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## WHAT MAKES ME MIGRATE?

### *Socially and Culturally Constructed Motivations of Georgian Women's Migration*

#### Introduction

The contemporary era is widely recognized as the “age of migration.” Over recent decades migration trends have grown increasingly complex and the number of female migrants has risen. Now women constitute about half of all global migration flows.<sup>1</sup> Though female migration still occurs due to family reunification, forced migration and trafficking, today more women than ever migrate independently in order to support their families or meet their own economic needs.<sup>2</sup> In the developed world, the combination of women’s increased participation in the workforce and society’s failure to develop family friendly labor policies and child-care options as well as the growing elderly population has led to a strong demand for the domestic labor of migrant women.<sup>3</sup> Domestic work is socially constructed as a female domain. Hence, migrant women typically find themselves in the domestic employment sector, in which increasing international demand plays an important role in determining the growing trends of the feminizing of migration.

After the collapse of socialism many more countries joined the ranks of domestic work “suppliers” on the international market. After gaining independence in 1991, Georgia became an inseparable part of the global processes of migratory flows. Growing inequality and political insecurity, increasing flexibility of the international market and massive decline in employment encouraged large-scale and mostly undocumented migration from the state. Unofficial estimates put the number of Georgians who left

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA-IOM Expert Group (2006), *Female Migrants: Bridging the Gaps throughout the Life Cycle*. Selected Papers of the UNFPA-IOM Expert Group Meeting, New York.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Oishi, N. *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 3.

the country since 1990s at approximately 1.5 million people.<sup>4</sup> Migration flows from Georgia have been directed towards the Russian Federation, the USA, Greece, Germany and other EU states.<sup>5</sup> According to national census results, 62.2% of the total number of labor migrants are women.<sup>6</sup> Demand for domestic labor force on the international level and massive feminization of responsibilities and work at the local level have conditioned the increasing feminization of migration from Georgia.

Thus, under the global trends of feminizing migration, exploring the international patterns of female migration is of special importance, especially for a country like Georgia, which has been experiencing large-scale emigration flows since gaining its independence.

This research tries to fill the gap which has formed due to the ignorance of gender-specific dimensions in the scarce literature about Georgian migration and focuses on one of the most important aspects of international female migration flows within the context of the sending country: the determinants of women's migration decisions. Specifically, it analyses the constructed motivations of Georgian women's migration decisions, as influenced by the cultural and social environment they live in. The main explorative questions of the study are as follows: *What are the factors that encourage Georgian women to migrate? How do they perceive their own migration decisions? How they construct their motivations?*

The research is based on an integrative approach to female migration which makes in-depth analysis of international female migration flows and tries to identify its encouraging and discouraging factors. Within the framework of an integrative approach I apply the concept of social legitimacy to Georgian women's migration motivations. The research is based on qualitative research methodology. The data is acquired from semi-structured interviews with Georgian migrant women of various ages, social statuses and backgrounds. The target group of the research is divided into three main categories: migrant mothers, migrant young single women and migrant middle-aged unmarried women. This kind of division derives from the different experiences, social statuses and life patterns of Georgian women, taking into account the gender-related prescriptions predominant in Georgian culture.

First I discuss the notion of social legitimacy and apply it to the Georgian case, then, in briefly examining Georgian society through the lens

<sup>4</sup> The official number according to the 2002 census is approximately one million whereas the population of Georgia is 4.5 million people.

<sup>5</sup> Migration in Georgia, A country Profile. 2008. Available at: [http://itlab.ge/iom/pdf/M\\_Georgia.pdf](http://itlab.ge/iom/pdf/M_Georgia.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Jashi, C. Tokmazishvili M. (2009), Gender Dimensions of the Financial Policy of Georgia. SIDA Publications, p. 106.

of gender relations, I aim to produce a short overview of the overall social and cultural environment Georgian women live in. After introducing the methodological part of my work, I shift to the main body of my study and, based on the acquired data, explore socially and culturally constructed factors which, along with economic incentives, play a crucial role in the migration decisions of Georgian women.

