

Migration in Terms of Dignity: The Case of Georgia

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Migration – an important player in political, social and economic life – is the central reality of Georgia, even if in most cases it is not so pleasant to talk about it. Emigration since independence in 1991 has significantly influenced the shape and dynamics of change in modern Georgia. Almost everyone in the country knows at least someone who has migrated. Entire families are supported by remittances that are sent home and entire communities have been altered by these movements. Georgia's labour supply, particularly its highly-skilled labour, has also been significantly affected. Every year the number of migrants leaving Georgia increases, so that there are more and more people (especially women) who leave their native country. In a new world without borders, this might seem like something normal, but before deciding whether it is, we should think about the reasons for, and results of, these movements.

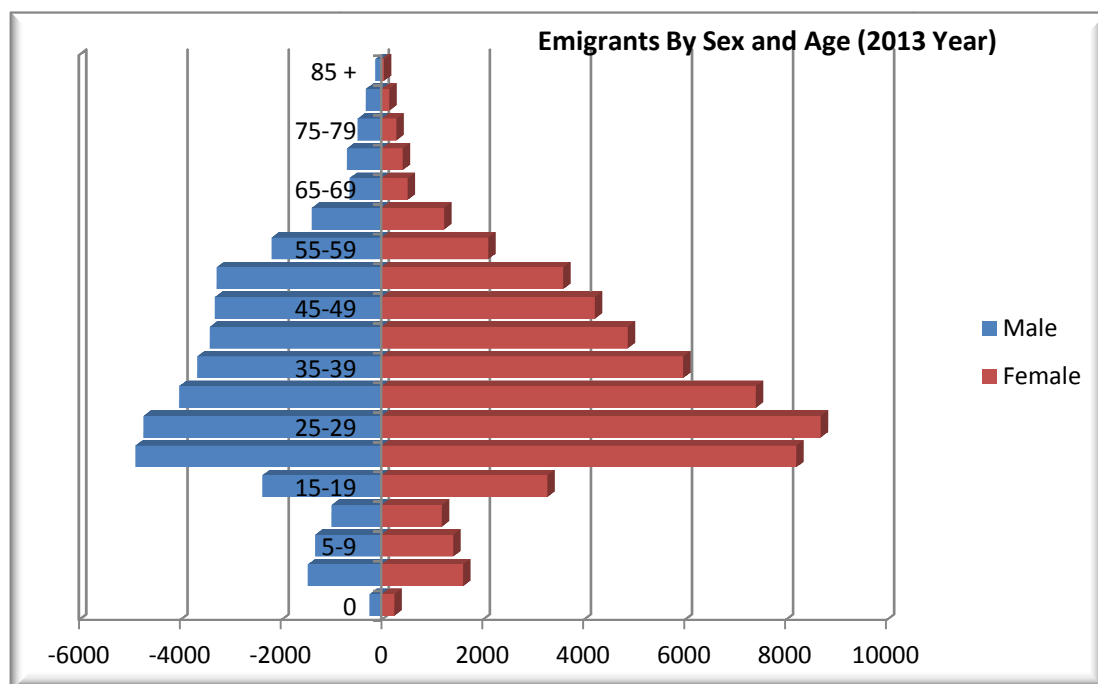
First we may search for some definitions of the concepts which we will need. Human migration is the permanent or semi-permanent relocation of people from one location to another. This movement may occur domestically or internationally, and can affect economic structures, population densities, culture and politics. People either choose to migrate (voluntarily), or they are made to move involuntarily (forced). Voluntary migration is based on one's free will and initiative. In such cases, people move for a variety of reasons, weighing options and choices. The strongest factors influencing people to move voluntarily are the desire to live in a better home and to find improved employment opportunities, but there are also other factors that contribute: a change in the circumstances of life (getting married, the "emptying of the nest", retirement, etc), political factors (a liberal state that starts to

turn conservative, states that recognize gay-marriage, etc.), and personal factors (such as the desire to move from a suburban form of life to the city). In the case of forced migration, we have another picture, often caused by persecution, development, or exploitation. In the Georgian situation we can find both kinds of migration. During the Soviet period, external migration was generally not allowed. Migration from and to the Republic was limited to the territory of the USSR. Post-Soviet emigration flows have been mainly directed towards the EU, the US and the Russian Federation. Top source countries for immigration flows include India, Turkey and China. In the early 1990s Georgia experienced a civil war and ethnic conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia¹, while in August 2008 there was the Georgian–Russian war². These conflicts led to massive emigration on the part of the affected populations, ethnic minorities in particular, including Greeks, Meshkhetian Turks, and Armenians. Twenty percent of Georgian territory was occupied during these two wars. The citizens had no other choice but to leave their cities and villages, even choosing to go abroad. Nobody knew for how long they would need to do so.

