



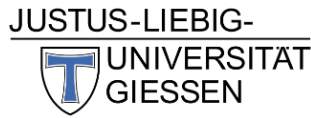
Gender Equality and Democracy Support in Georgia: A Spotlight on LGBTQI+

Gender Equality Fellowship Author: Ekaterine Skhiladze

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List of Abbreviations

DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement
ECtHR	The European Court of Human Rights
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
ILGA-Europe	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association in Europe
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and more
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDI	The National Democratic Institute
PDO	Public Defender of Georgia
UNDP	United Nations Development Fund
WISG	Women's Initiatives Supporting Group

About the Author

Ekaterine Skhiladze is a dedicated human rights defender and activist in Georgia who strongly promotes gender equality and women's rights. With 16 years of experience in the field, she has held various positions, including the role of Deputy Public Defender of Georgia. Ekaterine completed her bachelor's degree in law at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University and a master's degree in public law from the same institution. In 2023, she graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and holds an MSc in Gender, Policy, and Inequalities. Ekaterine was honoured with the prestigious Kato Mikeladze Award for Women Human Rights Defenders in 2016.

Research Stay

During my research stay in Brussels, I focused on the intersection of gender equality and democracy in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, with a particular emphasis on Georgia. I actively engaged with key actors, attending meetings with organisations such as the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI), Mental Health Europe, and the European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet). These encounters provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding gender-related issues and democracy promotion. A noteworthy highlight was my participation in the 15th EaP CSF Annual Assembly, themed 'Cooperation, Security, and Democracy: Making a multi-speed Eastern Partnership Work.' This event facilitated discussions on regional cooperation and the specific challenges faced by



Eastern Partnership countries, offering a comprehensive perspective on the dynamic landscape of gender equality and democracy in the region. These experiences enriched my research and broadened my understanding of the collaborative efforts shaping the intersection of gender equality and democracy.

1. Introduction

In the democratic development of a nation, gender equality stands as a crucial pillar. It ensures that every segment of society is included in progress and development, acknowledging the diversity of people. Democracy, rooted in the voice and participation of all its members, finds its strength in the diversity that shapes the development of the state. The connection between gender equality and democracy is fundamental through the lens of inclusivity. A democratic society thrives on equality, representation, and fair participation, principles that, when extended to gender equality, actively foster an environment where diverse voices contribute to shaping the democratic landscape. The true strength of democracy lies not only in formal structures but in the genuine inclusion and representation of all citizens.

While the interplay between gender equality and democracy presents challenges rooted in cultural norms, systemic biases, and historical inequalities, these challenges also unveil opportunities for transformative change. Addressing gender disparities becomes a catalyst for redefining and strengthening democratic principles. Furthermore, the relationship between gender equality and democracy holds transformative potential. A society championing gender equality is better equipped to dismantle systemic inequalities and biases, fostering a democratic culture that is more robust, dynamic, and reflective of its populace's diverse needs and perspectives¹.

Despite significant strides in democratisation, Georgia faces challenges in enforcing human rights and anti-discrimination laws, particularly regarding the LGBTQI+ community. Weak state institutions and a lack of political will contribute to the inadequacies in protecting the rights of all citizens, as highlighted by the country's national human rights institution, the Public Defender of Georgia². Notably, the binary perception of gender, primarily linking it to sex and discussing gender equality in terms of men and women, has been a longstanding agenda in Georgia and many other countries. This perspective often stems from traditional masculine perceptions and discriminatory practices towards the LGBTQI+ community. Hence, acknowledging gender

¹ Moeller, K. (2018). *The Gender Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development* (1st ed.). University of California Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt2050wwp>.

² Public Defender of Georgia. (2021). Report on the State of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022070612391254904.pdf>.



equality necessitates an understanding that it encompasses all gender groups, regardless of orientation or gender identity.

This report delves into the specific nuances of Georgia's journey in balancing the pursuit of gender equality within the democratic framework, closely examining the role of the European Union. The exploration aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics, challenges, and chances for supporting gender equality and democracy in Georgia's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods. This includes assessing how the European Union contributes to or intersects with Georgia's efforts, considering diverse positions within the country and alignments with EU-promoted gender equality concepts.

