

Gender Politics in Georgia

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Abstract

Achieving gender equality on the way to building a democratic state has been challenging for Georgia. Although the Georgian government has made some positive attempts to elaborate and implement a gender equality strategy and has adopted international obligations like the other South Caucasus countries, it must make a greater commitment to ensure gender equality and combat all kinds of discrimination against women.

No Democracy Without Equality

After the Rose Revolution, Georgia pursued a number of reforms with the goal of inculcating democratic values into society. Achieving democracy requires implementing numerous mechanisms and practices including establishing gender equality in which men and women have equal rights and opportunities. Civil society groups have gradually introduced gender equality into the political discourse and placed it on the list of required reforms; however, along with many other emerging social problems and political tensions, this issue has not received priority attention. It is essential to realize that gender equality is an explicit goal for democracy-building processes and institutions and a formal and declarative character cannot result into substantive gender equality.

Transition and the Local Context

Since independence, Georgia has made efforts to improve the situation of women; however, this work must be seen against the larger political context. For more than 15 years, Georgia has been struggling with the challenges and difficulties of the transition period on its way towards building a democratic state. Indeed, independence brought considerable freedoms and opportunities, but at the same time the country experienced political and economic uncertainties, including two unresolved ethnic conflicts that have affected both women and men in Georgia. These processes including the high level of migration, unemployment and poverty have had an especially negative impact on the status and condition of many women.

Women's status and rights in Georgia are deeply affected by the local context, traditions and cultural specificities. First of all, patriarchal traditions and behavior patterns persist in Georgia, especially in the rural areas, influencing the private and public spheres and the division of roles among women and men as well as attitudes about their respective places in society. In this regard, male supremacy becomes grounds for unequal treatment and discrimination against women. What's more, male-dominated households give women very little voice to express their opinions and little space to act.

Deeply rooted stereotypes that favor men over women are common everywhere in Georgia. Additionally, the rise of militarism and religious fundamentalism create especially powerful threats to the freedom and rights of women. All these contextual factors are fundamental in establishing an unequal power distribution between the genders and create a strong basis for gender inequality.

While the transition has taken a heavy toll on both women and men, women have found strategies to cope with it. Considering their background and work experience in such traditional female professions as education and health care, women easily became active in civil society by establishing and joining volunteer organizations and addressing a variety of social issues that are important for women, men and children. Although women started undertaking a number of roles in society, this new activism could not change their status in the family and society. This period witnessed the birth of a number of women's NGOs. Today, there are 200 officially registered organizations, out of which 80 are active throughout the country. Women's rights defenders have won some victories, however, their activism has been fragmented and, unfortunately, the women's movement has failed to consolidate into strong organizations, prepare effective initiatives, and communicate its concerns to the broader public.

The governments of post-communist countries, including Georgia, sought to pursue women's advancement and gender mainstreaming in policy and practice after the 4th World Conference on Women and after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action. During the newly-independent state's difficult political and economic transition in the late 1990s, the Georgian government sought to address women's issues by establishing the first state institution for the advancement of women in 1998. However, this attempt had a formal character and could not bring any substantive change or real positive development to the status and rights of women in Georgia.

Georgia expressed its readiness to fight discrimination against women and support the establishment of gender equality when it joined the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW) in 1994, thereby giving hope to many for a real commitment followed up by concrete steps for achieving greater gender equality in the country. In line with CEDAW, Georgia is expected to fulfill obligations endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 for increasing women's role in peace-building and conflict transformation and the Millennium Development Goal #3 on Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women, by 2015. However, women's and civil society groups in Georgia have always criticized these efforts, claiming that the state is not sufficiently committed to accomplishing its international or domestic obligations.

Emerging Issues for Women in Georgia

Women in Georgia face a reality filled with contradictions. On one hand, they have access to education, work actively in civil society organizations, and run small businesses, but, on the other, society still considers the major duty for a woman to be taking care of her children and household. Although lately there has been a shift in gender roles and women are starting to become their families' main breadwinners, this situation has not changed men's roles and the division of labor in households. Such traditional practices and attitudes leave little room for women to actively engage and advance in the public sphere.

Women are especially underrepresented in all types of politics—at both the local and federal levels, and in the legislative and executive branches. At present, after the democratic reforms witnessed during recent years, women MPs comprise just 6% of the entire Parliament and there are three women ministers in the government. Women's rights activists support the idea of introducing mechanisms that would result in greater gender balance in the relevant legislation on political parties and the electoral code; In this case, political will, ensured by the adoption of a gender equality law in March 2010, could help address these issues.

Women are largely employed in unpaid jobs and the Labor Code requires significant improvements in regard to women.¹ What's more, there is no national strategy for mainstreaming women in the labor market or giving them opportunities to overcome poverty and engage in the formal economy. Indeed, many studies show that the participation of both women and men in formal paid jobs increases economic efficiency and living standards.

While facing disadvantages in finding employment in other spheres, women are particularly well represented in the civil society sector. Women comprise

58% of NGO staff in Tbilisi and 63% of NGO staff in the regions of the country.²

Abortion remains the major birth control method in Georgia. Definitely, the introduction of various family planning methods have had a positive impact on the health of women in the last few years, however, many women still do not have access to information or resources about reproductive health services.

