



Unveiling the Active Role of Skilled Immigrant Women as Intermediaries and Developers: A Case Study in Batumi, Georgia

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Abstract

This study intricately delves into the multifaceted experiences of skilled female immigrants who have undertaken individual journeys to Batumi, Georgia in recent years. By focusing on their narratives, encountered challenges throughout immigration and integration processes, and their collaborative endeavors in supporting fellow migrants while advancing community interests, this research highlights the pivotal role these women play as advocates for communal progression. Additionally, through active engagement in the establishment of international social networks, they facilitate mutual support and aid in the integration process for themselves and their peers, fostering a more cohesive and inclusive community fabric. Acting as intermediaries bridging incoming immigrants with the local populace, they facilitate the exchange of invaluable skills and knowledge, all while meticulously preserving their cultural traditions and seamlessly integrating into the host community. Furthermore, through the initiation of innovative entrepreneurial ventures and financial initiatives, they actively contribute to the ongoing development of the region. Employing qualitative research methodologies such as case studies, literature review, and in-depth interviews with migrant women residing in Batumi, this study endeavors to offer a comprehensive exploration of their migration narratives, professional pursuits, integration experience, and the underrecognized role they play as major driving forces of migration, initiators of change, and intermediaries.

Keywords Female migrants · Intermediaries · Skilled migration · Batumi · Georgia · Immigration

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Introduction

Migration scholars widely recognize that migration is intricately intertwined with gender dynamics. Women's migration, in particular, represents a multifaceted and pressing issue that holds substantial significance within the global discourse. As the immigrant population continues to rise, women are assuming increasingly active roles in migration processes, making significant social and economic contributions to host communities, and emerging as agents of progress and innovation. Despite the increasing amount of research on the feminization of migration (Sassen, 2000; Jones, 2008; Piper, 2008; Paiewonsky, 2009), knowledge in this area remains fragmented, and the experiences of women migrants stand out as a nuanced and often neglected dimension.

As a typical post-Soviet country, with a population of approximately 3.7 million people, Georgia has grappled with significant out-migration since gaining independence in 1991 (Badurashvili, 2012). However, owing to political, social, and economic stability, as well as increased engagement in global migration processes and immigration reforms, immigration flows have experienced a notable upsurge over the past decade or so. In 2022, according to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat), the number of immigrants arriving in Georgia reached 179,778 (Geostat/National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2023). While Geostat offers valuable insights, the available data on migrant women remains somewhat limited, primarily encompassing demographic information such as age and country of origin. Nevertheless, analysis of this data reveals a consistent upward trend in the number of female immigrants, reaching a record high of 75,377 in 2022 (Geostat/National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2023). It's important to note, however, that immigration statistics may be misleading due to the methodology employed by the National Statistics Office of Georgia. This methodology categorizes any individual who has stayed in Georgia for a minimum of 183 days, without Georgia being their permanent residence country for the preceding six months, as an immigrant.

Article 3.1 of the Law of Georgia on Immigration defines an immigrant as an alien who has obtained the right of permanent residence in Georgia under Georgian legislation (Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, 1993). Consequently, to ensure precision in our analysis, it becomes pertinent to exclude female Georgian citizens from the official immigration statistics (Table 1). It is noteworthy that before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the number of female migrants in Georgia did not surpass 20,000. (Geostat/National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020). However, a significant upsurge in female migration occurred subsequently, primarily attributed to the Russia-Ukraine war, which catalyzed extensive migration waves and profoundly influenced the migration landscape of Europe and neighbouring regions. Historically, war-induced migration has been predominantly associated with the emigration of young men seeking to evade military conscription (Dragostinova, 2016). Nevertheless, feminist scholars have highlighted the need to broaden the scope of analysis concerning war and migration, which traditionally have been perceived as male-centric domains (Haleh, 2007).

Table 1 Number of female immigrants in Georgia by countries of their citizenship in 2022

Nationality	Number of Female Immigrants
Russian Federation	24 440
Ukraine	12 851
Belarus	6 004
India	1 918
Azerbaijan	1 076
Turkey	723
The USA	614
Armenia	547
Islamic Republic of Iran	517
China	153
Other	5 152
Stateless	18
Total	54 013

In the context of Georgia, while the majority of migrants arriving as a consequence of the war are men, the number of female migrants is also substantial. Analysis of the countries of origin of immigrant women in 2022 reveals that a significant proportion originated from the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus (Geostat/National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2023). This emphasizes the intricate nature of migration dynamics, calling for a detailed understanding that considers the roles and experiences of both men and women in the context of migration prompted by conflict.

As per the prevailing trend, migrant women in Georgia predominantly originate from neighboring countries. Nonetheless, there are also discernible migration flows from other regions, including South-East Asian and North African countries (IOM, 2021).

Regarding the age distribution of immigrant women, data indicates that a significant proportion, specifically 11,300 individuals, fall within the 25-29 age bracket (Geostat, 2022), suggesting that they belong to the economically active population segment. However, comprehensive information regarding their economic activity, educational background, and geographical distribution remains unavailable.

The phenomenon of female labor force participation (FLFP) is multifaceted and influenced by a myriad of micro and macro factors. Building upon the foundational tenets of Human Capital Theory, scholarly literature emphasizes the significance of female education, work experience, and skills (Becker, 1975). However, it is important to acknowledge that women's human capital is deeply connected to gender roles and societal norms, which shape women's socialization in various cultural settings (Eagly and Wood, 2012).

