findings, I attempt to present the perspectives of the father involved in the study. However, the transcript of the audio recording of his interview reveals that he either avoided discussing the proposed topics or shared his experiences only in fragments. Interestingly, when discussing his son's queer identity, the father stated that he was able to accept his son but could not justify his son's choice.

To gain a deeper understanding of his perspective, I asked the father to elaborate further so I could better grasp the framework through which he formed his opinion about his son's queer identity. I also asked him to clarify what he meant by "acceptance." He told me:

When he told me, it was a huge shock and initially unacceptable to me. But I didn't push him away, and little by little, I came to accept it. [...] The thing is, I'm a religious person; I go to church, and I believe that a man is born a man, and a woman is born a woman. That's my opinion, and I don't mean to insult anyone, no matter what path others choose. [...] I've never insulted anyone, but for me, as a religious person, this is still something I find unacceptable. [...] Still, he's my son, and I support him in every way. I can't push him away, and I'll never insult anyone else. I don't hate anyone, either, but to be honest, I still don't understand it fully.

The topic of religion and relationships seemed particularly important to the woman living in the countryside. She explained that she avoided discussing her son's identity with the outside world – her husband, relatives, and friends; she believed that she wouldn't receive the proper support from them. Instead, when reflecting on the support she had received, she remembered her relationship with her pastor, saying:

I still avoid talking about my son's issues. I somehow feel that, since they haven't experienced it, they won't understand [my] situation. But I am a religious woman, and I enjoy going to church in the morning. [...] I have discussed these issues with my pastor, and he has helped me a lot. He helps me navigate these difficulties more easily. In a way, he is like a psychologist to me. The pastor has also said that this is my son's decision, and we cannot change it, but we must respect it. He tells me that he is my son and that we should stand by each other.

Reflecting on the period after they learned about their son's/daughter's queer identity, some parents emphasized that society and the state were not supportive of queer individuals or their families. Parents observed that, society was more humane and accepting than state policies, the government often dismissed the challenges faced by queer people as insignificant, and even actively implemented policies that worsened the situation instead of alleviating it. During the conversations, it became apparent that many parents preferred not to speak about state policy. Instead, most expressed faith in society, believing that societal attitudes would shift in the near future, becoming more empathetic towards queer individuals and their families. When I asked some of these parents about the source of their optimism, several struggled to provide an answer. Others suggested that the growing visibility of queer individuals and their families was creating a gradual shift in societal perceptions, creating opportunities for stronger connections among community members.

One parent highlighted the significant difficulty of not having access to qualified psychological support during the initial stages; they pointed out that psychological services in Georgia are extremely expensive. The parent emphasized that a qualified psychologist could play a crucial role in helping parents better

understand themselves and their child's situation. Reflecting on this topic, the parent also shared her experience related to time poverty, saying:

I know very well how valuable a good psychologist or effective group therapy can be. But do you know how much it costs? It's incredibly expensive. In Georgia, I'm part of that class that works nonstop, and I can barely afford it. I work so hard that even when I managed to save enough for a psychologist, I wished for free time then for me to go there. Here, seeing a psychologist is truly a luxury. Insurance doesn't even cover it, how is that possible? I just don't understand.

After learning about their son's/daughter's queer identities, the interview findings revealed that the parents' lives underwent profound transformations. All parents reported a significant reassessment of their values and the discovery of a deep inner strength. One mother described this strength as dormant, saying it was instantly awakened when it came to the safety and protection of her son/daughter. She also shared an important reflection about self-sacrifice and love:

Do you know how strange it was for me to discover such strength? Imagine this: I suddenly told her that I would stand against anything, to not let my son become someone's prey. For me, my son has always been the one person I'd sacrifice my life for, but when he told me [he was queer], I felt this strength even more intensely. For instance, when it comes to love, I love my husband more than my son. [...] It's probably wrong to compare these two kinds of love, but the reason I say this is that I am not, and have never been, as selfless toward him as I am toward my son. [...] My son is, to this day, the only person for whom I would sacrifice myself.

When parents spoke about the difficulty of accepting their son's/daughter's queer identities, they emphasized that what might seem like someone else's pain from a distance turned out to be deeply personal and profoundly painful when experienced up close. They also shared that their immediate surroundings – family members, relatives, or neighbours – reacted differently to their son's/

daughter's gender or sexual identity. Some parents recalled, with heartache, the relationships they had to sever for the sake of their child's psychological well-being. Several parents noted that among those they distanced themselves from were especially dear and beloved relatives.

In earlier sections, where I discussed the forms of support parents needed to understand and cope with their son's/daughter's queer identities, I noted that mothers rarely mentioned the role of fathers – whether former or current partners. They did not often discuss the support they received from these partners or their involvement in rebuilding communication with their son/daughter. Instead, women tended to reflect on the broader role of men in society, often highlighting differing social realities. The following section delves into the dynamics of parents' relationships with society. It explores the challenges parents faced as their relationships with loved ones changed and, conversely, the moments of unconditional support they received during times of need from close friends, family, or even acquaintances.

QUEER SON/DAUGHTER AND COEXISTENCE WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

During the interviews, parents often emphasized the critical importance of support from loved ones, noting that, at times, it was the only thing that helped them cope with their grief and transformed parenthood. They explained that after learning about their son's/daughter's queer identity, their social connections changed significantly. Parents reevaluated their relationships with the outside world and rediscovered people they thought they knew, learning more about their values in the process. This journey, as the parents described, was both empowering and a source of additional anxiety and worry. On one hand, they discovered loved ones who provided unconditional support during an isolating and challenging time. On the other hand, they severed ties with close and cherished individuals, since, as the father involved in the study told me, instead of offering solace, they received judgment from them. When discussing support and communication with relatives, I asked the parents how they thought parents of other queer individuals should approach conversations with trusted people in their lives. I also asked what they believed these conversations would bring. One parent shared with me:

The best way is to be able to speak openly. As a parent, you first need to process and come to terms with the situation yourself. Once you've done that, you can calmly explain and share it with others. You should talk to people who are genuinely willing to listen, those who truly understand you or sincerely want to hear what you have to say. You should reach out to people who will share your pain.

During my conversations with parents about the importance and forms of support, several of them mentioned the psychological safety of queer individuals. From these discussions, it became apparent that while concerns about their son's/daughter's security in society were often focused on physical safety, these concerns shifted when it came to close relationships, and in these contexts, parents tended to frame their worries more in terms of psychological safety. To better understand the concerns expressed in this way, one of the mothers shared with me:

It's a completely different story when you think about your son going out and worry about whether they'll be physically safe, that they'll survive physically, that they'll be okay out there. [...] But now I'm speaking about psychological safety, which you asked me about, it's more about my son/daughter feeling at ease. [...] For example, if I have a guest over, if I invite them, that means I want them to be my guest. [...] That guest should never make my son or me feel uncomfortable. So, what if, let's say, my son is a man who happens to like men? Why should my son feel the need to leave the house or his room just because someone says something rude? I won't allow that. To me, that's what [psychological] safety is. Because if I don't protect that, it will harm my son. And I can't let that happen.

