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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



#GEODEM 2023



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

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Conference Notes N4

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Summary

As the 2024 parliamentary elections approach, it is becoming increasingly interesting to see what strategies the political parties choose to achieve electoral success and what issues they will prioritise in their election campaigns. Although the elections are more than a year away, it is important that both the ruling party and the opposition parties should start making efforts to properly reflect in their manifestos the specific needs of all segments of the electorate. According to official data from the Central Election Commission (CEC), women make up more than half of all voters in Georgia. It can therefore be seen as an anomaly in the party competition that political parties often avoid talking about the specific needs of this segment or including them in their political agendas.

According to the CEC data, women tend to be less active in voter turnout than male voters. This may indicate that this segment of voters, particularly in the regions and among ethnic minorities, needs additional mechanisms to ensure that their needs and visions are regularly heard and noticed in the Georgian political process. However, such mechanisms are lacking in Georgia's political environment. The political parties fail to engage with the regions and women voters. The reasons for this should be the subject of intensive research. The panel focuses on the following themes:

The role of women politicians and their activism in electoral campaigns or, more generally, in formulating party visions is crucial if the needs of women voters are to be adequately reflected in party platforms and strategies. Based on the principles of the resemblance model of representation, women politicians can better understand women's needs and incorporate these issues into their political party agendas. The introduction of the gender quota principle has led to an increase in the number of women candidates on electoral party lists, but it is interesting to see how women are represented in their political parties and whether they can actually influence the agendas of their parties. Panel 2 therefore discusses the role of women members of Georgian political parties in formulating party agendas, as well as the challenges of intraparty democracy in this regard.

The above-mentioned topics formed the agenda of the eighth annual conference "Democracy 2023". The conference was inaugurated by **Renata Skardžiūtė-Kereselidze**, the Deputy Director

of the Georgian Institute of Politics. In her welcoming remarks, she stressed the importance of considering the will of women voters and added that this was a challenge for political parties. As she noted, women voters are more critical than men in their assessments of the level of development of the country and the quality of democracy, thus stressing that their vision must be taken into account and that much work needs to be done to achieve this. She then introduced the topics of the panel discussions at the conference and gave the floor to the Ambassador of Switzerland to Georgia, **Heidi Grau**. The Ambassador stressed that discussions on achieving gender equality have been taking place for many years, recalling her student years at the University of Zurich where this topic was set as a goal for the generation, and noted that, unfortunately, society in both Switzerland and Georgia this still needs to be an issue for discussion, but in a different mode. That is why she sees the need to reiterate that the inclusion of women and their participation in political life is very important because democracy is defined precisely as representation and inclusion. According to her, there is no democracy without women and their full and meaningful participation.

After the welcoming remarks, the Panel 1 discussion on *“Women Voters in Georgia and Representation of Their Needs in Georgian Party Agendas* started, moderated by Professor **Iago Kachkachishvili** (Ivane Javakhsihvili Tbilisi State University). The aim of this panel discussion was to outline the needs of women voters as identified through research and surveys. The speakers at the discussion were: **Teona Kupunia** (National Democratic Institute, NDI), **Tamar Sabedashvili** (UN Women), **Nino Dolidze** (International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, ISFED), and **Tamta Mikeladze** (Social Justice Center, SJC). The Panel 2 discussion was dedicated to *“Women Politicians and Intraparty Democracy,”* moderated by Professor **Davit Aprasidze** (Ilia State University). The aim of the discussion was to examine internal party democracy from the perspective of promoting women’s involvement and representation. The second panel began with a presentation of the results of a policy paper by **Salome Kandelaki**, Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), which concerned the mechanisms for women’s involvement in party structures as well as the practices of political parties in their use of legal and constitutional guarantees of gender equality. After the presentation three women MPs took the floor: **Khatia Dekanoidze** (independent MP), **Ana Natsvlishvili** (Lelo for Georgia), and **Ana Buchukuri** (Gakharia for Georgia party). At the end of each panel, following the

speakers' presentations, discussions were held in which the audience could ask questions and make comments.

Key takeaways from the #GEODEM2022 conference:

Panel 1: Women Voters in Georgia and Representation of Their Needs in Georgian Party Agendas

- Political parties do not or cannot segment the electorate, including by gender, and cannot focus on women voters, although women comprise 54% of the total population and 52% of the total electorate;
- A component of pragmatic policies for political parties could be to segment their electorate, including women voters, according to their profession, place of residence and vulnerability, and to communicate with them accordingly;
- Recently, women voters have become much more sensitive to the foreign policy vector and course of development of the country; they have adopted a more critical stance towards the government;
- It is important that civil society works with women voters to educate them on how to present their demands to political parties and how to become less vulnerable to various influences; this will lead to political parties wanting to put women's needs on their agendas;
- It is not the natural state of women to enter the public space, so there are more filters for women in society than for men, in addition, women become easier targets for criticism than men;
- Increased authoritarian and conservative tendencies in governance in present-day Georgia directly contribute to the marginalisation of women from the political process, including from exercising political rights.

