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COUNTRY CASE STUDY: GEORGIA

BUILDING INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE:

Women's Political Participation in Conflict-affected Georgia

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Women's Political Participation in Conflict-affected Georgia

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CONTENTS

Acronyms	6
Introduction	7
Georgia's Armed and Social Conflicts	8
Inclusive Peacebuilding and Governance in Georgia	9
Assessing Women's Political Participation in Georgia	10
Women in Political Parties	10
Women in Local- and National-level Politics	10
Women in Civil Society	10
Four Key Challenges to Women's Political Participation and Representation in Georgia	12
Socio-economic Obstacles to Political Participation	12
National Stereotypes, Cultural Attitudes and Family Values	13
Lack of Awareness and Demand for Women's Participation	13
Violence, Problematic Masculine Identities and Subordination of Women	14
Conclusion	15
Recommendations for EU Support to Women's Political Participation in Georgia	16

ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EUSRs	EU Special Representatives
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
NAPs	National Action Plans
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PA	OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
PACE	Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution

INTRODUCTION

Georgia's complex challenges include ethno-nationalist protracted conflicts and weak democratic governance. While women have been primary actors in providing family income and actively rebuilding the social fabric, as well as a driving force in civil society, they remain markedly disenfranchised in political leadership and decision-making.

The Georgian parliament's ratification in March 2010 of a Law on Gender Equality presents a potentially invaluable opportunity for Georgia to make strides in democratisation, and to recognise and advance women's contribution to peacebuilding at a crucial moment in the country's history. The urgency of conflict issues has frequently been used to de-prioritise the area of women's participation. This is misleading and ultimately counter-productive. Women's greater participation in politics in post-conflict Georgia could form the heart of true reform, helping to significantly increase the culture of inclusivity in Georgian political life. In turn, this has the potential to have an impact on the management of inter-ethnic and national tensions.

This briefing note is based on a report by the Cultural and Humanitarian Foundation "Sukhumi", presenting research carried out in February and March 2010. Seventy-two representatives of political and civil society organisations were interviewed in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Senaki, Khobi and Ozurgeti. This report aims to provide a deeper understanding of the practical challenges that women face in both articulating and addressing their specific concerns in areas pertinent to UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and offers recommendations to enhance women's political participation in Georgia.

GEORGIA'S ARMED AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia's declaration of independence in 1991 was followed by armed conflict with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some 220,000 people remain displaced from those conflicts to this day.¹ UN- and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)-led peace processes made little progress in resolving the conflicts and, despite periodic flare-ups of hostilities, they came to be referred to as 'frozen' conflicts. However, in August 2008 a renewal of hostilities with the intervention of Russian troops resulted in the displacement of a further 26,000 people. This was followed, soon after, by the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation.

Beyond the separatist military confrontations, the country faces a number of other complex conflict risks including marginalised minority populations and poverty in rural regions. Georgia struggles to build a system of governance through which political, ethnic, social, regional and other differences can be mediated in a peaceful and inclusive manner, and as yet has not experienced a peaceful transfer of power through the electoral process.²

Post-independence de-industrialisation and unemployment contributed to plummeting socio-economic conditions and increasingly gendered marginalisation and impoverishment, placing greater stresses on society and on women in particular. As well as constituting the majority of those displaced and suffering the violence and trauma of war, women have become primarily responsible for household livelihoods, taking up agriculture and informal labour in order to survive.

1 About 6 percent of the population. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2009). 'Protection of IDPs in Georgia: A gap analysis'. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/4ad827f59.pdf>

2 The current president, Mikheil Saakashvili, came to power through popular and peaceful protest against President Shevardnadze in 2003, known as the Rose Revolution. The first popularly elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was forced to leave the country after a coup d'état in 1992.

INCLUSIVE PEACEBUILDING AND GOVERNANCE IN GEORGIA

Effective and sustainable peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts involves the long-term process of building capacity and strengthening institutions and culture within society to manage and resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner. The legitimacy and sustainability of governance institutions hinges on the extent to which these institutions are adhering to the principles of inclusive and participatory justice and rule of law. Failure to include and represent the full diversity of a society in political decision-making tends to undermine the peacebuilding process in conflict-affected situations such as Georgia's.

