



POLICY BRIEF

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Women's Political Empowerment and Georgia's Democratisation: Why is Parliament's Inclusivity Important?

Nino Samkharadze¹

Executive Summary

An inclusive political process is a primary factor in Georgia's Europeanisation. One of the main components of inclusivity is the political empowerment of women and the increasing of their involvement in the decision-making processes. In March 2023, parliamentary discussions on the so-called "Agent's Law" demonstrated positive impacts that can be brought into the political processes by the involvement of female politicians. Therefore, on the path to the European Union, studying and encouraging their role in the working of parliament is important. A number of reforms have been implemented in Georgia that are aimed at strengthening the political participation of women. As a result, the number of female representatives in political institutions has increased. However, this is not enough to ensure that they participate in the decision-making processes: given the polarised political environment and stereotypical views in the country, there are still many challenges that women in parliament face.

This policy brief examines how women's involvement can benefit the country on its path to Europe, what specific challenges face women working in Parliament and what can be done to overcome them. Firstly, this brief assesses women's representation in Parliament. Then it analyses the distinct strengths of women politicians that enable them to contribute to a healthy political process. The next part identifies problems that hinder women in their parliamentary work. Lastly, the policy brief offers recommendations to the relevant actors – the Georgian

¹ Nino samkharadze is a Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics

Parliament, political parties and women politicians in Georgia – that could help overcome these challenges.

Key Words: The Parliament of Georgia, Women Members of the Parliament (MP), Women voters.

Introduction

In Georgia, the political process is defined mainly by radicalised and non-substantive inter-party confrontations, which increasingly distance the country from its European perspective. One of the obvious shortcomings in Georgian politics is that female politicians' views are not influential beyond mainstream politics. Their views exist only formally, and cannot contribute to the formulation of substantive, Inclusive political discourse. Specific topics important for women voters, who represent 52% of the electorate (CEC nd.) are outside the political elites' sphere of interest. Even though several reforms have been implemented to increase women's political participation, tangible mechanisms to enable women to exercise influence over the political processes are weak. This hardly helps when the programme for European integration is already delayed and it is adding to the challenges.

This policy brief tries to analyse the challenges facing female politicians based on the example of women MPs in Georgia; why is it important to strengthen their position for the country's European future and what needs to be done to improve the existing situation. To do so, the work analyses scientific literature, international indexes, public information on the Parliament of Georgia, as well as personal interviews with women MPs from both the majority and the opposition parties.

Women MPs Problematic Path to the Parliamentary Mandate

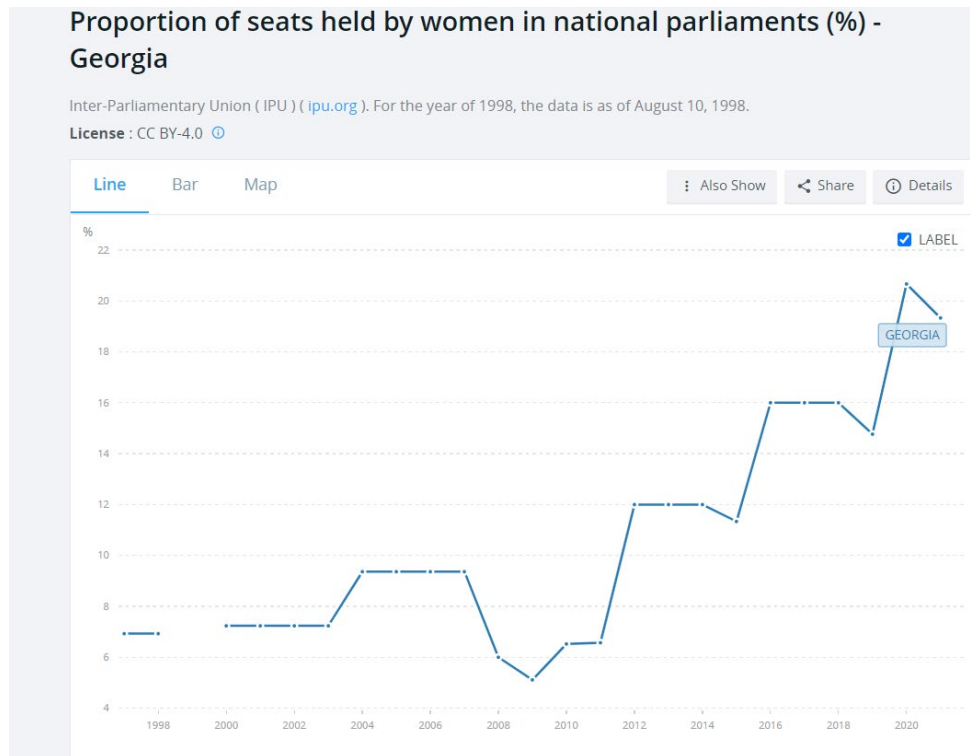
Considering that inclusivity is one of the primary components of a democratic state, analysing women parliamentary representation offers a wider perspective on how close Georgia is to European standards in this regards. Under the government of the Georgian Dream, several reforms have been implemented in this area. As a result, this indicator is increasing (Diagram 1), however, is not necessarily high (18.7%) (კუნჭულია 2022) ².

