

THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOR MIGRATION FROM GEORGIA: THE CASE OF TIANETI

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INTRODUCTION

Massive labor migration in Georgia began in the 1990s as a result of the difficult economic situation in country. The intra-border conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia proved devastating to the struggling Georgian economy, which had collapsed with the breakdown of the Soviet Union. A large part of the population of what had been one of the USSR's richest and most prosperous republics found themselves jobless and impoverished. Nor did employment guarantee prosperity—salaries, especially in the public sector, were low. The private sector, where wages were higher, could not provide a sufficient number of jobs to satisfy the demand for employment. It is thus hardly surprising that a significant part of the Georgian population resorted to emigration in order to survive economic hardship.¹

During the first years of Georgian independence, labor migration from Georgia consisted predominantly of males and was directed toward Russia, where Georgian migrant laborers were occupied mostly in construction and petty trade (Zaionchkovskaia 1994). A decade later, Dershem and Khoperia (2004), based on a quantitative study conducted in Georgia, and Tsuladze (2005), based on the results of Georgia's 2002 census, suggested that labor migration from Georgia was still predominantly male.

So far, studies of Georgian labor emigration have not paid much attention to the increasing proportion of female labor emigration from Georgia.² This paper attempts

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- 1 Between 1989 and 2002, Georgia's population shrank by more than one million, mainly due to reduced fertility and increased emigration (Sakartvelos ekonomikuri 2003; Vadachkoria 2004).
 - 2 Badurashvili 2004; Badurashvili 2005; Chelidze 2006; Gachechiladze 1997; Gugushvili 1998; Mosakhleobis migratsia 1998; Sakartvelos gare 1998; Tsuladze 2005; Vadachkoria 2004; Erin

to fill this gap in the literature by providing evidence of a trend toward increasing female labor emigration from Georgia, indicating that even remote areas of the country have been integrated into the global market with its demand for domestic jobs.

The present paper is based on a case study of labor emigration from Tianeti, a small, mountainous community inhabited by ethnic Georgians. Tianeti is an interesting case in that prior to the late 1990s—early 2000s, the community had no experience of large-scale international migration, but since then has been actively involved in migratory processes (Zurabishvili, Tavberidze, and Zurabishvili 2009:19). Unlike other migrant-sending communities in Georgia, emigration from Tianeti is overwhelmingly directed toward Western Europe, Israel, and North America (which are relatively new destinations for Georgian labor emigrants), and is predominantly female.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY³

Our research in Tianeti was conducted in April–September, 2006. We draw on both qualitative and quantitative data:

1. We conducted 23 in-depth interviews⁴ with Tianeti residents (18 women and 5 men between the ages of 22 and 72: returned migrants as well as family members of current and potential emigrants)⁵ between April and September 2006. Most informants had previous work experience; some had higher education. They had been used to Soviet middle-class living standards, but suddenly found themselves impoverished when the USSR collapsed. Informants who were returned migrants had had a variety of migration experiences.

2. Because no reliable information was available on the level of emigration from Tianeti, we decided to conduct a household census in the settlement and interview all households in Tianeti. We conducted the census⁶ in late August and early September 2006 in order to collect information on the socio-economic conditions of the households, the overall level of emigration from the settlement, and migration networks, and to assess the economic conditions of the households as well as the

Trouth Hofmann and Cynthia Buckley's paper (2008) devoted to the analysis of the traditional gender norms regarding female migration in Georgia is a rare exception.

3 Giorgi Tavberidze served as a research assistant in the quantitative part of the research. Both the quantitative and the qualitative fieldwork were greatly facilitated by assistance from Tianeti residents Mrs. Natalia Gonjilashvili, Mrs. Nino Chikhradze, Mrs. Tamar Kurshavishvili and Ms. Irma Turkiashvili.

4 The qualitative research was funded by a research scholarship from the Heinrich Böll Foundation's South Caucasus Office.

5 In some cases, informants were both returned migrants and family members of current migrants, as well as potential migrants. Informants were located using snowball sampling.

6 The quantitative part of our research was supported by a CRRG-Georgia (Caucasus Research Resource Centers) research fellowship (#C05-4113).

amount and uses of remittances⁷. According to the 2002 Population Census, there were 1,237 households in Tianeti⁸. As part of our study, 1,062 households were interviewed; in addition, 210 houses were registered as closed⁹ or dilapidated. Thus, we recorded a total of 1,272 dwellings, and we believe that the data accurately reflect the totality of households in Tianeti.