## **1. Gendering Georgian Migration**

### ***1.1. Social legitimacy for Georgian women's migration***

The concept of social legitimacy was introduced by Nana Oishi within the framework of an integrative approach to international female migration. While she is investigating migration trends from Asian countries, I find Oishi's approach relevant to Georgia due to factors which I discuss later on. Unlike conventional migration theories, Oishi's integrative approach explores women's international migration on different levels of analysis – macro level (the state), micro level (individuals), and meso level (society) – in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. The goal of this approach is to identify the factors that encourage and discourage international female migration. On the macro level I emphasize the importance of the state and the major role it plays in determining the patterns of women's international migration flows. On the meso (society) level Oishi proposes the concept of social legitimacy, which is crucial to my research. For international female migration, social legitimacy means a set of norms that are conducive to women's migration. At the individual level she discusses the autonomy of women in the process of deciding to migrate.

Oishi supposes that social legitimacy for women's migration is rooted in a number of socio-economic factors such as: historical legacy of women's employment, the sending country's integration into the global economy, gender equality, particularly in education, and women's rural-urban mobility. Applying social legitimacy to the Georgian case reveals that the Soviet past has played a considerably positive role in its formation. The historical legacy of women's employment, according to Oishi, refers to the tradition in which women were engaged in economic activities outside their homes, whether in formal or informal sectors.

This kind of legacy has served to prepare society to accept women's economic activities outside the home and has helped lend social legitimacy

to female labor migration.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the Soviet legacy of women's employment has had its own positive effects. The mass entry of women into the workforce as propagated by the Soviet state laid the groundwork for women to be actively engaged in the economic and public spheres. Though women rarely held leading positions, they were widely represented in the middle levels of management. Thus, Georgian women, like Soviet women on the whole, have had a considerable tradition of employment. It is notable that nine out of my 11 respondents have had employment experience.

Gender equality, and particularly equality in education, also affects - albeit indirectly - the levels of international female migration, Oishi says. Under Soviet rule, education was one of those rare realms where gender equality was attained.<sup>8</sup> It is assumed that educated women are more autonomous and free in their decision making, including decisions about migration. Education also increases women's expectations for a better life. They have a more developed sense of agency. Ten out of 11 respondents had higher education and one was in the process of obtaining one.

Oishi argues that women's rural-urban mobility has established a more acceptable environment for women to migrate to foreign countries. Along with the massive industrialization and urbanization of the Soviet republics, women's rural-urban mobility also increased. Women moved internally as primary earners as well as accompanying family members. The rates were maintained and further expanded in post-Soviet Georgia, during the transitional period when many rural women lost their jobs and migrated to urban places for survival. Movements of internally displaced women due to local conflicts also contributed to this process.

According to Oishi, a country's integration into the global economy also serves as a factor encouraging social acceptance of female migration. Georgia entered the global economy as an independent country in 1991. Additionally, under the new Georgian national government, crossing the boundaries and moving about internationally became much more attainable and migration became widespread practice.

Thus, the social and economic factors mentioned above laid the groundwork for Georgian women's migration works to enjoy a high level of social legitimacy. Besides, the degree to which a society accepts and legitimizes international female migration significantly influences the

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<sup>7</sup> Oishi, N. *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies and Labor Migration in Asia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> Donadze N. Kiknadze T. (2006). *The Problems of Gender Equality in Georgia*. *Gender – Political and Social Studies*. Tbilisi: Center for Social Sciences, p. 84.

decisions women make.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the Georgian government does not practice a so-called value-driven emigration policy as is the case in some Asian countries. It does not restrict or ban women's migration. If migrant women were stigmatized or their actions were limited by the government, this kind of large-scale female migration from the country would not occur. Factors such as the expectations of improvement of economic conditions further strengthen social legitimacy and stimulate women's incentives to migrate.