During the interview, while discussing new forms of relationships with the outside world, and social connections, one parent mentioned that after their son/daughter came out as queer, they began to notice other families in their circle of friends whose sons or daughters faced challenges integrating into society. Some parents also shared that they actively sought connections with other parents who could relate to their experiences. However, they also noted a period

of withdrawal, during which they fluctuated between wanting to interact with others and feeling hesitant to do so. When they did feel the desire to reach out, they often sensed a barrier to it. I asked one of the parents what, in her opinion, was holding her back when she wanted to share her feelings with someone but found herself unable to. She reflected:

I'm not sure how to explain it, but I felt like they wouldn't understand me. And that was very important to me, very important, and I was also afraid that someone might dismiss my feelings or try to comfort me in a way that minimized the situation, saying things like, [...] "don't pay attention to others," or "don't listen to that." How could I possibly do that? I'm not a robot. I couldn't just tell everyone, "I don't care about this, I don't care about that." Maybe that's what it was. I was searching for someone who wouldn't downplay my experience would not judge me either, because that would have been absolutely terrifying.

During the interview, the parent, who, as I mentioned earlier in this section, was searching for another parent with similar struggles, shared a story about a friend whose son/daughter had a disability. The parent recalled how her friend also had concerns about her child's condition and the challenges of navigating life in society. She explained that this shared experience created a special connection and similarity between them. She said:

Well, I was looking for someone like me [another parent]. I opened up to them, my friend, because their son/daughter had a disability. They were very worried about their son/daughter, and I was always trying to comfort them, to be there for them. I think when I told them about my son, I wanted to open up to them, but also to show them that they were not alone. In a way, I was comforting them too. I told them, "Here's the situation, my son is gay. Don't cry, just imagine how hard my situation is, and I won't cry either. All mothers have their struggles. I'm struggling, you're struggling, but what can we do about it?" I didn't sugarcoat anything. I told them that as mothers, we had a difficult path ahead.

After sharing this, the parent explained that this was the only friend she had ever confided in about her child's sexual orientation, and it brought her a sense of relief; and apart from that, from that day forward, she felt even closer and more connected to her friend, providing her with a sense of strength during a particularly challenging time in her life.

In general, I would like to note that parents viewed the process of disclosing their child's queerness to relatives as a significant challenge, since they feared the potential reactions of their family members. One parent, a mother whose son is gay, mentioned having a large extended family and a wide circle of acquaintances. Instead of directly disclosing her son's identity to her relatives, she began generally speaking with some of them, particularly her close family members, about queer people's situation and needs. She shared with a smile that she believed she was doing the right thing and was acting in a way as an activist. She said:

I am surrounded by a trillion people. Friends, relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances. Each of them is unique, and I have different impressions of all of them. Some I trust more, some less. For example, I haven't told my relatives about my son's identity. Especially not my colleagues, because I know how they are, or maybe they are not, but I'm probably not ready to tell them directly about my son's queerness. Instead, I've started having conversations with them. I say, "Look, they are just ordinary people. Neither we nor they are any more special than anyone else." I ask, "What would it change for you?" And they usually say that nothing would change. In a way, I feel like I'm preparing the ground, as if I want to prepare myself first, to feel certain and calm, so that when I do tell them, I can trust that they will receive it as they should.

The same parent also shared her experience with her coworkers and remembered:

Besides my relatives, I remember being at work on May 17th. No one reacted that day; we had so much work to do [laughs]. But I said to my coworkers, [...] "Imagine, I'm a lesbian, and I'm coming out on May 17th to defend my rights. Look, I'm a lesbian, and I'm coming out, what's changed for you?" I asked. They said nothing would change. [...]

We've joked so many times about things like this and ended up laughing. For example, how often have we liked some actor, only to later find out he's gay? And what? We accept these stories as normal. But when it comes to people close to us, we oppress them, I've said that. I can't tell you how many times we've had conversations like this. It's how I confront people around me who are a little homophobic.

Some parents who discussed the support they received, or didn't receive from their relatives, noted that they initially believed their close circle to be more homophobic than it actually was. One parent shared that this realization was very unexpected for her. She expressed surprise at discovering that, from the relatives she spoke to about her child's gender identity, she had only received support:

To be honest, I expected harsher reactions. I probably thought less of them than they deserved [laughs]. I meant it as a joke, but they received it in a way I was not expecting. They told me, "Don't worry, times are changing, and we're on your side. We won't let anyone hurt you." We even laughed a little at the time, but later, when I was alone, I felt an overwhelming sense of happiness. It was as if I fell in love with everyone who stood by me. So many people.

The reactions from relatives were unexpectedly supportive for one mother involved in the study. She shared:

A few of my friends and I have a group chat, college friends, and I wrote in there, "well, my son/daughter is transgender," and I posted a long statement [laughs]. I said, "My son/daughter is transgender, and if you have any objections, I don't mind if you stop saying hello to me," along with some other similar remarks. [...] One by one, they all called me on the phone. Seriously, they asked, "What are you saying? Are you okay? Do you think we're dinosaurs living in the Stone Age?" [laughs]. They argued with me, saying, "How can you think of us like that? How can you talk to us like that?" Their support was overwhelming. I had expected rejection, but instead, they said, "If we can be of any help, just call us and tell us what we can do."

For some parents, it seemed particularly significant to share memories of the moment they first decided to reveal their child's queer identity to loved ones. All of those who had this experience emphasized that they had discussed the process with their son/daughter in advance and had their consent. Parents noted that they carefully chose the people in their circle with whom they would dare to discuss this topic. They explained that they decided to confide in those they trusted the most.

One parent shared that the person she trusted the most wasn't necessarily the person she loved the most among her relatives and acquaintances. She expressed this with a sense of heartbreak and went on to recall how she planned to approach her loved ones and the conditions she set for maintaining her usual relationship with them. The mother explained:

From the very beginning, I planned this, while I would lie down, sit, and carefully think it through in my heart – what I would say, and what I would save for later. I weighed everything: who I trusted, who I believed in, and who I trusted less. [...]. When I finally talked to them, I gathered everyone in a room and presented the matter simply. I told them, "Either you remain silent and say nothing, or if you speak, don't say anything against my son." This all took place within my family. It was I who shared it with other members of my family.

I asked the parents I spoke with about their experiences of disclosing their child's gender identity or sexual orientation to loved ones and whether they had received any support that stood out as particularly memorable or unexpected. One parent, the mother of a transgender woman, shared:

To be honest, it was a huge shock for me that my aunt, a ninety-year-old woman, supported me when I first told her about it, but after that, I didn't bring it up with her again. How can I forget that years later, when my son, after his transition, presented herself to her for the first time... Of course, before they met, I tried to prepare her a little, reminding her of what I had told her. When they finally met, her reaction completely shocked me. She said to me, "Why were you hiding this from me, girl?!" Imagine that – my aunt,

a woman of that age, who had survived so many wars. I had assumed it would be difficult for her to accept. But no. I. After that moment, I no longer cared about anyone else's opinion. No one. Her support turned out to be so significant.