Boyd and Grieco (2003) assert that gender serves as a fundamental organizing principle underlying migration processes. Gender not only shapes migration outcomes by determining access to resources and opportunities but also profoundly

influences post-migration experiences, including the extent of women's agency, autonomy, and decision-making power. Gender emerges as a pivotal determinant in migration dynamics as women encounter distinct options, patterns, and barriers compared to men (Singh et al., 2015).

Migration, viewed through a gender lens, holds the potential to enhance women's self-respect, dignity, and autonomy (Gaye & Jha, 2011). It offers women an opportunity to transcend traditional gender roles and societal constraints, thereby enabling them to pursue personal goals and aspirations in a more equitable environment. Migration can thus be perceived as an empowering experience for women, providing them with avenues for liberation from entrenched gender norms and facilitating their engagement in socio-economic and political spheres on more equitable terms.

Defining "skills" within the context of skilled migrant women presents a significant challenge, as the discourse surrounding this topic encompasses a range of interpretations. The lack of a standardized definition for skilled migrants adds layers of complexity to the discussion, as noted by Lowell and Batalova (2005). Iredale (2008) delineates skilled workers as individuals possessing university degrees and/or extensive professional experience across various fields. However, for this paper, the definition proposed by Raghuram (2008) is adopted, which characterizes skilled workers as those with some level of tertiary education and possessing skills highly valued in the labor market.

Despite their considerable social and human capital, highly skilled migrant women often find themselves underrepresented among economic migrants. While some migrate independently, the majority are driven by a combination of economic, institutional, and personal factors. These factors may include motivations related to marriage, family reunification or accompaniment, and seeking international protection.

This paper explores the role of skilled immigrant women in Batumi, Georgia, as intermediaries, knowledge brokers, or boundary spanners, drawing upon the conceptual framework outlined by Frølund and Ziethen (2016). These women leverage their skills and expertise to facilitate the integration of other migrants and newcomers into Georgian society. Skilled immigrant women in Batumi endeavor to establish communities of support aimed at navigating the multifaceted challenges of integration. Despite the relative geographical and cultural proximity between their countries of origin and Georgia, as well as the generally welcoming attitude towards migrant populations in the country, adaptation to a new life remains arduous and demanding. This adaptation necessitates not only the severing of ties with their homeland but also the adjustment to the socio-cultural and economic nuances of the host country, alongside integration into the broader host society.

Batumi, a Black Sea resort and port city, is Georgia's second-largest city and the administrative centre of the Ajara Autonomous Republic. Located in the southwestern corner of Georgia, Ajara borders the Black Sea, and its southern border coincides with the state border of Georgia and Turkey. Located just 20 kilometers north of the Turkish border, Batumi is vital to the country's economic and social framework. The city's economy is largely driven by tourism and gambling, earning it the nickname "The Las Vegas of the Black Sea." Additionally, Batumi is a significant seaport and a hub for various industries, including shipbuilding, food processing,

and light manufacturing, all of which contribute to its dynamic development trends (Spritzer, 2010).

Social networks play a crucial role in providing material aid to immigrants, particularly those who have recently arrived. This assistance is especially vital in situations of extreme need, where social networks offer essential goods such as food, clothing, and even temporary housing. Moreover, these networks provide opportunities for social participation, enabling immigrants to engage in discussions about shared challenges and experiences. Additionally, they facilitate the expression of mutual affection, understanding, and trust among members (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006).

Through an in-depth examination of the experiences of female immigrants arriving in Batumi over the past decade (the respondents in the study immigrated over a span of years, with the earliest arriving in 2014 and the latest in 2022), this study aims to elucidate the pivotal role played by immigrant women as intermediaries within the host community. Specifically, it seeks to highlight how they bolster social networks and contribute to community development by aiding other migrants in their integration processes and navigating the challenges of a new society. The research focuses on skilled female migrants with higher education and sought-after skills in the local labour market.

To meet these goals, this paper will utilize qualitative research methods, particularly through conducting in-depth interviews with female migrants living in Batumi and experts in the field. Qualitative research (QR) offers a suite of techniques that allow for a nuanced exploration of how individuals shape their reality within their environment and the extent to which this reality is conceptually mediated. This approach aligns with constructivist principles, as elucidated by Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2022). By utilizing qualitative methods, this study aims to gather reliable information and deepen understanding of migratory patterns.

Data and Methods

To investigate the experiences of female migrants acting as intermediaries between the local community and immigrants, this study employs qualitative sociological research methods. While systematic focus on methodological issues in migration studies is relatively recent (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018), qualitative research has long been central to the field (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2022). Moreover, qualitative methods are well-suited for gender studies, offering a means to explore the foundational elements of gender expression (Smilde & Hanson, 2018). They enable an exploration of the complex layers of practices, discourses, histories, and identities that influence gender and sexualities (Smilde & Hanson, 2018).

This research comprises in-depth interviews conducted with female migrants residing in Batumi, as well as with experts in the field. Within the research framework, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with female migrants (Table 2), representing diverse economic sectors and actively engaged in host community matters and social networks. Semi-structured questionnaires were utilized during interviews, conducted in English, Georgian, and Russian languages. These interviews provide

Table 2 The main characteristics of interviewed female immigrants

Female Immigrants	Total Number 30
Medium Age	38
Marital Status	64% married, 36% single
Country of Citizenship	Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine
Visa Type	Residence permit-10 Working visa-2 Visa free regime-18 Tourist visa-0
Economical Activity	Employer-10 Self-employed and freelancer-14 Employed-6
Economic Sector	Tourism-30% Restaurant business-20% Real estate-14% Other services-36%
Position	Head of Company-10 Manager- 9 Other positions-11

valuable insights into how these women perceive the complexities of integration within Georgian society and the specific barriers they encounter due to gender dynamics.

