

# HISTORY

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## Women in Georgia

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### Abstract

The paper deals with a role of women in Georgia since the old ancient times up to today. Trend of gender equality is revealed on concrete examples, proceeding from the evidences of the relevant sources. Share of women in all kinds of activities in modern Georgia, correlation between emancipation of Georgia and emancipation of women, advantage and disadvantage of the leader and Georgian peculiarities in this term are studied.

**Keywords:** *gender, equality, election, education, employment, unemployment*

Gender as well as social equality for ancient and medieval societies is not a relevant issue. However different cultures have different traditions in this regard. Following oral and written sources one can trace to some extent the characteristics of gender relations in Georgia in different times. Georgia is a country with a cult around womanhood. This is emphasized by different expressions in the Georgian language: motherland, mother -father, sister brother, daughter- son, mother- pillar.

The role of a woman increased after Georgia accepted Christianity. Woman played an essential role in disseminating Christianity in Kartli (since the 1st century AD). Here one can mention the mother of Jewish Elios, who witnessed the crucifixion, and brought Christ's tunic, and also his sister, who died and was buried along with it. The first Christian temple was erected on the same place.

Oral and written tradition considered Georgia to be a share of Virgin Mary. Foreign pilgrims visiting the Holy Land in the 15th century referred to Georgians as Christians of the Cincture. The latter means Cincture of Virgin Mary, which for centuries has been kept in western Georgia (Megrelia) as a holy relic of the Georgians<sup>1</sup>. The enlightener of Georgia St. Nino of Cappadocia was also a woman, as was her biographer, Salome from Ujarma, the daughter- in- law of the first Christian Georgian king Mirian ( 4th century). The first followers of St. Nino, among them Mirian's spouse, Nana, were also women. According to the written sources all those women leaders were distinguished by their values, high morals; they were clever and courageous and they made the first steps toward progress<sup>2</sup>.

One can trace the concept of the gender equality in Georgian literature as well as in legal and historic documents. This idea of legal equality was expressed very clearly by the famous 13 th century Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli , who asserted, that "lion's whelps are equal

Let it be a lioness,  
Or let it be a male"

It's noteworthy that equality of lion's whelps or members of a royal family in cases when there was no male heir for the throne, as it was in case of Queen Tamar (12th c.), didn't apply to Georgian society as a whole. However it was a

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step forward. After being held for a long time that idea made enthroning of female kings possible. Besides Tamar, who became beloved heroine of the Georgian folklore, also her daughter Rusudan. That was the Golden Age of the Georgian history.

Medieval Georgian law was based on liberal, democratic and tolerant principles. Death penalty for even severe crimes such as treason against the state or king was never imposed. Exile or blinding of those found guilty was ordered in such high crimes. Although there were some cases when the people were condemned to death, that rarely occurred. One can never find a woman among those who were condemned to death in Georgia<sup>3</sup>. There was a time, when despite widely spread the cult of Virgin Mary, the European law was especially severe towards women. For example, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century England a woman had to be burnt for murdering her husband<sup>4</sup>.

The Georgian law protected women's rights and emphasized their significance. In some cases, women, like men, could inherit and participate in government and in diplomacy. Kidnapping of women was forbidden at least on paper. According to the written sources the tradition of kidnapping as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century was eliminated.

The law was strict in the case of the abandonment of an innocent wife by the husband since the family was considered the basis of a powerful state. When people divorced, the law was always on the woman's side, who, like a man, could initiate divorce. Even if the cause of divorce was adultery by the wife, the law tried to defend her rights and ordered her dowry returned<sup>5</sup>.

Besides politicians there were also female diplomats. In times of Tamar two ladies, representatives of the Georgian elite, were sent to insurgents for negotiation. They achieved their goal successfully since the uprising was peacefully quelled.

Tamar's daughter Rusudan sent the letters to the Popes in which she asked them for support against the invaders<sup>6</sup>. Numerous cases of sending letters to the foreign rulers by the Georgian women from the upper class are acknowledged in the late Middle Ages. Another lady, Gulchara, presumably the daughter of the Kartlian king Simon I (the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> cc.) participated in negotiations between the Safavid Persians and the Ottomans<sup>7</sup>.