2. Challenges to Gender Equality and Democracy within the EU

The foundational treaty of the European Union underscores the centrality of democracy and related values, as enshrined in Article 2³. Recent challenges to democracy within the Member States have garnered increased attention, prompting the European Commission to initiate proceedings against Poland and Hungary, while the European Parliament (EP) has responded to democracy concerns in Malta and Romania. Furthermore, the EP has expressed apprehension about the position of investigative journalists in Europe and advocated for the protection of the EU budget in the Czech Republic⁴. This includes addressing potential instances of corruption or misuse of funds to ensure transparency and accountability within the country's financial management practices. The EP's emphasis on protecting the EU budget underscores the importance of upholding financial regulations and preventing any irregularities that may undermine public trust in the EU's financial operations.

Critics have underscored a paradox in the European Union's approach to democracy, highlighting its support for 'the survival of authoritarian member governments' while striving to uphold democratic values⁵. The EU's safeguarding mechanisms, characterised by an underdeveloped system of party politics and a reluctance to intervene in the political affairs of its member states, effectively function as protective shields for national autocrats. Despite being a source of funding, the EU often lacks the political will to activate mechanisms that would ensure the suspension of funding when there are breaches of core values and democratic practices⁶. This

³ Official Journal of the European Union. (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

⁴ Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2021). Challenges to Democratic Practices and Discourses in the European Parliament: Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Political Groups. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 579–602. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab022>.

⁵ Kelemen, D. R. (2020). The paradox of EU democracy promotion. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(4), 481–499.

⁶ Ibid.



paradox is exemplified in instances such as the banning of the Central European University in Hungary, leading to its relocation to Austria⁷. In this case, although the EU values academic freedom and democracy, it did not take decisive action to prevent the closure of an institution that symbolised these values. The lack of robust enforcement mechanisms raises questions about the EU's commitment to upholding its fundamental principles and highlights the need for greater accountability and coherence in its governance structures.

The examination of gender intersections within the European Union reveals multifaceted challenges to both gender equality and democracy. A key challenge identified in the research is the conceptual framing of gender intersections in EU policies, suggesting that the current framing may not adequately capture the complexity of intersecting identities and experiences. This conceptual challenge raises concerns about the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of EU initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality within the member states⁸. The bureaucratic nature of EU institutions may contribute to the reproduction of traditional power dynamics, hindering the implementation of policies that genuinely empower marginalised groups, particularly in the context of gender and intersectionality⁹.

Additionally, recognising the diversity of women's experiences within the EU is crucial. A one-size-fits-all approach to gender equality policies may overlook the unique challenges faced by different groups of women. This lack of intersectional sensitivity may result in policies that inadequately address the needs of marginalised women, posing a challenge to the EU's goal of promoting inclusivity and equality for all.

The challenges faced by the EU reverberate in its role as a norm entrepreneur. Setting universally accepted norms on gender equality, democracy, and LGBTQI+ rights has become a nuanced task amid varying national perspectives and cultural contexts. The resistance to external influence and differing societal attitudes within member states pose significant hurdles to the EU's efforts to establish cohesive norms that effectively address the complex issues at the intersection of gender, democracy, and LGBTQI+ rights. Moreover, the challenges related to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights intersect with broader challenges to democracy within the EU. Discriminatory practices, unequal political representation, and cultural biases not only impede democratic values but also hinder progress toward gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights. Recognising the

⁷ Gall, L. (2020, September 3). Hungary continues attacks on academic freedom: EU should act to ensure autonomy of universities. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/03/hungary-continues-attacks-academic-freedom>.

⁸ Kantola and Lombardo, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.



interconnected nature of these challenges is crucial for devising comprehensive strategies that address the underlying structures perpetuating disparities in all three areas.

The potential implications of these challenges are profound, influencing the effectiveness of EU policies and initiatives in promoting gender equality, democracy, and LGBTQI+ rights. Failure to address these challenges may result in the perpetuation of inequalities, limiting the EU's capacity to serve as a beacon of democratic values and a champion of human rights, including those of LGBTQI+ individuals. In navigating these complexities, it becomes imperative for the EU to critically assess its strategies, engage in open dialogue with member states and, foster a collaborative approach that respects diverse perspectives while striving for common norms that uphold gender equality, democratic ideals, and the rights of LGBTQI+ people.