Under-representation of female MPs is shown in international indicators, such as the 2022 index of the International Inter-Parliamentary Union. According to this Georgia ranks 121 out of 193 countries on the number of women in Parliament (IPU 2022). According to the 2022 gender sensitivity index, Georgia's score is 61.78, which is roughly 7 points lower than the average

² After 2020 Parliamentary elections, several opposition MPs, including 4 women, refused the parliamentary mandate.

indicator of the EU and is a long way from the highest score of 100 (EIGE 2022). Therefore, it is evident that beyond increasing number of female MPs in the Parliament, there are shortcomings in the general context, and it is important to research them to find the answers.

Diagram 1: Proportional indicator of women MPs in the Parliament of the 10th Convocation



Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=GE>

One of the primary challenges could be trust issues towards women among both parties and voters, which is illustrated by the fact that among majoritarian candidate women are under-represented and fewer are elected. The proportion of women on the lists of the party and majoritarian candidates registered for the 2020 Parliamentary elections was 44.30% and 21.84% respectively (PoG 2022). Women members of the current Parliament are elected through the party lists. This may be related to the widespread opinion that traditionally it is hard for female candidates to compete individually against their male counterparts under equal circumstances: traditionally, during the pre-election period, obstacles facing female candidates include women’s weak social-economic stance and their greater attachment to families (Kittilson 2021; Inglehart & Norris 2003). Additionally, in general, females more often become the victims of stereotypes in public attitudes and it is easier to cause them reputational damage, therefore impacting their political activities (Akubardia 2023; Buchukuri 2023; UN Women 2017). All these factors limit women politicians’ accessibility to the political processes, particularly during the pre-election period, which does not help with trust building.

Hence, despite the increasing dynamics for women MPs in the Parliament of Georgia, in the wider context, women are facing problems on parliamentary representation and in their ability to work effectively. Resolving these issues is vital for the country at this crucial stage of European integration.

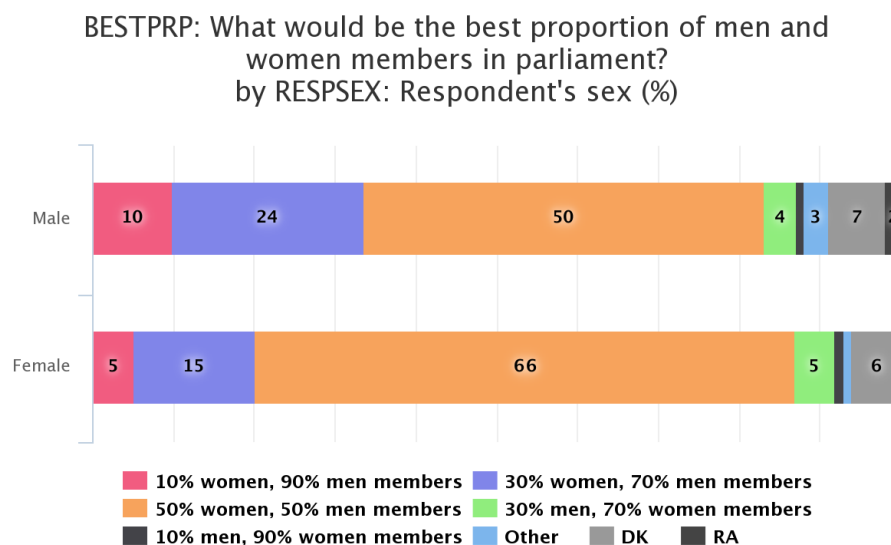
Why Is It Important to Empower Women Politicians in Parliament?