### *1.2. Gender aspects of Georgian society*

Georgian society is a traditional one with well-defined roles for men as breadwinners and women as child-bearers. Traditional perceptions about gender roles and gender relations, actively propagated by the influential church, permanently strengthen the conditions under which a women's role is reduced to production and reproduction functions. A "good woman" is still defined by her role as a wife and mother – the primary caregiver. The exaggerated cult of motherhood makes Georgian culture very specific. Being a small Christian country surrounded by Muslim neighbours and having an important geopolitical position targeted by enemies for centuries, Georgia has developed various "defensive", compensative or adaptive survival mechanisms throughout history. Due to all these factors some values were strongly activated in Georgia's culture and mentality to "save" the nation. The emergence and fortification of the cult of motherhood was one of these factors. The existence of this cult helped the Georgian people survive as an autonomous ethnic entity. This historical trend was one determinant of the tendency to equalize the concepts of mother and woman in Georgian culture. Thus, motherhood grants special value to Georgian women and those who due to different reasons lack the opportunity to become mothers are stigmatized.<sup>10</sup> Further propagated during the Soviet period, motherhood is a strong social phenomenon accepted as a primary obligation for women. Other forms of self-realization for them are not much appreciated.<sup>11</sup>

Under socialism Georgian women shared the fate of other Soviet women. The Soviet state policy on women's emancipation turned out to be superficial and led to women suffering under the double burden of

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<sup>9</sup> Oishi, N. *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies and Labor Migration in Asia*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> Surmanidze, L. (2002), *Some Orientations of Georgian Culture. Gender in Georgia*. Tbilisi: International Center for Women's Education and Information, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

household affairs and career options. Despite some achievements during the Soviet era, like equal opportunities in education, gender equality was not achieved in many fields. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia encountered severe economic and political problems which negatively impacted participation in economic life by Georgian citizens in general. Under conditions of mass unemployment and structural change of the labor market, women wound up mainly in low positions.

Following the economic and political transition, the system of values prevalent in Georgian society also underwent great changes. The process of re-evaluation of traditions and values turned out to be quite painful. Radical social and political changes deeply affected the lives of citizens who did not have appropriate experience and easily became vulnerable under the new conditions. Adaptation to the new environment became crucial for both men and women. Many Georgian men found themselves unable to adjust to the new realities and demands of the market economy. Women turned out to be more “prepared” to overcome the crisis. They set up their action plans for survival.

More and more women became the main providers for their families, though their options were quite limited. Migration became one of those limited alternatives and in some cases the only choice available for survival. It was mostly women - mothers, daughters and sisters - who took decisions to migrate and enter the legal or illegal workforce abroad. The increased number of unemployed men at home and the opportunities available to women to find jobs in the traditionally female gendered sphere abroad led to a shift of responsibilities of providing for families from men to women. I argue that this new role of women in participating in the world economy, as well as the feminization of responsibilities to support families, are the leitmotifs of the migration motivations of Georgian women.

## **2. Methodology**

I placed my research in the framework of qualitative research methodology in order to maximally show the “participants’ perspective”. My aim was to explore how the participants of my study made sense of the events and behaviors linked to their migration experience and how their views were influenced by their behaviors. Thus, exploring the context within which participants act and understand the effects of this context on migrant women’s actions is of special importance in this case.

The data I acquired for my research is based on my fieldwork in Tbilisi and Tianeti in July and August 2009. The reason for choosing these places of origin for my interviewees was to ascertain if the perceptions of migration motivations and decisions of women differ in a particular way in the capital compared to the periphery. I conducted 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with former and current migrants. (I chose the summer period for the interviews due to the fact that current migrants are mostly available during their summer returns to the homeland, when they usually have their vacations.)

The respondents were women of various ages, social statuses and backgrounds. Interviewees were divided into three sub-categories: migrant mothers, single young migrant women and middle-aged migrant women (unmarried.<sup>12</sup>) The sampling of the target group of my interviewees was determined by different social status, life experience and migration patterns they have in general. Five respondents from the sample group of migrant mothers, three respondents from the group of middle-aged unmarried women and three respondents from the group of young single women were interviewed. All of the interviewees from the group of migrant mothers were returned migrants.

Two members of the group of unmarried middle-aged migrant women had temporarily returned for summer holiday and one had returned permanently. Regarding the sample group of young migrant women, partly I used the data from my previous research about young Georgian women's migration experience in Germany. Though the topic of the previous study was a bit different and dealt with empowering aspects of migration, it absolutely covered the main questions of my current study. Among the three from this sample group interviewed in Tbilisi in 2009 two had returned permanently and one temporarily.