3. The EU's Role in Georgia: A Spectrum of Perspectives

In June 2014, an Association Agreement between the European Union (EU) and Georgia was signed, coming into effect on 1 July 2016. This agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement lays the groundwork for extensive political and economic integration between Georgia and the EU. Georgia's aspirations within this framework encompass advancing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and economic development. The Association Agreement's institutional framework establishes entities like the Association Council to oversee implementation, while the Association Agenda outlines priority areas¹⁰.

On 3 March 2022, Georgia submitted its EU membership application, and on 23 June 2022, the European Council acknowledged Georgia's European Perspective, expressing readiness to grant candidate country status once specific priorities are addressed. This milestone underscores Georgia's potential EU accession, with annual EU reports documenting its reform progress¹¹.

On 8 November 2023, the European Commission recommended Georgia for candidate country status, issuing a report along with key findings and a 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy outlining steps for Georgia to follow¹². On 14 December 2023, the European Council granted Georgia candidate country status, contingent on the country fulfilling the Commission's recommendations.

¹⁰ Delegation of the European Union to Georgia. (2023). The European Union and Georgia. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?s=221

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² European Commission (2023). Communication on EU Enlargement policy. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_697%20Georgia%20report.pdf

According to the report, the protection of the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals continues to pose significant challenges¹³. In Georgia, the LGBTQI+ community stands among the most marginalised groups, enduring systemic homophobia, negative societal attitudes, and the exploitation of homophobic sentiments for political gain. The authorities exhibit a failure to recognise the systemic nature of discriminatory patterns and inequalities affecting this community, resulting in substantial gaps in addressing these concerns. Concrete measures supporting LGBTQI+ individuals and combating discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are notably absent¹⁴.

3.1 Perceptions of the EU as a Supporter in Georgia

The National Democratic Institute released a public opinion poll in 2023, revealing strong support among Georgian citizens for political (54%) and economic (52%) cooperation with the EU. However, the survey notes a perceptual contrast, indicating that despite the people's aspirations, there's a prevalent belief that the government is not doing enough to ensure EU membership¹⁵. This underscores a noteworthy gap between public enthusiasm for deeper EU ties and a perceived shortfall in governmental efforts to secure membership. The survey brings attention to the complex interplay between public sentiment and governmental actions in the pursuit of closer integration with the EU¹⁶.

Despite this positive trend, the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia faces a pervasive challenge marked by the prevalence of negative biases and discriminatory attitudes. These biases lead to widespread social and economic exclusion, placing members of the community at constant risk of discrimination and hate crimes. Such discriminatory practices contribute to an environment where the LGBTQI+ individuals encounter obstacles in various aspects of life, including social inclusion, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. The persistence of these negative attitudes underscores the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address and eradicate systemic discrimination and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Democratic Institute. (2023). Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from March 2023 telephone survey. Retrieved from https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Eng_PUBLIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf.

¹⁶ National Democratic Institute. (2023). Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from March 2023 telephone survey. Retrieved from https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_March%202023%20telephone%20poll_Eng_PUBLIC%20VERSION_FINAL_03.05%20%281%29.pdf.

3.2 EU Gender Equality Policy in Georgia

The EU Gender Action Plan III 2021–2025 (GAP III)¹⁷ underscores the European Union's dedication to accelerating advancements in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. To meet GAP III targets, the EU Delegation to Georgia commits to ensuring that a minimum of 85% of all new actions it undertakes prioritise gender equality as a significant or principal objective in each priority area/sector of the Multi-annual Indicative Programme. The GAP III focuses on key thematic areas, including freedom from gender-based violence, the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights, strengthening economic and social rights, empowering women and girls, advancing equal participation and leadership, integrating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, and navigating the challenges and opportunities of the green transition and digital transformation¹⁸.

According to the Gender Equality Country Review, conducted in 2021, traditional gender norms and stereotypes in Georgia significantly impact the perception of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals. Intolerance towards LGBTQI+ minorities, frequently leading to acts of violence, has been fuelled by far-right extremist groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Despite legislation prohibiting discrimination against LGBTQI+ people in areas such as employment, progress in harmonising these legal safeguards with societal changes has been sluggish¹⁹.

