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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Compendium of Policy Briefs

May 2023

WOMEN IN POLICY-MAKING:
THE ACHILLES HEEL OF
GEORGIAN DEMOCRACY



Georgian diplomat Rusudan Mikeladze, a member of the official Georgian delegation, attending the meeting between the Ottoman Empire and a delegation of the Transcaucasian Seim and government in 1918.

***The cover photo belongs to the descendants of
Rusudan Mikeladze.***

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**WOMEN IN POLICY-MAKING:
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FOREWORD

Political processes in Georgia have seemingly entered an impasse in recent years. Political parties are unable to compete ideologically and substantively, nor can they respond appropriately to the specific needs of various segments of Georgian society. One segment which is often overlooked is that of female voters, which constitute 52% of the total electorate.¹ This issue is especially relevant in anticipation of the 2024 parliamentary elections. More than a year remains before these elections, however it is important for Georgian political parties to make the most of their efforts to offer a solid and issue-oriented agenda to voters and mobilize their support. To properly represent the interests of female voters in the political process, it is vital to work in both directions: to strengthen women's representation in the political elite and in decision-making, to increase the political involvement of female voters, increase research into their specific needs and to develop response mechanisms to those needs.

Today most voters do not consider any political party to represent their own interests, and trust in political parties in the country has been significantly reduced. One of the main reasons for the prolonged political crisis is exactly this. Therefore, researching the specific needs and interests of voters and discussing them publicly should be one of the main activities of political parties, because usually female voters are much more active and motivated to participate in the political

process. According to the recent public opinion polls, women in Georgia are less likely to approve that the country is developing in a right way. They are more critical about the democracy level in Georgia. Also, women have less trust in Georgian political parties.² Therefore, focusing specifically on this part of the electorate is an important task for the improvement of the political process in the country.

For the political elite to respond to women's needs adequately, the role of female politicians and their political activism is crucial. That is why it is important to have active public discussions about strengthening the role of female politicians, the challenges they face, and their empowerment. In this regard, it is also crucial to develop internal democratic structures of political parties to activate the views of female politicians in their own parties and reflect them in party platforms. There is also a need for extensive discussion about how effectively Georgian political parties manage to reach female voters. That is, do they reflect issues important to female voters? This would in turn help parties plan their long-term strategy in the run-up to the election, and specifically during pre-election campaigns. Parliamentary discussions of the "Agents' Law" in March 2023 demonstrated that the active work of female politicians can make positive changes in the political process. Therefore, the discussion on how to strengthen the role of female MPs in the legal process will significantly contribute to

¹ Central Election Commission (2021). Elections 2021. Available at: <https://cesko.ge/ge/archevnebi/2021> Last accessed: 25.04.2023.

² NDI (2023). Taking Georgians' pulse Findings from March 2023 telephone survey. Available at: https://cdn.us1.myspdn.com/atdspd1d6u5cm4j61kro6gh/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NDI-Georgia_March-2023-telephone-poll_Eng_PUBLIC-VERSION_FINAL_03.05.pdf Last accessed: 04.05.2023.

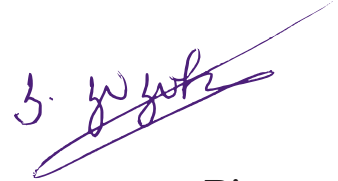
prioritizing the needs of female voters.

The Georgian Institute of Politics is pleased to present a collection of 2023 policy briefs addressing the current and actual political processes, challenges, and prospects in Georgia. We hope that the publication will lead to an interesting discussion in Georgian society. The documents and papers can be used as resources by political parties, as well as civil society representatives, industry experts, the academic community and other stakeholders involved in the democratic development of our country.

This collection, as well as previous publications, could not be published without the support of important institutions operating in Georgia, including the Embassy of the

Switzerland in Georgia. We also express our gratitude to the citizens of Georgia, civil society organizations, and the media for their continuous support of our work, and efforts to develop civil society organizations. Also, we are grateful for their contribution to strengthening the organizational basis of democratic institutions resulting in the development of democratic processes in Georgia.

Dr. KORNELY KAKACHIA



**Director,
Georgian Institute of Politics**

WHAT POLITICAL PREFERENCES DO WOMEN VOTERS HAVE IN GEORGIA?

TEONA ZURABASHVILI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Radical political polarization has significantly decreased public trust towards political parties in Georgia in recent years. This is problematic given the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections. Strengthening political parties, and thus improving democratic competition in the country's political landscape, is of enormous importance. For this to happen, political parties must study various segments of voters and adequately reflect their demands in election platforms and action plans. Female voters constitute one of these important voter segments.

More than half of voters in Georgia are women. Empirical research conducted in consolidated and emerging democracies suggests women voters have different political prefer-

ences compared to men, and therefore have different expectations from political parties. This Policy Brief shows a similar dynamic in Georgia, where, unlike male voters, female voters are more likely to prioritize social and economic issues. However, in addition to social-economic problems, the increasing number of cases of violence against women is also an important issue for women. In conclusion, this Policy Brief offers recommendations for political parties on how to study the preferences of female voters and reflect the issues important to them in their election platforms.

Key Words: women voters, political parties, social-economic challenges, violence against women, women's economic empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Radical and needless confrontation between parties has become the norm of Georgian politics in recent years, eroding voter trust and voters' ability to identify with party platforms. Estrangement between the political parties and the public breaks the democratic mechanism of the political process, which is an additional challenge in the context of the country's democratic backsliding. There is more than a year before the 2024 parliamentary elections and in terms of general voter dissatisfaction, it is clear that the ruling and opposition parties must work on identifying every segment of voters, reflecting their specific needs in party platforms and doing their best to ensure a high level of

public participation in this process.

An important segment of voters that parties may focus on are female voters. Topics relevant for women voters have long remained outside the political elites' sphere of interest, even though women make up 52% of the voter pool. Based on this discussion, the below Policy Brief aims to analyze the issues that are priorities for female voters in Georgia and how political parties may respond to voters' demands to achieve electoral success. To identify the political preferences of female voters in Georgia, this brief analyzes public surveys from 2022 and 2023.

FOCUSING ON WOMEN VOTERS – A PRAGMATIC CHOICE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

According to opinion polls, the number of people that think that the country is developing in the wrong direction has increased (NDI 2022, 2023). At the same time, citizens negatively assess the work of the ruling party and opposition parties (NDI 2022, 2023). Meanwhile, more than half of voters think that none of the parties express their interests (NDI 2022, 2023). In this context, with the 2024 parliamentary elections approaching, the question as to what strategies the political parties will choose to win the vote and what topics will be priorities for them during the campaign planning process become even more relevant.

With more than a year before the elections, the overall dissatisfaction of voters and their estrangement from political parties once again demonstrates the urgency for both the ruling and opposition parties to identify every segment of the electorate, reflect their respective needs in their platforms and present to the public their views of resolving these problems. One approach for political parties to this issue could be to identify potential voter support through a gender prism. In terms of political behavior, studying gender differences is an important research topic

in political science (Duverger 1955, Lipset 1981, Almond and Verba 1963). Based on an analysis of consolidated or developed democracies, it has been empirically proven that women have different political preferences from men and therefore, have different expectations from political parties (Jelen et al, 1994, Norris 2007). Therefore, based on these features, some researchers consider it important to focus on gender cleavages to explain political behavior (Knutsen 2001).

Identifying voter needs and political preferences in the gender prism may be particularly relevant in the context of Georgia. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), more than half (52.3%) of the Georgian electorate are women (CEC 2020). More specifically, prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections, women represented the majority among 30-60 and 61+ age groups (51,9% and 61,34% respectively), while women's share among 18-29 age group was 48.17% (CEC 2020). Therefore, during the pre-election period, focusing on a specific segment of voters and including their issues in the party agenda may be a pragmatic choice for political parties that lack significant public trust.

HOW DO FEMALE VOTERS' POLITICAL PREFERENCES DIFFER FROM THOSE OF MEN?

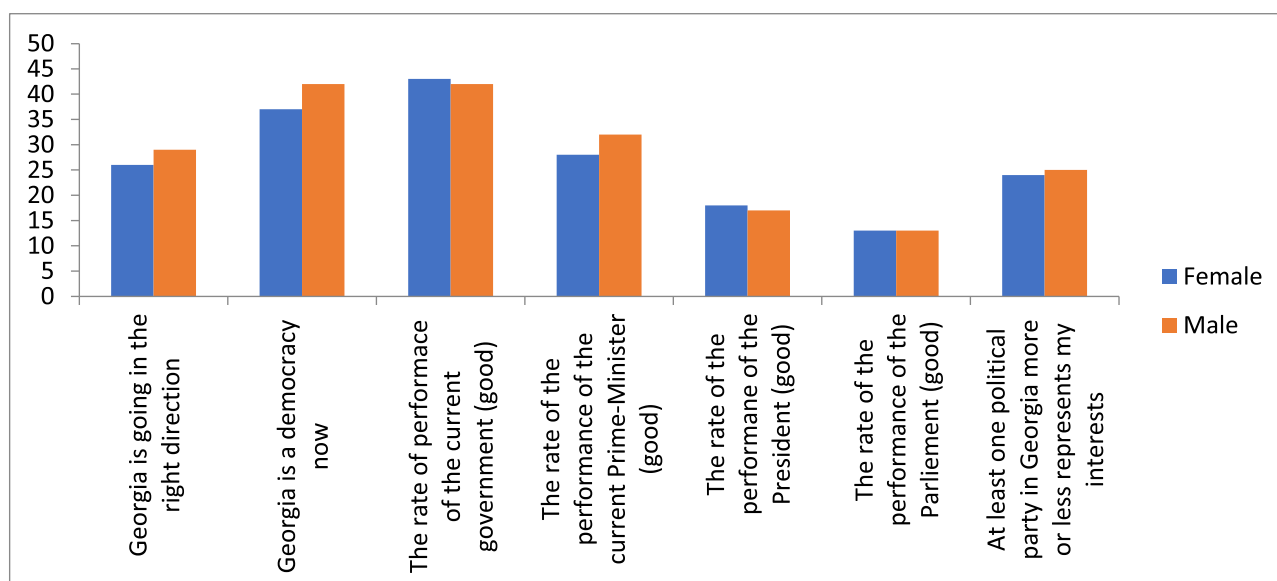
The literature that studies electoral behavior and the interrelationship between the genders and electoral behavior notes that gender difference impacts party affiliation, prioritization of policy issues and voting choice (Inglehart and Norris 2000, Harteveld et al, 2017). One of the factors determining the difference between political preferences among men and women is modernization, which advanced the visibility of women in social, political or economic life. Women's participation in the workforce led to women confronting the power structure and choosing leftist parties over right-wing ones (Inglehart and Norris 2000, Banducci and Karp 2000). Moreover, modernisation saw the entry of more women into the workplace, and thereby advanced issues important to women on the political agenda (Inglehart and Norris 2003). According to gender socialization theory, unlike men, women have a more advanced sense of social harmony and therefore, egalitarian values are more

important to them when making political decisions (Block and Block 1984, Eagly 1987, Johnson and Marini 1998, Gilligan 1982, Costa et al, 2001). Additionally, according to another discourse, social obligations towards families and children traditionally associated with women put more emphasis on healthcare, education and other social issues among their political preferences, unlike men who prioritize economy or justice (Croson and Gneezy 2009, Dalton and Ortegren 2011, Carlsson et al, 2010, Goldsmith et al, 2005).

These normative approaches are also reflected in the gender preferences analysis based on public opinion polls in Georgia.

Even though no radical differences were demonstrated among women and men voters in NDI's March 2023 public attitudes survey, women voters seemed to be more critical while assessing the country's overall situation and political parties (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Assessing country's direction, executive branch and political parties*



Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023.

