

Gender quotas: the worst mechanism for increasing women’s political participation except for all the others

Lika Tchipashvili, Fellow Researcher at Geocase

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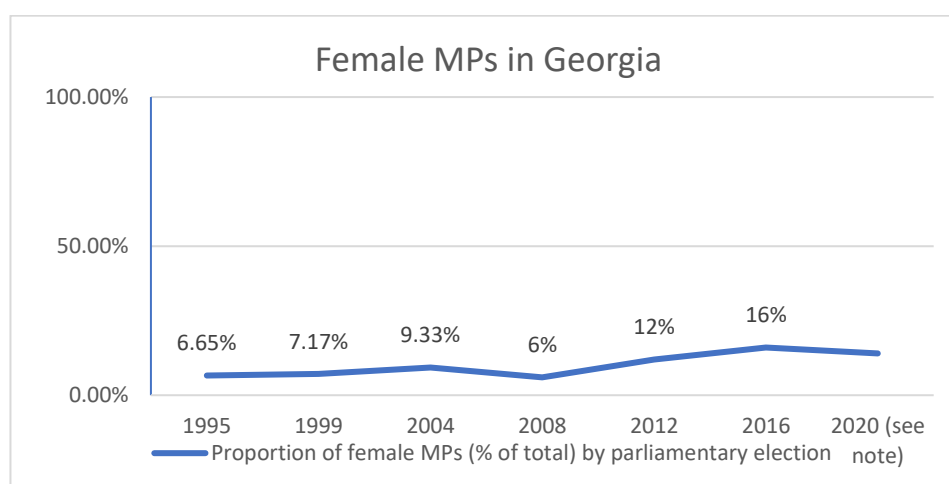


Image: <https://en.unesco.org/>

A few days ago, Georgia’s parliament approved a package of amendments to the Electoral Code, including mandatory gender quotas, whose goal is to gradually increase the number of female MPs. The relevant amendment states that political parties must nominate at least one woman for every fourth candidate on their party list before the 2028 parliamentary elections, and at least one woman for every third candidate for parliamentary elections held between 2028 and 2032. By introducing these mandatory gender quotas, the Georgian government has taken another pragmatic and results-oriented step for the country’s rapid development.

Women currently constitute over half (almost 54%) of Georgia's population, and their universally recognized right to vote and/or to run for office is firmly enshrined in Georgia's constitution. However, the number of women in politics in Georgia is extremely low: barely 14% of MPs are women—and the situation is even worse at the local government level, where only 13% of local council members and only one of Georgia's 64 directly elected mayors is woman.

According to [the 2020 'Women in Politics' map](#) produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Georgia ranks 144th of 193 in terms of the number of women in parliament, placing it below every European country except Malta, Hungary and Liechtenstein. Georgia has made some progress in this regard over the past 25 years, albeit at a very slow and irregular pace. The proportion of women in parliament following the last 6 parliamentary elections has evolved as follows:



N.B. 2020: As a result of changes within the Georgian cabinet and the rejection by some women candidates of their mandate, the proportion of female MPs has decreased to 14% since 2016.

Today, the global average of female representation in parliament (25%) is more than double what it was in 1995 (11.3%), which means that the goal that the world set itself 25 years ago to increase the proportion of women in parliament to a so-called 'critical minority' of 30% has essentially been achieved. Consequently, countries of the world are already discussing a [new goal](#): to adopt, by 2030, laws or mechanisms for gender quotas that will increase the proportion of women in national parliaments to 50%. Against this background, the situation in Georgia is extremely worrying. That is why the recent introduction of gender quotas was supported by the Parliament and enjoyed a broad public consensus, but public discussion in Georgia against gender quotas continues, and is in some cases unsubstantiated or based upon disinformation.

Gender quotas have been recognized and used around the world for decades as a fast and effective means to increase the participation of women in politics. Among the top 20 countries in the current global ranking

of women's participation, 16 have implemented gender quotas at the legislative or political party level. Whereas in 1995 only two countries (Argentina and Nepal) had introduced gender quotas into their legislation, this measure has since then been adopted by 84 countries around the world, and is particularly successful in those with proportional electoral system. That said, the proportion of women in politics can be increased without introducing legislative gender quotas, but this takes a fairly long time. In this regard, the example of Kazakhstan is interesting: the country has not introduced gender quotas in law but it has been actively lobbying for gender equality at state levels since 1991, as a result of which the proportion of women in Kazakhstan's parliament has doubled from 13.4% in 1995 to 27.1% in 2020. Also, very interesting examples can be found in Scandinavia, where gender quotas have been regulated not by law but at the level of political parties since the 1980s, making the Nordic model of gender equality in politics a global reference.