4. Legal and Policy Framework in Georgia²⁰

The principle of equality is a fundamental aspect of the Georgian Constitution and is found in Article 11²¹. While Article 11 does not explicitly enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity as prohibited grounds for discrimination, the Constitutional Court of Georgia has made important rulings. In 2008 and 2014, the Constitutional Court clarified that the list of prohibited grounds for discrimination in Article 11 is not exhaustive. The Court emphasised that the list should be

¹⁷ European Commission. (2020). EU Gender Action Plan. Retrieved from https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf.

¹⁸ European Union. (2021). Gender equality in Georgia in GAP III priority areas: Country review. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Georgia%20Country%20Gender%20Review_0.pdf.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Following the submission of this report, the Georgian parliament passed a law in September 2024 titled “Family Values and Child Protection”, which has further significantly altered the legal framework. <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/09/18/in-georgia-parliament-has-approved-the-clampdown-on-lgbtq-rights-borrell-moving-further-and-further-away-from-eu-membership/>

²¹ Parliament of Georgia. (1995). The Constitution of Georgia. Retrieved from <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>.



interpreted dynamically and inclusively, encompassing other characteristics and identities, including sexual orientation, among other grounds²².

In 2014, the Georgian Parliament passed the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination²³, which notably included sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories. The adoption of the law was part of Georgia's international commitment and efforts toward EU integration. Specifically, the Association Agreement with the EU mandated Georgia to adopt legislation prohibiting discrimination²⁴.

However, despite these legal advancements, the legislation's effective implementation has proven problematic in practice. In some instances, the changes introduced may seem superficial and lack real impact. There have been challenges in ensuring that the provisions of the law are effectively enforced and that discrimination cases are adequately addressed. The LGBTQI+ community in Georgia continues to face discrimination, violence, and social stigma. The conspicuous gap between the legal framework and the lived reality of LGBTQI+ individuals remain a significant concern²⁵.

In December 2022, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe raised concerns about the inadequacy of reflecting the needs of LGBTQ+ people in Georgia's draft human rights strategy. The Committee called on the Georgian government to address this issue and ensure the inclusion of these marginalised groups in the policy framework. Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Committee, in its concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Georgia, obliged the Georgian state to take concrete actions in combatting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. These calls from international bodies highlight the urgency for Georgia to prioritise and address the rights and needs of LGBTQI+ individuals, aligning its policies with human rights standards and principles of equality and non-discrimination²⁶.

Moreover, the 'State Concept of Gender Equality of Georgia,' approved by the Parliament of Georgia in 2022, is another significant document that excludes any mention of LGBTQI+ persons. Despite expectations that this updated version of the 2006 concept would be more progressive

²² Constitutional Court of Georgia. (2008). *Beridze v. Parliament of Georgia*, case No. 392. Constitutional Court of Georgia. (2014). *Asatiani v. the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia*, case No. 2/1/536.

²³ Parliament of Georgia. (2014). *The Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination*. Retrieved from <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2339687?publication=0>.

²⁴ Parliament of Georgia. (2014). *The Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination*. Retrieved from <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2339687?publication=0>.

²⁵ Public Defender of Georgia. (2023). *8th Annual Special Report on Situation of Equality in Georgia*. Retrieved from <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2023041011140537314.pdf>.

²⁶ UN Human Rights Committee. (2022). *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Georgia*. Retrieved from <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3987487?ln=en>.

and human rights-oriented, it falls short in its scope. The concept's goal is limited to achieving gender equality between women and men, offering an insufficient and incomplete definition of gender equality. Regrettably, the policy document completely overlooks the needs and rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, failing even to acknowledge their existence in any capacity²⁷.

According to the EU report, the process of legal gender recognition lacks regulation in Georgia, with general procedures remaining unclear. This situation has raised concerns about the protection of the rights of transgender individuals within the country. Notably, on 1 December 2022, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that the Georgian state violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically addressing the right to the protection of private and family life. This legal development highlights the need for more defined and transparent procedures related to legal gender recognition to ensure the safeguarding of the rights of transgender individuals in Georgia. This ruling indicates that current practices may not adequately protect the privacy and family lives of transgender individuals. Therefore, there is a pressing need to review and strengthen existing legal frameworks to ensure that transgender individuals have access to legal gender recognition processes that respect their rights and dignity²⁸.