OVERVIEW OF LABOR MIGRATION FROM TIANETI

Tianeti is a small rural settlement with a population of 3,598 people (Sakartvelos ekonomikuri 2003:47), situated in the Mtskheta-Mtianeti Region in the northeast of Georgia. As studies of poverty in Georgia suggested, the Mtskheta-Mtianeti Region, and the Tianeti district in particular, were among the poorest in Georgia—in 2003, 63% of the population of the Tianeti district fell below the poverty line¹⁰, compared to 47% of the total Georgian population (Labbate, Jamburia, and Mirzashvili 2003:21). Poverty is still rampant in Tianeti today, with 14% of Tianeti families receiving state social assistance (December 2008), almost twice as much as countrywide (8%) (Zurabishvili, Tavberidze, Zurabishvili, 2009:5).

The inhabitants of Tianeti hold very pessimistic views about the future of their settlement and believe that it is becoming more and more “lifeless” as greater numbers of its residents are migrating abroad. Moreover, our informants continually mention the predominance of female migration, which becomes especially visible during communal events:

I don't know how to say it, almost in every family one member has left, in some families—two, but on average one. If [...] I and my only female neighbor also leave, there will be no woman left here [in this neighborhood]. [...] Mostly women are leaving, only men are attending funerals, there are no women left. (M.; female, 49 years old)

My friend's mother-in-law passed away, [the family lives] near the hospital. I went there and the whole way I did not meet a single woman—and just a couple of men. Tianeti is empty now... (N.; female, 58 years old)

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- 7 In each household, we interviewed either the head of the household or a member of the household who was well-informed about the conditions of the household, or a returned migrant, or a member of the household who was both the head of the household and a returned migrant.
 - 8 Personal communication from Ms. Tamar Kurshavishvili, Head of the Tianeti Branch of the State Department of Statistics of Georgia. August 25, 2005.
 - 9 Most of the families that left Tianeti (either moving to other parts of Georgia or emigrating entirely) still own houses in Tianeti that are closed and, if unattended, become dilapidated.
 - 10 The poverty line is defined in Georgia as the minimum income sufficient for an adult to cover basic necessities.

However, in our census, only 28% of Tianeti's 1,062 households actually reported at least one international migrant. Several households reported more than one migrant, and thus the total number of current migrants in 2006 totaled 413 persons.

The overwhelming majority of the current and returned migrants from Tianeti went abroad with the aim of finding work (90%) and financially supporting their families back in Georgia (88%). That is also the primary goal of 50 out of the 57 potential migrants from Tianeti. Their reasons for migrating are mostly connected with the difficult economic situation in the community and in the country in general, and specifically unemployment, debt, and the lack of prospects in Tianeti.

FEMALE AND MALE MIGRANT WORKERS

Countrywide studies differ as to the precise gender profile of Georgian migration flows, but they all find that male migrants significantly outnumber female migrants. Dershem and Khoperia find that about 65% of all Georgian migrants are males (Dershem & Khoperia, 2004:45). According to Tsuladze (2005), who analyzed data from the 2002 Census, men constitute 59% of all migrants from Georgia (Tsuladze 2005:24, 33). Our study provides contrasting evidence for the "feminization of migration": men constitute only a third of all current migrants from Tianeti (32%).

The mean age of female migrants is slightly higher than the mean age of male migrants—41 and 35 years respectively, the oldest female migrant being 70 years old and the oldest male migrant being 60 years old. There are more unmarried persons among male migrants than among female migrants—40% and 28%, respectively¹¹.

Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of male and female emigrants (N=413) from Tianeti according to the receiving countries. In general, the overwhelming majority of emigrants go to Greece, which can be explained by the lower cost of travel, the existence of developed migration networks, and the relatively high chances of obtaining legal status in the receiving country (Zurabishvili 2007). The number of female emigrants going to Greece, Italy, and Germany is considerably higher than the number of male emigrants, while in the cases of Ireland, Russia, and France we observe the opposite trend.

Table 1

**Distribution of Male and Female Migrants from Tianeti
by Receiving Country (N=413)¹²**

Receiving Country:	N	n	n
	Female	male	total
Greece	195	48	243

11 60% of male emigrants and 57% of female emigrants are married; 5% of female emigrants are divorced, and 10% are widowed, while none of the male emigrants are either divorced or widowed.

12 Table 1 and the subsequent calculations include 28 persons who emigrated from Tianeti to study. However, as the in-depth interviews revealed, in addition to their studies these emigrants also work at least part-time.

Ireland	5	31	36
Germany	27	4	31
Israel	16	4	20
Russia	4	13	17
USA	10	6	16
Italy	15	-	15
Spain	4	3	7
France	1	6	7
Other countries (Azerbaijan, Belgium, UK, Cyprus, China, Turkey, Switzerland, Sweden, Ukraine)	5	16	21
Total:	282	131	413

As can be seen from Table 2 below, most migrants from Tianeti—both males and females—perform unqualified jobs abroad. More than half of them—almost exclusively females—are working as housekeepers, nannies/babysitters, and caregivers. Men are generally occupied in construction businesses, in factories, or on farms, performing unqualified manual labor.