Regarding particularly important and memorable support, a mother shared with me the reactions she received from relatives regarding her lesbian daughter's sexual orientation. She told me that the support she received from her own father was something she would never forget. She said:

The most important thing was the support from my father. It was particularly important because my father is a very traditional man, and I was always worried, thinking, what would he say? I remember clearly when my son started smoking cigarettes, he wouldn't even smoke in front of his grandfather. [...]. He would always go out onto the balcony to smoke. I remember once there was a terrible wind, and he stepped outside to smoke. My father followed him and said, "I'd rather you sit inside and smoke into my face than catch a cold" [laughs]. I loved my father so much. His acceptance of the news [about my son's sexual orientation] and how calmly and healthily he reacted, that impacted me the most.

While discussing the importance of support from loved ones, one parent shared that the recognition of her child's queer identity by family members was of utmost importance to both her and her child. She reflected on the support she received from a close family member and how significant it was for her child. The woman recalled:

My aunt was the one whose support made me so happy. She has always been a warm and kind woman. She always says – "Don't worry, just take care of yourself. They [children] will be fine anyway." She even says, "Excessive worry is just false nervousness" [laughs]. Her simple words had such an impact on me. When I heard them, I looked at my son and truly saw how strong he is, how well he knows himself, and how much strength he carries. That support likely gave him even more

confidence. Do you know why I am saying that? Because when you're not oppressed at home, it's much harder for the outside world to oppress you. Oppression begins at home. Since we didn't experience that, we overcame these challenges very effectively.

Discussing the support he received from relatives and friends was particularly significant for the father involved in the study. He emphasized that support is crucial in all difficult situations, describing it as a kind of test of brotherhood. The father explained that, like himself, his circle of friends consisted of individuals connected to religion, with some of his friends even living in a monastery. As a Christian, he acknowledged that discussing his son's gender identity with others would not be easy, but he held onto the hope that one of his friends in the monastery would be understanding. When I asked him to share the reaction he received from his friend, the father recounted:

By the way, his reaction wasn't bad at all. My friend, who has been a close friend of mine for many years, lives in a monastery. I talked to him and told him about it. Even now, we maintain a normal relationship. Occasionally, he gets the name [son's] wrong and then apologizes [laughs]. But the most important thing is that he too accepted my son. It's just that he's known my son since he was a kid, so perhaps he's having a bit of trouble adjusting.

During our conversation, the man emphasized that being the father of a transgender son involved even more challenging experiences. He added that many men might secretly harbour same-sex attractions but choose to hide them; in contrast, he pointed out that a transgender person's identity cannot be hidden, which likely makes the situation even more difficult for both parents and their sons/daughters. As we spoke, I learned that his son's gender identity added an additional layer of complexity to his relationships with others. Curious about this dynamic, I asked if, alongside the support he received, he had also experienced anything from those close to him that led him to sever ties with them. He replied:

Only few chose to leave my life. It was mostly my colleagues, I think. [...] I remember once we attended a funeral, and of course, my son came with me because he knew the person who had passed. My colleagues didn't say a word, not a single comment. But you could see it on their faces. After that, I cut ties with all of them. I walked away without saying anything. [...] From my close circle? I didn't lose anyone. Not a single person.

One of the parents had family members who were closely connected to religion, her sister and, even more so, her niece. She spoke of both with great affection, emphasizing that the support she received from them could never be replaced by the support of others. The parent also shared, as she noted herself, a pivotal moment that transformed her niece's perspective on queer issues:

The central figures in my life during this time are my sister and my niece. My sister, yes, but it was my niece, a deeply religious person, who was very distressed about my daughter's situation, believing what the church taught, that we, as parents who supported our daughter, and our daughter herself, had turned away from the church. As though we were serving something evil. My niece, of course, loved us very much, and this created a deep internal conflict for her. She cried a lot. She did not know how to talk to my daughter, what to say to us, or how to accept the situation. She could not push us away, since our children grew up together, and we are incredibly close. We are one big family. She struggled a lot. As for my sister, I remember the moment when we visited a sexologist together. When the sexologist explained that everything was perfectly normal, my sister started crying, when the doctor said, "What are you doing? They are like this, and you need to understand that this is normal. People like this have always existed and always will." He even joked that we did not need to consult any doctor about that, adding, "You shouldn't behave like this." That single visit profoundly changed my niece's perspective as well. That is how we maintained our bond.

Before planning the interviews, I hadn't considered the possibility of offering parents an opportunity for self-reflection on the topic of hiding their son's/daughter's gender or sexual identity from close relatives and friends. However, several parents brought up this issue, noting that parents should always prioritize their child's interests, but they also believe it is important for parents to consider their own interests as well. They emphasized that disclosing their child's sexual or gender identity to others should be a well-thought-out process, rooted in the goal of strengthening both the parent and the child.

Parents also observed that, in Georgia, gaining support from loved ones can be incredibly challenging, and in some cases, even impossible. Reflecting on this reality, one parent told me: if discussing their child's identity with someone does not bring relief, then it is better to avoid having that conversation at all. She shared her own experience:

This is a difficult issue. Talking to others – it's enough, it's hard for all of us [parents]. [...] Whoever opens up does so to feel relief, to calm down, to find support. But if that support doesn't come, it can destroy the person. It becomes unbearably difficult. Let me share my own example. My mother always says about my Giorgi [son], "When will he get a wife?" Every time she says it, I look at my son's face, worried he might get upset and one day blurt out that he'll never get a wife. But he doesn't respond because my mother is old, and if she were to find out the truth, she'd probably lose her mind, maybe even kill herself. So, neither he nor I believe it's right to start a conflict. Sometimes, the peace you've managed to achieve is far more valuable. That's why, for us, preserving this peace of mind is a priority.

During the interview, one of the parents, while reflecting on the support she received from her relatives, shared, "I should have told my friends—who else? Well, we were similar in that we were almost equally homophobic [laughs]. This [homophobia] wasn't unusual for our generation." The parent explained that for the sake of her child, first she had to confront and overcome her own homophobic attitudes, and then, through open and active conversations with her friends, she tried to help them understand how difficult life is for queer individuals in a homophobic society. She also emphasized the vital role her sister played, not

only in raising awareness about queer issues but also in providing emotional support. She added that her sister's involvement remains invaluable to this day. Reflecting on these experiences, the parent said:

I think that once I had overcome the small amount of homophobia I had, I talked to my friend about it. My friend was even more homophobic than I was, and had a certain intolerance. But I think I helped him overcome it, too. We had endless discussions, day and night, and through those conversations, we realized how little we actually knew. We understood that ignorance was a problem. My sister would help us by sharing what she had read or learned, and we'd talk about it. [...] During tough times, my sister would call me and ask, "Are you okay? Do you stand strong?" She'd tell me I was her determined, almighty sissy. She'd praise me. And it gave me so much strength. From the outside, it might seem like I'm very strong, but I was also breaking in small ways, even falling into despair. There were moments when I was so hopeless that I thought, "Alright, if this doesn't work out, I'll end it all." But then I'd tell myself, "Not today—maybe tomorrow or the day after." But would I have done it? No, because my son needed me. And you know what? I suddenly grew up. I became stronger somehow. There was this certain despair, but then, just as suddenly, there was this empowerment. It came thanks to the people around me, and I'm grateful for that.