Gender equality and women's political participation are important markers of inclusive peacebuilding and governance.³ This point has been recognised with the adoption of UNSCR 1325, which urges the international community to include women's perspectives, priorities and capacities in peacebuilding processes. The importance of the resolution is that it establishes that women's participation in peacebuilding is critical to rendering peacebuilding efforts more effective and sustainable. As such, UNSCR 1325 is a critical instrument to ensure that women are included and represented in peacebuilding and decision-making at all levels in society.

UNSCR 1325 and, in particular, the principles of inclusive peacebuilding and governance have direct relevance in Georgia. A cursory assessment reveals that principles of non-discrimination and equality of all citizens are enshrined in the Georgian constitution and relevant legislation. In addition, in 1994 Georgia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Since then, Georgia has worked steadily towards the development of state structures and mechanisms for gender equality. This includes several National Action Plans (NAPs), the establishment of various gender equality commissions and the introduction of new gender equality policies. In March 2010 the parliament of Georgia passed the so-called Gender Equality Legislation, which provides for the establishment of a national women's machinery, the enhancement of women's security, equality in the labour market and the strengthening of women's political participation. Institutional mechanisms to support women's inclusion and participation in peacebuilding and governance are nominally in place. However, the question is how institutional provisions can be deployed to ensure that these principles are translated into reality. A closer look at the nature and extent of women's participation in politics reveals some of the lingering challenges that need to be addressed.

³ A principle enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 25; and specifically regarding women: CEDAW, Articles 7, 8 and 14.

ASSESSING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN GEORGIA

WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES

Despite evidence that women have an equal interest in political issues to men, political parties fail to include women. During election campaigns, women constitute the administrative and practical workforce of political parties – mobilising support, checking voter lists, conducting door-to-door canvassing and performing secretarial duties. In the last parliamentary election (2008), women accounted for 28 percent of the party lists of all the political parties. Yet, no party put a woman at the top of the list and, even more tellingly, out of the 180 political parties in the country, only four are led by women.⁴ Statistics from 2008 reveal that one party put three women in the top ten; three parties had women in the top five; one party included two women; eight included only one and two had an all-male list. As summed up by one interviewee: 'the women do all the dirty work behind the scenes during the electoral campaign ... but they rarely figure in the top ten candidates on party lists'.

None of the 10 parties studied⁵ has a clear policy on gender equality and women's participation, nor do they use gender-sensitive approaches in their activities. Occasionally, party statements mention domestic violence and increasing participation. David Gamkrelidze in his 2008 presidential election campaign stated that 'real equal opportunities and equality of the sexes should be a major resource for the development of democracy and the Georgian economy'. Nevertheless, they are sporadic and declarative rather than practical. Even the constitution of the recently formed Women's Party fails to suggest mechanisms for women's promotion to leadership roles, despite supporting women's participation through research, training, seminars and conferences.

WOMEN IN LOCAL- AND NATIONAL-LEVEL POLITICS

In a recent survey for Transparency International Georgia, 64 percent agreed with the statement that women should have strong representation in parliament. Yet significant numbers – 23 percent of women and 26 percent of men – think that parliament is 'not the place' for women. In the 2006 local government elections, 201 out of 1,743 (11.5 percent) elected officials were women. Nine out of 130 parliamentarians currently are women, two of which are new members of parliament due to rotation in the ruling party; this is a downturn from 2004, when women accounted for 17 percent, and even from 1995 when the figure was 10 percent. A small number of women have been appointed to government roles, yet out of eighteen ministers only one is a woman – the Minister of Correction and Legal Assistance. The Georgian Security Council is also headed by a woman.

WOMEN IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Women were prominent actors in street demonstrations demanding Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union, in street actions preceding the "Rose Revolution" and in the post-conflict mass protests of October–November

4 These are prominent parties and elite political figures whose careers benefited from the Soviet system: former Foreign Minister Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement – United Georgia), Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way), Guguli Magradze (Women's Party) and Irina Sarishvili (Hope). Eka Beselia recently left the Movement for United Georgia and created a social movement.

5 United National Movement; Christian Democratic Party; Republican Party; New Rights; Our Georgia – Free Democrats; Labour Party; Women's Party "For Justice and Equality"; Conservative Party; Our Country; Democratic Movement – United Georgia.

2007 calling for early elections. Women contribute prominently to civil society,⁶ comprising 58.1 percent of the total workforce of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Tbilisi, and 63.8 percent of regional NGOs; 59.2 percent of NGOs are headed by women.⁷ The problem lies in the discrepancy between their activities and their representation in formal decision-making bodies. While women have developed this niche role partly due to the closed nature of politics, their prevalence in civil society has led to compartmentalising women in this sector, creating assumptions that “the place” for women’s public voice is in civil society rather than in political leadership, and de facto curtailing aspirations for other roles.