There is a long list of distinguished women in the Georgian history. Among them are Medea, the daughter of Kolkhian king Ayet ( 13<sup>th</sup> c. BC), who was very skilful in medicine; St Shushanik, the spouse of the ruler of the Lower Kartli, tortured in the 5<sup>th</sup> century; Mariam, mother of the Georgian king Bagrat IV ( the 11<sup>th</sup> c. ); Dedisimedi, the wife of Kaikhosro II, Atabeg (the 16<sup>th</sup> c. ); St, Ketevan, mother of Kakhetian king Teimuraz I, tortured and killed after being sent to Persia for negotiations; Mariam, the educator, the spouse of Rostom- the first viceroy of Kartli (17<sup>th</sup> c.)...<sup>8</sup>.

Women from the upper class frequently married foreigners. However they actively participated in politics and had close contacts with motherland despite great risk. One can find evidence about their cleverness and education. Tamar's grand-daughter, also Tamar, known in Turkey as Gurji-Khatun, was the beloved

spouse of the Rum Sultran Ghias ad-Din Key- Khusrev II and had close relationships with mevlana Jelal ad-Din Rumi. She commissioned the creation of his portrait and the construction of his Green tomb. The list of the ladies, who married foreigners and were involved in political and diplomatic activities is long<sup>9</sup>.

Georgia is also a country of a cult surrounding the family. Traditionally, The main function of a woman was reproduction. That was extremely important in ancient and medieval times with their high death rates. Besides reproduction women had many domestic responsibilities and duties. In fact she was an administrator of a family, although traditionally a man was considered as its head.

Since woman was recognized as mother, who raised up children and transferred all traditions and cultural heritage, she had to be educated. Being isolated Shushanik spent much time on reading holy books. There is a long list of the Georgian manuscripts which were saved, restored and copied by women throughout the Middle Ages. The missionary Archangelo Lamberti, who spent 18 years in western Georgia (Megrelia) in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, said “The Georgian writing could have completely disappeared if women hadn't preserved it. If somebody wants to learn the Georgian writing he has to take the lessons from a woman”<sup>10</sup>. Another missionary Christoforo Castelli, who visited Georgia in the same 17<sup>th</sup> century and left 570 pictures, 150 portraits of women among them, depicted some of them while writing or painting<sup>11</sup>. It was woman, who preserved Georgian culture in the Georgian land which was conquered by the invaders. The special kind of the Georgian writing known as “Dedabruli” (the writing of aged women) was preserved in the Georgian region Ajara, which was alienated by the Ottomans. “Books of dowry”, given to women in the late Middle Ages, include the books, which show diversity of their interests.<sup>12</sup>

The Emancipation of Georgia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also an emancipation of women. Many of them received higher education in Russian and European educational institutions, edited newspapers, wrote articles, translated plays for theatres, and translated Russian and European literature. Women were involved in political activity, and enrolled in political parties. In 1846 “Feminine charitable society” named after St. Nino was established and began founding schools for women. Together with the academic disciplines they provided a vocational education. The distinguished woman, public figure and founder of the first feminine organization Domenic Eristavi (1864–1924) wrote: “The great creative talent emerges where the woman is not a slave, but is a free person”.<sup>13</sup>

The first institution of higher education for women in the Caucasus “Women's Higher Courses” was opened in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup>

After the creation of the Soviet Union effective steps towards the gender equality were taken. Women received the right to elect and to be elected. There was no difference in the salaries of women and men. Total liquidation of illiteracy was a precondition for providing equality. Almost all girls and women were enrolled in schools and higher institutions. During Soviet times Georgian women were the most highly educated women in the Soviet Republics. However women were rarely promoted to high positions where they could be decision-makers. At the

same time there were numerous successful women in different fields: famous musicians, artists, actresses; even in the fields traditionally dominated by men, their number substantially increased. Moreover there was a dynasty of Georgian female world champions in chess. Nevertheless men held almost all top managerial positions in the country.<sup>15</sup> Women were the majority in such profession as teachers, physicians, representatives of culture, art and food industries. In spite of their ever-increasing duties women were still somehow inferior in the family and in a workplace. Regardless of a cult of womanhood in Georgia, this ideal and the reality of everyday life did not always coincide. Attitudes towards woman were somehow controversial.<sup>16</sup>

Georgia became independent after 1991. Changes in domestic as well as external relations, the collapse of the economy, a rapid rise in unemployment, two armed conflicts and the resulting mass of internally displaced persons in the country caused changes in intra-family relationships and revision of the woman's status in the society.

