

# Changing Mindsets for Gender Equal Security Institutions:

The Journey of the Georgian Ministry of Defence  
and Georgian Defence Forces



# Preamble

One cannot change what has yet to be measured. It is with this in mind that DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) undertook a structured, purposefully designed evaluative exercise to understand the impact of select activities implemented in 2022 and 2023 as part of the Ministry of Defense's *Women in Defense program*, under UN Women's *Accelerating the Implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in Georgia* program. This change story was designed to highlight progress by the Georgian Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) toward gender equality and DCAF's contribution to this journey.

The evaluative exercise was conducted between September 2023 and January 2024 by DCAF. DCAF developed the methodology and data collection guidelines with support from an external evaluation expert. Independent consultants conducted interviews with nine GDF personnel representing different profiles of project activity participants, specifically five male leaders (Sergeant Major, Colonel, and Brigadier General level), and four women of different ranks. The process also involved interviewing the UK Special Defense Advisor to Georgia and Armenia, project partners the Civilian Council on Defense and Security, and UN Women. Finally, DCAF extracted key insights from its engagement records throughout the project. The project team then thematically analyzed the interview data through a coding process, with support from the evaluation expert.

In addition to measuring, documenting, and highlighting progress for project partners, the change story aimed at identifying lessons learned for future program design.

“ We often talk about gender equality in theory, but the reality is different. For instance, I haven't appointed women to leadership positions. I can't pinpoint what held me back, as I've never consciously refused to appoint someone based on their gender.

— **Male Brigadier General**

“ At the institutional level, we have well-defined strategies and incorporate equality in all relevant documents [but] problems surface at the individual level. When individuals are faced with specific decisions on their own, this is where the challenges emerge. It is perceived as a risky decision to appoint a woman. The uncertainty and the unfamiliarity of the situation may lead them to avoid such ambiguity and choose tested methods over risks.

— **Male Colonel**

In a few sentences, these leaders in the Georgian military have captured one aspect of the complexity of barriers to achieving gender equality in their institution. How do we break biases that we don't even know exist? How might individuals interfere with the

implementation of a gender equality agenda?

In 2022 and 2023, DCAF and UN Women led a series of targeted engagements with the Georgian MoD and the GDF to open discussions on how to address barriers to women’s meaningful participation in the GDF, including two senior leadership engagements with international and national experts and military representatives in 2022 and 2023, and a residential workshop with female personnel (2022), followed by a women’s leadership program for women across ranks (2023). Some participants in these activities also took part in broader gender mainstreaming activities, namely a cross-security institutions Gender Professional Development Series and a Military Gender Advisor Training.

Initially, we intended to look for tangible proof of change such as new or updated gender policies, written guidance on gender mainstreaming, or any other documents that would reflect a positive development in the practices of the MoD and the GDF. However, the interviews with personnel revealed that by looking solely at the policies we missed key variables. Our interlocutors spoke at length of the shifts in perceptions and understanding they had experienced by participating in the project activities, much less of the strategies and policies governing their institution. In other words, they spoke of what was *personal* rather than *technically* in place in their institutions.

Many interviewees shared that with DCAF activities, they became aware of issues faced by women and the obstacles that prevented them from growing professionally in the GDF. They also expressed that the trainings helped them realize their own gender biases and to think about what they could change in their behavior.

The evaluative exercise revealed that gender equality dynamics tend to play out beneath the surface, in what is unseen. The dynamics show through our unconscious biases, the invisible structures and norms that uphold inequalities between men and women, and the unspoken barriers constraining women’s opportunities.

In the opening quotes, both interviewees refer to differences between policies in place “at the institutional level” or “in theory” and decisions made at the individual level. To understand the discrepancies that the interviewees are describing, one needs to understand that achieving gender equality requires a change in individual and collective attitudes

and beliefs alongside the establishment of structures (policies and practices)<sup>1</sup> supporting a gender-equal working environment. One component alone cannot support institutional transformation. In other words, institutions become gender-responsive when the sum of its representatives hold gender-equal views and act accordingly, supported by an enabling environment integrating policies and practices consistent with gender equality.



<sup>1</sup> These include but are not limited to resources allocation, strategic documents, regulations, accountability mechanisms, etc.

# The MoD and GDF's journey towards gender equality

The MoD adopted a Gender Equality Strategy for the first time in 2014, updated with the Gender Equality Concept adopted in 2021, and articulated around four key areas: 1) Strengthening and protecting gender equality, 2) Providing equal training and development opportunities, 3) Preventing and eliminating sexual harassment and violence, and 4) Integrating gender perspectives into operations, trainings, and courses.