6 <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2008/08/georgia-womens-participation-in.html>

7 N. Sumbadze (2008). *Gender and society: Georgia*. Available at http://undp.org.ge/files/24_425_824113_gender&society2008.pdf. It should be noted that, in contrast to other parts of the former Soviet Union, NGOs in Georgia play a more social than political-oppositional role since the former “democratic opposition” have been in power after the Rose Revolution.

FOUR KEY CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IN GEORGIA

Neither the numbers of women currently in formal political roles nor the policies of political parties indicate that equality of participation is increasing in Georgia, despite women's presence in public life at more administrative levels. In addition to assessing the current state of women's political participation in Georgia, the research report by the Cultural and Humanitarian Foundation "Sukhumi" points towards a number of challenges to women trying to gain political prominence and exert meaningful influence on decision-making processes. These challenges fall into four broad categories:

SOCIO-ECONOMIC OBSTACLES TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The most frequently cited restrictions on women's participation in Georgia's public life were socio-economic pressures, which include lack of time, childcare burdens, lack of financial resources, limited motivation, opportunities and capacity.⁸ These constraints are generally attributed to the changes in the socio-economic role and position of women after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet period, women had access to education, childcare and employment at all levels in most roles (although it is frequently noted that decision-making was still de facto conducted by men). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent process of de-industrialisation sharply decreased the availability of "men's work" and thus their role as economic providers. Women quickly took on the role of economic providers for their families by engaging in petty trading and subsistence agriculture, which has reinforced the sexual division of labour, whereby women are primarily engaged in labour-intensive, informal, low-paying work rather than official employment. This is reflected in their share of the official workforce: more men (63 percent) than women (48 percent) were employed in the formal economy and more men (45.7 percent) than women (33.6 percent) actively sought work.⁹ Despite their contribution to the household income, however, men still head the family and control decision-making, often including the distribution of the family budget even when they are not the primary breadwinners. The gendered division of labour and power reinforces women's restricted access to public life and official employment, which, in turn, impacts negatively on women's opportunities to participate in politics.

Overall, the shift in women's economic roles in the post-Soviet era has resulted in an increase in their workload, while the disintegration of social protection mechanisms has placed an additional burden on women. In sum, the labour-intensive and informal nature of women's work isolates them from the public and political sphere, which is further compounded by a lack of time and lack of resources to participate in politics. Many women therefore note the lack of a coherent state policy and mechanisms to improve women's participation in the national workforce (let alone politics) either by relieving socio-economic pressures or creating opportunities such as employment training.

8 Some survey respondents suggested that 'When the standard of living improves for citizens, and external threats have been neutralised, then Georgia will no longer have the problem of female political passivity. Women's representation in politics will grow in relation to the growth and strengthening of the country'.

9 N. Sumbadze (2008). Op. cit. p.73.

NATIONAL STEREOTYPES, CULTURAL ATTITUDES AND FAMILY VALUES

The politics of new nation-statehood has contributed to a return and entrenchment of gender stereotypes that place women firmly in the private sphere. With regard to women's participation in politics, opinion surveys highlight the problematic nature of existing socio-cultural attitudes. For instance, these surveys indicate, on the one hand, that women need the same qualities as men in order to compete successfully in politics. Those that were common to both sexes included education, intelligence, inspiring confidence and rhetorical skills. On the other hand, several attributes expected of good politicians were those less expected of women and those which society generally discourages in women. These include 'being recognisable' and 'having authority', 'prepared to go in to battle', 'being able to mobilise social support' and 'acceptability for society'. The term 'social acceptability' suggests they should fit in with traditional gender roles, i.e. those that make them less competitive in the political arena.

In addition, many consider 'passivity' the main reason for gender inequality, yet, at the same time, active women are looked upon negatively and male members of society frequently discourage or prohibit women from participating in the public sphere and political activities. For instance, and as described above, political parties' attitudes towards gender equality and women's interests illustrate some of the stereotypes of women as mother and carer. Perpetuation of such attitudes can also be attributed to women themselves. Women often play key roles in reconstituting traditionalist ideologies, for example, through their active roles in the return of religion.