Panel 2: Women Politicians and Intraparty Democracy

- It is easier for women in parliament to unite around topics;
- The response of political parties in condemning discrimination against women varies;
- The level of sensitivity to and awareness of gender equality in the regions is low;
- Involvement of women politicians by Georgian political parties is more of a legal obligation than an understanding of the need for gender equality on their part;
- The aim of women's councils established under the political parties is to attract women voters rather than to involve them in politics;
- A gender quota is the only means available today to empower women and maintain some degree of gender balance in politics;
- The role of women party members in the decision-making process in the Georgian political parties is currently ornamental;
- Power in Georgian political parties belongs mainly to male politicians because they have financial capital;
- Without institutional safeguards, the political activity of women politicians is twice as difficult.

Panel 3: Women's Political Engagement and Increased Participation

- Tangible progress cannot be achieved without adequate political involvement in political, economic and other issues;
- In Georgia, the most gender-unequal political parties are at the same time the largest;
- In terms of numbers, there is no big difference between the turnout of women and men, but since there are more women registered, the turnout of men is higher in percentage terms;
- Of the 50 Sakrebulo members in Tbilisi, only 13 (26%) are women; in Kutaisi, the corresponding figures are 21 and 8 (38%), and in Batumi, they are 35 and 10 (28%), respectively;

- According to the average online violence ratio, women are attacked about three times more often than men;
- Quantitatively, more women come to the polls, but while women form a large percentage of the female population their turnout is much lower than that of men voters;
- Political parties do not really take into account the challenges faced by women politicians and do not create an equivalent environment to enable them to participate in the decision-making processes on the same footing with men.

Panel 1: Women Voters in Georgia and Representation of Their Needs in Georgian Party Agendas

May 24, 2023

Moderator	Iago Kachkachishvili, Professor at Tbilisi State University
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teona Kupunia - Deputy Director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) • Tamar Sabedashvili - Deputy Country Representative at the UN Women • Nino Dolidze - Executive Director of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) • Tamta Mikeladze - Director of the Social Justice Center (SJC)

The panel discussion was focused on the following questions:

- What do women voters expect from Georgian political parties?
- Why do parties need to understand and react to women voters' needs?
- How well do Georgian parties address female voters' demands in their political agendas?
- How can the international actors and international experience help the parties in terms of working with the female electorate in Georgia?

The first panel session opened with a brief introduction by the moderator, **Professor Iago Kachkachishvili** of Tbilisi State University, who highlighted the diversity of issues to be discussed during the panel session. According to him, one of the challenges for the political parties is their holistic approach to voters, which means that the parties have a claim on the whole body of voters. As a result, the political parties are out of alignment with the stratified structure of society. Iago Kachkachishvili called this phenomenon "political greed," where parties try to mobilise and attract all segments of society as loyal voters. The moderator highlighted different methods of voter stratification - demographic, ideological, identity-related, etc. However, he also noted that party politics in Georgia is inconsistent in terms of targeting such stratified groups.

Speaking specifically about women voters, Iago Kachkachishvili held the view that the situation is inadequate. The communications and strategies of political parties do not have clearly formulated messages targeted at women, especially considering that there are different sub-groups among women, such as urban, PWD, single mothers, rural, and others. In this respect, the Georgian political arena is extremely poor and lacking diversity.

The first speaker on the panel was **Teona Kupinia**, the Deputy Director of the National Democratic Institute, whose main emphasis was on the lack of research on women voters. They are seen as a homogenous group, and, consequently, the political parties do not understand the female electorate. Although individual parties target different niches, they do not focus on women. Until recently, gender quotas and intraparty democracy were the pressing and hotly debated issues in terms of women's empowerment, but over the past few years, organisations specialising in women's rights and international organisations have made considerable breakthroughs in this regard.

However, Teona Kupunia believes that the progress to date is minimal. Much more work needs to be done on women voters, as women make up 52% of all voters and 54% of the total population. This is a very large number, making the research that is available look very sparse compared to the importance of the topic. As a result, there is no complete understanding of trends among women voters. Citing statistics, the speaker noted that women's electoral activity lags behind that of men by 5%-6%. Such issues require more fundamental research. When discussing the needs of women voters, the specifics of the municipalities should be taken into account, as they are of great importance, although some changes have been observed.

As the speaker noted, the results of the NDI surveys do not show much difference between the attitudes of women and men voters towards topics such as territorial integrity or economic issues, for example. But there are topics that clearly outline the issues of particular concern to women, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, the quota system, etc. When it comes to these topics, more women than men say there are problems. According to Teona Kupunia's observations, education is a topic that women are particularly interested in. Over the last year, women have become particularly critical of the country's foreign policy and this concerns the influx of Russian citizens, the visa issue, and many other geopolitical issues on which they take a

more critical stance than men. However, the speaker also noted that this trend need not necessarily be permanent, as it is only based on recent statistics.

Overall, female citizens are more closely aligned with the views of opposition voters. To particularise their concerns - they think less about emigration, fewer women feel protected, more women worry about security, and more women say that women and men should be equally represented in parliament. These differences are seen against the background that women are poorer, fewer women say they are employed, and fewer are interested in finding work.