As an integral component of the qualitative sociological research, in-depth interviews with 15 experts in the field were conducted. The majority of these individuals were recognized authorities in their respective areas of specialization, while others were public servants actively engaged in migration management.

The research has the following objectives:

- To understand the roles and experiences of female migrants acting as intermediaries between the local community and other immigrants in Batumi;
- To explore how female migrants perceive and navigate the complexities of integration within Georgian society;
- To identify specific barriers to integration faced by female migrants;
- To contribute to the methodological discourse in migration studies by utilizing qualitative research methods that emphasize gender dynamics.

The sociological research was conducted in Batumi due to its active female migrant community and their role as intermediaries between the host community and immigrants, alongside their promotion efforts on social media. As Georgia's second-largest city with 150,000 inhabitants and situated near the Turkish border, Batumi is one of the favourite destinations for migrants. Its multiculturalism and tolerance make it an ideal location for such a study.

The respondents of the research are qualified female labour migrants who include family members fleeing the Russia-Ukraine war or the Belarusian authoritarian

regime. Among them are refugees, and married or single women seeking to realize their potential. Female migrants were selected using a two-stage approach. Initially, purposive sampling identified 10 respondents based on specific criteria, including their origin country and occupation. Subsequently, snowball sampling facilitated the recruitment of an additional 20 participants through referrals. This method not only saved time but also revealed the awareness levels and social networks of the participants, who mainly hailed from post-Soviet and neighbouring countries.

The target audience includes academics and researchers from various fields, as well as the general public and migrant communities.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review (Conceptual Framework of Women's Migration and Integration)

Sociologists and anthropologists have long acknowledged the fundamental role that women play in migration (Khankhoje, 1984; Pessar, 1986, 1988). During the 1980s and 1990s, migration research, primarily qualitative in nature, extensively explored the gendered aspects of immigration. This research investigated how women's migration impacts their households and communities of origin, as well as the cultural factors that influence their migration decisions. As noted by Kanaiaupuni (2000), "Migration is inherently influenced by gender, and traditional explanations for men's migration often do not adequately address women's experiences." Gender is a pervasive factor across all aspects of migration and its consequences (Pfeiffer et al., 2008).

In the latter half of the 20th century and the early 21st century, efforts have increasingly focused on enhancing the understanding of women's migration and its unique features. The evolution of research on women's migration can be delineated into several phases. Initially, there was a notable scarcity of research focusing specifically on female migration until the mid-1970s. Subsequently, attention shifted towards family migration, albeit with limited emphasis on women's roles. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of significant works highlighting women's agency in migration, while also acknowledging gender disparities in the migration process and settlement. Finally, from the late 1990s onward, the term "feminization of migration" became prevalent, encapsulating the rising involvement of women in migration flows (Casas & Garson, 2005).

The existing body of social science literature on international migration lacks a unified theoretical framework, comprising instead a fragmented array of theories that have evolved largely independently of each other and often without clear disciplinary boundaries (Massey et al., 2001). Furthermore, gender issues have received relatively scant attention within the realm of international migration research. Historically, migration theories have tended to overlook the gender dimensions of international migration, largely due to the prevailing assumption that migrant workers are predominantly male, with women perceived as their dependents. While this perception has shifted in recent decades, there remains a dearth of scholarly efforts to comprehensively theorize international female migration.

Traditional migration theory has historically prioritized understanding the causes of international migration over the specifics of who migrates, leading to a neglect of gender-specific migration experiences (Boyd & Grieco, 2003). For instance, Neo-Classical Economic Theory, the oldest and most renowned, underscores economic factors such as labor demand and supply. According to this theory, individual migrants choose destinations where the profit potential outweighs associated costs (Massey et al., 1993). However, while this theory primarily focuses on economic aspects, it falls short in explaining patterns of international female migration.

Structurist Theory views migration as exploitation by industrialized nations but lacks direct evidence linking multinational corporations to female migration. The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM), or the theory of household economics, posits that migration decisions are made collectively by households (King, 2012). However, this perspective overlooks individual decision-making and fails to account for variations in migration rates between countries, as well as gender perspectives.

Human capital theory suggests that individuals' productivity hinges on factors like education work experience and other human capital variables. In "The Economics of Discrimination," Becker (1971) identifies differences in economic returns to human capital between men and women. Network Theory emphasizes the role of personal networks in migration, especially for women, yet it does not elucidate the initial development of these networks between countries.

In summary, while each theory offers insights into specific aspects of migration, none offers a comprehensive explanation for patterns of international female migration.

Gender plays a significant role in all aspects of migration and its impacts. Gender considerations permeate through individual decision-making, household dynamics, and broader economic impacts of migration (Fig. 1).

The migration process does not end with mobility, it is followed by a complex and difficult process of integration. Adaptation to a new society is the first step toward integration for migrants. This process involves the migrant's ability to fit into the pre-existing structures of the host society. It includes adapting to the existing rules and values and learning the mechanisms of the new economic, political, social, cultural, and political–institutional environment (Vinke et al., 2020). The term "Integration" still does not have a legal definition and is being interpreted differently. According to Robinson, (1998): "Integration is a chaotic concept. This is the word that is used by many but understood differently by most. According to Berry, (1980), integration is the incorporation of migrants into the host society by preserving some elements of culture. As Rinus Penninx suggested: "Integration is a process by which immigrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups" (Penninx, 2003). The article primarily explores the social integration of female migrants. This process encompasses several critical aspects, such as the naturalization of migrants, the removal of barriers between migrant groups and the social groups of the host society, and the establishment of networks among representatives of diverse social groups.

