

Female Face of Migration

IOM Georgia Brief for International Women's Day – 8 March 2022

On this day, IOM joins the world in celebrating the International Women's Day. In these challenging times, it remains of utmost importance to echo the voice of migrant women around the world who continue to show unbelievable courage and dedication to their families, communities, and host countries. This brief contains some of IOM's observations on migration journeys of Georgian women, and trends, challenges and needs of Georgian women upon their return home. It also highlights few of many successful stories of Georgian women returnees.

Feminization of Migration from Georgia

Recent experience indicates that more than half of Georgian migrants are women. The 'feminization of migration' entails and brings into the analysis various new and specific female perspectives of migration experiences along with different needs of female migrants in their migration journey, including but not limited to return and reintegration, which should define future approaches. Today, most Georgian female emigrants are working at domestic services as babysitters, caregivers, and helpers to provide for their families left behind. While this is the main driver of the movement for Georgian women, having to leave their children behind in the care of husbands and/or other family members is among the primary dilemmas for them.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and vulnerabilities it brought to Georgian migrants abroad, the number of returnees to Georgia has increased in 2020 and the net migration of the country was positive for the first time since 1994.¹ According to IOM's knowledge, many Georgian migrants who were left without a daily job or income in the destination countries have returned to Georgia. This mobility is also translated as decreased number of Georgian nationals applying for asylum in Europe.



Maia is a mother of two. When she left for Greece in 2004, her children, who back then were 9 and 10 years old, stayed behind with grandparents. Initially, Maia's plan was to work abroad for 2 years, but she ended up staying in Greece for 16 years. With the help of her sister, who was also working in Greece, Maia managed to find a job right away. She worked in bakeries, cafes, and cleaned private houses. As she watched from distance, her two kids grew up, got married and had children of their own. This made her life abroad especially difficult. But still, experience, which she gained in Greece, made her stronger. She helped other Georgians in need too – provided them with food and shelter. After spending so much time away from her family, Maia is happy to be back home. She returned home with IOM's support and started cattle-breeding business. Maia is not planning to go back to Greece for work any time soon. She wants to spend as much time as possible with her family. © IOM 2020 / Eric Gourlan

¹ Migration, Geostat. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

In 2019 alone, over 20,000 Georgian citizens applied for their first asylum in the European Union (nearly 0.7 per cent of the country's population) and hundreds of thousands made use of visa-free travel (Eurostat). However, in 2020, only 7,200 Georgians (3,180 are females) applied for asylum in Europe. With the ease of COVID-19 restrictions on international movement among other factors, this number exceeded 10,000 (nearly 4,000 females) in 2021.²

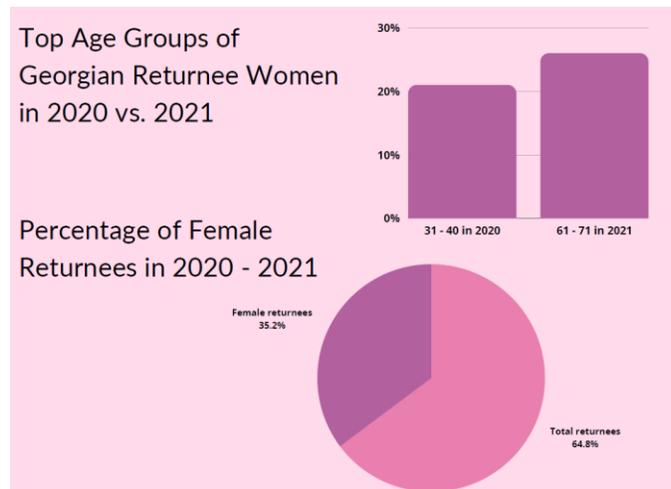
Women Migrants Contemplating Return

Making the decision to go back home can be extremely challenging for migrants, especially for women in need of employment, psychosocial support, and social assistance. Specifically for those female migrants who are single parents, divorced or widowed as the sole caretaker of their family members with disabilities, this process is particularly challenging. Access to timely, unbiased, and reliable information is essential in dignified voluntary return and sustainable reintegration, allowing migrants to make informed decisions and take ownership of the voluntary return process. IOM set up virtual counselling in response to the emerging challenges in the times of COVID-19. This online tool supports migrants in making informed return decisions. Through virtual counselling sessions, migrants are being provided with direct access to information about available reintegration support in Georgia through trusted counsellors who speak their language and understand, relate to, and address their concerns.