The oldest of the interviewees was 58 years old and the youngest was 24. Destination countries for migrant mothers and middle aged unmarried women were the USA, Greece, Italy and Israel, whereas for young single women it was primarily Germany. Apart from women of this group, all other respondents were undocumented migrants. Interviews were conducted in Georgian and were later transcribed and translated by me. Interviews lasted an average forty minutes and took place at a location of the respondents' choice, usually their private residences. With the assurance of confidentiality all of the women allowed interviews to be recorded, although all of their names used in the text are pseudonyms as most of them asked me to uphold their anonymity.

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<sup>12</sup> I describe this sample group more precisely in the subchapter primarily concerning them.



Through analyzing the data obtained, I tried to reveal the main concepts, themes and issues mentioned by the interviewees. I also concentrated on the contexts, phrases and words they used most frequently. Additionally, I tried to examine how the respondents constructed the details of their past life linked to the motivations behind their migration decisions and how they presented the events related to them. From the beginning I identified some of my interviewees through my personal networks. I used the snowball method to find other respondents.

### 3. Constructing Migration Motivations

#### 3.1. Gendered causes of migration

As Boyd and Grieco argue, there are three distinct stages where gender relations, roles and hierarchies influence the migration process and produce different outcomes for women: the pre-migration stage, the transition across the boundaries and the experience of migrants in receiving countries<sup>13</sup>. Taking into account the scope of my research, I discuss only the first stage. The authors further suggest that the pre-migration stage is affected by the following factors: gender relations and hierarchies, status and role of women and characteristics of the country of origin.

Gender relations and hierarchies within the family context affect women's migration because family is the first place where certain roles and obligations are assigned to women and this in turn determines their relative motivation and incentive to migrate. The interaction of women's roles, status and age within a particular socio-cultural context result in "migratory probability" which affects the ability of women to migrate<sup>14</sup>.

Women's participation in international migration reflects their social roles, their capacity and autonomy in making decisions as well as their access to resources. Accordingly, the existing gender stratification in origin and destination countries plays an important role. The degree of women's participation in social life and their access to resources and opportunities significantly affect their potential to migrate.

Hereafter, I discuss the migration motivations for each of the sample group of my study, naming the appropriate subchapters according to

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<sup>13</sup> Boyd M. Grieco E. (2003), Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory. Available at: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=106>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*



migration “projects” and migration incentives of women based on the data I acquired from my fieldwork.

### ***3.2. Solo migration projects of young Georgian women***

During the transitional period, many Georgian women, having lost their main source of income, began to seek second and third jobs by turning to the informal economy. In this age of “female creativity”,<sup>15</sup> women began to invent all sorts of income-generating projects. The young women learned the lesson from their mothers, quickly adapted to the situation and decided to earn their own money in a better position<sup>16</sup>. Their high school or university diplomas were no longer sufficient, as they recognized that knowledge of the West and Western language skills were the key to getting ahead in the Westernizing economy. As their family-based social and financial capital was not enough to acquire the necessary education at home or find a proper job, many of them opted for international migration.

One of the most desired destinations for thousands of young Georgian migrant women was Germany. Many were recruited through Georgian and German au pair agencies and through social networks of au pairs themselves. The opportunity to leave for Germany as an au pair<sup>17</sup> opened up for women (generally 18-24 years old) in the mid-1990s. Germany was a preferable destination for many young migrant women from former Soviet states and eastern European countries due to its “market demand” for au pairs, flexible educational system, highly regulated migration policies and developed welfare system.

My respondents said their au pair jobs gave them the opportunity to reside, work and study in a foreign country legally under safe conditions. In addition, au pair jobs were used as a stepping stone to social advancement as they became university students and remained in Germany to further their education. The goal to acquire a Western-type higher education was stated as the primary reason of migration by my respondents and au pair work was cited as the best opportunity to enter the destination country legally. I called this specific migration form the “German pattern” of young Georgian women’s migration and named it the “solo migration project” insofar as it is a form of independent migration and is implemented for self-fulfillment purposes.