5. Public Attitudes Towards the LGBTQI+ Community in Georgia

According to recent studies conducted in Georgia, homophobic attitudes persist in society, with various factors contributing to this phenomenon²⁹. The state's lack of awareness about stigma and prejudice against the LGBTQI+ community, coupled with hate speech propagated by politicians, and the absence of public acknowledgement of the challenges faced by the group, all contribute to the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes.

A study conducted in 2016 revealed a markedly negative attitude in society toward legal equality for the LGBTQI+ group and LGBTQI+ activists/human rights activists. The research indicated that attitudes toward individual rights varied by age and education level, with younger respondents demonstrating higher receptivity toward individual rights. However, education, widespread

²⁷ Parliament of Georgia. (2022). State concept on gender equality. Retrieved from <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5664358?publication=0>.

²⁸ European Commission (2023). Communication on EU Enlargement policy. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_697%20Georgia%20report.pdf.

²⁹ WISG. (2022). From Prejudice to Equality: Study on public knowledge, awareness and attitudes towards LGBT(Q)I community and legal equality. Retrieved from <https://wisg.org/Data/docs/publications/research-study/WISG-From-Prejudice-to-Equality-2022.pdf>.

myths, homophobic stereotypes, and the degree of religious fundamentalism also influenced individual rights attitudes³⁰.

A 2020 quantitative survey conducted by UNDP in Georgia shed light on prevailing societal attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community. The study found that a significant portion of both men and women expressed shame at having a homosexual child, and a majority of respondents believed that homosexual individuals should not be allowed to work with children. Furthermore, the survey revealed that many respondents were hesitant to have homosexual friends or neighbours, ranking homosexuals third on the list of undesirable neighbours, behind criminals and drug users³¹.

The Council of Europe's survey on attitudes to diversity in Georgia showed that the LGBTQI+ group received the lowest positive response regarding its importance for Georgia's development. A significant proportion of respondents stated that LGBTQI+ rights protection is not important at all. Regression analysis indicated that various factors influenced the perception of human rights protection for LGBTQI+ people, with gender being a significant variable. Men were less likely to support the protection of LGBTQI+ community rights compared to religious minorities' rights. Additionally, those more knowledgeable about minorities' rights were more likely to prioritise protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals³².

6. Incitement to Discrimination: Political Homophobia

Regrettably, high-ranking political figures in Georgia often resort to insulting expressions and hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community, which not only fosters discrimination but also creates a dangerous environment for LGBTQI+ individuals, putting them at risk of harassment and violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity³³. According to the report of the Public Defender of Georgia, the Vice-Speaker made a statement in response to the EU Ambassador, downplaying the events on 5 July, when violent groups gathered on Rustaveli Avenue, leading to attacks on journalists, human rights activists, and citizens, by claiming they were commonplace in the European space. Some members of political parties, also made negative remarks about the LGBTQI+ community. Moreover, the head of the government of the

³⁰ Agdgomelashvili, E. (2016). From Prejudice to Equality: Study of societal attitudes, knowledge and information regarding the LGBT community and their rights. WISG.

³¹ UNDP (2020). Men, Women, and Gender Relations in Georgia: Public Perceptions and Attitudes. Tbilisi. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org/georgia/publications/men-women-and-gender-relations-georgia-public-perceptions-and-attitudes>.

³² Council of Europe. (2021). Hate crime, hate speech and discrimination in Georgia: Attitudes and awareness. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/book-eng/1680a583d0>.

³³ Public Defender of Georgia. (2023). 8th Annual Special Report on Situation of Equality in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2023041011140537314.pdf>.

Autonomous Republic of Adjara, used a homophobic and discriminatory term when commenting on the wave of protests supporting European integration. He implied that it was not the will of the Georgian people or the dream of their ancestors to relinquish power to what he referred to as the ‘shadow cabinet of liberals’³⁴.

Taking centre stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference held in Hungary in May 2023, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili signalled his notable presence, hinting at an alignment with Western populist figures and sparking concerns over a potential rightward ideological trajectory within his ruling party. During an international conference of Conservatives, Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili asserted,

‘We will protect everyone’s rights, but just as we will not allow the abuse of minorities, we will not let minority members abuse the majority. We will not condone the attempts of the minorities to use aggressive propaganda to pervert the values deemed sacred by the majority, upon which our identity, worldview, and history are based’³⁵.