Basic theoretical models for the analysis of the integration process as well as theories of migration in general, are gender-blind and do not take into account

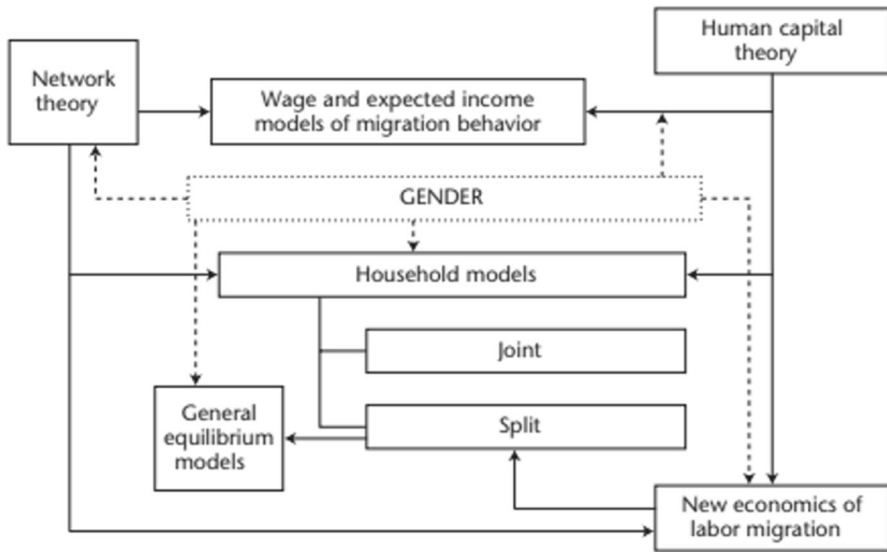


Fig. 1 The Role of Gender in Migration and Its Impacts. Source: Pfeiffer et al., (2008)

the gender aspects of migration. The classic ‘straight-line’ theory of assimilation emphasizes generational significance in assimilation, asserting that first-generation immigrants retain their home country’s identity, values, and norms most effectively (Warner & Srole, 1945; Gans, 1979). Theories of segmented and selective assimilation, in contrast to classical theory, posits that different ethnic groups experience distinct intergenerational assimilation paths with varying rates (Portes & Zhou, 1993). The racial/ethnic disadvantage model suggests that mere exposure to language and culture doesn’t always lead to increased assimilation. Discrimination and institutional barriers, particularly in employment and opportunities, hinder complete assimilation (Glazer, 1993). Critics argue it overly emphasizes racial/ethnic barriers and falls short in explaining socioeconomic mobility (Brown and Bean, 2006). A Model of Changing Identificational Assimilation suggests that contemporary Latin American and Asian immigrants challenge old models and theories, especially regarding racial-ethnic identification. Unlike traditional trajectories, modern migrants often see themselves as multiracial rather than fitting into black or white categories, making the old bipolar framework ineffective (Brown and Bean, 2006). Existing theories of integration predominantly overlook the nuances of women’s integration experiences, prioritizing generational and racial-ethnic factors while neglecting gender perspectives. These theories fail to adequately address the unique challenges and dynamics faced by women in the integration process.

Women are key actresses in sending and receiving countries’ developments, and their contributions include social and financial remittances, education, and the transmission of social and cultural values (United Nations, 2006). The experiences of skilled migrant women are often shaped by their education and qualifications. The “immigrant paradox” is a significant concept in migrant integration literature. This

paradox reveals that economically successful and highly educated migrants often face social exclusion rather than better integration into the host society (Buijs et al., 2006; Entzinger and Dourleijn, 2008). Classical theories of immigration propose that higher education contributes to various aspects of integration, such as fostering a sense of belonging and cultivating positive attitudes toward the host society. However, educated immigrants may experience feelings of exclusion as they assess their opportunities relative to those of the majority. They often face higher unemployment rates and are more likely to hold temporary or lower-level positions, exacerbating feelings of insecurity. The rising expectations theory posits that educated immigrants, with heightened expectations, become frustrated with unequal opportunities and discriminatory processes. Consequently, they may display more negative attitudes toward the local majority, contributing to the "Integration paradox" (Steinmann, 2019; Ten Teije et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2016).

The presence of social networks abroad serves as a catalyst for further migration, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the concept of social capital and underscored by migration network theory. These networks are pivotal in enabling multiple aspects of migration, acting as conduits for employment opportunities, housing arrangements, and cultural assimilation in receiving countries. Through the dissemination of vital information, they act as invaluable resources for migrants (Massey et al., 1993; Arango, 2004).

Migrant networks, essentially comprising interpersonal connections, significantly increase the likelihood of international mobility. These connections represent a form of social capital, granting individuals access to employment opportunities in host countries, even in scenarios where economic differentials or formal employment policies may not be the primary drivers of migration (Dustmann & Glitz, 2005). Thus, migrant networks demonstrate the enduring influence of social capital in shaping migration patterns, transcending purely economic determinants and sustaining migration flows over time.

After years of neglecting the gendered dynamics of social networks and migrant social capital, there's a growing recognition of their significant gendered nature. Pioneering studies, such as those conducted in Mexico, have shed light on how women often need the support of female-centered networks before pursuing migration projects (Cerutti, 2001; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003).