It is considered that empowering women politicians changes the content and the form of politics in positive and constructive ways (O'Brien & Piscopo 2019; Franceschut et al. 2012). Several characteristics distinguish women from men in politics: they express themselves in less radical terms than men and women find it easier to compromise and cooperate on issues, even though they might hold differing political views. In Georgia, women are more well disposed to depolarization and to politics built on cooperation than men, which is evidenced by existing practices in the Parliament of Georgia (Akubardia 2023, Buchukuri 2023).

It is easier for women with differing political views and party affiliations to reach inter-party mobilisation around certain gender sensitive problems, such as sexual harassment or violence (Interpressnews 2023), which may increase loyalty among opponents and expand the cooperation area. There was an interesting case, when women MPs from opposition parties in the Parliament declared support for a member of the ruling party - Tea Tsulukiani - when there was talk of her having problems related to women's rights while dealing with the sport federations (ცქიფურთიშვილი 2022; Buchukuri 2023). Narrow party affiliation was not a hindering factor on this gender-sensitive issue. This case shows that even though there is a high level of damaging polarization in Georgia, work focusing on women's problems and their needs can become a uniting factor in terms of inter party communication, which is an important resource for building a cooperation-based political culture.

Additionally, women can have positive impacts in increasing public trust towards state institutions, which is an important factor in strengthening democracy. There is a stereotypical view that voters rarely consider women to be strong candidates, and this is one of the factors impacting the decision on whether to vote for a woman candidate. According to various research, it is a widely held view that men are better political leaders than women and that in general, politics is a sphere more suitable for men than for women (ბაგრატიას 2020). However, in informal relationships during the campaign, voters may demonstrate more trust towards women politicians (Akubardia 2023). At the same time, more than half of the population (including male voters) think that the number of women in Parliament should increase and equate to the number of male MPs (Diagram 2).

Diagram 2: Public opinion on the proportion of women and men members in the Parliament, December 2022



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Source: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/nd2022ge/BESTPRP-by-RESPSEX/>

Therefore, there are certain requirements and expectations of women, yet, stereotypes and cultural barriers stop them playing a strong and effective part in the parliamentary agenda, which in turn may negatively impact public trust towards Parliament as an institution. Therefore, it is important that women MPs are given realistic opportunities to bring forward substantive discussions in Parliament around topics that are important for voters. This could transform the existing public trust in them into public trust in the institution.

Women MPs can bring issues into the parliamentary agenda that focus on the challenges facing women voters, since female politicians, in general, have a better understanding of such topics. Even if gender-related topics are not a specific sphere of interest for MPs, female MPs pay more attention to the specific needs of women, such as their economic empowerment, increasing women's employment in the police or security institutions, protecting the rights of women living by the occupation line, etc. (Parliament of Georgia n.d.; Akubardia 2023).

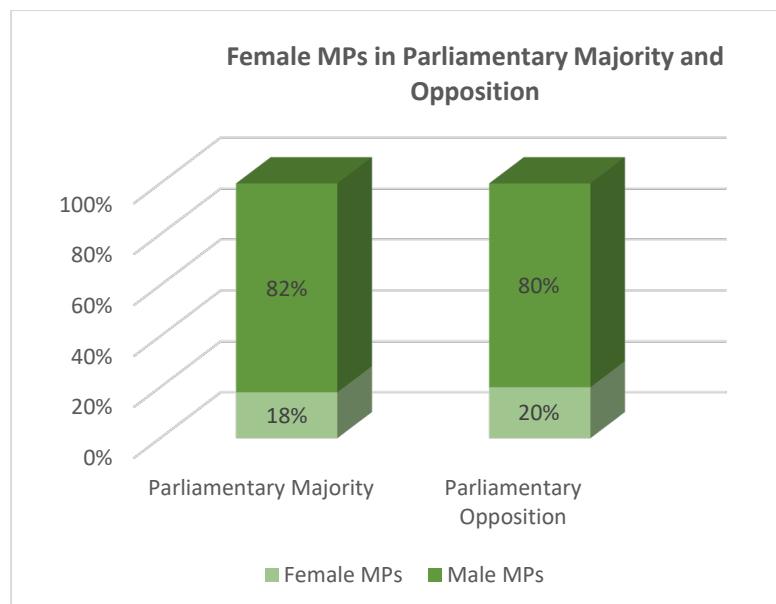
Therefore, female politicians could contribute significantly to the country's democratization, depolarization and in increasing public trust in substantive discussions and state institutions. However, female politicians face numerous institutional or stereotypical problems and without resolving them, getting closer to the Western model of a democratic state seems a remote prospect.