These kinds of statements and hate speech from political officials are deeply troubling as they not only perpetuate prejudice and discrimination but also contribute to an atmosphere of hostility and animosity towards the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia. Such rhetoric increases the vulnerability of LGBTQI+ individuals to discrimination and violence, undermining the principles of equality and human rights that should be upheld by all segments of society, including the political leadership.

There was an alarming increase in statements that incited discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly during the Tbilisi Pride Week in 2021. Rather than supporting the event, high officials attempted to politicise the issue and portrayed the Pride Week in a negative light. This negative portrayal was followed by violent actions on 5-6 July 2021. Notably, Tbilisi Mayor expressed his disapproval of holding the Pride Week, citing potential misuse by certain groups from both sides. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili went even further, describing the March of Dignity as a cause of civil strife and attributing the Pride to ‘*revanchist and radical*’ political forces. In advance of the Tbilisi Pride scheduled for 5 July 2021, Prime Minister Garibashvili delivered a notable address and statement in which he strongly criticised activists advocating for the event. He emphasised that in the face of an alleged overwhelming opposition, approximately 95% of the population, against hosting a propagandistic parade in a conspicuous manner, it is imperative to heed this sentiment. The Prime Minister asserted that as

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gabritchidze, N. (2023). Georgian PM’s far-right bromance draws concerns. Eurasianet. Retrieved from <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-pms-far-right-bromance-draws-concerns>.

representatives of the government elected by the people, they are duty-bound to honour and adhere to the prevailing public opinion. Additionally, he emphasised that the only procession he is aware of that will take place in the country is the military parade conducted by the national armed forces³⁶.

The restriction of the LGBTQI+ community's rights in the name of safety has led to an increase in homophobic attitudes, disrespect for their rights, and limitations on their presence in public spaces. The tolerance shown towards violence during the 5-6 July events further incited harassment and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals. Subsequently, reports of homophobic and sexist violence emerged, including assaults on a Polish tourist, a German DJ, and transgender women³⁷. According to an EU report, the utilisation of hate speech by politicians and public figures contributes to the exacerbation of animosity directed at LGBTQI+ individuals, rendering them socially marginalised and broadening the spectrum of violence against them³⁸.

7. Freedom of Expression and Assembly

One of the most pressing issues faced by the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia is the severe limitation of freedom of expression and assembly. Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity remains a significant challenge in Georgia, as the State's lack of action contributes to violence against the LGBTQI+ community and hinders the exercise of their rights and freedoms.

The years 2012 and 2013 witnessed violent actions targeting the LGBTQI+ community during events like the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. These incidents led to several decisions by the European Court of Human Rights, highlighting the state's failure to ensure freedom of expression and protect the community from violent attacks³⁹. The 5 July 2021, events were particularly alarming, as organisers of the violence were not held accountable, leaving a sense of impunity⁴⁰. The recent Tbilisi Pride Festival in 2023 also faced

³⁶ Civil.ge. (2021). Garibashvili on LGBT Pride: "95% Against Propagandistic Parade". Retrieved from <https://civil.ge/archives/431658#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20of%20Georgia%2C%20Irakli,%2C%20%5Bmy%5D%20friends.%E2%80%9D>.

³⁷ Public Defender of Georgia. (2021). Report on the State of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022070612391254904.pdf>.

³⁸ European Commission (2023). Communication on EU Enlargement policy. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_697%20Georgia%20report.pdf.

³⁹ European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). (2015). Case of Identoba and Others v. Georgia. Retrieved from <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-154400>.

⁴⁰ Public Defender of Georgia. (2021). Report on the State of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022070612391254904.pdf>.

attacks from far-right groups, further undermining the freedom of LGBTQI+ people to gather peacefully without adequate state protection and implementation of justice⁴¹.