During a discussion about the importance of support and supportive relationships with loved ones, a mother of a transgender man shared that almost everyone she loved and cared about stood by her side when she needed them the most. This support was crucial, as coping with her son's transition was an especially challenging time for her. However, she revealed that she struggled to let go of one of her friends, who was unable to accept her son's identity, and often faced criticism instead of support from them. Reflecting on this, the mother shared: "What could I do? [My friend] believed it was wrong for me to help my son through his transition. I supported him during hormone therapy and, when necessary, assisted with surgeries. My friend thought I was making a mistake."

The parent admitted that the lack of support from her friend was painful, but she also felt unable to sever ties with them. She emphasized the importance of preserving relationships with loved ones, saying that if a parent has even a little energy left, they should do everything possible to keep the people they love close. She recalled:

Of course, I had a friend whom I loved very much, but everything related to my son's transition and surgeries was unacceptable to her. She would say all sorts of things. Once she told me that she would send me to a psychiatric hospital for believing my son [laughs]. She claimed my son was manipulating me and even questioned whether my son was right or wrong. These conversations went on for several months. Well, I couldn't give up on this friend, and what I did might make you laugh, I pulled a trick on her [laughs]. I made her read and listened to so many things that made me worry, that in the end, she ended up worrying herself. [...] By the way, after the surgery, she actually took care of my son. When I had to go to work, she stayed by my son's side. She even took care of his stitches; cooked meals for him [...].

All the parents who spoke about the support they received from loved ones mentioned that they had to endure difficult times, not just during a single moment but at multiple stages of their lives. They explained that while they never wanted to sever ties with people in order to protect the safety of their queer son/daughter and themselves, the environment often left them with no other choice. One parent, the mother of a transgender man, shared that she even had to sell her apartment to ensure her son's physical safety because she no longer felt secure in the neighbourhood where she had lived for many years. During the interview, it was evident that parents still found it difficult to recall the experiences tied to the lack of support from relatives or neighbours. One mother, in particular, recalled with sadness the challenges she faced in her relationship with her neighbours. She also shared an insightful observation regarding the societal tendency to place all the blame on women:

You know what I remember most? When my [former] neighbour said to my son, "How is your mother not ashamed of herself? How does she even go out on the street?" To this day, I can't understand how I kept myself together back then, how I didn't completely lose it. Then, another neighbour said, "What kind of mother are you? What kind of son have you raised?" There was a lot of blaming, and I tried to keep my cool. I knew it was a better strategy [...] Do you know what else I think? Women are always the targets of these horrible judgments. Oh, your son/daughter did not eat? The mother is to blame. Does your son/daughter have a virus? Why did the mother let them catch a cold? Society always puts the blame on the mother, and on women in general. Women and mothers are always to blame, and I don't understand why it's like this. I can't explain why women themselves think this way. It was incredibly hard for me, but somehow, I managed to get through it with pride. Today, I'm trying to help other mothers, too, to help them avoid letting so much anger build up in their hearts because, at some point, it becomes overwhelming. I know this because I've been through it myself. That anger settled inside me and accumulated, making things so much harder. My family, my husband, who is still by my side today, gave me strength. My sister, who became like a fearless protector for my son, and protected me too. There were also moments when I, or my sister sat down with some relatives to talk things through. I explained everything to them. Even my aunts and uncles, who are over eighty years old, eventually accepted my situation. They all came to love my son even more, and that gave me the strength.

When discussing the support received from relatives or the lack of it, several parents emphasized that the support of family members and loved ones was especially important. One parent remarked, "The support of an acquaintance can never replace the support of a loved one. Conversely, not receiving support from a loved one is far more painful than, for instance, not receiving it from a neighbour." On the same topic, a mother shared her own challenging experience, after learning about her son's/daughter's queer identity, that was related to separation from her husband. She recalled:

When I talk about acceptance, I must say that this was not the case for my husband. Because of this, I went through very challenging and painful processes with him. I mentioned earlier that I didn't want to discuss these experiences [...] but why am I bringing it up now? It's because his inability to accept our son and stand by them made me feel that, in essence, he had abandoned the family. He was physically present, but emotionally absent.

I couldn't continue living like that. So, I made the decision to end our relationship and live separately with my son/daughter because I couldn't sacrifice my son's well-being. I'm telling the short version of the story, but it was a long and difficult journey; it wasn't a decision made in a single day. In reality, I became both the mother and the father to my son. I took on full responsibility. I didn't share the burden of raising him with their father; I did it all on my own, without his help.

I asked the same parent, whose son is a gay man, to recall the first time she spoke to her son's father and share what prompted her to have that conversation. I had assumed that the mother already knew about her son's sexual orientation, but that wasn't the case. The parent explained that when she first spoke to her ex-husband about their son's sexuality, she didn't know for certain; she only had her suspicions. She recalled:

I didn't know he was gay yet. How can I put it? I felt it more intuitively. [...] I believed that since he was a boy, he might feel more comfortable opening up to his father than to me. Because of this, I shared my thoughts with his father and told him what I suspected. I thought this because, generally, a mother knows her child better than a father. A mother is the one involved in her child's life, keeping an eye on his education, activities, and friends. Somehow, I just felt it. I can't explain why, but it was something I sensed inside.

I told his father that maybe he should talk to him, to pay attention. It was followed by a huge conflict. I didn't expect things to turn out the way they did. After that, I took on the responsibility myself and was left alone with my son. And together we found ourselves facing these responsibilities.

The parent indicated that, although these experiences were part of their past, she still could not forget them. However, she expressed that she felt empowered today and took a certain contentment in herself. Additionally, the parent often mentioned that his son played a significant role in helping her overcome these difficulties. When I asked her to elaborate on the support she received from her son, she shared:

When we started living separately, I went through very severe depressive periods. Of course, my son noticed this; he could sense how I was feeling. But it was my queer son who helped me get through that difficult time. Back then, I didn't have anyone I felt comfortable talking to about my son, even though I wanted to speak. [...] Recognizing this, my son found me a space where other parents of queer individuals gathered to share their experiences. It was a place where we could build connections, and I truly appreciated it. I entered that space with many questions and disagreed with a lot of the answers I heard. But it was a safe and supportive environment that gave me strength and allowed me to meet people who brought something new into my life. I'll admit, at one point, I thought my son's identity was him just following a trend. But I also let go of those foolish thoughts.