Dominant stereotypes are not questioned and their impact on women's marginalisation not fully understood, which impedes societal support for women candidates and political support for measures which would improve gender equality. Political parties tend to refer to women in their reproductive and caring roles, as part of nationalistic family policy. In a characteristic example, the Traditionalists – Our Georgia and Women's Party mention social guarantees for pregnant women and families with large numbers of children in order to encourage an increase in birth rate in Georgia. In sum, rhetoric is divided between declarations of inclusivity and promotion of the traditional public-private divide with strict gender roles for women. Practical steps to actively reach out and include women in Georgian politics are yet to be taken.

LACK OF AWARENESS AND DEMAND FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

A distinct lack of awareness and motivation to increase women's participation is evident at the political level as well as in wider society. The prevalence of stereotypes described above goes some way to explaining this. Around one-third of those interviewed for a research report noted that equality does not exist, although this was not always negatively assessed.¹⁰ There is a genuine lack of understanding why women should be more involved and better represented in politics. This question is usually interpreted as "what will they improve?" rather than the broader argument of inclusivity being positive for the quality of governance. A participant of a visit to Latvia said, 'we were surprised by the gender situation in the country. The town mayor was a woman and leadership positions were nearly all held by women. But we did not notice anything remarkable about their activities ... we got the impression that it was a kind of experiment which had failed!'

The former speaker of parliament, acting president and now oppositional figure and head of her own political party refuses to campaign 'as a woman'. She publicly maintains that people should be elected on 'equal grounds' and her Democratic Movement – United Georgia party gives no consideration to any aspect of gender policy. Similar opinions were elicited during research: 'In a highly competitive process conditions should be equal', and they use individual examples to prove that occasionally women can be competitive. These are accompanied by statements to the effect that 'in the modern world' there is no discrimination against women, indicating widespread lack of awareness of structural and cultural barriers to women's development.

This lack of awareness prevents women's participation by failing to acknowledge and address structural inequalities which pose barriers, such as their care-giving and socio-economic burdens; insecurities from domestic violence or discrimination in judicial processes; the prevalence of stereotypes which inhibit girls' aspirations to

¹⁰ N. Sumbadze (2008). Op. cit.

decision-making roles; and attitudes which equate physical power and masculinity with leadership. The lack of understanding across society and the structural challenges to women's participation indicate why earlier mechanisms established to address gender equality have been ineffective.

VIOLENCE, PROBLEMATIC MASCULINE IDENTITIES AND SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN

The violence and lawlessness permeating the environment (as well as need for protection from it), particularly in the 1990s, has bolstered the rhetoric of traditional masculine gender identities and strength as leadership qualities.¹¹ Exacerbated nationalism and authoritarianism driven by war were accompanied by a reassertion of the traditional, subordinate role of women and “hyper-masculine” role for men, focusing primarily on physical strength and the power to exert authority. Simultaneously, men felt their status diminished by unemployment; this exacerbated an unspoken sense of shame at having “lost the war”, and post-conflict stress and trauma. Displacement and male unemployment has led to a rise in male depression, alcohol consumption, inactivity and crime increasing the pressures on women. This has been manifested in an increase in domestic violence.¹² Many displaced women also suffered directly from sexual violence committed during the armed conflict. The lack of recourse to justice and impunity afforded to perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence create a social acceptance that enforces women's subordinate role. While this subordinate role and the dominance of male physical power is unquestioned, women will be impeded from competing for leadership.

11 Film culture in Georgia in the late-Soviet period celebrated the “outlaw”: “gang leader” was an aspiration for young boys in the 1990s. This has been removed by the new politics since the Rose Revolution when armed gangs were mostly eradicated. Nevertheless, it played a role in creating respect for a form of “hyper-masculinity” in the 1990s, emphasising physical strength and aggressiveness, coinciding with the conflict period in which masculine combat roles were honoured.

12 No precise data on sexual and gender-based violence among people of concern to UNHCR is available. However, profiling exercises, participatory assessments and NGO reports indicate that such violence is rife in all parts of society, including among refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). See <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48d2e6>

CONCLUSION

Nearly 20 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Georgia has generated a more labour-intensive work environment for women while removing state social support. Women have assumed key roles in ensuring the survival of their families and have suffered violence both during the armed conflicts and in the domestic environment. Women are politically active as leaders in civil society and provide the administrative and organisational backbone to political parties and government administration; however, traditional gender stereotypes disfavour women's participation in politics. Women are strikingly underrepresented in formal decision-making and political leadership positions. Socio-economic pressures and societal acceptance of women's physical and social subordination are also major challenges. Moreover, traditional gender roles function as an impediment to women's participation and representation in the political domain. Entrenched gender stereotypes are a powerful means of curtailing the political aspirations of women due to the stigma of not fulfilling their family responsibilities.

