

## Female Migrants from Georgia: Profiles and Migratory Projects

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### Abstract

The profile of Georgian migrants depends on whether they migrate to countries within or outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The distinction is also gendered. Closely examining female migrant profiles reveals key trends in their migration projects. Reflecting Georgian economic instability as well as social and family organization, these goals often appear to be rather short-termed and circumstantial. At the same time, partly because of the ways remittances are used, returning to Georgia is often as difficult as deliberately planning long-term migration. However, in this context, female migration to Turkey offers a special and more flexible case of mobility.

### Georgian Migration to and Outside the CIS: A Sharp Contrast

Observers agree that migration is a significant issue for Georgia, but they differ in estimating the scale of the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Figures range from 198,904 registered migrants (MPC 2013) to 1.5 million (CRRC 2007), which is the highest estimation including undocumented migrants. Estimates about remittances also illustrate the key role of migration in Georgia. In 2010, remittances represented 8.1% of the GDP (MPC 2013). Considering that this figure only takes bank service transfers into account, that is, only one third of the total money transfers (CRRC 2007), one can estimate remittances to be around 24% of the GDP. Thus, it is obvious that migrating became a nation-wide survival strategy. However, Georgian migrations are far from homogeneous and every kind of destination country is characterized by different migrants' profiles, migration projects and social perceptions. Here again, it is difficult to get reliable figures. Yet, by combining various surveys conducted in the last five years, the main features of migrants' profiles according to their destinations can be highlighted.

First of all, a larger stock of Georgian migrants is to be found within the post-soviet space, mainly in Russia. Estimates taking into account the large flows of Georgian undocumented migrants range from 400,000 up to 1 million (IOM 2008). After 2006, migrating to Russia became more difficult. Along with Western labor market demands, this led to a significant shift within migration patterns in Georgia. Besides Russia, the most popular destination countries are Greece, Italy, Turkey, Germany, Israel and the United States. This shift in destination countries in the last decade has resulted in the increase of female migration.

There is a sharp contrast regarding the profiles of Georgian migrants within the CIS and migrants to other countries. Georgian migrants to OECD countries are generally better qualified than migrants to CIS countries as leaving the CIS requires more linguistic, human and financial capital. In OECD countries, 38.7% hold a university diploma in comparison to 27.7% in CIS countries (MPC 2013). However, as those migrants are more educated, unlike migrants in the CIS, they also tend to occupy jobs far below their education. Migrants outside the CIS are mostly employed in the elderly and child care industries, crafts, factories, agriculture and construction. Interestingly, destinations outside the CIS are perceived by the public and by migrants as the only proper migration destinations since they are out of the historical zone of mobility. Thus, the downward mobility through migration and its feminization end up shaping the opposite image than that of the relatively successful man in Russia. Both are significant elements to understand the material and symbolic violence that migration causes to Georgian society.

### Destination Countries Strongly Defined by Gender

In 2001, it was believed that women represented between one third and 40% of migrants (CRRC 2007); according to various surveys, they now represent 50.8 % of migrants outside the CIS but only 36% within the CIS (MPC 2013). And, according to the combined results of two surveys (Geostat and CRRC), in 2008 women represented approximately 64% of migrants to Turkey and Greece while men constituted 70% of migrants to Russia (Trough Hofmann 2012). In general, informal migration job networks are strongly gendered. Firstly, this is simply because, except for factory jobs, men and women are employed in different sectors. Second, women tend to keep their distance from men in migration, mostly for the sake of reputation. This, along with the increasing demand in the care sector, is also an explanation for this strongly gendered destination pattern. Moreover, for

1 This article is based on the combination of survey results and anthropological fieldwork consisting of observations and qualitative formal and informal interviews (so far 25 formal in depth interviews and 60 cases reported) conducted in Georgia and Turkey.

the kind of jobs that those destinations offer, if there is a choice, female migration is preferred for various reasons: first, it is safer, care jobs being somehow less precarious than jobs in factories or on construction sites, second it is more profitable, women being less likely to spend their salaries abroad and having the reputation of being “better migrants” (Lundkvist-Houndoumadi 2010).

### Profile of Female Migrants

The first striking feature is that Georgian female migrants are more educated than their male counterparts. World Bank statistics show that 52.7% of female migrants who returned to Georgia had completed higher education, in comparison to 37.7% of their male counterparts (IOM 2008). Even if it is common belief among migrants that the downward social mobility is more difficult to bear for men than for women (which is one of the reasons given for the feminization of migration), it nevertheless causes significant social suffering for women. This suffering is increased by the nature of jobs in the care sector. Indeed, for most women, working in a family of strangers as a “servant,” being paid for what is conceived as the natural duty of women for their own family aside of a real and fulfilling job, is considered a greater humiliation than working, for instance, in factories. Even though most women do feel self-satisfaction helping their own families financially, in regard to individual identity it is often impossible for them to conceive of migrating to perform unskilled jobs as a life project.