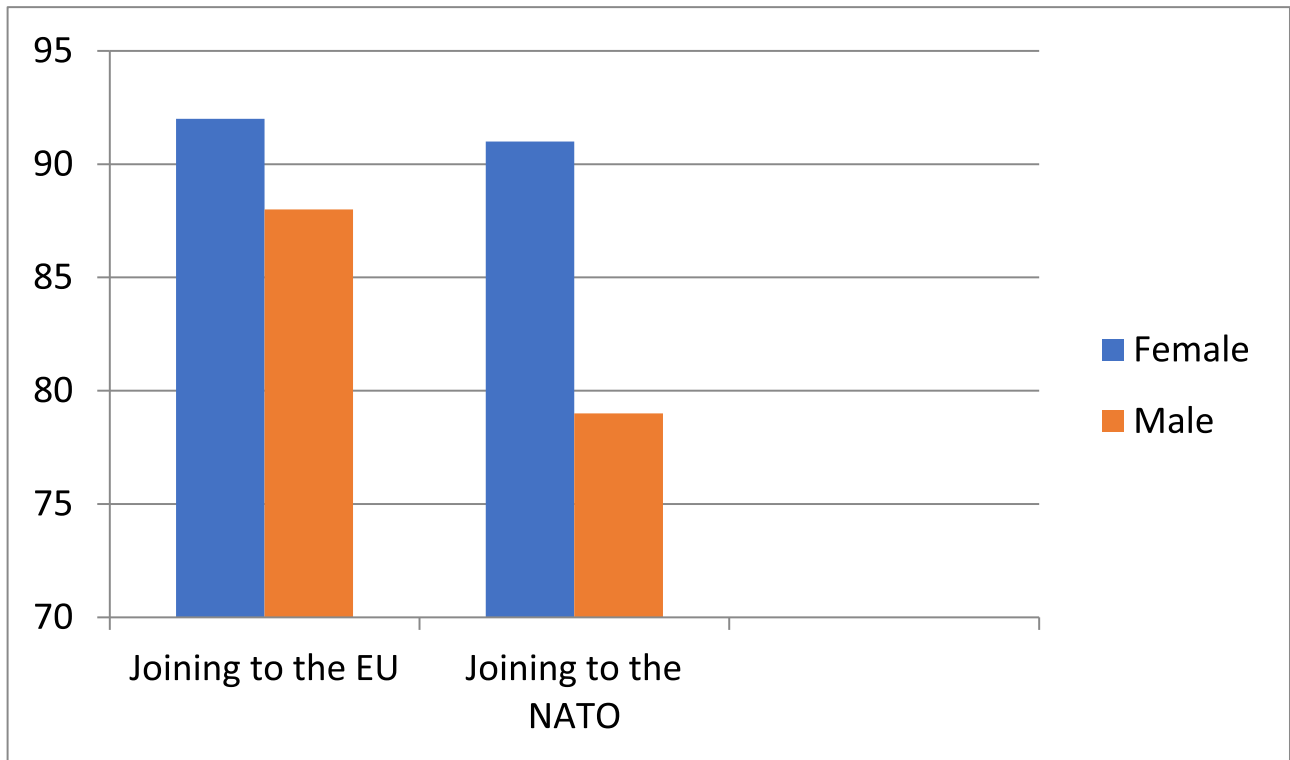
Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/codebook/>

According to the data, 26% of the women surveyed think that the country is developing in the right direction, while only 29% of men share the same opinion. Meanwhile, only 37% of women think that Georgia is currently a democracy, compared to 42% of men. Male and female voters have almost the same assessment of the work of the Government and the President, as well as their proximity to political parties (difference in the gender prism is only 1%). There is a slight difference between male and female voters in the assessment of the Prime Minister's work. 4% less women like the work

of the prime minister than men, whose approval rating is 32%.

There is a slight difference in the gender prism when it comes to the assessment of foreign priorities. In the wider picture, the majority of women and men voters support the Government's stated goal for NATO and EU membership. However, measured in percentages, women's support is higher. 91% of women support Georgian membership in NATO, compared to 79% of men. As for EU membership, the data indicates 92% of women and 88% of men's support.

Figure 2. *Do you approve or disapprove of the Georgian Government's stated goal to join the EU and NATO?*



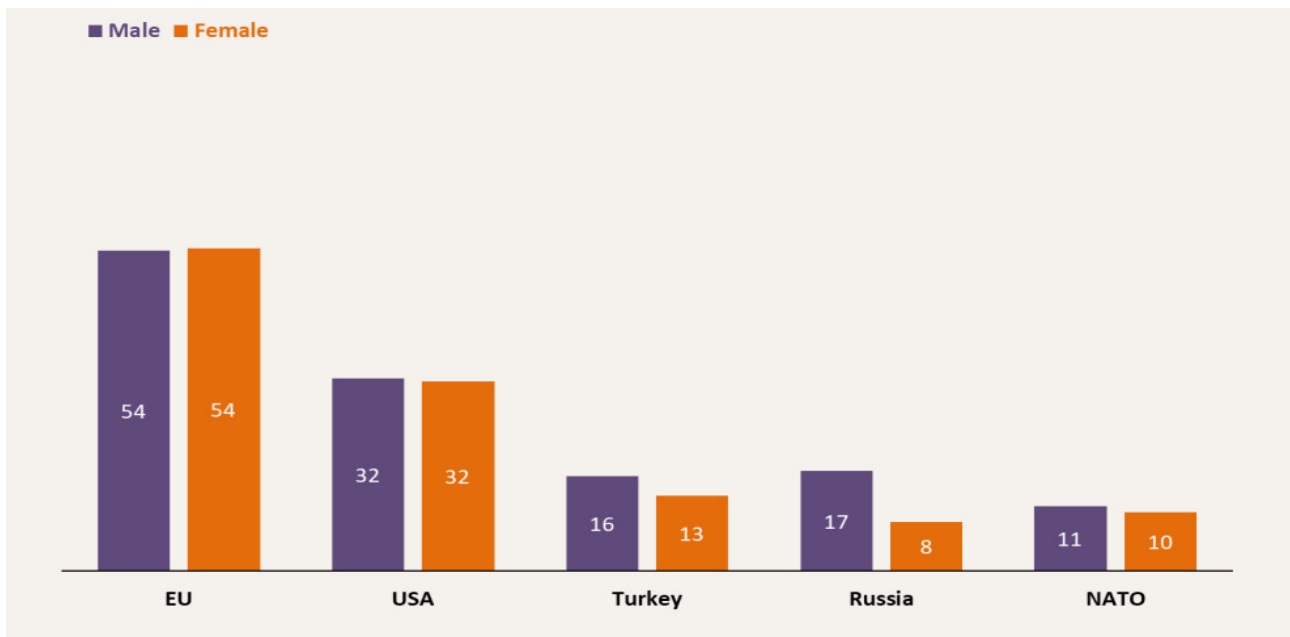
Source: NDI Public Attitudes Survey, March 2023.

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/codebook/>

Meanwhile, more men support closer political cooperation with Russia than women (Figure 3) and more women support lim-

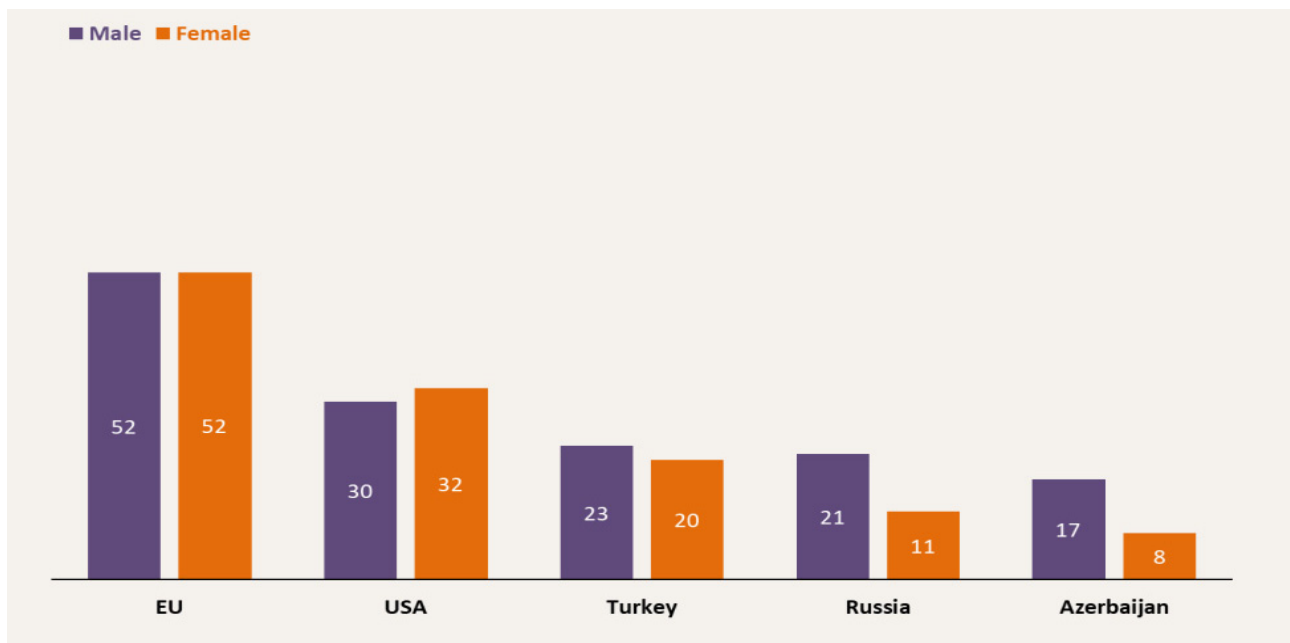
iting economic ties with Russia than men (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Which countries or unions should Georgia have the closest political cooperation? (please, select up to three answers)



Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Geo_PUBLIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf

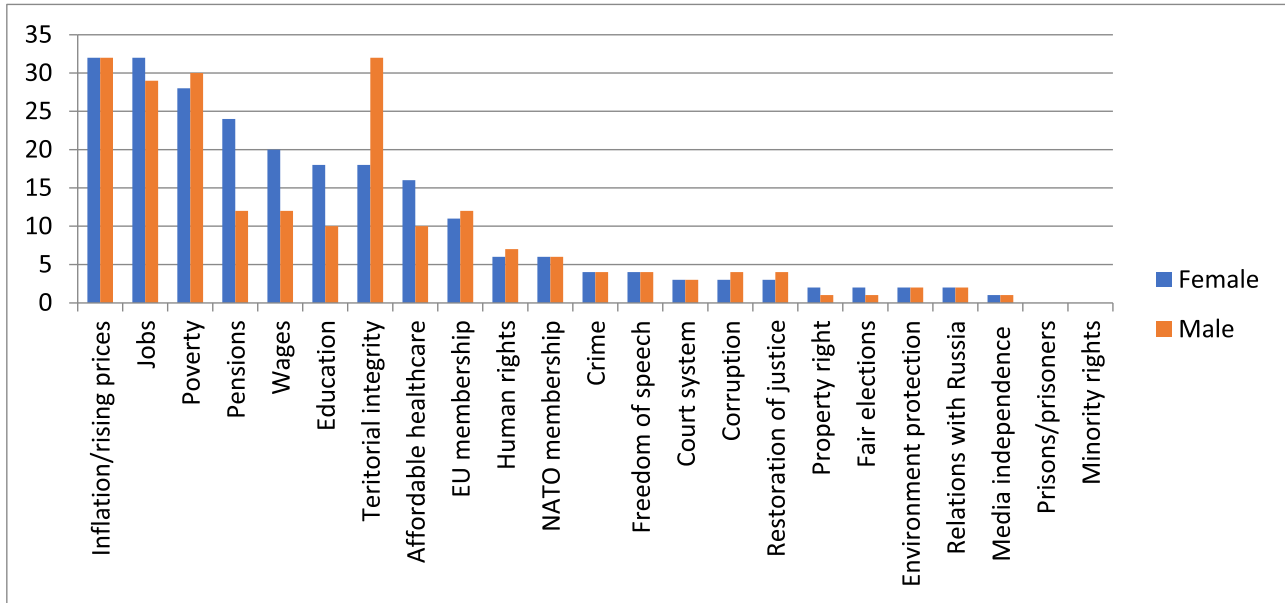
Figure 4. Thinking about Georgia's economic relations with Russia, in your opinion...



Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Geo_PUBLIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf

Differences in gender prism are more visible (Figure 5)
when prioritizing the national level issues

Figure 5. *The most important national level issue*



Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/codebook/>

As the public opinion survey from March 2023 illustrates, inflation/rising costs, unemployment, and poverty are among the top three social issues for female voters. According to the poll, it is also clear that pensions and salaries are among the top five priorities for women. At the same time, education and territorial integrity is of equal importance to them and they placed in women's top priority.

