



## What Political Preferences Do Women Voters Have in Georgia?

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### 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 preferences 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.

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## 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.

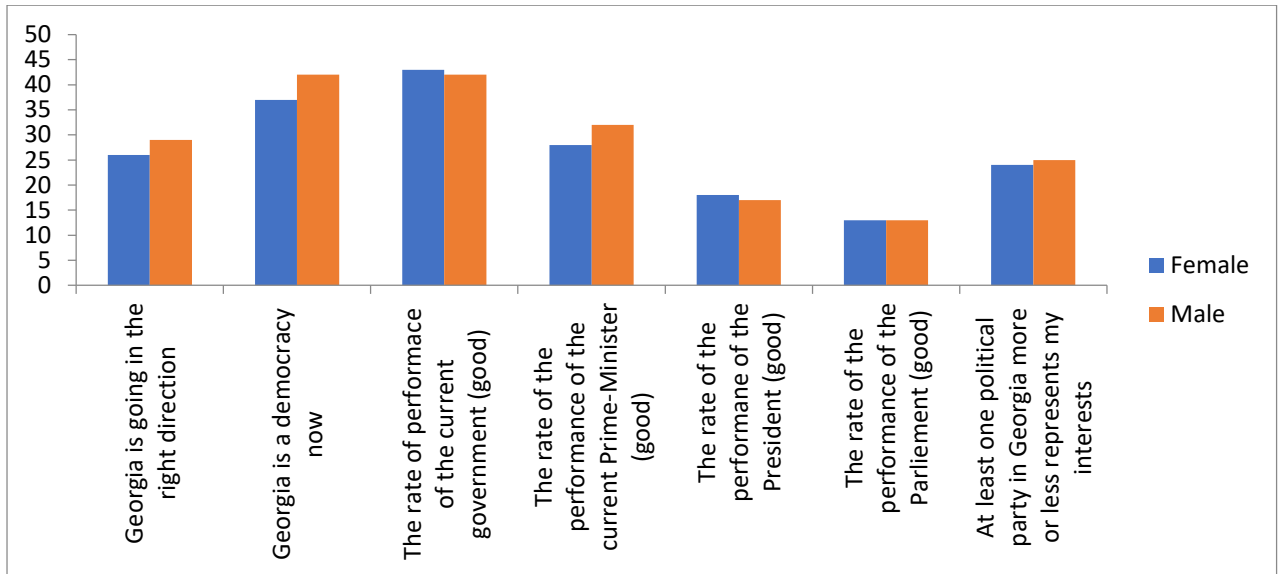
## How Do Female Voters' Political Preferences Differ from Those of Men?

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 (Graph 1).

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

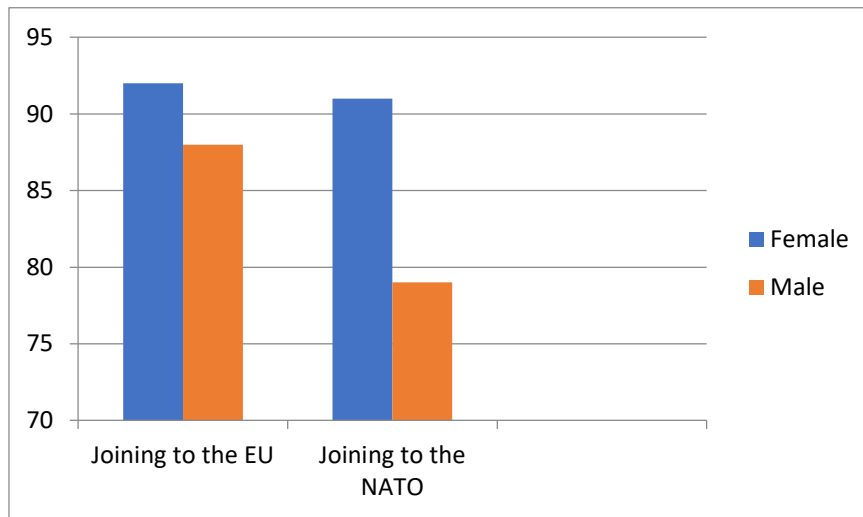


Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023.  
 Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/codebook/>

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.