Table 2

**Main occupation of male and female migrants from Tianeti while abroad
(N=413)¹³**

Occupation:	N	n	n
	Female	male	total
Housekeeper	99	2	101
Caregiver to the elderly	88	-	88
Construction worker	1	55	56
Unqualified manual worker	9	34	43
Student	20	8	28
Nanny/babysitter	32	-	32
Unemployed	10	9	19
Other	23	23	46
Total:	282	131	413

Taking into consideration the fact that 40% of migrants from Tianeti have completed higher education, 7% have incomplete higher education, 31% have professional/vocational training, and 22% graduated from a secondary school (Table 3), many of them experience professional downgrading abroad. This happens because most of them have no valid work permits in the receiving countries, are undocumented, and are not fluent in the languages of the receiving countries.¹⁴

13 The question was: "What is the main occupation of the migrant while abroad"?

14 However, migrants often learn the language of the receiving country after staying there for some time.

WHY WOMEN?

Similarly to other cases of female migration—such as Central American, Mexican and Caribbean (see Pessar 1999),—female migrants from Tianeti become “transnational mothers,” taking care of other people’s children and leaving their own children in the care of husbands and/or other members of their families, such as grandparents. The division of labor in Tianeti households is undergoing major changes as female emigrants often become families’ primary breadwinners.

The reasons why more females than males migrate from Tianeti are manifold. The first factor to be considered is the local community’s acceptance of female migration. Tianeti is a small, rural, mountainous community and hence could be expected to place significant pressure and restrictions on female autonomy and freedom of movement. However, the level of emancipation achieved by Georgian women during Soviet times, as expressed in a high rate of participation in the labor force and equal access to education, as well as the loosening of patriarchal family relations, made Tianeti’s women relatively independent members of their families and local community. In Soviet times, women’s autonomy was accepted by the Communist government: Ms. Mariam Gonjilashvili was first secretary of Tianeti’s Communist Party district committee in the late 1960s for three and a half years, and women were actively involved in the labor force, working in various socialist enterprises and contributing to household budgets. As one of our informants puts it:

Do you know why I did not experience economic hardship before? I did not because I was working at the factory, at the laboratory, and at the assembly belt. [...] There was a parquet factory [in Tianeti], garment production, poultry production, we had a lot of jobs, there was nothing to complain about, and unless you did not like this kind of work, one could find a job easily. I was finishing work at midnight at the cannery, I was coming home and going to work again early in the morning. And now?.. (A.; female, 56 years old)

Active female participation in the labor force became culturally accepted in Tianeti during the Soviet period, contributing to the local population’s rather positive attitude toward female migration in later years. Migration became a survival strategy for many Tianeti residents in a situation of increased unemployment and decreasing quality of life, and women started to migrate, eventually outnumbering male migrants and proving to be more active in taking care of their families. Moreover, women often become the principal decision-makers on issues related to migration, assuming leading roles in their households, some of them even migrating despite visible opposition from their family members.

For example, G.’s husband initially opposed her desire to migrate, but eventually G. managed to persuade him:

G: My husband wanted to go, but I told him that [...] well, he is disabled, his right hand and leg do not function properly, that instead of you going, it would

be better if I go, because his health condition was not good. I was not very healthy either, but we did not have a choice. [...] My husband was very much against me going abroad, he did not want me to become somebody's servant. Well, one way or another, I was a good teacher. [...] I gave private lessons and earned a small income. But then it became so hard, parents did not have money to pay for tutoring, and this tiny source of income dried up. I was forced to go.

TZ: And...

G: Well, after a lot of thinking, a lot of worries, I don't know, I was forced to go and he agreed, because he did not have another choice, you know? (G.; female, 49 years old).

Interestingly, unlike Mexican female migrants (Cerrutti and Massey 2001), female migrants from Tianeti rarely accompany their husbands; on the contrary, quite often they are the only family members to migrate, although they may bring their husbands abroad after establishing themselves in the receiving country. Out of nine married returned female migrants from Tianeti interviewed for the present study, only two eventually brought their husbands abroad, while none of them accompanied migrating husbands.

The second reason for the predominance of female migration from Tianeti is the demand for traditionally female jobs in the receiving countries, which shows that this small settlement has become involved in the global system of labor demand and supply. The demand for certain kinds of domestic work in more developed countries is caused by two major factors: the increase in the number of dual-earner households and the increasingly aging population (Kofman et al. 2001:118). Female migrants thus cater to an existing demand that is not met by insufficient state social services, agreeing to work longer hours and for much lower salaries than locals are prepared to do (Kofman et al. 2001:121). Informants from Tianeti often mention the existing "demand for female jobs" on the one hand, and the lack of "demand for male labor" on the other in certain migrant-receiving countries, demonstrating that they are rather well-informed about vacancies and working conditions in various countries and are able to make knowledgeable decisions about emigration.