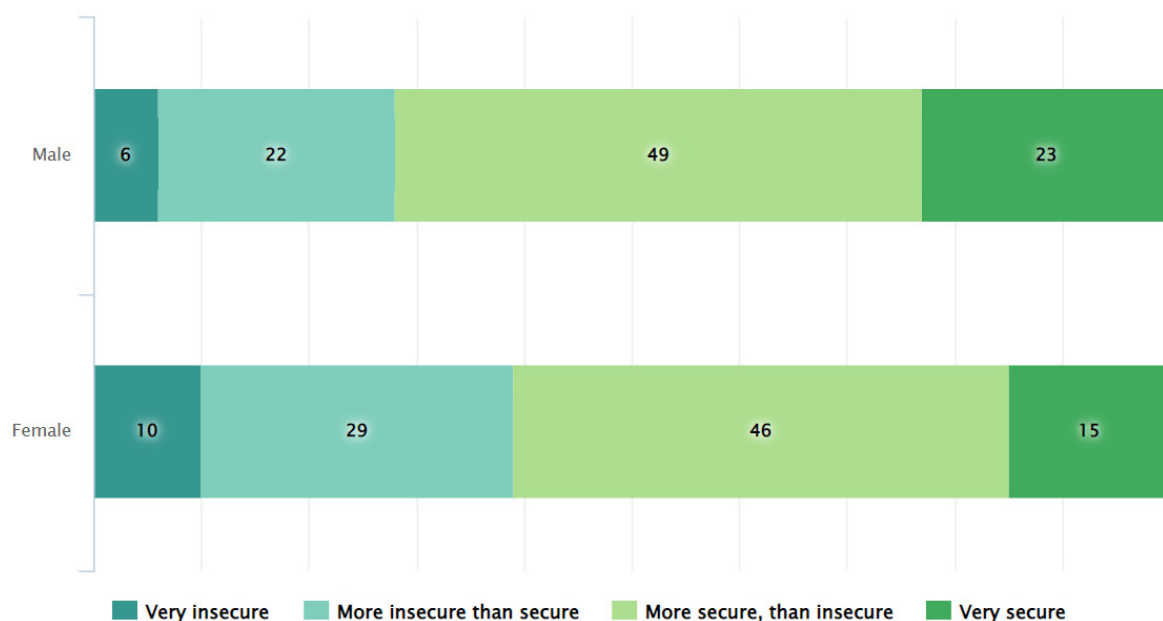
Inflation/increasing costs is also a number one priority for male voters - the same share of men and women voters (32%) names this issue as the main problem. However, unlike women, 32% of male voters consider territorial integrity in the priority list, ahead to

poverty and unemployment. In the case of men, EU membership and salaries are equally important issues, however, being the last of five national-level priorities with a 12% rating.

However, as for the egalitarian values such as freedom of speech, justice system, fair elections, right to property, restoring justice, environmental protection, minority rights and prison conditions come last in the national -level priority list both for men and women voters.

At the same time, the December 2022 NDI poll demonstrates that women feel more insecure in Georgia, than men (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *How safe do you feel in Georgia?*

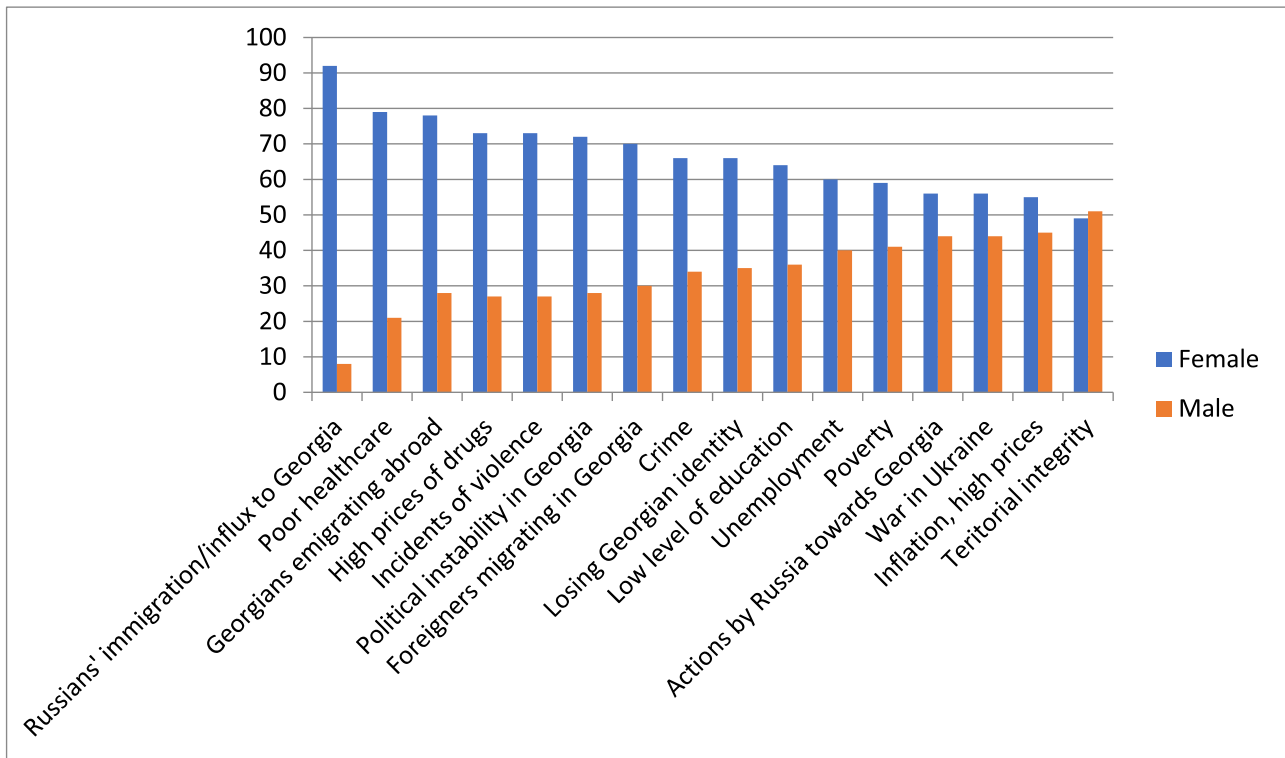


Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, December 2022

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

There is a gender difference in naming the factors that make women and men feel insecure in Georgia (Figure 7)

Figure 7. *What is the most important reason you feel insecure living in Georgia?*



Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, December 2022 wlis

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

For a large share of women, the main reason behind feeling insecure is recent Russian migration to Georgia, low quality healthcare, Georgian immigration, high cost of medicine, cases of violence, political instability in Georgia, foreigners migrating to Georgia, crime, low level of education, unemployment and poverty. The gender difference is less visible with regards to Russia's actions, war in Ukraine and inflation. As for the issue of territorial integrity, it is equally important for men and women (49% of women named territorial integrity as a primary factor for feeling insecure, while the same was true for 51% of men), according to the polls.

To sum up, we may conclude that women are more critical in their assessments of the overall situation in the country and political institutions than men. A larger share of women support Georgian integration into the EU and NATO. It appears more female voters oppose political and economic relations with Russia than men. While prioritizing national level issues, topics such as inflation/rising costs, employment, poverty, salaries, pensions, education, accessible healthcare are dominant issues for women. In addition to social issues, Russians migrating to Georgia, cases of violence and Georgian immigration abroad are among the factors that make women feel insecure.

WHAT PROBLEMS DO WOMEN'S PRIORITIES POINT TO IN THE COUNTRY?

The above analysis of women's political priorities, as gleaned from the results of public surveys, aligns with the proposition that political priorities differ by gender in Georgia. Social and economic priorities identified by women may be directly related to the low-economic development of the country. This is evidenced by a 2022 NDI survey, according to which every fifth questioned citizen is unemployed.

The majority of women say they are unemployed or are housewives (NDI 2022). "Every fifth family does not have enough money to provide food, every second [family] has had cases when they did not have money to cover the bills" (NDI 2022). The majority of the surveyed population spends most of its income on food, bills, medicines and loans (NDI 2022). A fourth of the population in Tbilisi, major cities and minority settlements (including 15% of women) want to leave Georgia (NDI 2022). Also, while discussing the national-level issues poverty is the main reason why the majority of the population feels insecure in the country (NDI 2022).

On the other hand, traditional social obligations towards women put healthcare, education or other social issues into women's political preferences, and this is also confirmed by the case of Georgia. Inflation/rising costs, employment, and poverty are priorities for both genders, yet women attribute more importance to pensions, salaries and education than men do. This factor may be explained by social obligations on the one hand, and by the traditional patriarchal culture on the other hand, that mostly leaves women

without an inheritance or startup capital (ქვეანიშვილი 2021, GDI 2017, არავიაშვილი 2015). Considering the fact that women face more economic hardship, it may be relevant to assume that for women, the education, salaries and later on - pensions might be the only solutions for women to path towards social and economic security.. Based on the example of consolidated democracies, it is impossible to successfully achieve sustainable development goals without gender equality and women's economic empowerment. However, at this stage, there are only donor organizations that work on trying to prioritize women's economic empowerment in Georgia (UN Women 2022), while this issue continues to have secondary importance for political parties.

The fact that gender socialization theory – according to which men, unlike women, have a more advanced sense of social harmony and therefore prioritize egalitarian values while making a political decision – is not confirmed by the public opinion surveys discussed above may be related to poverty (NDI 2023). In this regard, one should consider that economic hardship forces citizens to give less priority to those values that are beyond material needs (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, Lapuente and Charron 2010).

Non-economic issues identified by women which instill insecurity, such as the migration of Russians to Georgia and Georgians immigrating abroad, may also be related to low economic development and poverty. As specialists note, Russian citizens migrating to Georgia has resulted in rising costs in the

country and basic products or services have become less affordable for Georgian citizens (რადიო თავისუფლება 2022). Meanwhile, due to economic hardship and the lack of employment, the indicator of outflowing citizens has significantly increased in recent years (თოფურია 2021).

Besides economic factors, issues such as women feeling insecure due to increasing cases of violence must not be overlooked. Increased risks of sexual harassment and gender-based killings are challenges that directly impact women voters. For instance, , 56 cases of femicide or attempted femicide

were recorded in 2018-2022 out of those, 21 murders took place in 2022 alone (თარხნიშვილი 2022). Despite measures taken by the state, many more changes need to be implemented on the legislative, political and institutional levels to effectively prevent violence against women, something that women have been demanding for years. One of the important priorities is to improve legislation on violence against women; more specifically, to introduce an appropriate definition of rape, which in practice must be implemented by the executive branch (Publika.ge 2022, საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Focusing on delimiting lines in the gender prism is an important approach for political parties to formulate an appropriate political agenda and explain the political behavior patterns of the electorate. However, the radicalized political environment and unsubstantiated and narrow party discussions of recent years drained the political space of citizen-focused policies. In this context, political parties overlook the fact that women voters make up 52% of the electorate, which may have somewhat different and clearly distinctive political preferences. As public opinion polls demonstrate, compared to men, women voters are more critical in their assessment of the situation in the country and the work of political institutions, while more clearly demonstrating support for Georgia's pro-Western course.

When naming national level issues, women prioritize social-economic problems more. While in addition to social-economic issues, women identify Russian migration to Georgia, Georgian immigration and cases of vi-

olence as factors that make them feel more insecure. More in-depth discussion of women's political priorities demonstrate the need for the country's economic development, targeted economic empowerment of women and formulation of state policy preventing violence against women. The analysis offers some form of action plan to the political parties to work on the segment of women voters and identifies the direction to focus on.

Considering that there is not much time left before the 2024 parliamentary elections, it is important that political parties consider the preferences of women voters and reflect them in their political agendas. On the one hand, this approach would demonstrate more compatibility between the interests of women voters, who are more than half of the electorate, and topics brought forward by political parties. It would also be a step forward in increasing the public trust towards political parties. On the other hand, it would contribute to policy-making on substantial matters and would move inter-party

political competition onto a healthier track.

Therefore, based on the analysis of the needs

of women voters, the policy memo offers recommendations for political parties:

Political parties must:

- Pay particular attention to identifying the political preferences of women voters and including their needs in the political agenda in order to achieve electoral success, considering decreasing public trust and the configuration of voters
- Work on a strategic plan to advance issues that are priority for female voters with as much public involvement as possible
- Offer a concrete, measurable plan to overcome poverty and ensure the country's economic development to voters during the pre-election campaign, particularly when poverty is identified as the most important challenge by female women voters
- Ensure a detailed discussion of the plan to reduce unemployment and increasing migration of Georgian citizens abroad while communicating a detailed economic platform to the public
- List women's economic empowerment as one of the priorities while working on the election program, focus on integrating policies aimed at women's empowerment in national and sectoral strategies or action plans
- Provide a programmed response to the extremely important challenge of violence against women and work on the plan to prevent it, which will be implemented at legislative, political and institutional levels
- While working on the election program, focus on a healthcare sectoral program that will be focused on the accessibility of high quality healthcare
- While working on the election program, identify legislative or practical shortcomings in the area of education and present the reform roadmap to the voters
- During the pre-election campaign, present voters a specific plan to address migration from the Russian Federation, which will be implemented at the legislative or political levels
- Present a specific plan to voters during the pre-election campaign to decrease Georgia's economic dependency on Russian Federation

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WOMEN VOTERS IN THE AGENDA OF GEORGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

SHOTA KAKABADZE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As recent elections and ongoing political events have demonstrated, political polarisation and one-party rule remain hindering factors in the country's democratization process. The diversity of the political spectrum and the establishment of a resilient multi-party-political system, in which parties respond to voters' demands, is a deterrent in overcoming the status quo and the building of an inclusive democratic process. In these regards, running an election campaign tailored to specific segments of the voters, and their interests and needs, is of particular importance.