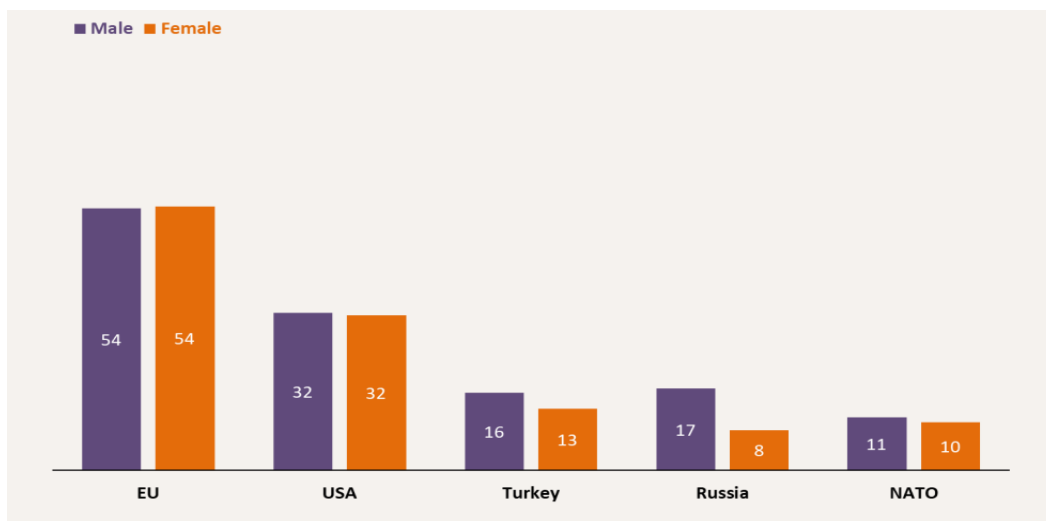
**Graph 2.** Do you approve or disapprove of the Georgian Government's stated goal to join the EU and NATO?



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

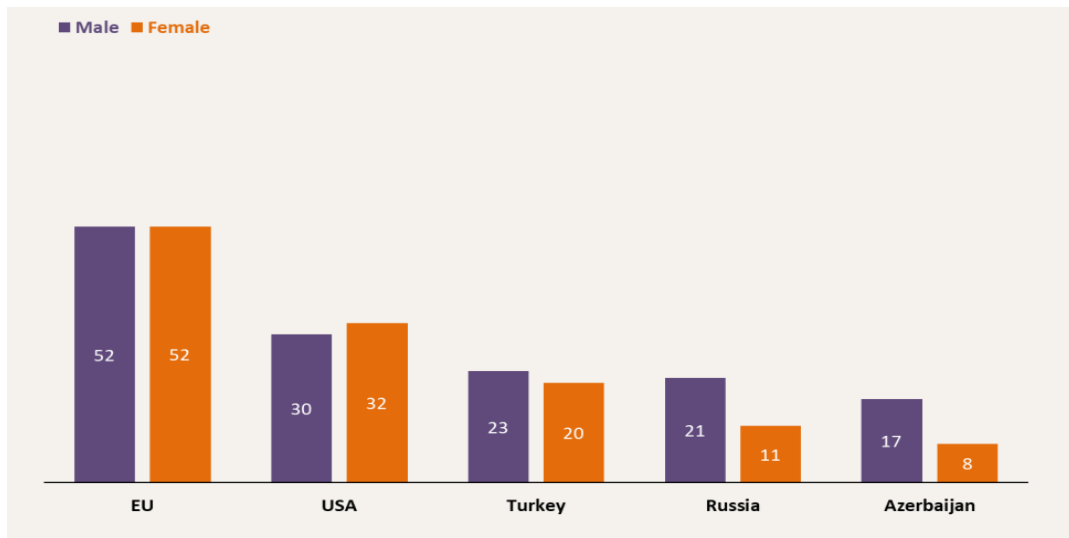
Meanwhile, more men support closer political cooperation with Russia than women (Graph 3) and more women support limiting economic ties with Russia than men (Graph 4).