Many preschool day-care institutions were closed (559). Between 1997 and 1998 4800 children left their schools<sup>17</sup>. According to 2002 data only 49 % of woman are employed. Because of this the role of a woman as mother had to increase. On one hand women have more time for rising children, on the other, - children need more attention from mothers, who are the only transmitters of knowledge and cultural heritage. However that is hindered by number of obstacles; consequently women can't perform this function efficiently.

While the rate of divorce decreased in 2002 the birth rate was 50,2 % of what it was in 1992. In the same period, the number of the registered marriages has decreased by 66,8%<sup>18</sup>. There are single-mothers, some of who are compelled to abandon their children in the maternity hospitals.

Unemployment became the main cause of migration from Georgia; the greater part of the emigrants is women. While public opinion prior to 90-s was against female labor emigration, currently one thirds, or 40 % of emigrants are women<sup>19</sup>. According to statistic publication, there are the following figures of female emigrants: from Tbilisi- 51 %, from Rustavi- 54%, from Tkibuli -33%, from Akhalkalaki -3%, total is 40%<sup>20</sup>. Between 1990 and 2000 800.000 and 1.000000 citizens left Georgia. Forty-four percent of these emigrants have high education. The majority of migrant women are skilled professionals, knowing foreign languages. It gives them an opportunity to go to far foreign countries, while the majority of men goes to the former Soviet republics. The main stream is directed towards four countries Russia (39 %), Greece (14 %), US (14 %) and Germany (13 %)<sup>21</sup>. However most of the women are occupied with unqualified, low-skilled work; domestic servants, office cleaners, nurses<sup>22</sup>. Separation of women from the family for a long time, alien for the Georgian society, is tolerated in a new reality<sup>23</sup>. 57% of those women, who abandon the country, are the family-women<sup>24</sup>, who have children and are the only bread-winners in the family. Some migrant women are involved in prostitution, drug-addiction and even worse, in the process of adoption of children by foreigners. Although it was forbidden in 1997 by the presidential order, it still continued illegally and, as a rule, that was

the business of women. Nearly one third of the emigrants, who went abroad through the private employment agencies is employed illegally<sup>25</sup>. Regardless of their occupation, the cash remittances sent by women to their families were more by 40% than those men<sup>26</sup>.

The number of street children is growing.; The majority of them have one, or both of their parents.. Some of these parents force them to beg or engage in prostitution. In some cases they beat children if they don't bring enough money. There are about 25000 homeless children in Tbilisi alone<sup>27</sup>.

Despite of these disadvantages we can see some steps towards equality and increased role for woman in the family. Women revealed more flexibility in new conditions and more readiness to meet the demands of labor market. 49% believe, that a decision in a family should be made through a consensus of spouses, only 13, 4% still recognize the primacy of the man in this regard. However Georgian society preserves traditions. A cult surrounding the family is still there: according to 94% the most respectful is a family-woman; 57% reveal negative attitude towards divorced women. In case of a divorced man just 30 % consider him as undesirable fiancée; the overwhelming majority of population emphasizes maternity as the main function of a woman; at the same time 94 % believe that a woman must have a profession. The majority of women consider success in a family as the most important for themselves. The second is success in a family and at a work-place. 95% of women and 93% of men think that a woman works more than a man in a family. The impact of women on children is more essential than that of men according to 72% of women; 25% hold the opposite opinion, that men are more influential; Among men 58% consider women more influential, 42% name men<sup>28</sup>; 47% of the girls who were surveyed vote for institution of virginity, 50, 5% decry sexual relations for women before marriage.<sup>29</sup> The main function of a woman is still raising children.. 92% of women and 89 % of men think that adult children must live together with their parents, according to 41% even if they live separately parents have to help them.