I asked the same parent to elaborate on how she now views the experiences she had with other queer individuals:

It was here that I learned about the difficulties that a queer person goes through. At these gatherings, we learned so much and had endless conversations about these issues, about each other's experiences. I can't even put it into words. We got to know each other. We cried and laughed so much. We have had so many hugs as parents.

So many things became clear to us, and this sense of having common experiences was incomparable; it was exactly what I needed at that time. And it was provided by my son.

The findings presented above, gathered from the parents involved in the study, highlight two key aspects: the critical importance of support from loved ones and the challenges parents of queer individuals face in obtaining that support. For these parents, receiving support from loved ones is a vital factor in their empowerment, adaptation to transformed parenthood, and ability to cope with a difficult reality.

The findings also reveal that, in some cases, the absence of support from loved ones forced parents to sever relationships with family members or acquaintances. Parents frequently cited the need to ensure the physical and psychological safety of both them and their children as the primary reason for these decisions. Furthermore, parents emphasized the importance of strategies used for preserving relationships with loved ones wherever possible. One significant observation that emerged from the study was one parent highlighting society's tendency to attach blame to women and mothers.

The next section of this research-based book explores the parents' visions for their future lives. For some, the future appears uncertain, while for others, it is filled with hope. This section still revisits parents' past memories and present experiences, as reflecting on their beliefs about the future often required the parents to engage in self-reflection on their past and present lives.



FUTURE

Before the interview, I had agreed with the parents to divide our conversation into three main parts: discussing their past, present, and attitudes towards the future. Across all interviews, it became evident that parents did not speak extensively about their beliefs or expectations for the future. For some, reflecting on the future seemed challenging; they described their vision as vague, expressing uncertainty about how society might develop.

Several parents acknowledged that the society went through a certain progress, noting that the voices and experiences of queer individuals had become more visible. They also emphasized the critical role parents play in fostering acceptance of queer people. They believed that parents, within their immediate circles, engaged in a form of activism by discussing their children and their situations with relatives, thereby contributing to change.

However, some parents shared that their thoughts about the future often shifted rapidly. A hopeful outlook could easily be replaced by sudden sadness and a sense of hopelessness. One parent reflected:

How can I put it? Sometimes I feel hopeful. I believe that people have grown, become more aware of their [queer people's] struggles, and become more sensitive [...]. But then, in the next moment, I have these overwhelming thoughts, and you know what I imagine? As if my son/daughter has been killed... and I'm giving an interview about it. When I picture this, I feel this incredible strength in me. I'm overwhelmed, and I realize that I will do absolutely anything to protect my child. I won't hold back or spare anyone if I see them causing my son/daughter pain. And as time passes, I feel this strength growing more and more within me.

Discussing the future with parents revealed significant variations in their outlooks. For instance, parents whose son/daughter lived outside Georgia tended to have more optimistic views about the future compared to those whose son/daughter remained in Georgia. This contrast was particularly pronounced among parents of transgender individuals. One mother, living in Georgia with her son/daughter, shared:

Sometimes I feel hopeless [...] and here's why [...]. My daughter needs medicine. Medicine, imagine, is something essential for survival. For staying physically alive. Now, when I think about the future, I'm constantly terrified that my daughter might be left without this medicine. It's devastating, and it hurts even more knowing that my daughter is thinking about this too. Imagine how hard all of this must be for her.

A parent whose transgender son lived abroad, in what she described as a safe country, shared:

My son doesn't live here [in Georgia], but he visits sometimes. When he is here, I feel more anxious. Whenever they go out, it's as if I'm living through it myself. I can't quite explain what I'm experiencing, but I feel like I worry more. Where he lives, being transgender isn't a threat to them. He tells me he feels very safe there. I have not asked him, but I think that when he visits, he doesn't feel safe in our country either. This is a huge problem for me, and I have no hope that the situation will improve anytime soon. But I'm grateful that he does not live here now.

One of the parents, when asked to reflect on her feelings about the future, shared that she was afraid of the future. I encouraged her to elaborate on these fears so I could better represent her perspective in the collection. She explained:

I would say that I have fears [about the future]. And why do I have them? Because I know that my son/daughter is not free. They are not able to be who they want to be or behave the way they truly want to. When a person isn't free and sees someone else who is, someone who can express themselves and live authentically, it's a heavy burden, both on them and on me. When I think about how my son's/daughter's life doesn't conform to someone else's absurd standards, it hurts me today, and I know it will hurt me tomorrow. Because I know how they feel. [...] You know, sometimes I think of my son/daughter as if they have disabilities. Don't get me wrong – I mean that just like people with disabilities who are hindered by an unsupportive environment, it is the same for my son/daughter. And I fear that will be the case in the future as well.

Parents of transgender individuals expressed more concern about the future. One parent explained:

I'm afraid of only one thing, and I've been afraid of it ever since my son took this step and went through the incredibly difficult transition process. I'm terrified that one day he will need to be hospitalized, like any of us might, and when that happens, everyone will know about him immediately. They'll know because the person reflected in his ID [identity card] is entirely different from who he is inside. I'm afraid that if they find out, my son won't be handled by someone understanding. Instead, they might face someone aggressive, and in that situation, I don't know what we are going to do.

When discussing the future, I asked parents to reflect on their desires and how they envisioned their lives unfolding. Most parents, when speaking about their own well-being, emphasized their son's/daughter's well-being, expressing that their future happiness and stability were deeply intertwined with their children's. One parent, who shared that she felt a sense of peace today and had rediscovered herself after separating from her husband, spoke about her hopes for the future:

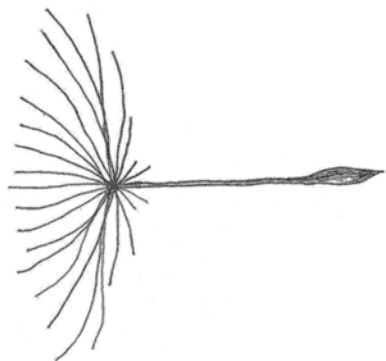
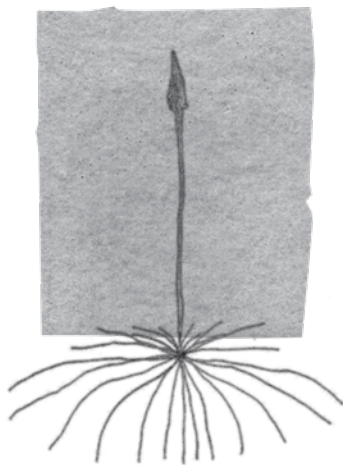
The first thing I want is for my children to be healthy. After that, I want to be healthy and to enjoy life. I want to travel a lot and get rid of these material problems [laughs]. I feel like I've reached an age and been through so much that I deserve all of this. I deserve to live the way people live abroad. That's what I want. I want some good news in my life.