The research of the Cultural and Humanitarian Foundation "Sukhumi" indicates a need for more inclusive governance in Georgia and also greater gender equality at the political level and within society at large. Although gender equality is enshrined within the national legislation, and a number of institutional mechanisms to advance gender equality have been established, women remain underrepresented in politics. Their continued exclusion from political institutions remains a troubling indicator for sustainable peacebuilding in Georgia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EU SUPPORT TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN GEORGIA

Real progress in the area of women's political participation in Georgia will require a more concerted, results-oriented approach. Although national stakeholders in Georgia should take the lead in this, external actors such as the EU are in the position to bolster national efforts to increase women's participation. The Comprehensive Approach to the EU implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820 on Women, Peace and Security (2008) outlines a common EU approach to implementing the two UNSCRs in its activities. With regard to strengthening women's political participation in Georgia, potential entry points for the EU are to be found at two levels:

Promote increased participation of women in political decision-making and government bodies through its engagement with state institutions and actors in Georgia.

- Capitalise on the opportunity presented by the new Law on Gender Equality introduced in March 2010. This could include providing assistance to the Council for Gender Equality to develop an NAP in order to strengthen women's political participation. The NAP should include specific measures, actions, timelines, benchmarks and accountability mechanisms, and would need to be accompanied by public awareness-raising activities. The provision of technical support and capacity-building for relevant ministries represents another intervention strategy to ensure that the provisions under the new legislation will be implemented.
- Use political and diplomatic opportunities to promote the inclusion of women in decision-making through the EU's interactions with government officials, parliamentarians and ministries such as the Ministry for European Integration. Georgia's positive outlook towards the EU can be instrumentalised through parliamentary exchanges with MEPs, Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA). In line with the EU commitment to UNSCR 1325, implementation through the Comprehensive Approach, the conduct of high-level consultations with the government of Georgia, the European Commission delegation and EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) should explicitly consider gender perspectives and encourage women's participation, in particular in the Geneva discussions. Awareness about the impact of actions should be maintained: neglecting to consult women's groups or insensitivity to the gender dimension of actions and policies can reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.
- Provide support to political parties to develop practical policies, which will be both gender-responsive (for example, on tackling domestic violence, sexual violence and discrimination) and introduce mechanisms for better gender representation (such as maternity support, social support or return-to-work training). This should start with the ruling United National Movement and the president as well as high-profile opposition. Parties should be motivated to "compete" on this point.

Support community-based women's groups and organisations as well as other non-state actors in their efforts to address societal prejudice against women's political participation.

- Address the prevalence of gender stereotyping and gendered violence through confronting the representation of gender roles in the educational system, especially in textbooks and by teachers. Develop educational tools to counter stereotypes that tackle gender stereotypes of hyper-masculinity and subordinate femininity. These tools should tackle both male attitudes and motivate girls. Follow up on the concrete recommendations in the CEDAW Report 2006 in this respect. Work with the media to tackle overt violence and sexism, especially

the way women are portrayed as inferior. Improve social acceptance of women's new roles and positive representation by working with religious and social leaders.

- Assist society to articulate and raise awareness of the need for more inclusive politics and a subsequent demand for greater participation of women. Women's associations provide a good platform for supporting society to articulate current power imbalances which disadvantage women, but broader society – especially those parts which are least likely to tackle this issue – must address the questions of women's roles in contemporary Georgia. Supporting this process may include developing public information campaigns and debates in schools, councils and in the media; working with the media on good and bad practice for representing gender issues and training for journalists; development of teacher-training material on gender equality, curriculum development and institutionalisation of support to girls in their educational and professional development; roundtables and public discussions including religious and community leaders to develop societal value for women's specific responsibilities, gender awareness and support for women political leaders. As well as increasing societal acceptance of women displaying leadership attributes, opening up public debate on what constitutes good leadership generally may lead to a reassessment of attitudes that equate masculinity with leadership.
- Build capacity and encourage participation of women in political processes by broadening women's understanding of the Georgian political and electoral system; support them to be more publicly active and increase women's access to, and currency in, political spaces (beyond civil society). Develop targeted information, incentives and provide capacity-building for female candidates including training, accessing resources, leadership and building wide public support.

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