Women MPs and Challenges They Face

Several major problems may be identified when discussing challenges that still impede women from having a positive role in improving the political environment in the country.

The uncompromising polarisation in Georgia causes irreparable damage to the effective work of the opposition MPs, the protecting of their rights in the Parliament and their representation in leading positions. While the share of women is slightly lower in the majority party compared to the opposition (Diagram 3), mathematically the ruling party has more female MPs than the opposition (15 and 11 respectively). There are only two women opposition MPs serving in leading positions on Parliamentary committees, which may point to the fact that female members of the parliamentary opposition parties have even more limited access to power in parliament and their effectiveness may be dependent on the political will of the ruling party.

Diagram 3: Proportional allocation of female MPs in parliamentary majority and opposition parties in the Parliament of 10th Convocation



Source: <https://parliament.ge/parliament-members>

Therefore, while discussing the challenges facing female MPs, we may talk about factors such as gender-specific views and obligations, structural gaps and the issue of political will in the working of parliament.

- *Gender Sensitive Challenges*

Female MPs face challenges such as family obligations, a role which in Georgian society is functionally assigned by gender, and it is considered that women should spend more time than men in caring for the family (ზაგრატი 2020). Therefore, it is much harder for them to manage their time so as to be available to participate in meetings and discussions (Akubardia 2023; Buchukuri 2023; Lashkhi 2023). Very often the Parliamentary processes do not take this into account, thus limiting women's active participation in discussions.

At the same time, the way in which male MPs perceive their female colleagues is often unprofessional: there have been cases in parliamentary sessions when male MPs resorted to physical force, seeking to cut their female opponents out of discussions – for instance by coming into physical contact or aggressively trying to talk over them or voicing gender-motivated stereotypical comments. (ბობინაშვილი 2021). Some male MPs have a perceptibly distorted view of equality towards their female colleagues (Buchukuri 2023), their actions blocking parliamentary processes and preventing professional discussions.

Lastly, female MPs in general are more frequently and easily becoming targets of demonization during elections. Given society's biases in relation to women, disinformation or the spreading of personal or family-related information harms them more than their male colleagues (Akubardia 2023; Buchukuri 2023; Lashkhi 2023). The negative impacts of all this are exacerbated by the radicalised political environment in Georgia where stereotypical or gender-sensitive matters become a tool for political confrontations aimed at neutralising opponents. Often, against the prevailing background of radicalised polarisation, even a high level of solidarity does not help create respect for ethical norms in terms of women's rights (Buchukuri 2023). This is because, despite the common problem, the gap between the women in the Parliamentary majority and opposition parties is wide.

- *Structural Parliamentary Problems*

Besides gender-sensitive topics, it is important to note the structural problems in the Parliament of Georgia, such as the effectiveness of the Gender and Ethics Councils in terms of empowering women, and the existence of political will in this regards.

If we look at some of the gauges of the power of female MPs and their work in the parliamentary councils, we will see that there are no women in the **Ethics Council**, which is a problem. The Ethics Council is the entity that should react on violations of ethical norms with respect to gender. While the Ethics Council is not particularly effective in identifying violations and responding to them (Akubardia 2023; Buchukuri 2023), with its current staffing all 12 members of the council are men- even addressing it may be a pointless exercise (PoG 2021). Therefore, improving this entity and making it more effective is important for empowering female MPs. Yet, frequently, the Council's response to violations is a matter of political will. Besides reorganizing it structurally (ensuring gender balance with staffing, strengthening the mechanisms of responsibilities), it is important that the Ethics Council work is guided by the principle of political impartiality, which does not happen currently (Buchukuri 2023; TIG 2020).