Consequently, Teona Kupunia believes that there is a lot of interesting material here and that political parties should identify these issues and start working on them. It would be logical for political parties to step up their activities as women, in addition to constituting more than half of the electorate, can act as agents of influence as they have specific social ties. At the end of her presentation, the speaker recalled international experiences and said that in other countries women had made great political changes; for example, in the UK, the female electorate was no longer as conservative as before, and this was affecting the political dynamics of the country. In the US, women voters have a strong influence in favor of democratic values. According to Teona Kupunia, this is a serious social group that requires a great deal of attention.

The next speaker was **Tamar Sabedashvili**, Deputy UN Women Country Representative, whose main message was that although political rights have been obtained in Georgia, they are not effectively exercised, or in other words the exercise of political rights must be protected. De jure, women have the right to vote, but numerous barriers and restrictions prevent women voters from exercising it effectively. These barriers may include family interference, various types of influence, etc. The result is a flawed democratic process.

Tamar Sabedashvili believes that international actors should work with women voters as a group to help them find their voice, and then the political parties will make an effort to find resources to communicate with them. The speaker gave the example of the USA, where the League of Women Voters, which was founded in 1920, fought for women's rights on a federal level. Today, the League is a nonpartisan, activism-based organisation focused on voter education. It is the best investment in building a democratic society. It is important to understand the responsibility that the political right implies, so that women do not allow others to manipulate this right. The various

achievements of the League of Women Voters were discussed as part of the international experience.

Referring to the UN Convention on Women's Rights, which deals with the exercise of political rights, Tamar Sabedashvili said that this document emphasises two spheres of life – public and private. Historically, the public sphere has been male-dominated, and the sphere of women's activities has been limited to the family, but women have fought fiercely to overcome this barrier and enter the public sphere. Women are not a homogenous segment, but for them as a general group the public space is not natural and their public activity is not welcomed and encouraged by society. There are conscious and unconscious attitudes toward women's public activity that are, on a subliminal level, already inherently critical; women face more filters in the public space than men do. Therefore, to make a difference, women must make up 30% or more of any decision-making process in order to disrupt the culture that exists in these entities. Otherwise, we should not expect that a group of women, as a minority, will achieve much change.

Consequently, according to Tamar Sabedashvili, the issue should not be considered through the prism of political parties, but through the prism of voters. Women should have opinions on a range of issues related to defense, economic development, etc., and not just those that affect them specifically.

The third speaker on the panel was **Nino Dolidze**, the Executive Director of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, who began her speech by saying that while the focus of the discussion until recently was women's political participation, it has now shifted to defining women voters as a segment, which is a very important development. The first point she emphasised was the legislation. It is important that the country's legislation is gender-neutral; it is also important that we have a history of being a tolerant legal state in relation to women, but the historical context has led to a reversal in terms of protecting the rights of women voters. According to Nino Dolidze, "gender-neutral" does not mean that the rights are exercised neutrally and equally.

Another issue on which the speaker focused her attention was related to statistics - according to the latest CEC data, women constitute about 54% of the electorate, but only 49% of them voted in the local elections of 2021, while a larger percentage of the quantitatively smaller group of male voters showed up for the elections. Regional specifics are important when discussing these

figures - the figure is lowest in Marneuli and highest in Samtskhe-Javakheti and the Imereti region. Therefore, female voters should not be viewed as a homogeneous group.

Speaking about political parties, the speaker noted that in Georgia, parties are young and weak which is the reason why they do not work segment by segment. Political parties are usually built around different segmental groups, but in Georgia they emerge around personalities and try to reach out to all electoral groups. Political parties in Georgia have a short life span, and the history of party development in the country shows that if a political party is not long established, it does not develop internal party structures. Moreover, the gender issue tends not to be mainstream. Based on her experience, Nino Dolidze noted that various organisations had to make an effort to increase the number of women in their party ranks, despite the fact that there were women members in political parties. However, the leaders do not give up their positions.

According to the speaker, segmenting voters and women and engaging with them accordingly is a pragmatic approach. Sharing her observations about the segmentation of party supporters, she said that some political parties are supported by women with higher education, others are supported by economically disadvantaged women, or by young women, etc. Political parties do not pay attention to segmentation among women and do not study their voters from that perspective. In addition to being pragmatically important, it is necessary to raise and address the needs of women. Like the previous speaker, Nino Dolidze emphasised that women are more pro-European than men, inter alia, because they have very different views about their children's education.

The last issue highlighted by the speaker is the participation of women in elections and whether they are subject to different pressures, such as in the case of election observers and coordinators. Women are more vulnerable to pressures that relate to the employment of members of their families, the safety of their children, etc. In such cases, it is easier to influence them through indirect pressure. The speaker singled out women teachers as a separate category who face specific threats and have specific needs. Consequently, they are easily instrumentalised. Such segmentation is not evident in the agenda of any political party.