Meanwhile the share of women in vocational schools in 2004-5 increased on 33,9%, and men's number reduced by 1, 2%. The percentage of females admitted at the state universities in 2004-5 is 50,3 %.<sup>30</sup> A woman is a teacher not only in her family, but also in schools. 93 % of teachers in primary school are women; in 10 Tbilisi schools there are 685 female teachers and only 70 men .. Nevertheless the answer for the question - who has to be a director of the school№ according to 55,8% - it has to be a man<sup>31</sup>.

**Employment and unemployment  
Population aged 15+ by economic status, *Thousand***

|  | 1996   |        | 2001   |        | 2002   |        |
|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|  | W      | M      | W      | M      | W      | M      |
| Population aged 15+, total                   | 1725.8 | 1450.1 | 1750.4 | 1440.7 | 1775.0 | 1464.5 |
| Economically active population (Labor force) | 1017.9 | 1063.4 | 1019.7 | 1093.6 | 994.6  | 1109.6 |
| Employed                                     | 882.0  | 936.9  | 911.0  | 966.7  | 885.1  | 954.1  |
| Hired  | 365.6  | 376.4  | 318.3  | 336.0  | 317.9  | 333.0  |
| Self-employed                                | 414.2  | 479.6  | 551.9  | 584.0  | 566.5  | 618.4  |
| Unemployed                                   | 135.9  | 126.5  | 108.7  | 126.9  | 109.5  | 155.5  |
| Unemployment rate, %                         | 13.4   | 11.9   | 10.7   | 11.6   | 11.0   | 14.0   |
| Economically inactive population             | 707.9  | 386.7  | 730.7  | 347.1  | 780.4  | 354.9  |

*Source: SDSG / Labor Statistics Division*

The rate of economic activity has decreased from 59.0% in 1996 to 56.0% in 2002. Among women, this statistic is 3% for the same period and has reached 76.% among men in 1992..

In 2002, the number of employed women increased by 0.4%, while the number of employed men climbed by 1.8 %. In 1996, the share of the employed women was 52.0%, and for men 48.0%. In 2002, these figures were 48% and 52.% respectively.

**Employees by sector of economy, Thousand**

|                  | 1996         |              | 2001         |              | 2002         |              |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                  | W            | M            | W            | M            | W            | M            |
| Employees, total | <b>882.0</b> | <b>936.9</b> | <b>911.0</b> | <b>966.7</b> | <b>885.1</b> | <b>954.1</b> |
| Public sector    | 312.6        | 294.2        | 237.9        | 212.1        | 225.4        | 196.2        |
| Private sector   | 569.4        | 642.7        | 673.1        | 754.6        | 659.7        | 757.9        |

**Employees by kind of economic activity, Thousand**

|   | 2001         |              | 2002         |              |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|   | W            | M            | W            | M            |
| <b>Employees, total</b>   | <b>911.0</b> | <b>966.7</b> | <b>885.1</b> | <b>954.1</b> |
| Agriculture, hunting, forestry  | 527.4        | 573.4        | 489.3        | 499.0        |
| Fishing   | 0.1          | 0.5          | 0.1          | 0.5          |
| Mining industry and quarries processing   | 1.3          | 4.3          | 1.1          | 4.1          |
| Processing industry   | 23.2         | 58.7         | 23.1         | 62.2         |
| Electric energy, gas and water supply   | 5.6          | 23.4         | 5.7          | 20.9         |
| Construction  | 2.1          | 17.8         | 1.1          | 33.0         |
| Whole and retail trade; repair of cars, motorcycles; everyday repair and other services | 85.6         | 70.6         | 100.4        | 115.0        |
| Hotels and restaurants  | 7.1          | 7.3          | 9.9          | 5.2          |
| Transport, warehouses and communications  | 18.5         | 46.0         | 14.8         | 63.5         |
| Finance activity  | 3.2          | 2.9          | 5.1          | 2.6          |