This policy brief examines how much the agendas of the main political parties in

Georgia reflect the interests and needs of the various segments of voters and the extent to which they are able to respond to voters' interests. More specifically, this paper looks at the extent to which these political entities are able to reflect in their agendas the needs of women voters, who represent more than half of the voter pool. To conclude, the policy memo offers recommendations to relevant actors to ensure a more effective response to the challenges and to contribute to strengthening inclusive democracy in Georgia.

Key Words: Women voters, Political Parties, Pre-election Campaign, Inclusive Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The last election, held in October 2021, once again demonstrated the difficult political situation in Georgia. One-party rule at every level of governance, political polarisation and a "monopolised" political space (zurabashvili 2021, 2) remain hindering factors to further democratization of the country. Winning over the hearts of so-called undecided voters, who represent 39% of the electorate according to 2022 December polls (Caucasus Barometer 2022), is essential for overcoming the status quo and contributing to the inclusive democratic processes. Involving this segment of voters more actively in the political processes and bringing them closer to the political parties will help to diversify the political spectrum and the establishment of a resilient multi-party-political system.

In order to increase the number of potential

voters it is important to identify a specific segment of the electorate and formulate an election campaign or strategy tailored to their needs. A strategy of working with women voters – an important segment of the electorate – is noteworthy in this regard. There are issues and challenges relevant for this part of the population, yet they make up a very small part of the political parties' platforms. This does not help to bring voters and party agendas closer to each other.

The 2023 data shows the disparities in society: the average wage for men is about 711 GEL more than that for women (Business Formula 2023); and as shown by the data almost 71% of those receiving pensions are women (Business Media Georgia 2023) thus they make up an important segment of the electorate. Regardless of the reasons the

lower wages for women and their longer life expectancy indicates that voters are not homogeneous. Therefore, the election campaigns of political parties and their strategies or programs should be tailored to women's issues. This would not only help political parties mobilise more voters but could help overcome the differences between Georgian voters and political parties (ბეგრძიძე 2016).

Using the experiences of the 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 local-government election campaigns and programs, this policy brief aims at analysing the extent to which the political parties are able to reach out to this specific segment of voters; it asks to what extent political parties reflect important issues

for women voters and their relevance. More specifically, the work analyses the election programs and campaigns of the five political parties that participated in both the 2020 Parliamentary and 2021 local-government elections (Georgian Dream, United National Movement, Lelo, Strategy the Builder, European Georgia) and to what degree their election agendas reflected the interests and priorities of women voters.

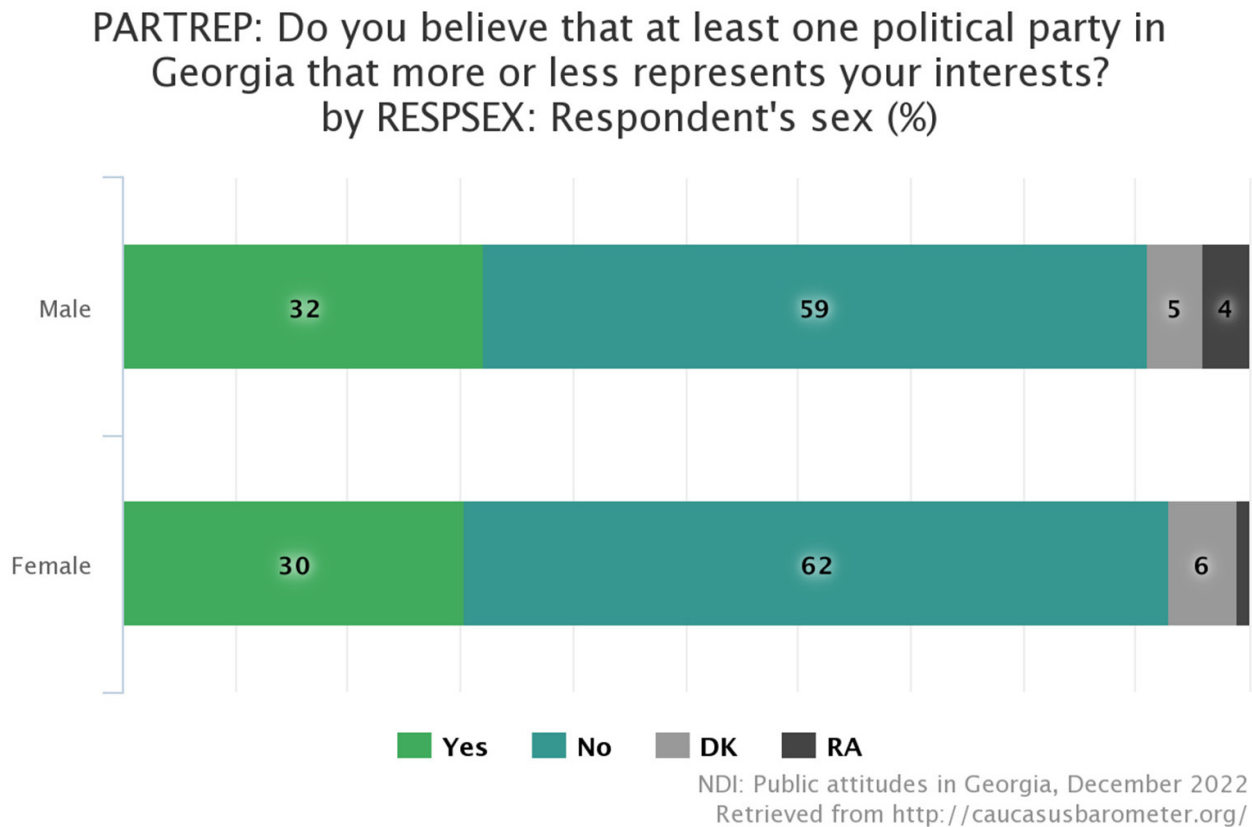
In the conclusion and recommendations, the work also suggests the main strategies the political parties should employ to increase and diversify their voter pool by focusing on women voters.

IDEOLOGICAL FEATURES OF GEORGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Despite their multiplicity, the mainstream political parties in Georgia are mostly uniform in their **ideological views**. The 2020 Parliamentary election analysis demonstrates that the main political party platforms in Georgia are mostly **centrist** on the left-of the conservative economic spectrum, strictly right-wing political actors being un-

common. The centrist parties change their ideological views/positions easily, depending on the political situation. On issues related to healthcare or social welfare, they take a more leftist stance (papava da TevdoraZe 2020). This uniformity in the political spectrum makes it harder for voters to identify with any one of the parties (Figure 1).

Figure 1: by sex – Do you believe at least one party represents your interests in Georgia?



Source: NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022.

Available at <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

The 2022 December data demonstrates that, regardless of gender, an absolute majority of those surveyed **do not see any one of the parties representing their interests**. It is also noteworthy that Georgia is characterised by **elite affective polarisation**, which implies that discussions among the political actors are emotional not substantive. This on its part hinders the growth of voter engagement, as people are not able to identify with any one of the parties (სამხარაძე 2022, 3). The share of the population that is characterized by more or less emotional polarisation

is just a third (სილაგაძე 2023). This points to the fact that undecided voters represent a large but underutilised resource for small political parties.

Therefore, **political parties should analyse the demands and needs of these “estranged” voters**, which requires a segmented approach to the electorate. More specifically, in order for the political parties to attract the “estranged” electorate, it is important to run political campaigns that are inclusive and reflect the interests of various voter groups.

INTERESTS AND NEEDS OF WOMEN VOTERS IN GEORGIA

The universal census of 2014 demonstrated that women represent around 52% (1,940 940) of the entire population (3,713 804) (საქსტატი 2014). According to 2020 Central Elections Commission data, prior to the Parliamentary elections, women voters were in majority in the 30-60 and 61+ age groups (51,9% and 61,34% respectively), while among the 18-29 age group their share was 48,17% (CESKO 2020). Research indicates that in terms of voter participation, men voters are more active, particularly in areas with ethnic minorities. Across the country, the average difference between activity levels among men and women was around 5-6% (Bagratia 2020, 7-8). This points to the fact that there is significant potential and space to increase votes for parties with the right strategies. The existing political polarisation leaves the **issues of women voters**

out of political agendas.

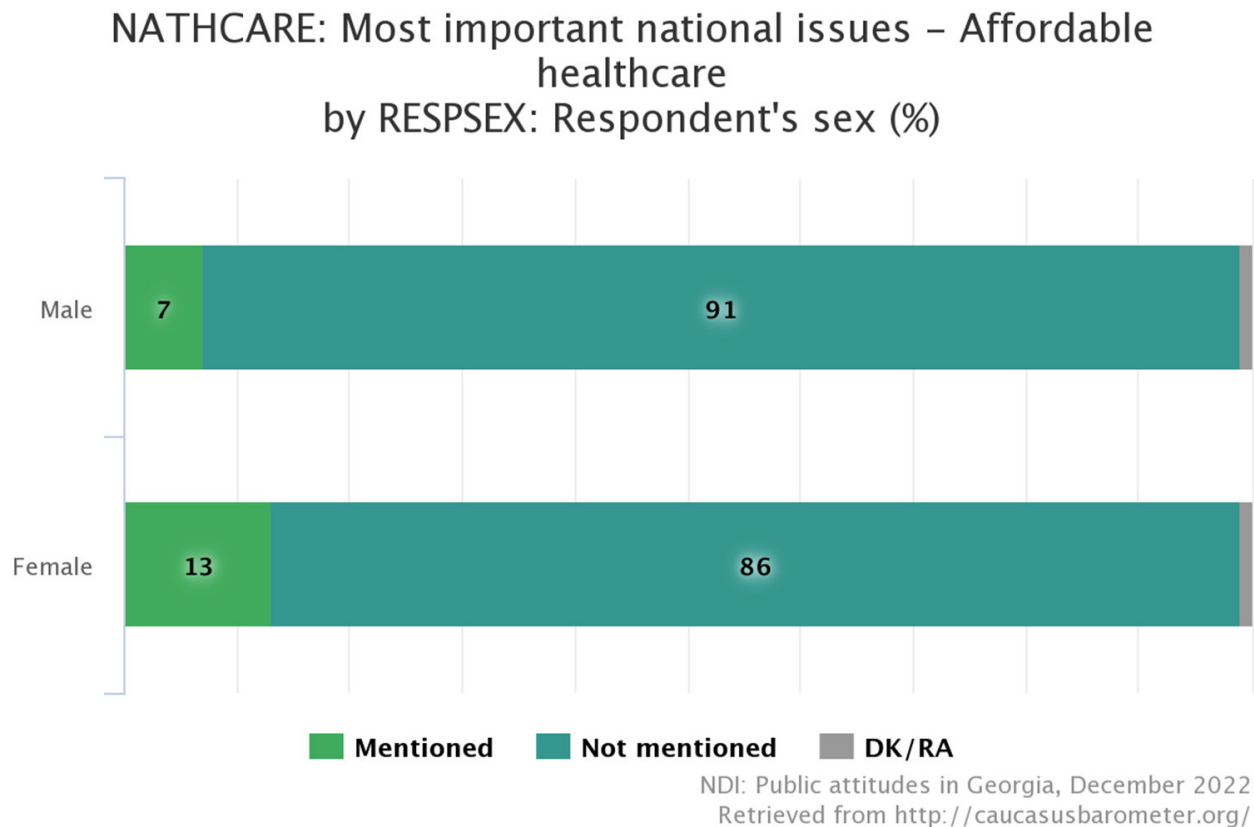
To measure the extent to which political party pre-election agendas reflect women voters' priorities and needs, it is important to determine the interests of this segment of the electorate. As in the 2017 analysis of elections in the UK, this policy brief focuses on three topics and on how they are reflected in party strategies and programmes. These topics are: **policies that are priority for women, political matters that have direct impact on women and policies that are directed towards eradicating gender inequality** (Annesley and Gains 2017). This paper will examine the topics in these areas that are of most interest for women in Georgia and the extent to which they are reflected/considered in party election promises and programmes.

Priority policy supported by Georgian women voters

The December 2022 **opinion polls indicated that opinions of female and male respondents differ, mainly on social issues.** The research demonstrates that for women voters, issues focusing on family values and the future of children play a more important

role in political communication than ideology (ბაგრატიონი 2020, 17-22). The 2022 opinion poll shows, for instance, that 6% more women than men named affordable health-care among the most important issues. (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *by sex – The most important national issue – affordable healthcare*



Source: NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022.