In conclusion, Nino Dolidze stressed that it is important for women to learn how to present their demands to political parties, not vice versa. Political parties are not able to meet the specific demands that women have. Women's issues are rarely singled out as a separate topic in party

platforms. This is among other things, because political parties do not provide enough support to their female members to enable them to adequately address women's needs.

The last speaker on the first panel was **Tamta Mikeladze, Director of the Center for Social Justice**. According to her, the first thing that needs to be widely discussed is the background picture in the country and the new political trends that are emerging in governance that will have a direct impact on women's political participation. Signs of growing authoritarianism and polarisation make the political field aggressive, antagonistic, and emotional. Consequently, the political environment is not at all attuned to values and needs, and women cannot find their place in such an environment. Aggression and hostility flood the political field, and it becomes very difficult to create socially sensitive politics.

According to the speaker, it is noticeable that women from different political parties manage to maintain solidarity, while men do not do so well. It is interesting to observe the work of the gender council. The opposition and the government also manage to cooperate here, but this component is now in crisis, too. Authoritarian tendencies directly contribute to the marginalisation of women. On the other hand, it is obvious that conservative populism as a communication framework and language of the government is getting stronger and has a homophobic content. Tamta Mikeladze recalled Prime Minister Garibashvili's speech at the CPAC conference where he spoke about family hierarchy, which raised fears that this rhetoric could acquire a sharply anti-gender content and attack the progressive dialogues and breakthroughs that society has seen in this regard.

The positive factor, according to the speaker, is that women are at the forefront of the fight in societies that are prone to authoritarianism, such as those in Poland, Argentina, and the United States. They have created a new type of movement that has become politically important. Regarding Georgia, Tamta Mikeladze cited the examples of women's activism during the March events as well as the success achieved by mothers of children with achondroplasia.

Another problem raised by the speaker concerns the reasons for the distrust of political parties. One of the main reasons is that political parties do not switch to issues important to society. Issues of particular concern to women might include health care, access to books, access to kindergartens, poor reading skills, and sensitivity to serious illnesses. Therefore, until women see

that not only the political culture but also the content of politics is changing, it will be impossible to eliminate mistrust.

According to Tamta Mikeladze, women's organisations consider issues related to political participation and challenging stereotypes as a higher priority, but it is also important to discuss issues such as the separation of private and public space - domestic work, unpaid work, and the double burden that women face at home, having to choose between a job and the burden of care. For political parties to combat such daily challenges and respond to them, it is important that they should work constantly at the level of self-government, because democracy is not just an electoral process. Democracy must be promoted at every level.

The presentations were followed by question-and-answer sessions where the audience raised issues in the form of questions, such as pressure on certain issues from the dominant political party in the context of the upcoming elections (which political parties cannot resist and refrain from openly discussing). This creates difficulties for women politicians, who are suppressed because of their progressive ideas. Another topic of discussion was the reputational damage done to women entering politics. A suggestion was made to ask the international community to give assistance to political parties to help develop strategies to empower women involve them in electoral campaigns for the 2024 elections, and to help those who want to enter politics overcome barriers at the municipal level.

Responding to these questions, **Teona Kupunia** stressed that the issue of women's participation is seen as a uniform one when viewed through the lens of political parties because, systematically and institutionally, they adopt a similar stance. However, for women personally the problems in the capital and the regions are different – in the former there are more access to national media, more resources, etc. Infrastructural problems, such as water supply, were also stressed, because even this creates more problems for women living in the regions than for men. **Tamta Mikeladze** noted that when any kind of tension related to minority issues arises, a large number of political parties try to keep silent. However, the high level of pro-European sentiment has a positive effect on such crises, and women are very important in overcoming such problems. In such cases, women politicians, after talking about these topics, are likely to cope with dominant political discourses as well. Mutual solidarity is seen as one of the tools against the demonisation of women. **Nino Dolidze** does not expect the next elections to be content-based. Moreover, it is

becoming more difficult for civil society to educate women because the media is not oriented towards in-depth analysis and content. She noted that civil society cannot run political campaigns but will focus on political education rather than supporting political party campaigns.

Discussion during the question-and-answer session also concerned the possibility of using women politicians as a resource when interacting with voters during various projects. The vulnerability of women to pressure from ruling party activists, especially in the regions, was again raised as a problem, and ways to reduce this pressure were discussed. During this session, the importance of the presence of public entities and of decision-makers who can effectively address these issues was emphasised.

Panel 2: Women Politicians and Intraparty Democracy

May 24, 2023

Moderator:	Davit Aprasidze - Professor at Ilia State University
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salome Kandelaki - Policy Analyst, Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) • Khatia Dekanoidze - Member of Parliament, Independent MP • Ana Natsvlishvili - Member of Parliament, Lelo for Georgia • Ana Buchukuri - Member of Parliament, Gakharia for Georgia party

The panel discussion was mainly focused on the following questions:

- How does organisational structure and intraparty democracy work in terms of empowering women politicians?
- How relevant is the situation in Georgian parties on adopting women members' visions in the party agendas?
- How can political parties increase the actual involvement and efficiency of their female members in the party strategy?