|   |       |      |       |      |
|---|-------|------|-------|------|
| Real-estate activity, rent and commercial activity        | 11.4  | 30.1 | 10.3  | 10.1 |
| State management and defense; compulsory social insurance | 34.9  | 72.4 | 32.7  | 75.8 |
| Education   | 112.6 | 33.2 | 105.5 | 24.2 |
| Health care and social service                            | 65.5  | 14.3 | 51.8  | 11.6 |
| Other community, social and personal services             | 11.0  | 8.3  | 26.9  | 25.1 |
| Private household with hired services                     | 1.1   | 1.9  | 7.1   | 1.1  |
| Extra-territorial organizations and bodies                | 0.4   | 1.6  | 0.1   | 0.2  |

Source: SDSG / Labor Statistics Division

Number of employed men exceeds number of employed women in almost all kinds of activity, except health care and education, in which the share of employed women prevails over the share of employed men.

| Year                              | Total | Registered marriages | Extra-marital births | Among them                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------------------|----------------------|--|--|
|                                   |       |                      |                      | According to the declaration of both parents | According to the declaration of mother |
| <b>Number</b>                     |       |                      |                      |  |  |
| 1989                              | 91138 | 74977                | 16161                | 11391  | 4770                                   |
| 1990                              | 92815 | 75912                | 16903                | 12706  | 4197                                   |
| 1991                              | 89091 | 72412                | 16679                | 12814  | 3865                                   |
| 1992                              | 72631 | 56819                | 15812                | 12477  | 3335                                   |
| 1993                              | 61594 | 46133                | 15146                | 13057  | 2089                                   |
| 1994                              | 57311 | 41039                | 16272                | 14433  | 1839                                   |
| 1995                              | 56341 | 39877                | 16464                | 14277  | 2187                                   |
| 1996                              | 55000 | 38005                | 16995                | 14556  | 2439                                   |
| 1997                              | 54000 | 35964                | 18036                | 15220  | 2816                                   |
| 1998                              | 51526 | 33286                | 18240                | 15895  | 2345                                   |
| 1999                              | 48695 | 30970                | 17725                | 15446  | 2279                                   |
| 2000                              | 48800 | 28743                | 20057                | 17927  | 2130                                   |
| 2001                              | 47589 | 26459                | 21130                | 18933  | 2197                                   |
| 2002                              | 46605 | 25202                | 21403                | 19266  | 2137                                   |
| <b>Per cent of all live birth</b> |       |                      |                      |  |  |
| 1989                              | 100,0 | 82,3                 | 17,7                 | 12,5   | 5,2                                    |
| 1990                              | 100,0 | 81,8                 | 18,2                 | 13,7   | 4,5                                    |
| 1991                              | 100,0 | 81,3                 | 18,7                 | 14,4   | 4,3                                    |
| 1992                              | 100,0 | 78,2                 | 21,8                 | 17,2   | 4,6                                    |
| 1993                              | 100,0 | 74,9                 | 25,1                 | 21,2   | 3,9                                    |
| 1994                              | 100,0 | 71,6                 | 28,4                 | 25,2   | 3,2                                    |
| 1995                              | 100,0 | 70,8                 | 29,2                 | 25,3   | 3,9                                    |
| 1996                              | 100,0 | 69,1                 | 30,9                 | 26,5   | 4,4                                    |
| 1997                              | 100,0 | 66,6                 | 33,4                 | 28,2   | 5,2                                    |
| 1998                              | 100,0 | 64,6                 | 35,4                 | 29,7   | 5,7                                    |
| 1999                              | 100,0 | 63,6                 | 36,4                 | 31,7   | 4,7                                    |
| 2000                              | 100,0 | 58,9                 | 39,0                 | 34,6   | 4,4                                    |
| 2001                              | 100,0 | 55,6                 | 44,4                 | 39,9   | 4,5                                    |
| 2002                              | 100,0 | 54,1                 | 45,9                 | 41,3   | 4,6                                    |

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