Women migrants can have a crucial role in the formation of social networks as well as in having positive impacts on other migrants. In specific contexts such as El Salvador and Morocco, empirical studies highlight the profound impact of migrant networks on the perceptions and behaviors of potential migrants. For instance, the existence of older female migrants, referred to as *viajeras*, in El Salvador, serves as a model that makes migration a feasible option for younger women (Mahler, 1999, as cited by Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003). Similarly, in Morocco, migrant women contribute to the gradual reduction of stigma associated with female migration (Crivello, 2003, as cited by De Haas, 2009). Moreover, the long-term effects of migration can include increased educational attainment and the emergence of migrant women as role models for younger generations (Crivello, 2003; Taylor et al., 2006, as cited by De Haas, 2009). Furthermore, female migrant networks are found to be more useful and comprehensive than male networks, aiding both genders in

migration endeavors and integration processes (Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003; Richter and Taylor, 2008).

Social networks play a crucial role in practical aspects of migration, such as finding housing, securing employment, and facilitating remittance transfers (Curran and Saguy, 2001). Empirical evidence from studies, such as Jong (2000) in Thailand, indicates that women migrants often have well-defined plans before migration, with prior migration experience significantly influencing future mobility due to the reliance on migrant networks.

In conclusion, the intricate dynamics of migrant networks underscore their profound influence on migration patterns and outcomes. These networks, grounded in social capital, not only facilitate practical aspects of migration but also shape migrants' perceptions, decisions, and integration experiences, particularly highlighting the significant role of women in migration processes.

Results and discussion

The semi-structured interviews with female migrants in Batumi covered seven thematic blocks: demographic data, migration decision and experience, employment, and working conditions, language knowledge and religion, human relations, free time activities, and overall assessment. This comprehensive approach ensured a thorough exploration of their backgrounds, motivations, labor market experiences, linguistic and religious integration, social networks, leisure pursuits, and personal evaluations of their migration journeys.

The majority of immigrants in Batumi hail from Turkey and the former Soviet Union republics. The significant presence of Turkish citizens can be attributed to both geographical proximity and historical connections with the region, making Batumi particularly appealing to them. As a prominent scholar in the field, notes, "Batumi has long been a cultural and economic crossroads, particularly for Turkish citizens, whose migration is facilitated by the free visa regime and deep historical ties with the region." The robust economic and social ties between Georgia and Turkey foster labor-intensive growth and strengthen cultural relations. Additionally, there has been a recent surge in immigration from post-Soviet countries, with citizens from both Turkey and these nations predominantly owning real estate in Batumi.

Living in Batumi is particularly comfortable for migrants from the post-Soviet space. While male migrants predominantly arrive from Turkey, a significant number of females from post-Soviet countries come to work in Batumi. The integration proceeds smoothly due to the absence of significant cultural and linguistic barriers, with the local population primarily fluent in Russian and English. *"In terms of adaptation, I feel very comfortable here. The older generation converses in Russian, while the younger generation prefers English. Personally, I find it effortless to communicate in either language, as both are widely understood."* – Kristina, 37, from Belarus, working in the tourism industry, arrived in Batumi in 2021. Moreover, it's noteworthy that the acceptance and readiness for integration among the local population are higher in Batumi compared to other areas (Sitchinava, 2022).

The willingness and readiness of the host society are crucial factors for successful integration, as integration is a two-way process. Despite the migrant's desire to integrate playing a key role, societal acceptance plays an equally important part. If the host society creates obstacles through discriminatory practices or stereotypes, integration efforts can be thwarted, leading to failure (Sardinha, 2018). Therefore, fostering acceptance among locals is paramount for the successful integration of migrants.

Compared to large cities, small cities are generally characterized by closer social ties (European Committee of the Regions, 2020). Consequently, immigrants find themselves interacting more frequently with natives. Living within these communities is both easier and more comfortable as integration and participation in social activities are facilitated.

The phenomenon of the feminization of migration has brought migrant women into the spotlight within European societies, underscoring their significance as integral members thereof. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the complex and diverse nature of women's migrations, which cannot be easily simplified or generalized. Women's migration experiences are highly diverse, shaped by their unique social positions and individual backgrounds.

Moreover, it's essential to acknowledge that women's migratory journeys are not solely defined by their gender but are intricately intertwined with various intersecting factors such as social class, race or ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. These intersecting identities profoundly influence the causes and patterns of women's migration and significantly shape their experiences upon arrival in a new country.

Understanding the complexity of women's migration necessitates an examination of these intersecting factors and their cumulative impact on the lived realities of migrant women. Only by embracing this nuanced perspective can we truly comprehend the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women in migration and work towards fostering inclusive and equitable societies.

Despite common stereotypes, female migration is diverse and multifaceted. Women migrate to Georgia for reasons beyond marriage, including employment. Migrant women arrive through various avenues, including labor migration, where they frequently fill gaps in the service sector or contribute as highly specialized workers. Additionally, they may migrate as family members or as refugees fleeing conflict or persecution. Migration patterns vary in duration, distance, and family involvement. Both young and older women participate, whether single or married, often leaving family behind for work opportunities. *"It's a good question, because I've traveled a lot, and I love it, but I did a lot of research on the Internet about where to go and saw that Georgia was an unexplored country and decided to try it, I came here alone, as a solo migrant."* Alina, 36, from Ukraine, working in a real estate company, arrived in Batumi in 2014. *"I arrived in Georgia independently and have remained here without relying on anyone else. Despite assumptions from my relatives that I might be visiting my fiancé, I made the journey on my own accord."* - Amina, 38, founder of a tourism company, arrived in Batumi in 2018.