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<sup>15</sup> The term introduced by Sabine Hess in Hess, S. (2005), *Feminized Transnational Spaces – Or the Interplay of Gender and Nation Anthropology Yearbook on European Cultures (AYAC)*.

<sup>16</sup> Here I mainly refer to those young women who migrated between the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s.

<sup>17</sup> Au pair is a foreign domestic assistant working for and living with a host family. Typically, au pairs take on a share of the family’s responsibility for childcare as well as some housework and receive a small monetary allowance.

During data analysis, different social, cultural and psychological factors were revealed that condition the migration decisions of young Georgian women. One of the reasons stimulating my respondents' migration incentives was economic dependence on parents, as determined by massive unemployment and the lack of job opportunities. Specifically, from an economic perspective, migration is associated with earning money independently and, if need be, assisting family members financially. If one household member, in this case the daughter, migrates, it automatically means that parents have to provide for only those who are left in the country.

Thus, the migration of the young provides a kind of economic "relief" for the household. In addition, it seems that daughters have much greater motivation to migrate than do sons. This kind of gender-based division is rooted partly in the patriarchal values of Georgian society and partly in the demographic problems of the state.

For centuries, sons within the Georgian household have been perceived as the continuers of the family name and the keepers of the familial and ancestral values, whereas daughters have been automatically recognized as future wives and mothers of the "other", someone outside the original family. In a country like Georgia, where motherhood is a revered institution and woman's primary obligation is considered marriage and maternity, daughters are generally expected to leave the family for another one. Thus, the household unconsciously is already ready for the departure of the daughter. Hence, daughters' leaving is not felt as painfully as that of sons. It was interesting to find out that most respondents from this sample group claimed that their brothers lived in Georgia with their own families and had no intentions to migrate.

Due to the patriarchal nature of Georgian society, traditionally daughters have fewer privileges within their parents' families than their brothers. In private (familial) or public discourse their departure is a "minor" loss. However, my previous research revealed that this kind of "social disadvantage" for young women based on the gender stratification in Georgian society can be transformed into a "social advantage" leading to their empowerment. The study showed that young Georgian migrant women living in Germany perceive their migration experience as empowering due to the wide range of opportunities such as: access to Western-type higher education, the opportunity to lead independent lives, to work and have stable income, to finance their studies, organize their lives and plan their future.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Melashvili T. (2009), *Georgian Women in Germany: Empowerment through Migration?* VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken, Germany.

### 3.3. “Survival projects” of Georgian migrant mothers

Nino says she led the life of an ordinary Georgian woman. After completing her higher education she got married. Though it was the beginning of the 1990s and the people encountered severe economic crisis and hardships of political conflicts, Nino said she was happy. She loved her husband and soon gave birth to her first child. Nino usually spent most of her time at home caring for her son while her husband worked and provided the family. After six years of marriage, her husband suddenly left her for another woman who was already seven months pregnant.

*I felt so insulted and deceived. It seemed that my husband never really loved me and was cheating on me all that time. But the real shock came not from here. The real shock came from the catastrophic fear: how could I support my child, how could I survive? I had not even worked before. I did not even know where to start.*

Her shock was so strong that she could not even get out of bed for some time. She did not sleep at all, obsessing day and night about how to manage the difficult situation.

*He promised to take care of my son, to support us, but he was going to have a new baby with his new wife. He had another family to support and to take care of, so I realized that I was the only person left, besides my child. And suddenly I was struck by the idea of migration. My close friend had already lived in Greece for two years. I talked to her and she suggested that I go there. She promised to help me find there a job as a domestic worker.*

Nino borrowed money for travel and visa and left the country. She said that all her family members, parents and siblings supported her in her decision. She said that most dramatic and painful moment in her life was the separation from her son. The adaptation period to a new country, society and circumstances was very difficult despite the fact that Nino found a job easily and was quite confident with her new work. She said that every single day spent abroad was devoted to her son. The thought that all the work she was doing was for the sake of her son's well-being kept her going. Nino accumulated enough savings to support her child and herself and after six years of living abroad she returned. Her son was already in his early teens. “He needed somebody to stand by him, especially at his age,” Nino said.