In contrast to male migration, female migration is much more strongly linked to family circumstances. Female migrants are twice as likely to be divorced as non-migrants, which is not the case for male migrants (Badurashvili 2012). Erin Trough Hofmann (2012) found that to come from a household with at least two women or no adult male tends to be positively associated with migration, while it is not the case for men. Women who choose to migrate have to be sure before departure that they can find a family arrangement for their children and their house. Because women do not only have the responsibility of bread-winning but also of the well-being of their family, their migration projects are more precarious and circumstantial.

### Short-term Migration Projects

Migration is often presented as an individual life course accident strongly connected with collective events such as the fall of the USSR or the 2008 Russian–Georgian war. The instability of the Georgian economy, consisting in short cycles, the dependence of many households on loans and the weakness of social policies, is also reflected in the migration time frame, its rhythm and expectations. In most cases, migration is seen as the only way

out of debts, the loss of one’s house or job, the disease of a family member or the failure of a business. It is then conceived as the only way to pursue an individual economic transition.

As it is linked to a specific problem, migration should cease when that problem is solved. But often, migration lasts longer than expected and the migrant enters a “migratory cycle”. This “cycle” is linked to the fact that remittances are used first for providing daily life necessities (food, health, education) of the family left behind, rather than for long-term personal investments. Causes for that phenomenon are multiple; the main one is the economic situation which makes it difficult to save money. Women also tend to have little control over how remittances are used, therefore, they can be “wasted”, or at least spent indiscriminately. As remittances become crucial for the family life, it is more and more difficult to consider returning back home. Those women who “attempted a return”, in the same way as they “attempted a departure”, on average leave again after a year because they did not find work at home. Various surveys show that it is very complicated for migrants to readjust to the Georgian labor market. This can be explained by the importance of personal networks: the longer one is abroad, the more one’s informal networks in Georgia weaken and by contrast the more one’s migration networks abroad are reinforced. Often, after a while, migration networks are reactivated or even reactivate themselves through job proposals from a family where one used to work or from a friend abroad.

In that regard, the case of Georgian female migrants in Turkey, which has been little investigated, presents a slightly different situation.

### The Special Case of Female Migrants to Turkey

Migrating to Turkey tends in general to be depreciated, mainly for religious reasons and because of the lower salaries that are offered. The bad reputation of Turkey as a destination country also lies in the risks of trafficking and prostitution. Moreover, migrating to Turkey being easier (no visa regime since 2007) and cheaper, it is perceived as a desperate migration move and thus, even though there is no evidence for it, a destination for rural people. However, migration to Turkey seems to present less of the “tragedy” aspect when compared to other migration stories. Indeed, family ties can remain more intense because of the obligation to come back to Georgia every third month and, since March 2012, to stay for another three months on Georgian territory before entering Turkey again. Women who succeed in getting a work permit also tend to return to Georgia on a regular basis because of the proximity and of low

travel costs. Hence, women can keep on playing their role within their families more efficiently than through *Skype* and telephone calls. Because ties to the family are more frequent, women are less separated from their environment and, in numerous cases, the use of remittances is better controlled as well. Thus, migration to Turkey, which has the reputation of being exclusively “survival migration,” can be more profitable than expected.

Migratory projects are also impacted by these different conditions. Migrating to Turkey allows wider latitude for decision and control regarding one’s migratory project. Paradoxically, migration to Turkey is more likely to be a short-term migration or a more long-term planned one. Unlike women who are going to Greece or Italy and who must wait for a few months and learn the language before having jobs interviews, migrants in Turkey can find a family where they can work within two weeks, and without any interviews, through acquaintances or through the numerous informal job agencies. Therefore, migration to Turkey can be used as a quick means of generating income or can be progressively seen as a more long-term primary source of earning as the psychological cost is relatively lower. It also has the advantage of giving migrants the feeling that it is always

possible to come back and, even more significantly, to migrate again. For other destinations, the illegal crossing of the border or the difficulty of obtaining a tourist visa often prevents the migrant from trying to come back as it will be a lot more difficult to migrate again. Thus, for many respondents, if choosing Turkey is not the only financial option, it is a choice consciously made with the purpose of not losing one’s family links and of remaining tied with one’s Georgian life. Therefore, the choice of helping one’s family financially requires fewer sacrifices on the part of the migrant.

### Conclusion

As migration in Georgia is still in its early phase, observing Georgian migration processes make it possible to explore how migration strategies are progressively shaped according to various factors such as economic rhythms, social policies, family arrangements or perceptions of success. As female migration adds to the social malaise caused by migration, it especially embodies the transitive nature of migration incentives and dynamics, both at the individual and social level, as well as the strategies undertaken to overstep it.

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