Most migrant women interviewed in Batumi made migration decisions independently, contrary to the assertions of household strategy theorists. Only around one-third of female migrants sought input from family members regarding their decision

to migrate. This highlights a greater degree of autonomy among women in migration decision-making, challenging conventional perceptions in migration literature. They emerge as the primary decision-makers in the migration process. For instance, this trend is particularly evident among women from neighboring countries, many of whom are of Muslim religion. *“Despite family opposition, especially from my older brother who tried to dissuade me, I remained determined to migrate. Despite his concerns, I decided to move to Batumi, and I have no regrets. Even when I visit my hometown in Kabardino-Balkaria (Russia), I feel unsettled, longing to return to the peace and calmness of Batumi.”* Fatima, 35, a small entrepreneur from Russia, arrived in Batumi in 2019.

Migration can empower women in various ways, including increasing their autonomy, boosting their skills and knowledge, and enhancing their confidence. This empowerment enables them to have a greater influence within their families and communities. As women migrate and access opportunities for education and work, they challenge traditional gender roles and promote equality. However, the level of empowerment may vary depending on factors such as the migration context, ethnic and religious belonging, legal status, urbanization, family dynamics, employment situation, and duration of residence in the new area (Hugo, 2000, cited in Piper, 2005).

Research has revealed that Georgia presents favorable opportunities for aspiring female entrepreneurs. Many women who had previously been employed in various offices or institutions in their home countries hesitated to start their businesses due to concerns about high taxes, lack of experience in business management, and unfavorable conditions. However, upon arriving in Georgia, particularly in Batumi, they found the environment conducive to entrepreneurship.

For instance, a 33-year-old Russian migrant initially planned to visit Georgia as a tourist but ended up staying and starting her own business. She expressed that in Russia, the perceived risks made it difficult for her to venture into entrepreneurship independently. However, she found managing a business in Georgia comparatively easier and more feasible. According to Galina, 33, from Russia, who runs a catering business, arrived in Batumi in 2022, *“At first I planned to come as a tourist, but then I just fell in love with the country and stayed. I decided to start a business in Russia because of the risks I probably could never decide on my own to initiate activities. Managing business in Georgia is easy.”*

Similarly, Karina, 35, from Ukraine, initially had experience in the tourism industry but found the gambling industry more profitable after arriving in Batumi in 2022. She highlighted the positive impact of migration on her career advancement, noting that her experience as a migrant in Georgia had made her more independent and significantly contributed to her professional development. As a result, she was able to secure a better position and advance in her career trajectory. Karina stated, *“I became more independent, and if we consider general development, then of course, yes, migration experience helped me a lot. I got promoted, well, hold a better position here.”*

Despite the prevalent issue of brain waste and underemployment among highly skilled migrant women, as documented by Ghosh (2009), none of the respondents in our study reported experiencing underemployment in Batumi. This finding is

particularly noteworthy given that most of the respondents were not fluent in the Georgian language. Furthermore, the process of finding suitable employment did not pose a significant challenge for them. *“Batumi, famous for its lively tourism scene with lavish hotels, bustling casinos, and abundant entertainment choices, made my job hunt a breeze. I secured employment here within a single day, feeling as though my expertise and experience guided me effortlessly. I decided to stick around to work in this vibrant city.”* - Aida, 30, from Kazakhstan, working in the hotel industry, arrived in Batumi in 2016.

It’s noteworthy that a significant portion of female immigrants arriving in Batumi often possess greater economic stability compared to the local population. Many arrive with savings earmarked for investment, business ventures, or property acquisition. This economic prosperity plays a vital role in their integration process. Moreover, highly qualified female immigrants express satisfaction with Georgia’s favorable economic climate, characterized by ease of doing business. This environment, coupled with their economic achievements and the formation of a new identity, further facilitates their integration into community.

Education stands as a paramount tool for integration and social development. Equipping individuals with the necessary skills fosters equal participation across all facets of life. Moreover, education serves as a cornerstone of identity, preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. It also serves as a highly effective means of fostering intercultural contact and mutual understanding (OSCE, 2012). Female migrants with a higher education level and better working skills were able to accumulate human capital in Batumi and were creating groups in social networks in order to help each other and newly arrived females helping them with sources of information and resource mobilization. They played the role of intermediaries between the host society in Batumi and migrants, helping them to integrate. They provided necessary information about the host community, posting job opportunities and helping with finding accommodation. *“The social network groups proved immensely beneficial, especially during my initial year of arrival when I was navigating unfamiliar territory. I still utilize one on Facebook specifically for legal inquiries. I was invited to join after engaging with several of their posts. For instance, when the border guards stopped us, I reached out to the ladies in that group to inquire if they had encountered a similar issue. There are instances where obtaining information can be challenging, and in such cases, these groups in Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram prove to be invaluable, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.”* - Larisa, 44, from Kazakhstan, shop owner, arrived in Batumi in 2019.

The research findings revealed that the migration of a significant number of Ukrainian females to Georgia between 2014 and 2022 was largely influenced by the Russia-Ukraine war. Initially, in 2014, migrants primarily originated from Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Dnipro. However, by 2022, this trend had expanded to encompass nearly the entirety of Ukraine. These female migrants recognized the importance of establishing and strengthening networks to gather information about their destination and available opportunities. Access to such networks, comprised of knowledgeable fellow female immigrants, was deemed crucial for obtaining necessary assistance and guidance. Despite the Georgian government offering certain services and aid, language barriers hindered their ability to access this information easily as

all information was posted only in Georgian. Consequently, compatriots and other female migrants who were more familiar with the processes provided invaluable assistance by sharing essential information. Furthermore, in 2022, there was a notable increase in the number of female migrants from Belarus and Russia, largely due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, as reported by the United Nations (2022).

