



Women's Political Participation: Intra-Party Mechanisms and Challenges

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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 essay 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.

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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 positions, 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:



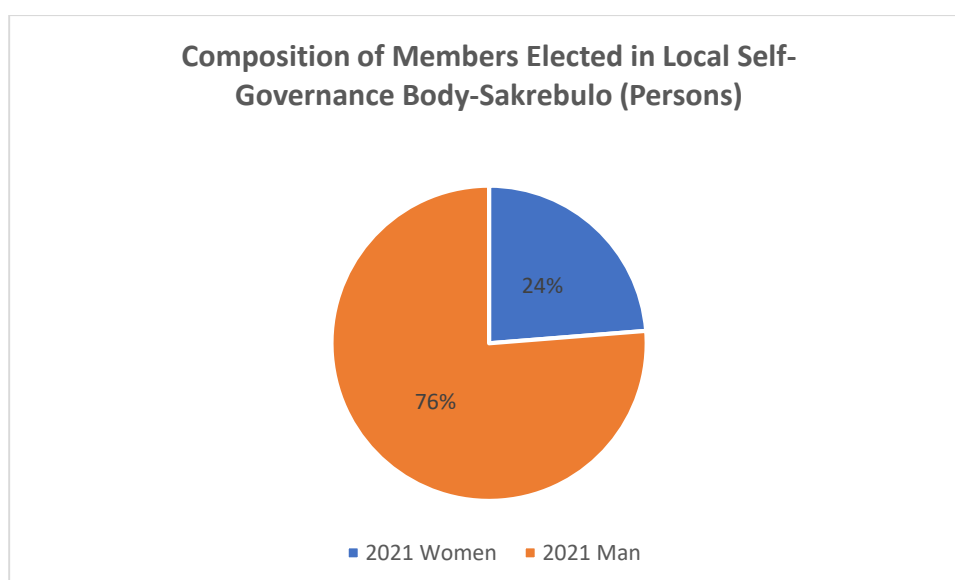
Source: Action Plan of the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council 2022-2024. Available at: <https://web-api.parliament.ge/storage/files>

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 Equality 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 secretariats.

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%	-	-

Source: Personal communication with party representatives and use of their official websites.

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 difficult 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 subsequently 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 political 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.
- 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;
- 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;
- 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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