Regarding voluntary migration, we can say that it is largely caused by social and economic hardships (emigration for educational purposes, when students travel to Europe in order to improve their qualifications, is a special case). Georgia became a newly independent country in 1991 (Georgia had a brief period of independence in 1918-1921, following the Russian Revolution of 1917. Then Georgia was occupied by Soviet Russia in 1921, becoming part of the Soviet Union as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic) and society had to get used to the changes caused by this in every sphere of life. Changes in trade and manufacturing caused an economic

and social crisis. Factories were closed; industry and agriculture no longer worked. Many people were unable to find a job. The internal political situation was also unstable, so that business people lacked the confidence to invest. The resulting unemployment was one of the reasons for the family crisis in Georgia. If we look into the past, we will see that the “leaders” in families were men. To be a housewife was the usual “profession” for women – to be at home and to take care of the family. When the men started staying at home (since it was difficult for them to find jobs and they considered themselves to be a lost generation), the family crisis started. There had to be a reaction. Women found that there was more opportunity for them to find work abroad, which accounts for the number of migrant women and why it is higher than that of men. Thus, according to information published by the State Department of Statistics in Georgia, the number of women emigrants in 2013 was 55.581, while that of men was 39.483. As the accompanying chart shows, most of the migrants are in the age range 29-39³. As a comparison, it is useful to know that, in 2013, the female population of Georgia was 2.345.000 while that of males was 2.138.800⁴. Therefore, nearly 2.4% of women and 1.8% of men have emigrated.

Most migrants rely on family and friends to help them with financing and organizing the migration process. While most Georgians enter countries legally, they often end up as irregular migrants. Some labour migrants manage to enter with short term documents allowing them to work, and then, loosing that status, they stay on illegally. Once a labour migrant has become undocumented, they can only find certain types of work. Women usually work as nurses, dog sitters, caregivers and cooks, while men tend to be construction workers and/or plant managers. Lack of sufficient language skills tends to hinder highly-skilled migrants from working in their professions. The working conditions are hard for migrants. In most cases they have working days that last for 12 hours or more, with only one day-off during the week and without a personal life (without family and friends). They put up with all these problems so as to make two types of investment in the future: one is in improving the social and economic conditions of their families, while the other is to give their children the opportunity (through paying for it) to get a good education.



Despite their working conditions, which often violate the basic principles of human dignity, many migrants still stay longer than they had expected when they left their home because they take longer to meet their economic goals, or else, even if their basic financial problems are already resolved, they simply no longer consider themselves to be members of Georgian society. According to what some migrants themselves say in a series of Georgian documentary films⁵ about migration, they are afraid that, should they return, they would not find a job and would be treated like foreigners. While family issues are the most cited reason for returning, other migrants return due to dissatisfaction with their life and opportunities abroad or because of legal issues⁶. Families with younger children are also more likely to return for affordable education. If they do decide to return home, the Georgian government gives them support in getting all their documents in order and helps them to realize their business ideas.

NOTES

¹ The Georgian Civil War comprised inter-ethnic and intranational conflicts in the region of Abkhazia. On August 14, Georgian forces entered Abkhazia to disarm separatist militias. By the end of September 1993, Russian-backed separatists fought back and took the region's capital, Sukhumi, after fierce fighting on September 27. Georgia's military defeat was followed by the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian majority in Abkhazia. The war produced approximately 20,000 deaths on both sides, and about 260,000 refugees.

² This war started on 8 August 2008 amidst worsening relations between Russia and Georgia, both formerly constituent republics of the Soviet Union. The fighting took place in the strategically important Transcaucasia region, which borders the Middle East. It was regarded as the first European war of the 21st century.

³ National Statistics Office of Georgia; Emigrants and Immigrants by Sex and Age (2013); http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=173&lang=eng

⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia; Women and Men in Georgia, Statistic population; 2013; http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/health/women%20and%20men-2013.pdf

⁵ Women from Georgia; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIJrqEVV9KA>

⁶ International Organization for Migration; 2011; *Support Reintegration of Georgian Returning Migrants and the Implementation of the EU-Georgia Readmission Agreement*; http://iom.ge/1/sites/default/files/pdf/IOM%26TIG_SurveyENG.pdf