I described Nino's case in detail with the aim to show the influence of the discourse of prevalent cultural and social norms of Georgian society on her narrative. It is easy to see how traditional gender roles were distributed between Nino and her husband within their small family. Nino's perception of being happy was related to the feeling of possessing the main components of the life of a "successful woman" – she was a mother and had her own family. Her shock after her husband's departure was significantly determined by her failure to live up to her traditional role as a woman.

Then, left alone, she had to fight for another goal in her life – she had to become the providing parent and entirely devoted mother for her son. We can assume that Nino's migration decision was made in response to a combination of different incentives and pressures. The strongly developed sense of survival, protection and responsibility which are perceived as deeply coded segments of motherhood became an important motivator for Nino's migration.

Nino, who had no work experience before, whose everyday life was limited to household chores and the duties of caring for the child, who, presumably was an "inseparable part" of her extended family and had very little sense of independence, decided to leave the country for a completely different, new and unfamiliar environment. This particular case serves as a vivid example of how women's migration decisions are shaped under the process where women's "traditional" responsibilities are transformed and supplemented by relatively new obligations related to their acquired role of a breadwinner and provider.

Another respondent, Tamar, in her early fifties, followed her son, who left for the USA legally as a student and asked his mother to join him as he had problems with adaptation. Tamar did not have financial problems that would necessitate migration but decided to go to the USA as she was, first and foremost, the "patron" of her son, she said. Through informal networks and taking out loans she left for the USA and worked there for five years as an illegal domestic worker in the same city where her son lived, seeing him every weekend. Tamar expressed satisfaction with her migration experience.

Though the job was hard, she thinks she acquired "manifold skills" through migration. Her nature undoubtedly played a significant role in her migration decision, though specific gender norms also played their role. She knew that despite having no special economic reasons for leaving, her departure would be "justified" due to the widespread and common understanding of the obligations of motherhood. This kind of strong

bonding between mother and child which sometimes continues in adulthood is a characteristic of Georgian culture that was partly determined by the “historical” and “traditional” absence of the father who used to fight wars or, later on, work to support the family.

Another respondent, Iamze, worked as a teacher and had never been abroad alone. Severe economic hardships in her family led her to see migration as the only way to survive. She lived and worked in Israel for four years and managed to finance her children’s education, and buy a car and a flat in the capital. Though she intended to stay abroad much longer, she encountered serious health problems.

Asked why she and nobody else in her family took the decision to migrate, she replied that her husband was ill and had problems with his heart and added: “female workforce is more needed abroad.” In saying this she sought to justify her spouse’s inability to support the family in its difficult circumstances. Though she did not mention it explicitly, it seemed she herself already had health problems before migration. Still, the strong sense of responsibility and the obligation of motherhood made her ready to sacrifice even her own physical wellbeing for the sake of her children. In spite of the fact that she knew her health was deteriorating (and she could not allow herself to get an urgent operation), she still planned to stay and continue to work there but soon she was deported as an illegal worker. In Georgia she was able to get the operation.

*I was so weakened that the doctor could not hide his surprise as to how I could stand on my legs and work; then he said: Iamze, say thank God that you have been deported; otherwise you would be in heaven right now. What can I say, it is the fate of a Georgian woman to devote her life to her children, when your children stay behind, your own life becomes worthless.*

Iamze portrayed herself as a heroic mother sacrificing her health for her the well-being and economic stability of her family and the safe future of her children. The theme of the sacrificing mother and therefore heroic mother was a leitmotif of her narrative. Thus, by emphasizing it, she tried to legitimize not only her migration decision but her whole life. The self-sacrifice motif in Iamze’s story serves as the core factor for her self-perception as a good mother.

Lili lived in Israel for five years as a migrant. Like other respondents she also claimed economic hardship as the main reason for her decision

to migrate. Her children were university students and in need of financial support. Lili took this obligation upon herself. Her husband first opposed her decision to migrate but after he lost his job, he gave his permission. He did not allow her to take the “burden” of supporting the family for as long as he considered himself to be the bearer of this burden, but when he lost his job and automatically lost his function of a breadwinner, he had no other option but to adapt to the new gender role rearrangement within the family.