Consequently, the successful experience of many different countries around the world unequivocally invalidates the arguments of those in Georgia who are against the introduction of gender quotas. These arguments include the beliefs that, by favouring female candidates during elections, quotas violate the democratic principle of equal opportunities, and that nominating a candidate of a predetermined gender deprives voters of their freedom of choice. Both these points of view would of course be absolutely legitimate if we lived in a world of equal opportunities in which there was no need to protect even women's rights—but the reality is that, even in the 21st century, achieving gender equality remains a significant global challenge! For example, women notably account for [two thirds](#) of the estimated 750 million adults without basic literacy skills, and [working women](#) around the world earn on average 20% less than men. It is on this background with other inequalities that gender quotas are far more valuable than discriminatory towards men, which, along with ensuring equal opportunities, protect women from discrimination while in politics. It is undoubtedly much easier to fight against discriminatory stereotypes about female politicians by involving more women in politics than fewer.

Gender inequality in each country is based upon specific reasons. In today's Georgia, gender inequality is not really due to the otherwise widespread stereotype that 'a job in politics is not for women': rather, it is primarily due to the low level of the political culture, to the extremely polarized political environment, and to public distrust towards political parties which mostly base themselves upon 'hate speeches' rather than ideological rivalry. Proof of this is the high public awareness of the importance of the social role of women and gender equality that have been known by the Georgian State for centuries—as illustrated, for example, in the 5th-century hagiography of the *Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, or by the fact that even in 12th-century Georgia it was considered that *'the lion's whelp is equally lion, though female or male it be'*.

Furthermore, the country experienced its golden age of statehood during the reign of Queen Tamar in the 13th century and Georgian women were among the first in the world to win the right to vote in elections in 1918 and at a time when women's participation in politics was a rarity, Georgia was one of the world's most progressive countries in terms of women's representation in the legislature. Unfortunately, the public at large do still not know that already in 1919 there were 5 women among the 130 members of the Constituent Assembly (parliament) of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia—Elisabeth Nakashidze-Bolkvadze, Minadora Orjonikidze-Toroshelidze, Ana Sologashvili, Eleonora Ter-Parsegova-Makhviladze and Kristine Sharashidze.



Georgia's first female MPs (1919) / Image: <https://on.ge/>

Regarding our present situation, as mentioned above, the number of women in Georgia's representative bodies is extremely low, both at the parliamentary and local self-government levels; but it is important to emphasize that this is not the case at the executive level and within the judiciary. Georgia is one of only 22 countries in the world whose president or prime minister is a woman, and as of 1 January 2020, Georgia ranks [18th](#) among 193 in terms of the number of women in the cabinet of ministers. Women also represent around 53% of Georgia's judiciary (but occupy relatively few managerial positions).

This complete picture of women's participation in Georgia's socio-political life clearly demonstrates the need for the further democratic development of the country's political parties if they are to become more credible and ideologically attractive to female candidates. Gender quotas in Georgia will significantly contribute to the development and sustainability of ideologies of political parties. Generally speaking,

women in Georgia are more loyal to political parties than men, as they leave or change political parties less. At the same time, the experience of countries around the world illustrates the fact that increasing the representation of women in parliament, in addition to affording greater protection to women's and children's rights, also contributes to the adoption of more effective legislation in the fields of education, health care and the environment. International experience also shows the advantage of a high participation of women in politics in the fields of peace-making and conflict resolution - especially important issues in Georgia, given the fact that 20% of Georgia's territory is still occupied by Russian military forces and the country lives in daily creeping occupation.

The introduction of gender quotas will also make a significant contribution to efforts to demolish stereotypes which restrict women to purely domestic and family matters. This stereotype is perhaps less common in Georgia than in other countries, but it nonetheless exists—largely in regions in which a patriarchal culture remains dominant as well as in ethnic minority communities, where women's access to education is also low.

For all these reasons (and others), affirmative action has become an important means of increasing women's participation in politics, and international practice has not yet found a more effective and faster tool for increasing their representation than gender quotas. However, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, who once said that 'democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time', I believe that gender quotas are the worst mechanism for increasing the role of women in politics except for all the others.

In the end, it is nothing new to argue that political decisions are not made on the basis of preferences dictated by individual conformism, but on the needs of the country; and in today's competitive and globalized world, it is crucial that Georgia with the modest economic opportunities make the best in order to ensure her rapid development.

And now that gender quotas have been introduced in legislation, the time is right to focus our attention upon the need to increase public awareness of the benefits of a greater involvement of women in politics, rather than on the 'anti-gender quota' discussions escaped from the Georgian reality. Georgia's political parties must also work to increase public trust in them and their political views and ideologies if they are to attract more women.

Georgia is already the 84th country in the world to introduce gender quotas in legislation, and the number of these countries will continue to increase until the need to defend the idea of gender quotas through the tool of the gender quotas and to protect women's rights will no longer exist in our world.

By Lika Tchipashvili

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