Some female migrants from neighboring countries aim to bring their families to Georgia, drawn by the country's atmosphere of freedom and friendliness.

“As a migrant, I’ve observed the deteriorating situation in my home country, where human freedom is increasingly restricted, and people feel squeezed. I believe relocating my family to Georgia would provide them with a safer environment, free from fear and oppression.” Svetlana, 31, from Russia, owner of photography studio, arrived in Batumi in 2022.

In response to prevailing immigration trends, the Georgian government has adopted a concerted approach over the last decade. The establishment of the State Commission on Migration Issues in 2010 marked a pivotal step, followed by the initiation of the migration strategy development in 2013. The current strategy, spanning from 2021 to 2030, has been crafted with a keen awareness of the dynamic nature of migratory and political landscapes, including key agreements such as Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU and the Visa Liberalization Action Plan of 2015. The latest migration strategy prioritizes immigrant integration, aiming to address challenges in this realm and formulate unified approaches toward integration. Notably, however, the strategy lacks a specific focus on female migrants. Objectives within the 2021–2030 migration action plan encompass raising public awareness of immigrants' potential and expanding opportunities for immigrants to learn the state language (Gogsadze et al., 2022).

The Georgian government has initiated the development of legislation tailored to address immigration concerns, alongside accelerating the establishment of institutions dedicated to managing immigration processes. Consequently, an array of formal resources, social services, and programs have emerged in recent years. It's important to highlight that integration programs are currently limited to foreigners under international protection due to the associated financial implications for the country.

Despite the proliferation of formal resources, immigrants predominantly rely on informal social networks for assistance and support. This observation aligns with research in social psychology, which consistently emphasizes the enduring significance of informal social networks in facilitating assistance and fostering community among immigrant populations, even amidst the presence of formal support structures (Lynam, 1985; Aroian, 1992; Leslie, 1992; Martínez et al., 1996, 1999; Hernández, 2005; Hernández et al., 2004).

Social networks can be particularly valuable in situations where traditional diaspora networks are weak or non-existent. In such cases, individuals may not have strong ties to a specific community from their home country, making it challenging to access the support and resources typically provided by diaspora networks. Moreover, diaspora networks typically unite migrants from specific

countries or backgrounds, social networks transcend such boundaries, bringing together individuals from diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds. This inclusivity fosters a sense of solidarity and support among immigrants, contributing significantly to their integration and well-being in their new environment.

“Upon my arrival in Georgia, I encountered difficulty in finding accommodation. Thankfully, a Facebook group aided me in securing my first apartment, and later, my initial job opportunity.” – Ezra, 30, from Turkey, owner of a construction company, arrived in Batumi in 2017.

Intermediary female migrants in Batumi have effectively utilized social media platforms as a means of communication and coordination, complementing traditional interpersonal interactions, to engage a broader audience. Through these channels, they have been proactive in organizing cultural-educational events with the overarching goal of promoting social cohesion among both the host community and fellow migrants. These gatherings not only serve as avenues for the introduction of diverse cultural practices to local residents but also facilitate the cultivation of interpersonal bonds within the immigrant population.

Gulnara, 38, from Kazakhstan, owner of a model management company, arrived in Batumi in 2016 and highlights the significance of female migrants in celebrating their national holidays and sharing them with the local community. Reflecting on her experience, she recounts her son’s observation, *“Once my son asked me, mum, why Nowruz in Batumi is more fun than in Kostanay?”* Initially stumped for a response, she eventually attributed the difference to one word: diversity. This underscores the enriching cultural exchange facilitated by female migrants, contributing to the vibrant tapestry of celebrations in Batumi.

Moreover, as part of their efforts to enhance community integration and provide valuable resources, these migrants have established an informational blog titled “Afisha Batumi.” This platform serves as a comprehensive repository of information pertaining to Batumi, encompassing details about the local community, tourist attractions, housing prices, and significant events. Through the creation of such a resource, they further contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and the facilitation of smoother integration processes within the community.

Natalia, 33, from Serbia, owner of a bookshop, arrived in Batumi in 2021, exemplifies the resilience of intermediary female migrants and their social media groups in organizing cultural-educational events.

“Our community is very active. The only period when we had to stop our gatherings was during COVID-19. But after COVID, we continued our cultural events. For example, last week we had a Georgian traditional food masterclass, where we invited our Georgian friends, who were teaching us how to make khinkali.”

Skilled female migrants have orchestrated a series of conferences aimed at facilitating the utilization and enhancement of skills in Batumi. These gatherings encompassed forums tailored for entrepreneurs, meetings of women leaders, and lectures focused on effective marketing strategies for local businesses. The

overarching objective of these initiatives is to bolster the development of requisite skills and elevate the competitive landscape within the local environment. Notably, each event featured participation from both locals and migrants, serving as platforms for knowledge exchange and collaborative engagement. Guest speakers, hailing from diverse backgrounds, enriched the discourse, further enriching the experience for all attendees.