Another respondent, Manana, mother of three children, worked as a teacher with a salary that did not allow her even to buy bread. She decided to migrate to support her family as they had no other income to survive. In addition, there was a need to finance her children’s education as two of them were students and one was entering school. Manana said that she thought about migration for a long time but could not decide to leave. She recalled one moment which finally led her to take the decision. After visiting her children who lived and studied in the capital she set off to return to her town. She left all the money to them, and was left without money at all after she bought her travel ticket. She got so hungry along the way that she lost consciousness.

*After that I thought it could not continue like this any longer. I did my best, took out a debt, filed documents and set off. I wanted to do more for my children and realized that I could do this only in another country.*

In Manana’s narrative we also can find lines of the discourse of a sacrificing mother. Manana managed to finance her children’s education and made some savings as well. Among my respondents she seemed to miss her homeland the most while living abroad. “It was horrible to live in another’s land. I began writing poetry there in order not to think about my family, my children, my homeland. Nothing is as precious for me as Georgia and as my hometown.” It is interesting to note that, like many traditional societies, Georgian society also prescribes women the duty of the bearer and transmitter of cultural values and traditions to the future generations. It seemed that Manana was influenced by this kind of discourse as well as by a strongly developed sense of patriotic duty as an inseparable part of being a good mother.

Manana seemed to be satisfied with the results of her migration. She said she did her “utmost” for her children and that all of them successfully finished their education, found good jobs and now are able to support themselves and their own families. This was a source of pride and satisfaction for her, as she considered herself the main agent in arranging successful lives for her

children. Asking her why she and no-one else in her family took the decision to migrate in order to support the family, she answered me passionately:

*Because I am strong. I am stronger than the others in my family, I am the strongest, and the barriers in my life make me much stronger. They make me fight, and you know what? When you are on the right path, God is with you.*

Manana thinks that her decision was “right” because it is “right” for a mother to do all she can for her children. Therefore, she considers her migration experience successful and says she had God’s support. She unconsciously tries to emphasize her devotion as that of a “true Georgian mother” and considers herself an accomplished person. In addition, she depicts herself as a very strong person who takes on life’s challenges and adapts to new circumstances.

As we see, Georgian migrant mothers construct themselves as devoted / self-sacrificing mothers who feel pride and success in identifying themselves as such. These kinds of good motherhood constructs are equally accepted as the right performance for women by themselves, by their family members and by society as well. These images in turn involve the self-perceptions of women as heroic mothers which equal the perceptions of good motherhood and accordingly, that of being a successful woman. Thus, motherhood in Georgia involves a much broader spectrum of actions, calculations and expectations which are well expressed in the narratives of Georgian migrant mothers.

#### ***3.4. Gaining status through migration – projects of Georgian middle-aged unmarried women***

Georgian middle-aged women were not excluded from the vast process of creating income-generating projects. The reason I included this specific group in my study derives from the underestimated status of these women in Georgian society. The strongly prevailing cult of motherhood devalues those women who for different reasons do not reproduce. In this case being beyond fertility age and being single works as a defining factor for these women to be undervalued as they remain without “the main function of the woman” - rearing and bearing children.<sup>19</sup>

Experts, on the basis of various studies, claim that the inferiority complex

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<sup>19</sup> Informally these women are labeled as “old maids” in Georgia, the name being closely intertwined with prevailing sexual dogmas and to a certain extent social and gender-based discrimination.



is mostly widespread amongst those Georgian women who due to different reasons have not reproduced<sup>20</sup>. This attitude in society - considering unmarried adult women with no children to be failed persons - is determined by the patriarchal and male-centric nature of Georgian society.

Under such circumstances, a woman's aspiration for marriage and children is equalized to the aspiration to feel like a fully-fledged member of society. When doing so is not a possibility, women have to find other ways of maintaining their status in order not to be stigmatized. In their case, financial strength becomes a "salvation", and allows them to be considered more or less "realized" persons. In conditions of mass unemployment and poverty, migration in most cases is the only way for such women to acquire economic strength and, accordingly, maintain the position of a "fully-fledged member" of society.