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) data, 15% of women named education as the most important issue for the country, while for men this figure almost halved, at 8%. (Caucasus Barometer 2022). One reason behind this difference may be the fact that, in general, internal family mat-

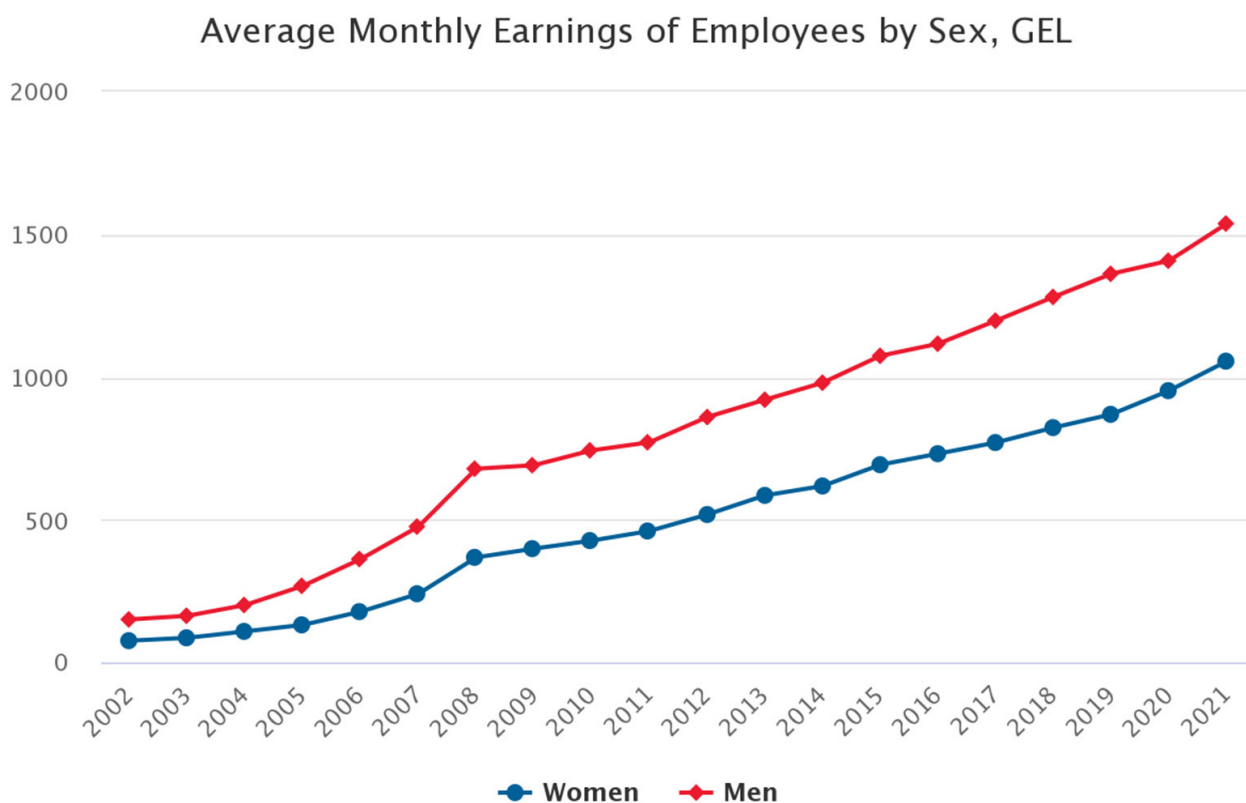
ters related to raising children, education, hospital visits, etc. are women's responsibilities (Bagratia 2020). Therefore, it is mostly this segment of the population that deals with such issues daily – these challenges are priorities for them.

Political issues that have a direct impact on women

There are political issues that directly impact women voters and for that reason are outside the focus of male politicians. For instance, gender inequality remains an important challenge in Georgia in numerous areas. A good illustration of this is the gap between average salaries. According to the

National Statistics Center, during the last two decades the gap between the average monthly pay of women and men employees is steadily increasing (Figure 3), which is an important issue and should not be ignored by political parties.

Figure 3: *Average salary of employees by sex.*



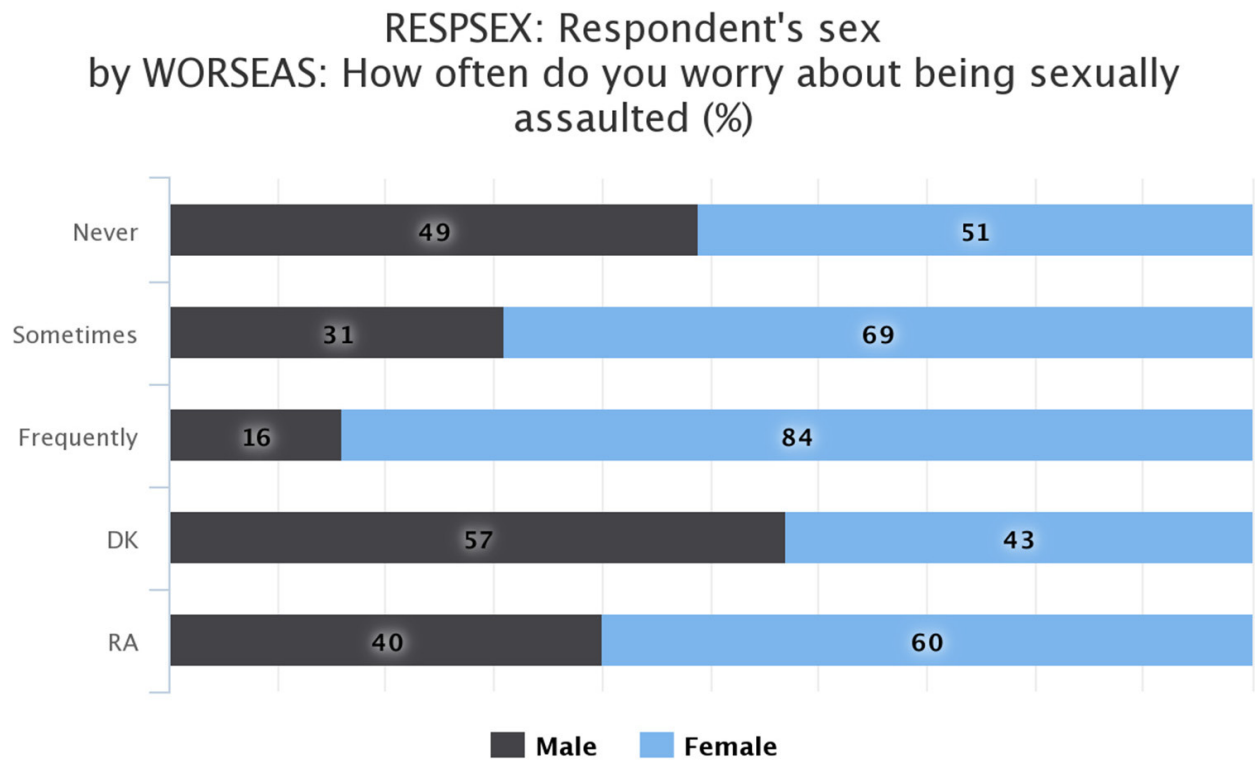
Source: Geostat.

Available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/39/khelfasebi>

Another important issue that has a direct negative impact on women voters is sexual harassment and the increased risks of gender-based homicide. The 2022 NDI polls in-

dicated that among those who sometimes fear sexual attacks, 69% are women, and the number is 84% for those who frequently have that feeling – 84% (Figure 4).

Figure 4: by sex – How often do you worry about the threat of sexual attack.



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

Source: NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022.

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

Purely gender-based homicide or homicide attempts are no less pressing issues.¹ This demonstrates the challenges that are im-

portant for women voters at elections and requires the attention of political parties.

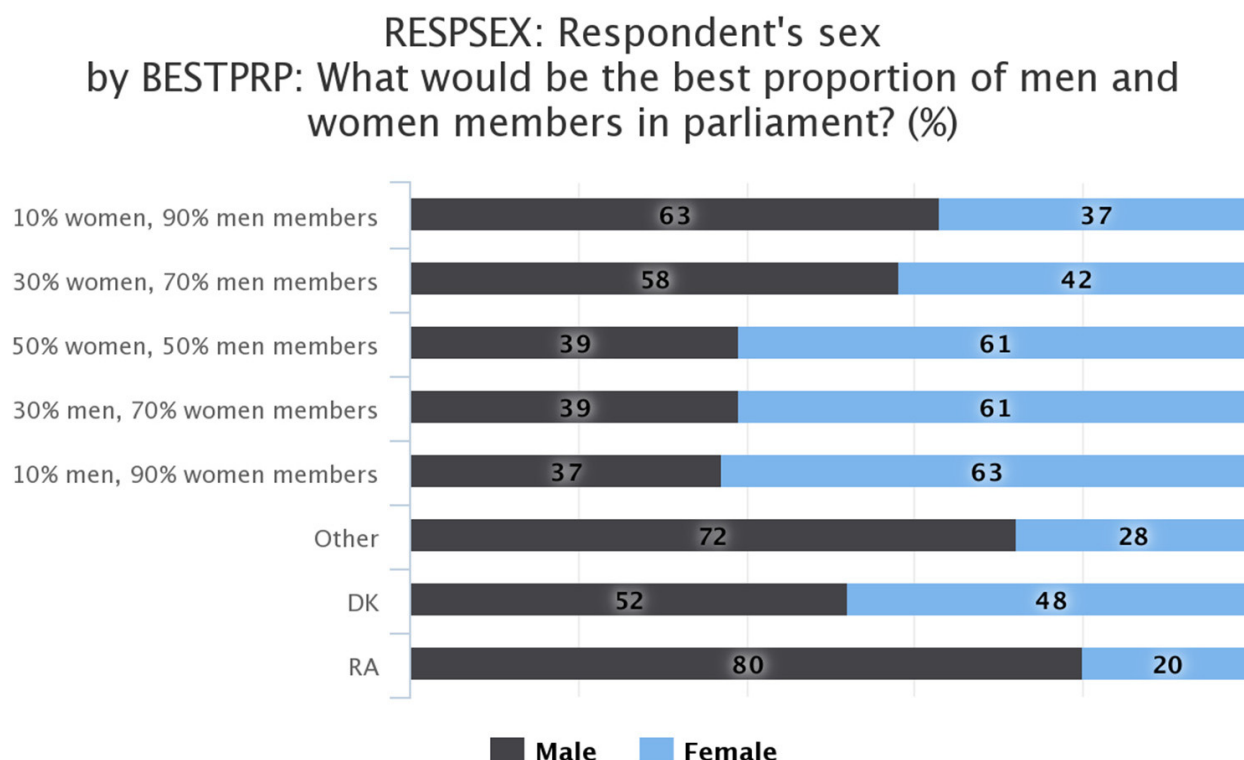
Policies that are directed at eradicating gender inequality

The latest research also demonstrates that increasing representation in the legislative branch is important for women voters. For instance, according to the December 2022

NDI polls, men make up less than half (39%) of those who think the share of women and men Members of the Parliament (MPs) should be equal.(Figure 5).

¹ For instance in 2018-2022, 56 people were killed or there were attempts to kill them, just because they were women (თარხნიშვილი 2022).

Figure 5: by sex – What would be the best proportion of men and women members in the Parliament?



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

Source: NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2022.

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nd2022ge/codebook/>

This data points to the fact that women voters demand that the status quo should be changed to increase their representation, which is an important message for the parties.

To be fair, some measures have already been taken in this regards. For instance, gender quotas were introduced in 2020, requiring political parties to include women in their lists as every fourth member (after 2028 elections – every third). Yet, it is noteworthy that while in the 2016 Parliament women MPs made up quarter of MPs (24.3%) (სოციალური სამართლანობის ცენტრი, 2020), in the 2020 Parliament, women MPs repre-

sent only 19% (taking in the boycotted opposition list and 30 majoritarian MPs).

All this points to the challenges that women face and demonstrate why it is hard for them to advocate their interests or agendas in Georgian politics. For their part, political parties, and particularly the so-called “middle” parties should be interested in working on this segment to get their votes. The demand among women voters for increased representation in the legislative branch creates a space that enables political parties to win more voters and attract the so-called “undecided”-voter share of the electorate.

TOPICS INTERESTING TO WOMEN VOTERS IN POLITICAL PARTIES' PLATFORMS

The 2020 and 2021 election programme analysis of the political parties demonstrates that most of the parties do not have a separate chapter for challenges to women voters, and that their strategies and programmes on how these issues need to be addressed are very general and often superficial.

It should also be noted that the 2021 local elections were held in a more tense environment than the Parliamentary elections. On the one hand, the opposition viewed it as a referendum, which further destabilised the political agenda and made the political party platforms or promises focusing on social and economic issues look irrelevant/secondary (კვაშილავა 2021).