The Gender Equality Council is the primary entity responsible for proposing the main directions of state policy in the gender field and at the same time, ensuring female empowerment in Parliament (PoG 2017). It is noteworthy that the Gender Equality Council is most active among permanent parliamentary councils and its work is, for the most part, assessed positively (TIG 2022a; Akubardia 2023; Lashkhi 2023). The 2022-2024 Action Strategy of the Council lays out several important measures to be implemented: gender analysis of the action plans of Parliamentary Committees, meetings of female MPs in interparty formats and considering international best practice planned within the framework of the community of practice of decision-making women in the Parliaments of Eastern Partnership countries.

Yet, the effectiveness of the Council may be questioned because of several shortcomings. Out of 26 female MPs, 13 are not members of the Council (Parliament of Georgia n.d.). Since the share of female MPs is already small in the Parliament, the absence of half the elected women in the work of the Gender Council raises questions on its work. The fundamental flaw may be the lack of results-orientation in State institutions' responses and of implementation mechanisms for the Council's recommendations (TIG 2022b). Therefore, it is necessary for members of the Council and other entities in Parliament to discuss the re-structuring of the Council so that the contribution of female MPs (even non-members of the Council) is increased. It is also important to start work on ways in which the accountability of other state institutions can be increased by initiating information or consultation platforms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Women's political empowerment could have a significant impact on Georgia's democratisation, particularly at this crucial period of European integration, when Georgia is hoping to receive candidate's status. Disregarding the resources at the disposal of women politicians hinders the resolution of fundamental issues, such as the radicalised political environment, the crisis of public trust in state institutions, insubstantial and narrow political discussions, etc. Female politicians have numerous instruments to bring about positive changes in these regards, which is evidenced by their work in the Parliament of Georgia.

By contrast, stereotypical, gender-sensitive and structural problems are still strong impediments for female MPs, limiting their empowerment. Among the problems are stereotypical perceptions towards women among voters and parties, attachment to family activities and their reputational vulnerability to demonization or other type of damage. Important institutes such as the Ethics and Gender Equality Parliamentary Councils, do not help them to resolve these problems since the councils' effectiveness, particularly that of empowering female opposition MPs, is down to the political will of the majority. In response to this challenge, this paper offers recommendations for Parliament, female MPs and political parties.

Recommendations to the Parliament of Georgia

- **The Parliament of Georgia** must plan and implement measures addressing perceptions of trust, solidarity and equality towards female MPs, to include, for instance, the sharing of international best practices, aiming to familiarise and harmonise with Western standards;
- **The Parliament of Georgia** must establish mechanisms, instruments similar to quotas, and increase the opportunities for female MPs from the Parliamentary Opposition to take various leading positions in parliament and thus be able to present their own agenda more freely;
- Strengthen the response mechanisms of the **Ethics Council** to the violation of gender norms. For this to happen, it is important that additional instruments for monitoring and accountability are established, for instance by inviting representatives of the Public Defender to discuss gender-sensitive violations in Parliament;
- In order to avoid political bias, the **Ethics Council** must be balanced, with non-party professional members (for instance civil society representatives), who will be able to influence the effectiveness of the Council through an advisory council or other type of consultative platform;
- Staff the **Ethics Council** in such a way that there are an adequate number of women represented among its members during decision-making processes;
- Hold discussions in the relevant structures of Parliament (committees and councils) on how to strengthen the control over implementation of **Gender Equality Parliamentary Council** recommendations in the various state institutions;
- **The Gender Equality Parliamentary Council** must establish additional multilateral formats with civil society and research centers for specialised work, sharing information. and deepening competencies that are required for work on gender sensitive matters.

Recommendations for Political Parties

- During pre-election campaigns, parties must try, as much as possible, to attract qualified female politicians to their election lists, ones who will ensure real changes are made in party agendas, programs and pre-election campaigns.
- During pre-election campaigns strategies should be formed to bring forward the strengths and benefits of female politicians to help gain voters' trust;

- Parties that already have women MPs should initiate information campaigns and publicity on “success stories” and this issue should form part of the planning of the 2024 election campaign strategy;
- Parties that already have women MPs must use this resource (committee hearings or other opportunities to request information) to reflect female voters’ needs and find ways to address them in their platforms;
- Strengthen discussion platforms for female members and voters through annual forums, summer schools and camps or research field trips;
- Initiate or declare support for women’s interparty platforms that will contribute to sharing the experience of female politicians, to create a precedent of political work through cooperation;
- Support the establishment of regular, joint consultative platforms with civil society organizations specialising in gender issues and strengthen the work in this area.

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge
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