In his opening remarks, moderator **Davit Aprasidze** noted that women politicians are a link connecting political parties and women voters. To enable the audience to discuss this topic more broadly, the moderator gave the floor to **Policy Analyst Salome Kandelaki of the Georgian Institute of Politics** to present the results of her analytical work before opening the discussion with the politicians.

Salome Kandelaki's policy paper concerned internal party mechanisms for promoting women's political participation and the challenges in this regard. In her introduction, she stressed that despite the existing legal and institutional mechanisms for achieving gender equality in Georgia, women's political participation remains a problem in the country. She cited a recent NDI poll showing that 56% of the population believes that women and men can equally pursue their interests in politics and stressed that the population would like to see more women in decision-

making positions. Consequently, she added, political parties should review their strategies to strengthen the gender equality component of their parties.

In her presentation, Salome Kandelaki highlighted the legal and institutional mechanisms for women's involvement in politics and spoke about how effectively they are used by political parties. She assessed the introduction of the legal mechanism of gender quotas in the Electoral Code as a positive development that led to an increase in women's representation both at the municipal level, which now stands at 24%, and at the parliamentary level, which stands at 19%. However, she added, the gender imbalance was still present and much work needed to be done to achieve equality. In terms of institutional mechanisms, she noted the effectiveness of the Permanent Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality, where deputies from both ruling and opposition parties could equally put forward initiatives. At the same time, gender equality councils established in local self-governments are ineffective due to inertia, gender insensitivity, and low awareness and understanding of the topic among the male members of these councils. Salome Kandelaki believes that political parties should significantly strengthen information campaigns in the regions in order to raise awareness of gender equality issues among the local population.

To study the individual tactics of political parties, Salome Kandelaki examined eight parliamentary parties, of which Strategy Agmashenebeli had the most gender-balanced political council with 33% female representation, while the United National Movement (UNM) was the least gender-balanced with a corresponding figure of 11%. Regarding the secretariat, the so-called executive body of political parties, only four out of eight parliamentary parties have such a body, and out of these four parties, women are represented only in the secretariat of Lelo for Georgia and, moreover, in the majority, there are four women out of its seven members. In terms of internal party mechanisms for the empowerment of women within the political parties, only four parties have such mechanisms: the Georgian Dream and the Strategy Agmashenebeli have them in the form of a women's organisation, the UNM has them in the form of the "Women's Wing Council," and Lelo for Georgia has them in the form of "12 Women's Groups." In the case of all four, the women's councils or organisations imply the creation of regional networks and the establishment of better connectivity with women voters across Georgia.

Based on interviews with representatives of these eight political parties, Salome Kandelaki identified four main barriers that women face in terms of political participation and that make it difficult for political parties to attract women. According to the speaker, the first barrier is society's lack of sympathy and trust in women politicians. It takes much more effort and time for women to gain the trust of society than for men, so when there is a choice political parties prefer to choose male candidates to run for elections. The second barrier is the refusal of families to allow their female members to engage in politics. The third factor is the low culture of distribution of domestic work between women and men, which often forces women to give up their political careers. The last factor mentioned by the speaker is society's lack of tolerance towards women, in particular in cases of bullying or physical or psychological violence, where society is more critical of women than of men.

Thus, the political analyst highlighted several key findings. The first is that women politicians more easily unite around topics in parliament; she also noted that political parties condemn discrimination against women politicians in different ways, thereby pointing to the subjectivity of parties. She noted that sensitivity and awareness of gender equality are low in the regions, and as one of the recommendations, she advised political parties to carry out gender mainstreaming awareness-raising activities there. She also shared her observation from the interviews she had conducted that the aim of women's councils is to attract women voters, not to involve them in politics. She concluded her presentation by saying that a gender quota remains the only way to make women more active in politics and to more or less maintain gender balance.

Women politicians spoke more specifically on this topic based on their own experiences. The second speaker on the panel was **independent MP Khatia Dekanoidze**. She stated at the outset that women politicians do face barriers to their participation in decision-making. Sharing her experience, she told the audience that she had long worked in the most male-dominated sector, namely the police, and was the head of the largest police department. However, after becoming a member of the UNM political council in 2019, she realised that a political party was much more sexist and misogynistic. As she explained, one of the reasons she left the UNM was the lack of internal democracy in the party. She stated boldly that today, women do not make decisions in political parties. According to her, women are involved in the decision-making process, but the final decisions are not made at the table around which women sit. The main reason for this is that

leadership positions in political parties are held mostly by men and that financial capital is in the hands of men. In her former political party, she continued, women politicians played a decorative role because they spoke well and were less conflicting.