I asked one of the parents, who lived in the countryside with his spouse and adult children, if they had any joint plans for the future. She replied:

To tell you the truth, we don't have any plans. We just want our children, especially [our transgender son/daughter], to be well. [...] My husband says, "Let's go somewhere, leave this village." He believes it's for the child's safety. But I can't leave my village. I can't live without Georgia. My husband thinks we should leave because he believes

that society here won't accept our son/daughter in the future either [...]. He worries they'll make fun of them, and maybe they will. I always try to tell them not to pay attention, and do you know why I do that? Because even if a person behaves perfectly, people will still say something negative about them. That is what I have realized; I don't pay attention to these things anymore. But for my husband, it's different, he cares more, he pays attention. How many times have I cried, how many times have I worried, thinking about why people treat each other this way? [...] Not just transgender people... I remember sending [my child] to school with torn shoes, and classmates laughed at them for it, and I heard about it. I experienced that too. After that, I realized it wasn't worth being upset over. It's like I've learned to stay calm. I don't think our society will change in the future. I don't see anything that tells me it will, but still, I have hope.

The findings revealed that parents' visions of the future varied significantly. The interview process showed that parents spoke less about the future compared to sharing past memories and present experiences. For some, the future appeared vague and was often associated with feelings of hopelessness or fear. Parents frequently emphasized that their own well-being in the future was intertwined with their son's/daughter's well-being, and they rarely reflected on their future lives independently of their children's situations. Despite the challenges faced by both parents and their sons and daughters, some expressed hope for the future. They noted that the voices and experiences of queer people in society were becoming more visible, which was gradually shifting public perceptions in a positive direction. Additionally, some parents highlighted their own efforts in activism within their immediate circles. They explained that the conversations they had with those around them about their son's/daughter's situation and needs helped them see a more hopeful future.



A MESSAGE FROM ONE PARENT TO ANOTHER

This collection of stories aimed to present the experiences of parents of queer individuals – reflecting on their memories, current challenges, coping mechanisms, and visions for the future. In line with the characteristics of the biographical-narrative interview method chosen for the research, it was essential not only to listen to the parents' experiences but also to understand how they evaluated their own lives.

The findings often revealed contrasting perspectives between the parents' lived experiences and their evaluations of those experiences. To better capture and amplify the voices of the parents, their quotes were incorporated throughout the collection.

The final section of the report concludes with the parents' reflections. This approach underscores the multi-layered nature of parenthood experiences and provides an important opportunity for indirect communication and connection between the parents and the reader.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I have a certain feeling that I could have done more with my child. More communication. But now that I reflect on it, I realize that as a parent, I didn't understand how to communicate with my son from the beginning. I had to learn it gradually, along the way. Something held me back, and perhaps I gave up at some point. For example, I can't even remember the last time I spent an hour with my son just talking, not about daily routines, but about each other. Asking how we're doing, what we're feeling, and what we're going through.

There's likely an explanation for this, but I've come to realize that it would have been better if I had gone through that process sooner; it would have benefited both me and my son. Maybe I've deliberately avoided such conversations, maybe I'm even afraid of them. But I know one thing: these conversations always empower us.

To other parents, I would ask: when was the last time you talked to your son/daughter about each other? About struggles, feelings, and emotions? When was the last time you set aside unnecessarily complicated topics and had a conversation without glancing at your phone?

I now see that it's been far too long since I did this. After this interview, I will make it a priority to sit down and have a conversation with my son. Sometimes, we think we understand our adult children and what they're feeling, but the reality is often very different. And sometimes, our children think they know us, but that's not always the case either, it can't be.

There's also a saying: If you don't love yourself, you can't love anyone else. I truly fell in love with myself after I broke up with my husband. It felt as though I had gotten my life back. Then, I was diagnosed with a very serious illness, and in that moment, I thought to myself, maybe this is my time. That illness taught me so much. There's another saying: If you can't save yourself, you can't save anyone else. That's exactly what happened to me. Once, my co-worker told me that you can't raise happy children if they see you being unhappy.

Even though my relationship with her eventually soured, I remain very grateful for those words. It was as if they gave me the push, I needed to start working on myself, to find beauty and happiness in life, and to share that joy with my children.

When I believe I can move mountains, I actually do. Today, I see myself as incredibly strong. I never imagined I had this kind of strength, but I found it.

To other parents: it's hard, but think about it—can't you find that strength, too? I believe we all have it in us, in different ways, but it's there.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I would tell parents, do not sacrifice your sons and daughters for others. Let me say it plainly, you cannot submit your son/daughter to "what will the neighbours say?" You cannot crush your son/daughter at home before life crushes them. You cannot uproot your son/daughter and tear them apart. That is nothing short of a crime.

When we plant a seedling, we prepare the soil, enrich it with fertilizer, and water it. If the seedling is fragile, we tie it to a stick for support to protect it from the wind. And yet, as parents, what are we doing? We take our precious child – our seedling – and we twist it, break it, and then expect it to grow into a strong, towering walnut tree that will bear fruit. Life doesn't work like that. It simply cannot.

I don't know why, but maybe at some point we think we need to be better than our children. We will feel ashamed, and I'm afraid it may be too late by then.

Parents, don't submit your sons and daughters to the public opinion. Stand by them. Don't leave them alone. They are already struggling.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

It's unimaginable to me that anyone could give up on their son/daughter. Truly unimaginable. To me, my son/daughter represents unconditional love. As a parent, I can't comprehend how someone could reject their own flesh and blood. You can show compassion, offer support, and help even to a stranger, then how could a parent turn their back on their own son/daughter? I can't understand that.

To parents, I would say – dare to be happy! Be happy, it does not matter what your son's or daughter's orientation is! Be courageous in your love and do everything in your power to help your children find their own happiness. The essence of life, its very starting point, is to help one another on the path to joy. We bring children into this world for happiness. I'm not sure how to articulate it perfectly, but I know one thing for certain – I didn't bring my children into this world for them to, as some people say, "Bring me a glass of water" or "Open a door for me" in my old age. That was never the reason. I may not know a lot of things for sure, but this, this I know with absolute certainty. For me, the most important thing is for my children to be happy. That's it. That's why I brought them into this world.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

It's hard to put into words what I would say to other parents. But at the very least, I would tell them this: we only live once, and no matter how far technology, science, or progress may take us, we'll never get the chance to live this life, in this world, a second time.

Parents are like rivers, and our children branch off from us. They flow in their own direction, and they will never follow ours. Yet, they originate from us. This new current is fast, strong, and full of fresh life. It's a life and energy that we created, and our role is to follow it till the end.

Every journey is difficult, and it will be no exception. Along this new path, we might find ourselves confused, surprised, or even angry at times. We may question what went wrong, asking – What just happened? Did we hurt each other? How do we reconcile?