For instance, the issue of encouraging and strengthening women's political participation is generally noted in 2020 programs, stating that they encourage "women's participation not only in party activities or decision-making process", but they also support "the engagement of more women in the country's political process" (partiebi.ge 2020). It is also noteworthy that European Georgia is against gender quotas (იკითხე პოლიტიკა 2020). The pre-election platform of Lelo was a lot more specific in this regard and included plans, such as appointing women to at least 40% of the state/high-level positions or introducing gender-balanced HR policies in the civil service (partiebi.ge 2020). Yet, no specific support from women voters was evident among Lelo voters, which may be explained by the fact that

there was no pre-election campaign specifically targeting them.

The election program of the ruling party is also general in this regard. More specifically, its program notes "the support of women's participation on the job market for gender equality through legislative initiatives and other programs" (ქართული ოცნება — დემოკრატიული საქართველო 2020, 20). As for the Strategy Builder, there is no separate chapter focusing on gender equality, women's empowerment, or political participation. However, these issues were being actively discussed when meeting with the voters (იკითხე პოლიტიკა 2020).

The handling of the issue of gender inequality in **average compensation among employees** is very vague and not properly reflected in most of the party platforms. The election platform of Lelo envisaged legal mechanisms to eradicate gender discrimination in compensation and the employment process (partiebi.ge 2020); however, it is uncertain if the party managed to make the issue relevant. In the case of Strategy Builder, this topic is fragmented – the program noted the salary gap and the need to improve working conditions in sectors that employ women yet did not deal directly with gender inequality. (იკითხე პოლიტიკა 2020). Nor is wage inequality mentioned separately in the 2020 election programs of the United National Movement or European Georgian which clearly would not arouse interest in these parties among women voters. The rul-

ing party's program very generally touches upon this topic, stating that "to ensure gender equality on a job market, women's participation will be supported through legislative initiative and other programs" (ქართული ოცნება დემოკრატიული საქართველო 2020, 28).

Gender-based violence is partly mentioned in political party agendas for 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local governance elections. Yet, it is very general. The European Georgia program does not acknowledge challenges facing women and there are no specific initiatives identified to address them (იკითხე პოლიტიკა 2020). There is a general discussion on violence against women and implementation of effective mechanisms to fight crimes motivated by discrimination-based intolerance (ქართული ოცნება დემოკრატიული საქართველო 2020, 20). Similarly, to the Georgian Dream, United National Movement program has a general mention of strengthening "preventive mechanisms for the violence against women" and

empowering women at the decision-making levels (ერთიანი ნაციონალური მოძრაობა – ძალა ერთობაშია 2020, 25). Lelo's platform highlighted preventive policies on violence against women (იკითხე პოლიტიკა 2020). However, in general, party political platforms lack specific measures and action plans.

To conclude, the analysis of the five main political parties' election platforms demonstrates that campaigns and platforms only superficially or partially reflect women voters' interests. Even though this segment of the population makes up a significant share of the electorate, global issues such as polarisation and European integration define the agendas of the political entities. These issues overshadow the topics identified in the beginning of the research: policies that are priority for women, political matters that have a direct impact on women and policies that are directed towards eradicating gender inequality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted, the latest research demonstrates that for the major part of Georgia's population, none of the political parties stand close to their views. Considering that women voters represent more than half of the electorate, a pre-election campaign tailored to this specific segment would create opportunities for political parties to increase their voter pool. Provided there is an appropriate political strategy and constant engagement with women voters, they [political parties] may reduce the level of estrangement between this segment of the voters and the parties and take specific steps towards closing the gap.

However, the research conducted as a part of this policy paper demonstrates that even though political parties acknowledge the importance of women's empowerment, and some of the entities even dedicate a separate chapter to this topic, measures taken in these regards are too general and lack specifics. This may influence how attractive one party or another is for women voters, and if they are able to reach this particular segment of the electorate. In response to the existing challenges, this policy brief offers recommendations to the political parties and the representatives of NGOs, academia, and the media.

Recommendations for Georgian political parties

- Parties should actively use focus groups, interviews, surveys, and similar research to study the specific voter segments and their needs.
- Women in political parties must constantly communicate their needs to the public using various inter-party mechanisms.
- Establish and strengthen political platforms and forums that ensure women voters' engagement in the work on party agendas.
- Political parties should demonstrate in detail in their party platforms action plans to resolve the issues important for women.
- While running election campaigns, political parties must consider the main messages relevant for women voters, regardless of any other issue of broader significance.

Recommendations for media outlets, NGOs and academia

- Media outlets should plan special shows focused on women voters' needs and discussions around this topic.
- NGOs and academia should facilitate communication between women voters and political parties and establish permanent dialogue formats.
- Media outlets, NGOs and academia should organise meetings and discussions where political party representatives answer questions from women voters and talk about their needs.
- In cooperation with international organizations, support research and publication of work focused on women voters.
- Elaborate a strategic plan to bring forward women voters' issues through wide engagement with the public and list specific steps to be taken.

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**WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:
INTRA-PARTY MECHANISMS AND
CHALLENGES**

SALOME KANDELAKI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to ensure women's political participation, an appropriate internal party structural arrangement and legal and institutional guarantees of gender equality are both important. Currently, the intra-party mechanisms of the Georgian parliamentary parties of 2020 ensure only the identification of women's needs and their involvement rather than their political empowerment. And as for legislative amendments, the issue of gender quotas, although theoretically increasing the number of women in politics, in terms of the quality of women's participation in representative bodies major challenges remain. This is due to the gender stereotypes entrenched in the minds of the general public and the non-serious perception of the issue of gender equality by male politicians. In terms of women's political empowerment, institutional mechanisms such as the Gender Equality Council in Parliament are

more inclusive and effective than the gender councils in local government, indicating lack of knowledge and interest in gender equality issues in the regions.

This political brief analyses to what extent and in what form women's intra-party participation is encouraged in the parliamentary parties of the 2020 convocation, what mechanisms they apply and what challenges exist in this regard in the Georgian political spectrum. The paper is based on an analysis of official documents and interviews with politicians. It concludes with specific recommendations for promoting gender equality in the parties and the political empowerment of women in general.

Keywords: political empowerment of women, internal party structure, gender quotas.

INTRODUCTION

The political participation of women in Georgia remains a challenge. Especially problematic is the election of women politicians to leadership positions in the parties in accordance with internal party democratic principles. However, equality in participation for women in politics is one of the prerequisites for the democratic development of the country, so without the presence of women there can be no equality or reflection of the interests of all groups of the population. This is evidenced by the results of an NDI survey, which found that the number of people who believe women and men can pursue their interests equally and who want to see more women in decision-making po-

sitions, has increased from 48 percent to 56 percent (NDI 2023, Figure 1). Therefore, it is important that parties begin to reconsider their intra-party arrangements and present more gender-balanced teams in the 2024 elections.

The introduction of mandatory gender quotas in parliamentary and self-government elections has partially increased women's political representation, but whether their political positioning and participation in decision-making at intra-party level is authentic in practice can only be established through an assessment of existing political practices. Considering this, the purpose of

this essay is to analyse to what extent and in what form women's intra-party participation is encouraged in the parliamentary parties of the 2020 convocation and what challenges exist in this regard within the parties. It is also important to analyse the extent to which the tactics used help advocate for the

concerns and needs of women voters. The analysis presented here is based on existing literature, reports, statistical data, personal or written interviews with representatives of parliamentary political parties, as well as requests for intra-party statistical information.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES USE THE LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS?

Before analysing the organizational structure of parliamentary political parties and intra-party democracy mechanisms for women members, it is important to consider what formal tools exist in the country to ensure gender equality in politics and how parties use these levers. The main legal guarantee of women's participation in politics is the *Constitution* of Georgia, according to which the rights and opportunities for women and men are guaranteed to ensure equality (Article 11). In addition, we can note the *Law On Gender Equality*, according to which the equal rights and opportunities of both genders in the spheres of political life are recognized and discrimination on this basis is not allowed (Article 3). Among the legal frameworks, one of the most important is the *Electoral Code*. According to the Code, not only is equality ensured at the normative level, but the law also defines the rules that oblige parties to include women in politics. In particular, additional funding stipulated by the Organic Law of Georgia "On Political Associations of Citizens" (Article 143) is related to the observance of gender balance. Furthermore, despite the introduction of a

gender quota mechanism, due to shortcomings identified in this regard following the 2020-2021 elections, in February 2023 the Georgian Parliament passed amendments to the Election Code regarding gender quotas by 88 votes to 3 (Parliament 2023). For example, the only female majoritarian MP was Nino Latsabidze. However, it is indicative that when she became mayor of Rustavi, she was replaced by a man (Tsilosani 2023). This is one of the shortcomings that led to changes in the Code.

The amendments concerned mainly the postponement until the end of 2032 of gender quotas. In addition, it was specified that in the parliamentary elections to be held from 2024 to 2028, every fourth person on the list must be a woman, and from 2028 to 2032 in each party's electoral list every third should be of a different gender. In addition, according to the amendments, a male MP crossed off the party list would not necessarily be replaced by a representative of the same gender, but by the next number on the list. This increases the likelihood that a man would be replaced by a woman, which in

itself would be a positive result in terms of increasing women's political representation. On the one hand the result of the introduction of gender quotas is an increase in the representation of women in parliament. In particular, 6,882 party list candidates were registered for the 2020 parliamentary elections, including 3,049 (44.30%) women and 3,833 (55.70%) men. Also, 490 majoritarian candidates were registered, including 107 (21.84%) women and 383 (78.16%) men (Parliament 2021). As a result of the elections, only 19.3% of the 150 members of the Georgian Parliament of the tenth convocation were women. Currently there are 139 members of Parliament, of whom 112 are men and 27 women. On the other hand, when the issue of gender quotas was on the agenda, the discussion was that every fourth candidate in the case of parliament and every third candidate on local -government lists should be of a different gender. However, without any discussion it was automatically assumed that this meant a woman. In fact, in the party proportional lists, it was not ruled out that a female candidate would be on the first two or first three numbers on the list.

Yet, for almost all parties it turned out that, to conform to the law, parties had artificially to include women on the electoral lists. Moreover, beyond the mandatory gender quota requirement, only a few parties used the financial incentive mechanism provided by the law, so this mechanism proved ineffective and needs to be reviewed (Pavliashvili & Mukhuradze, 2022).

As for institutional mechanisms for ensuring gender equality, there are two main directions: the first is the *Standing Gender Equality Council* in the Parliament of Georgia. According to the statute, the Council's authority is to define state policy in the field of gender by regulating the legal and regulatory framework, monitoring the activities of bodies dealing with gender equality as well as approving the action plan and developing a report on its implementation (Statute of the Gender Equality Council 2019). Currently, the Council is working in accordance with the approved Action Plan on Gender Equality for 2022-2024, the priorities of which are presented in the figure below:

Figure 1:



Source: Action Plan of the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council 2022-2024.
Available at: <https://web-api.parliament.ge/storage/files>

It is indicative that the Council has a total of 19 members, both women (12) and men (7) from the ruling (12) and opposition (7) parties (Parliament 2023). In the Council, issues are initiated mostly by women MPs, but in terms of participation in its activities, the opportunities for members of the ruling and opposition parties are largely equal. Accordingly, MPs from opposition parties have no restrictions in terms of positioning. The Gender Equality Council focuses on the elimination of discrimination against women and on their economic empowerment. However, in terms of protecting the rights of women MPs and condemning discrimination, party reactions are often uneven. As an example of the lack of solidarity between women and the prevailing double standards, a female MP representing the opposition party cites the case of a female MP from the United National Movement who was handled roughly by a male member of the ruling party (now the Speaker of Parliament) and forcibly removed by parliamentary officials (Radio Liberty 2021). This was generally condemned, but, according to our respondent, there was no reaction from female representatives of the Gender Equality Council (Buchukuri 2023). On the other hand, gestures made by a woman MP from the ruling party, who was asking for an extra minute to finish her speech, drew mocking comment from a journalist which was perceived by members of the ruling party as bullying, and their reactions were quite aggressive. (First Channel 2022). In this regard, it is important that when it comes to discrimination and human rights, the parties remain objective in their assessments and their position is not biased, because otherwise all positive normative initiatives will be seen as pretenses.

