Coming Back Was Only Half the Story: The Reintegration Challenges of Georgian Migrant Women

By Ani Letodiani

"My child was only five years old. There was nothing here in Georgia — absolutely nothing. We were facing extreme hardship. The only solution was to leave the country, just to avoid starving to death. There was no other thought, nothing beyond mere survival, " Nino Gotsadze, 52.

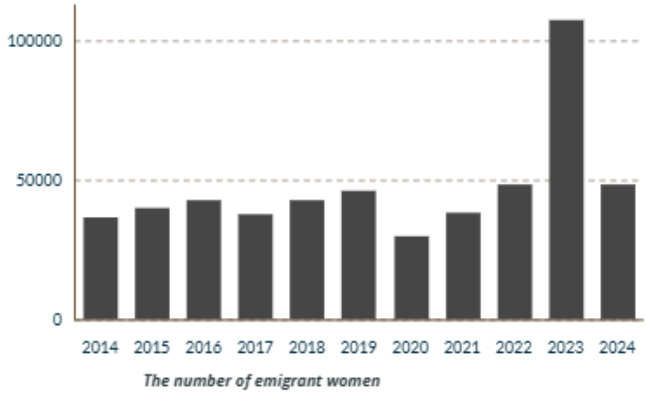
For over two decades, Georgian women like Nino have been leaving their homes behind in order to secure the survival of their families. Many have found employment as carers in other countries, sending money home to support their children, elderly parents or unemployed spouses. In doing so, they have not only carried the emotional and physical weight of migration, but have also taken on the role of primary provider - a responsibility traditionally assigned to men. This shift began in the early 2000s and has become increasingly evident over time. According to national statistics, by 2023, women made up half of Georgia's emigrant population. However, this figure may not reflect the true situation ,,This is not clear from the official data,'' explains sociologist Tamar Zurabishvili. ,, Many women left the country irregularly, without documents or through unofficial channels. Their stories are often not recorded," she said. Zurabishvili views this transformation as a quiet yet profound shift in society. As male unemployment increased, women took on economic leadership roles within their families, crossing borders to work long hours in other people's homes and sending their wages back to support their households. "We've seen women take on responsibilities that used to be the male domain, while men, in some cases, have withdrawn," she noted.

Zurabishvili also points out a notable trend in migration patterns over time. "In the early 1990s, Russia was the main destination for male migrants, while Europe became the primary destination for women, with the United States being an occasional choice," she explains. Recent data

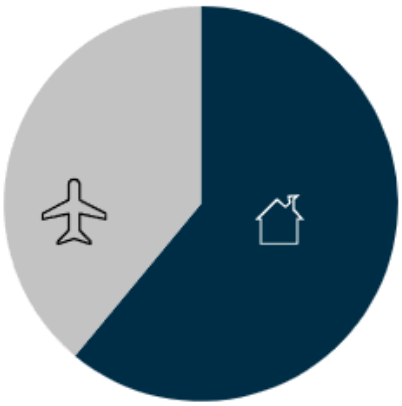
supports this trend. According to the National Bank of Georgia, the main countries of origin for remittances in the period 2024–2025 were the United States, Italy, Russia, Germany and Greece. Geostat data further shows that the largest proportion of female Georgian migrants live in Greece (24%), followed by Italy (17%) and Turkey (13%).

In contrast to previous years, a growing number of Georgian women are now returning home after spending long periods working abroad. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of female returnees has steadily increased since 2018. Interestingly, more women than men returned to Georgia through IOM-supported programmes for the first time in 2022. Around 40% of these women are widows, divorced or single mothers, who often carry the full responsibility of providing for their families.

The number of Georgian migrant women more than doubled in one year — from 48,162 in 2022 to 107,753 in 2023



The number of emigrant women



In 2022 *a historic reversal: more women came back than left*

source: Geostat.ge

However, returning home does not mark the end of their journey. According to a 2021 IOM study, women face greater challenges than men when reintegrating, particularly with regard to economic hardship and psychological distress. For many, the return is just the start of a new series of challenges.

Nino spent 30 years working as a migrant in Russia. Her journey began in the 1990s when, at the age of 22 as a single mother, she made the difficult decision to leave Georgia. Returning decades later was bittersweet. ,,Coming back was a blessing, leaving was a curse,'' she said. Although Nino found work as a cook, she admits that it barely covers her basic needs. ,,Many returnees can't adapt and end up going back abroad, the salary here just isn't enough.'' Beyond financial hurdles, Nino faced deep psychological challenges. "After 30 years abroad, I don't think the way I used to. I lived by their rules and adopted their mindset. Coming back, I felt like a guest in my own country," Nino said. Her biggest struggle was reconnecting with Georgia. ,, I had to relearn everything: the streets, the language, even how to talk. It feels like starting school all over again," she said.