On 5 July 2021, violent groups gathered on Rustaveli Avenue, leading to attacks on journalists, human rights activists, and citizens. The violent acts were further incited by the Prime Minister's statement, which shifted responsibility to the LGBTQI+ community and encouraged hate groups. Prior to 5 July there were public calls for violence from leaders and members of violent groups, and specific individuals were implicated in inciting violence. However, criminal proceedings were not launched against the organisers of the violent events. As indicated in the ILGA Europe report, the extremist group Alt-Info orchestrated efforts to gather funds for orchestrating anti-Pride activities, orchestrating the transportation of individuals from rural areas to the city. On the morning of 2 July Alt-Info attempted to take over the Pride Fest venue; however, law enforcement intervened and apprehended 26 individuals, ensuring the security of the location, with over 40 arrests made over the course of the weekend. Approximately 4,000 extremists were observed roaming the streets of Tbilisi throughout the day, engaging in acts such as burning NATO and EU flags and attempting to disrupt Pride activities later in the day. Notably, law enforcement provided protection for Pride participants throughout the entire day, effectively preventing any attacks from occurring⁴².

8. Social Rights: Access to Healthcare, Education and Work

Access to adequate healthcare is a major challenge for members of the LGBTQI+ community, primarily due to financial barriers and discriminatory treatment within the healthcare system. Poverty poses a significant obstacle, particularly affecting transgender individuals who often require expensive medical procedures such as hormone therapy or surgery. Despite some support provided by non-governmental organisations, their limited resources prevent them from fully meeting the community's healthcare demands⁴³.

Discriminatory treatment within the healthcare system further exacerbates the problem. Human rights defenders emphasise that the fear of privacy violations and the expectation of facing discrimination discourage LGBTQI+ individuals from seeking certain healthcare services or compel them to conceal their identity or orientation. This fear and mistrust prevent members of

⁴¹ The Guardian. (2023). Anti-LGBTQ+ protesters break up Pride event in Georgian capital Tbilisi. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/09/anti-lgbtq-protesters-break-up-pride-event-in-georgian-capital-tbilisi>.

⁴² ILGA Europe. (2023). Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex People in Georgia Covering the Period of January to December 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/2023/georgia.pdf>.

⁴³ Equality Movement. (2022). The research on the social and economic needs of LGBTQI community in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://equality.ge/8331>.

the community from accessing the care they need and deserve, leading to disparities in healthcare outcomes. Addressing these economic and discriminatory barriers is essential to ensuring equal access to healthcare for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity⁴⁴.

Research conducted and published between 2021 and 2022 unveils the widespread discrimination and bullying experienced by LGBTQI+ respondents within both secondary schools and higher education institutions. While respondents noted a comparatively more accepting atmosphere in higher or professional institutions compared to secondary schools, they encountered instances of homophobia among students and lecturers even at the university level⁴⁵.

Several research participants affirmed enduring discrimination and bullying during their school years. The reasons behind such mistreatment extended beyond just gender identity to encompass various characteristics like clothing choices, appearance, and ethnic background. Some individuals recalled their school years with positivity, stating they did not face negative experiences. However, this often came at the cost of concealing their true identity. Respondents recounted instances of verbal, physical, and psychological violence⁴⁶.

As outlined in a report by the UN Independent Expert on Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Georgia, workplace discrimination presents a significant hurdle for LGBTQI+ individuals, with trans people facing heightened vulnerability. This challenge is exacerbated by the issue of legal gender non-recognition, which creates barriers for trans individuals seeking employment with fair working conditions, often leading to unofficial and substandard work arrangements. Some trans individuals, particularly trans women, might resort to engaging in commercial sex work, exposing them to further risks and violence. Recent studies echo this concern, revealing that 61.4% of trans sex workers cited economic difficulties as their primary motivation for entering the sex industry. Respondents highlighted stress stemming from financial instability (79.5%) and existing life or health risks (77.3%) as key concerns related to sex work⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Equality Movement. (2022). The desk research on "Bullying in public schools of Georgia". Retrieved from <https://equality.ge/8305>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019). Visit to Georgia: Report of the Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. Retrieved from https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55098723e4b011797c300d41/t/5d00238e0eea6d0001686913/1560290190861/A_HRC_41_45_Add.1.pdf.