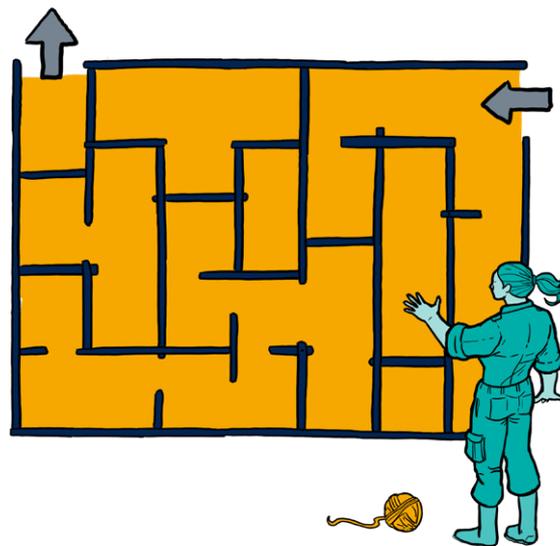
DCAF has been working with the MoD to support the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy since 2015. Meanwhile, the MoD has collaborated with other national and international stakeholders to promote gender equality, and the results achieved so far by the MoD and the GDF must be understood as the sum of combined efforts. For example, the MoD and UN Women worked to develop and implement a sexual harassment complaint mechanism as part of the broader UN Women program “Accelerating the Implementation of the WPS Agenda in Georgia”. At the same time, the UK Embassy in Tbilisi engaged the MoD bilaterally, including on gender equality.

Interviewees recognized the progress made in recent years in improving the professional environment and opportunities for women in the MoD and GDF. They noted that the MoD and GDF had made commitments towards gender equality and accepted its merits. Practically, more women have entered Georgia's military in the headquarters or subunits, despite few holding leadership positions. Interviewees also spoke of military **change makers** and **role** models with experience, drive, and ambition who have led by example and contributed to demonstrating the value of a gender-representative military force. It was described as a powerful driver of change and a desirable goal to aspire to: for military leaders consider gender equality not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do for the institution's success.

Despite significant progress, respondents' reflections suggested that changing beliefs and attitudes required time considering the role of traditions, and cultural and social norms. Many emphasized the need to educate the younger generations and enable them to challenge these deep-seated gender constructs early in their careers. Sometimes, women who occupy de facto leadership positions in tradition-

ally male-dominated military sectors such as combat, and who are respected as leaders by their subordinates, face challenges for their leadership status to be formalized and see time lags or a need for advocacy for it to happen. These difficulties in career progression affect women who constantly must prove that they are worthy of the promotion, even though they fulfil all of the required criteria, and they are undertaking these leadership duties while continuing to be paid according to their formal rather than their de facto position. This situation can generate emotional distress, including frustration and a loss of motivation, which can ultimately affect their performance and the institution's efficiency, as well as retention rate.

However, there are positive signs that things are changing. In November 2023, the first female 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant and Infantry Company Commander was appointed. This is an important milestone, perceived as paving the way for other women to be promoted and to command companies. The message sent with this appointment is that the GDF value women's skills and leadership, and that the armed forces can represent a valuable career option for women.



# Beyond awareness and toward understanding



First, interviewees were unanimous in saying that DCAF activities increased their understanding of gender equality generally as well as within their institution. It appeared for instance that some of the participants did not know of the lack of women in positions of leadership.

“*This topic was brought to my attention through these trainings. To be honest, I had never really considered this topic before. There is so much to think about, with numerous reorganizations taking place, but when I became involved in this, I realized that, indeed, this topic is a significant one. It wasn't just me; everyone in the training had the same realization that this issue truly exists. (...) “I had never contemplated these issues in a military context until DCAF brought them to my attention.*”

**Male Sergeant Major**

The interviews pointed to male leaders self-reflecting and questioning their practices. For instance, a Colonel reflected on the fact that he may have assigned different tasks to a woman in the past and that he did so unconsciously. Another Sergeant made observations that revealed how some members of the military wrestle with gender stereotypes. He reminded himself of the first time he saw a female brigade leader during a mission, she was the most capable in the group, and he described it as “a culture shock.”

“As members of the military, we’ve been on various missions and have already encountered culture shock. Witnessing women in high-ranking positions was a part of that shock. I still remember the first time I saw a female brigade leader, and she was the most capable among us. It was a significant culture shock for us. This occurred in 2004 during a mission.

**Male Sergeant Major**

DCAF also observed increased ability among participants to identify barriers to women’s participation, entrenched in social norms and expectations about women’s role in society. One of the interviewees explained that women might struggle to meet established criteria to access certain positions due to their family duties, among other issues.

