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Beyond “Co-Opted NGOs” and “Radical Grassroots Movements”: Women's mobilization in Georgia

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Introduction

This is a story of transcending divisions in the search for solidarity among groups of Georgian women, who have realized that “the opposite of feminism is not a vacuum, but an anti-feminist ideology.”² Recently, the quest for social change has united middle class non-governmental organization (NGO) professionals, female students, women from the regions, queer and transgender women, and women with ethnic minority backgrounds. Through demonstrations, art performances, and other grassroots initiatives, they have asserted both their common and separate needs. This is not to say that the activists, groups, and organizations discussed in the article completely agree on what for and how they should fight. The article hopes to convey, instead, the importance of solidarity, intersectionality, and constant reflection in feminist organizing. As Dean Spade rightly states, the goal of a transformative social movement should be “practice and process rather than a point of arrival” (Spade, 2015).

More specifically, this article is about the cooperation between women's NGOs and grassroots feminist groups in Georgia. Women's NGOs are defined as NGOs that predominantly employ women and work on women's issues.³ Grassroots movements are formed by the mobilization of “mass base of directly impacted people who share an experience of harm and a demand for transforming it.”⁴ Grassroots movements are participatory and non-hierarchical, while NGOs typically involve sponsors, executive boards, and professional staff.

By examining the work of women's NGOs and grassroots feminist groups in Georgia, this article challenges the NGOization framework that depicts civil society in post-Soviet Eastern Europe as dominated by Western-sponsored, bureaucratized, and professionalized organizations that fail to mobilize the population.⁵ While women's NGOs have served as the key actors working towards gender equality in Georgia following

its independence, the recently-mobilized grassroots feminist movements have diversified civil society and brought about a greater intersectionality of activism. However, countering the dichotomy of co-opted, Western-influenced NGOs and radical, autonomous grassroots movements, women's NGOs and grassroots feminist movements in Georgia often work together and connect their activism to local and global institutions and internationally recognized women's days.

In what follows, I chronologically trace the transformation of women's activism in Georgia, focusing primarily on the national independence movement, the establishment of women's NGOs, and the mobilization of grassroots feminist movement. This chronology is vital for understanding the context in which women's NGOs and grassroots feminist groups have come to collaborate. I became familiar with it by conducting a year-long qualitative research from May 2016 to May 2017 on the transformations within the Georgian feminist movement in the last quarter-century. Throughout the year, I closely reviewed the existing sources, including scholarly articles, newspaper and magazine entries, and websites and social media pages to locate my research within the broader discussions on post-Soviet Eastern European feminism, NGOization of civil society, and grassroots activism. I utilized both Georgian- and English-language sources capturing a variety of perspectives, written by scholars and activists located in and outside of Georgia. The most insightful sources, however, proved to be my interviews. In May 2016, I conducted six comprehensive expert interviews with the most prominent Georgian feminist scholars and activists involved in women's NGOs and grassroots feminist groups.⁶

My positionality in this study is noteworthy: although I had not participated in the work of any of these NGOs and grassroots groups, as I mostly lived abroad at the time of this research, I would still describe myself as occupying the space between an active participant and a mere observer. My reasoning for this identification is the following: as a

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² Tamar Tskhadadze, interview by author, Tbilisi, May 19, 2016.

³ Tamar Sabedashvili, *Gender and Democratization: The Case of Georgia 1991–2006* (The South Caucasus Regional Office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2007), 36.

⁴ Spade, *Normal Life*, 97.

⁵ For more works that question the NGOization thesis in post-communist contexts, see Jacobsson and Saxonberg (2013).

⁶ I interviewed: 1) Dr. Tamar Sabedashvili, program specialist at the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Georgia and head of Gender Studies Program at Tbilisi State University; 2) Dr. Tamar Tskhadadze, feminist philosopher and professor at Ilia State University; 3) Tamta Melashvili, feminist activist, co-founder of Independent Group of Feminists, writer, researcher, and lecturer; 4) Ekaterine Skhiladze, head of Gender Equality Department at Public Defender's Office; 5) Gvantsa Khonelidze and Ninka Khaindrava, feminist activists and members of Women's Gaze.

queer and feminist Georgian woman, I have experienced first-hand some of the challenges that these NGOs and grassroots groups mobilize against. Furthermore, I recognize the impossibility of impartiality in research aimed at creating valuable knowledge for social change. Inspired by the work of Heidi Armbruster and Anna Laerke, I fully embrace the responsibility accompanying the act of taking sides while conducting research.⁷

Independence and transition

Although contemporary Georgian scholars have traced Georgian feminist activism back to the late 19th century, the efforts most relevant to understanding today's feminist mobilization are rooted in the context of 1980s and 1990s. The first section in the chronology, therefore, examines women's involvement in the national independence movement, their exclusion from the positions of power in the independent state, and their subsequent need for creating alternative spaces, NGOs, for women-centered activism. By discussing the dismal circumstances in which women's NGOs arose, this section underscores the benefits NGOs provided to women, and hence sets up the stage for countering the critiques of NGOization.