Domestic violence is a critical gender issue for Georgia. Georgian women are subject to all forms of domestic violence; in addition to physical violence, psychological violence and economic control are also common. The widespread impunity of offenders and ignorance of women's rights have been major obstacles in combating this problem. Additionally, male supremacy as a basis for unequal treatment is quite common in Georgian families. The first nation-wide study on domestic violence in the South Caucasus (UNFPA, 2010) revealed that in Georgia among married women at least every eleventh woman has been subjected to physical violence, while more than 35% of married women have experienced acts of violence aimed at controlling their behavior. Most importantly, domestic violence is still considered a private matter, as a recent nation-wide survey revealed that about 78% of women consider that cases of domestic violence should remain within a family and shouldn't be publicly discussed.³

Georgia has a sound number of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minority women face cultural and language constraints, violation of human rights and lack of access to information and skills what especially hinders their integration and development. Although other minority groups of women, e.g. sexual minorities, manage to organize themselves and cooperate with a few women's NGOs, they face absolute isolation and discrimination from society.

Due to the two ethnic conflicts, Georgia has a large number of internally displaced persons (IDP). The 2009–2012 State Strategy on IDPs has gender aspects, but IDP women and rural women are in most vulnerable conditions resulting into the low economic status and poverty and having less access to information, rights and skills.

Gender Equality Policy in Georgia

Since the Shevardnadze government failed to address gender discrimination and advance women's rights, after the Rose Revolution gender equality once again appeared on the government agenda. In order to address gender issues, the parliament set up a Gender Equality

1 Georgia Gender Assessment, USAID, Georgia 2010

2 Sumbade Nana, "Gender and Society: Georgia," UND/SIDA, 2008, p. 57

3 Domestic violence survey in the South Caucasus, UNFPA, 2010

Advisory Council and the government established the Gender Equality Governmental Commission as institutional mechanisms in 2004–2005. Later, in 2006, at the initiative of UN agencies and women's civil society groups, the Parliament adopted the Concept on Gender Equality as a framework document for achieving gender equality in various spheres. Subsequently the parliament adopted the Gender Equality National Action Plan for 2007–2009. However, state agencies in both the legislative and executive branches failed to actively support implementation of this blueprint, monitoring showed.⁴ In practice, most of the resources and efforts put forward came from NGOs and international organizations.

While Georgia still lacks specific gender sensitive legislation and an overall gender approach to adopting laws, in March 2010 the parliament adopted a Law on Gender Equality. Women's rights NGOs, UN agencies and the Gender Equality Advisory Council helped to draft the law and worked to ensure its adoption. The law aims to eliminate discrimination and achieve gender equality in the areas of political participation, employment, education, health and social care. Although the law was watered down from an earlier draft, in the future it could serve as the basis for further legislative acts, documents and reforms. Nevertheless, the law gives women legitimate rights in various spheres. Passing a gender equality law is indeed a step forward; however because it has recently been adopted, there is not much evidence of how it will be implemented in practice.

The Gender Equality Advisory Council remains the only institutional body on gender equality in Georgia which has been granted a permanent mandate by the Gender Equality Law of Georgia⁵ and it will closely follow the implementation of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality currently being drafted.

A lot has changed in combating human trafficking and domestic violence after the Rose Revolution. In 2006 the government's commitment to reform and its willingness to work closely with NGOs resulted in the

adoption of laws on human trafficking and domestic violence. This legislation is backed up with the relevant action plans, establishment of interagency institutional bodies and a State Fund for Protecting and Assisting Victims of Human Trafficking, which at present has a crucial role in elaborating and implementing trafficking and domestic violence policies.

Conclusion

It took a long time to introduce gender equality into the political discourse in Georgia. The country has endorsed international obligations to fight discrimination against women and has expressed political will by adopting laws addressing gender equality, domestic violence and human trafficking while striving to adopt principles of democracy; still, these commitments need to be translated more into practice. In general, Georgia's national legislation is not gender sensitive and state policies and strategies lack gender mainstreaming. In addition, stereotypes, deeply rooted gender roles, and women's own lack of awareness of their rights prevent them from fully enjoying their freedoms and rights. The women's movement in Georgia has to be more consolidated and stronger to promote women's advancement.

Although Georgia has adopted broad democratic reforms, it has not yet expressed enough commitment to achieving gender equality. While there is a need for more commitment—political, financial and human resources—for addressing broader gender equality issues, instead most of the pressure comes from international organizations. If Georgia strives for accession to the European Union, it should note that combating gender discrimination and introducing equality in programs and policies is one of the core principles the EU considers for future member states. Adherence to such principles guarantees the establishment of effective and sustainable democracies, inclusive and diverse societies and equal opportunities for community members.

About the Author:

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Recommended Reading:

- Georgia Gender Assessment, USAID, 2010: <http://georgia.usaid.gov/index.php?m=28&newsid=512>
- Sumbadze Nana, "Gender and Society", UNDP/SIDA, 2008: http://undp.org.ge/new/files/24_425_824113_gender&soc_iety2008.pdf
- Sabedashvili Tamar, "Gender and Democratization: the Case of Georgia 1991–2006", Issue 1, HBF Surveys and Policy Papers, Tbilisi 2007

⁴ Review of Gender Equality Strategy and Monitoring implementation of 2007–2008 GAP, UNFPA, 2008.

⁵ *Gender Equality Law of Georgia*, March 2010, Article 12.