**Graph 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](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Geo_PUBLIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf)

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

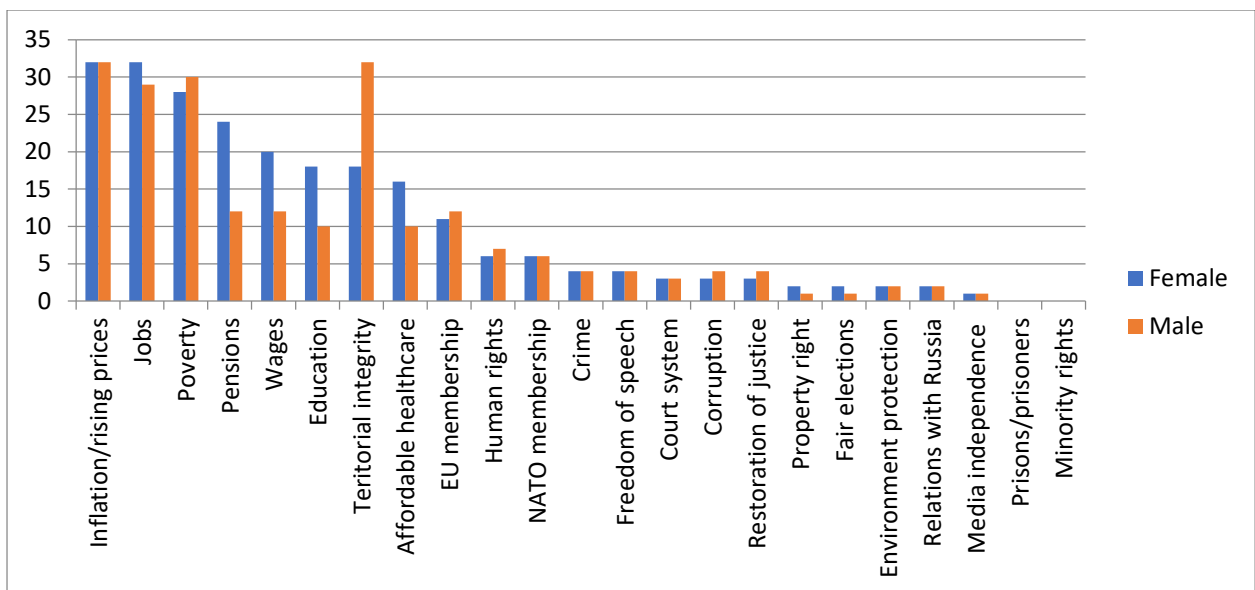


Source: NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2023. Available at:

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

**Graph 5.** The most important national level issue



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

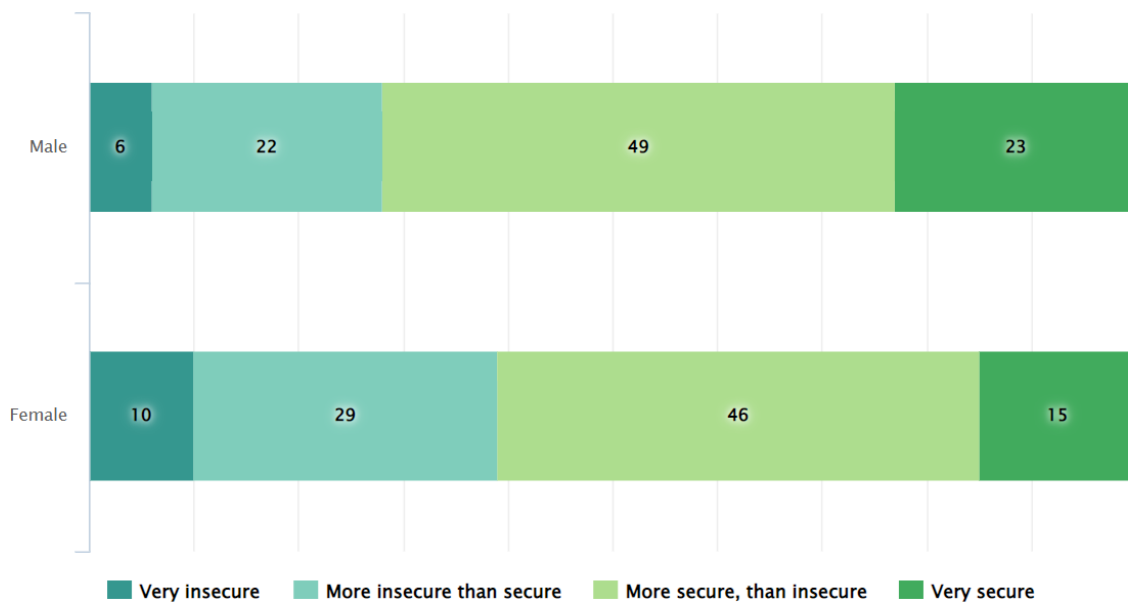
As the public opinion survey from March 2023 illustrates, inflation/rising costs, unemployment, and poverty are among the top three social issues for female voters. According to the poll, it is also clear that pensions and salaries are among the top five priorities for women. At the same time, education 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 (Graph 6).