“I must note that even during DCAF meetings, I observed that individuals who initially came with suspicions seemed to change their perspective by the end of the meetings.

**Male Brigadier General**



# Agents of change, drivers of results

The presence of change-makers and role models in institutions is equally important for a positive change to occur. While the project invested in male leadership to promote gender equality it also allowed women in positions of leadership to realize their role in advocating for gender equality and supporting other women. The quote below illustrates the importance of mentorship and relationships.

“ I felt a strong desire to share my own experiences with the newcomers, helping them navigate potential obstacles more smoothly than I did. We were seen as seasoned and experienced women role models within the system. Conversations and relationships among participants often led to solutions, and these informal discussions were particularly interesting and productive.

**Female Lieutenant Colonel**

The women’s leadership program brought together women in the GDF who may have never crossed paths, because of their different ranks, positions, or postings. While women are underrepresented in the security sector in general, and in the defense sector in particular, bringing them together and listening to each other’s experiences fostered a sense of solidarity and motivation to face adversity.

“ It was very impressive to get to know women who once were low-level employees, performed not only their but others’ duties, and men were credited for their work. (...) Engagement of people with such background and their motivation to change something is so motivational. I have seen men saying that it is time for them to rest and quit, and then I compare them with these women who have fought and persevered and after all these years are still willing to continue the fight and to contribute... This is inspirational.

**Female Lieutenant**

The project opened **platforms** for members of the GDF to discuss issues around gender equality openly. Safe spaces are key to encouraging self-awareness, self-questioning, and reflection on one’s attitudes and behavior. Specifically, the women leadership program provided a platform for women across ranks, positions, and posting to share information and experiences, and provide advice and support to each other. The program revealed the need for women to be connected across the defense institutions and to understand the diversity of their experiences, as it helps visualize women’s potential and possible career paths.

“ I needed to be surrounded by people who would help and empower me to do what I needed to be done. I would tell them [men] that I am equal, I can drive the truck like you, I can perform my duties and there is no need to assign me to do other, “more fitting” tasks. (...) So, when I became a participant in this project, I met like-minded people and I saw that if there was anyone to follow my footsteps their way would be already paved and that no one would tell them that it is not a woman’s job.

**Female Corporal**

## Empowerment through experience-sharing

Interviews also show that participation in DCAF-led project activities led women to develop increased **confidence, self-esteem**, and a sense of empowerment, to recognize that they share similar experiences and can help each other, including through collective action.

“ This program was such a motivation for me, such a boost to my self-esteem. And now I am one of the most visible results of the program as I got admitted to a sergeant’s course (...) You know what we did through these meetings? It is becoming mandatory, and brigades are receiving instruction that when men are sent to some event, a woman serviceperson from the brigade also attends it. And this is coming from this program.

**Female Corporal**

“ What DCAF has accomplished along with raising overall awareness is that it has given us a voice.

**Female Lieutenant Colonel**

# What lessons are we taking forward?

Part of this evaluative exercise focused on identifying what worked well in DCAF's approach with the MoD and GDF in Georgia to inform future interventions. We asked participants if they could identify a "DCAF approach", what had been particularly effective, and what could be improved.

**The setting and tone in the workshops and meetings matter:** DCAF emphasized the need to understand and navigate sensitivities around the issue and to adapt the activities' format and content accordingly. Interviewees considered that informal settings facilitated dialogue between officials of different ranks and allowed for honest conversations to happen.

“ I fully support the informal setting and atmosphere of the meetings, first you process things differently and second having an opportunity to meet servicemen holding different ranks in an informal environment helps to break the ice. There is a strict chain of command and such events help to bypass it and speak openly about issues of concern and voice an opinion.

**Female Lieutenant**

**Finding the right balance between highlighting international and local experience:** Bringing international speakers and highlighting experiences from other countries was effective in conveying key messages, and in prompting reflection on best practices that could work in the Georgian context.

**Creating a group dynamic:** Involving the same participants over time allowed them to build relationships across departments and institutions and to use these relationships for networking and peer-to-peer support after the activities ended.

**Men's participation in women-specific programs is indispensable:** from the perspective of women, having a few male leaders participating in the women's leadership program was useful, but more men from different positions (decision-makers, middle management) should be involved. The more men are involved, the more likely they are to understand women's issues, to hear women out, and to support them.



**Reaching out to the more skeptical elements of the institution:** GDF personnel nominated to participate in the women leadership program, as well as broader gender mainstreaming activities, already had a certain level of affinity and familiarity with the topic of gender. Future activities should consider bringing together a more mixed crowd of personnel including a broader representation of different military ranks, and personnel who have never been sensitized to gender to enhance the reach and effectiveness of the program.

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