Women, women [are leaving], men mostly stay at home. There is little demand for male labor, and men are more in danger. If the police see the men, they stop them more often, especially young ones. Among my relatives there is not a single man who emigrated, all are women (N.; female, 50 years old).

Here, N. touches on a third reason why female migration became a widespread phenomenon in Tianeti: security considerations. Because females, as a rule, mostly perform domestic jobs in the receiving countries, they are less often subjected to ID checks by the local police and consequently have better chances to avoid deportation than men.

They [the police] have been arresting and deporting men, while women were living in the houses and nobody was looking for them there... (G.; female, 49 years old).

So, we [the family] decided that I was going [to emigrate], because I could not rely on my husband, plus, it has been said that if a man goes, the police will catch him, because he has to work outside... (M.; female, 49 years old).

Thus, to be a live-in domestic worker is considered the safest way to survive in a foreign country without valid documentation. Furthermore, living with the families they work for enables female migrants to save the money they would otherwise need to spend on housing and food. Yet some informants emphasized that living as a servant in someone else's house and experiencing downward mobility often becomes a cause of psychological stress.

Finally, some female informants point to a fourth factor that contributes to the feminization of migration from Tianeti: women's sense of responsibility to their families. Some female informants believe that it is their duty as mothers to provide for their children. Consider the example of B., whose daughter was working in Germany as an au pair and sending remittances to her family:

I could not accept a single penny she was sending. I was crying all the time that I was eating the result of her work. And I decided: I will go, I will work, I will suffer and I will not be a burden to my child. My husband was not working, my second child needed to be taken care of, and it could not become all her responsibility. It is a mother's duty and I had to do it. (B.; female, 49 years old).

B. never questioned that it was hers and not her husband's duty to support the family. Female migrants usually justify their husbands' idleness by their poor health, the greater demand for female labor, or other similar reasons.

In the case of Tianeti we assume that women managed to adapt better to a changing economic situation than men, found new types of employment more easily than men, and felt more responsibility toward their families while men remained rather apathetic and depressed. However, as this interview with a male returned migrant shows, traditional views of masculinity may still be found in Tianeti:

I, I [had to go], because I was the man and because I had the family and children, I had to do all this, how could I tell my wife—go, work and feed me? (V.; male, 42 years old).

Some female informants, however, think that while male migrants work and support their families who remain in Tianeti, they do not deprive themselves, while women often work extra hours, limit expenses and leisure activities and forget about their own interests and desires.

A lot of women [from Tianeti] left, a lot. I don't think you can find other women similar to Georgian women. They deprive themselves of everything just to be

able to support their families. I was happy only when I was getting a salary and was sending it to them [the family], when the purse was getting empty. [...] We women are born to suffer. And men are born to enjoy life. Of course, men also work, but by comparison, women work more, men do not burden themselves with work. I don't know what else to say... (G.; female, 49 years old).

The perception that female migrants send more remittances and are better able to support their families is also prevalent among returned female informants. They recount stories of how they deprived themselves of basic needs: they did not go out during their days off, called home only twice a month, or did not buy anything for themselves in order to save as much as they could for their remittances. Moreover, female migrants state that they worked extra hours, took extra weekend jobs, endured discrimination and unfair treatment by their employers, and suppressed their dignity and self-esteem, which often caused serious psychological and health problems.

CONCLUSION

The case of Tianeti demonstrates that the feminization of migration from Georgia has already started. Due to its limitations, it is difficult to make estimates regarding future changes in migratory flows from Georgia, although anecdotal evidence from other Georgian regions suggests that females have started to emigrate *en masse* even from communities which previously "exported" only male laborers. The interviews conducted in the community helped us determine four major reasons of female migration, namely: (1) social acceptance of female labor activity, even abroad; (2) increased demand for female labor in developed countries; (3) migrants' security considerations in the receiving countries; and (4) women's sense of responsibility, which became especially evident during the transition from a planned to a market-oriented economy Georgia experienced in the last decade. A focus on these macro- and micro-reasons facilitating female migration provides a better understanding of female migration from Georgia, provided that the character and structure of migrant-sending communities are known.

It should be expected that migration networks established by Georgian emigrants abroad (Zurabishvili 2007) will play a more and more instrumental role in increasing migration flows from Georgia. However, as Caroline Brettell (2000:108) argues, "immigrant women are often at the center of these immigrant networks. They both initiate and maintain them." The impact of migration networks may be expected to become more visible in stimulating more female than male emigration, but further research is needed to prove this.

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