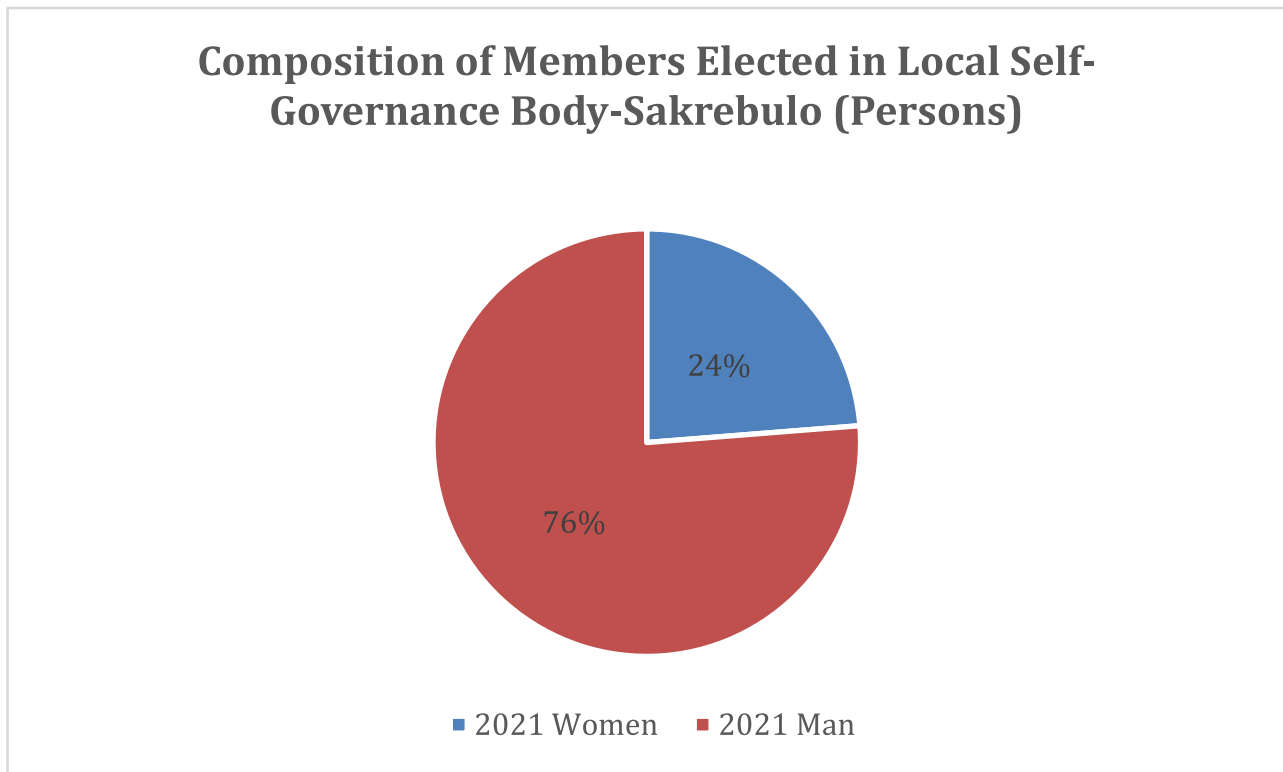
The second main institutional mechanism operating at local level is the *Gender Equal-*

ity Councils under the city councils and local government bodies, which also involves cross-party participation and, in addition, the activity of representatives of the civil sector. It is indicative that, at local level, action plans are developed individually in municipalities based on local needs. Action plans have been actively approved in 57 out of 64 municipalities (Public Defender of Georgia 2020). However, unlike Parliament, members of opposition parties in local governments are not that much involved in the activities of councils. According to the ruling team, this is due to a lack of desire on the part of opposition parties, while according to the opposition gender councils at the local level are symbolic and mostly associated with Georgian Dream. The low level of participation by opposition parties in gender councils in local governments can be explained by the fact that the number of female party representatives at the municipal level is much lower than of men, especially in the case of representatives of the opposition parties. Despite the fact that the quota system has increased the representation of women at municipal level, there is still a big difference in terms of gender equality - 491 women and 1577 men were elected (Figure 2). 31.4% (441) of women were elected by proportional list, and 7.6% (50) of women were elected from the majoritarian list (Central Election Commission 2021). Therefore, based on the fact that the topic of gender equality interests mainly women, and women from opposition parties are less represented in the self-government bodies, which is, perhaps, one of the results of the passivity of the opposition. At the same time, the results of a study conducted by the Public Defender's Office, showed that at local level, in some municipalities, men mostly leave Gender Council meetings early, or are just listeners. The men are not able to pinpoint local

gender issues, which indicates their low level of awareness of the issue (Public Defender of Georgia, 2020). However, men in the Citizens' Party take a different view and are interested in women's needs. Female party

representatives are also active in this regard because it is easier for women to talk about their problems and needs with a representative of the same gender (Turazashvili 2023).

Figure 2:



Source: National Statistics Service of Georgia (Geostat), 2021. Available at: http://pc-axis.geostat.ge/PXweb/pxweb/ka/Database/Database__Gender

INDIVIDUAL PARLIAMENTARY PARTY TACTICS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Eight political parties were selected for the study from among the parliamentary political parties, including For Georgia, (which is not singled out as a separate political group in Parliament, since it separated from the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party after its entry to the Parliament.) The European Socialists, were part of the Alliance of

Patriots party, but formed a separate party. However, after they left Parliament in a boycott, part of this party remained and founded the European Socialists party. Of the eight political parties mentioned, we were able to contact seven for study purposes in order to obtain information on gender distribution within their internal party structures

and the mechanisms they have developed to empower women (Figure 3).

The political council of the Agmashenebeli Strategy is the most gender-balanced, having 33% being women members, while by far the most unequal in terms of gender is the political council of the National Movement, where 11% are women. However, the latter party is now reconstructing. Only three of the parties listed below have formed a secretariat so far (Georgian Dream, National Movement and Lelo). One of them, the National Movement, as already mentioned, is in the process of reorganization. Of the three parties, only Lelo has women representatives in its secretariat, and it should also be emphasized that women are in the majority, namely four out of seven being women. One of the remaining five parties, the For Georgia party, is in the process of party formation, and the rest do not officially have sec-

retariats.

Only four out of eight parties have formal mechanisms to encourage political participation and representation of women in internal party structures. In particular, Georgian Dream has had a women's organization since 2022 and the National Movement has had one since 2013, which is now called the "Women's Wing Council". The Lelo for Georgia party has formed groups of 12 women and has women's councils in all regions, although there is no separate women's organization. The Agmashenebeli Strategy has established a women's organization since its foundation. In the case of all four parties, having women's councils or organizations implies the possibility of establishing regional networks and better connections with women voters throughout Georgia.

Figure 3:

| Party | Gender distribution in the political council | Percentage of women in the political council | Secretariat | Women's intra-party body |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| Georgian Dream - Democratic Georgia | 14 men - 4 women | 22% | 7 men - 0 women | Georgian Dream's women's organization |
| United National Movement - United Opposition Bloc Strong in Unity | 31 men - 4 women (reorganization in progress) | 11% | 3 men - 0 women (reorganization in progress) | National Movement's Women's Wing Council |
| Lelo – Mamuka Khazaradze | 11 men - 3 women | 21% | 3 men - 4 women | Lelo's women's groups of 12 - councils |
| Giorgi Vashadze - Agmashenebeli Strategy block | 8 men - 4 women | 33% | ● | Women's organization of Agmashenebeli Strategy |
| Girchi | 16 men - 0 women (advisory) | 0% | ● | ● |
| Aleko Elisashvili - Citizens | Reorganization in progress | | ● | ● |
| For Georgia | 12 men - 3 women | 20% | The party is in the process of structural formation | ● |
| European Socialists | 6 men - 1 woman | 14% | ● | ● |

Based on interviews with the parties of the 2020 parliamentary, four main problems hindering the political participation of women have been identified: Firstly, there is in society a lower level of rapport and trust towards women politicians, especially in the regions (Gogoladze 2023, Tsilosani 2023, Buchukuri 2023). Politicians, based on their experience, note that due to entrenched traditional attitudes, female candidates take longer to win the trust of the electorate than male candidates. Therefore, when it comes to making a choice parties prefer male candidates. The second obstacle making it dif-

ficult for parties to politically engage women is family barriers. In a number of cases, in communication with the parties women openly express their desire to actively engage in politics, but later there were cases when they had to withdraw from party activities at the firm insistence of their families (Buchukuri 2023, Galdava 2023, Bunyan and Liluashvili, 2022). The third, and equally important problem is the low level in traditional sharing of family labor between men and women. In particular, there were cases where, while no one restricted women's political activities, they had to be at home to do

housework. Therefore, women often have to make the decision on choice between political activity and family work in favor of the family because of the amount of work that needs to be done. Hence, an MP from the Citizens' Party suggested that the awareness of the need for labor redistribution should be raised and that education in the regions should be particularly intensive in this regard (Turazashvili 2023). The fourth sensitive problem was that, because of stereotyped attitudes toward women and because of sexism, women politicians are under pressure to their male peers, whether psychological, sexual harassment, or bullying, in the online space. There are certain issues that can clearly undermine a woman's reputation and the population of Georgia takes a stricter and less tolerant of women. This attitude is often the reason that for a female politician criticism and bullying may be more devastating than for a male politician. (Tsilosani, 2023, Bunyan and Liluashvili, 2022, Buchukuri, 2023).

Despite all these barriers, some political parties actively try to attract women to politics and make them politically active. Women politicians are motivated to actively work with women, and to judge by what can be seen, women MPs in the Parliament of Georgia can more easily unite around a particular issue than male MPs (Buchukuri 2023). From their point of view, regardless of who represents which party, when it comes to national interests women mostly unite for common interests (Buchukuri 2023, Galdava 2023).

Of the eight parliamentary parties, four parties that have women's internal bodies at intra-party level have different approaches to politically promoting women and reflecting their needs at the party level, and sub-

sequently at the legislative level. In particular, Georgian Dream, based on its resources, works quite actively with women voters across the country. The approach is to conduct information campaigns about women's organisations in the regions and to identify new women leaders. In this, they are assisted by gender councils, which are asked to identify active people and attract new so-called allies, who then are provided with information on further party initiatives and are given the opportunity to bring forward their concerns.

The case of Racha, where there were many people in need of cochlear device, was cited as a successful example of advocacy for women's issues at national level. According to an MP, at the initiative of the women's organization, a special direction for the financing of cochlear apparatus in the mountainous areas has been established (Tsilosani 2023). In the case of the United National Movement, over a period of years representative offices of the women's organization have been opened in each region, which, according to party representatives, has been the most powerful platform for involving women in intraparty activities (Gogoladze 2023). With the support of the party, women often represent the National Movement at international and local meetings and conferences, and trainings are also provided for them to cater for women's needs (Narmania and Gogoladze, 2023).

Lelo's strategy for promoting women's participation in politics is different – acting through groups of 12 women or women's councils in each region the party tries to obtain information about the local needs of women and uses digital, messaging and online connections to communicate with them, including in terms of accountability. Online

connections are also used to reach emigrant women. Lelo mainly tries to strengthen its position in representative bodies by highlighting women's social problems.

As for Agmashenebeli Strategy, according to its charter its women's organisation is focused on protecting women's rights, increasing women's political activism, and strengthening women's economic independence, as well as on building regional networks of women supporting the party. The party conducts trainings for women with the help of international organizations, so that the experience of other countries in terms of strengthening women's participation can be shared (Chikhladze, 2023).

As for the other four parties, both the For Georgia party and The Citizens explained that women in their party are highly represented and fully involved in decision-making. The Citizens did not single out the direction of women in the party, as they believe that human rights should be protected in general. However, they note that women outnumber men in their party (Turazashvili 2023). The For Georgia party, with the help of the Polish OSCE-ODIHR office, is working on a guidebook that will also cover areas of gender equality (Buchukuri, 2023).

The leaders of Girchi and The European Socialists are members of the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council, although they have not created a separate mechanism for empowering women within their party structures and do not see the need for it. Girchi's position is that people should not be divided into "women" and "men" and that everyone should have absolutely equal chances to become a politician in Girchi (Sabo 2023).

In general, it can be said that the issue of gender equality in internal party structures is not taken seriously enough by the parties for them to make a special effort to address this issue. The above examples show that, when working with women, the goal is mainly to identify and advocate their needs, rather than to actively involve women in politics. During the elections, women's representation on proportional and majoritarian lists was due to legal obligation rather than a real understanding of the need for gender balance. However, as the laws are aimed at gender equality in politics, the political parties will have both to mobilise women more for the upcoming elections and empower them politically.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of the internal structure of the political parties in the parliamentary of 2020 and the existing mechanisms for political empowerment of women, it can be said that gender quotas are currently the only way to achieve active involvement of women in politics and guarantee protection of gender balance. Conspicuously, the purpose of women's councils in parties can be seen to be to attract women voters rather than to involve them in politics. However, it should be noted that the creation of women-oriented internal party bodies allows parties to better understand women's needs and advocate for them at the legislative level. In the case of the ruling party, this can even solve some of their problems as they have more leverage in the executive branch. Due to the low political awareness of gender equality issues, political elites have not yet fully understood the need for the po-

litical promotion of women. However, it is noteworthy that the efforts of women politicians represented in national legislatures, especially in the Parliament, have resulted in changes to the Electoral Code on gender equality. If women's representation in Parliament and city councils increases in the next elections, the combined efforts of women will create potential for the issue of women's political participation and the protection of gender balance in politics in general to gradually become more acceptable and relevant for the general public. To ensure the political empowerment of women in internal party and representative bodies, this political essay provides recommendations for political parties and local and international organisations concerned with elections and gender equality.