But perhaps there was no harm done. Maybe we simply need to talk, to reconnect our thoughts and minds.

A rose is beautiful, but it is not easy to pick—it has thorns. This rose is our child, and as parents, we must embrace it with its thorns. If we reject the thorns, we lose the essence of the rose. I want this rose in its wholeness, not its fragments. If you want the rose, you must also be willing to face the thorns, even if it means getting wounded by them.

Parents, no one forgets the time when our children were within us. It is impossible to erase or uproot this part of our lives—it remains within us always.

Many argue that culture has its own laws. But I ask you to think – what are these laws? Who created them? Do these laws harm others, ruin lives? To me, the absence of love defines such laws—where there is no love, laws like these prevail. When we have children, we must accept them and choose love over imposed rules.

I am proud that I can love. I am a proud mother because I have two of the most precious and strongest children in the world. I saw in them an incredible strength, and they taught me to be stronger in return.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I would tell mothers that this process is incredibly difficult and often it seems it never gets easier. Yes, it seems so, because everyone feels entitled to interfere in your life, leaving you with no room to breathe. I understand parents and the heavy burden we carry. From where I stand today, I simply wish for my adult children to be safe and healthy. That's all I think about now.

I've already gone through the phases of adaptation and coming to terms with reality, and I believe other parents must go through this as well to reach a new stage – one where they can love their grown-up children and accept their lives.

For me, the most important thing today is for my son/daughter to be exactly who they want to be, to live with someone who will bring them happiness. Parents, let's be honest: we all want to look at our children and see joy on their faces. If society or the people around us oppose that happiness, then to me, society's opinions become irrelevant, insignificant, and that has been a case in the past. No one should think that I take this process lightly; no. I consider myself very lucky that my son/daughter has taught me so much. I've asked many questions, and that's something I would encourage other parents – don't shut yourself off, ask questions.

At first, your questions may irritate your children, and they might not even answer you. But this process will lead you to the answers, and it will lead you to a new chapter in life, one where you rediscover both your sons and daughters and yourself. You might even find yourself saying, “God, how much time I wasted worrying about something that was so natural all along.”

To parents who are struggling to accept their sons or daughters, I would ask: why do you think our children deserve less happiness than others?

And to mothers who have just discovered their child’s life, I would say, don’t expect an easy road ahead. But while you walk this path, hold your head up, be proud. I wish someone had told me that.

A MOTHER’S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

Parents, take a moment to look back on your own childhood. Think about it – did you always act in a way that made your mother and father happy? We all make mistakes, don’t we? I’ve reflected on my own youth countless times, remembering mistakes I made and the heartbreak I caused my parents. That’s just life; it’s not easy.

I wish I could offer parents a simple formula to ease their worries, but I can’t. I struggled with it myself. Your child is the most precious thing, and that’s why I couldn’t let go of them. Do you know why I couldn’t? Because I knew they wouldn’t be safe out there. I kept asking myself, “If the environment were safe, would I worry this much?” And the answer was no. I wouldn’t. But it isn’t safe, and since I can’t change that, I try to create safety for my children through my love and accept them as they are.

Everything related to your child’s life is a matter of concern. When I first learned about my child, do you know what I felt? Fear. I was scared; truly scared. And I still am. I always will be. Do you know why? Because I’ve seen how harsh the world can be. I know how difficult life might be for my son/daughter – getting an education, starting a job, spending time with friends, or even just going to the local store. Parents, I can’t promise you that the road ahead will be easy. But by caring for one another, we can save so many.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I have always been aware of the challenges my queer son/daughter would face in our society; a society where all policymakers seem more focused on fuelling aggression and hatred toward queer people. From what I see, this situation is only worsening. So, parents, as painful as it is to say, I prepare yourselves for the fight and the difficult scenarios you may face.

At some point, we must be ready. To do this, we must cultivate the instinct and strength to protect our sons and daughters from harm. Of course, this is not going to be easy, as many of us may not yet feel such strength. But when it comes to our children, when we see the harm being done to their present and future, we discover that strength, unexpectedly. Looking at this today, I can't help but feel that the challenges for us will only intensify in the future. For those of us who stay in this country, we cannot adapt to this reality, but we must face it. It is difficult because the environment often distorts our sense of reality, leaving us confused about what is true. But to find what is real, we must trust our hearts and find the strength that way. Finding that strength becomes easier when we connect with other parents of queer individuals. Shared pain often empowers us, helps us find collective strength. In Georgia, however, this openness can feel almost impossible. We are detached, since the environment is confusing and frightening. But I know the power of connection firsthand. Once, when I was outside Georgia, I attended an event where I met a queer girl, an artist. She was there with her parents – both her mother and father. By that time, I had already been aware, so this didn't surprise me, but it made me happy and somehow empowered me. It was a beautiful scene to witness... It wasn't extraordinary, just some parents supporting their child. I still remember it, it was very empowering. This is why I always say, parents, let us find each other. We need to stand together now, and we will need each other even more in the future.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

What would I say to parents? Honestly, I don't know, when I think about it, I realize there might not be anything I could say. I'm the kind of person who retreats inward, preferring to confront my problems alone. This tendency to withdraw becomes even more pronounced when it comes to the most precious part of my life – my child, and their life, their health, their happiness.

I close myself off to process it alone. I can't always identify what would empower me, let alone what might help someone else. It is not that straightforward for everyone. And the harder the topic, the more difficult it is to find the solutions.

You asked if I could recall anything that had empowered me at some point in my life. Yes, I do remember. Years ago, I met the parents of a queer person, both the mother and the father. What amazed me was how supportive the father was of his child. He stood by them unconditionally, trying to protect them. It was an extraordinary feeling. Even though it happened years ago, somehow the memory empowers me to this day. Fathers have to endure so much pressure from other men, and from their own parents. The kind of pressure fathers endure seems different, heavier in a way.

I wish to hear more fathers speak up. Just like us, they will make mistakes, but I believe that, in the end, we will stand together for our sons and daughters. Why? Because protecting our children is not just a mother's responsibility.

Today I carry my own worries. I go to bed with them and wake up with them. I sit here with them. My greatest concern is that my transgender son/daughter always has access to the medicine they need, and they can continue their life. As for the rest, I'll find a way to manage, I've learned to adapt, I will find my way, find strategies for my battles.

Parents, our children don't ask to be born; we make that choice for them, and once we do, it becomes our responsibility to walk beside them through life. It's strange how the most complex meanings can be captured in such short sentences.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I don't know exactly what I'd say to fathers, except this: speak up. I don't see fathers the way I see mothers. I don't see them where a parent should be when their son/daughter is struggling. If someone has an explanation for this, I'm willing to listen. Maybe, by staying silent, they think they're helping in some way – we, the mothers are ready to hear what they think, maybe we will take that into account. But your son/daughter needs both parents. A mother can't replace a father, and a father can't replace a mother. That's how I understand what it means to stand by your children. I feel myself getting angry as I say this, so I want to pause and return to the main question.