Khatia Dekanoidze stressed the importance of women's organisations in political parties. However, according to her, women's organisations in parties are only ornaments. She believes that women's representation will remain ornamental if women do not become key decision makers in political parties. Agreeing with the first panel speaker, Tamta Mikeladze, she noted that it is very difficult for women politicians to carry out their activities, especially during elections, in such a polarised environment as in Georgia, where politics is permeated with hate speech and toxic discourse. She has gone through two elections - parliamentary and local - and according to her assessment, this is a very difficult period for women politicians, including those like her who have easy access to the media, while those who do not must find it much more difficult. Dekanoidze also spoke about the pressure women politicians feel on social media, including from family members, as well as about the instrumentalisation of women by men who use them as an object of attack. She believes the only solution may be an increase in women's participation in decision-making. She believes that the more decisions are made informally, the smaller the role of women becomes because women are rarely informal rulers. Women have a different sensibility, female rulers are communicative, and female rulers have a natural inclination to have as many women around as possible, she said. It would be more comfortable if there were more women in the Georgian parliament than there are now. She said that there is a format of cooperation among women in the Georgian Parliament, which is one of the most valuable factors to her. She noted that she would be glad if the representatives of Georgian Dream would join this format of cooperation, but unfortunately, they are not cooperating. In the case of men, the biggest problem is communication between them, whereas in the case of women there are not many such obstacles.

From Khatia Dekanoidze's perspective, institutional support is important for everyone. Based on her experience, she said that by leaving a political party, she lost institutional support. The degree of independence might be very high in this case, but there is a lack of institutional support. She named a gender quota and involvement of more women in the decision-making process as mechanisms of encouragement. She also mentioned so-called mentorship, which can be used to

empower women in the regions and may be supported by both international organisations and national politicians.

The next speaker on the panel was **Ana Natsvlishvili, a Member of Parliament from Lelo for Georgia**. She said that women's rights are one of her top political issues. According to her, when there is a discussion on the topic "women in politics" we face pretty basic problems. Most politicians simply do not understand why women politicians are singled out as a separate group and refuse to recognise that they are a political entity with different needs and concerns. Consequently, the denial of this structural inequality is the reality in which women politicians have to make their way. Some male politicians see our problems as personal rather than systemic. They believe that women have to adjust to the system, not the other way around.

Touching upon another important issue - time - Ana Natsvlishvili said that time is a very serious obstacle for women politicians. The main reason for this, she said, is the unequal distribution of domestic work. She also mentioned disorderly transportation systems and public entities. Also, time is a key resource when it comes to self-development and building the image of a woman politician, without which it is difficult to imagine achieving important goals in politics.

Intraparty democracy was a topic that Ana Natsvlishvili also stressed. According to her, political parties tend to give women a presentational role rather than a decision-making function.

Speaking about the financial inequality faced by women, Ana Natsvlishvili noted that there are no crowdfunding mechanisms that could give women politicians additional funds to develop their careers. Reputation is another important capital for women politicians, and women face yet another obstacle in the form of a lack of time, according to the representative of Lelo.

Ana Natsvlishvili concluded her speech by saying that political parties must create real and fair conditions for women politicians, not just ornamental ones. Otherwise, no viable political environment can be expected in the country.

The last speaker on the panel was **Ana Buchukuri, a Member of Parliament from Gakharia for Georgia party**. According to her, the March 2023 events clearly demonstrated the importance of

women politicians in the country's political agenda, in particular the role of women MPs in the legislature.

As Buchukuri observed, women politicians are more likely to raise the social problems and gender issues that exist in society as they are much more sensitive to the aforementioned issues than men. For some reason male politicians avoid talking about gender issues. Based on her personal experience, she said that women voters are a special segment of the electorate and are distinguished by their activism.

At the end of her speech, the representative of Gakharia for Georgia party stressed the importance of involving young women in politics. According to her, seeing the attacks on female leaders young people do not want to connect their future to politics although this is badly needed.

Panel 3: Women's Political Engagement and Increased Participation

May 24, 2023

Moderator:	Levan Tsutskiridze - Executive Director, Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD)
Speakers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mariam Kobaladze - Researcher, Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC Georgia) • Dr. Sonja Schiffers - Director, Heinrich Böll Foundation South Caucasus Regional Office • Tamar Bagratia - Gender Expert • Elene Rusetskaia - Director, Women's Information Center (WIC)

The panel discussion focused on the following key questions:

- What are the attitudes of women voters in Georgia?
- What steps should the parties take to ensure more active engagement with the women supporters?
- Except for the political parties, how can civil society empower women's narratives and their political engagement?
- What are the international experiences to motivate female voters and what can the Georgian parties and CSO share in that regard?

According to the **Executive Director of EECMD, Levan Tsutskiridze**, GeoDem conferences have already become an integral part of Georgian democracy, and it is important that they continue. It is also important that society, which is interested in meaningful discussions on important topics, has the possibility to do so. It is also part of political socialisation, allowing people with different views to gather around a table or a panel to discuss and talk. He believes that such platforms are important to maintain civility amidst political confrontation.

The moderator noted that little has changed in terms of women's engagement, which is a problem for everyone: it is a problem for political parties, it is an issue for donors and partners to discuss,

and it is a problem for Georgian democracy, because we will not make tangible progress without proper co-participation in political, economic, and other issues. He was also critical of organisations, including his own, in this regard because he believes that methods, approaches, and strategies need to change. He no longer has any illusions that training members of Georgian political parties to understand that women's participation in politics is a good thing will lead to any positive change.