Recommendations to political parties:

- In close cooperation with OSCE ODIHR, develop well-defined strategies for attracting qualified female representatives to their parties and strengthening their position as candidates in the upcoming elections by developing their leadership skills.
- Organize workshops, trainings, or information sessions for male representatives of parties on the importance of introducing gender mainstreaming into politics, which will help activate them in self-government gender councils;
- Ensure that decision-makers from countries with similar practices conduct master classes for party members to learn about ways to integrate women politically, as well as best practices in this regard;
- Promote better media coverage of female party representatives, which will give female representatives an opportunity to promote women's needs and put issues that have received less attention on the political agenda thus far.

Recommendations to local and international organizations focusing on elections and gender:

- Ensure the promotion of awareness in local government and introduction of new programs on the political empowerment of women with the aim of equal participation by governing and opposition parties in the activities of the gender equality councils at the local government level;
 - Encourage the inclusion in politics of active young women interested in politics. It is important to hold various events, including simulation workshops, conducted by experts on the mechanisms of political engagement to stimulate their interest;
 - Support funding of women voters' initiatives at local government level under the small grant projects programmes in order to develop party agendas adapted to women voters;
 - Support initiatives aimed at engaging male politicians in activities to promote gender equality, and ensure that research is conducted throughout Georgia on the gender sensitivity of male politicians.
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**WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT
AND GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATISATION:
WHY IS PARLIAMENT'S INCLUSIVITY
IMPORTANT?**

NINO SAMKHARADZE

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 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

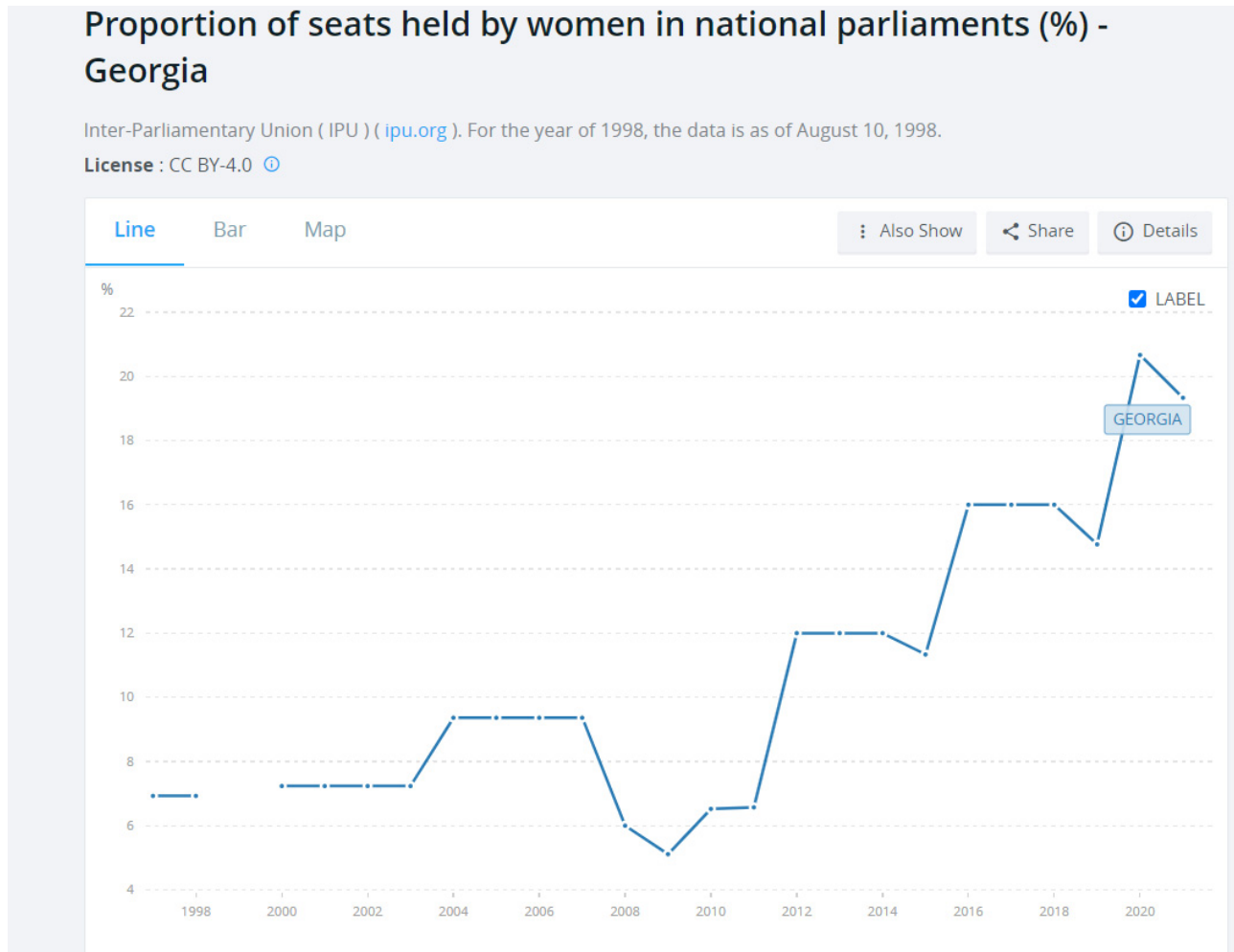
Considering that inclusivity is one of the primary components of a democratic state, analysing women parliamentary representation offers a wider perspective on how close Georgia is to European standards in this regards. Under the government of the Georgian Dream, several reforms have been implemented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

Under-representation of female MPs is shown in international indicators, such as the 2022 index of the International Inter-Par-

liamentary 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 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.

¹ After 2020 Parliamentary elections, several opposition MPs, including 4 women, refused the parliamentary mandate.

Figure 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?

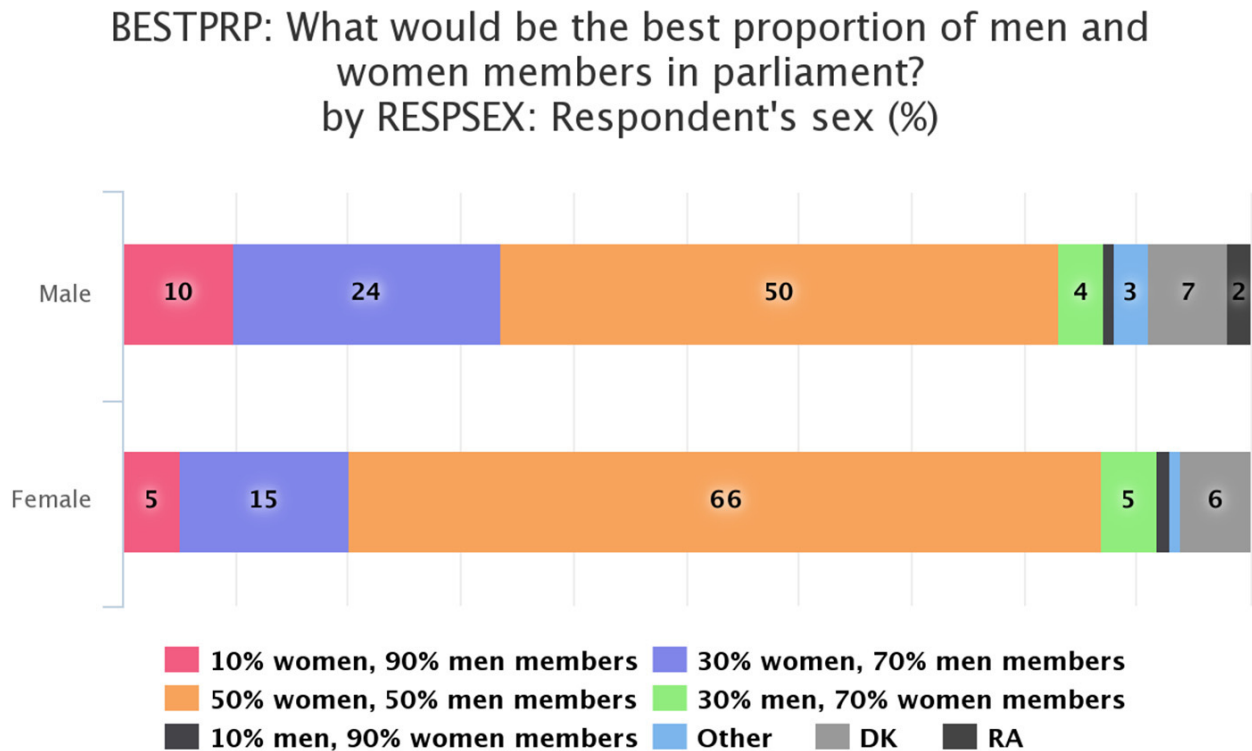
It is considered that empowering women politicians changes the content and the form of politics in positive and constructive ways (O'Brien & Piscopo 2019; Fraceschut et al. 2012). Several characteristics distinguish women from men in politics: they express themselves in less radical terms than men and 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 (ცქიფურბიშვილი 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 (ბაგრაგია 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 (Figure 2).

Figure 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.

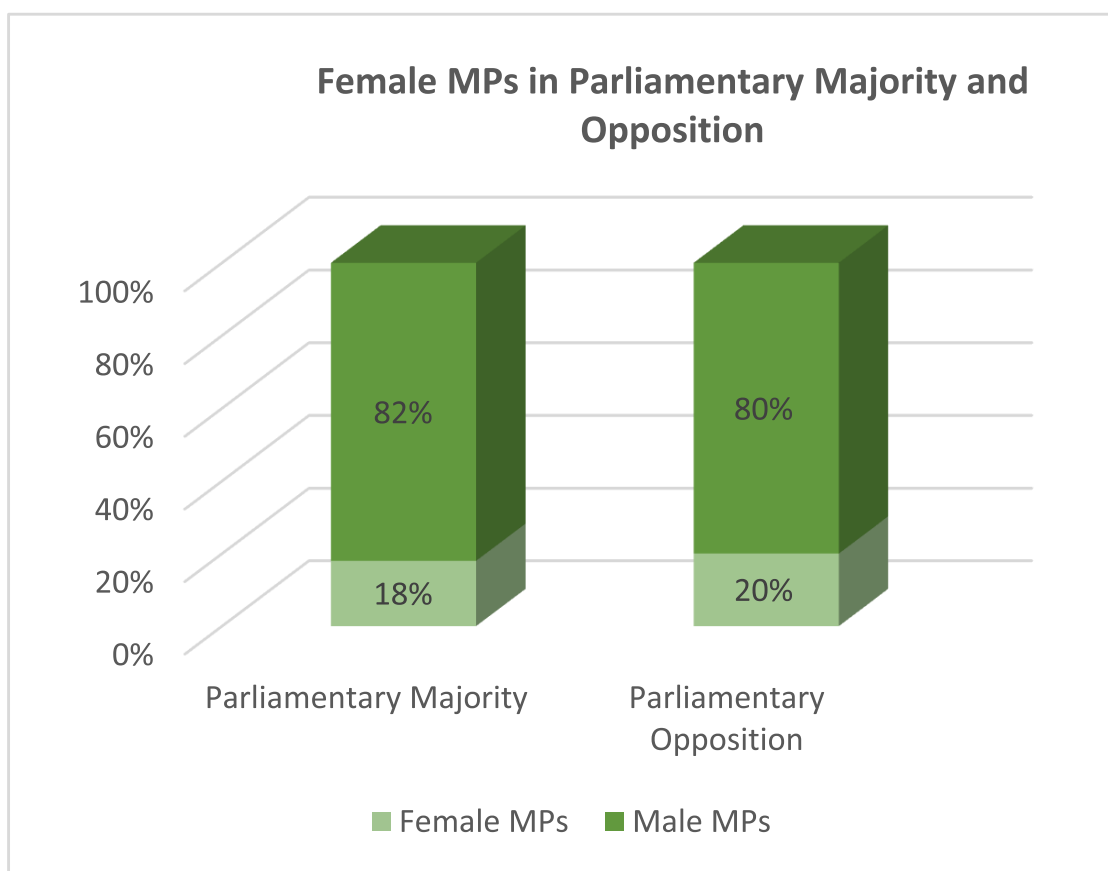
WOMEN MPS AND CHALLENGES THEY FACE

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 (Figure 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.

Figure 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 ob-

ligations, 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 (Bagratia 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. (biZinaSvili 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 par-

liamentary 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 num-

ber 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 (com-

mittee 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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