It might sound cliché, but I would tell them to learn to love our sons and daughters not for who we imagined they would be. And be fully involved in their lives. If you don't understand something, ask questions, and share your opinions with them. Don't shut down. When we close ourselves off, they do the same, and that is not healthy.

I've gone through that struggle, but I've learned that asking questions, even having difficult conversations or arguments, can help. My advice is to talk to your sons and daughters in a calm environment. Parents' words always stay with them, even if they don't seem to agree with them. And, in the same way, a parent will also reflect.

My daughter told me, "I hate you. I don't love you." But I knew that wasn't true. Deep down, I believed they loved me. And maybe that's why our children sometimes lash out at us, they love us and since they can't let us go, that's why they yell, they break our hearts. I'm speaking from my own experience.

I'm a refugee, and I live in a dormitory. I've fought so many people to protect my child. There were so many struggles, I've lost count of them. But when I managed to stay calm, my son/daughter always came back to me, hugging me, without words. They have said, "Look, Mom, you were right in this, and I was right in that", and that's what kept us in each other's lives.

When a parent holds on tightly to their son or daughter, no relatives, no neighbours can interfere with it. And fathers, in particular, need to stand firm. I'd tell fathers this: get to know your children. Befriend them. I don't know how men's minds work, but I'm certain of one thing – that friendship between a father and his son/daughter can grow into a deep and extraordinary love.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

I don't know exactly what I would say to parents, but the first question I'd ask is this: Have you ever thought about how long a person can live in a lie? Everything we avoid thinking about, questioning, confronting, or even letting ourselves feel angry about, that's living in a lie. As humans, we hold onto this hope that, we'll find happiness in some other place after death. But our lives are so short. If we spend our time here living in denial, how can we possibly expect to find peace or happiness anywhere else? Why do we go through life without facing the truth, even when it hurts us? When we go to God, we can't ask him "god, why

did you give me this child?" Or even, "God, why did I want such child? I was expecting something different" Over time, I've come to realize that our generation fought so hard just to survive that we left no time to think about anything else. We weren't taught in schools or universities the things we'd actually use in understand life. How good that time is over. I've had time to sit, read on the internet; asking my son, "don't just talk to me all the time; give me something I can read and understand for myself." The truth is, we parents often live locked inside our own little worlds. We don't talk to each other; we don't open up. And yet, parents manage to understand things, some more than others. But if we could truly connect with one another, trust me, we'd be so much stronger. Even now, whoever is reading this—believe me—you're not alone in your struggles. When a person realizes they're not the only one carrying a burden, it gives them courage. It helps them find the strength to love their son/daughter not quietly, but openly and fiercely. It's as if, in sharing our struggles, we find allies. The state does nothing to help these connections among parents, help us to strengthen one another. How many mothers suffer in silence, feeling alone; even when there are others like them nearby? We exist, but can't find the way to each other and yes, that is why we are suffering.

I sympathize the most those who are kept in villages, I feel their pain; our country, our Georgia, is so small. How is it possible that the state hasn't found a way to help parents find one another? A strong citizen builds a strong country. And yet, perhaps that's the issue, perhaps the state doesn't want strong citizens. I don't know how we're supposed to endure this. But parents, I beg you: do everything you can to connect with other parents. We can say to one another the words we most need to hear, the words that will empower us.

A MOTHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

Based on my experience, I have something important to share with parents: take charge of yourself. Find that space, that community, or even just one person, a friend, someone with whom you can fully open up. Even if that openness feels like plain gossip, gossiping about yourself, your thoughts, and the things you don't fully understand or can't explain.

It's difficult for me to suggest turning to a specialist, like a psychologist, because I know most people can't afford it. But I still feel I must emphasize how import-

ant it is the guidance of a well-trained psychologist in our lives. The relationship between a parent and their son/daughter is intertwined. If a psychologist helps me improve my mental health, that change will positively affect my child, too. It's a two-way process. That's why it's so important for us as parents to be strong.

Let's not forget to hug and talk to our children. They didn't ask to be born. At times, we might refuse to support our sons and daughters financially because we're struggling to handle those responsibilities, or we might want to focus on our lives. But the responsibility of care is something we can't abandon, no matter how old our children are. I've often thought – if I don't take care of my child, how can I expect him to one day care for me? I'd feel ashamed and unable to accept it.

Now, as I talk about parents, I have to admit that I usually mean mothers. I rarely see fathers, and I wonder – why? It's not that parenting is easy for mothers but somehow challenging for fathers? Then I wonder: where are the fathers? We need them, too. Because we have responsibilities to society, and these extend to the people around us. We have to find a way to talk to each other. We can't be divided and say, "I won't talk to you because you're homophobic," or "I won't talk to you because you're queer." How can we endure that? Where will it lead us?

I talk to homophobes, and they talk to me. Maybe I've reached a place in my life where I've found the strength to do this. I've even reached a consensus with many. Not everyone who lacks knowledge about queer people is an abuser. Do you know how many questions they have asked? And what I've realized is that many people simply don't know, they need the information that could help them understand and treat these so-called different people right (my son/daughter dislikes the phrase), treat our sons and daughters right. I truly believe that everyone has the strength to start a conversation. I'm just an ordinary woman. If I could do it, believe me, you can too.

A FATHER'S MESSAGE TO OTHER PARENTS

All parents will face challenges with their children. Because some of us lack the knowledge or tools, some are afraid of approaching them; and sometimes, our sons and daughters distance themselves, believing we're against them, even when all we want is to learn with them. As we speak, I am thinking about what I would say to other parents, there's so much I want to say, I find it hard to articulate my thoughts.

What I can't hide, and want to share, is that as a father, I've had moments of aggression toward my child, sometimes very strong. As a man of faith, it was hard for me to reconcile these two things with each other. It took time, perhaps too long, but I realized that my son is still my son, and I needed to let them live, to stand by him, and to protect him.

If I did not do it, I would always worry he would do something that I would regret forever, as a man of faith. To fail him would go against everything I believed in—my Christianity, my moral compass, and my humanity.

Now, I ask only one thing from God – please, protect my son from harm, please let him be happy. From a father's perspective, that's all I can say. It's bitterly hard to overcome these challenges.

When we overcame those challenges, he finally became so attached to me, and I became so attached to him that even his mother was surprised. She would say, "How did you two become such close friends?" I remember hearing her saying to him once, "Your father is a Christian; he won't accept you." And maybe even my wife was surprised by that.

Even now, there are moments when I struggle to accept certain things or find it hard to agree with. But isn't that normal? We don't always agree with each other.

Today, though, I've come to accept my son as a person, as a human being. It feels as if he has forgiven me for all the hurtful things I did.

What would I say to other parents, mothers, and fathers? Honestly, I don't know if I have the right words. But the sooner you overcome the difficult times, the sooner life begins to get better.