"This conference in Batumi was one of the smoothest to organize, given my extensive experience in event planning. Having resided in Batumi for over 7 years, I'm intimately acquainted with nearly everyone in this close-knit city. Together with my migrant friends, we've orchestrated a diverse array of events over the years, ranging from conferences and photo sessions to excursions, concerts, stand-up shows, and even fashion weeks. While some events were offered free of charge, others incurred fees due to logistical complexities, venue requirements, and the volume of registrations. For instance, our conferences often attracted over a hundred eager participants. As a woman from Lithuania, it's been immensely rewarding to contribute to the vibrant cultural fabric of Batumi through our collaborative endeavors." Lukne, 39, from Lithuania, event manager, arrived in Batumi in 2016.

Female migrants mostly engage in the tourism sector or related fields like HORECA. However, there are exceptions, such as Annagul, 28, from Turkmenistan, who is a social entrepreneur. She arrived in Batumi in 2019, and she introduced new products to the market, such as social businesses that benefit both the community and women. *"I started this project several years ago. As a marketing manager, I find very talented needlewomen in Georgian villages nearby and I assist in developing and promoting their products."* The finished goods are not only sold locally throughout Georgia but also distributed abroad, demonstrating the widespread impact of Annagul's socially conscious enterprise.

"I have always been passionate about running a business that benefits society, and eventually, everything fell into place, leading me to start this venture. My husband and I focus on recycling plastic. In our production, we're proud to have both locals and migrants working alongside us." - Medina, 32, from Kazakhstan, a small entrepreneur arrived in Batumi in 2018.

Certainly, migrant women encounter various challenges in their daily lives. One prominent issue is the adaptation to the local medical system. During the research period, it was noted that only immigrants employed by large companies typically had access to health insurance, leaving many self-employed and freelance women without coverage. As expressed by Inga, 28, from Belarus, who works in the IT sphere and arrived in Batumi in 2021- *"I don't have health insurance; I pay for health services separately"*.

Furthermore, challenges such as feelings of separation from their homeland and missing family members were commonly cited. The integration policies of the host country were also critiqued for their lack of focus on female migrants and their unique needs. Particularly, the absence of state-sponsored language courses for migrants was highlighted as a significant barrier to integration, with language proficiency being identified as a crucial factor. Nelly, 42 from Lithuania, working in

a tourism agency, arrived in Batumi in 2019, remarked, "*I enrolled in private language courses, but it's clear that not all women have access to such opportunities*".

Overall, it was observed that the state has yet to articulate a comprehensive integration policy tailored to the diverse needs of different immigrant groups, including women. Despite Georgia's open-door immigration policy, which allows migrants from post-Soviet countries to stay visa-free for up to one year, the practical integration support provided by the state remains minimal, placing the onus largely on individual migrants to navigate integration processes independently.

Research findings indicate a positive correlation between the income level of immigrant females and their successful integration into the host society. The income of migrant women is predominantly influenced by their skill sets and prior work experience. Notably, some immigrant women arriving in Georgia possess prior migration experience, having worked in various countries, thereby bringing with them international work experience and language proficiency. As articulated by Karina, 35, from Ukraine with a background in the tourism sector, "*Well, initially I worked in different countries, I worked almost all over the world, and I worked in the tourism, sphere.*" The integration of skilled migrant women in Batumi primarily hinges on their individual efforts, skillsets, as well as their social capital and networks established within the community. Conversely, migrant women with lower qualifications are likely to encounter greater challenges throughout the integration process in Batumi. In comparison to other immigrant groups, the integration journey for women hailing from post-Soviet countries tends to be relatively smoother due to the absence of language barriers. However, migrant women who lack proficiency in English, Russian, or the native language, Georgian, will face significant hurdles in effectively communicating with both fellow migrants and the local populace. This language barrier compounds the complexities of integration for such individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research conducted in Batumi offers profound insights into the multifaceted experiences and contributions of skilled female migrants as intermediaries in the integration process. Through a comprehensive examination of their roles, challenges, and impacts, the study underscores the pivotal importance of recognizing and harnessing the potential of skilled female migrants as agents of positive change in their new communities.

The findings of the research highlight the diverse backgrounds, motivations, and challenges faced by migrant women, emphasizing the importance of tailored support programs to address their unique needs. Key among these findings is the crucial role played by social networks and community engagement in facilitating integration. Female migrants emerge as central initiators and facilitators of these networks, actively participating in cultural events, providing essential information, and fostering community cohesion.

Furthermore, the research illuminates how migration profoundly changes female migrants' lives, providing them with increased autonomy, self-reliance, and chances for personal and professional development. Their contributions to the local economy

through the introduction of higher standards, innovative business ideas, and entrepreneurial ventures further highlight their importance in fostering economic growth and social cohesion in Batumi.

Despite these contributions, the research also underscores the need for comprehensive integration policies tailored to the needs of female migrants. The absence of such policies remains a significant challenge, highlighting the importance of addressing economic, social, and policy-related barriers to create inclusive and equitable environments where migrant women can thrive and contribute positively.

In this context, skilled female migrants play a crucial role as intermediaries between newly arrived migrants and the local community. Through active participation and interaction with both groups, these women facilitate cultural exchange, promote understanding, and bridge the gap between different communities. By serving as mediators and fostering community unity, female migrants contribute to the creation of inclusive and harmonious environments where integration is encouraged and celebrated.

In summary, recognizing and harnessing the potential of skilled female migrants as intermediaries is essential for building cohesive and resilient societies in Georgia and beyond. By fostering collaboration, innovation, and prosperity, skilled female migrants make significant contributions to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of Batumi, enriching the lives of both migrants and the local community. As we move forward, it is imperative to continue supporting and empowering skilled female migrants, recognizing them as vital catalysts for positive change and integration in their new communities.

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