The first speaker on the last panel was **Mariam Kobaladze, researcher at the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC Georgia)**. She presented the results of a public opinion survey which included gender issues. The data she presented was mainly taken from the database of the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC Georgia).

According to her, of all voters registered by the CEC for the 2021 elections, 54% - that is, more than 1,800,000 - were women, which is a very large number for Georgia. In terms of numbers, there is no big difference between the turnout of women and men, but since there are more women registered, the turnout of men is higher in percentage terms. Despite such a large number of female voters, women are not sufficiently represented in the legislature. She showed the audience the figures, according to which of the 50 Sakrebulo members in Tbilisi, only 13 (26%) are women; in Kutaisi, the corresponding figures are 21 and 8 (38%), and in Batumi, they are 35 and 10 (28%), respectively. As she explained, in terms of dynamics, these are rising figures and there had not been such a large number of women before. According to Mariam Kobaladze, society would like to see an increase in the representation of women, with 62% of respondents thinking that the best ratio between men and women in the parliament would be 50/50. The number of people who think so has almost doubled in the past decade. She said that the gender difference on the majority of issues can hardly be observed, save on the issue of gender representation in the parliament.

The CRRC's 2021 survey of young respondents shows that most young people (43%) favor having more women in politics, and only 11% do not care. There is also a difference in young people's responses by gender: most women believe that women's participation in politics is important. According to Kobaladze, when asked what changes increased participation of women in politics would bring, most young people answered that the rights of women and men would become equal and they would have equal opportunities. In addition, most believe that it would also

improve the enforcement of laws prohibiting sexual and domestic violence. Forty-four percent of young people also believe that more women's participation would contribute to conflict resolution in peacebuilding processes. She noted that the 2021 data showed a very low desire among youth to engage in and participate in politics. Only about one-third of young people were interested in Georgian politics, and thus most young people do not understand Georgian politics. Based on the results, she concluded that participation of youth in politics is limited mostly to voting in elections.

Kobaladse drew parallels and said that the CRRC's 2020 study of online violence against female majoritarian candidates identified on Facebook confirms the view expressed at the previous panel about the existence of a toxic environment in the social space. She said the study also found that online violence is distinctly gendered, with women more likely to be the targets of comments and insults about their personal and sexual lives, as well as admonitions to go home, take care of the family, etc. The speaker highlighted an interesting observation: when female candidates were insulted, the insults were directed at them personally, whereas in the case of male majoritarian candidates, the insults were directed at their wives or mothers. A study by the speaker's organisation found that, according to the average ratio of online violence, women are assaulted three times as often as men. She believes that online violence is a serious barrier to women's increased participation in politics.

The next speaker on the panel was Elene Rusetskaia, the founder of the Women's Information Center (WIC). According to her, statistics on gender distribution among voters had been missing from the CEC website for a long time. It is thanks to the efforts of women's organisations that this data is no longer calculated manually. She also noted that the work of the women's organisation has brought results such as the gender quota legislation, for which six attempts had to be made to push it to adoption. She said she was not happy with the result, but at least the numbers have increased and some progress has been made.

She added proudly that the thwarting of the Russian law was the result of everyone's efforts, and women were one of the main driving forces. According to her, women have tremendous power, and they were able to achieve results, but in response we thus created an anti-gender movement. Therefore, she believes that today society must protect the results that have been achieved so that they are not lost to the anti-gender movements. As for how to do that, she said: "We've seen that

unlike in big cities, women in the villages are scared and afraid to even write their opinions. Living under fear is very bad." So, the way out is to strengthen the work on the political and economic empowerment of women, which primarily means self-confidence, monetary and economic empowerment, and power, which will lead to an increase in their motivation to engage in politics.

According to the speaker, it is important for politicians and particularly decision-makers to circulate in the countryside, at least for a few days, to find out what the real needs of people are, how much they understand the language that politicians speak, and how much the perceptions of politicians correspond to the reality.

The next speaker on the panel was **gender expert Tamar Bagratia**. Based on data from the CEC and Geostat, she said that although quantitatively more women come to the polls, the turnout of women is much lower than that of men voters. For example, in 2021, this difference was 5.3% in favor of men. The corresponding figures were 9% in 2020, the highest rate; 6.25% in 2014; 5.6% in 2016; 6.07% in 2017; and 5.1% in 2018. One of the reasons for this, according to her analysis, is the feminisation of migration, meaning that a significant portion of emigrants are women; however, she added, there is no definitive information on this yet.

Moreover, if you look at these figures for municipalities, the situation is simply catastrophic, she said. In some electoral districts in Georgia, women's turnout is even 20% lower than that of men. This is such a huge difference that it requires additional work in these municipalities. As she found out from the data, the biggest difference is observed in Mtskheta, Gardabani, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Akhalkalaki, Chokhatauri, Zugdidi, Keda, Kobuleti, Khulo, Khelvachauri, and Sagarejo. The passivity of women in the listed municipalities was more than 10% compared to men. As she explained, this indicates a certain geographical logic, as these areas have compact settlements of ethnic and religious minorities. Lack of awareness among women living in mountainous regions is also an additional problem.