Natia Suladze, a psychotherapist and counselor, notes that the psychological challenges migrant women face upon return are shaped by the reasons for migration and individual characteristics such as age and adaptability. "Women who leave for survival, career, or personal growth experience migration differently," she said. Emotional isolation and difficulty adjusting to a changed environment are two of the most common effects, especially among older women.

Madonna Kukhianidze, 65, spent 22 years working in Italy. "When I left, I didn't know the language. I worked for one family for 19 years and later in hospitals they were wonderful people," she said. Returning home wasn't easy. "I've fallen into a routine of work and home, work and home. Being in crowded places now makes me uncomfortable. I don't know if it's a mental health issue, but I just prefer staying with my family," she admitted.

Suladze emphasises that reintegration is not just a physical return; it is also a deeply emotional process, particularly for women. "After decades abroad, everything , even their home , can feel unfamiliar," she explains. While psychotherapy is helpful, she believes the most essential support comes from close family and friends who acknowledge the sacrifices women made abroad. Many struggle with anxiety, depression, and a sense of alienation. These feelings often arise

from unmet expectations , returning with hopes of stability or an emotional reunion, only to face economic hardship or estranged family relationships.

“Leaving your country takes strength,” says sociologist Tamar Zurabishvili. “But coming back and trying to start over—that takes another kind of strength.” She believes that preparation for reintegration should begin long before women return, including access to training, financial planning, and stronger support systems..

Mariam Jvania, 30, left Georgia five years ago with her husband, leaving their young child in the care of her mother. Their goal was simple - to save enough money to buy a home. They succeeded, but Mariam’s heart never fully left. “Even before we left, I kept thinking about when we’d come back. It was hard to leave,” she said. Now, as she prepares to return, Mariam dreams of starting a small business. However, uncertainty still looms over her plans. ,,If it doesn't work out, if things are the same as before, we'll go abroad again, just for a few months,’’ she said. Her biggest concern is her relationship with her son. “ We talk every day, but I feel he’s grown distant. He expects more material things from us than emotional closeness now. He’s almost a teenager. I worry, after five years apart, how do you rebuild that bond?” Mariam said.

In Greece, Mariam works as a kitchen helper in a restaurant and occasionally babysits to earn extra money. Sociologist Tamar Zurabishvili describes this pattern as ,,transnational motherhood’’— when women leave their own children behind to care for the children of others abroad. In some cases, she explains, they become what she refers to as ,,Skype mothers’’, maintaining contact via screens while missing the precious moments.

Researcher Meko Chachava, who led a study on the topic, says, “People tend to focus on why women leave, but rarely ask what happens when they come back.” Her interviews with returnees reveal difficult realities. Many of the women are middle-aged or older. They come home to a changed country, to children who’ve grown distant, and to a job market where their previous qualifications no longer count. “Most of them come back with no savings,” Chachava explained. “They sent everything they earned to their families while abroad. And the kind of jobs they did, long hours, no contracts, meant they couldn’t develop new skills. Some even lost the ones they had,” Chachava said. This leads to what she calls “dequalification”. A schoolteacher who left for ten years, for example, might return to find she’s no longer considered fit to teach.

Tamuna Purtseladze, 52 , was 30 years old when she decided to migrate. "I spent exactly 12 years in Greece, in Athens. I mainly worked as a nanny, taking care of children," she recalls. After returning, she faced the same problem that had pushed her to migrate in the first place — financial instability. "Of course, I didn't have a guaranteed job waiting for me when I came back. I looked for work and eventually found a position. It was a prestigious job, but the salary was so low that it couldn't even cover my basic expenses. Prestige meant nothing to me because, with that salary, I couldn't even pay my bills," she said. Despite building a life in Georgia, Tamuna still considers the idea of migrating again. "I have often thought about leaving again for better financial conditions," she said.

Sociologist Tamar Zurabishvili echoes this concern, warning that women who return to the same conditions that drove them to leave in the first place are at high risk of migrating again. "If there's no job, no support, and no savings, a woman might feel she has no choice but to leave," Zurabishvili said.