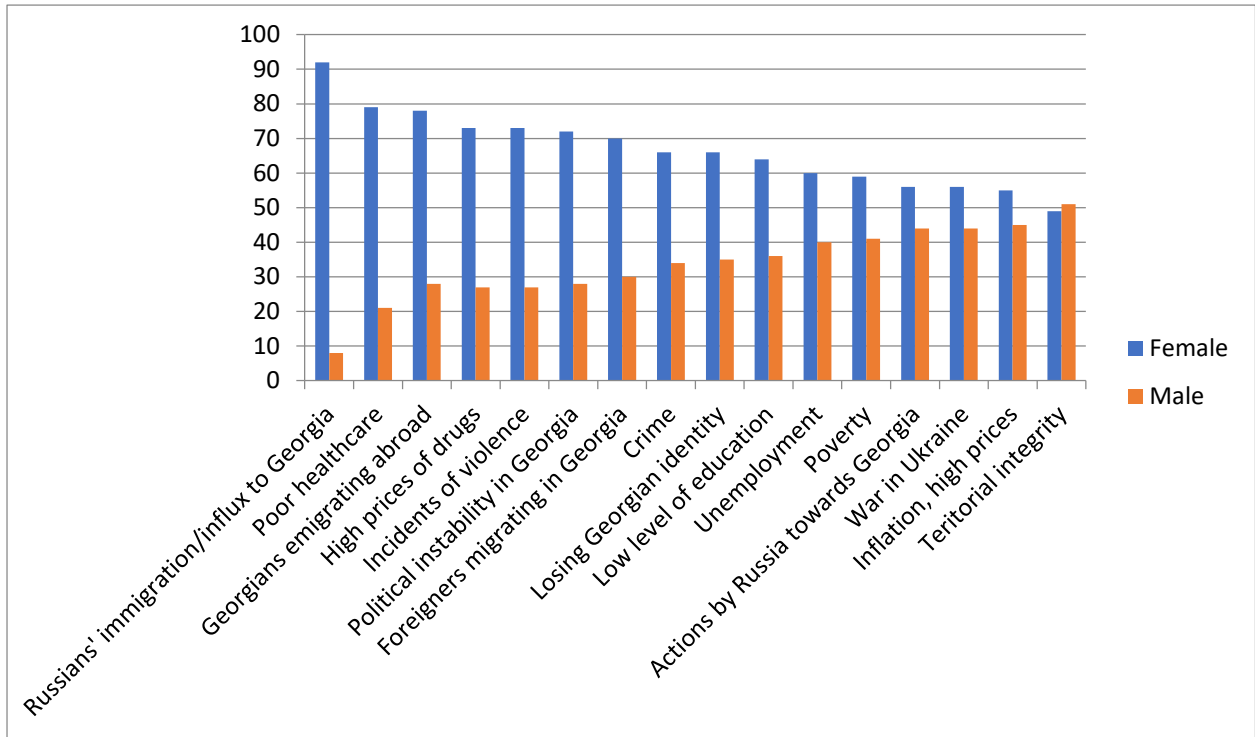
**Graph 6.** How safe do you feel in Georgia?



*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 (Graph 7)

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



*Source:* NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, December 2022 *ქვემოთ*  
 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 (რადომ 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 violence 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 programed 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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