Majority of migrants who make use of IOM's Virtual Counselling services are women, often single mothers with no sufficient income to ensure quality life for their children after return. Often, they are caring for children with serious medical issues and concerned about availability of necessary medical services or funds to cover for those. Other women migrants with children, thinking about return to Georgia, are also interested in availability of schools, especially when their children do not speak Georgian. Naturally, all potential returnee women want to be informed about employment opportunities, return process – its organization and the time it will take them to get back home. These questions are important considering that they are planning to leave either due to some challenges in the host country or because they are in a hurry to come back to their family members left behind, for example, elderly parents who often depend on them for support, which might go beyond financial needs.

Who Are Women Returnees to Georgia?

In 2020 - 2021, IOM has assisted a total of 988 returnees with reintegration assistance of which 537 were female returnees. Vast majority of assisted female Georgian migrants chose Greece (80%) as the primary destination mainly to perform domestic work, followed by Germany (8%) and Switzerland (4%)³ where the profile is slightly different



since migrants are not travelling alone but with their families including husbands and minor children. Majority of the female returnees to Georgia (35%) spent one to three years abroad, 16 per cent from three to six years, 15 per cent from 12 to 20 years.

Capital city of Tbilisi and Imereti region are primary districts of residence for female returnees, followed by Samegrelo and Kakheti.

Majority of returned migrant women are above 50 years old, with either secondary or higher education. However, none of them were following their career paths abroad; instead, majority of

² This information is generated from official Eurostat website on 1 March 2022. Last two months of 2021 are not included on Eurostat, therefore, it is anticipated that the given number is higher.

³ Remaining countries of departure in descending order are Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Finland, Ireland.

returnee women are coming back from domestic work to households, which they were supporting through remittances and savings.

The ‘feminization of migration’ was observed among those migrants returned due to and during pandemic, though less pronounced compared to Georgia's general migration trends. Women among these returnees spent longer time abroad than men. Women also returned at a later age – 39 years old on average compared to 35 years of age among men.

How to Better Support Women Migrants Returning to Georgia?

According to IOM’s latest findings, reintegration has not been an easy process for most returnees, especially female returnees, upon their arrival due to and during COVID-19. Most female returnees stated that returning to the homeland was the only positive aspect in the post-return period because of the hard living conditions and economic problems, which were the basis for their emigration decision, emerged again as soon as they arrived.

Structural problems such as unemployment, economic hardship, lack of medical services and opportunities continued to drive emigration as in earlier years. Although female returnees voiced a strong desire to stay in Georgia, they also stated they may have no other choice than to re-migrate in the face of “economic hardship and poverty”.

In 2021 alone, IOM assisted a total of 501 individuals with reintegration assistance among them 275 were female (55%). Vast majority of assisted female beneficiaries were returnees from Greece (74%), followed by Germany (11%), Belgium (4%) and France (4%).⁴ While 38 per cent of female returnees were above 60 years old, 31 per cent were between 40 – 60 and another 31 per cent were below 40.

To understand better the experiences of women returnees, IOM is organizing focus group meetings during which they share their stories of life in host countries and in return to Georgia. They also receive support and tips from peers who have overcome challenges such as lack of employment, lower level of infrastructure and social assistance programmes at home compared to the host countries. IOM observed that peers sharing their experiences of success in various domains after return to Georgia serves as further motivating factor.