Many Georgian citizens became involved in democratization before the collapse of the Soviet Union, uniting around the cause of independence. Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed censorship under perestroika, which allowed citizens to organize national opposition movements to Soviet rule. Women engaged in civil society, and gained experience of grassroots political mobilizing, despite being outnumbered by men in the leadership positions of the independence movement. Despite women's involvement, however, they did not become power-holders in the formal political system of independent Georgia. Neither did they raise feminist issues, as national freedom occupied the central place on the agenda (Sabedashvili, 2007). Tamar Sabedashvili, program specialist at the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Georgia and head of Gender Studies Program at Tbilisi State University, explains that:

In the 90s, the priority of both men and women was independence. The women that were involved never prioritized gender equality, we do not see any hint of that in their speeches. They never claimed to be feminist activists. Simply, patriarchy gave them the answer that it always gives to the women that became active during the revolution – it gave them a place in the background... After revolutions, once the attention goes to dividing the power positions, no one needs women anymore.⁸

Indeed, the experience of participating in the national independence movement did not necessarily lead citizens towards building a stronger civil society. The difficulties of the transitional period discouraged most citizens from uniting around non-material goals. In the context of violence, displacement, lack of economic opportunities, and confusion about the direction of the country, Georgian citizens prioritized immediate survival needs over civil mobilization.⁹ The population as a whole, and women in particular, experienced trauma as a result of the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁰ Militants on all sides used sexual violence as a tool of ethnic cleansing (Sabedashvili, 2011).

These incidents not only affected the direct victims, but also left imprints on the collective memory of the society. Immediately after independence, the population “valued physical and economic security more than democratic inclusion and other liberal values.”¹¹

The citizens' suspicion towards politics further led them to return to their private, practical affairs. The state encouraged the revival of the pre-Soviet, “untainted-by-communism” national identity, which hindered the role of women in the society. Many saw feminism either as an imported Western ideology or an old communist principle.¹² Women, however, found ways of “maneuvering without compromising.” Instead of emphasizing the “dirty” word feminism, which would shift the discussion away from the issues facing women, they used terms that were marginally more accepted such as “gender relations,” set up hotlines to provide women with information, and did other feminist-friendly work.¹³

A backlash against the Soviet style emancipation of women, together with an essentialist interpretation of women's role as the guardian of the family and an increase of male-domination in politics relocated women to the private sphere.¹⁴ The rise of neoliberal political ideology introduced the idea that individuals compete in the market for economic well-being and social status according to their merit and skills. Therefore, if someone gets left behind, it is because the individual lacks the necessary qualifications. Because neoliberalism went against welfarist, statist approaches to social issues, women's issues, seen as private, were largely left to NGOs and other service organizations. The belief that the state should not interfere in the private sphere complemented liberal individualism as well as invocations of family values. In this context, women's NGOs had to absorb the social services that the state had relinquished, including services for the victims of domestic violence (Racioppi & O'Sullivan See, 2009).

Neoliberal economic restructuring brought insecurity to the post-Soviet Eastern Europe. The transition from socialism entailed two major economic disruptions: marketization, the move from a planned to a market-driven economy; and privatization, the shift from state to private ownership. Georgia witnessed an economic downturn in the initial years of transition, which significantly affected women.¹⁵ However, they also received unprecedented opportunities. Democratization opened up spaces for activism, and women could now mobilize to challenge the status quo.¹⁶

NGOization

This section recounts the establishment of women's NGOs in Georgia in the 1990s and considers the critiques of NGOization in context. By reflecting on the work of a prominent NGO, Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), it indicates that women's NGOs vary in their strategies and their relationship with state and societal structures. Thus, the dichotomy of co-opted NGOs and radical grassroots movements fails to fully account for feminist organizing in Georgia. More broadly, this section shows that women's NGOs in Georgia brought about a greater sensitivity to gender issues, provided women with valuable services and opportunities for engagement, and laid the foundation for the campaigns that the later-emerging grassroots groups carried out.

¹¹ Sabedashvili (2011, 117).

¹² Renne, *Ana's Land*, 2.

¹³ Renne (1997, 3).

¹⁴ Although women in the Soviet Union did not have substantial political power, the quota system implemented by the state resulted in relatively high representation of women in the Supreme Soviets. In the early 1980s, women held approximately 30% of the Supreme Soviet seats in the Union Republics. In the 1990s, women lost formal political representation in post-Soviet countries. In Georgia, women's representation in the parliament fluctuated between 6.3 and 16% between 1990 and 2016. For a discussion of women's political representation in the Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia, see Shahnazaryan, Badasyan, and Movlud (2016).

¹⁵ Sabedashvili, *Gender and Democratization*, 15.

¹⁶ Racioppi and O'Sullivan See, *Gender Politics in Post-Communist Eurasia*, 1.

⁷ See Armbruster and Laerke (2008).

⁸ Tamar Sabedashvili, interview by author, Tbilisi, May 17, 2016.

⁹ Sabedashvili, *Gender and Democratization*, 34.

¹⁰ Abkhazia and South Ossetia are two breakaway regions that have gained de facto independence from Georgia after ethnic conflicts of 1992–93 and 1991–92, respectively. Georgia and most other countries consider them as sovereign territories of the Georgian state under Russian military occupation. Another conflict between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia took place in 2008. In 2009, there were over 293, 048 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Georgia as a result of the conflicts in early 1990s as well as the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. For an analysis of the gendered effects of these conflicts, including abuses such as sexual violence committed against women, see Sabedashvili (2011).

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