Of three respondents I interviewed from this sample group, Asmati was a returned migrant; the others - Irina and Nana - were interviewed during their temporary return to Georgia in summer. Asmati is 56 years old, and Irina and Nana are 49 and 45, respectively. All of them were employed before migration, though Asmati mentioned that one of the reasons she decided to migrate was her retirement due to the labor cuts in the office where she used to work as an accountant. Nana worked as a kindergarten teacher and Irina as a nurse in a hospital. They mentioned that the salaries they earned were insufficient to support themselves. Only Asmati lived in her own private place, Irina and Nana lived in extended families with their brothers.

*It was so difficult. I could do nothing. I could buy only bread for the family. Actually I was dependent on my brother and he had to take care of his own family, his kids. Winter came and my boots were so old, all torn apart, impossible to wear. He (my brother) gave me money to buy new ones. I said no, but he insisted. I bought new shoes but then I cried like a child all night long. Then I thought I had to do something. My brother really loved me but I could not be a burden for him. He had his own kids to take care of. (Nana)*

Economic hardship was also the reason Asmati and Irina decided to migrate. Asmati did not have either savings or a job any more. There was no chance for her to find new employment because she was considered

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<sup>20</sup> Surmanidze, L. (2002), Some Orientations of Georgian Culture. Gender in Georgia. Tbilisi: International Center for Women's Education and Information, p. 19.

to be too old “as it is a trend in Georgia, everywhere here young people are employed”. She used networks of her friends who already worked in Greece as domestic workers, took out a debt to finance her travel, filed the documents and left the country. Irina also mentioned “unbearable” economic conditions in her family and added that she had problems with her sister-in-law which further complicated her life. Thus, she also found migration as the only way to overcome the difficulties and left for Italy.

Though all the respondents mentioned economic reasons as their motivation to migrate and described in detail their hard lives before leaving, the socially and culturally constructed background for their decisions was easy to reveal. Their low status within their families played an important role in their decisions, which due to the common perceptions of Georgian society was even lower because of the fact that they could not support themselves and contribute to their extended families. The only way to compensate and improve their status was to earn their own money by working abroad.

It was interesting to follow the track of the narratives of my respondents and explore how they recounted their lives before and after migration. Before migration their lives were represented as miserable in comparison to the ones they led during migration and after. It seemed migration made it possible for them to “write” their own success stories.

Though all of them mentioned difficulties they encountered while living abroad, they were satisfied and proud of the results. Asmati, after working for five years abroad, returned and managed to start her own business. Now she has her own shop and runs it successfully. She says she now has enough income to support not only herself but also her relatives and friends. “Now I am confident in my peaceful years of life and do not fear the future,” she said.

Irina cheerfully shared with me her “achievements” as she talked about her current situation and future plans. She bought her own flat where she “will live quietly when she returns.” Now she is busy repairing it. She also talked about her personal feelings with family members, relatives and friends.

*You won't believe it, but my sister in-law meets me in the station when I come back. Now we are friends (laughs). It's like I've been reborn. I am different. I feel much more strength inside me and much more respect from others. I help my brother's family whenever they need it. I always come back loaded with presents for my family members, friends and relatives.*

Nana also mentioned the sense of empowerment she felt as a result of her migration. Apart from gaining economic independence and supporting her elderly parents and the family of her brother, she is also “successful “and happy in her private life.

“At this old age I found a person I love and I have my own private life,” she said, smiling.

It is interesting to see how economic independence and strength make these women feel that they are fully-fledged members of the society. After being seen as “failed women”, they managed to reclaim their status through migration, economic independence and the ability to support others.

Though the price of working abroad is high and involves a lot of work and stress, having their own income gives women a large degree of economic independence which gives them the chance to overcome the strict limits of the “traditional” status prescribed to them.

## **Conclusion**

In this study I tried to explore the determinants and specific characteristics of the motivations behind Georgian women’s decisions to migrate, find out to what extent these motivations are based on women’s general societal status and how social legitimacy works in their case. The study shows that status of women, along with traditionally prescribed obligations and relatively new responsibilities laid upon them under transitional conditions, as well as challenges to improve and sustain the well-being of themselves and their families all define Georgian women’s incentives to migrate. My research once again shows that in the case of female migration many different factors play important roles, hence it cannot be explained as a simple phenomenon determined only by economic factors.