"I spent 22 years in Greece, specifically in Athens. I never returned home during that time. I worked as a caregiver for the elderly, living with them and providing 24-hour care," Liana Furtseladze, 75, mother of Tamuna, returned to Georgia only six months ago, but her first emotions were surprising: "When I finally decided to come home, I couldn't even process it. I was so emotionally drained that I couldn't understand I was coming back to my homeland. Adapting is difficult. Living abroad as a migrant is hard, but coming back after 22 years, you feel disconnected from your own country, from your own family. Adjusting to life here is even harder than adjusting to life in a Greek household," she said. Liana describes the painful reality of losing connection with her social circle: "After coming back, I barely recognize anyone. Most of my friends have passed away. I left behind four siblings, and none of them are alive anymore. Not even my husband," Liana said.

Liana returned to Georgia with the support of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program, implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Greece.

"I came back through the IOM Greece program, which means I arranged my documents, and then they provided me with a ticket. They called me, set a date for my return, gave me a ticket, and 1000 EUR," she said.

The program is designed to support migrants who wish to return to their home countries, particularly those in vulnerable situations, such as the elderly, pregnant women, and individuals with health or other challenges. It offers comprehensive assistance to ensure a safe, dignified return and promote sustainable reintegration. Through this initiative, Liana also received financial support of approximately 2 000 EUR to help restart her life. In April 2025, IOM Greece organized another charter flight, facilitating the voluntary return of 134 Georgian nationals from Athens to Tbilisi, including 47 vulnerable individuals.

Reintegration support programs for returnees do exist in Georgia. Alongside the International Organization for Migration (IOM), initiatives are implemented by the Georgian state, Caritas, the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), and the German development agency GTZ. However, experts are of the opinion that despite their presence, these efforts often do not have a lasting effect. “These are short-term fixes,” says researcher Meko Chachava. “There’s no long-term plan, and they rarely address the gender-specific challenges women face.”

Since 2003, IOM Georgia has supported the return of more than 25 000 Georgian nationals from EU countries and Switzerland. Over 6 000 of them received reintegration assistance. Today, the largest numbers of returnees come from Greece. In response to growing needs, IOM has incorporated gender-sensitive elements into its programs. “Women are often primary caregivers for children, the elderly, or people with disabilities. That creates unique burdens,” explains Rusiko Imniashvili, a representative from IOM Georgia. “That’s why we emphasize psychosocial support, self-help groups, and peer networks,” Imniashvili said.

Still, mental health support remains one of the weakest links. Natia Suladze points out that existing psychological programs are often too short-term and superficial. “Real change doesn’t happen in ten sessions,” she says. “Most of these programs are limited to psychoeducation and basic crisis intervention. They’re not designed for long-term, individualized care.”

Georgia’s State Program for Reintegration Assistance offers grants for income generation, vocational training, temporary housing, and medical support. It targets citizens and stateless persons with permanent residence who have lived abroad irregularly, applied for asylum, or held refugee status. IOM also works with vocational colleges, the State Employment Support Agency,

and private employers to connect beneficiaries with training, internships, or subsidized work based on their skills.

However, geography plays a significant role in shaping the reintegration experience. Women returning to urban areas like Tbilisi benefit from more job opportunities and access to reintegration programs. However, those who return to villages or small towns face limited support. Older women, especially those over 55, are often excluded from reintegration programs altogether.

Yet even though reintegration programmes exist, a fundamental problem remains: a lack of awareness. “Many women simply don’t know these programs exist,” says Zurabishvili. Outreach remains limited, and those who need the most help are often left uninformed. None of the women interviewed for this article were aware of any reintegration support available in Georgia.

The situation is further complicated by growing political uncertainty. As Georgia’s integration with the European Union becomes more uncertain, there are growing concerns that funding for reintegration initiatives may be reduced. The potential loss of visa-free travel would make matters worse. For many migrant women, this opportunity has offered a legal and affordable way to visit family, arrange care responsibilities and keep in touch with their homeland. „It is a meaningful form of stability for many, without it, reintegration becomes even more challenging.” says researcher Meko Chachava.

Chachava also highlights a deeper issue, the increasing resistance within Georgia’s political environment to gender-related policies. “Even mentioning the word ‘gender’ has become politically sensitive,” she explains, noting that the Gender Equality Council has been dismantled. In this context, the development of gender-sensitive reintegration programs,already limited, has become increasingly unlikely. This presents a critical gap, particularly as returning migrant women often face reintegration challenges that are closely tied to their gender.

For now, the journey continues. For many women, coming home is not the final chapter - it’s the beginning of a new struggle: rebuilding identity, reconnecting with loved ones, and navigating life in a country that has changed as much as they have.