Bela is a lawyer. She used to work for Tbilisi City Hall and Tbilisi City Court. She loves her profession, but still had to choose to work abroad to cover her father’s medical bills. In 2012 Bela moved to Italy. After two years of hard work as a caretaker for an elderly person, Bela left for Belgium, with a hope to find a better paid job. She spent six years in Antwerp, applied for asylum, but her request was denied. She still decided to stay and found a job as a housekeeper. Bela returned to Georgia with her 2.5-year-old daughter Viviane. She managed to find a job back home at a hypermarket but works long hours and leaves her daughter with a friend or Viviane’s grandmother, whom the child calls *oma*. Bela is concerned that her daughter does not have any Georgian friends - she does not speak Georgian, so children refuse to play with her. For a single working mother, with little income, it is also hard to arrange day care for her daughter in the time of pandemic. Now Bela is looking for a new job, with better income. Based on her work experience in Belgium, her background as a lawyer and the accounting skills she gained at her current job, Bela wants to start her own business in the service sector and offer customers cleaning service with high standards and compatible prices. © IOM 2020 / Eric Gourlan

⁴ Eight female returnees from Switzerland, two female returnees from Finland, two female returnees from Poland and one female returnee from the Netherlands.

In terms of access to sustainable livelihood, younger women express more interest in training courses, employment and/or starting up a small income generating businesses in bigger cities such as opening bakeries, involving in trade and service sectors, whereas older women are more interested in small farming projects in rural areas. Further, it is observed that women returnees especially acknowledge the need for psychosocial assistance is since the beginning of the pandemic. In 2021, psychosocial assistance has become an important part of IOM Georgia's reintegration efforts. Through group meetings with migrant women and vulnerable returnees, IOM facilitates communication and exchanges in search of ways to help returnees cope with post-return stress and pressures. IOM works with psychologists to engage and empower vulnerable family members of returnees and facilitate independent living, education, and employment. These meetings provide a safe space for returnees to speak openly about their experiences in host countries and share their stories, some of them being that of success, after returning to Georgia.

IOM observed a need for further awareness-raising among returnees to ensure information sharing about available, free, and paid social, medical, and educational programmes and services. A more specific need in terms of psychosocial assistance identified is the assistance to family members of persons with disabilities, including children. For example, IOM noticed that part of the female returnees, especially the ones returning from Germany, are major caregivers for their sick family members or family members with disabilities, including children. They lack information about available assistance, they need referrals to free on-line consultations with psychologists and behavioural and/or occupational therapists. These families with vulnerabilities need excessive support in the form of information provision, referrals, and psychosocial assistance.

What is still very limited in Georgia is activities that are designed to increase the wellbeing of the families and their members. For example, almost all returning children, no matter what their needs may be, are facing difficulties

adapting. In such cases, necessary referrals for improving children's cultural and language skills are crucial. It is observed that mothers are usually more involved with these problems; however, father tend to engage more and more. Further, in those families where mothers have been abroad for a very long time (mainly returnees from Greece), alienation from the side of children who were left in Georgia in a very young age is observed.



The ongoing pervasive effects of COVID-19 continue to have a particularly negative impact on women migrants, especially those were involved in domestic work. The pandemic and policy interventions introduced by the states

such as international movement restrictions, extended lockdowns, isolation, and social distancing have further exacerbated inequalities for migrant women. Those Georgian women abroad who have faced with loss of job, livelihoods, and lack access to services, have found themselves in a situation to make return decision to Georgia, and they have faced with challenging reintegration processes upon their return. In Georgia, IOM is committed and dedicated to continuing to explore and evaluate opportunities available for Georgian returnees, with special focus on women and girls. IOM supports them with safe and dignified return home, challenging socio-economic reintegration processes, accessing education, labour market and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

“Every person on the move has a different story - whether they move because of imminent danger, in search of better opportunities, for love, or to re-join their families. Migrants bring with them hopes as well as capabilities, and we have the duty and the responsibility to listen to and respect them.”

IOM Director General, António Vitorino