What matters, she said, is not only how many women go to the polls but also how independently they make their choices and whether their choices express autonomy, since women's political will, especially in the regions, is influenced by husbands, employers, representatives of self-government bodies, and informal leaders in the families.

According to Bagratia, statistically, around one million women, on average, do not go to the polls, which means that such a huge number of voters do not participate in, for example, the legitimisation of parliament.

The last speaker on the panel was **Sonja Schiffers**, the Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation South Caucasus Regional Office. She shared with the audience her experiences during her first visit to Georgia as a foreigner. She said she was pleasantly surprised by all the influential women, for example, in civil society and the work they do. Also, when in 2017, as part of the OSCE mission, she observed the local elections, she saw that almost all election commissioners were women and was impressed by such active participation of women in politics. In parallel, she said that although women are very strong, this strength has not translated into their political power. For example, representation is very important, and the introduction of a quota system is an important step to increase it, but in her view, it is not big enough. A mere representation is not enough, she said, it must be substantial.

She also spoke about the experience of her foundation, saying that for many years the foundation has been trying to support the perception of women in society, the way women see themselves, and to support so-called feminist influences in Georgia. At the same time, Georgian feminism has a long history since the first feminists lived in the 1860s. They founded the first feminist newspaper during the First Republic, maintained contacts with Western feminists, and introduced their practices to Georgia. Kato Mikeladze, for example, founded the Women's League in western Georgia. She was, of course, aware that back then in the Soviet Union, active women, and not only women, were severely restricted and repressed. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a commercialisation of women's movements, such as Women's Day on March 8. However, in Georgia, especially since 2010, one can observe women's activism on bringing back March 8 as a day marking the struggle for rights. According to her, this was evident in the demonstrations in March this year.

The speaker also touched on the instrumentalisation of women's rights. She spoke, for example, about Poland, where the ruling party tries to attract women voters through social policies and programs, and about women's councils, which are sometimes set up, not from grass-roots levels, but only to give the impression that there is gender representation in political parties.

According to her, it should also be noted that women's political engagement is hindered by domestic work. For example, it is difficult to attend a political meeting if you do not know with whom to leave the children. Political party membership and activities require a lot of time and work, even at night and on weekends. It is very chaotic, and when you have children, it is very difficult to do so.

After the key speakers finished their presentations, the audience was given the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Several questions were posed to the panelists. The first of these concerned why we do not celebrate the fact that we have a woman president; is it not important that a woman politician has achieved this position? If so, does that not call into question the effectiveness of the quota system in empowering women in general? Another question from the audience concerned polarisation and how much polarisation could be reduced if there were more women in representative bodies. It was also asked whether the panelists in general saw how women from civil society or politics could contribute to reducing polarisation. Another question concerned the social marginalisation of women and solutions to this problem. A journalist asked whether issues such as democratisation and women's rights were discussed in schools and how this could be strengthened to reach young people on a large-scale and in a systematic way rather than episodically. A politician also asked what the basis was for Tamar Bagratia's statistics that about one million women did not show up at the polls and whether the migration of women had anything to do with this topic, in particular the huge difference in turnout between women and men for the elections.

Answering the questions, Sonia Schifers said that lately she, and not only she, has become a supporter of Salome Zourabichvili. According to her, the reason for the attitude towards Salome Zourabichvili is because it is hard to change attitudes towards someone who did not come to politics, so to speak, on an independent platform. However, she said that Zourabichvili was a high-ranking and experienced politician even before becoming president. In her opinion, it is wrong to link this particular issue to that of quotas because women tend to be evaluated more critically than men, and quotas will help increase the representation of women.

Asked about the statistics, Tamar Bagratia said that based on CEC data, 1,327,000 women did not show up for the 2018 elections, 1,524,000 women for the 2017 elections, 946,698 women for the

2016 elections, and 1,112,603 women for the 2014 elections. She also said that when data that can be compared to migration by gender becomes available it will be possible to explain what impact gender migration has had. According to her, today there is a low turnout of emigrants, as well as a very low turnout of women emigrants, at polling stations opened abroad for elections.

Other questions were answered by **Elene Rusetskaya**, who noted that the country celebrated the inauguration of Salome Zurbishvili. As for the defenders of women's rights, they celebrated it statistically because it was on the record that the country had its first female president. It was a huge achievement for the country. She also said that women are naturally and professionally willing to mediate in various processes, including peacebuilding, if there is ground to do so. There is also a chosen method where “we bring all the political parties together and prepare women to ask questions of the leaders of all the parties on issues that are important to them and listen to the answers.” She added that it is fundamentally important for the civil society sector to work with all political parties, not just a few in isolation. So, this point is very important, she said.

Mariam Kobaladze explained in her answer that opinion polls do not show a big difference between the responses of female and male respondents. However, the last survey conducted in March showed one interesting aspect: fewer women said than men that Georgia must have close economic and political ties with Russia; this is noteworthy. After the Q&A session, the moderator summarised the panel discussion. He expressed hope that women’s representation will increase notably in the forthcoming elections and that their engagement will become more meaningful.