A study conducted in 2018 shed light on discrimination faced by lesbian and bisexual women in the workplace. It found that 28.2% of these women experienced discrimination due to their sexual orientation and gender expression, primarily during the employment process (21.4%). Furthermore, 11.2% encountered inequality in opportunities, and 6.5% reported discrimination during promotion processes. The study also indicated that discrimination was more prevalent in the private sector (32.6%) compared to the public sector, particularly affecting lesbian and bisexual women who presented themselves as gender-conformist or non-binary. Overall, these findings underscore the persistently discriminatory environment, with specific challenges for LGBTQI+ individuals seeking fair and equal treatment within the labour market (Aghdgomelashvili, 2018). In the Georgian context, young individuals within the LGBTQI+ community frequently confront the dilemma of choosing between pursuing education and securing employment opportunities. Many of them grapple with inadequate support from their families, leaving them unable to rely on financial assistance⁴⁸.

9. Conclusion

In the intricate tapestry of Georgia's pursuit of democracy intertwined with gender equality, this report has navigated through the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that define the nation's socio-political landscape. As a fundamental pillar in the democratic development of any nation, gender equality emerged as a catalyst for societal inclusivity and progress. The interconnected relationship between democracy and gender equality was illuminated, illustrating that the strength of a democratic society lies not only in its formal structures but in the genuine inclusion and representation of all citizens.

The paradoxes and challenges faced by Georgia, including the binary perception of gender, cultural norms, and weak enforcement of human rights, were examined. The LGBTQI+ community, one of the most marginalised groups, remains at the forefront of these challenges, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive policies. Despite commendable strides in democratisation, Georgia grapples with the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, signalling the importance of examining the role of external entities. The European Union's involvement was scrutinised, emphasising the need for tailored policies that respect Georgian values while upholding universal principles of gender equality and democracy. The report explored the EU's multifaceted role, ranging from legislative and policy recommendations to fostering community-driven initiatives.

⁴⁸ Equality Movement. (2022). The research on the social and economic needs of LGBTQI community in Georgia. Retrieved from <https://equality.ge/8331>.



Recommendations will be outlined below to guide future endeavours, emphasising the adoption of successful Georgian legislative measures, strengthening institutional cooperation, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and investing in inclusive education. These recommendations form a strategic framework for the EU to contribute meaningfully to Georgia's journey toward a more inclusive, equal, and democratic society. As Georgia continues to grapple with its challenges, the collaborative efforts between the EU and Georgian stakeholders become pivotal. The EU's commitment to gender equality and democracy, as articulated in its Gender Action Plan III, provides a foundation for transformative change. By learning from Georgia's experiences, adopting successful practices, and fostering dynamic partnerships, the EU can play a vital role in shaping a future where democracy and gender equality flourish hand in hand.

10. Recommendations

1. Legislation and Policy

- Strengthen cooperation between Georgia and the EU, facilitating the identification and adoption of successful legislative measures from the EU that address challenges faced by marginalised groups, including the LGBTQI+ community.
- Promote extensive knowledge exchange to implement similar legislation in Georgia based on EU best practices.
- Advocate for the acknowledgment and integration of effective policy frameworks from the EU by Georgia, contributing to gender equality and democratic values.
- Strengthen cooperation to facilitate the adaptation of successful EU policies by Georgia, reinforcing a comprehensive approach to these issues.
- Enhance cooperation for Georgia to allocate resources to educational initiatives, integrating gender-sensitive curricula and emphasising civic education.

2. Cooperation

- Collaborate closely with Georgian institutions, fostering a robust partnership to enhance their capacity in effectively addressing gender-based discrimination.
- Ensure EU policies are aligned with the specific challenges and cultural intricacies of Georgia, fostering cooperation that addresses the unique needs of the region.
- Engage in active and inclusive dialogue with diverse local stakeholders to collaboratively craft policies. These policies should uphold universal principles of gender equality and democracy, reflecting the rich tapestry of perspectives within the country.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Implement robust mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation of EU-funded projects in Georgia.

- Ensure initiatives align with evolving needs and challenges, allowing for timely adjustments and improvements, especially in policy and legislative frameworks.

4. Community Engagement

- Strengthen partnerships with Georgian civil society organisations actively involved in advancing gender equality and democracy.
- Provide financial support, capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative projects to amplify the impact of grassroots efforts.
- Learn from Georgia's community-driven initiatives that have effectively fostered gender equality and democratic values at the grassroots level.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange and consider replicating successful community engagement models in relevant EU regions.

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